Nationalism, States and the European Union

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I am asking two straightforward questions in this lecture—does nationalism pose a problem for the European Union? Does the EU undermine nationalism? Like many basic questions in politics, it is easy to formulate the questions and very difficult to answer them. As I said in the Conclusion to my book STATES AND NATIONALISM IN EUROPE SINCE 1945 (1) 'General assessments of the impact of nationalism and the meaning of national identity involve “big questions, large processes, huge comparisons.” Disagreements are inevitable about these assessments and plausible objections [may be made to all of] them.'

In brief, my answer to the question is that it is not possible to envisage, in the foreseeable future, a Europe in which nationalism is eradicated. Until some equally powerful political doctrine or belief emerges, it is probably undesirable, if one wishes to preserve democratic institutions, that basic loyalty to the nation and nation state should be seriously undermined. But in certain areas of policy, nationalism represents a problem for the European Union a problem which will probably become more difficult in an enlarged EU. More generally, it represents a latent threat to the cohesion of the Union. I am now going to explain how I arrive at this answer.

This lecture is divided into four sections. First, a brief introduction to nationalism, nations and national identity; second, an assessment of the importance of nationalism in contemporary European politics; third a view on the controversy about whether European integration poses a threat to the European nations; and finally the implications for the EU of the persist-
The easiest task I have is to define nationalism because it is a very simple idea or doctrine. The central contentions are that almost all people belong to a reasonably homogeneous national group. Nations have characteristics—habits, ways of thinking and institutions—which clearly distinguish them from other national groups. One's own nation is, in some ways, regarded as more valuable than other nations, although it may sometimes be grouped with other "like minded nations". Most important from the political point of view, nations should be "self-determining" and should have independent governments.

There is now little agreement that, as a political doctrine, nationalism was formulated at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries but national identities and national sentiments are obviously very much older. Some nations, such as the Chinese, Persians and Jews, seem as old as recorded history. The difficult question is what are these nations and what binds them together over long periods of time. In other words, this requires a reply to the question posed in the title of the best-known contribution to an enormous literature—"What is a Nation?" by Ernest Renan published in 1862. I am not engaging with this question, although whether membership of a nation is primarily derived from a blood relationship or an ethnicity, or an historical accident or a political community consciously built, is still highly relevant to contemporary controversies.

More important politically—indeed a crucial factor in contemporary European politics—national identity remains a basic element in the personal identity of almost all individuals in European societies—people think of themselves as French, German, Portuguese, Irish and so on before they think of themselves as European or, except in exceptional cases, belonging to a local or regional ethnicity. Additionally, nationalism is a crucial element in constituting the political legitimacy of the member states of the EU. National sentiment is also a complicating factor in formulating EU policies in matters such as Common Foreign and Security Policy, Immigration policy, the
creation of an area of ‘freedom, security and justice’ introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam.

To move on to the second topic — most leading politicians in Europe, since the Second World War, have been powerfully influenced by nationalist doctrine, without thinking of themselves as nationalists. This includes the so-called ‘Fathers of Europe’, De Gasparri, Spaak, Schuman, Monnet, Adenauer, none of whom contested that for most purposes nations should be self-governing, and that national identities and national cultures were important and valuable. For large numbers of ordinary citizens, this has not been identified as nationalism but simply as plain common sense.

Nonetheless nationalism has had a very chequered reputation. States and nationalism have been inter-twined in modern European history. States have derived their legitimacy from the national principle and multinational states have had great difficulty in surviving. Nationalism, as part of an universal liberating ideal, apparently triumphed at the end of the First World War when national self-determination was accepted in principle, if not always in fact, for allocating territory in Europe in the peace settlements which followed that war. Even Lenin and Stalin paid lip service to this principle and appealed to national sentiment when it suited them. In the first half of the 20th century, the capacity to mobilise large populations in great projects and particularly for war relied on appeals to national sentiment.

