Does Nationalism Facilitate Order and Justice?

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NADIA VITTORIA, MAR 7 2012

The concept of nationalism is more than just a theory of international relations. It also represents an ideology, a concept and a belief. It is these diverse facets of the one concept that make its definition so difficult to formulate. Importantly, in understanding the influence of nationalism on order and justice in world politics, it is essential to define what constitutes a 'nation'. A nation is an 'imagined' community[1] in which a group of individuals share similar characteristics, such as culture, language and symbols.[2] Despite this, Ernest Gellner suggests that for a nation to exist in its purest form there must be some form of mutual identification from its members.[3] Thus, it is the creation of a sense of belonging and a feeling of solidarity which allows a nation to construct its boundaries.[4] Although the definition of a nation is quite broad, it essentially emerges as a result of humanity's constant analysis of themselves and the need to feel part of something larger than oneself.

This essay will seek to examine how humanity's incessant need to recognise themselves by nation status impacts on the concepts of order and justice in international society. For the purposes of this essay, order is defined as the ability to maintain stability with relative peace and no conflict. Justice, in contrast, is the ability to exercise and maintain universally accepted norms, such as the right to self-determination or the right to live without oppression. This essay will explore the negative impact of nationalism on both these concepts by firstly examining the different processes of nationalism and the emergence of ethnic and civic nationalism. Secondly, consideration will be given to the role of nationalism in ethnic conflicts and how, using the case of socialist Yugoslavia, nationalism has both the potential to facilitate and dismantle order. And finally, consideration will be given to the impact of national self-determination and its influence on order and justice both in a positive and negative sense.

At a very basic level, it is contended that different processes and theories of nationalism relate more to justice or to order than others. Depending on which theoretical approach is applied, order or justice may be facilitated or hampered. John Gledhill suggests that the literature regarding nationalism has emerged to show a clear contrast between two particular forms of nationalism: ethnic and civic nationalism.[5] Ethnic or cultural nationalism relates directly to myths of common ancestry, homeland, origin and migration within a nation.[6] It portrays the very foundations of nationalism as being a cultural entity which is strengthened by the presence of a common language, religion and other cultural norms.[7] It is primarily based on the presence of one ethnic group and demands a correlation between that ethnic group, the nation and the state.[8] This emphasis means that nation's wishing to congruent the notions of ethnicity, nation and state must exercise a right to self-determination. This concept goes to strengthen the notion of justice and cements the ideal that all people have the right to 'determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development', but it does have significant potentially to undermine world order.[9] For example it is suggested that Indonesia alone has 744 ethnic communities.[10] Thus, if one in ten demanded self-determination the international community would have to accommodate for 74 new nation-states. Therefore, the question becomes: at what expense? Ethnic nationalism may support a liberalist idea of justice but it confounds the concept of order by mobilising all nations to demand the same rights.

In contrast, civic or liberal nationalism centres upon a common territorial homeland in which all people involved contributed to the distinctive national character and culture, regardless of their ancestral roots.[11] This kind of nationalism is not about a common cultural heritage, rather it attempts to build upon and construct a community.[12] Thus, it is often described as 'forward-looking' in the sense that its focus is upon the vision and the process of formation for the nation, not on its collective history.[13] This nationalism categorises the nation as a political entity

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and thus, encompasses different ethnicities under one common destiny. For example, China has 254 ethnic groups[14] and whilst there are some exceptions to the general rule, the majority of these groups unite under the strong and stable ideology that they are all Chinese. This broader nationalism appears to supersede the cultural heritage of separate ethnic groups, but does not replace it altogether. Thus, as long as civic nationalism can maintain the common identity as the dominant form of nationalism it can continue to promote stability and order. With this said it is arguable that such an application of nationalism is oppressive to minorities and places the maintenance of order at the expense of justice. What can be concluded from both processes is that ethnic nationalism, in theory, favours the maintenance of justice and civic nationalism promotes the concept of stability and order. As international society currently stands it is difficult to ignore the negative effects of nationalism on these concepts, despite the limit successes of nationalism in facilitating order and justice.

