

Some (philosophical) corollaries of the linguistic update of the study of nationalism

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After running through “[a linguistic update](#)” of the study of nationalism and outlining some of the [psychological underpinnings](#) of the nationalist worldview that such an update suggests, it is now time to take stock. It is time, that is, to consider some the repercussions of this general take on things.

Three interconnected corollaries come to mind, which I shall rank, and present, from the more general of consequences to the narrower and more significant. I should add that this is probably the sort of stuff that overzealous referees of academic journals dismiss outright, without giving it much thought (I know from experience), but do humour me anyway.

The first corollary has to do with the study of nationalism itself; or more properly, with what may well be termed “the origins of nationalism” – i.e., the genesis of nationalist beliefs.

There has been plenty of discussion on this issue in the relevant literature, with various proposals on offer, each espousing a whole paradigm. Some of the better-known accounts come under the names of *perennialism*, *primordialism* or *ethno-symbolism*, while the consensus on the study of nationalism I myself outlined is based on the so-called *modernist* paradigm, perhaps the most prominent of them all. Though a well-trodden topic, I think some of the material I presented in what I am now calling Parts 1 (the update) and 2 (the psychology) of this series on nationalism offers some novelty. As argued in Part 2, after all, it is by teasing out “the building blocks” of nationalism that we can obtain a better view of the overall phenomenon, and it may well be by drawing attention to the psychological underpinnings of nationalist beliefs that it might be possible to make sense of where nationalism as an idea comes from.¹

As discussed in Parts 1 and 2, the gathering of a large group of people under a specific nationality, language or culture is clearly artificial and the result of a concerted and top-down effort – nations are certainly not a *perennial* reality in the history of humanity. Humans do naturally form groups on their own, are prone to communicate with each other by using a common language, and co-operate with each other for various purposes (to work, to socialise, etc.). There *are* certain precursors to the nationalist spirit, especially in terms of the Humean propensity to imitate and share each other’s ways of speaking and acting, but there are few givens in nature and certainly no naturally congruous languages and cultural customs but infinitely many diverse manifestations of these phenomena – thus, nations and nationalisms do not constitute natural or *primordial* divisions of humanity.

What nationalism does is co-opt a number of basic properties of human nature, in particular exploiting the fact that human cognition allows for both commonalities and diversities in the very phenomena that are central to building a nationalist sentiment (language, culture, etc.). But the commonalities nationalisms produce are always due to *modern* conditions, often created anew and not always from pre-existing iterations – oftentimes the key factor is how cultural or ethnic ties with the past are *imagined* to be, especially perceptions of a common past, common language, etc., the very beliefs that are used and exploited by the elites of a country to construct the very identities that are central to individual nationalisms.

There is certainly something rather natural about nationalism as an *idea*, but in practice a specific nationalism is a contingency and particular national identities quite illusory, based as they ultimately are on unobservable, internal realities such as the mental grammars that underlie what looks like an external language, but (quite) isn’t.

This conclusion brings me to the second corollary. Particular nationalisms, and specific national identities, are often determined – that is, identified – in terms of a language that nationals share – a “national” language, that is – but generative linguistics casts some doubt on the significance of any identity conditions for individual languages – and by extension, insofar as they are identified in terms of a common language, for national identities.

As noted in Part 1, generative linguists argue that languages as we customarily speak of them have no real existence outside of humans; languages are instead represented in the minds of speakers in a peculiar way: in terms of a number of primitive units that are manipulated by various rules and principles. It is these internal grammars and not (only) their externalisations that makes it possible for people to communicate.

But of course it is not the linguistic details of how a people come to share a language that establishes how national identities are identified, but some of the common beliefs most people associate to the concept of individual languages and how such beliefs interact with one’s view of belonging to a given group. The details of the psychology of nationalist beliefs, that is, especially in terms of the body of beliefs a given concept is associated with – in this case, some of the mental representations underlying and orbiting nationalist beliefs.

Two kinds of (confused) beliefs regarding individual languages can be identified on the basis of the material from Parts 1 and 2, both of which affect the coherence of particular nationalisms as much as the coherence of some of the actual beliefs of nationalists. There is, first of all, the belief that there is continuity in the history of any one (official) language, whereas in reality the linguistic history of any territory involves myriad internal grammars and myriad externalisations of such grammars. We may find it useful to draw a line from Old to Middle English and then to modern English, but these are very broad labels, referring as they do to the many different varieties the elites spoke at different times, typically by very few people indeed and in rather small regions (over and above the many varieties of non-elite languages, mostly undocumented). The labels should not be taken to suggest that each variety constitutes a different stage in the process of a single historical phenomenon (viz., the history of English), as this would be to commit a category mistake.

A second, equally misguided belief supposes that there is much unity in any of the apparently homogenous linguistic nations (or regions) of today, whereas in actual fact there is great variety in any one place, no matter how widely spoken some languages appear to be nowadays. This is especially true of large territories, where there is likely to be much social and physical distance among many sections of a population, but it is also true of two people who live in the same street – as stressed in Part 1, any two people will have different vocabularies and they may also well disagree as to the correctness of certain sentences.

