Section XIII: Political Liberalism and Nationalism, 1815-1871

Contemporary Civilization (Ideas and Institutions of Western Man)

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4. Nationalism as an Idea

Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold L. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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4. Nationalism as an Idea

Abstract
Nationalism may be described as a state of mind which gives priority to the idea of nationality. Nationality in turn refers to a group of people who pride themselves on their common descent, customs, or traditions. As a rule these people inhabit a well-defined geographic area and are united by a common language. Often they tend to exhibit a collective egoism, convinced that their particular culture and ethnic stock are superior to all others. Some notable exceptions to these generalizations exist, yet even these exceptions are also characterized by what has been called "a living and active corporate will" as an essential element. [excerpt]

Keywords
Contemporary Civilization, Nationalism, National Self-Identification

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Comments
This is a part of Section XIII: Political Liberalism and Nationalism, 1815-1871. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:
From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems. A second edition, retitled Ideas and Institutions of Western Man, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

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4. Nationalism as an Idea

Nationalism may be described as a state of mind which gives priority to the idea of nationality. Nationality in turn refers to a group of people who pride themselves on their common descent, customs, or traditions. As a rule these people inhabit a well-defined geographic area and are united by a common language. Often they tend to exhibit a collective egoism, convinced that their particular culture and ethnic stock are superior to all others. Some notable exceptions to these generalizations exist, yet even these exceptions are also characterized by what has been called "a living and active corporate will" as an essential element.

When a people, acting under this corporate will, attains political independence under a common government which is in a special and close relationship with individual citizens, a national state in the modern sense is created. The interests of the individual are merged with that of the state, the welfare of which is identified with the well-being of the individual. Nationalism, therefore, may be further described as a belief that nationality is "the source of all creative energy." In modern usage the national state becomes the legitimate, logical, and ideal political arrangement for the nationality.

In at least a quiescent form nationalism antedated the nineteenth by many centuries. The ancient Hebrews, conceiving themselves a chosen people with a messianic destiny, exhibited certain nationalistic traits. Although themselves politically disunited, the ancient Greeks regarded all non-Greeks as "barbarians." Both the Roman Empire and the Medieval Church successively insisted on the universal society, but neither was able to impose this concept completely upon the peoples within its jurisdiction. Eventually, the Holy Roman Empire and the Church succumbed to those forces of national self-consciousness that in time created the national state. By 1500, some Europeans were already identifying themselves as Frenchmen, Germans, Italians, Englishmen, and the like. In each case they preferred a specific culture, were loyal to a particular sovereign, and cherished an affinity for a limited territory -- like Provence, or Scotland, or Bavaria.

The modern nationalism that developed by the midnineteenth century was more inclusive than this, and owed much to the previous one hundred years. Since the days of the Tudors in England and Henry IV of France there had existed examples of the advantages to be gained by stressing national self-identification. As we have already noted, this earlier version of nationalism opened the gates to the rise of royal absolutism and despotism. But the Glorious Revolution in England (1688-1689), followed a century later by the American Revolution (1775-1783), seemed to prove that national self-interest could be gained and enjoyed in
an atmosphere of liberty and constitutional government. The English and American examples of a national spirit in which a close union was effected between the ruler and the ruled, and liberty prevailed under the law, were not lost on the humanitarian enlighteners of the eighteenth century. In France, Rousseau envisaged French nationalism as supplanting the dynastic absolutisms of the Bourbon kings, and in his Social Contract he preached the gospel of the general will as an instrument of virtuous patriotism.

The French Revolution reversed the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment and launched modern nationalism as a viable creed. The early dedication of the revolutionaries to the cause of all mankind was gradually redirected to that of the enlightened portion of mankind which was French. Fraternity came to mean the brotherhood not of men but of Frenchmen. French Jacobins recognized the claims of all the people of France, and members of all classes were raised (or lowered) to the simple level of "citizens." Not only did the Revolution abolish class distinction, but old provincial boundaries in France were erased and an attempt was made to outlaw all languages but French. It is important that the Jacobins called the instrument of their policy the National Assembly and its decrees were enforced by the National Guard. In the wars which followed, Frenchmen looked not to royal troops for protection against foreign armies but to the republican and national levée en masse. French revolutionary enthusiasts erected altars bearing the inscription: "The citizen is born, lives and dies for the fatherland." They projected a comprehensive system of national education to promote patriotism; transformed the Louvre into a national museum; sang La Marseillaise as a patriotic anthem; and held great national festivals in praise of the soil, the people, and the culture of France. Maximilien Robespierre's paean to France in 1794 illustrates widely held sentiments:

