Zionism and Its Critiques

By Emmanuel Navon

“I have met in my life Frenchmen, Italians, and Russians; I even know, thanks to Montesquieu, that there are Persians. But for man, I declare that I have never met him, and if he exists, it is without my knowledge.” Joseph de Maistre.

Joseph de Maistre’s satirical denigration of the “Rights of Man” proclaimed by the French Revolution reveals two conflicting views on nationalism: Is nationalism part of human nature or is it a fabricated ideology? For de Maistre, men are born with a national identity that is part of their nature. Similarly, Edmund Burke criticized the French concept of universal human rights by claiming that those rights are not innate but are produced and safeguarded by civil and national society. Not that the French revolutionaries were innocent universalists: it was in the name of the allegedly universal human rights that Revolutionary – and later Napoleonic – France attempted to subjugate the European continent to French rule and culture. But behind the French Declaration of Human Rights lies the idea that men are naturally united by their “universal rights” and artificially divided by their “national tyrants.” The attempt to play down the authenticity and legitimacy of national belonging was taken a step further by Marxist theory: for Marx nationalism is indeed a bourgeois plot aimed at preventing proletarian cross-border solidarity. According to that view, nationalism is not a natural and legitimate phenomenon but a fabrication manipulated by a ruling and threatened class.
Zionism constituted a revolt against both the French Revolution and Marxism, as it denied the universal tenets of the two ideologies. Ironically, Zionism both integrated and rejected the ideological foundations of the French Revolution: it integrated the concept of national sovereignty but rejected the idea of universalism. This paradox was a by-product of the contradictions of the French Revolution. Herzl became the advocate of Jewish nationalism precisely because he saw in the Dreyfus Affair the French Revolution’s failure and betrayal of the Jews. Most early Zionists were indeed Marxists, but the Mapai leadership soon abandoned the socialist dogmas that proved to be incompatible with Jewish national claims and interests in Mandatory Palestine.¹

Zionism is often criticized for being precisely what it is: Jewish nationalism. Nationalism does not have to be romantic, military, or fascist. Nationalism is the attachment to the culture and interests of a particular nation, and the aspiration for national independence. As such, it seems to be legitimate and even praiseworthy. However, it is vilified by those who rightly see in it a phenomenon that is at least partly incompatible with universalistic ideologies. The de-legitimization of nationalism is based on the argument that nationalism is an artificial fabrication. This article explains and challenges the theories that attempt to “deconstruct” nationalism in general and Zionism in particular, and highlights their many flaws and inaccuracies. It reaches the conclusion that academic critiques of nationalism and Zionism are far from being conceptually consistent and politically innocent.
Nationalism is not a popular phenomenon among scholars. Many prominent historians and philosophers such as Kedourie, Popper, and Toynbee, have condemned nationalism in the strongest terms, arguing that it constitutes an artificial and deleterious ideology. Their arguments are generally more polemical than academic. Other scholars, such as Deutsch, Gellner, and Hobsbawn, have developed economic and social theories to try and demonstrate that nationalism is not an authentic phenomenon but a fabricated ideology.

Elie Kedourie argued that nationalism is artificial and therefore illegitimate. According to Kedourie, nationalism is “a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.” Nationalists “make use of the past in order to subvert the present” and their ideology is nothing but “a rejection of life, and a love of death.” Kant’s ethical theory is the point of departure of nationalism because “it did not allow for the paradoxical and dangerous possibility that self-legislation, restrained by nothing but itself, can adopt evil as its own good.” Nationalism is a European ideology that sees in the nation the supreme expression of man’s freedom and identity. This ideology became popular because it satisfied the need to belong to a coherent and stable community at a time when traditional institutions such as the family, the neighborhood, and the religious community were undergoing profound changes in modern Europe. Not only is nationalism an artificial and fabricated ideology, but it is also a dangerous source of instability and conflicts.

Karl Popper has written that nationalism is “an irrational, romantic, and Utopian dream, a dream of naturalism and tribal collectivism [appealing to our] tribal instincts, to passion and prejudice.” Arnold Toynbee claimed that nationalism is a “western virus” responsible for the
cruelties and injustices caused by the partition of the Indian sub-continent and of Mandatory Palestine. The partition of these two former British colonies constituted “examples of the destructively explosive effect of the Western ideology of nationalism in which geographically intermingled communities had previously been enabled to live together in virtue of being organized in millets.”  

