

“Our” Country:
Identity, Exclusion, and the “Nation-State”

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Every schoolchild in the United States learns the Pledge of Allegiance. Most learn several different national songs, including “America” and “America the Beautiful,” besides the official national anthem. The emphasis of patriotism early in life reflects the importance of American-hood in society at large. But why does society consider sharing this nationalist ideology so important? In *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism*, Robert Heilbroner describes ideologies as “systems of thought and believe by which dominant classes explain to themselves how their social system operates and what principles it exemplifies” (107). In the context of the nation, ideology attempts to give all citizens something to hold in common—an ideal, a past, or a dream for the future. The ideology of the nation is useful in building solidarity among individuals with a common background. However, this solidarity necessarily comes at the cost of excluding those who do not fit this privileged identity.

The nation is ideologically defined as the history held in common between many individuals. Ernest Renan’s article “What Is a Nation?” discards many possible definitions of the nation. He demonstrates that historical, anthropological, and geographic truths do not support the idea of the nation as defined by a set of geographic borders, shared race or ethnicity, or a common language. Instead, Renan defines the nation as “a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the

past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future” (19). This vision of the nation is evidenced by numerous examples, including the United States’ anthem “America.” The song identifies America with a shared sacrifice by characterizing the nation as the “land where my fathers died,” a reference originally to the Revolutionary War. France’s “Marseillaise” also recalls a revolutionary struggle. The song both calls the citizenry “aux armes [to arms]” against “rois conjures [conspiratorial kings]” and, as Esteban Buch writes in *Beethoven’s Ninth: A Political History*, functionally replaces the aristocracy’s elitist “Te Deum” with a French song that common citizens can understand and an elitist choral setting with a simple tune that “eliminat[es] the barrier between musicians and nonmusicians and... establish[es] the united voice of the people” (29). This remembrance of national struggle in song creates the nation’s identity for the future.

Renan not only contends that national ideology is founded on historical sacrifice-- he justifies this ideology. Arguably, a national identity founded on history is as artificial as claiming the political significance of geographic borders. Instead of reflecting history accurately, ideology often constructs a “cult of past heroes” (Buch 27). Thus, the nation fails to remember that the Revolutionary War most served to benefit the wealthy merchant class, the United States committed genocide against American native tribes, and Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. However, even if a nation’s ideological interpretation of history may be incomplete, Renan argues that citizens have a legitimate duty to and connection with the nation’s past: “Man...does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have

made us what we are” (19). Renan believes that because any contemporary nation stands on the shoulders of past giants, it has a duty to give them credit.

The ideology of the nation empowers the nation to overcome crises by building unity. Artifacts of national ideology, such as national anthems, loyalty oaths, and invocations of patriotism unite the nation by reminding individuals of the history they share in common with their fellow citizens. For example, the Marseillaise strengthens post-revolutionary France by calling on the present generation to share its ancestors’ struggle:

Bien moins jaloux de leur survivre / [We are much less jealous of
surviving them (our elders)]

Que de partager leur cercueil, / [Than of sharing their coffins]

Nous aurons le sublime orgueil / [We will have the sublime pride]

De les venger ou de les suivre! [Of avenging or joining them!]

The power of nationalist artifacts is so strong, it prompts citizens to sacrifice themselves on the battlefield. National ideology thus derives its utility in motivating citizens to act for the good of the whole, instead of their personal interests.

The construction of national identity necessarily excludes citizens who do not fit the ideological ideal. Most modern nations are a melting pot of different ethnicities, faiths, and worldviews to some extent. As seen most apparently in the United States, this presents a problem for national ideology. The national song, “America,” claims that the United States is a “sweet land of liberty.” However, as Robert James Branham writes in “Of Thee I Sing: Contesting ‘America,’” the United States has not always been a free country.:

In 1831, when Smith proclaimed America a... "land of the noble free," over two million Americans were in bondage. A majority of the nation's residents, including Native Americans and women, were denied the franchise and other legal rights. ... For many, to sing of America as a "sweet land of liberty" was to deny the reality of their own experience. (5)

The underside of American history leaves African-Americans, women, and many other groups to ask themselves, "How... can one sing a song of freedom in a land where one is not free?" (6). "America" also normalizes white English colonist heritage as the "land of the pilgrim's pride" (4). Most Americans' ancestry does not link back to the early colonies, but rather to one of the many waves of immigration from other nations. For Native Americans, while the United States is their "native land," their ancestors died fighting the "pilgrim's pride" as European colonists pushed them off of their land. By attempting to unite the nation with a single set of historical sacrifices, the ideology of the nation excludes citizens with different histories. By labeling individuals who do not fit the ideological mold as less than full citizens, this exclusion serves only to entrench discrimination.

The development of a strong national ideology can also entrench ideas of superiority over other nations. In Germany in the 1930s, Hitler rose to power largely by appealing to the patriotic sentiments of German citizens suffering under World War One reparations. This national pride prompted the Nazi party to reinterpret the German national anthem, "Deutschland Über Alles [Germany Over All]" as literal truth (Kang 2004). Germany asserted its self-supposed dominance over the rest of world with aggressive expansionary policies and the extermination of non-Aryan groups such as

Jews and Gypsies. The ideology of the German nation, closely aligned with ethnic pride, caused arguably the worst acts of violence of the twentieth century. The power of a nation united by intense nationalist fervor is indubitable. Power, however, can be used for good or bad ends. In Germany's case, the ideology of the nation blinded the citizenry to such an extent that they could not see the atrocities their nationalism fueled.

Identifying with a group based on shared sacrifice is not usually a bad thing in itself. Certain social groups have acted destructively independently, such as white southerner ideology as embodied in the Ku Klux Klan. However, most of the time ethnic or other social groups do not have the motivation or resources to impose their ideology on others. The problematic features of the ideology of the nation arise when the government attempts to universalize one ideology to the exclusion of others: the "nation-state," in a literal sense. Within the "nation-state," one ideology acquires the authority to forcibly impress itself on minority citizens and the rest of the world. When one national identity is enshrined in law, all others' legal rights are imperiled.

Works Cited

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