After the Second World War, and even today, nationalism has had a very poor reputation among political elites. The degeneration of nationalism into its extreme forms of fascism and nazism, and their defeat in the Second World War, discredited it. The re-emergence of minority nationalism (Northern Ireland Republicans, Basques, Corsican and so on), especially from the 1960s did little to improve the image of nationalism, because they were often regarded as violent and irrational. More recently, virulent nationalism in eastern Europe since the collapse of Soviet Communism, whose emblematic figures are Milosovec in Serbia and Zhirinovsky in Russia, has been going through a revival. The consequence of this has been to
associate nationalism with mischief-making, reactionary, and archaic societies and the belief that it inevitably lead to bloody disputes over territory.

Extreme forms of nationalism, associated with xenophobia and disdain for all foreigners are not, however, the only expressions of nationalism. Very far from it, because varieties of nationalism are part of everyday life in Europe. Appeals to it are the common currency of election campaigns and what Michael Billig, in an interesting and original book, has called banal nationalism, the omnipresent flagging of national identity and of national belonging in the media, in recurrent phrases in everyday speech and in flags and symbols. The literature on the European Union takes little account of this banal nationalism. But there has been, quite separate from analyses of the EU, the growth of a large literature on the history, theory and contemporary manifestations of nationalism in the last decade. This has largely been because of the revival of nationalism as a disruptive political force over the past decade.

I introduce the third theme with a question. Is the EU a challenge to the national principle and the core doctrine of nationalism, namely, that nations should be self-governing?

Initially, European integration was a deliberate attempt to curb what was regarded as nationalism in Europe—excessive and belligerent competition between nation states in which war was regarded as a normal instrument of policy. European integration was a project to bind the European nations together, not a project to challenge their existence. In the course of a complex evolution of what pro-Europeans call “the construction of Europe” national interests and national sentiments have supported and sometimes resisted moves towards integration.

Since the coming into force of the Treaty of Rome, a dispute has persisted between those who believe that the states of Europe are genuinely pooling sovereignty and those who argue that the nation state in Europe has been rescued by European institutions. The former hold that the nation
state and its ideological underpinning, nationalism, are in decline and a European or cosmopolitan citizenship is replacing it. According to this latter view, European institutions are an advanced form of inter-state co-operation and not genuine supra-nationalism around which could be formed a new European identity.

This view has had some persuasive exponents. The apparent complementarity of national interests and European institutions in the early phase of the European Communities led a distinguished historian, Alan Milward, to conclude that European integration has "rescued" the nation state. The continental European states emerged strengthened both in terms of effectiveness and of the loyalties of their citizens to them. More recently, others, such as Moravcsik, have argued that the states continue to be the decisive actors in EU enlargement and the institutional development of the Union. These views suggest that the extent to which states have lost their independence is limited and the supranational aspect of the EU is largely mythical. On the other side, many have argued that the loss of sovereignty over economic legislation is almost complete. Moreover, the EU is establishing some authority over virtually all areas of policy.

The dispute will probably be resolved in the next ten years when the implications of decisions taken in the 1990s have been worked through. The main decisions are qualified majority voting in the European Council of Ministers on "Community" matters, the single currency and the European Central Bank, open borders between member states and a common immigration policy, the Tampere programme on co-operation in Justice and Home Affairs (including revolutionary proposals for a European arrest warrant) and institutional change such as increased powers for the European parliament. Present indications are that it will be resolved in favour of those who believe that European institutions are a genuine higher level of government, despite clear hostility to this in several EU countries. The argument continues, with many on the nationalist Right and 'eurosceptics' across the political spectrum determined to prevent further loss of state sovereignty.
which their opponents see this as an inevitable development.

Much has been made of the lack of a strong European identity, of a
genuine European people to sustain the integration process. This slows any
attempt to solve the so-called democratic deficit in the EU and weakens its
legitimacy. It can be argued, and it has been strongly argued by liberal
nationalists, that a strong sense of national identity, coupled with the belief
that nations should be self-governing has been the cement and underpinning
of democracy in Europe. If the measures now on the agenda, particularly in
the fields of Justice and Home Affairs, and Common Foreign and Security
Policy, are successfully carried through, making the fulfilment of the long-
standing aim of creating a supranational tier of government clear and appa-
rent to all, then nations will clearly be much less self-governing. There is a
genuine challenge to nationalist assumptions posed. But it is very unlikely
that the existence of nations will be challenged. Indeed it is more likely that
EU policies will be designed to support their existence and preserve cultural
diversity, widely regarded as one of the riches of Europe.