John Dunn defined nationalism as “the starkest political shame of the twentieth century, the deepest, most intractable, and yet most unanticipated blot on the political history of the world since the year 1900.”  

Hugh Seton-Watson was no less virulent: nationalism is a coin “on the side of which appear the venerable features of Garibaldi, [and] the obscene figure of the Commandant of Auschwitz.”

International relations theorists generally share the harsh and polemic tone of the above critiques. Edward Hallett Carr denied that nations are authentic entities with natural rights: “the nation is not a ‘natural’ or ‘biological’ group – in the sense, for example, of the family. It has no ‘natural’ rights in the sense that the individual can be said to have rights. The nation is not a definable and clearly recognizable entity.”  

Therefore, one must reject the idea that “any international order must take the form of an association of nations.”  

Carr argued that “today…a large majority of the population of the world feels no allegiance to any nation” and that “the failure to create an international community of nations on the basis of international treaties and international law marks the bankruptcy of nationalism in the West.”  

For Carr, nationalism is an ideological relic of the nineteenth century, from which twentieth century diplomats ought to emancipate themselves in order to conduct a “realist” foreign policy. Similarly, Hans Morgenthau claimed that nationalism “destroyed the international society” and that political realism ought not “to identify the moral aspirations of a political nation with the laws that govern the universe.”  

For both Carr and Morgenthau, nationalism should be
expunged because it blurs the statesman’s “objective” perception of reality and thus his ability to conduct a “realist” foreign policy.

Some international relations theorists have criticized the realist school for ignoring and dismissing the impact of nationalism on foreign policy, but their condemnation of nationalism remains intact. For instance, William Bloom attempted to assess the influence of nationalism in international relations only to conclude with a political slogan reminiscent of the Communist Manifesto: “The historic arias that nationalism and patriotism played on the stage of political competition must, quite simply, be banned from the repertoire. The audience should refuse to listen, the musicians refuse to accompany, and the singers refuse to sing.”

As explained at the beginning of this section, there is a second category of academic de-legitimization of nationalism. It is less polemic and more substantiated, although not ideologically innocent. Karl Deutsch argued that “nation-building” is the result of a social design and that ethnic identity will wither away with economic development and modernization: “The process of partial modernization will draw away many of the most gifted and energetic individuals into the cities or the growing sectors of the economy away from their former minority or tribal groups.” Ernst Gellner claimed that nationalism and the search for national identity are the result of industrialization. For Gellner, pre-modern societies had no interest in nationalism, for their elite and masses were separated by cultural barriers. Modern societies, in contrast, require cultural homogeneity to function. Moreover, industrialization and modernization created an urban melting pot educated by the state educational system, which itself provided the social and cultural basis for nationalism. Nationalism, then, does not express the will of an existing nation, but “invents” the nation: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.”
Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger argued that ideologies that project a national historical antiquity are invented and fabricated by ruling elites. For these authors, national symbols are “invented” by a ruling class and imparted to society for the sake of political stability and cohesion. Rapid industrial change threatens the cohesion of society and therefore requires the creation of a “national feeling” by the political elite for the survival of the state. National identity and nationalism “rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation.”

According to Hobsbawn, nineteenth century urbanization, mass migration, and theories of “race” provided a mass support for nationalism. This nationalism, Hobsbawn argues, has become irrelevant in our era of large-scale economies and polities. The resurgence of an ethno-linguistic nationalism is a reactionary response to globalization and will inexorably fade: “In spite of its evident prominence, nationalism today is historically less important. It is no longer, as it were, a global political program, as it may have been in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”

Other authors attempt to provide a psychological rather than economic “deconstruction” of nationalism. For Anthony Giddens, nationalism is a “psychological phenomenon” that compensates for the ideological desiderata of the modern state, thus providing a basis for trust and cooperation. In this view, nationalism stems more from a psychological need than from an historical and cultural reality.

