Nationalism
Past Neglect and Present Power

I

The history of ideas is a rich, but by its very nature an imprecise field, treated with natural suspicion by experts in more exact disciplines, but it has its surprises and rewards. Among them is the discovery that some of the most familiar values of our own culture are more recent than might at first be supposed. Integrity and sincerity were not among the attributes which were admired — indeed, they were scarcely mentioned — in the ancient or medieval worlds, which prized objective truth, getting things right, however accomplished. The view that variety is desirable, whereas uniformity is monotonous, dreary, dull, a fetter upon the freely-ranging human spirit, 'Cimmerian, corpse-like', as Goethe described Holbach's *Système de la nature*, stands in sharp contrast with the traditional view that truth is one, error many, a view scarcely challenged before — at the earliest — the end of the seventeenth century. The notion of toleration, not as a utilitarian expedient to avoid destructive strife, but as an intrinsic value; the concepts of liberty and human rights as they are discussed today; the notion of genius as the defiance of rules by the untrammelled will, contemptuous of the restraint of reason at any level — all these are elements in a great mutation in western thought and feeling that took place in the eighteenth century, the consequences of which appear in various counter-revolutions all too obvious in every sphere of life today. This is a vast topic which I shall not directly discuss: I wish to draw attention to, at most, only one corner of it.

An earlier version of some of the theses in this essay, although in a different form, was included in an article entitled 'The Bent Twig: a Note on Nationalism' in *Foreign Affairs* 51 (1972), 11-30.
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II

The nineteenth century, as we all know, witnessed an immense growth of historical studies. There are many explanations of this: the revolutionary transformation of both life and thought brought about by the rapid and triumphant development of the natural sciences, in particular by technological invention and the consequent rise of large-scale industry; the rise of new states and classes and rulers in search of pedigrees; the disintegration of age-old religious and social institutions, as a result of Renaissance secularism and the Reformation; all this riveted attention upon the phenomena of historical change and novelty. The fillip given to historical, and, indeed, to all genetic studies, was incalculably great. There was a new sense of continuous advance, or at any rate of movement and change in the life of human society. It is not, therefore, surprising that major thinkers in this period set themselves to discover the laws which governed social change. It seemed reasonable to suppose that the new methods of the natural sciences, which proved capable of explaining the nature and the laws of the external world, could perform this service for the human world also. If such laws could be discovered at all, they must hold for the future as well as for the past. Prediction of the human future must be rescued from mystical prophets and interpreters of the apocalyptic books of the Bible, from the astrologers and dabbler in the occult, and become an organised province of scientific knowledge.

This hope spurred the new philosophies of history, and brought into being an entire new field of social studies. The new prophets tended to claim scientific validity for their statements about both the past and the future. Although much of what some of them wrote was the fruit of luxuriant and unbridled and sometimes egomaniacal imaginations, or at any rate highly speculative, the general record is a good deal more respectable than is commonly supposed. Condorcet may have been too optimistic in prophesying the development of a comprehensive and systematic natural science of man, and with it the end of crime and folly and misery in human affairs, all due to indolence and ignorance and irrationality. In the darkness of his prison in 1794 he drew a glowing picture of a new, virtuous and happy world, organised by the application of scientific method to social organisation by intellectually and morally liberated men, leading to a harmonious society of nations, unbroken progress in the arts and sciences and perpetual peace. This was plainly over-sanguine, yet the fruitfulness
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of applying mathematical, and in particular statistical, techniques to social problems was a prophecy at once original and important.

Saint-Simon was a man of genius who, as everyone knows, predicted the inevitable triumph of a technocratic order. He spoke of the coming union of science, finance and industrial organisation, and the replacement, in this new world of producers aided by scientists, of clerical indoctrination by a new race of propagandists – artists, poets, priests of a new secular religion, mobilising men's emotions, without which the new industrial world could not be made to function. His disciple, Auguste Comte, called for and predicted the creation of an authoritarian church to educate and control the rational, but not democratic or liberal, society and its scientifically trained citizens. I will not enlarge upon the validity of this prophecy: the combination of technological skills and the absolute authority of a secular priesthood has been realised only too successfully in our day. And if those who believed that prejudice and ignorance and superstition, and their embodiment in irrational and repressive laws, economic, political, racial and sexual, would be swept away by the new enlightenment, have not had their expectations realised, this does not diminish the degree of their insight into the new paths which had opened in western European development. This was the very vision of a rational, swept and garnered, new order, heralded by Bentham and Macaulay, which troubled Mill and Tocqueville and deeply repelled both Carlyle and Disraeli, both Ruskin and Thoreau, and, before them, some among the early German romantics at the turn of the nineteenth century. Fourier, in his turn, together with much nonsense, thundered against the evils of trade and industry, engaged in unbridled economic competition, tending to wanton destruction or adulteration of the fruits of human labour by those who wished to increase their own profits; he protested that the growth of centralised control over vast human groups led to servitude and alienation, and advocated the end of repression and the need for the rational canalisation of the passions by careful vocational guidance which would enable all human desires, capacities, inclinations, to develop in a free and creative direction. Fourier was given to grotesque fantasies: but these ideas were not absurd, and much of what he predicted is now conventional wisdom.

