
# National Identity: The Political Idea that Refuses to Disappear

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*"In recent years, any writer who predicted that nationalism was the wave of the future would have been regarded as eccentric….However, it [has] become increasingly clear that nationalism is back."*

Gideon Rachman, *The Economist*, November 13, 2014

National identity has always commanded much attention among social scientists, but recent years have shown increasing interest in the subject, evidenced by new and fascinating studies. Renewed engagement with national identity is connected to political processes around the world in recent years that have changed international politics immeasurably. The rise of the political right in Europe, Britain's departure from the European Union, and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States—events in which national identity played a central role—sparked new interest in the topic. The reexamination of national identity has also prompted the reemergence of old questions, such as: How should national identity be defined? What are the roots of this identity? Are there different types of national identity—ethnic vs. civil? The renewed interest has also raised new questions about the future role of national identity.

This review will map the academic debate regarding national identity in various periods. It will first review the classic discourse on national identity, ongoing since the middle of the last century, which focuses on the source and roots of national identity: Is this a modern social structure, or an identity whose origins

are deeply rooted in the more distant past and are an integral part of human nature? Later, the review will track developments in the debate from the 1990s, when with the rise of globalization and neoliberal economics, the Western world apparently transitioned to the post-nationalist era. At the same time, however, nationalism came under increasing attention, mainly in East European countries, where 15 new nation-states were created with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and others were released from the Warsaw Pact. The review then outlines new studies in the field of national identity, which deal with the "return" of nationalism to center stage in the West in recent years. In conclusion, issues will be raised that have not yet been the subject of in-depth discussion and merit further study. In view of the large number of studies on the subject, examples are presented of leading research in each school of nationalism studies, and the survey focuses on the most prominent scholars in each of these schools.

## National Identity: Real or Imagined?

The debate regarding national identity has dealt with a variety of questions, led by: What are the roots of such identity? Is it a new phenomenon that was invented as part of the transformations that took place in modern society? Is it an integral part of human history and embedded deep within the human soul? These questions have become a central axis in the discourse on national identity, since they have far-reaching political implications.

Those propagating nationalist ideas, most of whom were European intellectuals from the mid-19th century, implored their people to adhere to the romantic notion of nationalism in order to break from the old, rotten order of imperialist-monarchist regimes in Europe and to attain popular freedom. This was the original, primordial concept of the nation, which viewed national identity as a natural part of the identity of each person, as much as the color of her eyes or shade of his skin. These ideas formed the basis of the "Spring of Nations" in 1848.

Among the primordial school of thought were various approaches to the nature of national identity. For instance, in 1882 French philosopher Ernest Renan characterized nationalism as a spiritual and emotional idea, and not a physical quality implanted within a person (Renan, 2018). This was the basis for civil nationalism, which includes those who identify with its ideas. In contrast, German thinkers in the 19th century, such as Johannes Gottlieb Fichte (Fichte, 1922) emphasized the deep common characteristics that communities shared over the years, which gave rise to their national identity.

Notwithstanding the rise of the nationalist idea in the 19th century, it was the end of the First World War in the 20th century that led to the establishment of dozens of nation-states as part of Wilson's "Fourteen Points" (Rachmimov, 2004). These nation-states demanded of their citizens absolute loyalty to their national identity and the commitment to sacrifice themselves and their children for the national idea and the national interest. Pursuant to the romantic ideas of the 19th century, the nation-states adopted nationalist ideologies that related to nationality as an integral part of the person, and exhorted citizens to follow the order of their natural—i.e., national—identity.

Beginning in the mid-20th century, the primordial approach attracted various critiques. The most important of them was put forth by a group of sociologists who argued that national identity is a modern social construct. The most prominent among this group, who became known as modernists, were Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm. Gellner described nationalism as a creation of modern society and of processes that took place in the 19th century: industrialization, urbanization, and education (Gellner, 1983). The transition from a rural to an urban and industrialized society broke the traditional identity links of many Europeans, which were based on family and local, rather than state, identity. Furthermore, education weakened the place of religion in

the lives of citizens. This created a need for an overarching unifying identity that would provide a response to the alienation of urban life in an industrialized society. Hence, instead of tribal-family, local, and religious loyalties in the urban, educated, and industrialized society, people began identifying with the nation.

