Funding the Future

Nationalism - good or bad?

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RobertJ asked a question on this blog yesterday that goes to the heart of how I believe that we should think about belonging, identity, and the politics of care. He asked whether nationalism is good or bad, or whether it all depends.

That is not an abstract question. In the UK and Ireland, nationalism has been a defining political force for centuries. From conquest and colonialism to Home Rule, devolution, and independence movements, nationalism has shaped who we are, who we think we are, and who we think others are not. In that case, the question deserves serious reflection, and I have given it a lot of thought, most especially as I write for The National, Scotland's only pro-independence newspaper.

First, I do not view nationalism as a negative sentiment because I think its roots lie in care, whether that be for a people, a place, a language, or a culture. So, when Welsh speakers defend their language, or when Scots argue for self-government, or when Irish people remember centuries of suppression and demand dignity, that nationalism is not rooted in hate; it is rooted in love for a community and its identity, and care for its survival. It is about wanting the right to govern one’s own life and community. That form of nationalism is inclusive: it does not require an enemy. It is not built on exclusion, but on belonging.

Second, nationalism can also be a response to powerlessness. In that sense, it can be a progressive impulse. When Westminster dismisses Scottish votes or when London drains wealth from English regions, it is unsurprising that people turn to national identity to reclaim agency. Nationalism, then, can become a language of resistance and a way of saying 'we matter too'.

Third, however, nationalism can curdle. When identity turns inward and begins to define itself by who is not included, it becomes toxic. When English nationalism defines “real” English people as white, or when Union Jacks become symbols of exclusion rather than community, nationalism becomes a politics of fear. The flags remain the same, but their meaning changes. The St. George’s Cross that decorates a local football ground in

celebration of a win by a national team is not the same as the one wielded by a mob chanting about migrants.

So perhaps the question is not whether nationalism is good or bad, but what it is for, and that brings me to what I call the politics of care.

The politics of care, about which I have often written a lot of late, begins with recognising that all people have equal worth, wherever they are born and whoever they are now. Care in this context is inherently relational precisely because it ignores who a person is and affirms their worth, wherever and whatever they might be, or think they are. As such, it will always connect across boundaries. That means nationalism must always be held in tension with something larger, whether that be humanity, decency, or empathy.

A nationalism consistent with a politics of care would:

* defend self-determination but reject superiority;
* protect culture, but refuse exclusion;
* celebrate belonging but resist the myth of purity.

It would see nationhood not as a fortress but as a framework for democracy, solidarity, and mutual care.

In that sense, there is an ethical distinction to be made between what might be described as differing forms of nationalism. The nationalism of the oppressed, who are the colonised, the ignored, and the disrespected, can be emancipatory. The nationalism of the powerful, which is used to dominate or exclude, is reactionary.

That distinction is what allows us to celebrate Plaid Cymru's recent victory in Caerphilly but fear a Reform UK government. The former seeks dignity within diversity; the latter demands obedience through division. The distinction is both real and essential.

That said, the left has often struggled with this. Internationalism, which is the belief in solidarity across borders, was heavily associated with early socialist and social democratic thinking, in particular, and can be made to sound as if it denies the importance of national identity. It can be used to argue that class matters more than any other identity, and that there is a reach beyond borders on that basis, and of course, that can be true: it is entirely possible to have more than one identity, and I have always found it hard to work out why some have so much difficulty with that idea.

Having empathy for others in different communities on the basis of similar social circumstances does not, and should not, however, prevent anyone from appreciating the culture, customs, community, and patterns of communication (often represented by language) closely associated with the place where they come from, live, or have moved

to. Holding both these things in mind simultaneously is, I suggest, vital. If we all have material, emotional and intellectual needs which lead us on a quest for meaning in life which may (and might not) lead us to spiritual exploration, then to appreciate both where we are and what matters to others is a sign not of abandoning principles, traditions and differing identities, but of upholding them, whilst reserving the right to criticise if they are abusive of those in any community. A healthy internationalism does, then, depend on self-confident nations that can cooperate, and not on loyalty to a single homogenised global state or ideal.

The same might be said of faith traditions. These might have their own visions, but the challenge is to reconcile those visions with the moral value of belonging somewhere in particular, and respecting that the person of one faith is exploring just as much as the adherent of any other faith, and none might be.

Why does this matter? It does because nationalism is again shaping the political landscape, whether that be in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and, perhaps most dangerously, in England. How each form of nationalism expresses itself will tell us a great deal about the kind of political and moral imagination that exists in the UK. The vital thing will be to understand the key point I am making, which is that not all nationalisms are alike. Nationalism can be used to unite or divide, to justify exclusion or to promote justice. It can be used to express love and care or for all in a community, or to induce fear and the ostracisation of some within it. Those approaches could not be more different.

My own answer to whether nationalism is good or bad is that it is good when it is an act of care, and bad when it is an act of domination, whilst it is only necessary when it gives voice to those who might otherwise be ignored. The test of any nationalism should be simple and is does it expand empathy, or does it shrink it? That is the ethical line that separates the politics of care from the politics of hate.

If we remember that, nationalism can be embraced as something of value, whilst being aware that if we forget it, nationalism can destroy us. But perhaps what is most important is to understand that, at its empathetic best, nationalism might help us rediscover who we are together.

This morning's post on the philosophy of John Rawls might be read to contextualise this post.

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