Liberal nationalist versus postnational social integration: on the nation’s ethno-cultural particularity and ‘concreteness’*

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ABSTRACT. Liberal nationalists advance two claims: (1) an empirical claim that nationalism is functionally indispensable to the viability of liberal democracy (because it is necessary to social integration) and (2) a normative claim that some forms of nationalism are compatible with liberal democratic norms. The empirical claim is often supported, against postnationalists’ view that social integration can bypass ethnicity and nationality, by pointing to the inevitable ethnic and cultural particularities of all political institutions. I argue that (1) the argument that ethno-cultural particularity demonstrates the need for nationalist integration depends on an implausible reification of national identity at the level of social theory, and that (2) this reification ironically serves to undermine liberal nationalists’ normative claim.

Introduction

Twentieth century nationalism is inextricably linked with some of the ugliest, most brutal episodes of the twentieth century. In the wake of two World Wars, even nationalism’s subsequent contributions to anticolonial liberation struggles have failed to shake many North Atlantic intellectuals’ perception that nationalism is a close ally of racism.¹ Over the last decade, however, a number of theorists have attempted to rehabilitate nationalism within a liberal framework. They suggest not only that nationalism is normatively compatible with liberal democracy, but that it is positively indispensable to it on empirical grounds. Both the normative and the empirical claim feature prominently in the recent wave of democratic ‘liberal nationalist’ writings. It is my thesis that there is a serious tension between these two liberal nationalist claims, and that the empirical claim can only be sustained by jeopardising the normative. I shall, moreover, call into question the empirical claim on theoretical grounds.

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One important version of the empirical claim consists in what I call the *nationalist thesis*, according to which a liberal democratic society can motivate support for democratic projects and effect social integration democratically only to the extent that its citizens are unified by a shared nationality. On this view, liberal democratic social integration must be nationalist integration. The *cultural nationalist* version of this functionalist thesis holds that a liberal democratic society can solve the twin problems of motivation and integration only via a shared national culture (Schnapper 1994; Miller 1995). The upshot is that, unless the continued existence of a shared national culture has somehow already been secured, the liberal democratic state must sponsor cultural nation-building projects.

The cultural nationalist version of the thesis is important because it speaks to both the empirical and the normative issues raised by democratic liberal nationalist theorists. On one hand, the emphasis on the *nation* is designed to harness the motivational power of nationalism for democratic politics, a power nationalists allege is indispensable to democratic social integration. On the other hand, the emphasis on *culture* seeks to reconcile nationalism to liberalism at the normative level. The strategy here is to distinguish between ethnic and non-ethnic varieties of nationalism, with the implication that only the former is inherently antiliberal. Will Kymlicka (2001), for instance, argues that the widespread distinction between ‘ethnic’ and ‘civic’ nationalism must be understood to distinguish between a nation whose membership criteria are exclusionary and ‘closed’ on genealogical grounds, and a nation that is in principle ‘open’ to anyone willing to adopt its national culture. Benedict Anderson, who also conceives the nation in terms of culture – especially vernacular language – expresses the same hope:

> Language is not an instrument of exclusion: in principle, anyone can learn any language. On the contrary, it is fundamentally inclusive, limited only by the fatality of Babel: no one lives long enough to learn all languages. (1991: 134)

For Anderson, cultural nationalism is less like racism and more like the great universal religions: it is open, and it has the power to motivate tremendous sacrifices.3

Recent developments within liberal political philosophy itself have facilitated this normative project of reconciling liberalism and nationalism. Post-war liberal political philosophers opposed nationalism in part because they feared that using the state to advance particularistic ethnic or national projects would simply fuel tribalist conflict. This fear is reflected in the neo-Kantian doctrine, advanced most prominently by John Rawls (1971) and Ronald Dworkin (1978) in the 1970s, that the state should remain neutral between competing conceptions of the good. The state must not, on this view, be used to advance particularistic religious, ethnic or cultural nationalist agendas.4 This doctrine of state neutrality expresses the liberal aspiration to find conditions under which individuals from different religious, ethnic and cultural-national groups could live peaceably together, under political institu-
tions they all see as legitimate. But in the wake of the ‘communitarian critique’, which characterised state neutrality as chimerical, even the strongest champions of neutrality have since been compelled to temper their support (cf. Rawls 1996: 190–5; Dworkin 2000: 239, 281–2). In particular, liberals have increasingly come to realise that political institutions cannot be divorced from culture in the same way that they might be from religion. There has thus been a shift towards acknowledging a second thesis advanced by cultural nationalists: the cultural core thesis, according to which neither the nation nor political institutions can be rendered wholly culturally neutral (Kymlicka 1995: 111–15; 2001: 24; Tamir 1993: 148–9).

