

**The Discourse on "Post-Nationalism"
A Reflection on the Contradictions of the 1990's**

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Post-nationalism may be a presentiment depending on the geography one is situated in or produces knowledge about. Regardless of geography, however, it is possible to discern post-nationalism as a discourse which proffers new sets of ideas to a post-bi-polar world and to the culture of a putatively borderless, "global" economy. My purpose in this essay is to highlight some of the contradictions lurking behind this discourse and the historic forces that produce it. In positing that post-nationalism's sphere of action is essentially that of a discourse and not that of an ideology, I am relying on Foucault who exhorts that discourse "has to take account of its own presentness in order to find its own place, to pronounce its meaning, and to specify the mode of action which it is capable of exercising within this present" (12). Post-nationalism today exercises its action and meaning as the emergent discourse against a historically dominant and hegemonic nationalism.

I.

It is one of the patent contradictions of the New World Order that for the peoples who have to reinvent their national identities and draw their territorial borders after the collapse of their ancien regimes, nationalism proves to be a potent ideology-- more potent than capitalism even. Against this background, analyzing a discourse beyond nationalism may be a counter-intuitive exercise, or a fantasmatic aberration at worst. In the US and in Europe however, "post-nationalism" is one of the privileged terms of an academic, economic, and political debate which delineates the transition from modernity to postmodernity, from the old order of the world to its new order, indeed from this century to the next. This ongoing debate has thus far produced a genealogy of ideas such as postmodernity, supranationality, globality, and perhaps cosmopolitanism. By dint of this genealogy, "nation" is put under erasure in discourse. The economy of this genealogy relegates nationalism and nationality struggles to a geography that has been traditionally categorized as the Third World. Nationalism is then "viewed as a dark, elemental, unpredictable force

of primordial nature threatening the calm of civilized life ... [l]ike drugs, terrorism, and illegal immigration, it is one more product of the Third World that the West dislikes but is powerless to prohibit" (Chatterjee 4).

In the same process, "ethnicity" is equally charged with ambiguity. For instance, in the western media's coverage of the civil wars and ethnic strife--especially from the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and central Africa--ethnicity is maligned as a tribalism non-western peoples are condemned to; whereas, in the west neo-ethnicity could be valorized as something people and institutions can affirm and reassert. (At this juncture, one immediately thinks of the popularity of such concepts as multiculturalism and polyethnicity in recent years.) Put reductively, nationalism and a certain brand of ethnicity are fast becoming the new collective "others" for superstates such as the US and Europe in the absence of general categories to conceptualize a new international system. Furnishing this interim with a logic, ideas such as post-nationalism find their referents in the historic disappearance of the older concepts of national culture and national life. More tangibly, post-nationalism's referents benefit from the disappearance of national markets and their replacement by transnational polycentric blocs created by NAFTA, GATT, and the European Community. So far as I can pin down, this interim phase has two main characteristics. First, interventions of unprecedented kinds across national territories become commonplace exercises. Secondly, de-differentiation and an ensuing interchangeability between such metropolises as Tokyo and Los Angeles, New York and Toronto, Paris and Bonn in terms of their function in organizing the flow of capital, ideas, and information become normative. Even the mundane patterns of everyday life become facilitators to the execution of this flow as the notion of empirical national time is overstepped by all kinds of satellite broadcasts, and as people consent to digitalization in lieu of using human resources.

In the field of culture, the closure of macropolitical national identity corresponds to the vanishing significance of class identity and class-based politics in postindustrial societies. A whole range of small, non-class groups emerging into the *socius* (Note 1) with a focus on such issues as environment, abortion, nuclear energy, sexual preference do not require a nationally bound territory for defining their practices. The micropolitics of these movements, in effect, replace nationalism or write off nation as an "imaginary non-place." Moreover, not only class identity, but human agency is challenged in daily life by the increasing reliance on post-human technologies as simple as the telephone answering machines, or as complex as the computerized robotic arms which can conduct surgery without the aid of a surgeon. In culture industry, especially in film production, on-location shootings are superseded by digitalized image storage: once stored digitally, images can virtually produce films from a computer screen. Furthermore, communication technology creates a neutral, borderless, and unconflicted cyberspace to carry e-mail. Yet, while ushering the globalization process, the high-tech transnationalism deepens the rift between the new cosmopolitans and the refugees, the displaced peoples whose numbers in the 1990s reach the highest peak recorded in history. They also

lead a nationless life on leave, in and out of permeable borders. For them, nation has also become an "imaginary non-place."