In a similar vein, Benedict Anderson claimed that the nation is an “imagined political community” because its members will “never know their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” People are ready to die for an alleged national identity and historical legacy that are, in fact, “inventions of their imagination.” The imagined nation is a product of “print capitalism” (i.e. the spread of mass reading, vernacular languages, and Protestantism in the wake of Guttenberg’s
new printing device): men identify with an imagined community “narrated” by novels and newspapers.

Both anti-nationalist diatribes and “deconstructionist” theories of nationalism are often applied to the Jewish national movement. Toynbee, in his *Study of History*, described the Jewish people as a “fossil” and argued in a subsequent article that Zionism is a colonial movement that cynically referred to an ancient past to justify its illegitimate seizing of Palestine. For Toynbee, Zionism is not the modern expression of the Jews’ age-old dream of national redemption, but a disease that the Jews caught in Europe: “The Western gentile races invented nationalism, which I strongly dislike, and the Jews caught this disease from the gentiles, which is very unfortunate.”

Hobsbawn, for his part, applies his theory of nationalism to Zionism and argues that Jewish nationalism belongs to the category of “ethno-linguistic nationalism,” i.e. the nationalism that emerged as a reaction to modernity and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, Zionism was invented by a petit-bourgeois intelligentsia excluded from power. Like its gentile counterparts, the nineteenth century Jewish bourgeoisie invented national symbols, history and memory to calm its anxiety and fears in a world of economic upheavals and moral relativism. Zionism is therefore illegitimate:

It is entirely illegitimate to identify the Jewish links with the ancestral Land of Israel…with the desire to gather all Jews into a modern territorial state situated in the ancient Holy Land. One might as well argue that good Muslims, whose highest ambition is to make the pilgrimage to Mecca, in doing so really intend to declare themselves citizens of what has now become Saudi Arabia.

“Deconstructionist” theories of nationalism provide the ideal arguments for the de-legitimization of nationalism in general and of Jewish nationalism in particular. In an academic article aimed at “proving” that Zionism is a colonial – and therefore illegitimate – movement,
Azmi Bishara typically uses “deconstructionist” themes. According to Bishara: “The ethnic nationalism of our days is not a primordial, ancient nationalism but the modern outcome of two simultaneous processes: globalization and particularization”\(^30\) and the nation “is not a natural given, but a social, cultural, historical phenomenon.”\(^31\) Indeed, there is no intrinsic, natural, and pre-existing national identity: the belief in a common origin is “created” and nationality is not the product of an ancient “common identity” but of instruments such as a “modern army” and the use of “divine promises.”\(^32\) It might be that in a “hypothetical beginning there existed some kind of natural ethnic elements, but history did not keep any of these… Contrary to what Smith argues, the nation does not have an ethnic origin.”\(^33\) There is therefore no ethnic and historical continuity between modern nationalism and ancient national identities. Typically, Zionism “attempted to turn the Jews into a nation” by cynically manipulating an “imagined collective.”\(^34\) Therefore, Zionism is nothing but “colonialism”\(^35\) and “historically, the idea of the Jewish state is illegitimate.”\(^36\)

**Deconstructing “Deconstructionist” Theories**

Nationalism is not necessarily a romantic, exalted cult of the nation. It can be a mild and legitimate form of patriotism. The “anti-nationalist diatribes” referred to in the previous section confuse nationalism with a radical, indeed caricatured version of nationalism. “Deconstructionist” theories of nationalism, for their part, are built on hollow arguments that are generally refuted by facts, especially when it comes to Zionism. Finally, nationalism constitutes the ultimate justification of the nation-state and one cannot de-legitimize the former without de-legitimizing the latter.
Nationalism is not a monolithic ideology; neither is it necessarily radical and violent. As explained by Carlton Hayes, nationalism can be humanitarian, Jacobin, traditional, liberal, or integral.\textsuperscript{37} “Humanitarian nationalism” is the nationalism of Herder, which constitutes an ideological reaction to the intellectualism of the Hobbsian and Lockian theories of the social contract. “Jacobin nationalism” is the militant, missionary, and military nationalism of the French Revolution. “Traditional nationalism” is the nationalism of Burke, de Maistre, and de Bonald, namely a nationalism based on history and tradition. “Liberal nationalism” is the nationalism of Jeremy Bentham, a nationalism which stresses the absolute sovereignty of the nation-state but limits the implications of this principle by stressing individual liberty. “Integral nationalism” is the nationalism of Charles Maurras, which raises the nation to a supreme value, an end in itself. Nationalism may also be divided, as argued by Margaret Canovan, between a “romantic-collectivist” version and a “liberal and individualistic” one.\textsuperscript{38}