Everyone has recognised the fatal accuracy of Tocqueville's uneasy anticipation of the conformity and the monotony of democratic egalitarianism, whatever may be thought of the nostrums by which he sought to modify its effects. Nor do I know of anyone who would
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deny that Karl Marx, whatever his errors, displayed unique powers of
prognosis in identifying some of the central factors at work in his day
that were not obvious to his contemporaries — the concentration and
centralisation of the means of production in private hands, the inexor-
able march of industrialisation, the rise and vast development of big
business, then in its embryo, and the inevitable sharpening of social
and political conflicts that this involved. Nor was he unsuccessful in
unmasking the political and moral, the philosophical and religious,
liberal and scientific disguises under which some of the most brutal
manifestations of these conflicts and their social and intellectual con-
sequences were concealed. These were major prophets, and there were
others. The brilliant and wayward Bakunin predicted more accurately
than his great rival Marx the situations in which great risings of the
dispossessed would take place, and foresaw that they were liable to
develop not in the most industrialised societies, on a rising curve of
economic progress, but in countries in which the majority of the
population was near subsistence level and had least to lose by an up-
heaval — primitive peasants in conditions of desperate poverty in back-
ward rural economies where capitalism was the weakest, such as Spain
and Russia. He would have had no difficulty in understanding the
causes of the great social upheavals in Asia and Africa in our own day.
I could go on: the poet Heine, addressing the French in the early
years of the reign of Louis Philippe, saw that one fine day their
German neighbours, spurred by a combination of historical memories
and resentments with metaphysical and moral fanaticism, would fall
upon them, and uproot the great monuments of western culture:
"Like early Christians, whom neither physical torture nor physical
pleasure could break, restrained neither by fear nor greed", these ideo-
logically intoxicated barbarians would turn Europe into a desert.
Lassalle preached, and perhaps foresaw, state socialism — the people's
democracies of our day, whether one calls them state communism
or state capitalism, a hybrid which Marx utterly condemned in his
notes on the Gotha programme.

A decade or so later Jakob Burckhardt anticipated the military-
industrial complexes which would inevitably control the decadent
countries of the west; Max Weber had no doubts about the growing
power of bureaucracy; Durkheim warned of the possibility of anomie;
there followed all the nightmares of Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, Orwell,
half satirists, half prophets of our own time. Some remained
pure prophecies, others, notably those of the Marxists and Heine's
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barbarians who dominated the imagination of racialists and neo-pagan irrationalists, were, perhaps, to some degree self-fulfilling. The nineteenth century generated a great many other Utopias and prognoses, liberal, socialist, technocratic and those that were filled with neo-medieval nostalgia, craving for a largely imaginary Gemeinschaft in the past—systems for the most part justly forgotten. In all this great array of elaborate, statistically-supported mass of futurology and fantasy, there is one peculiar lacuna. There was one movement which dominated much of the nineteenth century in Europe and was so pervasive, so familiar, that it is only by a conscious effort of the imagination that one can conceive a world in which it played no part: it had its partisans and its enemies, its democratic, aristocratic and monarchist wings, it inspired men of action and artists, intellectual elites and the masses: but, oddly enough, no significant thinkers known to me predicted for it a future in which it would play an even more dominant role. Yet it would, perhaps, be no overstatement to say that it is one of the most powerful, in some regions the most powerful, single movement at work in the world today; and that some of those who failed to foresee this development have paid for it with their liberty, indeed, with their lives. This movement is nationalism. No influential thinker, to the best of my knowledge, foresaw its future—at any rate, no one clearly foretold it. The only exception known to me is the underrated Moses Hess, who, in 1862, in his book Rome and Jerusalem, affirmed that the Jews had the historic mission of uniting communism and nationality. But this was exhortation rather than prophecy, and the book remained virtually unread save by Zionists of a later day.

There is no need to emphasise the obvious fact that the great majority of the sovereign states represented at the Assembly of the United Nations today are actuated in a good deal of their behaviour by strong nationalist passions, even more than their predecessors of the League of Nations. Yet I suspect that this fact would have surprised most of the prophets of the nineteenth century, no matter how intelligent and politically intuitive. This is so because most social and political observers of that time, whether or not they were themselves nationalists, tended in general to anticipate the decline of this sentiment. Nationalism was, by and large, regarded in Europe as a passing phase. The desire on the part of most men to be citizens of a state coterminous with the nation which they regarded as their own, was considered to be natural or, at any rate, brought about by a historical-
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political development of which the growth of national consciousness
was at once the cause and the effect, at any rate in the west. National-
ism as a sentiment and an ideology was not (in my opinion, rightly)
equated with national consciousness.