These contradictions, by no means exhausted here, make it an imperative to contemplate the viability of received notions about national life and the possibility to represent social totality, indeed nationality. Even the symbolic meaning of the national boundaries has to be reinterpreted, for it seems to have lost its former explanatory and value-giving power in and among the west, while retaining an invented significance and cultural memory as a bulwark against "incursions" from the non-western subjects. The German border, for instance, is a porous European border for the members of the EC, but it is nonetheless a forbidding national border to ward off unwanted numbers of immigrants from Poland. Similar dualisms exist in France to curb immigration from North Africa. In the case of the US, Mexico is not only a NAFTA partner but it is also the departure point for the highest number of undocumented, "unauthorized" immigrants who are testing the American people's otherwise generous mettle in the issue of immigration, to the point of producing the infamous California Proposition 187. Hence, as Fredric Jameson puts it, the contradiction underpinning the 1990s is "to establish the coordinates of a stable geographical entity and its other vocation as sheer movement and restless displacement" (*Syntax of History* 95).

Jacques Derrida also ventures into the contradictions of the 1990s as he deconstructs Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* which hails the universalization of the ideal of liberal democracy and the capitalist market system with no consideration of the countless sites of suffering. Derrida, in contesting Fukuyama's thesis, argues that the law of the market, foreign debt, the inequality of techno-scientific, economic development maintain an effective inequality. In Derrida's words, "never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity . . . no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the Earth" ("Spectres" 52-53). Moreover, techno-scientific capital creates its own international law with an inadequate discourse on human rights. As a rejoinder to Fukuyama, Derrida posits that a "new International" spirit, a link of affinity in suffering has already come into being as the nemesis of the dominant transnationalism. According to Derrida, "it is an untimely link, without status, without title, and without name, barely public even if it is not clandestine, without contract, 'out of joint', without coordination, without party, without contract, without national community (international before across, and beyond any national determination), without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class" ("Spectres" 53).

While enveloping these bifurcated meanings, sites, and modes of action, the discourse on post-nationalism underscores the asynchrony lurking behind the process of globalization. Like all other "posts," in attributing contemporaneity and

normativity to the developed parts of the world, belatedness is issued to those who cannot enter the economy of the "post." The ever deepening rift between north and south, east and west, post-industrial, post-modern, post-class, post-historical, post-human world and the increasingly impoverished populations of Asia, Americas, Africa are made objects of knowledge within the discursive unity of the post-national condition in the west.

II.

As to the question of how "nation," and "nationalism" historically lose their significance, Eric Hobsbawm has provided a widely accepted thesis. It seems necessary to rehearse it at this juncture.

Hobsbawm argues that, functionally different from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "nations" and "nationalism" today are no longer major vectors of historical development. In the developed world of the nineteenth century, the building of nations as strong nation-states with the vying national economy was a central fact of historical transformation. In the dependent and colonized worlds of the twentieth century, on the other hand, national liberation and independence were the main agents for the political emancipation from the colonial yoke. Here, the Wilsonian principles of self-determination were replaced by decolonization, revolution, and interventionism (of outside powers). However, nationalism did not survive even the decolonization process--where it proved to be most instrumental--because when independent states were created in the wake of colonial administrations by the colonially educated intelligentsia, the process was undertaken without reference to, or without the knowledge of their inhabitants. Nationalism, therefore, had little or no national significance for the population *en masse*.

