

Book Review

NATIONS AND NATIONALISM SINCE 1780: PROGRAMME. MYTH, REALITY

By E. J. Hobsbawm

A year ago Eric Hobsbawm published a collection of his political essays over the last decade called Politics For a Rational Left. Reading them, I never doubted that they served the cause of leftist rationality. No one has looked at British politics with a clearer eye. In his critique of Thatcherism, his opposition to the "hard left," his refusal of Labourite sentimentality, his sensible strategic proposals, Hobsbawm has provided a model of intellectual engagement. But rational leftists have always had trouble with nationalism, and this new book is a catalog of Hobsbawm's troubles.

It is organized as a work of historical scholarship, and the survey of nationalist politics since the French Revolution is brilliantly done. Hobsbawm is a master of reference; his narrative is rich with examples drawn from the history of every nation, proto-nation, and would-be nation on the European continent. (He has little to say about the rest of the world.) But for reasons that go to the heart of his troubles, he tells no extended stories. His examples are like witnesses at a trial, called to the stand, asked a few questions, hastily dismissed; they are not allowed, as it were, to speak for themselves. This is historical scholarship with a polemical purpose. Hobsbawm wants us to reach a verdict on nationalism: that its program is wrong, its myths dangerous, its reality ugly.

Myth is the dominant idea. The immediate point of Hobsbawm's survey is that the claims that modern nationalists make when they demand statehood and sovereignty are false. Above all, the nation is not an ancient community. Nationalism, according to Hobsbawm, rarely reflects a long-term tradition or a coherent way of life. Nor is it necessarily founded on a common language, or religion, or ethnicity, or historical experience. All these are more often the result of sovereignty than its reason: they are social artifacts, political constructions. The nation is an imagined (and, what is more, a newly imagined) community.

"Imagined community" is a phrase that Hobsbawm takes from the Cornell anthropologist Benedict Anderson, who, in his own book on nationalism, nowhere used it as a term of disparagement. But Hobsbawm seems to think that imagined communities serve ineffectively and inauthentically "to fill the emotional void left by the retreat or disintegration . . . of real human communities" (his italics). What these real communities were he does not tell us, and I have some difficulty imagining them. I can only imagine imagined (not the same as imaginary) communities -

Christendom and Islam, say, or ancient Israel and ancient Rome.

Surely the unity of Saxons and Normans, of Scottish clans and Russian villages, was imagined. How could it not be? Except perhaps for mothers and children there are no natural ties among human beings. Even the family, or at least every particular structure of familial relationships, is imagined. Relationships depend on ideas; relationships are ideas. My connection to a blood relative in Miami is no less a function of my imagination than my connection to fellow Americans in Wyoming or fellow Jews in Romania. Saying this does not reduce the force or the value of the connections; I have a rich imagination. So does everybody else.

Hobsbawm assumes the disvalue of imagined communities. That's why he spends so many pages demonstrating that the nation has no consistent origin in real communal life. He dispels all the myths, and as a result the phenomena become incomprehensible. Why is the nation such a powerful focus for thoughts and feelings, energy and commitment? At one point in his book, Hobsbawm asks a related question: Why did the left, during and after World War II, make such an effort to appropriate national and patriotic symbols? The point, he says, was "to refuse the devil's armies the monopoly of the best marching tunes." That is nicely put, but why were those the best marching tunes, the tunes to which people were most ready to march? This I don't think Hobsbawm ever explains. He writes as if men and women calling themselves nationalists are making a conceptual mistake - misunderstanding what a nation is - or falling into the darkness of unreason. One senses throughout the book that Hobsbawm is irritated by nationalism, like a respectable citizen confronting someone else's bad habits or nervous tics.

He would like to tell us that some group of people (the lower-middle-class intelligentsia is the most likely candidate: journalists, schoolteachers, provincial civil servants) perpetrated nationalism on everyone else. But he is much too good a historian for an argument like that. And so he makes the argument only while warning us against it, as in this discussion of language:

I do not wish to reduce linguistic nationalism to a question of jobs, as vulgar materialistic liberals used to reduce wars to a question of the profits of armament firms. Nevertheless it cannot be fully understood, and the opposition to it even less, unless we see the vernacular languages as, among other things, a vested interest of the lesser examination-passing classes.

Yes, the lesser examination-passers (note the contempt) are important imaginers of the nation, carriers of nationalist ideology, political construction workers. But what they are able to make depends, in ways that Hobsbawm obscures as often as he clarifies, on what they have to work with. He quotes with approval a line from a nineteenth century Italian nationalist: "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians." What Hobsbawm admires here is the frank admission that Italy was first made in the absence of Italians - that is, of a unified ethnic and linguistic group with a singular history. But this is a half-truth, as we can see if we reflect on how much easier it was to make Italians out of Neapolitans, Romans and Milanese than out of Libyans and Ethiopians.

Nations are imagined communities constructed out of the remains of earlier imagined communities. The construction is partly political, therefore coercive, but it is easier or harder, more coercive or less coercive, depending on what we might think of as the nearness of the old and new imaginings. Machiavelli one of the early imaginers of the Italian nation, has a nice image in The Prince of one political change leaving a "toothing-stone" for the next: a point of possible connection. Previous political changes, up and down the peninsula, had left their tothing-stones for Italian nationalism. Had they not done that, there would never have been an Italian nation but some other, or several others. These connections to the past don't make Italian nationalism real in Hobsbawm's sense, but they do explain why we are inclined to regard it as a legitimate politics, whereas the effort to make Italians out of Libyans or Frenchmen out of Algerians was illegitimate.