The need to belong to an easily identifiable group had been regarded,
at any rate since Aristotle, as a natural requirement on the part of
human beings: families, clans, tribes, estates, social orders, classes,
religious organisations, political parties, and finally nations and states,
were historical forms of the fulfilment of this basic human need. No
one particular form was, perhaps, as necessary to human existence as
the need for food or shelter, security or procreation, but some form
of it was indispensable, and various theories were offered to account
for the historical progression of these forms, from Plato and Polybius
to Machiavelli, Bossuet, Vico, Turgot, Herder, Saint-Simon, Hegel,
Comte, Marx and their modern successors. Common ancestry, com-
mon language, customs, traditions, memories, continuous occupancy
of the same territory for a long period of time, were held to constitute
a society. This kind of homogeneity emphasised the differences be-
tween one group and its neighbours, the existence of tribal, cultural
or national solidarity, and with it, a sense of difference from, often
accompanied by active dislike or contempt for, groups with different
customs and different real or mythical origins; and so was accepted
as both accounting for and justifying national statehood. The British,
French, Spanish, Portuguese and Scandinavian peoples had achieved
this well before the nineteenth century; the German, Italian, Polish,
Balkan and Baltic peoples had not. The Swiss had achieved a unique
solution of their own. The coincidence of the territory of the state
and nation was regarded as, on the whole, desirable, save by the sup-
porters of the dynastic, multinational empires of Russia, Austria,
Turkey, or by imperialists, socialist internationalists, anarchists, and
perhaps some ultramontane Catholics. The majority of political
thinkers, whether they approved of it or not, accepted this as an inevit-
able phase of social organisation. Some hoped or feared that it would
be succeeded by other forms of political structure; some seemed to
regard it as 'natural' and permanent. Nationalism — the elevation of
the interests of the unity and self-determination of the nation to the
status of the supreme value before which all other considerations must,
if need be, yield at all times, an ideology to which German and Italian
thinkers seemed particularly prone — was looked on by observers of a
more liberal type as a passing phase due to the exacerbation of national
By the middle of the nineteenth century the aspirations for political unity and self-rule of the Germans and Italians seemed well on the way to realisation. Soon this dominant trend would liberate the oppressed peoples of the multinational empires too. After this, nationalism which was a pathological inflammation of wounded national consciousness would abate: it was caused by oppression and would vanish with it. This seemed to be taking longer than the optimists anticipated, but by 1919 the basic principle of the right to national self-government seemed universally accepted. The Treaty of Versailles, recognising the right to national independence, whatever else it might fail to achieve, would at any rate solve the so-called national question. There was, of course, the question of the rights of various national minorities in the new national states, but these could be guaranteed by the new League of Nations - surely if there was anything these states could be expected to understand, if only from their own historical experience, it was the need to satisfy the craving for autonomy on the part of ethnic or cultural groups within their borders. Other problems might still rack mankind - colonial exploitation, social and political inequality, ignorance, poverty, injustice, corruption, privilege; but most enlightened liberals, and, indeed, socialists, assumed that nationalism would decline, since the deepest wounds inflicted upon nations were on the way to being healed.

Marxists and other radical socialists went further. For them, national sentiment itself was a form of false consciousness, an ideology generated, consciously or not, by the economic domination of a particular class, the bourgeoisie, in alliance with what was left of the old aristocracy, used as a weapon in the retention and promotion of the class control of society, which, in its turn, rested on the exploitation of the labour power of the proletariat. In the fullness of time the workers, whom the process of production itself would inevitably organise into a disciplined force of ever-increasing size, political awareness and power, would overthrow their capitalist oppressors, enfeebled as they would be by the cut-throat competition among themselves that would undermine their capacity for organised resistance. The expropriators would be expropriated, the knell of capitalism would sound, and with it of the entire ideology of which national sentiment, religion and parliamentary democracy, were so many particular aspects. National differences might remain, but they would,
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like local and ethnic characteristics, be unimportant in comparison with the solidarity of the workers of the world, associated producers freely cooperating in the harnessing of the forces of nature in the interests of all mankind.

What these views had in common was the belief that nationalism was the ephemeral product of the frustration of human craving for self-determination, a stage of human progress due to the working of impersonal forces and the ideologies thereby generated by them. On the nature of these forces, theorists were not agreed, but for the most part they supposed that the phenomenon of nationalism itself would disappear with its causes, which in their turn would be destroyed by the irresistible advance of enlightenment, whether conceived in moral or technological terms — the victory of reason or of material progress or of both — identified with changes in the forces and relations of production, or with the struggle for social equality, economic and political democracy and the just distribution of the fruits of the earth; with the destruction of national barriers by world trade or by the triumphs of science and a morality founded on rational principles, and so the full realisation of human potentialities which sooner or later would be universally achieved.

In the face of all this, the claims and ideals of mere national groups would tend to lose importance, and would join other relics of human immaturity in ethnological museums. As for the nationalists among peoples who had achieved independence and self-government, they were written off as irrationalists — and, with Nietzscheans, Sorelians, neo-romantics, out of account. It was difficult to ignore mounting nationalism after national unity had been largely achieved — for instance, German chauvinism after 1871, or French integralism or Italian sacro egoismo or the rise of racial theories and other anticipations of Fascism. None of these, however accounted for, were, so far as I know, regarded by the futurologists of the late nineteenth century or the early years of our own as harbingers of a new phase of human history; and this seems equally true of conservatives, liberals and Marxists. The age of Kriege, Krisen, Katastrophen, which, for instance, Karl Kautsky predicted, he attributed to causes, and described in terms, in which nationalism, if it appears at all, figures only as a by-product, an element in the 'superstructure'. No one, so far as I know, so much as hinted that nationalism might dominate the last third of our own century to such a degree that few movements or revolutions would have any chance of success unless they came arm-
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in-arm with it, or at any rate not in opposition to it. This curious failure of vision on the part of otherwise acute social thinkers seems to me a fact in need of explanation, or, to say the least, of wider discussion than it has so far obtained. I am neither a historian nor a social psychologist, and do not volunteer an explanation of it: I should merely like to throw out a suggestion which may cast some light on this odd phenomenon.

III

Before doing so, however, I should like to say something on the origins of European nationalism as a state of mind. I do not mean by this national sentiment as such— that can probably be traced to tribal feeling in the earliest period of recorded history. I mean its elevation into a conscious doctrine, at once the product, articulation and synthesis of states of consciousness, that has been recognised by social observers as a force and a weapon. In this sense, nationalism does not seem to exist in the ancient world, nor in the Christian Middle Ages. The Romans may have despised the Greeks, Cicero said disparaging things about the Jews, and Juvenal about Orientals in general; but this is mere xenophobia. There is passionate patriotism in Machiavelli or Shakespeare—and a long tradition of it long before them. I do not mean by nationalism a mere pride of ancestry—we are all sons of Cadmus, we all come from Troy, we are descended from men who made a covenant with the Lord, we spring from a race of conquerors, Franks or Vikings, and rule over the progeny of Gallo-Romans or Celtic slaves by right of conquest.