I introduce the fourth topic also with a question. What are the implica-
tions for the EU of the persistence of nationalism?

At some points, nationalism and national sentiment have acted as a brake
and as a complicating factor over a whole range of policy matters. The
most familiar incident is de Gaulle's successful opposition to majority voting
as a method of reaching decisions in the mid-1960s. De Gaulle was a highly
idiosyncratic nationalist but he believed that nations were millennial phe-
nomena, which could not be genuinely challenged by supranational institu-
tions as legitimate locations of political authority. However, the situation
has changed. Majority voting is now routine and it has, since the Treaty of
Nice, been accepted as a way of taking decisions even over very sensitive
matters such as immigration policy, although the implementation of this is
subject to delay.

Does this mean that nationalism within the EU has declined over the last
forty years? This is probably not the case. Indeed there is a stronger argu-
ment to be made that popular support for the European integration has declined during this period. At the governmental level, there is acceptance that a device such as qualified majority voting is essential to take decisions in an enlarged EU but most governments, and certainly the governments of the larger states are reasonably confident that they could assemble blocking coalitions against measures they did not like. Also, if they expressed clearly their opposition to measures on grounds of national interest, they are also confident that every effort would be made by the other member states to reach a compromise. The reason for this is, that the EU collectively does not wish to challenge openly a major state whose government would certainly be backed by strong national sentiment in the event of confrontation. In this connection, it is fortunate that the Treaty of Nice was not put to referenda in the majority of the member states, because Qualified Majority Voting would not have been attractive to electorates. In one state, Ireland, where a referendum was held, it was lost—although no general conclusions should be drawn from this rather curious setback.

Nationalism and national sentiment are complicating factors in developing the constitution of the EU, restricting both the use and the nature of the system of majority voting in the Council of Minister, limiting the development of the power of the European parliament, and blocking, or at least delaying, the introduction of certain policies such as tax harmonisation, a common immigration policy and a common foreign policy. Indeed many European Union policies have to be presented by member state governments as being in the national interest in order to win popular consent. Could the power to hinder European integration become more serious?

We can examine this question in the context of certain pessimistic scenarios for the future of the EU. First, there are early signs, as certain sceptical economists predicted, that the economies of the members of the European Monetary Union diverge. Some may experience growth whilst others move into recession. This is also true of large federal systems like the USA, where some states may be prospering whilst others suffer a sharp slowing
of economic activity, but there is much greater mobility of labour within a single nation such as America than in the EU. In the circumstances of the EU, a single rate of interest could cause grave tensions between states. Nationalist sentiment could be mobilised by aggrieved politicians and economic interests. It is also possible that there could be nationalist reactions, as a result of differences over policy concerning external trade, particularly if the world’s major trading blocs become more protectionist.

Second, the different geopolitical situations and political traditions of member states could result in divergent approaches to international crises. This has already become apparent when Britain, alone of the European states, actively supported the US air strikes against Iraq from the late 1990s and Greek public opinion, alone of the European nations, overwhelmingly supported the Serbs in the 1999 Kosovo crisis. The enlargement of the EU to include five east central European states and, possibly, Cyprus will increase the likelihood of these divergences because the west European countries are unlikely to have the same perspective on a serious crisis, for example, in Ukraine, to that of Poland. They could threaten Poland directly but not the EU states on the Atlantic seaboard. This difference in geopolitical situation could also have consequences for low intensity crises, such as the sudden influx of refugees as a result of economic distress and armed conflict in neighbouring states.

