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**The Contextual Insensitivity of the Theory: Marxist and  
Liberal Rationalist Readings of Nationalism**

**Steven Segal**

**Macquarie Graduate School of Management**

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**Research Office**

Macquarie Graduate School of Management  
Macquarie University  
Sydney NSW 2109  
Australia

Tel 612 9850 7732

Fax 612 9850 9942

Email [research@mgs.edu.au](mailto:research@mgs.edu.au)

URL <http://www.mgs.edu.au/research>

Associate Dean of Research A/Professor Suresh Cuganesan  
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**\* Corresponding Author**

Dr Steven Segal  
Senior Lecturer in Management  
Macquarie Graduate School of Management  
Macquarie University NSW 2109, Australia

Phone: +61 2 9850 9907

Fax: +61 2 9850 9019

Email: [steven.segal@mgs.edu.au](mailto:steven.segal@mgs.edu.au) / [segal@netspace.net.au](mailto:segal@netspace.net.au)

## **THE CONTEXTUAL INSENSITIVITY OF THEORY: MARXIST AND LIBERAL RATIONALIST READINGS OF NATIONALISM**

**STEVEN SEGAL**

*Macquarie Graduate School of Management*

Many authors have claimed that both liberal rationalist and Marxist examinations of nationalism have failed to offer convincing accounts of nationalism. Making this point in general Gellner has said: "Internationalism was often predicted by the prophets and commentators of the industrial age, both on the left and on the right, but the very opposite came to pass: the age of nationalism."<sup>1</sup>

There is widespread agreement on Gellner's point both within circles that predicted the downfall of nationalism as well as from commentators on the critiques of nationalism. For example, Tom Nairn has acknowledged the failure of Marxism to come to terms with nationalism: "The theory of nationalism represents Marxism's greatest historical failure."<sup>2</sup> And Yael Tamir has maintained that liberalism has tended to neglect the significance of nationalism. She maintains that liberals need to "rethink their beliefs and policies and seek to adapt them to the world in which they live."<sup>3</sup>

Berlin maintains that the problem with Marxist and liberal readings of nationalism is that they were insensitive to the everyday realities out of which nationalism emerged: "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 ... displayed insufficient grasp of social reality."<sup>4</sup> Berlin maintains that "This curious failure of vision on the part of otherwise acute social thinkers seems to me a fact in need of explanation..."<sup>5</sup>

In this paper I will account for what Berlin calls the "failure of vision" by demonstrating that Marxist and liberal rationalist accounts of nationalism have lacked a phenomenological dimension of being unable to conduct their investigations into nationalism by taking the life-world and "average everyday" intelligibility of nationalism into account. Rather than being sensitive to the language of nationalism, to the meaning of "rationality," "myth" and "emotion" in the context of nationalism, liberal rationalist and Marxist analyses of nationalism demonstrate a reductive imposition of their own assumptions about the nature of reality onto the everyday lived experience, of nationalism. They tend not to take into account nationalism's

own notion of the relationship between everyday experience, the language it uses to describe its experience and the assumptions of reality which underlie its context.

This paper will be divided into three sections. Firstly it will show how liberal rationalist and Marxist critiques of nationalism have failed to be sensitive to the particular way in which nationalism uses language. Secondly, it will then show that that the criterion of truth to which nationalism responds is quite different to that of liberal rationalism and Marxism and that this has not been taken into account by Marxists and liberal rationalists in their critique of nationalism. It will be shown that whereas Marxism's epistemology is underpinned by historical materialism and liberal rationalist's epistemology is driven by disengaged rationality, nationalism is a response to the anxiety of homelessness and the desire to find a home in the world. I will conclude by summing up the way in which critiques of nationalism have not explicitly taken the average everyday context or life-world of nationalism into account in their critiques.