By nationalism, I mean something more definite, ideologically important and dangerous: namely the conviction, in the first place, that men belong to a particular human group, and that the way of life of the group differs from that of others; that the characters of the individuals who compose the group are shaped by, and cannot be understood apart from, those of the group, defined in terms of common territory, customs, laws, memories, beliefs, language, artistic and religious expression, social institutions, ways of life, to which some add heredity, kinship, racial characteristics; and that it is these factors which shape human beings, their purposes and their values.

Secondly, that the pattern of life of a society is similar to that of a biological organism; that what this organism needs for its proper
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development, which those most sensitive to its nature articulate in words or images or other forms of human expression, constitutes its common goals; that these goals are supreme; in cases of conflict with other values, which do not derive from the specific ends of a specific 'organism'—intellectual or religious or moral, personal or universal—these supreme values should prevail, since only so will the decadence and ruin of the nation be averted. Furthermore, that to call such patterns of life organic is to say that they cannot be artificially formed by individuals or groups, however dominating their positions, unless they are themselves penetrated by these historically developing ways of acting and thinking and feeling, for it is these mental and emotional and physical ways of living, of coping with reality, above all the ways in which human beings deal with one another, that determine everything else and constitute the national organism—the nation—whether it takes the form of a state or not. Whence it follows that the essential human unit in which man's nature is fully realised is not the individual, or a voluntary association which can be dissolved or altered or abandoned at will, but the nation; that it is to the creation and maintenance of the nation that the lives of subordinate units, the family, the tribe, the clan, the province, must be due, for their nature and purpose, what is often called their meaning, are derived from its nature and its purposes; and that these are revealed not by rational analysis, but by a special awareness, which need not be fully conscious, of the unique relationship that binds individual human beings into the indissoluble and unanalysable organic whole which Burke identified with society, Rousseau with the people, Hegel with the state, but which for nationalists is, and can only be, the nation, whether its social structure or form of government.

Thirdly, this outlook entails the notion that one of the most compelling reasons, perhaps the most compelling, for holding a particular belief, pursuing a particular policy, serving a particular end, living a particular life, is that these ends, beliefs, policies, lives, are ours. This is tantamount to saying that these rules or doctrines or principles should be followed not because they lead to virtue or happiness or justice or liberty, or are ordained by God or church or prince or parliament or some other universally acknowledged authority, or are good or right in themselves, and therefore valid in their own right, universally, for all men in a given situation; rather they are to be followed because these values are those of my group—for the nationalist, of my nation; these thoughts, feelings, this course of action, are
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good or right, and I shall achieve fulfilment or happiness by identifying myself with them, because they are demands of the particular form of social life into which I have been born, to which I am connected by Burke's myriad strands, which reach into the past and future of my nation, and apart from which I am, to change the metaphor, a leaf, a twig, broken off from the tree, which alone can give it life; so that if I am separated from it by circumstance or my own willfulness, I shall become aimless, I shall wither away, being left, at best, with nostalgic memories of what it once was to have been truly alive and active, and performing that function in the pattern of the national life, understanding of which alone gave meaning and value to all I was and did.

Florid and emotive prose of this kind was used by Herder, Burke, Fichte, Michelet, and after them by sundry awakeners of the national souls of their dormant peoples in the Slav provinces of the Austrian or Turkish empires or the oppressed nationalities ruled by the tsar; and then throughout the world. There is a distance between Burke's assertion that the individual may be foolish but the species is wise, and Fichte's declaration, a dozen or so years later, that the individual must vanish, must be absorbed, sublimated, into the species. Nevertheless the general direction is the same. This kind of value-laden language may at times affect to be descriptive, aimed only at illuminating the concept of nationhood or historical development. But its influence on conduct has been—and has by those who use it been intended to be—as great as that of the language of natural law or of human rights or of the class war or of any other idea which has shaped our world.

Finally, by a development which need cause no surprise, full-blown nationalism has arrived at the position that, if the satisfaction of the needs of the organism to which I belong turns out to be incompatible with the fulfilment of the goals of other groups, I, or the society to which I indissolubly belong, have no choice but to force them to yield, if need be by force. If my group—let us call it nation—is freely to realise its true nature, this entails the need to remove obstacles in its path. Nothing that obstructs that which I recognise as my—that is, my nation's—supreme goal, can be allowed to have equal value with it. There is no over-arching criterion or standard, in terms of which the various values of the lives, attributes, aspirations, of different national groups can be ordered, for such a standard would be super-national, not itself immanent in, part and parcel of, a given social organism, but deriving its validity from some source outside the
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life of a particular society — a universal standard, as natural law or natural justice are conceived by those who believe in them. But since, on this view, all values and standards must of necessity be those intrinsic to a specific society, to a national organism, and its unique history, in terms of which alone the individual, or the other associations or groups to which he belongs, if he understands himself at all, conceives all values and purposes, such appeals to universality rest on a false view of the nature of man and of history. This is the ideology of organicism, loyalty, the Volk as the true carrier of the national values, integralism, historic roots, la terre et les morts, the national will: it is directed against the forces of disruption and decay categorised in the pejorative terms used to describe the application of methods of the natural sciences to human affairs — of critical, 'analytic' reason, 'cold' intellect, destructive, 'atomising' individualism, soulless mechanism, alien influences, shallow empiricism, rootless cosmopolitanism, abstract notions of nature, man, rights, which ignore differences of cultures and traditions — in short, the entire typology and catalogue of the enemy, which begins in the pages of Hamann and Burke, reaches a climax in Fichte and his romantic followers, is systematised by de Maistre and Bonald, and reaches a new height in our own century in the propagandist writings of the First and Second World Wars, and the anathemas of irrationalist and Fascist writers, directed at the Enlightenment and all its works.

