

Comments on Bernard Yack, *Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community*.

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It is a great pleasure to be asked to comment on Bernard Yack's fine book, from which I have learned a great deal. It is a wonderful example of deep scholarship lightly worn: it is an ocean away from those depressingly familiar books in which each sentence seems to have a Harvard-style reference at the end while containing a clumsy paraphrase of the cited author's thought. The book poses a particularly strong challenge to those like myself who have defended the position that has come to be labelled 'liberal nationalism'. It is particularly strong because it is mounted from a position close by, so it comes near to being an internal critique. Unlike liberal cosmopolitans, for instance, Yack accepts the value of belonging to a national community; he accepts that it is reasonable to display national loyalty and national partiality; he does not look forward to a bright new future where nations have withered away and everyone has become a citizen of the world – a condition that Isaiah Berlin once described as 'a tremendous dessication of everything that is human'.¹ Nevertheless Yack is worried about nationalism, understood as an attempt to make nation and territorial state coincide, geographically. He is insistent that 'nation' and 'people' – the latter understood as the set of persons who are subject to the authority of a state, and more recently regarded as the ultimate holders of sovereignty – must be kept separate. If nationalism is 'morally problematic' as he puts it, then a fortiori this must also apply to liberal forms of nationalism. Can one then be both a nationalist and a liberal? Or is nationalism always liable to lead to outcomes that liberals will find abhorrent – ethnic cleansing for example? That's the main challenge that Yack's book poses for people like me.

I shall concentrate my remarks in two main areas. First I shall discuss Yack's concept of 'nation' and the way in which he tries to remove from it those political elements that give rise to nationalism. Second I shall address the issue of territory, and Yack's attempt to drive a wedge between nation and territory, as he argues against national self-determination as a political ideal.

A nation, according to Yack, is a community of people who feel a special concern for one another, and who are picked out from the rest of humanity by virtue of sharing a cultural heritage. What makes up this heritage is quite variable: Yack mentions 'language, relics, symbols, stories of origin, memories of traumatic experiences, and so on' (p. 69). He also emphasizes that each person can pick and choose among the items that go into this heritage, adopting some elements but rejecting others. I shall come back to this selectivity in a moment, but first let us ask what it means to share a cultural inheritance, as a criterion of group membership. This is less straightforward than it might at first appear. I can bring this out by considering Yack's own example of the American in Paris. This woman

may know more about French history than a particular native, she may even speak a purer French; but that does not make her a member of the French nation if she developed her facility in French culture in the course she chose to take at American universities (p. 84)

¹ N. Gardels, 'Two Concepts of Nationalism: An Interview with Isaiah Berlin', *New York Review of Books*, 21 November 1991, p. 22.

According to Yack, this woman *knows* the French cultural heritage, but does not *share* it. But what does that mean? What disqualifies her from being a sharer? As far as I can see there are three possibilities, none of them helpful to Yack's position.

1. The woman, though immersed in French culture, remains an American citizen. Her political loyalties are still with the US. But Yack wants to draw a clear distinction between nationality and political citizenship. So on his account it cannot be her lack of French *citizenship* that prevents her from being included in the French nation.
2. The woman acquired her French culture in the wrong place; Yack says she studied French at American universities, and was presumably brought up there. But this gives us a territorial conception of nationality: a person shares a cultural inheritance (in the relevant sense) if and only if they were born and raised in the territory associated with that culture. But Yack as I noted earlier (and I will come back to this later) wants to draw a line between nation and territory. Although ideas of homeland may be included in a nation's cultural heritage, territorial location does not define a nation. So our woman cannot be excluded from French nationality just because she was raised in the US.
3. The woman does not identify herself as French. Although she loves French culture and is better versed in it than many natives, she still thinks of herself as an American abroad. Well that sounds right, but then there must be something more to her identity than the sharing of a cultural inheritance. Because in the most obvious sense of the word she does share in that inheritance. When she meets with French people she can discourse with them, in her perfect French, about the relative merits of Camus and Sartre, about the importance of remembering St Bartholomew's Day, in case they should have forgotten, and so forth. So the missing element cannot be the cultural inheritance itself, but the way in which she regards it, and the way that others would regard her participation in it.

