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The Enduring Power of Ethnic Nationalism

Jerry Z. Muller

PROJECTING THEIR own experience onto the rest of the world, Americans generally belittle the role of ethnic nationalism in politics. After all, in the United States people of varying ethnic origins live cheek by jowl in relative peace. Within two or three generations of immigration, their ethnic identities are attenuated by cultural assimilation and intermarriage. Surely, things cannot be so different elsewhere.

Americans also find ethnonationalism discomfiting both intellectually and morally. Social scientists go to great lengths to demonstrate that it is a product not of nature but of culture, often deliberately constructed. And ethicists scorn value systems based on narrow group identities rather than cosmopolitanism.

But none of this will make ethnonationalism go away. Immigrants to the United States usually arrive with a willingness to fit into their new country and reshape their identities accordingly. But for those who remain behind in lands where their ancestors have lived for generations, if not centuries, political identities often take ethnic form, producing competing communal claims to political power. The creation of a peaceful regional order of nation-states has usually been the product of a violent process of ethnic separation. In areas where that separation has not yet occurred, politics is apt to remain ugly.

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A familiar and influential narrative of twentieth-century European history argues that nationalism twice led to war, in 1914 and then again in 1939. Thereafter, the story goes, Europeans concluded that nationalism was a danger and gradually abandoned it. In the postwar decades, western Europeans enmeshed themselves in a web of transnational institutions, culminating in the European Union (EU). After the fall of the Soviet empire, that transnational framework spread eastward to encompass most of the continent. Europeans entered a postnational era, which was not only a good thing in itself but also a model for other regions. Nationalism, in this view, had been a tragic detour on the road to a peaceful liberal democratic order.

This story is widely believed by educated Europeans and even more so, perhaps, by educated Americans. Recently, for example, in the course of arguing that Israel ought to give up its claim to be a Jewish state and dissolve itself into some sort of binational entity with the Palestinians, the prominent historian Tony Judt informed the readers of *The New York Review of Books* that “the problem with Israel ... [is that] it has imported a characteristically late-nineteenth-century separatist project into a world that has moved on, a world of individual rights, open frontiers, and international law. The very idea of a ‘Jewish state’... is an anachronism.”

Yet the experience of the hundreds of Africans and Asians who perish each year trying to get into Europe by landing on the coast of Spain or Italy reveals that Europe’s frontiers are not so open. And a survey would show that whereas in 1900 there were many states in Europe without a single overwhelmingly dominant nationality, by 2007 there were only two, and one of those, Belgium, was close to breaking up. Aside from Switzerland, in other words—where the domestic ethnic balance of power is protected by strict citizenship laws—in Europe the “separatist project” has not so much vanished as triumphed.

Far from having been superannuated in 1945, in many respects ethnonationalism was at its apogee in the years immediately after World War II. European stability during the Cold War era was in fact due partly to the widespread fulfillment of the ethnonationalist project. And since the end of the Cold War, ethnonationalism has continued to reshape European borders.

In short, ethnonationalism has played a more profound and lasting role in modern history than is commonly understood, and the processes

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that led to the dominance of the ethnonational state and the separation of ethnic groups in Europe are likely to reoccur elsewhere. Increased urbanization, literacy, and political mobilization; differences in the fertility rates and economic performance of various ethnic groups; and immigration will challenge the internal structure of states as well as their borders. Whether politically correct or not, ethnonationalism will continue to shape the world in the twenty-first century.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

THERE ARE two major ways of thinking about national identity. One is that all people who live within a country's borders are part of the nation, regardless of their ethnic, racial, or religious origins. This liberal or civic nationalism is the conception with which contemporary Americans are most likely to identify. But the liberal view has competed with and often lost out to a different view, that of ethnonationalism. The core of the ethnonationalist idea is that nations are defined by a shared heritage, which usually includes a common language, a common faith, and a common ethnic ancestry.