The language and the thought behind them, charged with emotion as they tend to be, are seldom wholly clear or consistent. The prophets of nationalism sometimes speak as if the superior, indeed, the supreme claims of his nation upon the individual, are based on the fact that its life and ends and history alone give life and meaning to all that he is and does. But this seems to entail that other men stand in a similar relation to their own nations, with claims upon them equally valid and no less absolute, and that these may conflict with full realisation of the ends or 'mission' of another, for example, a given individual's own nation, and this in its turn appears to lead to cultural relativism in theory, which ill accords with the absolutism of the premise, even if it does not formally contradict it; as well as opening the door to war of all against all.

There are nationalists who seek to escape this by efforts to demonstrate that a given nation or race — say, the German — is superior to other peoples, and its goals transcend theirs, as measured by some objective, trans-national standard; that its particular culture breeds
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beings in whom the true ends of men as such come closer to full realisation than in men outside its culture. This is how Fichte speaks in his later writings (and the same thesis is to be found in Arndt and other German nationalists of this period). This, too, is the sense of the idea of the superior mission of historic nations, each in its appointed time and place, to be found in the thought of Hegel. One can never feel completely certain whether these nationalist writers acclaim their own nation because it is what it is, or because its values alone approximate to some objective ideal or standard which, ex hypothesi, only those fortunate enough to be guided by them can even so much as understand, while other societies remain blind to them, and may always remain so, and are therefore objectively inferior. The line between the two conceptions is often blurred; but either leads to a collective self-worship, of which European, and perhaps American, nationalism has tended to be a powerful expression.

The nation is, of course, not the only focus of such worship. Similar language and rhetoric have historically been used in identifying the true interests of the individual with those of his church, his culture, his caste, his class, his party; sometimes these have overlapped or been fused into a unified ideal; at other times they have come into conflict. But the most powerful appeal of all these centres of devotion and self-identification has historically been the nation state. The revelation of its hold on its citizens in 1914, when it proved so much stronger than class solidarity of the international working-class movement, exhibited this truth in a peculiarly devastating and tragic fashion.

Nationalism has assumed many forms since its birth in the eighteenth century, especially since its fusion with statism, the doctrine of the supremacy in all spheres of the state, in particular the nation state, and after its alliance with forces making for industrialisation and modernisation, once its sworn enemies. But it seems to me, in all its guises, to retain the four characteristics which I tried to outline above: the belief in the overriding need to belong to a nation; in the organic relationships of all the elements that constitute a nation; in the value of our own simply because it is ours; and, finally, faced by rival contenders for authority or loyalty, in the supremacy of its claims. These ingredients, in varying degrees and proportions, are to be found in all the rapidly growing nationalist ideologies which at present proliferate on the earth.
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It may be true that nationalism, as distinct from mere national consciousness—the sense of belonging to a nation—is in the first place a response to a patronising or disparaging attitude towards the traditional values of a society, the result of wounded pride and a sense of humiliation in its most socially conscious members, which in due course produce anger and self-assertion. This appears to be supported by the career of the paradigm of modern nationalism in the German reaction—from the conscious defence of German culture in the relatively mild literary patriotism of Thomasius and Lessing and their seventeenth-century forerunners, to Herder’s assertion of cultural autonomy, until it leads to an outburst of aggressive chauvinism in Arndt, Jahn, Körner, Goerres, during and after the Napoleonic invasion. But the story is plainly not so simple. Continuity of language, customs, occupation of a territory, have existed since time immemorial. External aggression, not merely against tribes or peoples but against large societies unified by religion, or obedience to a single constituted authority, has, after all, occurred often enough in all parts of the globe. Yet neither in Europe, nor in Asia, neither in ancient times nor medieval, has this led to a specifically nationalist reaction: such has not been the response to defeat inflicted on Persians by Greeks, or on Greeks by Romans, or on Buddhists by Muslims, or on Graeco-Roman civilisation when it was overrun by Huns or Ottoman Turks, quite apart from all the innumerable smaller wars and destruction of native institutions by conquerors in either continent.

It seems clear, even to me who cannot pretend to be a historian or a sociologist, that while the infliction of a wound on the collective feeling of a society, or at least of its spiritual leaders, may be a necessary condition for the birth of nationalism, it is not a sufficient one; the society must, at least potentially, contain within itself a group or class of persons who are in search of a focus for loyalty or self-identification, or perhaps a base for power, no longer supplied by earlier forces for cohesion—tribal, or religious, or feudal, or dynastic, or military—such as was provided by the centralising policies of the monarchies of France or Spain, and was not provided by the rulers of German lands. In some cases, these conditions are created by the emergence of new social classes seeking control of a society against older rulers, secular or clerical. If to this is added the wound of conquest, or even cultural disparagement from without, of a society which has at any rate the
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beginnings of a national culture, the soil for the rise of nationalism may be prepared.