The question is what the relation is between the cultural nationalist thesis and the cultural core thesis. It is easy to conflate the two, or to suppose that acknowledging the latter implies support for the former; the inevitably of the state’s cultural particularity seems at least to attenuate normative objections to state-sponsored cultural-nation-building projects. My purpose in this paper is to demonstrate that, first, to the contrary, the cultural nationalist thesis rests not on the fact of nations’ and political institutions’ inevitable cultural particularity per se, but on a specific interpretation of this fact. There are two distinct ways to argue for and interpret the fact of particularity: what I call the masquerade argument, which maintains that particularity can never be transcended in practice, and the functionalist argument, which maintains that particularity is functionally necessary for nations and political institutions in principle. Only the second interpretation of the cultural core thesis supports the cultural nationalist thesis. Second, the functionalist interpretation confronts cultural nationalists with a dilemma: on one hand, it is indispensable to their critique of postnational theories of social integration; on the other hand, it compromises their liberal normative aspirations by instigating the collapse of cultural into ethnic nationalism. For nations and political institutions are just as incapable of transcending ethnic particularity as they are of cultural particularity: if we support the cultural nationalist thesis by interpreting the fact of cultural particularity in light of a functionalist need, then we must interpret ethnic particularity by the same light, yielding the ethnic nationalist thesis that social integration depends on shared ethnicity. Third, the functionalist argument is implausible: it depends on a theoretical reification of the category of nation, a reification that (a) is inconsistent with the premises of liberal nationalists themselves and (b) helps explain the collapse of cultural into ethnic nationalism. The same reification that propels cultural nationalism’s collapse is also a reason to reject the functionalist argument grounding it.

1. Ethnic and cultural cores

What is common to all versions of the nationalist thesis, as I have defined it, is the claim that liberal democratic political institutions require citizens who
enjoy the corporate unity imputed to nationhood. Different models of the nation, however, bank on different supports to secure that corporate unity. Drawing on the seminal work of Hans Kohn (1944), Anthony Smith (1986: 134–8; 1991: 9–12) distinguishes between the territorial or civic model, on one hand, and the ethnic model of the nation, on the other. For Smith, the civic-territorial nation has four main features: it is associated with a bounded, historic territory; its members are bound by the common legal code of a shared political community; its members enjoy the sense of legal equality that comes with the notion of shared citizenship; and it presupposes a measure of common culture and a civic ideology. The ethnic nation, by contrast, is first and foremost defined by a presumed common genealogical origin, rather than grounded primarily in a common territory; this stress on common descent and kinship ties goes hand in hand with a rhetoric of populist mobilisation; and the territorial model’s stress on legal codes and institutions is replaced by an emphasis on a shared vernacular culture – of dialects, customs and traditions – as the cement that holds the nation together.

But Smith notes that these are not water-tight categories. For one thing, ‘all nations bear the impress of both territorial and ethnic principles and components’ (1986: 149) – i.e. every nation, to varying degrees, partakes of the characteristics that in principle distinguish the civic-territorial and the ethnic models. For example, ethnic identity also has a territorial basis. There are ‘two broad types of [ethnic] nostalgia, that of kinship and that of territory’ (1986: 34). Ethnic communities themselves always possess ties to a particular locus or territory… An ethnie need not be in physical possession of ‘its’ territory; what matters is that it has a symbolic geographical centre, a sacred habitat, a ‘homeland’, to which it may symbolically return, even when its members are scattered across the globe. (1986: 28)

When ethnies became ethnic nations, they did so by ‘transforming’ ethnic’ into national ties and sentiments through processes of mobilization, territorialization and politicization’ (1986: 137, emphasis added).

Conversely, every nation, including territorial nations, necessarily has what Smith calls an ‘ethnic core’ (1986: 212). One reason for advancing this ethnic core thesis might be a no-nonsense sociological realism: the claim that despite ideological pretensions, no civic nation has in practice been able to achieve neutrality between the ethnic groups that make (or made) up its population:

modern ‘civic’ nations [1] have not in practice really transcended ethnicity or ethnic sentiments. This is a Western mirage, reality-as-wish; closer examination always reveals the ethnic core of civic nations, [2] in practice, even in immigrant societies with their early pioneering and dominant (English and Spanish) culture in America, Australia, or Argentina, a culture that provided the myths and language of the would-be nation. (1986: 216, emphasis added)

I call this reason for advancing the ethnic core thesis the masquerade argument, which amounts to a variant of the by-now familiar critique
(canvassed by feminists, communitarians, postmodernists, etc.) that the so-called universal or neutral ‘view from nowhere’ turns out, upon further analysis, to be a particular (masculine gender, liberal conception of the good, context-bound rationality, etc.) masquerading in universalist guise. The masquerade of the particular here takes the form of a particular (dominant) ethnie’s practices or understandings infusing the civic-national ones which are meant to be common to all ethnic groups. Kymlicka (1995: 111–15), for example, argues that the polity must necessarily decide which ‘societal cultures’ it will support, when it chooses how to draw internal political boundaries, which public holidays to recognise, what state symbols to adopt, and which language(s) to use within governmental institutions, in the provision of services, and in public schooling. Kymlicka could make the same point about the civic nation as Smith conceives it as well, since a civic nation requires a common legal code and common citizenship, and so necessarily finds articulation in the politico-legal institutions of a polity.