Hobsbawm never asks why people think of themselves as members of a community. He tells us more than once that imagining a nation is mostly a matter of reaction and resentment, a response to imperial domination, foreign threat, or immigrant pressure. Half-true, again; but the persistence of these imaginings, across a variety of kinds of communities, suggests something deeper. Deeper, but also very simple: there is, I think, a fairly ordinary human desire to live in a familiar world with known others, and to establish some sort of continuity over the generations ("between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born," as Edmund Burke wrote). The forms of the familiarity vary a great deal. Even modern nations, with their interchangeable ideologies, are variously constructed out of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and historical commonalities. There is no pattern, as Hobsbawm amply demonstrates. Any given common feature may or may not make for nationalistic imaginings. Particular imaginings may or may not express themselves in a successful, let alone an attractive, politics.

Old and new communities have been under stress for a long time now. Economic mobilizations, mass migrations, and large-scale warfare have thrust masses of men and women into unfamiliar worlds where they find no tothing-stones, no easy connection. The people upon whom they have been thrust respond to the newcomers, often enough, with fear and hostility. For these (and other) reasons, nationalist politics often turns ugly, much like religious politics and class politics in similar circumstances.

Hobsbawm makes nationalism ugly by definition, for he holds that its central principle is that duty to the nation overrides every other political and moral duty. (Hence committed nationalists can never be trusted to write the history of their own nation: they will tell the truth only when it suits their purposes. He himself, Hobsbawm assures us, suffers no such disability.) But this is like saying that the central principle of individualism is that the self always takes precedence over the other. Individualism is egotism. Nationalism is chauvinism. Why does our language have different words for such singular phenomena? In fact, the second term in both these false equations expresses a possibility, perhaps a tendency, but not an identity. It is important to recognize exactly when nationalism turns into chauvinism and under what conditions - so that we can try to avoid the transition or reverse it. Assume the identity and there is nothing to do with all the perverse men and women who think of themselves as members of a nation.

The assumption of perversity leads Hobsbawm into a strange argument about recent events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. "We can now see in melancholy retrospect," he write, that "it was the great achievement of the Communist regimes in multinational countries to limit the disastrous effects of nationalism within them." On his own reading, the right verb here is probably "postpone" rather than "limit." But at what price was this postponement won? A price worth paying, he seems to suggest: "The 'discrimination' or even 'oppression' against which champions of various Soviet nationalities abroad protest is far less than the expected consequences of the withdrawal of Soviet power." To this sentence he attaches a note saying that it is not to be read, as it easily might be, "as condoning the mass transfer of entire populations on the grounds of their nationality." But if he acknowledges the brutality of the Stalinist transfers, he ought to take "oppression" out of inverted commas: it was real enough. Where are the Lithuanian or Armenian nationalists who have anything like that in mind?

Despite these grim expectations, Hobsbawm is remarkably optimistic about the future - and remarkably confident about his own ability to read the future.

Nationalism "is no longer a major vector of historical development." History is still, it seems, on the side of moral and political progress. We are well on our way to a supranational, even a global, society and economy. There will be many years still of nationalist resistance and adaptation; nations and ethnic-linguistic groups may even flourish "locally," though now in "subordinate and . . . minor roles." National identity will continue to be one (but only one among many) of the ways in which people imagine and describe themselves. But all this is somehow trivial when set against the overriding certainty of decline.

Since I have no similar knowledge of the future, I cannot say yes or no to this prognosis. But even if Hobsbawm is right about world politics, he is wrong about the relative importance of nationalist resistance, local flourishing, and imagined identities. He is making a mistake characteristic of rational leftism, a mistake that has done a lot of damage on the left generally. We can see the mistake at work in the radical critique of "consumerism," as if it were not a good thing for ordinary men and women to possess useful and beautiful objects (as the rich and powerful have always done). When possession becomes the sole end of their existence, there is something to criticize; but we need to mark off that moment from all previous moments of innocent desire and acquisition.

Hobsbawm expresses a similar disdain for the ordinary in his critique of nationalism - as if the forms of human fellowship are not of vital and permanent importance. When fellowship (of any sort) becomes exclusive, paranoid, and aggressive, there is something to criticize. But we have to be able to recognize value short of that. Indeed, the chief reason to criticize and oppose the aggression of this or that nation is to protect the other nations who are threatened or injured by it.

Globalism will never be politically attractive if it does not allow for the local flourishing of imagined communities. This globalism is not a minor matter; nor will it be easy. Hobsbawm is at his formidable best when he argues for the difficulty. "A world of nations cannot exist," he says, "only a world where some potential national groups . . . exclude others." Given the scope of international migration and the mixing of peoples, this may well be right. We can nonetheless work toward the least possible exclusion. We can experiment with political regimes that provide some overarching protection while still accommodating difference. Here, whatever the world-historical drift, is an appropriate agenda for the rational left.