Yet one more condition for it seems necessary: for nationalism to develop in it, a society must, in the minds of at least some of its most sensitive members, carry an image of itself as a nation, at least in embryo, in virtue of some general unifying factor or factors—language, ethnic origin, a common history (real or imaginary)—ideas and sentiments which are relatively articulate in the minds of the better educated and more socially and historically minded, a good deal less articulate, even absent from, the consciousness of the bulk of the population. This national image, which makes those in whom it is found capable of resentment if it is ignored or insulted, also turns some among them into a conscious intelligentsia, particularly if they are faced by some common enemy, whether within the state or outside it—a church or a government or foreign detractors. These are the men who speak or write to the people, and seek to make them conscious of their wrongs as a people—poets and novelists, historians and critics, theologians, philosophers and the like. Thus resistance to French hegemony in all spheres of life began in the apparently remote region of aesthetics and criticism (I do not here wish to go into the question of what it was in particular that stimulated the original reaction against French neoclassicism in England, or Switzerland). In the German lands it became a social and political force, a breeding ground of nationalism. Among the Germans it took the form of a conscious effort by writers to liberate themselves—and others—from what they felt to be asphyxiating conditions—at first from the despotic dogmas of the French aesthetic legislators, which cramped the free development of the spirit.

But besides the arrogant French, there were domestic tyrants, social and not merely aesthetic. The great outburst of individual indignation against the rules and regulations of an oppressive and philistine society, which goes by the name of the 'Storm and Stress', had as its direct objective the knocking down of all the walls and barriers of social life, obsequiousness and servility below and brutality, arbitrariness, arrogance and oppression above, lies and 'the cant and gibberish of hypocrisy', as Burke calls it, at every level. What began to be questioned was the validity of any laws—the rules, supposedly enjoined by God or by nature or by the prince, that conferred authority and required universal obedience. The demand was for freedom of self-expression, the free expression of the creative will, at its purest and strongest in artists, but present in all men. For Herder, this vital energy was
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incarnated in the creations of the collective genius of peoples: legends, heroic poetry, myths, laws, customs, song, dance, religious and secular symbolism, temples, cathedrals, ritual acts—all were forms of expression and communication created by no individual authors or identifiable groups, but by the collective and impersonal imagination and will of the entire community, acting at various levels of consciousness; thus, he believed, were generated those intimate and impalpable bonds in virtue of which a society develops as a single organic whole.

The notion of a creative faculty, working in individuals and entire societies alike, replaced the notion of timeless objective truths, eternal models, by following which alone men attain to happiness or virtue or justice or any proper fulfilment of their natures. From this sprang a new view of men and society, which stressed vitality, movement, change, respects in which individuals or groups differed rather than resembled each other, the charm and value of diversity, uniqueness, individuality, a view which conceived of the world as a garden where each tree, each flower, grows in its own peculiar fashion and incorporates those aspirations which circumstances and its own individual nature have generated, and is not, therefore, to be judged by the patterns and goals of other organisms. This cut athwart the dominant philosophia perennis, the belief in the generality, uniformity, universality, timeless validity of objective and eternal laws and rules that apply everywhere, at all times, to all men and things, the secular or naturalistic version of which was advocated by the leaders of the French Enlightenment, inspired by the triumph of the natural and mathematical sciences, in terms of which German culture, religious, literary, inward-looking, liable to mysticism, narrowly provincial, at best feebly imitative of the west, made such a poor showing.

I do not wish to imply that this crucial contrast was, at any rate at first, more than a vision in the heads of a small group of German poets and critics. But it was these writers who felt most acutely displaced by the social transformation through which Germany, and in particular Prussia, was passing under the westernising reforms of Frederick the Great. Barred from all real power, unable to fit themselves into the bureaucratic organisation which was imposed on traditional ways of life, acutely sensitive to the incompatibility of their basically Christian, Protestant, moralistic outlook with the scientific temper of the French Enlightenment, harried by the petty despotism of two hundred princes, the most gifted and independent among them responded to the undermining of their world, which had begun with the humilia-
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tions inflicted upon their grandfathers by the armies of Louis XIV, by a growing revolt. They contrasted the depth and poetry of the German tradition, with its capacity for fitful but authentic insights into the inexhaustible, inexpressible variety of the life of the spirit, with the shallow materialism, the utilitarianism, and the thin, dehu-
manised shadow play of the worlds of the French thinkers. This is the root of the romantic movement, which in Germany, at any rate, celebrated the collective will, untrammelled by rules which men could discover by rational methods, the spiritual life of the people in whose activity – or impersonal will – creative individuals could participate, but which they could not observe or describe. The conception of the political life of the nation as the expression of this collective will is the essence of political romanticism – that is, nationalism.

Let me repeat once again that even though nationalism seems to me in the first place to be a response to a wound inflicted upon a society, this, although it is a necessary, is not a sufficient cause of national self-assertion. The wounds inflicted upon one society by another, since time immemorial, have not in all cases led to a national response. For that, something more is needed – namely, a new vision of life with which the wounded society, or the classes or groups which have been displaced by political and social change, can identify themselves, around which they can gather and attempt to restore their collective life. Thus both the Slavophil and the populist movements in Russia, like German nationalism, can be understood only if one realises the traumatic effect of the violent and rapid modernisation imposed on the country by Peter the Great, as it had been, on a smaller scale, by Frederick the Great in Prussia – that is, the effect of technological revolutions or the development of new markets and the decay of old ones, the consequent disruption of the lives of entire classes, the lack of opportunity for the use of their skills by educated men psychologi-
cally unfit to enter the new bureaucracy, and, finally, in the case of Germany, occupation or colonial rule by a powerful foreign enemy which destroyed traditional ways of life and left men, and especially the most sensitive and self-conscious among them – artists, thinkers, whatever their professions – without an established position, insecure and bewildered. There is then an effort to create a new synthesis, a new ideology, both to explain and justify resistance to the forces working against their convictions and ways of life, and to point in a new direction and offer them a new centre for self-identification.