But notice that Kymlicka speaks in terms of societal cultures. What is intriguing about the passage from Smith above is that the first part advances the ethnic core thesis, but strictly speaking the anecdotal evidence cited in the second part (see my bracketed numbering) supports the cultural core thesis (that the nation and political institutions cannot be culturally neutral). Now, the masquerade argument might be used to advance the cultural core thesis as well: try as it may, the nation cannot in practice attain cultural neutrality.

But the ethnic core thesis adds something new to the cultural core thesis, for not all culture is by definition ethnic, i.e. tied to a myth of common descent. To say that all nations have some sort of shared culture is one thing, to say that all have an ethnic core another. Of course, that Smith argues for the ethnic core thesis by defending the cultural core thesis is not a complete non sequiter, because it might be thought that the cultural core of the civic nation in practice implies an ethnic core, i.e. the shared civic culture might necessarily derive its elements from particular vernacular ethnic cultures. The American civic nation, for example, has a cultural core (Lind 1995), and that cultural core is one that might be more readily identified with by Americans of Anglo-Saxon ethnicity rather than, say, of Japanese ethnicity, because of the historical roots of that cultural core. Thus, if the polity necessarily recognises some ‘societal cultures’, these cultures are in practice more strongly associated with certain ethnic identities or histories than others. Something like this might explain the parallel terminological shift (from culture to ethnicity) in Kymlicka’s argument.6

So civic-territorial nations have ethnic components, and ethnic nations have civic-territorial components. According to Smith,

No ‘nation-to-be’ can survive without a homeland or a myth of common origins and descent. Conversely, no ‘ethnie-aspiring-to-become-a-nation’ can achieve its goals without realizing a common division of labour and territorial mobility, or the legal equality of common rights and duties for each member, that is, citizenship. (1986: 149, emphasis added)
Thus there is a ‘dualism at the very heart of the concept of the ‘nation’, which means that there is an inherent instability in the very concept of the nation, which appears to be driven, as it were, back and forth between the two poles of ethnie and state which it seeks to subsume and transcend. (1986: 150)

But there is an interesting tension in Smith’s account. To speak in terms of a dualism at the heart of the nation suggests a symmetry between the two models – i.e. where one principle dominates, the second principle beckons the nation with a force equal to that which the first would have beckoned had the priority been the reverse. But the very next sentence of the passage just cited gives a different emphasis: ‘Very few of today’s nations have succeeded in subsuming the two poles and making the ethnie co-extensive and fully congruent with the state’.

To see why the symmetrical account might turn out to be belied by an asymmetrical one, we need to attend to a second reason, different from the masquerade argument, for advancing the cultural and ethnic core theses. If the first reason has to do with the fact that in practice attempts to transcend culture or ethnicity always fall short, the second reason points to why even in principle an ideal of transcendence may be incoherent. This parallels two different ways in which the two models of the nation may overlap. First, parallel to the masquerade argument, both models of the nation in practice partake of those characteristics that in principle distinguish them. Second, according to Smith, civic-territorial and ethnic nations share characteristics even in principle – such as requiring some sort of common culture. While the ethnic model draws upon a shared vernacular culture, the fourth feature of territorial nations means that they must also be cultural communities. The solidarity of citizenship required a common ‘civil religion’ formed out of shared myths and memories and symbols, and communicated in a standard language through educational institutions. So the territorial nation becomes a mass educational enterprise. It [sic] aim is cultural homogeneity. (1986: 136, emphasis mine)

This is the cultural core thesis, but the identification of homogeneity as the aim of the nation is a sign that the argument has gone beyond the masquerade argument. And just as Smith couches the cultural core thesis here in terms of a requirement of homogeneity, when he advances the ethnic core thesis, he frames it in terms of a functionalist imperative of survival:

nations require ethnic cores if they are to survive. If they lack one, they must ‘re-invent’ one. That means discovering a suitable and convincing past which can be reconstructed and re-presented to members and outsiders. (1986: 212)

It is not so much that in practice the nation will have an ethnic core; in principle it positively requires one.

We need to ask why a myth of common descent would be required by the civic nation. The answer for Smith is that the mobilising power of the nation
comes, even in the civic model, from shared *ethnicity*, i.e. a myth of common
descent.