The ethnonationalist view has traditionally dominated through much of Europe and has held its own even in the United States until recently. For substantial stretches of U.S. history, it was believed that only the people of English origin, or those who were Protestant, or white, or hailed from northern Europe were real Americans. It was only in 1965 that the reform of U.S. immigration law abolished the system of national-origin quotas that had been in place for several decades. This system had excluded Asians entirely and radically restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

Ethnonationalism draws much of its emotive power from the notion that the members of a nation are part of an extended family, ultimately united by ties of blood. It is the subjective belief in the reality of a common "we" that counts. The markers that distinguish the in-group vary from case to case and time to time, and the subjective nature of the communal boundaries has led some to discount their practical significance. But as Walker Connor, an astute student of nationalism, has noted, "It is not what is, but what people believe is that has behavioral consequences." And the central tenets of ethnonationalist belief

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are that nations exist, that each nation ought to have its own state, and that each state should be made up of the members of a single nation.

The conventional narrative of European history asserts that nationalism was primarily liberal in the western part of the continent and that it became more ethnically oriented as one moved east. There is some truth to this, but it disguises a good deal as well. It is more accurate to say that when modern states began to form, political boundaries and ethnolinguistic boundaries largely coincided in the areas along Europe's Atlantic coast. Liberal nationalism, that is, was most apt to emerge in states that already possessed a high degree of ethnic homogeneity. Long before the nineteenth century, countries such as England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden emerged as nation-states in polities where ethnic divisions had been softened by a long history of cultural and social homogenization.

In the center of the continent, populated by speakers of German and Italian, political structures were fragmented into hundreds of small units. But in the 1860s and 1870s, this fragmentation was resolved by the creation of Italy and Germany, so that almost all Italians lived in the former and a majority of Germans lived in the latter. Moving further east, the situation changed again. As late as 1914, most of central, eastern, and southeastern Europe was made up not of nation-states but of empires. The Hapsburg empire comprised what are now Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia, and parts of what are now Bosnia, Croatia, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, and more. The Romanov empire stretched into Asia, including what is now Russia and what are now parts of Poland, Ukraine, and more. And the Ottoman Empire covered modern Turkey and parts of today's Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and Serbia and extended through much of the Middle East and North Africa as well.

Each of these empires was composed of numerous ethnic groups, but they were not multinational in the sense of granting equal status to the many peoples that made up their populaces. The governing monarchy and landed nobility often differed in language and ethnic origin from the urbanized trading class, whose members in turn usually differed in language, ethnicity, and often religion from the peasantry. In the Hapsburg and Romanov empires, for example, merchants were usually Germans or Jews. In the Ottoman Empire, they were often Armenians, Greeks, or Jews. And in each empire, the peasantry was itself ethnically diverse.

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Up through the nineteenth century, these societies were still largely agrarian: most people lived as peasants in the countryside, and few were literate. Political, social, and economic stratifications usually correlated with ethnicity, and people did not expect to change their positions in the system. Until the rise of modern nationalism, all of this seemed quite unproblematic. In this world, moreover, people of one religion, language, or culture were often dispersed across various countries and empires. There were ethnic Germans, for example, not only in the areas that became Germany but also scattered throughout the Hapsburg and Romanov empires. There were Greeks in Greece but also millions of them in the Ottoman Empire (not to mention hundreds of thousands of Muslim Turks in Greece). And there were Jews everywhere—but with no independent state of their own.

THE RISE OF ETHNONATIONALISM

TODAY, PEOPLE tend to take the nation-state for granted as the natural form of political association and regard empires as anomalies. But over the broad sweep of recorded history, the opposite is closer to the truth. Most people at most times have lived in empires, with the nation-state the exception rather than the rule. So what triggered the change?

The rise of ethnonationalism, as the sociologist Ernest Gellner has explained, was not some strange historical mistake; rather, it was propelled by some of the deepest currents of modernity. Military competition between states created a demand for expanded state resources and hence continual economic growth. Economic growth, in turn, depended on mass literacy and easy communication, spurring policies to promote education and a common language—which led directly to conflicts over language and communal opportunities.