This is a familiar enough phenomenon in our own time, which has
not lacked in social and economic upheavals. Where ethnic ties and common historical experience are not strong enough to have created a sense of nationhood, this new focus can be a social class, or a political party, or a church, or, most often, the centre of power and authority—the state itself, whether or not it is multinational—which raises the banner under which all those whose traditional modes of life have been disrupted—landless peasants, ruined landowners or shopkeepers, unemployed intellectuals, unsuccessful professionals in various spheres—can gather and regroup themselves. But none of these have, in fact, proved as potent, whether as a symbol or as a reality, as capable of acting as a unifying and dynamic force, as the nation; and when the nation is one with other centres of devotion—race, religion, class—its appeal is incomparably strong.

The first true nationalists—the Germans—are an example of the combination of wounded cultural pride and a philosophico-historical vision to stanch the wound and create an inner focus of resistance. First a small group of educated, discontented Francophobes, then, under the impact of the disasters at the hands of the French armies and Napoleon’s Gleichschaltung, a vast popular movement, the first great upsurge of nationalist passion, with its wild student chauvinism and book-burnings and secret trials of traitors, a sorcerer’s apprentice who got out of hand and excited the disgust of calm thinkers like Goethe and Hegel. Other nations followed, partly under the influence of German rhetoric, partly because their circumstances were sufficiently similar to create a similar malaise and generate the same dangerous remedy. After Germany, Italy and Poland and Russia, and in due course the Balkan and Baltic nationalities and Ireland, and after the débâcle the French Third Republic, and so to our own day, with its republics and dictatorships in Asia and Africa, the burning nationalism of regional and ethnic groups in France and Britain, Belgium and Corsica, Canada and Spain and Cyprus, and who knows where else.

None of the prophets of the nineteenth century, so far as I can tell, anticipated anything of this kind. If anyone had suggested it, it would surely have been regarded as too improbable to be worth consideration. What is the reason for overlooking the likelihood of this cardinal development of our day?
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v

Among the assumptions of rational thinkers of the liberal type in the
nineteenth and for some decades in the twentieth century were these:
that liberal democracy was the most satisfactory—or at least, the least
unsatisfactory—form of human organisation; that the nation-state
was, or at least had historically come to be, the normal unit of inde-
pendent, self-governing human society; and finally, that once the
multinational empires (which Herder had denounced as ill-assorted
political monstrosities) had been dissolved into their constituent parts,
the yearning for union of men with common language, habits, memo-
ries, outlooks, would at last be satisfied, and a society of liberated, self-
determined nation-states—Mazzini's Young Italy, Young Germany,
Young Poland, Young Russia—would come into existence, and, in-
spired by a patriotism not tainted by aggressive nationalism (itself a
symptom of a pathological condition induced by oppression), would
live at peace and in harmony with each other, no longer impeded by
the irrational survivals of a servile past. The fact that a representative
of Mazzini's movement was invited to, and attended, the meeting of
the First International Workingmen's Association, however little
Marx may have liked it, is significant in this respect. This conviction
was shared by the liberal and democratic founders of the succession
states after the First World War, and was incorporated in the constitu-
tion of the League. As for Marxists, although they regarded nationa-
lism as historically reactionary, even they did not demand the total
abolition of national frontiers; provided that class exploitation was
abolished by the socialist revolution, it was assumed that free national
societies could exist side by side until, and after, the withering away
of the state conceived as an instrument of class domination.

Neither of these ideologies anticipated the growth of national
sentiment and, more than this, of aggressive nationalism. What, I
think, was ignored was the fact which only, perhaps, Durkheim per-
ceived clearly, namely, that the destruction of traditional hierarchies
and orders of social life, in which men's loyalties were deeply involved,
by the centralisation and bureaucratic 'rationalisation' which industrial
progress required and generated, deprived great numbers of men of
social and emotional security, produced the notorious phenomena of
alienation, spiritual homelessness and growing anomie, and needed
the creation, by deliberate social policy, of psychological equivalents
for the lost cultural, political, religious values on which the older order
rested. The socialists believed that class solidarity, the fraternity of the exploited, and the prospect of a just and rational society which the revolution would bring to birth, would provide this indispensable social cement; and indeed, to a degree it did. Moreover, some among the poor, the displaced, the deprived, emigrated to the New World. But for the majority the vacuum was filled neither by professional associations, nor political parties, nor the revolutionary myths which Sorel sought to provide, but by the old, traditional bonds, language, the soil, historical memories real and imaginary, and by institutions or leaders which functioned as incarnations of men’s conceptions of themselves as a community, a Gemeinschaft – symbols and agencies which proved far more powerful than either socialists or enlightened liberals wished to believe. The idea, sometimes invested with a mystical or messianic fervour, of the nation as supreme authority, replacing the church or the prince or the rule of law or other sources of ultimate values, relieved the pain of the wound to group consciousness, whoever may have inflicted it – a foreign enemy or native capitalists or imperialist exploiters or an artificially imposed, heartless bureaucracy.