“Deconstructionist” theories of nationalism are often contradicted by facts, especially with regard to Zionism. As Anthony Smith pointed out, Benedict Anderson’s theory fails to explain the diversity of the alleged “imagined communities,”\textsuperscript{39} and “deconstructionist” theories “tell us little about the distinctive qualities and character of the national community.”\textsuperscript{40} Basing his research on an extensive array of historical examples, Smith shows that modern nationalism has deep ethnic and historical roots and that “nations and nationalisms spring up on the basis of pre-existing ethnie.”\textsuperscript{41} There would be no lasting nation or national movement were it not for the existence of an ethnie. The modern state and modern nationalist ideologies played an important role in homogenizing populations and stimulating their feelings, but the active role of the state in modern times would have produced no durable and consistent results without ethnic cores and ethnic models: “Without ethnie and ethnicism, there would be neither nations nor nationalism.”\textsuperscript{42}
Like other nationalist movements, Zionism emerged both from a pre-existing *ethnie* and from the influence of European nationalism. As explained by Shlomo Avineri, Zionism is the product of both an age-old religious tradition and of the identity crisis and social dilemmas experienced by European Jews after their emancipation.\(^{43}\) Zionism would not have emerged as a political movement without the ancient bond linking the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, and without the cultivated aspiration of the Jews to return to their country. On the other hand, Zionism could only have emerged as an organized movement in the political and social conditions that followed the emancipation of the Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The French Revolution uprooted the Jews from their traditional and religious structures without providing a solution to the daily practical dilemmas faced by the newly emancipated Jews in a secularized Christian society.\(^{44}\) While posing unprecedented social and identity problems to the newly emancipated Jewish citizens, the French Revolution also compelled them to confront societies organized around the idea of *nation*. Christian identity was not replaced by universal fraternity but by French, German, Russian, and other nationalist movements. Theodore Herzl realized with the Dreyfus Affair that the promises of the French Revolution were never kept: no matter how hard Jews tried to assimilate and identify with their national environment, they were still considered alien by their fellow citizens. Herzl wrote about the Dreyfus Affair: “Dreyfus is only an abstraction now. He is the Jew in modern society who has tried to adapt to his environment, who speaks its language, thinks its thoughts, sews its insignia on its tunic –and who has those stripes ripped off by force. Dreyfus represents a position which has been fought for, which is still being fought for, and which – let us not delude ourselves –has been lost.”\(^{45}\) Herzl concluded that the Jews should cease to believe in an ideal that never materialized – a conclusion whose acuteness was tragically confirmed by the Holocaust.\(^{46}\)
Zionism contradicts some of the basic tenets of “deconstructionist” theories of nationalism, especially Ernst Gellner’s. Gellner argued that nationalism emerged in nineteenth century Europe because industrial society calls for universal literacy in a homogenized culture and a standardized language. Not so for modern Jewish nationalism: Zionism rejected Jewish assimilation into a homogenized culture and advocated the revival of Jewish particularism. Gellner’s theory is further invalidated by the revival of the Hebrew language. According to this theory, European nationalism involved the replacement of the universal language of high culture (Latin) by the vernacular languages of low culture. But Hebrew was the language of high culture, whereas the Jews’ vernacular languages were Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic.

Attempts to blur the link between Zionism and Jewish history fail to explain why the Jews have survived at least from the time of Ezra, why they have kept a spiritual and physical link with their land for three thousand years, why they have preserved their faith and tongue throughout their wanderings, and why they are united by a legal system and religious practice. The Jews, after all, are the only people in the Middle East speaking the same language and practicing the same religion as their forefathers did thousands of years ago.

