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An interview with Bryan Magee

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NATIONALISM: THE MELTING-POT MYTH

An interview with Bryan Magee

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ADOLF HITLER (*recorded extract from speech*)

BRYAN MAGEE That's the voice of militant nationalism in the twentieth century at its most notorious – Adolf Hitler. Even today, nearly half a century after the demise of Nazism, nationalism remains the most powerful single political force in many parts of the world. And it isn't only a phenomenon of the political right. It's a striking fact that when left-wing organisations have come to power in any part of the Third World since the Second World War, they've nearly always done so not by appealing to their populations to support socialism or communism, but by appealing to them to fight for national liberation. That's the cause that rouses the deepest passions. The sheer force of nationalist feeling in the former Soviet republics has come to most observers as a surprise, as has the apparent break-up of Yugoslavia along the borders of the nationalities.

One reason why all this is so surprising is that no major political thinker foresaw it. In the nineteenth century and the first part of this one, political prophecy took many different forms. At first, most people thought countries like Germany and Italy would be satisfied once they'd achieved unification. Many thought the nation State was an interim stage on the way to some sort of world government. Some thought the future would be determined by conflicts between great empires, and perhaps it has been. There were certainly many who believed that social and economic class would be the chief focus of people's loyalties. But no one of name predicted that nationalism would become the overwhelming force that swept all others before it in much, if not most, of the world. Why is it so? And how are we going to cope with the problems it raises?

A writer whose ideas on this subject have an international audience is Sir Isaiah Berlin. After talking to him I'll discuss it

further with Geoffrey Hosking, Professor of Russian History in the University of London, and then Sir Brian Urquhart, who for forty years worked with the United Nations.

Sir Isaiah, how do you explain the extraordinary strength of national feeling?

ISAIAH BERLIN You're quite right in saying that nobody in the nineteenth century predicted it. It's a very extraordinary thing, that. They all thought – you are quite right in saying that what they assumed was that once the great empires had gone, all these nations, when they achieved self-determination, would live peacefully side by side. That's what Mazzini thought, that's what other liberal nationalists thought, and yet it's one of the strongest single forces of our time: not so much in the Western world, but as you say, certainly in Eastern Europe, certainly in Asia and Africa. The extraordinary thing is that these prophets who didn't prophesy it did not prophesy it because they were Eurocentric; because I don't believe that any of these prophets, some of whose prophecies certainly came about – Saint-Simon, Burckhardt, Karl Marx – ever thought of Asiatics or Asians or Africans as fully human beings. There's no hint in even the works of Marx that India one day would have a State of its own, parliament, liberal institutions. Nobody thought that the Africans would. I think it's just Eurocentric blindness on their part.

MAGEE But why is it happening now?

BERLIN Oh goodness, I can't begin to explain that.

MAGEE Well, can I offer a suggestion? And let me ask you to comment on it. Could it be, do you think, that now is the age in which the Third World, which is after all most of Africa or Asia, is actually freeing itself from European domination?

BERLIN True. Now let me say something about that. I think you are right. The thing is this. In my view, nationalism is a pathological condition of what might be called national consciousness. National consciousness is a perfectly normal state of affairs. As my hero Herder in the eighteenth century once said: Men need food, they need drink, they need security, they need shelter, and among other things which they need equally strongly is

to belong. That means they want to be members of a society, not necessarily a State society, which speaks their language, which shares common memories with them, so that they feel at home among these people, and when they speak, they don't need to explain themselves, there's a certain degree of instinctive mutual understanding [between] people like that. Well, the nineteenth-century unit, of course, was the nation State; consequently you get a great deal of national feeling among all these States.

Now, the next point I wish to make is that it seems to me that nationalism in the aggressive sense, which is what you were talking about, is usually brought about by some kind of wounds or humiliation, which one nation inflicts on another. Let me go back a little bit in history, if I may. In the seventeenth century the French were top of the world, in arts, in war, in philosophy, in every possible respect, England not far behind. The Germans, if you take 1610 or 1600 as the year – they were literate, but all they produced was grammarians and theologians. When the French thought about them, they thought about them as a lot of kraut-eating yokels, pipe-smoking simpletons who had not made a single great contribution to culture. And of the seventeenth century, the first half of it, this I'm afraid is true. The Germans never really had a Renaissance in the full European sense.