Crucially, if we were to negate the two beliefs I have just described – and negate them we must – this would have the effect of casting doubt on the significance of what is usually the central identity criterion for particular nationalisms and individual national identities – namely, the idea that a given language is, and indeed has been, the common speech of a given people. The situation is rather different: very few people at the time actually shared what we now call Old or Middle English, very few people have shared modern English until recently, and in any case this “sharing” should not be taken to apply in any strict sense.

To put the matter succinctly, we may find it useful to talk about this or that national identity, the same way we find it useful to talk about this language or that culture, but this is at heart a manner of speaking, as the underlying realities of these phenomena are psychological and

thus internal to an individual, and intrinsically diverse to boot. Each person's representation of their own language is in one way unique, and so are the relevant individual representations of one's culture and national identity.

And *this* conclusion brings me to the third corollary, and perhaps the most significant of the three: the merits, and even justice, of nationalism and national identities as facts of the world. I myself regard nationalism as inherently unjust and national identities as detrimental to both the autonomy of an individual and the social connections people freely partake in.

The case against nationalism is especially compelling because promoters of nationalist policies can often pervert otherwise just causes. Nationalism is often associated to such fundamental human rights as the self-determination of a people, and when the focus of attention falls upon small nationalist movements regarded as being oppressed in one way or another, usually by a greater nationalist movement, it is easy to sympathise with the objectives of such movements and forget all that is in fact reactionary to nationalism – the imposition of a language and a culture, the enforced contrast with other peoples, etc.

Nationalism is intrinsically a top-down, social phenomenon and someone is always repressed under it: within a moderately-sized country, as in the case of so-called peripheral nationalist movements vis-à-vis a country's core nationalism; within a peripheral nationalist movement, as when someone fails to speak the right language or follow the correct customs; and in fact simply in general, and nowhere is this more evident than when an individual fails to recognise that they supposedly belong to a community greater than those they actually take part in (at school, workplace, area of residence, etc.).²

There is much more to a person than the (national) identity one is supposed to belong to, and it would be a gross mistake to subordinate the autonomy of individuals and the associations individuals freely form to the unconditional acceptance of what is supposed to be common to a given group of people, for such premade representations of what a person is imposes quite wide-ranging constraints to one's development. Indeed, the *life experience* nationalism forces upon a person is anything but innocent: the imposition of a specific upbringing and the demand for allegiance, not least in the expectation that one must share in past glories or achievements, sometimes in opposition to peoples never met, are just some of the restrictions on a person's overall autonomy that nationalism normalises. After all, there are always outsiders when identity conditions are in place and national identities are particular prone to foster divisions. Such a regrettable situation may be another side-effect that the nation-state bestows upon a world in which such a state of affairs dominates and organises people's lives so thoroughly.³

Be that as it may, it is important to emphasise that nationalist feelings do not arise naturally, and the fact that they are ubiquitous precisely because there is an overall structure that promotes them is an indication that they may not be so central to the fabric of human societies after all. Indeed, though nationalism is ultimately based on basic features of human nature (language, culture, relationships of kin, etc.), it is separate and separable from all these and in fact necessitates both a particular combination of such features and a particular way to impose them upon a population. After all, the self-determination that nationalists of all colours incessantly invoke is most meaningful when a person has a say in their own affairs in cooperation with people actually in contact with, be this at school, work, or else, and in such settings nationalist feelings rarely ever surface. All it really remains of nationalism in the day-to-day is the usefulness of sharing a language and some customs: the ordinariness of human relationships, all cognition and no spirit.

So I say about nationalism and the study of nationalism. In order to bring this overall series to an end, in four weeks' time I shall consider a practical case, that of Catalan nationalism, in some ways a peripheral nationalist movement. The discussion of an actual example might prove to be a bit contentious, but it should nevertheless be illuminating.

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¹ Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2001), discusses some of the paradigms mentioned in this paragraph in some detail, especially his own *ethno-symbolism*, which elaborates upon the modernism I have mostly drawn from in this series. Smith's particular account lends much weight to pre-existing cultures and ethnic ties, which he claims form the basis upon which individual nationalisms are built, generation by generation. The point is well taken and I have given it some credence in the previous posts, though in my overall discussion I also claim that there's little unity or continuity to pre-existent cultures and ties, something that is in fact easy to overemphasise.

² A peripheral nationalism is a nationalist movement that arises within a country where a different, "core" nationalism is dominant, and from where peripheral nationalist movements might want to secede – the Catalan nationalist movement in Spain is a case in point, as I remark below.

³ Another feature of modern life that greatly affects human autonomy is the market economy, and here too there is a connection to nationalism, especially in relation to so-called "identity politics", which naturally include national identities (various scholars have argued that nationalism and capitalism have actually developed *pari passu*, but this will have to await another post). As the philosopher and legal scholar Brian Leiter has remarked in an [interview](#), this kind of politics may well be 'the narcissism of the aspiring bourgeoisie, who want to get their share of the "capitalist pie", including their share of "respect" as reflected in language and culture'. In the case of national identities, this is a phenomenon that took place long ago.