The presence of nationalist conflict is one such indication as to why nationalism does little to promote international order and justice. According to Andreas Wimmer since the end of the Cold War, the number of ethnic-nationalist conflicts throughout the world has outweighed all other forms of political confrontation.[15] The correlation between nationalism and conflict is difficult to deny and even more difficult to understand. Stephen Van Evera suggests that the effect of nationalism in a conflict is incredibly varied.[16] He proposes that some types of nationalism will pose more of a potential threat to conflict than others and some will actually dampen the risk of conflict in the right circumstances.[17] Thus, this perspective suggests that nationalism has the potential to both undermine and affirm order in different circumstances. Usually it is nationalist movements that lack the foundations of a state which raise the greatest potential for war as they result in the most disruptive change.[18] In this sense, it is suggested that nationalism in the Western world has little association with conflict as most nations within the West have their own states.[19] In turn, these nations have attained a level of homogeneity and possessed an ability to accommodate minorities effectively, thereby; performing a careful and more considered balancing act with stability and justice. Such an approach is questionable as nationalism does present the potential for oppression of minorities by the controlling majority nation. However, this oppression is likely to be more obvious and widespread in a situation that involves conflict because the balance of power has shifted to competing nationalist movements that lack the institutions established within a nation state.

Continuing from this analysis, Van Evera suggests that the destructive force of nationalism is at its most powerful in the weaker successor states that have formed since the collapse of the strong Soviet bloc in 1991.[20] The issue in Eastern Europe is that weak successor states have to maintain some level of control to avoid the redistribution of power to the large number of stateless and well-supported nations. This often presents a situation where order takes precedent to upholding justice. This was seen in the actions of President Slobodan Milošević of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War.[21] Milošević's criminal responsibility lay in his involvement in carrying out the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo Albanians based on their ethnicity and religion in retaliation to the rise of the stateless Kosovo Liberation Army.[22] He was subsequently put on trial for crimes against humanity, war crimes and violations of the laws or customs of war.[23] The conflict in Kosovo shows that in an attempt to uphold power, the maintenance of order is often used as the justification in undermining the values of justice, the rule of law and the rights of a nation. In a very basic sense, nationalism reveals that not only does it have the potential to evoke conflict but it also demonstrates that there can be no implementation of justice without some basic level of national order. Nationalism lets individuals hide their injustices behind the facade of proactively taking steps to maintain order.

Furthermore, nationalism does little to facilitate order and justice because it is evolves from the internal workings of the nation and can easily change its alliances and loyalties to suit the goals of its members, with very little consideration of others.[24] By definition nationalism requires individuals to give their loyalty to those belonging to their nation or ethnic group.[25] In particular it is this loyalty which is expected to surpass the loyalty felt to any other group, regardless of shared territory or any other common characteristic.[26] The case of socialist Yugoslavia provides an example of when nationalism has been proactive in facilitating order but also an example of when such competing and changing loyalties have undermine it. The formation of Yugoslavia was on the basis of multi-nation unity; however, it is contended that its collapse was due to the failure to maintain the national identity it had sought to build in its creation.[27] When Yugoslavia was formed, there were two types of nationalism present. Firstly, a civic form of nationalism in which individuals saw themselves' as defined by a supranational identity based on the whole of Yugoslavia.[28] Importantly, Vesna Godnina contends that this was never considered to be the national identity, just

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a state identity.[29] Secondly, there was an underlying form of ethnic nationalism based on the different ethnic nations constituting the Yugoslav state.[30] Both forms of nationalism were able to co-exist until the collapse of that supranational identity. It was then that the secondary ethnic loyalties proceeded to eliminate any other form of nationalism with the result being wide-spread conflict and the dismantling of the entire state.[31] Nationalism presented to Yugoslavia potential order in the creation of a unified state and at the same time was the reason for conflict and instability. Such circumstances illustrates how easily nationalism can turn a situation where it was proactive in maintaining stability into a situation where nationalistic movements and its highly personal focus prevented the implementation of any form of order or justice.

Inherently linked to the presence of nationalism and conflict, is the right of self-determination. From the process of decolonisation to the struggles of the Kurds to have the region of Kurdistan recognised,[32] self-determination has shown that nationalism is more than just a common ideology. It is a sentiment that accompanies a political desire to live within and have a nation-state.[33] After all, national self-determination has been the justification for the establishment of 150 new and independent states within the international community.[34] It is a concept recognised in both the United Nations Charter and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[35] It is inherently linked to nationalism. However, this acceptance of national self-determination within the international society largely relates to the process of decolonisation and the success it had in facilitating justice for nations in Africa and Asia. However, as Martin Griffiths suggests it is the increasing recognition of the sub-nation's right to self-determination, post-decolonisation that has undermined the fundamental principle of international order – territorial sovereignty.[36] It is territorial sovereignty that brings legitimacy to the nation state and as the world order currently stands; it has little tolerance for the change that nationalist movements strive for. It is this sub-state nationalism that has noticeably affected the political and territorial stability of many states resulting in continued political crisis and asymmetrical warfare.[37] There are simply too many nations to effectively accommodate all of them with their own nation state; thus, tensions can arise when one group threatens the territorial sovereignty of another.