In tracing the resurgence of separatist ethnic movements to the historic decline of the Wilsonian principle of national self-determination in the post World War II era, Hobsbawm ascertains that the nationalist movements of the late twentieth century are essentially negative and divisive. Geographically, the new ethno-nationalist movements are regarded as the successors of the small nationality movements directed against the Habsburg, Czarist Russian and Ottoman Empires. These movements display an insistence on ethnicity and linguistic difference. In their programs, the referents and projects of ethnicity are left intently vague and exclusive so that ethnicity can be combined with religion or whatever is apposite and exigent for the moment. Moreover, the unity of the ethnic groups crumble as soon as the national cause is identified not with generalities but with much more divisive specifics such as a certain political leader or a party. Thus, nationalisms in the late twentieth century are committed to sectional or minority interests, and they are deemed politically unstable. Hobsbawm concludes by arguing that state formation in the greater part of the twentieth century world has overwhelmingly

been carried out with non-nationalist principles and ethnic agitations can be interpreted as a response to this. (Note 2)

Moreover, "nation" is in the process of losing another important part of its old function, namely that of constituting a territorially bounded national economy. Since the 1960s, the role of national economies has been undermined by major transformations in the international division of labor whose basic units are transnational, and multinational. Hence, the ongoing removal of the flow of capital from the control of nation-state renders nationalist ideologies obsolete (Hobsbawm 163-183).

Published in 1990, Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism* is situated on the brink of a new era and does not address the ways in which the official end of the Cold War broached the issue of culture rather than that of the "nation." Put differently, in the wake of the Cold War, the idea of culture-nation seems to be the contested territory. And that is what I would like to explore next.

III.

In the 1990s, disciplinary re-formations within the American humanities and social sciences are fuelled by a concern for the understanding of how culture produces nationality and the differences, rather than sameness within nationality. Such projects seek to abrogate nationalism as an ideology that was instrumental in creating unity and uniformity on the basis of culture and class identity. These projects immanently lay out the structuring differences between the nation formation in the US and in Europe. For example, in Philip Fisher's contribution to *The New American Studies: Essays from Representations*, nationalism is portrayed entirely as a product of the political history of Europe. Basked in the ideas of Volk and soil, European nationalisms are not considered modular for American nationality. Culturally, Americans were not a *Volk*; they had no common "racial" origin; expanding by immigration, there was no common history between peoples; and no deep relation to a common language. There was, in short, no unity of culture that preceded the consolidation of a territorial nation state--contrary to the formation of culture-nations such as Germany and Greece (see Jusdanis 38-49). As a side note, the absence of a cultural glue was one of the most obdurate problems in the works of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century writers and intellectuals from Nathaniel Hawthorne onwards, including Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. This absence, among other things, prompted them to forge culturally hybrid works.

Moreover, in a continental nation as vast as the US there was no sense of an enduring *Heimat*. With the advent of industrial modernity, with the arrival of the machine to the garden, the earlier Puritan *Heimat* was quickly transformed into a suburban layout producing and replicating a place like home, and similar types of

civic and social institutions such as the school, church, and shopping mall, in every part of the country. (Hawthorne's *The House Of The Seven Gables* traces this development minutely.) In effect, the United States pre-empts all romantic theories of nationalism that reached an apogee in the European nineteenth century. Instead, the US solves its problematic of national identity in two spheres: first, within the economic life; secondly, in the production of a democratic social space (Fisher 70-111). Space does not allow me to elaborate on this very extensive topic, but suffice it to say that within the first sphere, cultural sameness is secured not by ideology, religion, language, but by means of technologies--such as Taylorism and Fordism--that prevailed early in this century. (Note 3)

Ancillary to the above, new notions of citizenship and other technologies such as eugenics were deployed to instill and contain the fear of loss of a particular lifestyle which was further annexed to the issue of race. These, as different from the above, instilled an overall dislike of "foreign" elements in the national life that could create dissensus and dissent. Americans' penchant had to be for consensus. Historically, these proto-nationalist technologies and sentiments were effortlessly co-opted by the movements which identified themselves as nationalist, such as Teddy Roosevelt's "New Nationalism."