Pursuing point 3, what exactly *is* missing here? Surely the fact that the woman we are considering does not regard herself as engaged in any kind of political project to protect and develop those elements of French culture that she happens to know and admire. What is lacking is precisely the political dimension to nationality that Yack wants to exclude. She has no interest in acquiring French citizenship, except merely as a convenient way of extending her stay in Paris. If she instead acquires it because she wants to become involved politically – perhaps she wants to protest against Qataris buying up Impressionist art – she is well on the road to becoming French, in the national sense. It is not the legal status of citizenship that matters – I agree with Yack about that – but the use to which it is put.²

My first point, then, is that although co-nationals do indeed share in a cultural heritage, the fact of sharing by itself is not enough to distinguish them from others. What is missing is a certain practical stance towards that heritage, namely a collective commitment to protect and extend it into the future.

² One corollary of the conception of 'nation' that Yack adopts is that the nation/ethnic group distinction evaporates. Yack concedes this: 'in the end, nation and *ethnos* (or *ethnie*) are two words for a single form of association: an intergenerational community based on the affirmation of a shared cultural inheritance' (p. 93).

My second point will be about the picking and mixing. Are we as free as Yack suggests to choose the attitudes we adopt towards different elements in the cultural array we inherit? According to Yack:

It is the affirmation of a shared cultural heritage as a source of mutual concern and loyalty that makes a national community, rather than the sharing of any particular beliefs, practices, or institutions. In a nation we share, to use Renan's expression, a rich "legacy of memories" and other cultural artifacts, regardless of whether or not we are inclined to employ or celebrate the contents of that legacy (p.74).

This of course is helpful if one wants to show that national membership involves no breach of liberal principles. You can be as critical as you like of the contents of your national heritage, and still remain a full paid-up member of the nation.

But is that really so? Doesn't it depend on which parts of the cultural heritage we are considering? Yack's position makes good sense if we are thinking about, for example, national sports. We can recognize that baseball is the national sport of Americans, hockey of Canadians, cricket of the English, and so forth, from within these communities without adopting any particular attitude towards the sport itself. I might find cricket a dull and stupid game (I don't) while recognizing that it forms part of my cultural heritage as an Englishman. But is that true of all the elements that make up the heritage in question? What about, in particular, defining historical events, such as the American Revolution or World War II? First it seems hard to deny that as a member of the relevant nations you must believe in the *significance* of these events – you must agree that they are indeed defining events. And second it seems that you have to adopt a particular stance towards them, or at least a stance that falls within a relatively limited range. For example, if you are an American, you have to believe that the Revolution was justified, and that it was the moment that gave birth to a new nation as the shackles of colonial rule were thrown off. Rival views, such that it was really the first American Civil War between rival factions inside the country, fall outside the permissible range. Or a Briton looking back at World War II must think it a matter of national pride that in 1940 Britain stood alone against the onslaught from Hitler's Germany. The alternative view, put forward at the time by Lord Halifax and his supporters, that the prudent course was for Britain to negotiate a peace settlement with Hitler, is again outside of the range.³

To be clear, when I say that certain views are impermissible to hold, I don't mean that people should be prevented from expressing them – far from it. If someone wants to defend Halifax by laying out a counterfactual history in which Hitler's ambitions are held in check by a peace settlement, he is perfectly entitled to do so. Liberal rights of freedom of thought and expression are not at issue. The point is rather that for a nation to exist there must be a broad consensus on certain key questions. Somebody who holds a contrary view on one or more of these issues to that extent renounces their national identity. Moreover it is legitimate for elements of the consensus to be handed on intergenerationally through formal education and in other ways. So a liberal who thinks that it is positively desirable for everything to be challenged and for as many conflicting opinions as possible to be expressed may find the existence of nations an impediment to her wish. A liberal nationalist, then, is a particular kind of liberal, one who appreciates the truth of a remark of Tocqueville's that I cited as an epigraph to *On Nationality*:

³ I don't mean to suggest that these points of reference are set in stone for all time. The claim is about what it means to belong at nation N at a particular moment in history.

In order that society should exist and, a fortiori, that a society should prosper, it is necessary that the minds of all the citizens should be rallied and held together by certain predominant ideas; and this cannot be the case unless each of them sometimes draws his opinions from the common source and consents to accept certain matters of belief already formed.⁴

I turn finally to the issue of territory, and Yack's claim that nations are not in essence territorial groups. Territorial issues only arise, he claims, when the idea of national self-determination appears on the scene, for this is understood to involve the nation as holding exclusive rights over the territory that it regards as its own. This immediately opens the door to conflict, since nations intermingle with one another on the ground and their ideas of the nation's homeland overlap. Indeed, Yack says, national self-determination as it is commonly understood involves an inner contradiction, for the attempt to make the borders of states line up with national boundaries clashes with the idea of popular sovereignty, which is the claim of all those who permanently reside in a territory to act as the source of the authority that governs it. Either you start with nations as subjectively defined groups, or you start with politically-defined territories and those who de facto live in them, but you cannot start from both at once.

