



Institute for Journalism, Media & Communication Studies, Keio University

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**CAN NATIONALISM (IN ASIA) STILL CHANGE?**

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**Editor's note**

Benedict Richard O’Gorman Anderson passed away on 12 December 2015 in Batu, East Java, Indonesia. He was 79 years old. Professor Anderson was the author of, among others, *Imagined Communities* (1983) and *Under Three Flags* (2005). Back in March 2007, we had the honor to host him as keynote speaker for an international workshop entitled “Changing Faces of Nationalism in Asia,” one of the events organized to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> year anniversary of Keio University. The article below is the paper he delivered for the public lecture. He had given permission to print it in a campus bulletin back then, which we unfortunately had neglected to do. We are publishing it today in order to commemorate his extraordinary work in the fields of nationalism and Southeast Asian studies, and especially, speaking as a former student of his at Cornell University, his generous spirit as scholar.

Rest in peace, Ben!

Yamamoto Nobuto  
13 December 2015

Towards the end of the last century the great British-Jewish comparative historian Eric Hobsbawm expressed the view that the explosion of highly sophisticated theoretical and empirical studies of nationalism, which began in the early 1980s, was a sign that nationalism's world noon-time had passed. Using Hegel's vivid metaphor "Minerva's owl takes flight at dusk," – meaning that we only understand a great world-historical force when its end is near, he argued that nationalism's creative, emancipatory energies have become almost exhausted, and it is now condemned to repeat itself in ever more defensive, reactionary, and sterile forms. What he might also have said is this: the nation-hyphen-state, to which all nationalisms aspired, was the first state form in history to be based on the idea of the Future and of Progress, with a utopian horizon always receding up ahead. But what would happen if this rosy horizon disappeared, and the nation-state was left in the nostalgic posture of defending, naively or cynically, the past?

If one looks around Asia today, one could easily believe that Hobsbawm was correct. Koizumi and Abe have nothing to say about the rosy future, but offer plenty of equivocations or even lies about the past. The same could be said of the governments in Yangon, Bangkok, Manila, Seoul, Phnom Penh, Peking, Dakha, Islamabad, Jakarta, Delhi, Kuala Lumpur, Hanoi and Colombo.

How should one think about this? A number of years ago a fine American historian published a study of German policy towards Catholic and Jewish Poles forcibly included in the Empire after the late 18th century partition of Poland between Germany, Russia, and Austro-Hungary. Impressed by the successes of the French Revolution in attracting followers all over Europe, the rulers of Germany tried very hard to assimilate these new subjects, but failed to do so in many cases because they had nothing to offer them that paralleled the utopian slogan – Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. The German empire was an authoritarian state, dominated by an aristocracy, with little capacity to feel fraternal to these Slavs and Jews. Worse still, they came more and more inclined to believe that they had failed, not because of stupid policies, but because truly German Germans were unique, very ancient, and connected as much by blood as by language or culture. Here the basis was laid for the horrors of Nazism.

It is not at all difficult to find thematically comparable examples in modern Asia. Pre-national Tokugawa Japan forbade the Ainu from adopting Japanese dress and customs, and insisted that envoys to Kyoto coming from Okinawa dress as 'Chinesely' as possible. But nationalist Meiji Japan did the opposite, in a harsh manner that did not open any utopian

horizons. Vietnam, Laos and China all offer examples in the German manner, failed policies of coercive assimilation, whereby minorities come to see death not hope on the horizon. The southern Philippines, West Papua, East Timor prior to 1999, the old Scheduled Territories of Burma, Thailand's Malay south, and so on, have very similar experiences. It has always struck me as symptomatic that if Indonesians call someone a warga negara, which means citizen, they are referring strictly to people of Chinese descent. Everyone else is an Indonesian, as if citizenship and Indonesianness were conceptual opposites.

But are we looking at things too one-sidedly? I think it is worth a brief look back at what successive waves of nationalism historically aimed for, and partially achieved.

The first grand wave was opened with the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, and was soon followed by revolutionary uprisings in the Caribbean and South and Central America. The central feature here was the abolition, with a few short exceptions here and there, of the dynastic principle of monarchy, and the introduction of republican forms of government based on elections (however corrupt and violent). Revolutionary France soon succumbed to Napoleon's self-installation as Emperor and the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty up until the 1870s. Europe generally remained overwhelmingly monarchical till the end of the Great War. But thereafter rapid decline. Today, however, only about 14% of the United Nations has a hereditary figure as head of state. Their combined land area is less than half Brazil's and their total population less than half India's. It is certain that this percentage will continue to decline. That said that we have also to remember that these new republics excluded from citizenship all women, indigenous peoples, and often the poor. Bolivar succeeded in abolishing slavery in the old Spanish Empire, but the US kept it till the 1860s, and the discriminatory residues are still very visible there to this day. Only Imperial Brazil kept slavery longer.