If the nation is to become a ‘political community’ on the Western territorial and civic
model, it must, paradoxically, seek to create those myths of descent, those historical
memories and that common culture which form the missing elements of their ethnic
make-up, along with mutual solidarity. It must … emphasize the historic *kinship* of its
collective *ethnic* … This is done by creating or elaborating an ‘ideological’ myth of
origins and descent. (1986: 147)

The suspicion is that, despite the symmetry that ‘dualism’ suggests, the real
pole of gravity is the *ethnic* nation – that in reality there is an *ethnic* nation
lurking beneath the surface of every *territorial* nation. This asymmetry is
exactly what Smith elsewhere seems to imply:

most nationalists after 1789 became increasingly influenced by an ‘ethnic model’ of the
nation. Once nationalists had set out on the road to nation-formation, the problem of
cultural and social integration became paramount, along with that of ethno-political
congruence. To achieve *integration* and legitimate a set of borders and a ‘homeland’,
*myths of descent were needed*, not only for external consumption, but for *internal
mobilization*. (1986: 148, emphasis added)

Here we begin to see the confrontation with the twin problems of motivation
and integration. The point is that, on Smith’s account, what provides the
motivational bases for social integration is first a common culture, but
ultimately, *ethnicity* (myths of shared descent).7

Briefly stated, then, the second reason for advancing an ethnic core thesis –
the *functionalist argument* – is the following: it is *ethnicity*, and not the nation
*per se*, that provides motivational power, and the nation can mobilise its
citizens only in so far as it draws upon *ethnicity*. Nations functionally *need* an
ethnic core for social integration. So any nation that lacks an overarching
myth of shared descent must emulate shared *ethnicity* by creating some sort of
myth of origin to do the job:

Because of this urgent and deep-seated need, modern nationalisms have had to resort
increasingly to unifying ethnic myths, even when there are competing *ethnie* from
which the new national culture must be forged. (1986: 148)

And in so far as such myths fail to emulate fully the real thing, as it were (i.e. a
myth of fully *shared* descent), ‘polyethnic states which also claim to constitute
[civic] nations’ suffer from the ‘familiar modern phenomenon’ of ‘the
sundering of citizenship from solidarity’ (1986: 150–1).

One might still understand this ‘sundering’ in terms of the symmetrical
dualism that Smith sometimes wants to suggest:

What this means is a dual attachment: on the one hand, loyalty to the political unit, the
state, expressed in terms of citizenship rights and obligations; on the other hand, a
sense of affiliation and solidarity with the ethnic community. (1986: 151)

But in fact, ‘loyalty’ to the state turns out to be little more than an
instrumentalist ‘attachment’ to the ‘rights and benefits’ of citizenship. Ethnic
‘solidarity’ is grounded in affective ties, but the state and civic nation can only
motivate by reference to reward. Thus the asymmetry between the ethnic and civic-territorial poles of the nation amounts to this: whereas an ethnie aspiring to become a nation is pulled toward the civic-territorial model in so far as it must ‘become a territorially centralized, politicized, legal and economically unified unit bound by a common civic outlook and ideology’, the civic-territorial nation is pulled toward the ethnic model because its ‘solidarity’, its very capacity to be a ‘mobilising force’, depends on it (1986: 152). An ethnie has an affective, mobilising content that must simply take on a territorial form; but a civic nation as such lacks any affective content at all. It is a body without a soul. A form without content.

2. Normative troubles

The normative implications are clear. If the ethnic core thesis simply reflects the masquerade argument that in practice civic nations will never be able fully to transcend ethno-cultural particularity, then one obvious conclusion might be that the regulative ideal requires compensating the minority groups who lose out as a result of this empirical shortcoming. This is in fact the critical conclusion that Kymlicka draws vis-à-vis ethnicity. For Kymlicka, the point of the ethnic core thesis is a critical one: a critique-by-unmasking of the power of dominant ethnies – power which they might enjoy, for example, thanks to their chronological priority in the history of the nation. Far from seeing in the ethnic core thesis an imperative for homogeneity, he argues that justice and equality require the state to compensate groups that are disadvantaged by its inevitable failure to achieve neutrality, for example by granting them poly-ethnic rights. An argument for pluralism.

But if the ethnic core thesis reflects the functionalist claim that the nation can mobilise its citizens only via myths of common descent, then even in principle the civic ideal of mobilising citizens on a non-ethnic basis is incoherent. Why? Because the civic ideal represents two contradictory principles: on one hand, mobilising citizens on a non-ethnic basis requires the transcendence of ethnicity; on the other hand, mobilising citizens at all requires the (re)production of ethnicity. The very commitment to mobilise, to forge an identity, undercuts the sort of identity the civic ideal was committed to mobilize in the first place. This would imply that an attempt by the civic-territorial nation to ‘transcend’ its ethnic core is an incoherent, self-defeating project that must be abandoned – for fear of undermining social integration. As we shall see, this is the conclusion that Dominique Schnapper draws – a conclusion she puts to service in a critique of Habermas’s advocacy of a post-ethnic, postnational mode of social integration.