Anderson emphasized the role of education and printing in the rise of nationalism, and argued that national identities are the "imagined" structures of an educated society that records its history as it wants to imagine it. During such writing, the nation edits its narrative—what it wants to remember, and even more importantly, what it wants to forget. This imagined narrative becomes the story that motivates citizens to commit to serve it and even to sacrifice their lives for it (Anderson, 1983).

Hobsbawm explained the emergence of national identity from a modernist-Marxist viewpoint. He argued that modernism released the masses from the bonds of religion and from traditional loyalties, and threatened the ruling elites in European countries. He described the emergence of nationalism as a response by the elites to a situation in which they were about to lose their place, and as a tool of renewed incitement and enslavement of the masses. According to Hobsbawm, the elites came up with traditions and customs that appeared as if they had been taken from the distant common historical past of the nations, but they invented traditions in order to create legitimacy for their continued leading role in society (Hobsbawm, 1983).

The common thread among modernist thinkers is that they view the nation and national identity as a novel social construct that emerged as part of the transition from the ancien régime to the new modern era. The modernist approach resonated widely in social sciences, and became almost hegemonic in nationalism studies. It also enriched the constructivist theoretical discourse that became central in the social sciences.

A deep theoretical and ideological chasm opened between the primordialists and the modernists. If national identity is a new, imaginary phenomenon manipulated by the elites, then the primordialist proponents and defenders of nationalist ideas are in the best case mistaken and misleading, and in the worst case exploiters and manipulators. The question becomes even starker in conflict and war: Do we send our children to die for an imaginary idea, or even worse, for an elitist manipulation?

A bitter political discourse took place in Israeli society as well surrounding the question of the origin of national identity—Israeli-Zionist and Palestinian alike. From the Israeli political-left, historian Shlomo Zand argued that the Jewish nation is a modernist invention of Zionist leaders (Zand, 2008). In contrast, those on the Israeli right explain the phenomenon of Palestinian nationalism as a result of post-colonialist theory (see, for instance, Greenstein, 2015). These politically and socially sensitive topics have turned the primordialist-modernist debate into a long, bitter dispute.

Despite the divide, a few researchers have enriched the discussion from different angles. Alongside primordialism, there are researchers who argue that nationalism is not a new phenomenon, but a continuation of identities with deep historical roots, known as perennialism. Perennialists do not view nationalism as an integral and natural part of the person, but the roots of nationalism are to be found in ancient history. Gat and Yakobson described a situation of this sort in their book *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Gat & Yakobson, 2012), positing the existence and continuation of the foundations of national identity before the modern age. The book brings examples of the solidarity and attachment that were characteristic of ethnic groups from ancient times until today, which in the opinion of the authors refutes the arguments of the modernists regarding nationalism as a modern and invented structure that exists in the imagination of citizens in the new age. In the Israeli context, the book by Assaf Malach,

*From the Bible to the Jewish State* (Malach, 2019), presents a perennialist approach that attempts to challenge the modernist concept by Zand and connects perennialism to the current Israeli political discourse.

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The second group of scholars between the modernist and primordialist poles are the ethno-symbolists, led by historian Anthony Smith. Smith argued that while nationalism is a new phenomenon that developed in the modern period and an invention by the elites who created national narratives and myths, these narratives rely on identities and symbols with a deep history that provides them with exceptional political power (Smith, 1999). Smith exposed the foundations underlying national identity, and those that turned national myths from a meaningless story to a strong political narrative that drove masses. Smith described certain patterns that repeat themselves in national myths, including a common distant past, hardships that were experienced along the way, and stories of heroism about figures that overcome the difficulties. All these bind the nation together and structure a similar way in which individuals, primarily in ethnically-based nations, tie their fates to that of the nation.

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## From the End of History to the End of Nationalism?

If the end of the First World War became the "big bang of nationalism," as described by historian Iris Rachmimov (Rachmimov, 2004), globalization was supposed to end the nationalist idea, together with the end of history as foreseen by Francis Fukuyama at the end of the Cold War (Fukuyama, 1992). Neoliberal globalization, which is the current faster wave of human convergence, accelerated the transfer of goods, resources, and people around the globe at a pace unseen in human history. Behind all these stood ideas of freedom and nonintervention of the state in the global economy and in civilian life. The nation-state retreated both from physical management and from the creation of ideological narratives for its citizens. In addition, the Western economy moved to the post-industrial age service-based economy and toward the digital age.