The second wave occurred in Europe (which then included a substantial part of the Ottoman Empire, growing steadily in strength from the 1830s till the Great War). Popular nationalist movements in Europe were also often aimed against dynastic and aristocratic rule, but typically spoke in the name of oppressed and subjected peoples; in particular their cultures and languages == something new by comparison with the Americas. Coupled with Romanticism, this kind of nationalism resulted a huge tide of creative activity in literature music, and other arts, as well a serious archaeology of popular, especially peasant, traditions. It was no longer to be dangerous or shameful to speak and write in Finnish, Gaelic, Catalan,

Norse, and so on. (We can also see here the origin of today's identity politics.) It is, nonetheless, very important to recall that these nationalist movements also had their international aspect; they usually regarded each as brothers, and it was out of this brotherhood that eventually the concept of the League of Nations emerged.

But women were still excluded from public political life for the most part; and a good number of these nationalist movements did not hesitate to oppress smaller minorities like Jews and Gypsies if they had the power to do so. In self-preserving reaction to these movements, threatened aristocratic and monarchical groups tried to nationalize themselves, and to use nationalism as an instrument of state, rather than the state as an instrument of nationalism as had been the case earlier. In Asia the most striking example of this counterflow was Japan.

The last big wave of emancipatory nationalism is represented by the anticolonial movement, which began to appear in Asia during the 1880s in the Philippines and India, and in Black Africa during the 1930s. Hitherto all the nationalist movements were "white," and some of them were not above colluding with racist imperialism. It was the anticolonial movement that made nationalism something world-wide, available to everyone regardless of the colour of their skins. The anticolonial movements represented an advance over earlier forms, in that generally they opened public life to women, and they initially at least saw themselves as Left. This tendency operated at the bases of colonial-era societies; but in Asia, especially, eventually, after independence, produced a series of female national leaders, some pretty good, some fairly wicked, to a far greater extent than in Europe or the Americas. These movements also for a long time thought of themselves as involved in a brotherly manner in a common international struggle, with today's UN as the eventual institutional form thereof.

We can add two further important aspects of these anticolonial movements. In the majority of cases they arose within and against particular colonial states, whose boundaries had nothing to do with nationality, and everything to do with the accidents of military conquest and imperial rivalries. Hence their populations typically consisted of many groups with different mother-tongues, cultures, and religions, unlike the majority of cases in Europe. Hence a lot of genuinely new things had to be created. The strange half-Latin half-Greek name Indonesia, invented by an obscure German scholar in the late 19th century, and the Philippines, named after the 16th century Spanish monarch Felipe II are specially striking examples. But Vietnam, "Burma," Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh even India are modern coinages. We are speaking here of genuinely national identities often deliberately without ethnic content

(Finnish, however, could be either national or ethnic depending on circumstances).

Anticolonial nationalisms were thus very often the pioneers in incorporating what Europe and North America would much later on call “multiculturalism.” Secondly, these nationalisms typically had to wrestle with the question, rarely raised in previous nationalist movements, of language. By luck, Indonesia was well placed to create an astonishingly successful national language which does not belong to any powerful domestic group. But this was a rare exception. The solution most often – quite unlike Europe – was to establish separate languages of state and languages of nationality, with the former typically that of the former imperial ruler, but now “neutral” from an ethnic point of view, if not from that of class. In many places the national languages were and are plural – South Africa today recognized no less than 13 national languages, as well as English as language of state. But there were of course also many cases where the numerically dominant ethnic attempted to impose its language on the others, rarely with complete success.