## I

In terms of their own taken for granted assumptions about being, Marxists and liberal rationalists dismissed nationalism. For example, in terms of criteria of reason nationalism was condemned to what Gertrude Himmelfarb calls the "ash can of history." Making this point, she says: "Liberals find it difficult to credit the fact, and the force, of nationalism because it violates some of their most cherished assumptions: that people are rational individuals with universal interests and aspirations; that nations are nothing more than an aggregate of individuals; and that nationalism is irrational, parochial, and retrograde."<sup>6</sup> This point is reiterated in the following observation from Berlin: "As for the nationalists ... they were written off as irrationalisms -- and with Nietzscheans, Sorelians, neo-romantics, out of account."<sup>7</sup> Reinforcing this perspective Ross Poole has said: "Too easily nationalism has been assumed to be a form of unreason, a pathology which is not worthy of and is perhaps unavailable to the techniques of philosophy."<sup>8</sup>

However, that on rational and historical materialist grounds the beliefs of the nationalist should be rejected as irrational and even as ideological or neurotic<sup>9</sup> has not meant that the nationalist has rejected his belief. On the contrary, as Himmelfarb has noted, the national question is "threatening to become the question of the present and the future."<sup>10</sup> As Žižek says, this has left the liberal rationalist in an awkward position: "Liberal intellectuals refuse it, mock it, laugh at it, yet at the same time stare at it with powerless fascination."<sup>11</sup> The dismissal of nationalism in the name of rationality is dangerous because nationalism does not itself disappear<sup>12</sup> but festers in a space that is now unintelligible to reason.

What critics who reject nationalism in these ways take for granted is the

belief that their own criteria of reason, rationality and pathology have been commonly accepted as the terms in which to analyse nationalism. They assume that nationalism shares their ontology. They do not take into account that they are seeing nationalism in their own terms and thus that their seeing as well as their perplexity in the face of the continued growth of nationalism is shaped by this language. In many analyses of nationalism there has been a tendency on the part of commentators to see nationalism in terms of their own ontological assumptions without seeing that nationalism may have a view of the nature of reality which is different from their own.

This same point can be made in terms of the function myth plays in rational and nationalist discourses. Nationalism has often been criticised as myth and calls have been made for its de-mythologisation. This, for example, is the position of Hobsbawm who characterises nationalist writings as "exercises in programmatic mythology."<sup>13</sup> But from the nationalist perspective myth is not something to be ashamed of. It is the basis of meaning and commitment. It is only in terms of a disengaged rationalist perspective that myth is something to be avoided. In fact there are many psychotherapists who are calling for a remythologisation of the being of the human. This is the view, for example, of Rollo May who, speaking about scientific and industrial being in the twentieth century says: "Our myths no longer serve their function of making sense of existence, the citizens of our day are left without direction or purpose in life, and people are at a loss to control their anxiety and excessive guilt feeling. People then flock to psychotherapists or their substitutes, or drugs or cults, to get help in holding themselves together."<sup>14</sup>

Rollo May sees the rationalist tendency to demythologise as partially responsible for the crisis in meaning experienced by so many in the twentieth century and which underlies nationalism itself: "But there is another reason in our day for the mistaken definition of myths as falsehood. Most of us have been taught to think only in rationalistic terms. We seem to be victims of the prejudice that the more rationalistic our statements, the more true they are. ... Gregory Bateson rightly reminds us that `mere purposive rationality unaided by such phenomena as art, religion, dream, and the like is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life.'"<sup>15</sup>

Not only must we not be too quick to disrupt all meaning in the name of myth but we must call into question the very terms in which myth is assumed to simply be "false" or "untrue." Therefore, to critique nationalism in the name of an assumed universal characterisation of myth as negative is to critique nationalism in terms that have no pulling power from the perspective of the nationalist. This does not mean that we must accept myth at face value. Rather we need to develop a logic to decipher the power and significance of myth and a logic to decode nationalism itself.

## II

Nationalism, as many others have noted, is responsive to a different notion of reason from that which underlies liberalism and Marxism. For example Gary Gerstle maintains that rather than being responsive to a liberal criterion of rationality or a Marxist vision of economics as the basis of "truth," nationalism is rooted in an attunement to finitude. Reinforcing his argument with reference to Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities he maintains that "Nationalism addresses the question of death. Membership in a nation offers citizens the possibility of transcending their own finitude."<sup>16</sup>