Modern societies are premised on the egalitarian notion that in theory, at least, anyone can aspire to any economic position. But in practice, everyone does not have an equal likelihood of upward economic mobility, and not simply because individuals have different innate capabilities. For such advances depend in part on what economists call “cultural capital,” the skills and behavioral patterns that help individuals and groups succeed. Groups with traditions of literacy and

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engagement in commerce tend to excel, for example, whereas those without such traditions tend to lag behind.

As they moved into cities and got more education during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnic groups with largely peasant backgrounds, such as the Czechs, the Poles, the Slovaks, and the Ukrainians found that key positions in the government and the economy were already occupied—often by ethnic Armenians, Germans, Greeks, or Jews. Speakers of the same language came to share a sense that they belonged together and to define themselves in contrast to other communities. And eventually they came to demand a nation-state of their own, in which they would be the masters, dominating politics, staffing the civil service, and controlling commerce.

Ethnonationalism had a psychological basis as well as an economic one. By creating a new and direct relationship between individuals and the government, the rise of the modern state weakened individuals' traditional bonds to intermediate social units, such as the family, the clan, the guild, and the church. And by spurring social and geographic mobility and a self-help mentality, the rise of market-based economies did the same. The result was an emotional vacuum that was often filled by new forms of identification, often along ethnic lines.

Ethnonationalist ideology called for a congruence between the state and the ethnically defined nation, with explosive results. As Lord Acton recognized in 1862, "By making the state and the nation commensurate with each other in theory, [nationalism] reduces practically to a subject condition all other nationalities that may be within the boundary. . . . According, therefore, to the degree of humanity and civilization in that dominant body which claims all the rights of the community, the inferior races are exterminated, or reduced to servitude, or outlawed, or put in a condition of dependence." And that is just what happened.

THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION

NINETEENTH-CENTURY LIBERALS, like many proponents of globalization today, believed that the spread of international commerce would lead people to recognize the mutual benefits that could come from peace and trade, both within polities and between them. Socialists

agreed, although they believed that harmony would come only after the arrival of socialism. Yet that was not the course that twentieth-century history was destined to follow. The process of “making the state and the nation commensurate” took a variety of forms, from voluntary emigration (often motivated by governmental discrimination against minority ethnicities) to forced deportation (also known as “population transfer”) to genocide. Although the term “ethnic cleansing” has come into English usage only recently, its verbal correlates in Czech, French, German, and Polish go back much further. Much of the history of twentieth-century Europe, in fact, has been a painful, drawn-out process of ethnic disaggregation.



Massive ethnic disaggregation began on Europe's frontiers. In the ethnically mixed Balkans, wars to expand the nation-states of Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia at the expense of the ailing Ottoman Empire were accompanied by ferocious interethnic violence. During the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, almost half a million people left their traditional homelands, either voluntarily or by force. Muslims left regions under the control of Bulgarians, Greeks, and Serbs; Bulgarians abandoned Greek-controlled areas of Macedonia; Greeks fled from regions of Macedonia ceded to Bulgaria and Serbia.



World War I led to the demise of the three great turn-of-the-century empires, unleashing an explosion of ethnonationalism in the process. In the Ottoman Empire, mass deportations and murder during the war took the lives of a million members of the local Armenian minority in an early attempt at ethnic cleansing, if not genocide. In 1919, the Greek government invaded the area that would become Turkey, seeking to carve out a “greater Greece” stretching all the way to Constantinople. Meeting with initial success, the Greek forces looted and burned villages in an effort to drive out the region’s ethnic

Turks. But Turkish forces eventually regrouped and pushed the Greek army back, engaging in their own ethnic cleansing against local Greeks along the way. Then the process of population transfers was formalized in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne: all ethnic Greeks were to go to Greece, all Greek Muslims to Turkey. In the end, Turkey expelled almost 1.5 million people, and Greece expelled almost 400,000.