These processes were described by sociologists Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, who argued that modernity itself changes and becomes the new modernism—"late modernity" (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1996). Bauman and Giddens concurred with modernists regarding the roots of national identity as a modern structure created as a result of urbanization, education, and industrialization, but they argued that as modernity evolves, national identity refashions itself along with it. They described how the state's retreat from the life of its citizens since the 1980s has blurred and weakened national identity. Citizens in the West were empowered to decide on their identity, and together with increased migration, societies in the West became more pluralistic in relation to the identities of their citizens. As Bauman described it, globalization put the creation of identity in the hands of individuals, who could rely only on themselves to produce new identities that matched the fast-paced world that was developing around them. The new identities that were created were more

flexible, and Bauman used the metaphor of liquid to describe them.

However, Bauman and Giddens did not deny that alongside cultural pluralism and the retreat of the state from the lives of its citizens, national identity continued to play a role in the political life of advanced post-industrialist Western states. Sociologist Michael Billig described national identity in the post-industrialist era as "banal" (Billig, 1995). He argued that national identities in this age are the default of each citizen in an advanced Western country, and are deeply imprinted in citizens. However, and perhaps because of the deep assimilation of these identities, the citizens in those countries no longer have to engage in grandiose actions to demonstrate their national affinity, but reflect such affinity through everyday practices. Thus, nationalism in this age, as described by Giddens and Bauman, has weakened and become flexible, but as Billig noted, is an underlying and unspoken force that still dominates life in Western societies. In contrast, enthusiastic and fervent nationalism has been branded in the post-nationalist age as a dangerous ideology that exists in the global periphery and among peoples who lag behind progress. As Billig described it: "The guerilla figures, seeking to establish their new homelands, operate in conditions where existing structures of state have collapsed, typically at a distance from the established centres of the West" (Billig, 1995, p. 5).

The rise of the post-nationalist era deflected nationalism to the global periphery, and mainly to the new countries in Eastern Europe that were established following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Theoretician Rogers Brubaker reframed the topic of national identity in Eastern Europe (Brubaker, 1996). He described three types of nationalisms that developed in Eastern Europe after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The first type is "nationalizing nationalism," which drives groups that feel they have been marginalized in the past and now demand national hegemony in their "own" territory. This type of nationalism was attributed to ethnic groups in the new countries that were created in the 1990s, which demanded that these countries reflect their national uniqueness. The second type of nationalism Brubaker described is "homeland nationalism," which comes from the source countries, and aims to protect minority groups that remained outside the national borders. For instance, the nationalist movements in Russia frequently championed the minority rights of ethnic Russians who remained outside Russian borders and were given inferior status in some new countries. The third type of nationalism is "minority nationalism" belonging to those who remained outside the borders of the new national entities that were created. Following the imperial collapse, these minorities who remained outside the borders of the national state of the ethnic group to which they belong, were exposed to nationalist policies of the new countries. They developed nationalist concepts that differed from what the leaders in their countries of origin expected. The three types of nationalism defined by Brubaker provided the framework for understanding the development of nationalism in Eastern Europe following the

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## Back to the Future: Is the Post-Nationalist Era Coming to an End?

2016 proved to be the breaking point for the globalist dream. Brexit in the UK and the election of President Trump seem to have heralded a radical change of direction in the balance between globalism and nationalism. Two major countries that had been symbols of the post-industrialist and post-nationalist age chose to deviate from the global path and reinforce their national identities. However, many of the signs of the crisis were in place long before 2016. Neoliberal globalization had economically served neither emerging countries, nor the entire public in developed countries. But of no less importance, the lack of the anchors of identity, the demand for constant adaptation, and the blurring of national identity were shown to be unpleasant for many. For various population sectors, 2016 was the culmination of years-long erosion in their status, their financial state, and their perception of themselves and their identity.