As discussed previously, nationalism is very much the result of the internal workings of a group; therefore, nations are motivated to act out of fear for their survival.[38] If sub-nations begin to challenge the recognition of another nation's territorial sovereignty, it is that increased competition for sovereignty within the state that has the potential to exacerbate any underlying conflict.[39] In this sense, nationalism coupled with the undermining of sovereignty has both the power to weaken the self-determined nation and strengthen the cause of the nation seeking recognition. As most states are multinational in some way, the challenge of accommodating multiple claims to self-determination within a single territory is a very difficult thing to satisfy.[40]

Furthermore, as Griffiths suggests the most disputed aspect of national self-determination is determining 'who' has this right.[41] A cosmopolitan interpretation of justice would suggest that all persons should have the right to self-determination and in turn, each person should impose limits on their conduct in order for another to realise their rights.[42] However, international society has little tolerance for the acceptance of new states that are formed at the expense of the pre-existing order. The application of self-determination in a post-colonial world requires the carrying out of a careful balancing act between the rights of one nation over the rights of another. The problem is this: even if the right to self-determination of one nation is accommodated, the rights of another are disrupted. Thus, it is difficult to comprehend how the creation of a new state for one nation facilitates order and justice when it uproots the state of another and challenges an opposing nation's existence and their own right to self-determination.

An example of this can be seen in the partitioning of the Middle East and the creation of the Israeli state. The nation state of Israel has subsequently been at odds with Palestinian and Arab nationalism since the time of its creation. E.G.H Joffe suggests that as a result of its creation Israel continues to confront a more 'potent form of nationalism' that combined with Arab unity has seen the Palestinian struggle for recognition and self-determination become subsumed into the wider Arab world.[43] Although beneficial for the Israeli nation, this exercising of self-determination has done little in the way of justice in the eyes of the Palestinian people and has only further confounded the concept of order in the Middle East, particularly in light of resistance movement and anti-Semitic sentiment.[44] The difficulty with nationalism is that its benefits and successes are very subjective, particularly if self-determination involves obstructing the rights of another nation. The situation in the Middle East shows that in some sense, nationalism presents itself to be a careful balancing act in determining who should have the right and at what

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expense.

It can be concluded from this that it is the many facets of nationalism that make its impact on order and justice so difficult to understand. Nationalism is more than just a theory for explaining why things happen, it is very much a sentiment felt by all people who feel some sense of belonging. Its strengths and weaknesses lie in the fact that it is extremely subjective and comes from within the make-up of the nation. Thus, nationalism has the potential to create havoc particularly in terms of creating or exacerbating conflict and tension. Whilst nationalism plays a large role in maintain the global order and facilitating the creation of new nations with the decolonisation process, nationalism, whether civic or ethnic, has far greater negative implications. Nationalism has been used as the justification to conflict and has the ability to disguise injustice in the name of maintaining order. By its definition, nationalism has shown to be very much about loyalties which can wax and wane depending on the goals of the internal actors of a nation.

As was seen with Yugoslavia, nationalism can present order in the creation of a unified state but can subsequently cause conflict and instability when faced with the goal of liberation from secondary ethnic nationalist movements. Furthermore, it is the basis for undermining territorial sovereignty and its subjective nature means that a careful game of balance must be played when determining what 'peoples' can demand the right to self-determination. Nationalism is a force which can easily strengthen itself and just as quickly weaken its own foundations. The fundamental reason why nationalism fails to facilitate order and justice is that it is extremely volatile and highly unpredictable in its nature. In the worst case scenario, the forces of nationalism have the ability and strength to undermine any of its previous successes. However, the real question is, can there be an alternative?

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[18] ibid., p. 31

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[39] ibid.

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Written by: Nadia Vittoria
Written at: Deakin University
Written for: Dr Costas Laoutides
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