Out of the breakup of the Hapsburg and Romanov empires emerged a multitude of new countries. Many conceived of themselves as ethnonational polities, in which the state existed to protect and promote the dominant ethnic group. Yet of central and eastern Europe's roughly 60 million people, 25 million continued to be part of ethnic minorities in the countries in which they lived. In most cases, the ethnic majority did not believe in trying to help minorities assimilate, nor were the minorities always eager to do so themselves. Nationalist governments openly discriminated in favor of the dominant community. Government activities were conducted solely in the language of the majority, and the civil service was reserved for those who spoke it.

In much of central and eastern Europe, Jews had long played an important role in trade and commerce. When they were given civil rights in the late nineteenth century, they tended to excel in professions requiring higher education, such as medicine and law, and soon Jews or people of Jewish descent made up almost half the doctors and lawyers in cities such as Budapest, Vienna, and Warsaw. By the 1930s, many governments adopted policies to try to check and reverse these advances, denying Jews credit and limiting their access to higher education. In other words, the National Socialists who came to power in Germany in 1933 and based their movement around a "Germanness" they defined in contrast to "Jewishness" were an extreme version of a more common ethnonationalist trend.

The politics of ethnonationalism took an even deadlier turn during World War II. The Nazi regime tried to reorder the ethnic map of the continent by force. Its most radical act was an attempt to rid Europe of Jews by killing them all—an attempt that largely succeeded. The Nazis also used ethnic German minorities in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and elsewhere to enforce Nazi domination, and many of the regimes allied with Germany engaged in their own campaigns against internal

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ethnic enemies. The Romanian regime, for example, murdered hundreds of thousands of Jews on its own, without orders from Germany, and the government of Croatia murdered not only its Jews but hundreds of thousands of Serbs and Romany as well.

POSTWAR BUT NOT POSTNATIONAL

ONE MIGHT have expected that the Nazi regime's deadly policies and crushing defeat would mark the end of the ethnonationalist era. But in fact they set the stage for another massive round of ethnonational transformation. The political settlement in central Europe after World War I had been achieved primarily by moving borders to align them with populations. After World War II, it was the populations that moved instead. Millions of people were expelled from their homes and countries, with at least the tacit support of the victorious Allies.

Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin all concluded that the expulsion of ethnic Germans from non-German countries was a prerequisite to a stable postwar order. As Churchill put it in a speech to the British parliament in December 1944, "Expulsion is the method which, so far as we have been able to see, will be the most satisfactory and lasting. There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble. . . . A clean sweep will be made. I am not alarmed at the prospect of the disentanglement of population, nor am I alarmed by these large transferences." He cited the Treaty of Lausanne as a precedent, showing how even the leaders of liberal democracies had concluded that only radically illiberal measures would eliminate the causes of ethnonational aspirations and aggression.

Between 1944 and 1945, five million ethnic Germans from the eastern parts of the German Reich fled westward to escape the conquering Red Army, which was energetically raping and massacring its way to Berlin. Then, between 1945 and 1947, the new postliberation regimes in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Yugoslavia expelled another seven million Germans in response to their collaboration with the Nazis. Together, these measures constituted the largest forced population movement in European history, with hundreds of thousands of people dying along the way.

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The handful of Jews who survived the war and returned to their homes in eastern Europe met with so much anti-Semitism that most chose to leave for good. About 220,000 of them made their way into the American-occupied zone of Germany, from which most eventually went to Israel or the United States. Jews thus essentially vanished from central and eastern Europe, which had been the center of Jewish life since the sixteenth century.

Millions of refugees from other ethnic groups were also evicted from their homes and resettled after the war. This was due partly to the fact that the borders of the Soviet Union had moved westward, into what had once been Poland, while the borders of Poland also moved westward, into what had once been Germany. To make populations correspond to the new borders, 1.5 million Poles living in areas that were now part of the Soviet Union were deported to Poland, and 500,000 ethnic Ukrainians who had been living in Poland were sent to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Yet another exchange of populations took place between Czechoslovakia and Hungary, with Slovaks transferred out of Hungary and Magyars sent away from Czechoslovakia. A smaller number of Magyars also moved to Hungary from Yugoslavia, with Serbs and Croats moving in the opposite direction.