There has been a continuous link between the people and the land of Israel century after century, and Jewish immigration to the Holy Land did not start with the emergence of Zionism. During the Middle Ages, the most prominent figures of world Jewry put into practice what they considered to be their religious duty of “ascending” to the Land of Israel: Saadia Gaon, Benjamin of Tudela, Maimonides, and Judah Halevi in the twelfth century; Nachmanides in the thirteenth century. In 1211, the “aliya of the three hundred rabbis” brought to the Land of Israel leading Torah scholars from France, England, North Africa, and Egypt. In the third decade of the sixteenth century, thousands of Jews moved to the Land of Israel from Western Europe, as well
as Poland and Lithuania. This *aliya* transformed the Galilee town of Safed into a lively center of Jewish life, under the spiritual leadership of Rabbis Jacob Berab, Joseph Karo, Solomon Alkabetz, and Isaac Luria. A new wave of immigration occurred in the mid-seventeenth century, led by Rabbis Abraham Azulai from Morocco, Jacob Tzemah from Portugal, Nathan Shapira of Krakow, and Isaiah Horowitz of Prague. In 1740, the Ottoman authorities invited Rabbi Haim Abulafia to rebuild Tiberias. The Jewish populations of Jerusalem and Tiberias increased, thanks to a new wave of immigration that included Rabbi Haim ben Luzzatto. A group of about three hundred Hasidic Jews immigrated to the Land of Israel in 1777, followed, between 1809 and 1811, by hundreds of Jewish families.  

In addition to its shortcomings, the methodological de-legitimization of nationalism undermines the very legitimacy of the nation state. The theories of national sovereignty and royal absolutism developed by Bodin, Machiavelli, and Hobbes left unanswered the question of the purpose of separate sovereignties. After the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Hobbes argued that sovereignty is neither a divine nor a natural body, but an entity created by men to escape from the state of nature. However, since this created identity is artificial because it is based on a social contract, what need is there for different sovereignties? Given Hobbes’s denial of the existence of an ancestral or natural community, there is an unresolved contradiction in his theory. A similar question arises from Locke’s theory of power. Like Hobbes, Locke does not provide a satisfactory answer to the question of the existence of separate political entities in a system of sovereignty based on a social contract between men. Both Hobbes and Locke believed that what convinced men to unite in a social contract was not a sentiment of common origin or common loyalties, but a rational self-interest, the desire of men to escape the disadvantages of the state of nature. The theory of the social contract was not entirely satisfactory in that it did not provide an
adequate substitute for the religious idea of the Middle Ages. Indeed, the rational motive of self-interest could never be strong enough to cement national unity in the face of conflicting interests. As pointed out by Sanjay Seth: “There is a monumental inconsistency in early liberal theory; an unexplained gap between the universal man, which is its point of departure, and the citizen or subject of the state, which is its point of arrival.”

Rousseau tried to solve this contradiction by emphasizing the powerful role of national identity and nationalism. For Rousseau, fear and crude interest could not provide national unity and cohesion. What gives significance to an association of individuals is a common aim, the volonté générale. Rousseau recommended the establishment of a national religion as a substitute for Christianity. The volonté générale and the civil religion would become the basis for patriotisme, which is the common identification and sentimental attachment to the patrie. Rousseau also suggested that men abandon their emotions and loyalties to their families, customs, and surroundings so as to transfer them to the nation. Only then would national sovereignty stand on a firm ground: “Do we wish the common people to be virtuous? Then let us begin by making them love their country!”

One of Rousseau’s strongest ideological opponents, Edmond Burke, also made a case for nationalism. As opposed to Rousseau, Burke did not believe in a universal law of nature valid for all times and places. For Burke, the law must express the essence of the nation. The British common law is far superior to the French constitution because it is made “By what is ten thousand times better than choice, it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time.” Burke emphasized the importance of human feelings and of national identity, which were overlooked by the abstract theories of Locke.
In the nineteenth century, Émile Durkheim argued: “There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality.”