Thus the distinction between the masquerade and the functionalist arguments is crucial, since only the latter motivates the homogeneity imperative. Just citing the fact of ethnic particularity does not serve to buttress the ethnic nationalist thesis about the prerequisite of social integration.
argues against the homogenisation position precisely because he subscribes to the ethnic core thesis, except that he does so without appeal to the functionalist argument.9) The question is, then, how best to interpret the empirical evidence that all nations in fact do have aspects of ethnic particularity.

The parallel question must also be asked with respect to culture. The cultural nationalist thesis, and its rejection of the possibility of postnational modes of social integration, depend on interpreting the fact of cultural particularity in terms of the functionalist, as opposed to the masquerade, argument. We can see this by comparing the specifically cultural nationalist thesis to the more general nationalist thesis, on one hand, and to the contrasting postnational thesis, on the other. The nationalist thesis’s reference to shared nationality is a reference to a collective identity whose members’ unity is grounded in some (imagined) shared non-political quality that non-nationals lack.10 Nationalism, even ‘civic nationalism’, involves allegiance to a nation: while the nation may coincide with state institutions, the focus of loyalty is the people conceived as internally cohesive and separate from state structures. Patriotism, on the other hand, refers explicitly to allegiance to a state, which only appears synonymous with national loyalty when the nation and the state happen to coincide. (Keitner 1999: 347)

The nationalist thesis contrasts with the postnational thesis, according to which the motivation/integration problems can be solved politically by direct appeal to the loyalty of citizens to their state institutions, independent of any special non-political quality that distinguishes them from others. Nationalist integration involves citizens having a special ‘sense of belonging together’, while postnational modes of integration require only a ‘sense of belonging to a polity’.11 Thus, on Habermas’s doctrine of constitutional patriotism (1998; cf. Ingram 1996; Markell 2000), if citizens come to see the liberal democratic institutions of their polity as embodying rationally defensible principles, social integration can be effected by securing allegiance to the set of political institutions as such, without reference to a non-political basis of unified national identity.

The functionalist interpretation is indispensable to the cultural nationalist in two ways: it motivates (a) the critique of the postnational thesis and (b) the move from the nationalist to the specifically cultural nationalist thesis. (a) The functionalist interpretation is indispensable to the critique of the postnational thesis because only on this interpretation do the polity’s cultural particularities stem from the indispensability, to social integration, of a shared cultural-national identity. The masquerade argument is, by contrast, wholly compatible with the postnational thesis: according to the masquerade argument, the fact of ethno-cultural particularity says nothing about the requirements of social integration.

(b) The second point becomes clear if we grant the nationalist thesis but interpret the cultural core thesis in terms of the masquerade argument. On this
interpretation, the national identity needed, by hypothesis, for social integration is indeed in practice inevitably shot through with cultural particularity. But what is needed to solve the motivation/integration problems is not the cultural particularity itself. What is needed is the nation: the nation always happens to be culturally particular, but its cultural particularity is not what makes the nation indispensable. What is indispensable is the solidarity grounded in some non-political quality distinguishing nationals from foreigners. The normative implication is that (even granting the nationalist thesis) we can safely permit attempts to overcome and compensate for this cultural particularity, without undermining social integration. Thus even granting the nationalist thesis, on this masquerade interpretation we do not end up with the cultural nationalist thesis that a common national culture is required for social integration. Deriving the cultural nationalist thesis requires the added premise that national identity can be secured only to the extent that co-nationals share a common culture, i.e., that it is the common culture itself that causally explains national identity and solidarity – that the ‘non-political’ quality must be a common culture.\(^\text{12}\) This is the interpretation of the cultural core thesis that the functionalist argument provides.

### 3. Naturalising the nation

To evaluate the plausibility of the functionalist argument, on which the cultural nationalist thesis depends, we should start with the following question: why should the postnational appeal to the principles embodied in political institutions be insufficient for social integration, and a shared culture indispensable? One way that nationalist critics of postnationalism often answer is by saying that motivating citizens and effecting integration requires ‘concrete’ objects of affect. So, for example, Habermas’s notion of constitutional patriotism is said to be incapable of motivating solidarity and integration because it appeals only to ‘abstract’ principles.\(^\text{13}\) The tacit premise of the nationalist critique is, of course, that the nation is ‘concrete’ in the relevant, motivationally efficacious sense. As Schnapper puts it, ‘The intellectual adherence to abstract principles ... cannot replace ... the political and affective mobilization to which the interiorization of the national tradition gives rise’. The nation has a concreteness that cannot be done away with: ‘The nation is a concrete social and political form’ (1994: 79–80).