The formation of the United Nations also represents, if we look back historically, another milestone in the emancipatory progress of nationalism. Why so? It was created in the immediate aftermath of what Europeans think of as the Second World, which was characterized by massive, quite traditional conquests of huge amounts of enemy territory. We recall Hitler’s vast Third Reich, Japan’s Greater East Asia Sphere, and even Stalin’s wide expansion of the Soviet Union’s western borders. But the first two were destroyed by the war, and Stalin’s gains in the 1930s and 40s were largely lost, quite peacefully in the 1990s. The crucial fact is that United Nations represents the end of one old and very powerful reason for war: conquest. This is one reason why no country today still has a Ministry of War, only ministries of defense or security. Since 1946, no state has substantially enlarged its territory, except Israel, and few seriously believe that in the end Israel will be able to hang on to its annexations. National territories have become sacrosanct. New nation-states continue to come into existence, but they are born from internal conflicts, not external conquest. The Soviet Union, Old Ethiopia, Old Pakistan, and Yugoslavia are the best example of this splitting process, which will continue in the future. This does not mean that the big powers do not continue to bully and manipulate the small nations, but it does mean that they cannot obliterate them or incorporate them anymore.

It is always possible that war will break out between members of the United Nations – it is not difficult to imagine China and Japan, for example, entering hostilities. But the result of

any such war will not be the cession of Kyushu to Peking, or Manchuria to Japan. At worst it will be a matter of a few tiny islands in the seas between them, and perhaps the oil beneath the water. Thus there is a kind of emancipatory normative base to the United Nations, which seems to us commonplace today, but never, surely, be paralleled by a United Religions or United Ethnicities.

Are there still evolving emancipatory elements in nationalism?

I think so, but one could also say that they are not so much something entirely new, as extension of nationalism's emancipatory logic. Let me give you just three examples. The first is the field of social welfare. If one compares the 'state' in 1807 or 1907 with that in 2007, one sees a vast expansion, even if often corrupt and incompetent, of national agencies for promoting citizen welfare: social security, minimum wages, health care, schools, etc. which in principle are designed to show that the national state represents and cares for the everyday welfare of all its components, something that would have horrified Washington or Bolivar, McKinley or Asquith. Over the past two decades neoliberal ideologies have conducted a fierce assault on 'state welfarism,' but I think this has probably already passed its peak, as the real consequences of privatization become more obvious.

The second example is the growing political activism and power of oppressed indigenous groups, mainly but not entirely in the Americas. The most spectacular sign of this is Evo Morales' election as president of Bolivia, the first time in almost 200 years that an indigenous Aymara has become head of state. A fair number of hopeful experiments are going on to give such groups much enlarged autonomy and self-government. One can find Asian examples, too, in Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines and Taiwan. But again, it seems to me that these developments are mostly logical extensions of earlier nationalist aspirations.

Less important, but very interesting are gender-based activisms. For most of its history nationalism was either silent about gays or lesbians or took a strong punitive line against them. The US offers us an especially fascinating example, given the country's fiercely homophobic traditions. Forty years ago homosexuals were persecuted and had no public voice; today the country is deep in a debate about gay and lesbian marriage. The grounds for this change are clearly national. Gays and lesbians in the US are treated far better today than a generation ago, not on the grounds of their homosexuality but rather on their claims as Americans, or better, citizens of the Republic. Comparable movements are becoming visible in Latin

America, Europe, Asia, and even in Africa. How new is it? It would have startled Mazzini, Ataturk, and Sun Yat-sen, but one could say that in a way it is a logical extension of the movement for women's suffrage and female emancipation, itself inseparable from the history of nationalism.

There is enough here to support my belief that Hobsbawm's verdict on nationalism's future is rather exaggerated. I would also be inclined to go one step further. Across the globe a consensus is building that massive, planetary catastrophe lies not too far ahead. It is quite clear that the only institutions with the capacity to diminish or ward off this catastrophe are the nation-states in the United Nations, acting in some kind of negotiated concert, and facing growing public (national) insistence that serious action be undertaken. It is by no means certain that they will succeed, and there are plenty of grounds for apprehension, but there is no chance at all without them.

In spite of all this, there is evidence that nationalism faces some new difficulties, conceptual and practical. I will discuss briefly only two, which are interrelated, and also probably the most important,

The first is unprecedentedly large migrations of nationals, sometimes temporary and sometimes semi permanent, across national boundaries. We are familiar with the main reasons for this. Global inequality is today worse than the internal inequality in almost any single country. The immiseration of huge populations in the global South is pushing the migration wave, while spectacular demographic decline and ageing in the countries of the rich North are pulling in uneasy concert. But we can also observe immigrations going on legally and illegally in other directions – go to Taiwan, to Singapore, to Malaysia, to Thailand and you will find hundreds of thousands of such migrants. I would say that the most peculiarly Asian aspect of this is the huge demand for live-in maids in bourgeois families. Such live-in maids are much rarer in Europe and the Americas, and indicate that for the Asian employers a reactionary pseudo-feudal, social climbing is at work.