As a result of this massive process of ethnic unmixing, the ethnonationalist ideal was largely realized: for the most part, each nation in Europe had its own state, and each state was made up almost exclusively of a single ethnic nationality. During the Cold War, the few exceptions to this rule included Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia. But these countries' subsequent fate only demonstrated the ongoing vitality of ethnonationalism. After the fall of communism, East and West Germany were unified with remarkable rapidity, Czechoslovakia split peacefully into Czech and Slovak republics, and the Soviet Union broke apart into a variety of different national units. Since then, ethnic Russian minorities in many of the post-Soviet states have gradually immigrated to Russia, Magyars in Romania have moved to Hungary, and the few remaining ethnic Germans in Russia have largely gone to Germany. A million people of Jewish origin from the former Soviet Union have made their way to Israel. Yugoslavia saw the secession of Croatia

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and Slovenia and then descended into ethnonational wars over Bosnia and Kosovo.

The breakup of Yugoslavia was simply the last act of a long play. But the plot of that play—the disaggregation of peoples and the triumph of ethnonationalism in modern Europe—is rarely recognized, and so a story whose significance is comparable to the spread of democracy or capitalism remains largely unknown and unappreciated.

DECOLONIZATION AND AFTER

THE EFFECTS of ethnonationalism, of course, have hardly been confined to Europe. For much of the developing world, decolonization has meant ethnic disaggregation through the exchange or expulsion of local minorities.

The end of the British Raj in 1947 brought about the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, along with an orgy of violence that took hundreds of thousands of lives. Fifteen million people became refugees, including Muslims who went to Pakistan and Hindus who went to India. Then, in 1971, Pakistan itself, originally unified on the basis of religion, dissolved into Urdu-speaking Pakistan and Bengali-speaking Bangladesh.

In the former British mandate of Palestine, a Jewish state was established in 1948 and was promptly greeted by the revolt of the indigenous Arab community and an invasion from the surrounding Arab states. In the war that resulted, regions that fell under Arab control were cleansed of their Jewish populations, and Arabs fled or were forced out of areas that came under Jewish control. Some 750,000 Arabs left, primarily for the surrounding Arab countries, and the remaining 150,000 constituted only about a sixth of the population of the new Jewish state. In the years afterward, nationalist-inspired violence against Jews in Arab countries propelled almost all of the more than 500,000 Jews there to leave their lands of origin and immigrate to Israel. Likewise, in 1962 the end of French control in Algeria led to the forced emigration of Algerians of European origin (the so-called *pieds-noirs*), most of whom immigrated to France. Shortly thereafter, ethnic minorities of Asian origin were forced out of postcolonial Uganda. The legacy of the colonial era, moreover, is hardly finished.

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When the European overseas empires dissolved, they left behind a patchwork of states whose boundaries often cut across ethnic patterns of settlement and whose internal populations were ethnically mixed. It is wishful thinking to suppose that these boundaries will be permanent. As societies in the former colonial world modernize, becoming more urban, literate, and politically mobilized, the forces that gave rise to ethnonationalism and ethnic disaggregation in Europe are apt to drive events there, too.

THE BALANCE SHEET

ANALYSTS OF ethnic disaggregation typically focus on its destructive effects, which is understandable given the direct human suffering it has often entailed. But such attitudes can yield a distorted perspective by overlooking the less obvious costs and also the important benefits that ethnic separation has brought.

Economists from Adam Smith onward, for example, have argued that the efficiencies of competitive markets tend to increase with the markets' size. The dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into smaller nation-states, each with its own barriers to trade, was thus economically irrational and contributed to the region's travails in the interwar period. Much of subsequent European history has involved attempts to overcome this and other economic fragmentation, culminating in the EU.