Well, the French despised the Germans, the Germans resented it; Europeans despised Africans, the Africans resented it – or at least patronised. If they didn't resent [sc. despise?], they thought of them somehow as at best children, at worst some sort of primitives; and what always happens in these cases is the following. Number 1, they begin to feel inferior themselves, because people always partly share other people's view of themselves; then they start imitating the people who've humiliated them. (MAGEE Because they regard them as superior.) Well, yes, because they've done well, because they are successful. And then after a bit somebody arises and says: 'Why should we imitate these people? Haven't we got something? Aren't we something? Aren't we just as good as they are, maybe better?' In Germany, the pietist Lutheran movement began to say, 'Let the French have art and war and a lot of abbés sliding across lacquered parquets – but that's all nonsense, just dross. We are the only people who really understand what life is about: it is about the relation to God, and the relation to ourselves. The soul, the spirit, the inner life: the French know nothing about that, we are the ones.' This grows in the eighteenth

century. The Germans indeed produce an art – Bach and the other composers, who are inward in a certain sense and deeply affected by the kind of religion which played no great part in French eighteenth-century culture. This has happened to the Africans equally, when Nkrumah, for example, published postcards in which he showed his people, the Ghanaians, as having invented the alphabet, having built the pyramids. This was simply a crude but quite intelligible attempt to raise their spirits, to say they're not what they were thought to be, not primitives, not savages, but a civilised nation of power and imagination, equal to anybody.

MAGEE So what you're saying is that militant nationalism is always a backlash, that it's an over-reaction, an aggressive over-reaction on the part of people who've been made to feel inferior, been humiliated.

BERLIN Yes, I do, I do, I do. It's always some kind of, as you say, backlash. The bent twig, I once called it: when it lashes back it goes too far, and that creates aggressive nationalism.

MAGEE Now what you've done is, you've painted a portrait of two types of nationalism: a benign type, which you attributed to Herder, which meets the human being's need to belong, and that's a basic human need and perfectly civilised; and the militant, aggressive type, which is a response, you say, to humiliation or mortification of some kind. Now it seems to me that there's really a very short step, or two short steps, between these two. It's only a very short step from being very proud of your own culture and society to thinking that it's better than other people's, and then it's only another very short step from thinking that your culture and society is better than other people's to being willing to impose it on them. How do you stop the benign kind of nationalism from turning over into the malign kind?

BERLIN There's no way of doing this, I'm afraid. The main cause of aggressive nationalism has on the whole been wars. If you ask me what causes wars, nobody's ever been able to answer that. There was a Russian sociologist who said it is caused by egoism. This is totally untrue. Egoism would lead people not to make wars, but to live peacefully and contentedly. It's altruism, usually, a desire to help the others to a higher level of civilisation by

imposing your yoke upon them – maybe perverted altruism, but much more than so-called egoism. However, no doubt that's a paradox, although I would cling to it. Wars are the most wound-inflicting operations in human history.

You will find – take for example France. France in the eighteenth century was not nationalistic. It became so, to some degree, only after Napoleon's defeat, and to a high degree after Bismarck's victorious war, the famous Franco-Prussian War (MAGEE 1870–71) – exactly – when violent nationalism broke out in France, *anti-Dreyfusardisme* and that kind of thing. The same thing in a way is true of other countries as well. The Germans were comparatively peaceful in the eighteenth century. Frederick the Great was not nationalistic at all. He talked French and employed French officials to revive the economy of the Eastern domains of his country, but after the Napoleonic invasion the Germans became, in some respects, violently nationalistic. In the end sated powers are not nationalistic. England is a sated power. No foreign foot has stepped on English soil for something like a thousand years, with the result that English nationalism is a very containable phenomenon. Irish nationalism is not, for obvious reasons.

MAGEE But at this very time, when so many different countries in the world, or so many different peoples, are trying to achieve their own nation States, one can't resist the thought that in fact the nation State may already be an anachronism, because if one thinks of the most serious of all problems facing mankind – the preservation of peace, disarmament, the control of nuclear energy, preservation of the environment, even terrorism – every single one of those is a problem that can't be solved at the level of national governments: it needs something supra-national, or co-operation between governments, to solve it. So we have this spectacle of people striving to achieve nationhood at the very time when nationhood is not enough.

BERLIN Well, I wouldn't say that nationhood is not enough. I think I would deny that. I think co-operation, as you say, is indispensable. I think if the United Nations were a more powerful instrument than unfortunately it is, that would be a very good thing. I think that control of, say, aggressive powers who wish to use nuclear energy, or, indeed, proliferation of those weapons, could be under severe control, and that of course would be

acclaimed by all decent people. But I don't believe that an international community will ever fully arise. Through conquest, yes: the Roman Empire, of course, was such a one, but that's because the Romans conquered the others. We don't know what the Cappadocians felt, because they were eliminated. We don't know what the unfortunate little peoples of Asia Minor felt, and so on. But people, I should like to repeat, need a community to which they feel they belong. It needn't be a State, it can be something smaller than that. It can be a Church, it can be a party, it can be a class – all these things involve loyalties, and there are people who feel that's enough in the way of belonging. The normal unit to[wards] which people feel this is the State, because that is the major formation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

MAGEE But isn't Western Europe moving in the opposite direction from this? Aren't the countries of Western Europe, which are after all the oldest nation States in the world, giving up more and more of their own national sovereignty, and coming together more and more?

