



The Evils of Nationalism

Review of Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*

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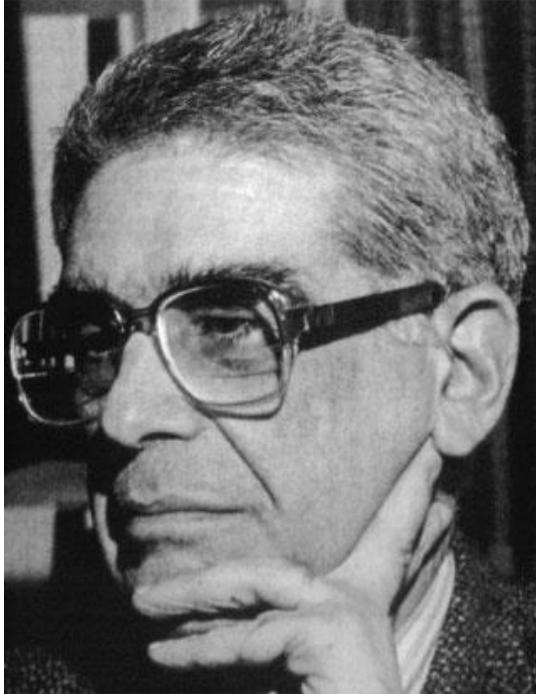
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The Evils of Nationalism

Review of Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London, 1960: Hutchinson), *Oxford Magazine*, New Series 1 (1960–1), 19 January 1961, 147–8



MR KEDOURIE regards nationalism as the most evil (as it is certainly the most influential) movement of our day. He is resolved to trace it to its origins in an amalgam of three equally pernicious heresies: the belief that society can be radically transformed in accordance with ideas (in particular that of popular sovereignty); the substitution of will and principle for empirical skills and interests; and faith in the supreme value and unique mission of specific human groups owning common soil and especially a common language. The first was preached by the French *philosophes* and erupted in the French Revolution; the second stems from the doctrines of Kant, Rousseau and Fichte; the third is to be found in

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Herder and his German disciples, especially Schleiermacher, Jahn, Arndt and the chauvinistic ‘Teutomaniacs’ inspired by them.

Mr Kedourie knows that belief in popular sovereignty and collective national sentiment are older than the eighteenth century. But he draws a sharp distinction between patriotism, tribalism and xenophobia on the one hand – which he regards as more or less natural phenomena – and, on the other, nationalism proper, which he condemns as an artificial and metaphysical invention of Western Europe in the nineteenth century, which duly boomeranged against its own authors and went on to spread havoc in the entire world. Mr Kedourie pursues it fiercely in all its varieties, German, Italian, Balkan, Arabic, Japanese, Zionist, in the firm conviction that it might have remained a mere aberration in the brains of a handful of hotheaded fanatics, and blown itself out in a few abortive conspiracies, were it not for the deliberate use made of it by power politicians for their own quite different, essentially non-nationalistic, ends. Napoleon III and the House of Savoy in Italy, Bismarck in Germany, Russia in the Balkans, British pro-Arabs in the Middle East, Japanese in Eastern Asia – it is these short-sighted manipulators who are to blame for our present plight. If nationalism had not been deliberately fostered when it was still young, weak and controllable, by men who needed it only to serve their own imperialistic ends, it would not have grown to a size and virulence which threatens to destroy our world.

Mr Kedourie’s account of the rise of nationalist ideas is spirited and accurate; yet there is no need to be a disciple of Marx, Weber or Namier to wonder whether an enquiry into the origins or elements of an ideology that takes so little count of the circumstances and needs which called it into being can be entirely satisfactory. Mr Kedourie hates the theory and practice of nationalism so deeply that he cannot believe that it could not at some stage have been arrested and perhaps rendered harmless by wise and far-seeing men, at any rate outside Europe. The French royalists in the early nineteenth century (and perhaps Burke too) held a very similar view about the storm that uprooted their world;

but neither they nor Mr Kedourie provide empirical evidence in support of this belief.

For Mr Kedourie (as for Maistre) nationalism is sheer perversity, an unexplained disease. Why, he wonders, could not Mazzini – the ‘son of a worthy family’ in Genoa – have lived on peacefully under the dreary but surely not intolerable rule of the Austrians? And he looks in Musset for an explanation of this pathological phenomenon. Mr Kedourie believes in good, rather than self-government; this is the fruit of good sense and has regard to history and nature, and sustains large multiracial empires which make it possible for minorities to breathe; it survives by means of political combinations, the balance of power, and the avoidance of ideas whose influence subverts and blinds.

Like Maistre and Bonald (and Napoleon) Mr Kedourie wonders whether philosophical speculation is compatible with civil order, and quotes with approval a famous Russian obscurantist, Magnitsky, an early, and by no means ineffective, prototype of Senator McCarthy, who managed to suppress liberal education in at least one Russian university in the reign of Alexander I. Mr Kedourie does not often go quite so far: his central doctrine about the justification of change, which owes something to Burke and conservative empiricists, is well summed up in the last, very characteristic, words of his book:

The only criterion capable of public defence is whether the new rulers are less corrupt and grasping, or more just and merciful, or whether there is no change at all, but the corruption, the greed and the tyranny merely find victims other than those of the departed rulers. And this is really the only question of issue between nationalism and the system to which it is opposed. It is a question which in the nature of the case admits of no final and conclusive answer.

The thought that runs through the entire book is the appalling damage which the ideas – more than the practices – of Europeans have inflicted on non-European peoples. Mr Kedourie’s account of these ideas and their effect is exemplary: clear, learned, vivid and

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just. The only faults are those of omission: Kant's rationalism – as opposed to his doctrine of the will – whose decisive influence on Romanticism Mr Kedourie is one of the [148] few writers in this country to understand, is not mentioned; the steps whereby Fichte moved from individualism to autarky are not explained; the economic, social and religious roots of European deviations in the nineteenth century are scarcely touched upon; the outlook of President Wilson's followers at the Versailles Conference is made even simpler than it was. Mr Kedourie does not seem to allow for the possibility that some men may desire self-government for its own sake, even at the cost of security or efficiency. But despite these queer blind spots, Mr Kedourie has written an interesting and, in places, moving and absorbing book. It is, first and foremost, a tract – learned, lucid, completely honest – against the consequences of mounting nationalism, perhaps the greatest of the perplexities of the liberals and socialists of today, none the poorer for being scrupulous, original and full of passionate feeling.

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