Ethnic disaggregation also seems to have deleterious effects on cultural vitality. Precisely because most of their citizens share a common cultural and linguistic heritage, the homogenized states of postwar Europe have tended to be more culturally insular than their demographically diverse predecessors. With few Jews in Europe and few Germans in Prague, that is, there are fewer Franz Kafkas.

Forced migrations generally penalize the expelling countries and reward the receiving ones. Expulsion is often driven by a majority group's resentment of a minority group's success, on the mistaken assumption that achievement is a zero-sum game. But countries that got rid of their Armenians, Germans, Greeks, Jews, and other successful minorities deprived themselves of some of their most talented citizens, who simply took their skills and knowledge elsewhere. And in many

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places, the triumph of ethnonational politics has meant the victory of traditionally rural groups over more urbanized ones, which possess just those skills desirable in an advanced industrial economy.

But if ethnonationalism has frequently led to tension and conflict, it has also proved to be a source of cohesion and stability. When French textbooks began with “Our ancestors the Gauls” or when Churchill spoke to wartime audiences of “this island race,” they appealed to ethnonationalist sensibilities as a source of mutual trust and sacrifice. Liberal democracy and ethnic homogeneity are not only compatible; they can be complementary.

One could argue that Europe has been so harmonious since World War II not because of the failure of ethnic nationalism but because of its success, which removed some of the greatest sources of conflict both within and between countries. The fact that ethnic and state boundaries now largely coincide has meant that there are fewer disputes over borders or expatriate communities, leading to the most stable territorial configuration in European history.

These ethnically homogeneous polities have displayed a great deal of internal solidarity, moreover, facilitating government programs, including domestic transfer payments, of various kinds. When the Swedish Social Democrats were developing plans for Europe’s most extensive welfare state during the interwar period, the political scientist Sheri Berman has noted, they conceived of and sold them as the construction of a *folkhemmet*, or “people’s home.”

Several decades of life in consolidated, ethnically homogeneous states may even have worked to sap ethnonationalism’s own emotional power. Many Europeans are now prepared, and even eager, to participate in transnational frameworks such as the EU, in part because their perceived need for collective self-determination has largely been satisfied.

NEW ETHNIC MIXING

ALONG WITH the process of forced ethnic disaggregation over the last two centuries, there has also been a process of ethnic mixing brought about by voluntary emigration. The general pattern has been one of emigration from poor, stagnant areas to richer and more dynamic ones.

In Europe, this has meant primarily movement west and north, leading above all to France and the United Kingdom. This pattern has continued into the present: as a result of recent migration, for example, there are now half a million Poles in the Great Britain and 200,000 in Ireland. Immigrants from one part of Europe who have moved to another and ended up staying there have tended to assimilate and, despite some grumbling about a supposed invasion of “Polish plumbers,” have created few significant problems.

The most dramatic transformation of European ethnic balances in recent decades has come from the immigration of people of Asian, African, and Middle Eastern origin, and here the results have been mixed. Some of these groups have achieved remarkable success, such as the Indian Hindus who have come to the United Kingdom. But in Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, on balance the educational and economic progress of Muslim immigrants has been more limited and their cultural alienation greater.

How much of the problem can be traced to discrimination, how much to the cultural patterns of the immigrants themselves, and how much to the policies of European governments is difficult to determine. But a number of factors, from official multiculturalism to generous welfare states to the ease of contact with ethnic homelands, seem to have made it possible to create ethnic islands where assimilation into the larger culture and economy is limited.

As a result, some of the traditional contours of European politics have been upended. The left, for example, has tended to embrace immigration in the name of egalitarianism and multiculturalism. But if there is indeed a link between ethnic homogeneity and a population’s willingness to support generous income-redistribution programs, the encouragement of a more heterogeneous society may end up undermining the left’s broader political agenda. And some of Europe’s libertarian cultural propensities have already clashed with the cultural illiberalism of some of the new immigrant communities.

Should Muslim immigrants not assimilate and instead develop a strong communal identification along religious lines, one consequence might be a resurgence of traditional ethnonational identities in some states—or the development of a new European identity defined partly

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in contradistinction to Islam (with the widespread resistance to the extension of full EU membership to Turkey being a possible harbinger of such a shift).