Yes, this delightful land which we inhabit and which nature caresses with love is made to be the domain of liberty and happiness. This sensitive and proud people is truly born for glory and virtue.... I am French, I am one of thy representatives!... Oh, sublime people! Accept the sacrifices of my whole being. Happy is the man who is born in your midst; happier is he who can die for your happiness.

The egalitarian nature of Jacobin nationalism, with its radical methods and fanatical secularism, discredited it in the more conservative circles of Europe. This was particularly the case when Napoleon Bonaparte exploited the ideas of the Revolution for his own ends. Within France the emperor unified the system of law and government, but he proceeded in the spirit of the enlightened despots of the previous century. Outside France his ruthless administration of the territories occupied by his armies aroused violent opposition, an opposition which rose curiously enough out of the very nationalist yearnings he had exploited. At first welcomed as liberators, the French troops
and the imperial system soon proved intolerable. Peasants found their sons conscripted to fight for French interests; business classes were burdened with taxes to finance further French conquests; the aristocracy, understandably unreconciled to the egalitarianism spread by the invading armies, joined the lower classes in national resistance movements; and pillaging by the French soldiery stimulated anti-French insurrections and aroused patriotic emotions in the hearts of Germans, Spaniards, and Russians. As a consequence, men of all political beliefs in the subject territories united to drive out French influences.

In Germany, liberation came with Napoleon's crushing defeat by the allies in the "Battle of the Nations" (a significant title) at Leipzig in 1813. The degree of German unity achieved here appeared to justify the hopes of German nationalists. On the Iberian peninsula, Spanish guerilla bands, aided by British troops, waged an unrelenting and deadly fight against the French. "The Spanish ulcer destroyed me," Napoleon explained later. The savagery of the warfare in Spain, immortalized in the paintings of Goya (1746-1828), inspired and glorified Spanish patriotism. National sentiment was an important factor in Russia's successful repulse of Napoleon's Grand Army in 1812. Here the population willingly embraced a scorched earth policy, consigning their homes and possessions to the flames in an effort to halt the advance of the hated French.

Napoleon gave some encouragement to nationalist desires in Germany, Poland, and Italy, not least by exemplifying the benefits attainable through patriotic unity. His imperial system was more acceptable in Italy and Poland. In the former country, for example, he reduced the number of states to three and stimulated Italian hopes of ultimate unification. Middle-class Italians welcomed the greater governmental efficiency and the weakening of clerical influences, and they never forgot their brief taste of national unity.

The Austrian Empire before the Napoleonic upheavals had been composed of a polyglot population which lacked racial, geographical, or linguistic unity. The several nationalities within its borders were held together solely by their common allegiance to the imperial crown. Therefore, the burgeoning nationalist notions evoked by the Revolution appeared to Prince Metternich to threaten not only the empire but the throne itself. A devotee of legitimacy, the Austrian minister opposed any development which would strengthen the cultural or political self-consciousness of the several nationalities within the Hapsburg domain. For this reason he tried to thwart nationalism not only in the empire, but in Germany, Italy, and anywhere else on the Continent. The Vienna settlement of 1815 represented an important line of Metternichian defense against the disintegration of Austrian imperial possessions.

Paradoxically enough, early nineteenth century nationalism operated sometimes as a force for political unification and
sometimes for political disintegration. The national spirit present in Germany and Italy aimed at unifying within single states peoples who were linguistically the same but whom the Vienna settlement had consigned to the separate rule of petty kings and princes. In contrast, in the Austrian Empire the fourteen separate and distinctive ethnic and linguistic groups present continually strove after 1815 for separate autonomy or independence. In either case, nationalism became a revolutionary force challenging the status quo. This being so, it is not difficult to see why in many instances the nationalist joined with the political liberal in an alliance against prevailing political regimes. Political liberalism held that among the natural rights of mankind was the right of men to determine their own political destiny, and proceeding logically from this presupposition was the conclusion that they possessed the inherent right to unite in a national brotherhood. Leagued by their common grievance against the status quo, the political liberal and the nationalist together moved against what one writer called "the lie of legitimacy."