Inevitably, nationalism in general and Zionism in particular challenge the Kantian ideal of universal values produced by pure reason. For if values are universal there is no need to preserve the ones that emerged from specific national traditions. Herzl eventually rejected Rousseau’s theory of the social contract precisely because he reached the conclusion that the true foundation of a common national existence is the subjective and powerful identification with a nation. Thus, the true foundation of national sovereignty is not a rational calculation but an emotional affection.

Contemporary political thinkers who feel uncomfortable with the very concept of nationalism fail to provide a convincing alternative to nationalism’s central role in modern democracies. Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*, for instance, claims to be universal but nowhere does it explain why the moral relations between individuals within a given country should be different from relations with individuals of another country. Since Rawls’ theory relies upon the fact that individuals are to be considered “fully co-operating members of society,” one may wonder how they can possibly be “fully co-operative” if not for the sake of a shared identity and national feeling. Margaret Canovan is thus correct to point out that “Lurking behind the apparently universalistic terms of Rawls’ theory…is a territorial political community of fate, not choice, and that seems remarkably like a nation.”
Conclusion

The “deconstructionist” case is weak, but the question of whether nationalism is natural or artificial is mostly an ideological one. Therefore, both sides in the debate over the nature of nationalism are legitimate and worthy of respect. Or so it would be if “deconstructionists” were consistent and honest – which they are not.

For all his hostility toward nationalism, Toynbee had only praise for Arab nationalist claims against Israel. Hobsbawn has a traditional Marxist antipathy for nationalism, but this antipathy reaches suspicious heights when he speaks and writes about Zionism. As a distinguished newspaper has recently written about him: “As a child of Mitteleuropa, with his background in the multilingual and multiconfessional Habsburg empire, he detests the nationalism of blood and soil everywhere. The behaviour of Israel’s Likud Party, whose founders, he writes, were inspired by Mussolini, often tests the vow he made to his mother never to be ashamed of his Jewishness.”

Bishara extensively quotes “deconstructionist” theories of nationalism to make his case against Zionism, but then admits that “National ideology and national identity…are essential elements of society’s modernization… Indeed, I am an Arab nationalist.” All national movements are equally illegitimate, it seems, but some are more equal than others.

As was argued before, nationalism needs not be romantic, military, or fascist. This obvious fact seems to have never occurred to many prominent Zionists, especially academics with a German cultural background and a Kantian philosophical outlook. Martin Buber moved to Mandatory Palestine where he ambiguously advocated some sort of Jewish revival, but he considered himself too sophisticated to be called a Jewish nationalist. The immigration of Jews
to the Land of Israel caused him “guilt,” and after Israel’s independence he argued for the curtailment of further Jewish immigration into Israel and defended the right of Arab refugees to return to their homes. Yeshayahu Leibowitz was a vowed Zionist who openly said that he did not want to be “ruled by goyim,” but he would obsessively repeat Franz Grillpärzer’s formula: “The path of modern culture leads from humanity, through nationalism, to bestiality.”

The accusation of nationalism seems to cause more embarrassment among certain scholars than that of inconsistency or lack of logic. Attempts to de-legitimize Zionism through inflamed slogans or sophisticated theories tell us more about the political and ideological agenda of “deconstructionist” theoreticians than about the nature of nationalism. Indeed, to paraphrase de Maistre, I have never met a political theorist without any form of national allegiance, and if he exists it is without my knowledge.

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3 Kedourie, *Nationalism*, p. 70.
4 Kedourie, *Nationalism*, p. 82.
13 Carr, *Nationalism and After*, p. 32.
26 Anderson, Imagined Communities, p. 129.
46 See Hazony, The Jewish State, pp. 81-115.
49 Seth Sanjay, “Political Theory in the Age of Nationalism,” Ethics and International Affairs 7 (1993), pp. 75-76.
50 Quoted from The Royal Institute for Royal Affairs, Nationalism (London: Frank Cass, 1963), p. 29.
51 Quoted from The Royal Institute for Royal Affairs, Nationalism, p. 33.
53 Theodor Herzl, Der Judenstaat.
55 Canovan, Nationhood and Political Theory, p. 34.
57 “The Citizen Azmi,” p. 27.
58 Hazony, The Jewish State, p. 277.