In fact, as far back as the 1990s, Gidden and Bauman indicated the gaps in neoliberal globalism that in their view were a risk to its continued development (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 1999). Giddens noted that nationalism had a psychological function. It creates continuity of people's identity and a sense of ontological security. This security described by Giddens develops from day-to-day practice and from long-term relationships that create people's identity. Neoliberal globalization intentionally undermines the continuity of identity in that it calls for flexibility and rapid adaptiveness to new situations, thereby undermining the ontological security of many citizens. Giddens and Bauman warned back in the 1990s that these cracks would create social tensions over the years, which would be impossible to overcome. They both indicated that this state of affairs would lead to a "longing for identity [that] comes from the desire for security."

It certainly seems that Giddens and Bauman's warning was on the mark. In the second decade of the 21st century, there was an unprecedented nationalist mobilization relative to previous decades, which was based on the yearning for a strong, stable, and more defined identity. These calls came at the expense of global values and the expression of national identity through banal practices. With the re-emergence of nationalism in the West, the nationalist mobilization in Putin's Russia seems a vanguard in a world that is becoming ever more nationalistic. As Putin's former advisor Vladislav Surkov concluded: "When [the West] was still crazy about globalism…Moscow provided a clear reminder that sovereignty and national interests matter.…They taught us that there is no reason to hold on to the values of the nineteenth century.…The 21st century, however, turned out to be closer to our path: the English Brexit, 'Make America Great Again,' and the anti-migrant movements in Europe are just the first items on a long list of the ubiquitous manifestations of deglobalization, resovereignization, and nationalism" (Surkov, 2019).

The old-new situation and the return of nationalism to center stage in the current era has led to a resurgence of attention to the topic and a large number of books that have tried to

explain the phenomenon. The most prominent of these include the book by historian Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Freedom: Russia, Europe, America*, in which Snyder links the rise of authoritarians in Russia and the nationalist movements in Eastern and Western Europe with the rise of Trump in the US (Snyder, 2018). Although Snyder deals frequently with Russia's direct influence on Western countries and its undermining of liberal democratic ideas, he also emphasizes the close link between the in-depth processes that have taken place both in Russia and in the West and have led to a rise of nationalism.

Another prominent book that deals with the rise of Trump and the rise of nationalism in the United States was written by anthropologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (Hochschild, 2016). In her book *Strangers in Their Own Land*, she explains the philosophies and the sense of loss and estrangement felt by layers of the white working class in the United States regarding the changing world around them, in which identities became flexible, while groups such as migrants and Afro-Americans "jumped" the line on the way toward the American dream. Former Israeli education minister Yuli Tamir presented her theory in her book *Why Nationalism* (Tamir, 2019), which describes the political, social, and economic gaps in the post-nationalist era, and in which she calls for liberal nationalism to heal the rifts created in society due to globalism. Journalist Nadav Eyal also touched upon similar points in his book, *The Revolt against Globalization* (Eyal, 2018).

As the list of new books and articles on national identity becomes longer, most researchers show a tendency to describe the return of nationalism to the center of the political agenda as a pendulum, with global identity on one side and national identity on the other. As the pendulum swings from one side to the other, identity transforms from global to national. If so, are we going back toward a society similar to the one of the 19th or early 20th century, or is the return of nationalism a sudden short-term flickering that will disappear as the pendulum swings back toward globalism? These directions of thought may soon prove to be overly simplistic. The likelihood that in a few years we will find ourselves living in a futuristic version of 19th century politics is quite low. To the same extent, it is clear that the return of nationalism indicates a deep difficulty within the process of globalization. It is therefore difficult to show that it may be possible to limit these tensions quickly and successfully, and to continue with the dizzying pace of globalization that we have so far experienced.

From a historical point of view, this may not be a pendulum movement, but an internal struggle within societies and between various groups with conflicting philosophies. In historical struggles such as this, the results have frequently been surprising and completely unexpected, and have led to the emergence of new ideas. For instance, the idea of sovereignty

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that formed the basis for national ideas and nation-states grew out of the wars of religion in 17th century Europe. Therefore, researchers in the field must take nonlinear developments and implications into account, as well as the appearance of unexpected black swans that fundamentally change the face of society (such as the coronavirus that is currently spreading throughout the world and may have far-reaching implications for national ideas). These directions of thought have not yet attracted attention from national identity researchers, and are awaiting in-depth thought and further research.

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