Two additional factors which produced and conditioned nationalism after 1815 need to be noted. Of prime importance was the Industrial Revolution, which was gaining headway in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The rapid and drastic alteration in productive technology occurred first within existing national states before the lingering traditions of mercantilism had completely disappeared. Furthermore, improved means of communication and transportation facilitated a more effective dissemination of patriotic propaganda by nationalist groups. Cavour, the famous Italian nationalist, regarded railroads as an effective means "to stitch the Italian boot." Business classes saw in political unity within a nationality a convenient way to promote greater markets.

The second important influence which gave impetus to nationalism was romanticism. Peculiarities of national life and culture were stressed and consecrated by the romanticists; and in their idealization of the past they appealed to folk-history, exalted folk-language and folk-literature, and attributed inherent and distinctive mental qualities to the "folk-soul." "Has a people anything dearer than the speech of its fathers?" asked the German philosopher Herder (1744-1803) in 1793.

As we noted above, the Congress of Vienna not only thwarted the aspirations of those who hoped for liberal government, but when it redrew the boundaries of Europe it disregarded the principles of self-determination. The Metternich system was a formidable hurdle in the path of nationalist objectives of the Italians, Germans, Belgians, and the multinational population of the Austrian Empire. Conservatives like Metternich, viewing nationalism and political liberalism as merely two strands of the same subversive movement, could not distinguish between them. In fact, even with the perspective of decades, it is even now difficult to see them as separate forces as they emerged between 1815 and 1848. If one scratched below the skin of the early
nineteenth century political liberal, he likely found a nationalist, and vice versa. Until the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 the two discontented factions cooperated against their common foe. After that date they not only went their separate ways but, as we shall see later, in some countries developed an abiding hostility toward each other.

In no person, perhaps, was the flavor of liberal nationalism better illustrated than in the idealistic and ultrarepublican, Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872). As the nationalistic messiah of Italy's nineteenth century Risorgimento (Resurgence), Mazzini wrote: "In Europe today the word revolution is synonymous with the word nationality." His writings include instructions to the members of his "Young Italy" society, and while his words failed to win widespread popular support, especially among the peasantry, they remain a standard exposition of nineteenth century liberal nationalism. In 1858, Mazzini abjured his fellow Italians to recognize their obligations of humanity, and assured them that "in labouring for our own country [nation] on the right principle, we labour for Humanity." Nationalism, he seems to say, is the only way in which cosmopolitanism can be realized. In this belief, Mazzini demonstrates the romantic attitudes and impulses that actuated him.

Mazzini's purpose and its philosophical basis are clear in the selections that follow. Politics to him was undergirded by a moral outlook which he could not ignore. The document entitled "Liberty-Equality-Humanity-Independence-Unity" sums up his program for the Italian people:

Young Italy is a brotherhood of Italians who believe in a law of progress and duty, and are convinced that Italy is destined to become one nation, convinced also that she possesses sufficient strength within herself to become one, and that the ill success of her former efforts is to be attributed not to the weakness, but to the misdirection of the revolutionary elements within her, -- that the secret force lies in constancy and unity of effort. They join this association with the firm intention of consecrating both thought and action to the great aim of reconstituting Italy as one independent sovereign nation of free men and equals....

The aim of the association is revolution; but its labors will be essentially educational, both before and after the day of revolution; and it therefore declares the principles upon which the national education should be conducted, and from which alone Italy may hope for safety and regeneration....