This sentiment was, no doubt, deliberately exploited by parties and politicians, but it was there to be exploited, it was not invented by those who used it for ulterior purposes of their own. It was there, and possessed an independent force of its own, which could be combined with other forces, most effectively with the power of a state bent on modernisation, as a defence against other powers conceived of as alien or hostile, or with particular groups and classes and movements within the state, religious, political and economic, with which the bulk of the society did not instinctively identify itself. It developed, and could be used, in many different directions, as a weapon of secularism, industrialisation, modernisation, the rational use of resources, or in an appeal to a real or imaginary past, some lost, pagan or neo-medieval paradise, a vision of a braver, simpler, purer life, or as the call of the blood or of some ancient faith, against foreigners or cosmopolitans, or ‘sophists, economists and calculators’, who did not understand the true soul of the people or the roots from which it sprang, and robbed it of its heritage.

It seems to me that those who, however perceptive in other respects, ignored the explosive power generated by the combination of unhealed mental wounds, however caused, with the image of the nation as a society of the living, the dead and those yet unborn (sinister as this could prove to be when driven to a point of pathological exacerbation).
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displayed insufficient grasp of social reality. This seems to me to be as true of the present as of the last two hundred years. Modern nationalism was indeed born on German soil, but it developed wherever conditions sufficiently resembled the impact of modernisation on traditional German society. I do not wish to say that this ideology was inevitable: it might, perhaps, not have been born at all. No one has yet convincingly demonstrated that the human imagination obeys discoverable laws, or is able to predict the movement of ideas. If this cluster of ideas had not been born, history might have taken another turn. The wounds inflicted on the Germans would have been there, but the balm which they generated, what Raymond Aron (who applied it to Marxism) has called the opium of the intellectuals, might have been a different one—and if this had happened, things might have fallen out otherwise. But the idea was born: and the consequences were what they were; and it seems to me to show a certain ideological obstinacy not to recognise their nature and importance.

Why was this not seen? Partly, perhaps, because of the ‘Whig interpretation’ so widely disseminated by enlightened liberal (and socialist) historians; the picture is familiar: on the one side, the powers of darkness: church, capitalism, tradition, authority, hierarchy, exploitation, privilege; on the other, the “lumière”, the struggle for reason, for knowledge and the destruction of barriers between men, for equality, human rights (particularly those of the labouring masses), for individual and social liberty, the reduction of misery, oppression, brutality, the emphasis on what men had in common, not on their differences. Yet, to put it at its simplest, the differences were no less real than the generic identity, than Feuerbach’s and Marx’s ‘species-being’. National sentiment, which sprang from them, fell on both sides of this division between light and darkness, progress and reaction, just as it has within the communist camp of our own day; ignored differences assert themselves, and in the end rise against efforts to ride over them in favour of an assumed, or desired, uniformity. The ideal of a single, scientifically organised world system governed by reason was the heart of the programme of the Enlightenment. When Immanuel Kant, who can scarcely be accused of leanings towards irrationalism, declared, ‘Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made’, what he said was not absurd.

I have one more suggestion to offer. It seems to me that the thought of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was astonishingly Europocentric. When even the most imaginative and the most radical
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political thinkers of those times speak of the inhabitants of Africa or Asia, there is, as a rule, something curiously remote and abstract about their ideas. They think of Asians and Africans almost exclusively in terms of their treatment by Europeans. Whether they are imperialists, or benevolent paternalists, or liberals and socialists outraged by conquest and exploitation, the peoples of Africa and Asia are discussed either as wards or as victims of Europeans, but seldom, if ever, in their own right, as peoples with histories and cultures of their own; with a past and present and future which must be understood in terms of their own actual character and circumstances; or, if the existence of such indigenous cultures is acknowledged, as in the case of, let us say, India or Persia, China or Japan, it tends to be largely ignored when the needs of these societies in the future is discussed. Consequently, the notion that a mounting nationalism might develop in these continents was not seriously allowed for. Even Lenin thinks of national movements in these continents solely as weapons against European imperialism; and of support of them only as likely to accelerate or retard the march towards revolution in Europe. This is perfectly intelligible, since he and his fellow revolutionaries believed that this was where the centre of world power lay, that the proletarian revolution in Europe would automatically liberate the workers everywhere, that Asian or African colonial or semi-colonial regimes would thereby be swept away, and their subjects integrated into the new, socially emancipated international world order. Consequently, Lenin was not interested in the life of various communities as such, in this respect following Marx, whose pages on, for example, India and China, or for that matter Ireland, expound no specific lessons for their future.

This wellnigh universal Europocentrism may at least in part account for the fact that the vast explosion not only of anti-imperialism but of nationalism in these continents remained so largely unpredicted. Until the enormous impact of the Japanese victory over Russia in 1904, no non-European people presented itself to the gaze of western social or political theorists as a nation, in the full sense of the word, whose intrinsic character, history, problems, potentialities for the future, constituted a field of study of primary importance for students of public affairs, history, and human development in general. It is this, as much as anything else, that may help to explain this strange lacuna in the futurology of the past. It is instructive to bear in mind that while the Russian Revolution was genuinely free of any nationalist
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element, even after the Allied Intervention – indeed, it is fair to
describe it as wholly anti-nationalist in character – this did not last.
The concessions which Stalin had to make to national sentiment
before and during the invasion of Russia by Hitler, and the celebra-
tion thereafter of the heroes of purely Russian history, indicate the
degree to which the mobilisation of this sentiment was required to
promote the ends of the Soviet state. And this holds no less of the vast
majority of states that have come into being since the end of the
Second World War.

It would not, I think, be an exaggeration to say that no political
movement today, at any rate outside the western world, seems likely
to succeed unless it allies itself to national sentiment. I must repeat
that I am not a historian or a political scientist, and so do not claim to
offer an explanation of this phenomenon. I only wish to pose a
question, and indicate the need for greater attention to this particular
offshoot of the romantic revolt, which has decisively affected our
world.