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

SINCE ETHNONATIONALISM is a direct consequence of key elements of modernization, it is likely to gain ground in societies undergoing such a process. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it remains among the most vital—and most disruptive—forces in many parts of the contemporary world.

More or less subtle forms of ethnonationalism, for example, are ubiquitous in immigration policy around the globe. Many countries—including Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Serbia, and Turkey—provide automatic or rapid citizenship to the members of diasporas of their own dominant ethnic group, if desired. Chinese immigration law gives priority and benefits to overseas Chinese. Portugal and Spain have immigration policies that favor applicants from their former colonies in the New World. Still other states, such as Japan and Slovakia, provide official forms of identification to members of the dominant national ethnic group who are noncitizens that permit them to live and work in the country. Americans, accustomed by the U.S. government's official practices to regard differential treatment on the basis of ethnicity to be a violation of universalist norms, often consider such policies exceptional, if not abhorrent. Yet in a global context, it is the insistence on universalist criteria that seems provincial.

Increasing communal consciousness and shifting ethnic balances are bound to have a variety of consequences, both within and between states, in the years to come. As economic globalization brings more states into the global economy, for example, the first fruits of that process will often fall to those ethnic groups best positioned by history or culture to take advantage of the new opportunities for enrichment, deepening social cleavages rather than filling them in. Wealthier and higher-achieving regions might try to separate themselves from poorer and lower-achieving ones, and distinctive homogeneous areas might try to acquire sovereignty—

courses of action that might provoke violent responses from defenders of the status quo.

Of course, there are multiethnic societies in which ethnic consciousness remains weak, and even a more strongly developed sense of ethnicity may lead to political claims short of sovereignty. Sometimes, demands for ethnic autonomy or self-determination can be met within an existing state. The claims of the Catalans in Spain, the Flemish in Belgium, and the Scots in the United Kingdom have been met in this manner, at least for now. But such arrangements remain precarious and are subject to recurrent renegotiation. In the developing world, accordingly, where states are more recent creations and where the borders often cut across ethnic boundaries, there is likely to be further ethnic disaggregation and communal conflict. And as scholars such as Chaim Kaufmann have noted, once ethnic antagonism has crossed a certain threshold of violence, maintaining the rival groups within a single polity becomes far more difficult.

This unfortunate reality creates dilemmas for advocates of humanitarian intervention in such conflicts, because making and keeping peace between groups that have come to hate and fear one another is likely to require costly ongoing military missions rather than relatively cheap temporary ones. When communal violence escalates to ethnic cleansing, moreover, the return of large numbers of refugees to their place of origin after a cease-fire has been reached is often impractical and even undesirable, for it merely sets the stage for a further round of conflict down the road.

Partition may thus be the most humane lasting solution to such intense communal conflicts. It inevitably creates new flows of refugees, but at least it deals with the problem at issue. The challenge for the international community in such cases is to separate communities in the most humane manner possible: by aiding in transport, assuring citizenship rights in the new homeland, and providing financial aid for resettlement and economic absorption. The bill for all of this will be huge, but it will rarely be greater than the material costs of interjecting and maintaining a foreign military presence large enough to pacify the rival ethnic combatants or the moral cost of doing nothing.

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Contemporary social scientists who write about nationalism tend to stress the contingent elements of group identity—the extent to which national consciousness is culturally and politically manufactured by ideologists and politicians. They regularly invoke Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities,” as if demonstrating that nationalism is constructed will rob the concept of its power. It is true, of course, that ethnonational identity is never as natural or ineluctable as nationalists claim. Yet it would be a mistake to think that because nationalism is partly constructed it is therefore fragile or infinitely malleable. Ethnonationalism was not a chance detour in European history: it corresponds to some enduring propensities of the human spirit that are heightened by the process of modern state creation, it is a crucial source of both solidarity and enmity, and in one form or another, it will remain for many generations to come. One can only profit from facing it directly. 🌐