In the face of the anxiety of finitude, it is of no use to preach the gospel of economic determinism or epistemological rationalism: "People may find in their `nation' answers to, or at least solace regarding, their own misfortunes. And this suffering arises not so much from economic deprivation as from our vulnerability to disease, injury, deformity, and aging. Apostles of the Enlightenment -- Marxists and liberals alike -- have been reluctant to address ... the inescapable, terrifying fact of mortality."<sup>17</sup>

That these concerns are not included within the framework of Marxist and liberal concepts of truth, meaning and significance is of no consequence to nationalism. On the contrary, it is liberalism and Marxism that need to re-evaluate themselves in the light of the concern with finitude: "The need to transcend human finitude will certainly outlive the current stage of capitalism. And radicals and liberals must begin to appreciate this abiding need if they want to regain their moral authority in the world."<sup>18</sup>

This suggests that to fault the nationalist on economic and epistemological grounds is to fault him on grounds in terms of which he does not evaluate himself; it is in terms of the logic of habitus that we must respond to the nationalist. Calhoun makes this point in another way by maintaining that the logic of nationalism is rooted not in epistemological needs for accuracy but in the existential need for habitus.<sup>19</sup> It is the anxiety of homelessness, the threatenedness that underlies lack of identity that defines the horizon in which nationalism makes sense. Only when being is already experienced as meaningful can we be concerned with epistemological truth<sup>20</sup> but when the issue is one of the anxiety of meaninglessness, the issue of epistemological truth takes a back seat. The same point is made in a different way by Anthony Smith who maintains that the nationalist's commitment to his history is not based on detached empirical and, we may add, rational analysis but is rooted in the "yearnings for an ideal community."<sup>21</sup> Reinforcing this point, Anderson maintains that nationalism is a response to issues revolving around the anxieties of the contingency of human existence.<sup>22</sup>

The nationalist, therefore, reasons, responds and commits himself not in abstraction but in the context of the tensions and demands of everyday living. As Argrys and Schon have pointed out, reasoning in abstraction and reasoning in the context of everyday living follow different logics: "the technology of rigorous research works best when it does not deal with real-

time issues -- for example, when scholars take years to study a decision that took several hours to make. This technology of rigorous research is based on diagnostic techniques that ignore or cannot cope with properties of effective action under real-time conditions."<sup>23</sup>

But it is under what Argyrus and Schon call "real-time conditions" that nationalism operates. Its writings and reflections are not the product of detached rigorous research but of the experienced need to cope with the demands of everyday existence. These "real-time" conditions do not include only the need to make a living but, as I have already indicated, the entire spectrum of contingencies faced by the human being, including death and illness. Therefore the notion of contingency cannot be reduced, as materialist would wish to do, to the notion of the material conditions of existence. Contingency has much more to do with issues of mortality and finitude and the way that these affect everyday human existence. Materiality is a significant subcategory within the broader horizon of finitude. It is shaped and gains its significance from finitude.

It seems that both versions of Marxism and liberal rationalism have failed to address either part or the whole spectrum of these contingencies. Making this point in terms of a rationalist feminism Angelika Bammer has said: "One of the most painful lessons that feminists have learnt from the struggle for reproductive rights is that we cannot cede the language of emotion (longing, pain and fear) to those on the political Right while we try to make do with an abstract language of civil rights."<sup>24</sup>

Making the same kind of point in a different way Miller has said, "Philosophers, especially, will have great difficulty in coming to grips with the (logic) of national attachments.... Philosophers are committed to forms of reasoning, to concepts and arguments, that are universal in form" whereas nationalism is situated in a context of particularistic and embedded reason, a context which, according to Miller, is seen by rational philosophers as irrational.<sup>25</sup>

And in the context of Marxism, Peter Gabel has maintained that what he calls a positivist Marxism, a Marxism which wishes to reduce the everyday to materialist terms, has been unable to speak to the tensions and stresses of the everyday lived reality of people:

People on the Left still talk primarily in economic terms about the nature of and solution to fundamental social problems because they do not yet have any other way to talk. As a result, conservative forces, which have a better understanding of social connection and meaning to people's lives, have gained ascendancy in the West through their affirmation of religion, the 'free' world and market, and traditional family values; and through appeals to the imaginary or 'substitute' social connection symbolised by, for example, the flag.