In the recent past, solving the problem of national identity within the economic sphere had its most tenacious hold in the Cold War program and rhetoric. Here, culture was used as a propaganda instrument in inventing and validating a nationality that complied with the exigencies of the Cold War. With that ideological superstructure now in the process of liquidation, by placing culture before nation, disciplines and peoples are aiming at better self-definitions and producing more variegated interpretations of the decades after the eighties. Theoretically, however, there are still a number of caveats to pay heed to. First, in seeking to reverse the older dominant paradigm of national identity which categorically subsumed all differences in an acceptable form under an overriding sameness, "difference" should not be constructed as a credo in itself, or an objective by itself. Otherwise, "difference" can not change the state of fact. (This is the lesson of Derrida and aporetic thinking.) Secondly, by empowering "culture" to create the differences within nation and nationality, one should never lose sight of culture's complicity with the ideological apparatuses. (This is the lucid lesson of Edward Said.)

Let me give a few examples of culture's complicity in validating nationalism. At the populist ideological level, the movie industry of the 70s and the 80s is culpable for producing the Rambo, Rocky, and Terminator types. At the disciplinary ideological level, the so-called "canon wars" (see Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*), and the "area studies" come to mind. More intricately, inscribed in Americans' leisure activities such as travelling, or even in mundane everyday life there used to be a symbolic proximity established between the US and its allies, alongside an imaginary remoteness to non-allies. (For example, a phone call from

the US to East Berlin used to cost more than a call to West Berlin.) At a more profound level, there were culturally constructed "grand narratives." English, for instance, as the bearer of American culture and idioms signified the ability to transcend borders. Second, "freedom" signified and was held synonymous with the life in America; but actually freedom was directed outward. Third, an absorbing Fichtean cosmopolitics was disseminated from within the US to the world, which, in Jacques Derrida's words, was in the name of "a privilege in responsibility and in the memory of the universal" (Derrida, *The Other Heading* 47-48). (Note 4)

Accordingly, leaders appealed to the American people to rise above themselves to carry a ubiquitous political ethics that can be extended to vast quantities of peoples—everywhere all at once. Here, the historic significance of the American ethnos was imagined as not being co-terminous with the national borders. Ingrained in such a universalism and trans-nationalism was the idea that one nation can supplement all locally attained freedoms. Individual liberties of one nation could become universal, provided that the people who envisions such a supra-national frontier also envisions itself as indispensable to its realization. The "grand narrative" of the universal nation gives its "national" elements an explanatory value in terms of the universal. This narrative further engenders the idea that in each historical epoch there is one nation whose ideals outlast the people who originate them. The radical Harvard Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch asserts that such "traditions build upon a complex symbolic-ideological system, involving a distinctive myth of history (predicated on the American Way 'as the final form of human government'), a nationwide ritual of generational renewal and rededication" (308). It would be incorrect, however, to conflate the above with a certain kind of intellectual discourse which locates a universal kernel within the American national identity. For the sake of differentiation, we can identify the latter as the cosmopolitan imperative: the desire for world citizenship. This idea is entertained in a contemplative way from Thomas Jefferson onwards, by such figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry James Senior, Randolph Bourne, and Edmund Wilson. Thomas Jefferson's faith in the American national mission was conceptualized as mankind's vanguard in the fight for individual liberty, in tandem with the humanitarian ideals of the eighteenth century. The American nation was to be a universal nation in the sense that the idea which it pursued was believed to be universal and valid for the whole of mankind. Later, Emerson believed, in a Hegelian stroke, that in every age of the world there has been a leading nation representing the spirit of the age (Kohn 57,138). In the works of others, the universalizing imperative takes the form of an embattled distance to the parochialism of the national life in favor of a more cosmopolitan American identity.

Henry James Senior, for example, expresses a precocious discontent with the European nation form as he summons cosmopolitanism as a corrective to European nationalism. He argued that Europeans were "destined to be recast and remolded into the form of a new and denationalized humanity, a universal from which will

quickly shed all the soil it has contracted in the past" (qtd. in Matthiessen 287). Henry James Sr. is a seminal figure in that his defense of America's ur-democratic kernel exemplifies how the nationality problem in the US began to be solved within the production of a democratic social space. From this vantage, Henry James Sr. defended the American institutions not on the grounds that they had fulfilled the democratic idea, but on the grounds that however imperfect the early stages of the American institutions were, they had "at least exploded the old conceptions of government" (qtd. in Matthiessen 11). (Note 5)