Of course it is perfectly obvious to everyone that the nation is not concrete in the literal sense that its existence or nature is open to inspection by the physical senses. The modern nation is an imagined community à la Anderson (1991) – its very existence can only be envisioned by an act of creative imagination that leaps beyond the bounds of the observable. Whether ‘abstract’ means an ‘idea’ of the human mind, ‘socially constructed’, or ‘beyond the face-to-face’, the nation is decidedly abstract, no less than ‘humanity’ or ‘principles’.\(^\text{14}\) Nor can the nation be, for the nationalist,
‘concrete’ in the sense of taken-for-granted: after all, for nationalists the nation is a political project to be realised or defended.\textsuperscript{15}

My thesis is that attempts to theorise the nation as ‘concrete’, motivationally efficacious, and so indispensable to liberal democracy invariably require a theoretical reification of the nation that (a) propels a collapse of nationalism into ethnic nationalism, (b) is theoretically implausible, and (c) exposes an incoherence in the cultural nationalist thesis. The insurmountable problem is to construe the nation as ‘concrete’ in a sense that distinguishes it from postnational sources of allegiance, on one hand, and ethnicity, on the other.

It is hardly surprising that attempts to specify what is ‘concrete’ about the nation have led theorists to turn to ethnicity. When Schnapper’s critical gaze is directed towards postnationalists, she helps herself to the ‘concreteness’ of the nation, calling it ‘a concrete social and political form’. But when she turns her attention directly to the nation, it turns out that the nation is not in itself ‘concrete’ after all. Echoing Smith, she suggests that the nation has ‘concrete’ motivating force only in so far as it is ethnic:

\begin{quote}
pour donner corps à la communauté abstraite qu’est la nation et assurer la mobilisation collective, il devait aussi soutenir l’élan national par des appels à une ethnicité.
\end{quote}

(Schnapper 1994: 136, emphasis mine; cf. 104)

[to give corporate existence to the abstract community that is the nation and to assure collective mobilisation, it had to sustain the national élan by appeal to ethnicity.]

In so far as the nation is civic, i.e. defined in terms of citizenship, it is an ‘abstract’ form: ‘every political community is by nature abstract’ (1994: 104). Only in so far as the nation is ethnic – Schnapper (1994: 80–1) reiterates Smith’s ethnic core thesis – does it have a concrete affective content. For Schnapper, as for Smith, what provides the cultural nation with its motivational power is its ethnic core. Thus Habermas’s constitutional patriotism fails because it attempts fully to transcend ethnicity (1994: 181–2); and this, according to the functionalist interpretation of the ethnic core thesis, is incoherent.

The normative problem is that if ethnicity is the concrete content providing even the civic-territorial nation with its motivating power, then nationalists like Schnapper can solve the motivation/integration problems only by courting a xenophobic politics. If social integration requires shared ethnicity, then the wrong kind of ethnicity represents a threat to national integration. This is clear in the racist overtones of much ethnic nationalist ideology, but it is also true for non-ethnic nationalists for whom the ethnic core thesis is true because of the functionalist argument, according to which the nation must even in principle appeal to ethnicity to mobilise its citizens. None of this can sit well with the contemporary liberal nationalist theorists. Forestalling the collapse into ethnic nationalism is, after all, the whole point behind their emphasis on culture as opposed to ethnicity.

But to say that ethnicity is burdened with normative problems is obviously not to say that the functionalist interpretation is, at the level of social theory,
descriptively implausible. That ethnicity is empirically required for social integration may be deplorable, but it may nonetheless be true. In fact, however, both the ethnic and the cultural nationalist theses are theoretically implausible: they depend on reproducing at the level of social theory the naturalisation and reification of ethnicity and nationality that routinely occur at the level of social practice. The empirically observable motivational power of ethnic or national identity may indeed depend on its reification by social actors themselves: such identities are powerful sources of mobilisation perhaps because social actors take their naturalness for granted. But the plausibility of the thesis that only the nation (or ethnicity) can have the requisite motivating power depends on reproducing this reification at the theoretical level. Contemporary nationalist theorists do not follow old-style ethnic nationalists in construing the nation and ethnicity as primordially existing natural kinds; what they do instead is reproduce the ethnic nationalist strategy of naturalising the nation. This does not mean that they simply assign causal efficacy to national identity, which in and of itself is unproblematic; ‘reification’ here rather means failing to explain the contingent sociopolitical bases of that causal efficacy, which explanation would demonstrate that other, non-national social formations could, under different circumstances, enjoy the same causal efficacy as the nation. For one of the tasks of social theory is to explain social processes of reification; to do so, theory must first recognise reified objects as reified social constructions. Thus by problematising the importation into social theory of the reified categories of social practice, I hope to call into question both versions of the nationalist thesis – or, what amounts to the same thing, to call into question the functionalist argument as a plausible basis for the ethnic and cultural core theses.