This conservative ascendancy cannot be effectively challenged by the Left's prevailing economic world view, because the world view simply fails to address the desire for a community of meaning that is at the very heart of the Right's message.<sup>26</sup>

Problems of meaning and, to use a phrase of Berlin's, "mental wounds," have generally been ignored by Marxists. But much of the anguish which characterises nationalism is centred around the ruptures of taken for granted meanings which arise in the transition from premodern to modern forms of life. Speaking in the context of the postcolonial project which also involves the question of nationalism, Bhaba, quoting Habermas, has said: "The postcolonial project, at the most general theoretical level, seeks to explore those social pathologies -- 'loss of meaning, conditions of anomie' -- that no longer simply 'cluster around class antagonism, [but] break up into widely scattered historical contingencies.'"<sup>27</sup>

The transition from a peasant and feudal mode of living to a commercial and industrial mode of living is not something that occurs automatically but requires an entire transformation in assumptions, identities and aspirations; an entire new way of reading experience. It entails the relinquishing of the familiar for the insecurity of the unfamiliar. The insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety experienced in this transition is something that has been neglected by most Marxists. As Jean Ziegler has said: "Materialist and dialectical sociology has long been guilty of wilful blindness. Fascinated by the practical aspects of class struggle, by the numerous conflicts men experience on the material production front, it has neglected another battlefield: the one where wars are fought for control of the imaginary."<sup>28</sup>

Others have pointed out that identity is intimately tied to the imaginary. According to Hall "We only know what it is to be 'English' because of the way 'Englishness' has come to be represented, as a set of meanings, by English national culture. It follows that a nation is not only a political entity but something which produces meanings -- a system of cultural representation."<sup>29</sup>

While agreeing that nationalism involves a set of images and representations, it is more than just a set of representations; it is a set of representations in a particular existential setting and established in response to particular existential demands. Zizek hints at this when he maintains that the being of nationalism lies in "some real, non-discursive kernel of enjoyment that must be present for the Nation qua discursive-entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency."<sup>30</sup>

We must be careful not to separate the set of representations from the existential context in which they occur. The set of representations which define nationalism attain their being not in themselves but in terms of a non-representational and non-discursive phenomenon called enjoyment. Zizek



sees the experience of a nation under threat as an example of enjoyment. Such a threat brings the nation face to face with itself in such a way that through the possibility of losing itself it comes to see itself as something worth preserving: "This relationship toward the Thing ... is what is at stake when we speak of the menace to our `way of life' presented by the Other: it is what is threatened when, for example, a white Englishman is panicked because of the growing presence of `aliens.' What he wants to defend at any price is not reducible to the so-called set of values that offer support to national identity."<sup>31</sup>

Zizek allows us to see that nationalism is not a doctrine or set of representations in a vacuum but it is a set of beliefs in the context of enjoyment or in the context of a particular way of being threatened -- or what in (still to be developed) Heideggerian terms can be understood as "mood" or "attunement." From this perspective, Hall is correct to see nationalism as a set of representations whose specific nature includes the fact that it is imagined as a narrative expressed in the form of a history that allows the people of the nation to represent themselves to themselves. However, what he fails to express is that this imagining is situated in the existential context of enjoyment or attunement and that the narrative of the nation is an endeavour to express its way of coping with the way in which it is threatened.

### III

In general the problem with liberal rationalist and Marxist critiques of nationalism is that they fail to situate the beliefs of the nationalist in the context of its life-world or what Heidegger calls "average everydayness." From an Heideggerian perspective, beliefs are not decontextualised entities but are embedded in and developed against the background of an average everyday horizon of intelligibility that is not itself explicit. This background gives the set of beliefs its particular meaning and sense. To appreciate these beliefs we need to appreciate the background of this life-world. Marxism and liberal rationalism seem to have abstracted nationalism from its background and reduced the opinions and beliefs of nationalism to their own context of reference.

Therefore, against a rationality which would treat the nationalist's beliefs as independently existing sets of propositions to be criticised in their own right, we must maintain that these beliefs have meaning and sense against the background of an average everyday life-world. And against a Marxism which either avoids the life-world or reduces it to the material conditions of existence, we shall maintain that the life-world is more than the material conditions of existence, that it includes finitude and thus contingency and that materiality is but one aspect of finitude. We cannot assume that the only meaning that contingent phenomena have is a material meaning.