These huge migrations put pressure on nationalism in contrasting ways. One can consider first the nationalisms of the host countries. There are ruthless regimes like that in Singapore, a small-city state with weak popular nationalism and no tradition of civil liberties. In Singapore foreign workers are not allowed to settle, are heavily policed, have no civil rights, and, as far as possible, are prevented from marrying locals. Korea, on the other hand, facing



depopulation in rural areas and the difficulty of male farmers obtaining Korean wives, has half-encouraged the importation of wives from Southeast Asia. Taiwan does the same, driven primarily by fear of immigration for the poorer provinces of China. Germany is an unusually interesting case because, for historical reasons mentioned earlier, German nationalist ideology liked to conceive of Germanity in terms of blood and lineage. But huge immigration, especially from rural Turkey, now three generations deep, Turkish activism, and the dominant rules of the EC, have been forcing the German government gradually to break with the past and to accept young Turks as citizens provided they have mastered the German language and adapt in part German modern culture. Countries with long histories of immigration, such as France, the US and Canada have had firmly assimilationist policies for a long time, and on the whole these have worked not too badly. States that attempt to deal with the migrations in illiberal ways – here Japan could be mentioned -- face not only growing criticism from the outside world, but even from civic-minded Japanese activist groups and open-minded municipal authorities. The obvious question is whether Japan will eventually have to redefine its national self-perception, in the manner of Germany. I think it still too early to give even a tentative answer to this question.

The immigrants themselves allow us to consider nationalism from another angle. In the period up to World War I, most immigrants came from dynastic states, and were subjects, not citizens in their place of origin. Since then, far carries a “national passport,” meaning that they really belong back in their national home. What happens to their national identity? For those who go to work in places like Singapore and the Middle East, where they cannot stay long, and are heavily policed, not much changes, except that most end up feeling pretty hostile to their ruthless hosts. In more liberal environments, where at least limited possibilities of assimilation are open, where marriage is not legally restricted and long-term domicile is on the cards, it is likely, especially in the second generation that a sort of dual identity begins to emerge. One can notice this if one watches football. Turkish Germans will cheer happily for German teams, except when they play against Turkish teams.

This is moment for a short historical digression. In the wake of World War I there was a powerful movement for women’s legal emancipation in Western Europe and in the Americas. Large numbers of women thus became voting citizens in their own right, and thus fully national. But nationalism and sex do not necessarily live in the same house, all the more so in an age when the principle of patriarchy was still very strong, such that women first bore the

surname of their father and after marriage that of their husband. In an earlier era a French woman marrying an Argentina man would immediately become an Argentinian, whether she wished it or not. But after World War I, women in this position increasingly and successfully campaigned to keep their origins; nationality all their lives. This is origin of the legal status of bi-nationality, as sort of compromise between France and Argentina. The practice of perfectly legal dual citizenship has been spreading steadily ever since, no longer just for women but also for men and for children. It is obvious that the whole concept of dual citizenship would have horrified the older nationalist movements, for whom it would have implied dual and divided fundamental loyalties. But today it is a public option in many countries. One additional powerful reason for the change comes from an odd place: national militaries.

From the time of the French Revolution up to about the 1960s, conscription of adult males was both normal (given the level of development of military technology) and morally obligatory. Military service was an essential aspect of national citizenship, and one big reason for resistance to female suffrage was exactly that women were thought incapable of carrying out this patriotic duty. Today, with external conquests a thing of the past and military technology very far advanced, conscription has become obsolete, and few countries still practice it. Up till the 1930s, any American man serving in a foreign army forfeited his citizenship, but this has long been not the case anymore. One could thus argue that the decline of obligatory military service by national males has not only helped equalize the position of male and female citizens, but made dual nationality a more acceptable possibility.

Dual nationality thus represents a real and recent innovation in the history of nationalism; if it spreads further, which I think globalization will make more likely, then nationalism can be said to be still capable of change. But what impact has this new practice had on the national-identity formation of migrants and their descendants?

It is here that we can turn finally to the second extremely interesting – and possibly negative – side of nationalism in the new century.