Third, the pessimistic political scenario—the more the European Union approximates to a state the more it may experience the problems of multinational states in the past. With the abolition of economic frontiers and the fading of political frontiers, cultural frontiers are likely to increase in importance. This could be the case for near neighbours as well as more distant societies. Proximity of peoples and frequency of daily contacts may increase irritations based on cultural difference and different habitual ways of doing things. Distance from other peoples, particularly after the next enlargement, will dilute the sense of being involved in a common project. Popular perceptions of other nations may become even more stereotyped,
simplified and represented by unscrupulous politicians as consistently competitive. National symbols may be defended with greater tenacity if politicians and sections of the population become convinced that they are under threat. An idealised national past may be contrasted with the threat of a European melting pot, in which, it is feared, mass culture will be dominated by the least desirable American cultural products. A sense of European identity, as a second identity could decline— as, indeed, it has in France and Germany since the beginning of the 1990s according to the Eurobarometer surveys. Belief that it is in one’s country’s interests to belong to the EU could continue to decline.

My concluding remarks on this vast topic of nationalism and the European Union are—

No one can predict the future and the scenarios outlined represent fears and anxieties felt in certain circles in Europe. But even if the pessimistic scenarios come to pass, they are unlikely to result in the disintegration of the EU. The reasons are evident to anyone with a close working knowledge of European institutions. The integration process has gone too far; the EU legal order is too deeply entrenched; the major economic actors have adapted to the Single Market and to the EU as a single actor in international trade negotiations; the Euro and the European Central Bank are established facts; major initiatives are on the agenda in Justice and Home Affairs; and Governments cannot see a way of pursuing their interests outside the EU.

However, what Lindburg and Scheingold described in 1970 as the “permissive consensus” supporting European integration has disappeared. The electorates of the member states are much less ready to let their governments get on with the process of European integration without interference. Governments cannot take the citizen’s consent in this matter for granted; any referendum held in almost any member state on important additional powers to EU institutions will be highly controversial and the result very uncertain. The citizens of the smaller states are clearly restive but, for
example, it is very doubtful whether the German electorate would have approved the single currency if the question had been put to it.

What is clear from an examination of nationalism is that the European Union cannot, in its final form, be modelled on the nation state, even if there may be a certain superficial resemblance in the symbolism—with an EU flag, anthem, constitution, currency, etc. But the emotionally charged identification of individuals with a language and a history, a nation and a state cannot be replicated at the European level. This means that the form of democratisation of Europe—the way in which the so-called democratic deficit can be addressed—must be different. This question has been intelligently discussed by Philip Schmitter and others who argue, quite correctly, that new concepts and new institutions will have to be invented to give a real democratic legitimacy to the EU. Three dimensions of the EU are central—citizenship, representation and decision-making. Joseph Weller has analysed these dimensions brilliantly in a recent collection of essays, lies beyond the subject matter of this lecture. I limit myself to saying that the task for the EU is not to undermine and subvert nations and nationalism, because this would risk weakening the democratic political order. The task is to invent something different so that not only governments but also peoples will be prepared to accept certain sacrifices and burdens for the sake of a common European interest. I am confident that this task will be accomplished.


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It is not possible to envisage, in the foreseeable future, a Europe in which nationalism is eradicated. Until some equally powerful political doctrine or belief emerges, the preservation of democratic institutions probably requires that basic loyalty to the nation and nation state should not be seriously undermined. But in certain areas of policy, nationalism represents a problem for the European Union, a problem which will probably become more difficult in an enlarged EU. More generally, it represents a latent threat to the cohesion of the Union.

The article is organized in four sections: first, a brief introduction to nationalism, nations and national identity; second, an assessment of the importance of nationalism in contemporary European politics; third, a view on the controversy about whether European integration poses a threat to the European nations; and finally the implications for the EU of the persistence of nationalism.

In conclusion, the result of the persistence of nationalism is that the “permissive consensus” supporting European integration has disappeared.
Any democratic consultation on important additional powers to EU institutions will be highly controversial and the result uncertain. It is also clear that the European Union cannot, in its final form, be modelled on the nation state, even if there may be a certain superficial resemblance in the symbolism—with an EU flag, anthem, constitution, currency, etc. The emotionally charged identification of individuals with a language and a history, a nation and a state cannot be replicated at the European level. This does not, however, justify pessimism about the future of the European Union.