To appreciate views in the context of their life-world does not mean surrendering the voice of critical or reflexive reason, for we can, undertake an immanent critique of nationalism in which we deconstruct the way in which nationalism accounts for its life-world. It is these dimensions of critique that Marxism and liberal rationalism seem to have neglected. Rather than simply imposing their assumptions on to nationalism they need to develop a phenomenological sensitivity to the context out of which nationalism responds as a basis upon which to engage in a meaningful critique of nationalism.

<sup>1</sup> Gellner E. Nations and Nationalism. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, p52

<sup>2</sup> Nairn T. "The Modern Janus" in New Left Review 1975, 94, p3

<sup>3</sup> Tamir Y. Liberal Nationalism Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, p4

<sup>4</sup> Berlin I. "Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power" in Against the Current London: Hogarth, 1979, p352

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 341

<sup>6</sup> Himmelfarb G. On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, p111

<sup>7</sup> Berlin I. op cit., p340

<sup>8</sup> Poole R. Morality and Modernity London: Routledge, 1991, p19

<sup>9</sup> Nairn has claimed in materialist terms that nationalism is a neurosis of modernity. See Nairn T. op cit., p26

<sup>10</sup> Himmelfarb G. op cit., p112

<sup>11</sup> Zizek S. Tarrying With The Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p212

<sup>12</sup> In Baumanian terms we can see here the legislative imperative in rationalist and marxist condemnations of nationalism: all that these critiques succeed in doing is marginalizing rather than overcoming a phenomenon that represents the aspirations of people who already feel marginalized.

<sup>13</sup> Hobsbawm E. Nations and Nationalism Since 1870: Programme, myth, reality Cambridge: CUP, 1990, p101

<sup>14</sup> May R. The Cry for Myth New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991, p16

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p25

<sup>16</sup> Gerstle G. "Capture the Flag." in Tikkun 6,2, 1991, p78

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. The Heideggerian dialectic which I shall develop in Part II will allow me to show that this (what I shall call) "prism of attunement" has been repressed in reductive Marxism and positivist rationalism.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. I wish to emphasize that I am not aiming at a support of nationalism but to establish that nationalism does address real issues and that if, like many Marxist and rationalist critiques of nationalism, we turn our backs on nationalism before finding out what these issues are, we become bamboozled by its onward march.

<sup>19</sup> Calhoun C. "Nationalism and Ethnicity" in American Review of Sociology 1993, 19, p222

<sup>20</sup> This point is made by Bruce Wilshire who says that "only meaningful beliefs and assertions have a chance to be true."; Wilshire B. The Moral Collapse of the University New York: State University of New York Press, 1990, p99. This indicates that the issue of sense precedes that of epistemological truth. My argument is that nationalism must be seen in the context of the logic of sense and not that of epistemological truth.

<sup>21</sup> Smith A. D. Theories of Nationalism Great Britain: Duckworth, 1971

<sup>22</sup> Anderson B. Imagined Communities London: Verso, 1983 p16

<sup>23</sup> Argyris C. and Schon D. Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness London: Jossey Boss, 1974, p4

<sup>24</sup> Bammer A. "Editorial" in New Formations 17, 1992, pxi

<sup>25</sup> Miller D. "In Defence of Nationality" in Journal of Applied Philosophy 10, 1, 1993, p3

<sup>26</sup> Gabel P. "On Passionate Reason: Transcending Marxism and Deconstruction" in Tikkun 4, 6, 1989

<sup>27</sup> Bhaba H. The Location of Culture London: Routledge, 1994, p171

<sup>28</sup> Ziegler J. quoted in Verhelst T. No Life Without Roots London: Zed Books, 1990, p20

<sup>29</sup> Hall S. "The Question of Cultural Identity" in Hall S. et al (eds) Modernity and its Future England: Polity Press in association with the Open University, 1992, p292

<sup>30</sup> Zizek S. "Eastern Europe's Republic of Gilead" in New Left Review 183, 1990, p52

<sup>31</sup> Zizek S. Ibid.