These positions are not novelties of American intellectual culture, but perhaps its paradoxes. Depending on who tells the story today, the Fichtean universal either triumphed or exploded from within. I tend to think that with the exhaustion of superpower hypernationalisms and the entrenchment of the postmodern condition in the US, the Fichtean imperative and the nationalism premised on "the privilege in responsibility" exploded from within, and irreversibly entered into the everyday life of Americans in the form of a crisis of allegiance. In the end of the Cold War, what is characteristic of the postmodern culture, according to its astute critic Fredric Jameson, is the impossible representation of social totality, of nationality today: in other words, the dissolution of the links between people, state, nation, and government. The impossibility of representing a totality also signifies the impossibility to transform the complexity of social relations into politically "stabilizing" programs such as nationalism.

Instead, the post-national condition is marked with a heightened sense of self-awareness people have of themselves and of their own moment of history. A new sense of one's place in the global system perhaps changes the given meanings of the nation-state. Put differently, the meaning of nation-state may be wildly at odds with people's own inner experiences and their own interior daily life (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 281-318). In the US, what seems to replace national feeling is group solidarity. In the wake of individualism, social atomization, and what Jameson calls "existential anomie," individuals organize and collectivize as groups, and new structures of social movements proliferate often with oppositional agendas. The dynamic of the 90s' oppositional movements is different from that of the late 60s, in that the 60s mobilized against the wars; the movements and ideas remained organically linked to the Third World, the Vietnam War and the decolonization processes in British and French Africa. In other words, a First World 60s owed to the Third World its mission in resistance to wars (Jameson, *Syntax of History* 178-207).

Affecting the rich and the poor alike, the 1990s register not an internationalism that bears upon national politics but the decentered role of "nation" as a value giving category and its gradual displacement by forms of identity afforded by groups. In a self-conducted survey, I found out that even those Americans who are not involved in any group movements think of themselves less in "nationalistic" terms than in "democratic" and "pluralistic" or even in neo-ethnic terms. The groups demand the

right to speak in a new collective voice, hence in the group movements the meaning and domain of "freedom" in the American 90s is directed inward rather than outward.

In conclusion, beyond its contradictions, the discourse of "post-nationalism" enables us to analyze not a fragmentation of nationality, not the break-up of some older organic totality called "nation-state" or national culture, but the emergence of the multiple in new and unexpected ways, unrelated strings of events, modes of classification and compartments of reality. Or better put, in Jameson's phrases, post-nationalism is a signpost of "an absolutely random pluralism--a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems whose overlap is perceptually maintained" (*Postmodernism* 371-72).

Notes

1

Socius means the social machine that distinguishes people according to affiliations and status.

2

There is a spate of very recent books which disseminate weaker versions of the theses above, often but with little discretion about the historical and regional differences among contemporary ethnic-nationalist movements. For instance, Michael Ignatieff's *Blood and Belonging* (1994) traces the origins of the current wave of ethnic nationalism in the Balkans, in the Caucasus, and in eastern Turkey to the confluent histories of the Czarist Russian and Ottoman Empires. To characterize these as conflicts waged on ideas of "blood" and "belonging" attributes an irrational vitalism to these nationalisms. Also, in analyzing these nationalisms as mired in a history--which is accessible to only a handful of western specialists--books like Ignatieff's show the temerity simply to write the past as the present. Such reductionist assessment of nationalism, its emergence and consequences, I think, owes a great deal to the media coverage which captures only the most dramatic spectacles of the ethnic warfare in sixty-second historical backgrounders. Subsequently, it behooves writers such as Ignatieff to write (off) the history.

3

One of the central ideas of Americanism was provided by Fordism. Fordism stood for the masses rather than for the individual. It provided one standard and constant manufactured object: the model T which was reduced to functional essentials. After that, the ethos of good citizenship, consumerism (or simply the consumer-citizen) was invented with the instrumental reason provided by industry. See Wollen 44.

4

There is also a very good discussion of Fichte and the appearance of cosmopolitanism and of the "universal" within the rise and decline of nationalist thought in Etienne Balibar's recent *Masses, Classes, Ideas* 61-84.

5

In these words there is more than just a hint about the present state of Europe but also a foresight into the pernicious potential of 19th century European nationalism which culminated in the colonization of the entire globe by the end of that century.

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