

Precis 1: Nationalism and Its Elements

Nicholas Muto

(By permission of Prof. Wharton)

The phenomenon of modern nationalism is cemented by commonalities in cultural and national characteristics, guided by a common ideology and driven by a national destiny. When examining nations and nationalism, it is very important to separate the more physical characteristics that unify nations from the spiritual aspects, which guide and drive nations. One cannot ignore that factors such as a common language, territory, culture, economic interest and shared history have united communities of interest creating nations. However, a nation develops nationalism when the nation evolves a national character and ideology creating for itself a national destiny.

For one to understand the phenomenon of nationalism, first it is necessary to define what a nation is. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a nation as “a community of people composed of one or more nationalities and possessing a more or less defined territory and government” (Merriam-Webster online). This definition of a nation poses a good description of what a nation is but it doesn’t help one grasp the concept of “nationalism.” The Merriam-Webster definition of a nation conjures up ideas of a nation being a physical and material object, without addressing the mental and psychological aspects associated with being a member of a nation. These mental and psychological aspects create an ethereal ideology, which forms the root of nationalism.

Ernest Renan is one political scientist to fully recognize the spiritual component necessary in the recipe for a nation. In his piece, “What is a Nation?” Ernest Renan states, “No, it is not the soil any more than the race which makes a nation. The soil provides the substratum, the field for struggle and labour: Man provides the soul” (Renan 153). In addition, Renan goes on to affirm that, “A nation is a soul, a spiritual principal” (Renan 153). Although Renan recognizes the spiritual component necessary in making a

nation, ultimately he is flawed in believing that “soil” (territory) and other physical characteristics have little weight in unifying a nation. In fact, common national traits play a large role in determining national identity and character, which form the basis for a national ideology and, in turn, nationalism.

In particular, Stalin is one politician who clearly identifies the national factors for establishing a nation while emphasizing national character as the most important unifying national trait. In his essay “Marxism and the National Colonial Question,” Stalin writes, “A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture” (Stalin 192). In addition to providing this comprehensive definition of what a nation is, Stalin goes on to explain that “national character” is the only essential characteristic necessary for a nation (Stalin 192). Consequently, the necessity of national character for the development of nationalism cannot be down played because as Stalin sees it, national character leads to a national ideology.

Since the political ideas of Stalin have provided the connections between national character and national ideology, the connection between national character and national destiny must be made. The ideas of Otto Bauer in his essay “The Nationalities Question and Social Democracy” establish this connection. Otto Bauer claims, “The nation is the totality of man bound together through a common destiny into a community of character”(Bauer 183). Although Bauer claims that common destiny creates the “community of character,” it seems obvious that the present values and ideals of a nation (character) will dictate that country’s vision of the future (destiny).

Considering the ideas of Renan, Stalin, and Bauer, the connections between nationalism, national character, common ideology and national destiny are evident. On one hand, for nationalism to materialize there must be a concrete element of national identity, which is dictated by national characteristics including national character. On the other hand, nationalism is given life through national ideology and destiny, which are constructs of national identity.

Works Cited

Bauer, Otto. "The Nationalities Question and Social Democracy." *The Nationalism Reader*. Ed. Omar Dahbour., Micheline R. Ishay. Humanity Books, 1999. 183-191.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online. 2005. 27 Feb. 2005
<<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary?book=Dictionary&va=nation>>

Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" *The Nationalism Reader*. Ed. Omar Dahbour., Micheline R. Ishay. Humanity Books, 1999. 143-155.

Stalin, Joseph. "Marxism and the National Colonial Question." *The Nationalism Reader*. Ed. Omar Dahbour., Micheline R. Ishay. Humanity Books, 1999. 192-197.