

Nationalism: good or bad?

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Nationalism can be a politics of care — about belonging, culture, and democracy — or a politics of control, built on fear and exclusion.

In this video, I explore how nationalism can empower the powerless, but also how it can curdle into prejudice.

I suggest that identifying the two is easy: good nationalism expands empathy, whilst toxic nationalism shrinks it.

So, what do you think? Is nationalism good or bad?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BoQijWkuLA?si=b_6tDn_sJNiKXx8D

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=9ymr4-19b46b7-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&fonts=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

Nationalism: is it good or is it bad? That's a question that goes through the very heart of belonging and identity, and to what I call 'the politics of care,' so it's a subject that very definitely fits in this channel, because nationalism shapes who counts and who is left

out, and that matters.

Nationalism has defined the politics of the UK for centuries, from conquest and empire to devolution and independence. Nationalism isn't just about history; it's what's shaping our politics again now. So what is nationalism for, and what happens when it turns toxic?

Let's be clear, nationalism can be a good thing, which I can embrace and endorse. At its best, nationalism begins in care, care for people, for language, culture, and place. It says, "We matter, and our dignity as a group of people matters." And that's important, because that's about belonging and not exclusion. It's about love of community and not hate of others.

That is something that also lets people join together when they feel unheard and demand that their voices count. And in a democracy, that's important. When Westminster ignores Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, or London drains the regions of England, as it does, then nationalism, or regionalism within England, becomes a form of language of resistance. It's a call for agency. It says, we want the right to define ourselves, and that's democracy at work. It's not about declaring superiority.

This is important because this is about the economics of powerlessness. This is linked to economic autonomy, the power to decide locally and not be dictated to, which was once the whole foundation of our local authority system within the UK as a whole, which did in the 19th, and for a large part of the 20th century, fuel the way in which our local economies thrived and delivered for the well-being of the people who lived within them.

In this case, nationalism is about tackling the neglect that fuels resentment, and nothing could be better than that in my opinion. Cultural identity, when used in this way, becomes a rallying cry for fairness. And we can see examples of this in the UK right now, not only in the independence movements in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but also in places like Manchester, where Andy Burnham is very clearly saying, "I want the power to decide for the people of this locality." And some other mayors are doing the same thing. In this situation, you cannot separate culture from economic justice. Progressive nationalism links dignity with democracy.

But, and let's add a very big but, at this point, nationalism can curdle and go off. Nationalism, when it becomes about control, is deeply toxic because nationalism that is about control defines itself by who's not included. It creates outsiders, by definition, and then flags become symbols of fear, and patriotism turns into prejudice. And we have that too in the UK right now, and all too obviously.

Reactionary nationalism of this sort feeds on fear: fear of outsiders, fear of change, fear of loss. It offers obedience instead of understanding to those who adhere to the idea. But in the process, of course, it alienates others. And its message is, and always has

been, the same: "Follow the strong man; trust no one else", and in that situation, democracy always withers.

The politics of care is the antidote to this form of nationalism. Care begins with the assumption that everyone is of equal worth, because they are. It connects across boundaries. It listens before it labels, and it turns fear into empathy, and exclusion into cooperation. This is a caring nationalism, which defends self-determination and not superiority, which protects culture and not purity, and celebrates belonging and not exclusion. Nationhood should, in this case, be a framework for democracy and solidarity, and not a fortress.

There are then two types of nationalism, and there's a moral difference between the two. The nationalism of the oppressed provides a voice and dignity. The nationalism of the powerful seeks control and obedience, and the contrast is obvious. For example, Plaid Cymru recently won the Caerphilly by-election, and that brought me hope of a better Wales, for the people of that country and for their well-being. In contrast, Reform UK's rise brings with it fear, which we can almost feel.

The left has always had a dilemma with any form of nationalism, and this, too, has to be addressed. The problem for the left is that it has always believed in internationalism. It has valued solidarity of the working class across borders. And I get that. People who are being prejudiced by an international order - like neoliberalism - do have issues in common, and to understand that those are international is of significance because it means lessons can be learned. But local identity still matters. It grounds empathy. And we can, anyway, hold two ideas at once. We can have pride in place, and solidarity and care for all. These are not mutually exclusive, and I believe the left has got it wrong when it tries to claim that they are.

Nationalism is something for the left as well as for everybody else in our society. We can literally carry many identities, and I believe that I do. I'm an East Anglian, I live in England, I have an Irish passport, I feel like I'm European. I don't see the contradictions in those things. They make me a human being in different contexts at different times, but all of them are relevant and all of them add to who I am.

But the important point is that belonging does not then require boundaries. Empathy across differences strengthens and not weakens community, and provides me with access to multiple communities, which is really advantageous. Real confidence welcomes diversity, in other words.

And the same is true of faith traditions because I think they should be mentioned within this context. Many faith traditions wrestle with this same idea that there are boundaries, each claiming the truth, when in fact I see no difference: wherever I look, there are faith traditions searching for meaning, and that is a common human condition. We need to respect that because that search humanises belief when too often belief has also become a reason for creating difference and outsiders. This is

about respect without domination, and that should always be the goal of any faith tradition.

So we have to recognise all these conflicting aims, but stand back and say 'Nationalism is a part of life.' It's everywhere in the UK. So the question is: what sort of nationalism do we want? Do we want one which embraces moral imagination, which will guide us, and which will empower those who are below? Or do we want a form of nationalism which demands obedience to those who are above? That is the choice that we are now faced with. That choice will shape our future.

And it's a simple ethical test.

Does our nationalism expand empathy or shrink it?

Does it build care or does it breed fear?

If our nationalism expands empathy and builds care, it's good.

If it shrinks empathy and breeds fear, it's bad.

It's as simple as that. And in most cases, the dividing line is glaringly obvious.

Nationalism is good when it's about care. It's bad when it's about domination. It's necessary when it gives voice to the ignored. And if we remember that nationalism is, in fact, good because it can unite us in trying to find answers to common questions, which could otherwise divide us, and that's important because the alternative will destroy us.

Nationalism, what do you think? Is it good or bad? There's a poll down below.

Poll

[poll id="247"]

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