

Identity: National and Personal

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National identity is a much debated issue today, primarily because of the consciousness of immigration as it impacts on public assumptions of service demand and expense. That most of the debate is based upon uninformed assumption (or worse still, pure prejudice) makes the whole issue very muddy. Finding sense means looking at both history and context.

Firstly, the rise of such a concept as a 'nation' is a fairly recent event. Prior to the Reformation, most national entities considered themselves part of a much larger international system of Roman Catholic hegemony, with the Pope in Rome as its titular head. Such spiritual empires had a huge impact on national life and the power of local rulers. There was always the possibility of an appeal to Rome if local law was seen as unjust. There was always the possibility of Papal interdict or excommunication; sanctions that were taken very seriously in those times.

Prior to Christian hegemony, local rulers rarely had any conception of national aspiration. This was primarily because the binding links between and within communities were those of family, blood, and obligation. Not of common language or cultural habits. The boundaries that were set between territories were not fixed, but much more flexibly enforced, with debatable buffer zones between claimed lands. This can also be seen at the time of the Roman Empire, where the boundaries between Roman rule and 'barbarian' activity are fought over on a constant basis. The 'Limes' in modern day Germany and the Antonine Wall in the UK are both good examples of attempted drawing of border lines. Both were largely ineffectual and later abandoned.

The conceptual rise of a Nation, and what it means to have allegiances that are established outside of clan or tribal links, is therefore symptom of what is often called the Modern Era. Boundaries in the form of national borders, national flags, national dress, and policies on immigration, all come about as Monarchies give way to oligarchic or parliamentary rule. In order to have a symbolic sense of 'in' and 'out' groupings, it was necessary to invent a sense of common identity. Invention is the key point here: most

national identities do not organically evolve, but are created out of thin air. A very good example of this is the national identity of Scotland. This is mostly a Victorian invention, with its clan tartans, kilts, bagpipes, tam-o-shanters, and all the enthusiastic flim-flammery that goes with it, being a creation of writers such as Sir Walter Scott. Prior to that point, Scotland had been a very internationalist country, with no strong cultural identity that it did not share with England or France. The growth of national identities is not always a response to self-determination, but can also be a reaction against perceived foreign oppression or disruption. The more one sees oneself as 'weak' in the face of external influences, the more ones personal attributes need to be magnified or bolstered by invention.

As capitalism gained a foothold across the world, and imperialism followed in its wake, the necessity for clear cut identities became ever more important. The imperial scramble for resource grabbing in Africa led to a need to identify the basis of who individuals were within the hierarchies of Empire. The process of boundary making in Africa also cut across traditional clan allegiances. Peoples who did not share a tribal identity (and had been rivals for resources) found themselves squeezed together within artificial nations that they did not create. The history of the African continent is replete with the consequences of such nation building (viz Rwanda, South Africa, Ethiopia, etc.)

Once one has established territorial boundaries, and given these territories a name, it became necessary to justify the acquisition of such territory by cultural means. That modern nations are almost always a mongrel mix of influences and cultural blends from all over the planet, has not stopped the aspiration for the clarity of '*our people*', '*our land*', and '*our identity*', even though this is a recent invention and has no justification in actual events.

The matter has escalated in importance as the division between rich and poor has grown. The poor feel their share of the national economic 'pie' is being diminished by incomers from abroad, whilst the rich (who own most of the pie) emphasise national identity as means of keeping the poor focussed on their nationalistic paranoia. This works very well for unscrupulous politicians. It gives an easy slogan to brandish when the nation is going through financial problems. During time of financial stability, identity and immigration are hardly ever thought of as important debating points.

The matter of personal identity spins off from most of the above, and especially impacts us because of the increasing influences on our lives from across the globe. Since

international communication (analogue, digital and travel) became within everyone's reach (at least theoretically), it became ever more clear that 'foreign' influences on local cultures was inevitable. A classic example is that of British cuisine. Foreign travel changed British tastes in food within one generation, to the point that many seemingly 'foreign' cuisines, are now central to the national sense of self.

This has had its psychological effects. It's never easy to feel confident when living in a world that changes every day. The old certainties of country, nation, culture, and personal identity are confused by evolving contact with outsiders. The **Fear of The Other** grows; a sense of having ones sense-of-self being undermined increases. There is an unconscious reaction. A clinging to old systems of identity, even though these are fictional and weakly applicable in the contemporary world. The practical response is to keep out any 'foreign' influences, consolidate the sense of tradition, and demand that all incomers assimilate to the fictional demands of nationality. The less this actually works in practice, the more extreme become the demands for implementation. Leading, of course, to the growth of extremist neo-fascism.

It's not for nothing that prejudicial judgements with regard to national identities also spin over into the sexual and gender worlds. The absolutism of national pride leans into the personal world, creating a deep fear of the unknown and unassimilated 'other' within our midst. Hence the current irrational paranoia over such groups as transgender people.

What do we have? We have a society where our boundaries are more imaginary than real, and in which our cultures are necessarily evolving. Just as they did in the past. We can manage incomers (via immigration), but we can't manage the internal changes that a very diverse world has always created within us. Nations are not eternal. Cultures are evolutionary. Traditions may be valued, but often give us no guidance. Boundaries may change without warning. That this is an inevitable truth from the past, is a good indicator of the likely outcomes for the future.

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