Take the following example from Michael Walzer. In 1992, soon after the collapse of the Eastern bloc, he wrote:

The tribes have returned, and the drama of their return is greatest where their repression was most severe. It is now apparent that the popular energies mobilized against totalitarian rule, and also the more passive stubbornness that eroded the Stalinist regimes from within, were fueled in good part by ‘tribal’ loyalties and passions. How these were sustained and reproduced over time is a tale that waits to be told … I imagine tens of thousands of old men and women whispering to their grandchildren, singing folk songs and lullabies, repeating ancient stories … bring the ‘people’ into political life and they will arrive, marching in tribal ranks and orders, carrying with them their languages, historic memories, customs, beliefs. (1992: 164, emphasis mine)

Much is going on rhetorically in this passage. First, although tribal passions are not exactly thought to be given by nature – they must be reproduced – they are clearly imagined as prepolitical. That is in part why, later in the same article, Walzer (1992: 171, emphasis mine) says that ‘Tribalism … is a permanent feature of human social life … It can’t be overcome; it has to be accommodated [i.e. politically]’. Tribes must be accommodated politically almost as if they were brute facts of nature. Second, if these passions, produced prior to politics, are not accommodated by the political structure,
they are necessarily repressed. The Freudian language, with roots in Nietzsche, is perhaps not self-consciously intentional, but it is revealing. If the tribal passions are repressed, they will somehow – inevitably – find an outlet for expression, discharged in this case by toppling the ‘Stalinist regimes’. But whatever the merits of psychoanalytic explanations for individual behaviour, the implicit assumption here that a group possesses a mind is slightly problematic. Third, along with imagining the tribal passions as ‘sustained and reproduced’ prepolitically, all vestiges of coercive power in the production of identity drop out of sight, in favour of a romantic tale of lullabies and folk songs, which express the authentic (prepolitical) being of the people.

Or consider Miller’s disagreement with Michael Ignatieff about events in Yugoslavia:

Ignatieff tends to blame the political élites for fomenting nationalism, but this overlooks the fact that, if the identities of the various communities had not already been national as well as ethnic, it would not have been possible to put the issue of political boundaries so quickly and centrally on the agenda. (Miller 1995: 158, note 5, emphasis mine)

Here ethnonational identity appears as a stable, persisting substrate which is the explanans, not the explanandum, of political phenomena.

The most extreme articulation of this realism of the group comes from Schnapper, who even resorts to the language of nature she elsewhere manages to avoid:

The sentiment of ethnic ‘belonging’ and the passions it elicits are the direct expression of the natural attachment which men carry for the soil and for the immediate collectivity, familial or ethnic, in which they have grown up. (Schnapper 1994: 155, emphasis mine)

Walzer and Miller, of course, are aware that ethnic passions are not brute facts of nature. Indeed, in more careful moments, so is Schnapper (1994: 99). But Schnapper’s reference to a natural attachment to the soil here is particularly instructive, because one of the ways in which, as a matter of social practice, the nation is invariably naturalised is via the trope of ‘grounding’ it in territory, thus ostensibly providing a prepolitical ground in which to root the polity. The problem arises when this social process smuggles its way into social theory without being theorised.

As Brubaker (1996: 13–14) notes, despite the fact that ‘in the last decade or so … developments in social theory have combined to undermine the treatment of groups as real, substantial entities’, many continue to understand nations ‘as real entities, as communities, as substantial, enduring collectivities … Nations are conceived as collective individuals, capable of coherent, purposeful collective action.’

The problem with this substantialist treatment of nations as real entities is that it adopts the categories of practice as categories of analysis. It takes a conception inherent in the practice of nationalism and the workings of the modern state and
state-system – namely the realist, reifying conception of nations as real communities – and makes this conception central to the theory of nationalism. (1996:15 emphasis in original)

So Walzer misses the mark when he says that that his argument ‘is not compromised … by the postmodern discovery that communities are social constructions’ because ‘Constructed communities are the only communities there are; they can’t be less real or less authentic than some other sort’ (Walzer 1992: 165). Brubaker is not proposing that a non-realist conception of the nation implies that nations do not exist; rather, it involves a reconceptualisation of how they are theorised:

we should focus on nation as a category of practice, nationhood as an institutionalized cultural and political form, and nationness as a contingent event or happening, and refrain from using the analytically dubious notion of ‘nations’ as substantial, enduring collectivities. (Brubaker 1996: 21)

Brubaker draws the following lesson from his theoretical argument in the post-Soviet case:

To see these [post-Soviet nationalisms] as the struggles of nations, of real, solidary groups who somehow survived despite Soviet attempts to crush them – to suggest that nations and nationalism flourish today despite the Soviet regime’s ruthlessly antinational policies – is to get things exactly backwards. Nationhood and nationalism flourish today largely because of the regime’s policies. Although antinationalist, those policies were anything but antinational. Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the Soviet regime pervasively institutionalized it. (1996: 17, emphasis in original)