BERLIN Giving up sovereignty is a very good thing, but giving up national independence is not. There is a difference. Of course they must co-operate, of course they mustn't build walls between themselves and others. Of course chauvinism is a detestable state of mind. We heard Hitler's lunatic cries, which I suppose are perhaps the most savage phenomenon of its kind in the twentieth century, unless you think something similar happened in the Soviet Union at one time. But the only way of curing the thing about which you are talking is of course some way of satisfying the reasonable ambitions of these people without stifling them. India is a very good example of a country which contains many peoples, many languages, which nevertheless is not aggressive in that sense, at least not by the standards you speak of. They, under the influence of Gandhi, Nehru and other reasonable and far-sighted men of considerable spiritual influence, managed not to develop a violently aggressive attitude. About China I am not so sure.

MAGEE So you think it's not an unrealistic hope that we could reach a world of separate nation States which are different and accept each other's differences?

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BERLIN Well, that's what was hoped in the nineteenth century, of course, by all these major thinkers. I believe that it is a hope – I believe it's not impossible. What I fear, and it won't happen in our time, so my fear is not personal, is that there will be one world, which is what people like Willkie preached. If that happens there'll be civil wars in that one world, and that can be more murderous than even national wars.

MAGEE Now if you are against the idea of one world, does that mean you're against the idea of world government, which has been considered such an ideal by certain people?

BERLIN I am, I am. I think I am against it. I think if there's world government people will rebel against it. Sooner or later people want to live with and among themselves. Divisions among human beings of a benign kind, of a perfectly undangerous kind, are perfectly natural and proper.

MAGEE Does this also mean that you're against cosmopolitanism in the sense of us all belonging to one single international culture?

BERLIN My hero Herder said: 'Cosmopolitans are empty people, they are loyal to nothing, and they have no ideas.' Yes, I am. Internationalism is an admirable ideal, but for that you need nations, inter- whom there are alliances, there are combinations, there are agreements, there are peace treaties. That, yes. But cosmopolitanism, I think, is the deprivation of human beings of the feeling of wishing to belong, and that I think would impoverish them.

MAGEE The point's been made that no major thinker foresaw the overwhelming force of nationalism in the middle of the late twentieth century. (BERLIN Yes.) Were some of the politicians perhaps more prescient in this respect than philosophers? Didn't people like Bismarck appreciate the emotional force and pulling power of national feeling?

BERLIN I don't think so. I think Bismarck was a nationalist (MAGEE Yes), that's something different (MAGEE Not the same thing, yes), and what he wanted was for the Germans to become a

dominant power. But if you had asked Bismarck, ‘What about Spain? What about Iran? What about Russia? Don’t you think they might develop these feelings?’, he would see no need for that, otherwise I think he would have restrained himself.

MAGEE Because like so many of the major developments in history, the reasons for it seem obvious in retrospect, but nobody saw it coming.

BERLIN Very true, very true. I think Bismarck, without intending it, certainly generated Hitler in the end. He had very different ideas, he was a civilised man in many respects, but if Bismarck had really convinced himself that nationalism in Germany would provoke the violent resistance which it did, and would end by crushing defeats for Germany, twice in the twentieth century, he might have held his hand.

MAGEE You say you think you’re not in favour of the one world idea, in the sense of there being a single world government. If that *is* your view I think a lot of people will be very surprised to hear it, because it’s actually taken for granted by a lot of well-meaning idealistic people that world government would be a jolly good thing indeed, if we could get it.

BERLIN Well, of course the desire for peace is a very desirable and strong desire, and perhaps a great many sacrifices ought to be made to it. I just don’t believe that people will be satisfied to belong to a huge, ultimately impersonal entity. The desire to live amongst their own, to speak one language and not Esperanto, to have memories which they share with other people of their own kind, is something which people can’t do without. Not necessarily States – they could be smaller communities, they can be much less aggressive – but variety, I think, is a great merit. I think it’s a very good thing that the Spaniards and Portuguese are not in every respect like the Swedes and Norwegians, and therefore the idea of uniformity in the world which would necessarily follow would create a great, flat, dull, monotonous world, which ultimately I think is not only undesirable in itself, but which I think people wouldn’t bear.

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MAGEE Isn't one's national identity worth giving up in return for peace?

BERLIN If the alternative is war, it certainly is. What I don't believe is that ... Supposing there were one world, which some people sincerely believe in, then there would be civil wars, because people in the end wouldn't be able to bear the weight of this one huge uniform thing bearing down on them, and civil wars can be much more savage than even national wars. If I believed that one world would persist, I would withdraw my objections to uniformity, to dullness, to monotony and so on, for the sake of peace. Yes. I don't believe for a moment that this will happen, or could happen.

MAGEE That was Sir Isaiah Berlin ...

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