This is a powerful challenge, borne out in the eyes of many by the often intractable territorial conflicts that persist in the world today, but I want to meet it first by casting a critical eye on Yack's claim that 'the same or overlapping lands can belong to more than one nation, since the members of national communities not only dwell frequently side by side in the same territories, but can also recall the same sites of past greatness and trauma' (p. 91). Here we need first to disentangle the claim about residence from the claim about historical memory. Cases in which members of two distinct nations are intermingled throughout a territory seem to me to be quite rare, if we discount cases in which populations have been deliberately moved to cement political conquests, as happened in the case of Russian immigrants sent to the Baltic states following World War II and more recently with the Han Chinese and Tibet. Much more commonly we find large areas overwhelmingly occupied by members of two (or occasionally more than two) distinct nations, and then a borderland area in which national identities are mixed. The borderlands are disputed, but neither nation makes territorial claims to the whole of the other's territory. Indeed the only case I can think of in which there is an across-the-board dispute between rival groups claiming the whole of a territory in which their members live is Israel-Palestine. Now 'debatable lands' are certainly hard cases for the principle of national self-determination, and the conflicts they create may require ingenious solutions that give each side partial self-determination through an elaborate power-sharing arrangement.⁵ But even they do not quite match Yack's description.

What next about 'sites of past greatness and trauma'? That these play a large role in national memory is not in doubt. But in most cases there will be a clear distinction between sites that fall within the national homeland and those that do not. In 2014 hundreds of thousands of visitors from Britain, Germany, France and other places further afield are expected to descend on the city of Mons to recall one of the most traumatic battles of World War I. But nobody supposes for a moment that Mons properly belongs to anything other than the territory of Belgium. Any country with an imperial past will contain in its collective memory significant events that happened outside of the

⁴ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. P. Bradley (New York, Vintage, 1945), vol. II, p. 9.

⁵ I have discussed these cases in 'Debatable Lands', forthcoming in *International Theory*.

homeland, without believing that it retains any territorial claim to the places where they occurred. Do Turks who recall what happened in 1683 still think that they have any residual claim to Vienna: surely not? Indeed one effect of the consolidation of national territory is to draw a sharp line between homeland proper and what we might call the theatre of national history, which may indeed have a wide stage. So the difficult cases will be ones where homelands remain in dispute for the reasons given in the previous paragraph. Yack cites the example of Kosovo, but the point about Kosovo is that it is not just a 'site of past greatness and trauma' for the Serbs, but also an area in which Serbian and Albanian populations remained intermingled until very recently (indeed still do to some extent). In the great majority of instances nations can happily 'share' historic sites because only one of them at most still regards the place as belonging to their national territory.

Even if reflection on these cases convinces the reader that national self-determination and popular sovereignty do not collide as sharply as Yack suggests, it might still be said that there is a conflict of principle (pp. 244-8). Popular sovereignty requires that since 'the people' are defined as those who inhabit a given territory with fixed boundaries, these boundaries must be treated as sacrosanct; whereas the national principle tells us to redraw them wherever this better serves the cause of national self-determination. But does popular sovereignty actually prohibit boundary redrawing? Was it a violation of popular sovereignty when the two halves of Germany reunited, or the two halves of Czechoslovakia split? If the demos votes to reconstitute itself in one or other of these ways, why is this not an exercise of popular sovereignty rather than its negation?

There is a further point worth adding here, though I cannot develop it fully.⁶ If popular sovereignty is to have more than merely formal content – if it means that the people should exercise real democratic control over their government – then the *composition* of the people and not merely its geographic location will matter. The claim of (liberal) nationalists is that democracy works best when its constituents overwhelmingly share a national identity, for reasons having to do with the presence of trust, and the need to reach political agreements that all can accept. Despite the oft-repeated claim that there is no democratic way of deciding where the boundaries of the demos should fall, there may then be democratic reasons for drawing political borders in such a way that they correspond to national boundaries wherever possible, and exercising ingenuity in the small number of instances where this cannot be made to work. If this is true, then the relation between national self-determination and popular sovereignty may be one of mutual support, and not the mutual undermining that Yack asserts.

⁶ I have done so in 'Democracy's Domain', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 37 (2009), 201-228.