Nationalism and the Historians

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THE HISTORY OF NATIONALISM is as much a history of its interlocutors as of the ideology and movement itself. Exactly because it appears so protean and seems so elusive, nationalism reveals itself only in its various forms, or rather the forms given to us by its proponents and critics. That is why nationalism is so often considered an ‘historical movement’ par excellence. Not only did it emerge in a given epoch of European history, and not only does it manifest itself in specific historical situations. Nationalism is also profoundly ‘historicist’ in character: it sees the world as a product of the interplay of various communities, each possessing a unique character and history, and each the result of specific origins and developments.

But, beyond this, there is a more specific sense in which we may term nationalism a profoundly ‘historical’ movement. Historians figure prominently among its creators and devotees; but they have also led the way in seeking to assess and understand the phenomenon of nationalism. That historians should contribute in such large measure to so ‘historicist’ a movement, is not surprising, given the common elements in early European nationalism and the historiography of the romantic epoch. Michelet, Burke, Muller, Karamzin, Palacky and many others, provided the moral and intellectual foundation for an emerging nationalism in their respective communities. Along with the philologists, the historians have in many ways furnished the rationale and charter of their aspirant nations.1

Historians have also been among nationalism’s sharpest critics and opponents, especially since the Second World War. Indeed, most of them have been sceptical of its ideological claims, if not downright hostile. They have attributed to nationalism a variety of harmful consequences, ranging from absurd social and cultural policies to totalitarian terror and global destabilisation. This attitude has been conditioned by a number of widely held assumptions about the nature of the phenomenon. Historians have generally seen nationalism as a doctrine or principle or argument; it has been nationalism rather than the nation that has exercised their imagination, with a few exceptions. This doctrine or principle has often been regarded as an idée fixe, a motive force that remains constant beneath its many disguises. Alternatively, nationalism is equated with ‘national sentiment’, a feeling of belonging to, and identification with, the nation. The nation is then seen as serving individual

and collective needs for warmth, strength and stability which assume much greater importance once the ties of family and neighbourhood are loosened. In that sense, nationalism may be functional for society in the modern era.²

But the costs are high. There is no reason, for the critical historian, why a group of human beings should not prefer to live, work and be governed together, perhaps on the basis of some cultural tie or shared historical experiences; and they may be better governed by representatives of their own community than by others. But this liberal doctrine must not be confused with the Continental and Romantic varieties of nationalism, which treat individuals as members of immutable communities which can only be free if they are self-governing.³ Such a doctrine spells disaster for all, particularly in ethnically mixed areas, where it can only exacerbate existing differences and historic antagonism.

Speaking generally, then, the historical understanding of the complex phenomenon of nationalism is grounded on a rather narrow definition of the field and a similarly specific mode of explanation. The latter is largely contextual, psychological and diffusionist. It insists, rightly in my view, in locating nationalism and the concepts characteristic of this movement in the context of European thought and history, at least as far as the origins of nationalism are concerned; these concepts and ideas can only be understood within that historical framework. Because modern Europe witnessed a breakdown in its modes of community, economy and political order, the psychic advantages and aspects of nationalism are emphasized; and the functions it performs for disoriented individuals and dislocated communities receive special attention. Finally, the favoured mechanism for explaining the spread of nationalism to Asia, Africa and Latin America is a mixture of imitation and reaction: elites, especially intellectuals, adopt and adapt Western ideas of the nation and national regeneration. Nationalism flourishes in the specific circumstances of European imperialism and colonialism; but its diffusion is largely self-propelled and self-reproducing, once a tiny stratum of intellectuals has made its appearance in the recipient country⁴ (Perham 1963; Hodgkin 1964).

Latterly, two other aspects of the historians’ understanding of nationalism have become more visible, aspects which are shared by scholars from neighbouring disciplines. The first is the constructed nature of the nation. Not only is nationalism regarded as purely contingent and logically untenable: the nation itself, the object of every nationalism’s endeavours, is artificial, a concept and model of social and cultural organisation which is the product of the labours of self-styled nationalists bent on attaining power and reaping the rewards of political struggle. The nation is an invented category; it has roots in neither nature nor history. This leads into the second recent feature: the modernity of nations and nationalism. The past to which nationalists aspire is mythical: it exists only in the minds of nationalists and their followers, even when it is not cynically fabricated for present political purposes. The nation dates from the moment of nationalist success: it is a purely modern concept and the product of quite modern processes like bureaucracy, secularisation,