It is a curious aspect of the history of major sociological concepts that they first appear long after the phenomena they describe have come into existence. “Industrialism,” “capitalism,” “militarism,” and “nationalism” were coined decades after the things themselves were born. We should therefore be careful not to imagine that because the word “globalization” came

into common use very recently, the thing itself is at all new. We know now that in the 19th century cross-state migrations were, proportionately, not far behind those of today. We know that in the same period, finance capital travelled across the globe even more smoothly than today. What we may, however, have forgotten is this. It is now more than a century since virtually instant communication was possible around the world. Exactly 100 years ago, President Theodore Roosevelt sent himself a round the world cable, and received it 7 minutes later. During a recent intensive study of the first great novel by the Filipino nationalist Rizal – *Noli Me Tangere* published in Berlin in 1887) – I was amazed by the number of casual references to various characters sending telegrams, inside the then very backward and remote Philippines, but also overseas. Photographs started to be sent by press-agencies as early as 1912. To say nothing of the later development of worldwide radio networks, and eventually television in its primitive and advanced forms. We could indeed say that we are now in the age of Late Globalization, or, more modestly, Middle Globalization. Obviously, the very recent spread of privately owned computers and cheap internet shops and the huge elaboration of the world-wide web represents an enormous advance from what existed thirty years ago. But what impacts have – and will have – this advance on the future of nationalism?

Ready access to the internet encourages various types of activism from many people, especially the young, in contrast to television, radio and even newspapers, which are there primarily to be passively consumed. It is much harder for the national state to control internet access, by comparison with the older mass media. Search engines make the computer offer much wider access to the past than do television and the newspapers == and on a continuous 24 hours day basis. These features make possible entry into various fantasy=worlds in which users can change their identities as they please. Furthermore, since accessing computers is in a way a lonely, asocial, activity, it also offers a convenient place for releasing anger, envy, hostility, and the like. If the experience of the United States is anything to go by, blogging messages are heavily negative, filled with rumors, slanders, and hostile insinuations. There is thus a possibility that spreading internet access actually increases political, religious, and other rifts within national states.

Another difference is also apparent. Television, radio, and newspapers, even if they have plain political positions, are nonetheless forced by markets and competition to open themselves fairly widely to a general public – domestic political news, foreign events, fashions, amusement, sports, business, education, health fads, cartoons, children's sections

and so on. They cannot afford to be aimed too narrowly. But the internet, in which the user is an active searcher, can provide a quite narrow, even monomaniacal framing for the world, in which everything unwanted or irrelevant can be instantly weeded out. One could say it opens real doors for fanaticisms.

It is likely that this form of consciousness can be especially worrying when we look at the diasporas that contemporary migrations make possible. A generation ago, immigrants intending or permitted long-term residence in other countries had no alternatives to television, radio, and newspapers for whom they were not the primary customers, so that these media tended to have assimilationist influence. But if we imagine the Indian in Canada or the Thai in Argentina today, we can suppose that they can access “India” and “Thailand” in various forms, at any time, such that the long communications distances of earlier diasporas can no longer exert their assimilationist influence. But what of India or Thailand do they access? There is a fairly successful Filipino newspaper in California which can also be accessed on the internet. Its contents are very instructive. There is always a full page devoted to crimes and disasters in the Philippines, which tell the reader that he or she did the right thing to leave for California; there are pages devoted to “Grandmother’s recipes,” to photos of “beautiful Philippines,” to gossip about Filipino movie stars – and of course also stories about small local successes of California: Filipinos doing well in local politics, business, sports or schools. The paper constantly tells the readers never to forget being Filipino, but the picture it offers of the Philippines today is very far away from observable reality. This case, quite mild and harmless in itself, nonetheless shows us something which does not correspond to dual citizenship, but rather a sharp divorce between citizenship (American) and nation-ness (the Philippines). Nationalism is becoming portable – over long distances, long times, and even generations.

We cannot yet be sure of the long-term consequences of this apparent change in nationalism, where the basic original assumption was that Indians belonged in India and Thais in Thailand. We know that absentee voting is becoming normalized, that domestic political parties actively solicit funds from the diasporas, which small fanatical groups tend to prosper where everyday experience of life in the mother country has ceased. In the case of India, the so-called IRAs, Indians Residing Abroad, have organized themselves quite effectively to demand privileges from the government in Delhi, as well as lobbying for various policies, even if they do not carry Indian passports. Even if much of this activity is probably fairly harmless, it is

nonetheless obvious that such people, active in Indian politics from far away, are not accountable to the Indian nation=state. Unaccountability in politics is, I believe, always a bad thing.

If “portable nationalism” is really a new form of nationalism, we could say that nationalism in Asia can still change, but what we cannot easily say is that new emancipatory horizons are opened up.

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