Young Italy is republican and unitarian, -- republican, because theoretically every nation is destined, by the law of God and humanity, to form a free and equal community of brothers; and the republican government is the only form of government that insures this future: Because all true sovereignty resides essentially in the people, and not of the People, through idealistic elements, culture can only flower when the nation is united. Culture contributes to all mankind.
nation, the sole progressive and continuous interpreter of the supreme moral law;...because the monarchical element being incapable of sustaining itself alone by the side of the popular element, it necessarily involves the existence of the intermediate element of an aristocracy, -- the source of inequality and corruption to the whole nation; because both history and the nature of things teach us that elective monarchy tends to generate anarchy, and hereditary monarchy tends to generate despotism; because, when monarchy is not -- as in the Middle Ages -- based upon the belief, now extinct, in right divine, it becomes too weak to be a bond of unity and authority in the State; because the inevitable tendency of the series of progressive transformations taking place in Europe is toward the enthronement of the republican principle, and because the inauguration of the monarchical principle in Italy would carry along with it the necessity of a new revolution shortly after.

Our Italian tradition is essentially republican; our great memories are republican; the whole history of our national progress is republican; whereas the introduction of monarchy amongst us was coeval with our decay, and consummated our ruin by its constant servility to the foreigner and antagonism to the people as well as to the unity of the nation.

While the populations of the various Italian states would cheerfully unite in the name of a principle which could give no umbrage to local ambition, they would not willingly submit to be governed by one man, -- the offspring of one of those States; and their several pretensions would necessarily tend to federalism.

If monarchy were once set up as the aim of the Italian insurrection, it would, by a logical necessity, draw along with it all the obligations of the monarchical system, concessions to foreign courts, trust in and respect for diplomacy, and the repression of that popular element, by which alone our salvation can be achieved. By intrusting the supreme authority to monarchists whose interest it would be to betray us, we should infallibly bring the insurrection to naught....

Young Italy is unitarian, because, without unity there is no true nation; because, without unity there is no real strength; and Italy, surrounded as she is by powerful, united, and jealous nations, has need of strength above all things; because federalism, by reducing her to the political impotence of Switzerland, would necessarily place her under the influence of one of the neighboring nations; because federalism, by reviving the local rivalries now extinct, would throw Italy back upon the Middle Ages;...because federalism, by destroying the unity of the great Italian family, would strike at the root of the great mission Italy is destined to accomplish for humanity; because Europe is undergoing a progressive series of transformations, which are gradually and irresistibly
guiding European society to form itself into vast and united masses; because the entire work of internal civilization in Italy will be seen, if rightly studied, to have been tending for ages toward unity.

The means by which Young Italy proposes to reach its aim are education and insurrection, to be adopted simultaneously and made to harmonize with each other. Education must ever be directed to teach, by example, word, and pen, the necessity of insurrection. Insurrection, whenever it can be realized, must be so conducted as to render it a means of national education. Education, though of necessity secret in Italy, will be public outside of Italy.

Insurrection, by means of guerrilla bands, is the true method of warfare for all nations desirous of emancipating themselves from a foreign yoke. This method of warfare supplies the want -- inevitable at the commencement of the insurrection -- of a regular army; it calls the greatest number of elements into the field, and yet may be sustained by the smallest number. It forms the military education of the people and consecrates every foot of the native soil by the memory of some warlike deed. Guerrilla warfare opens a field of activity for every local capacity, forces the enemy into an unaccustomed method of battle, avoids the evil consequences of a great defeat, secures the national war from the risk of treason, and has the advantage of not confining it within any defined and determinate basis of operations. It is invincible, indestructible. The regular army, recruited with all possible solicitude and organized with all possible care, will complete the work begun by the war of insurrection.

All the members of Young Italy will exert themselves to diffuse these principles of insurrection. The association will develop them more fully in its writings, and will explain from time to time the ideas and organization which should govern the period of insurrection.*

In "The Call," Mazzini reveals the mixture of cosmopolitanism and nationalism which moved him to action. His devotion to "the great Unity," Rome, qualifies him to be classed as a romantic nationalist. His further assertion that "a regenerated Italy" is destined to become the initiatrix of a new life and Unity to all the nations of Europe, attests to his liberal cosmopolitanism.

It was during these months of imprisonment in Savona that I conceived the plan of the association of Young Italy (La Giovina Italia). I meditated deeply upon the principles

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Mazzini was, as we have indicated, an idealist and a visionary. Yet he was not wholly lacking in a sense of the possible. In the selection below he warns against ill-thought action, declaring that the liberation of Italy can come only by a program of revolution prosecuted with enthusiasm, energy, and sacrificial devotion in the name of the Italian people.