According to Brubaker, the Soviet regime institutionalised nationhood by dividing the state into more than fifty ethnonational territories and by classifying citizens into over one hundred ethnic nationalities (1996: 17–18). Rather than simply folksongs and lullabies, a fairly impressive coercive apparatus seems to have helped produce what the new nationalists frequently theorise as prepolitical identities. Nor is the political production of ethnonational identity confined to Eastern Europe (e.g. Harrell 1995). Nor do we need to agree with Brubaker’s strong emphasis on state practices and institutions, or the particular details of his account of post-Soviet nationalisms, to appreciate the theoretical point about the difference between reificatory practices/institutions and reificatory social theory.

To all this it might be objected that cultural nationalists cannot reify the nation because their position logically commits them to recognising the constructedness of the nation: after all, cultural nationalist theorists who support state-sponsored nation-building projects must logically assume that the cultural nation is a contingent social construction. And of course this is half right: cultural nationalists logically cannot reify the nation. The fact that, as I have demonstrated, they do reify the nation – the fact that the nationalist thesis requires them to do so – exposes an incoherence in cultural nationalist theory. On one hand, cultural nationalists are committed to recognising that the nation is an imagined, socially constructed phenomenon. This recognition, however, undermines the attempt to explain to postnationalists why only the
nation and not say, legitimate political institutions can motivate social action. On the other hand, the cultural nationalist thesis requires defending precisely this claim: that the nation is a ‘concrete’ phenomenon whose motivational power other (e.g. postnational) social formations lack. To do so, the cultural nationalist theorist is forced to adopt the reified conception of the nation permeating social practice, i.e. to treat the nation as if it were a prepolitical thing of nature. Hence the collapse into ethnicity: since cultural nationalists must logically deny the naturalness of the nation, they turn to ethnicity as the nation’s ostensibly ‘natural’ supplement, in order to explain the nation’s supposedly unique ‘concrete’ motivating power.

This is a fundamental error: if ethnic and national identities are anything, they are not ‘concrete’ in any sense that distinguishes them from other social formations. Claims to ‘concreteness’ here simply speak of the reification of collective identities at the level of social theory. To adopt a realist ontology of groups, as prepolitical things that politics must take as given, is to fail to notice the contingent sociopolitical processes that produce them. Of course the fact that ethnicity and nationality are reified in social practice means that they may very well become important causes of other sociopolitical phenomena as well. But we are dealing with a feedback loop: the causal efficacy of identity is filtered via, and contingent upon the nature of, the sociopolitical phenomena that at once reify and are affected by the identities in question. A functionalist argument that imputes unique motivational power to ethnic or cultural nationality fails to theorise this reification upon which the power of the nation is contingent.

4. Conclusion

I have tacitly assumed throughout this paper that the cultural nationalist thesis commits liberal nationalists to the view that the boundaries of the liberal democratic state ought to coincide with that of the cultural nation. This is indeed what cultural nationalists have traditionally believed. Their support for state-sponsored nation-building projects, designed to foster a shared national culture, is a result of this belief. But the commitment to ‘one nation, one state’ often leaves democratic liberal nationalists in a quandary: what happens if nation-building projects are resisted by precisely those citizens subject to them? On one hand, cultural nationalists believe that cultural-nation-building is instrumentally indispensable to liberal democracy; on the other hand, a policy of cultural-nationalist social integration here would intrinsically violate the liberal democratic norm of legitimation via consent. Matters are aggravated when citizens resist such policies precisely because they see themselves as belonging to a minority nation within the state, and thus do not identify with the cultural nation promoted by the state. Liberal nationalists are then faced with two competing (majority and minority) nationalisms (Kymlicka and Straehle 2001), and two unattractive options: either suppress the minority nation or split the political community...
via secession. The first option violates liberal democratic norms; the second option is often impossible (because, for example, the national groups are territorially intermingled, or their memberships are too small to produce viable states). The result is this: when not all citizens share a single national culture, as is often the case, the traditional ‘one state, one nation’ view threatens to pull the liberal nationalist synthesis apart.

No surprise, then, that some liberal nationalists have recently sought to attenuate their commitment to this traditional nationalist doctrine. Kymlicka, for example, has argued that the cultural nationalist thesis only implies that cultural-national boundaries ought to coincide with ‘political units’, but not necessarily sovereign states; indeed, he has made receptivity to multination states a defining feature of liberal nationalism (2001: 234, 40–1; cf. Tamir 1993). He argues that, when a minority nation is territorially concentrated, federalist arrangements can create sub-state political units aligned with putative national boundaries. Thus the locus for collective democratic politics becomes the sub-state unit, and the functionalist requirement for nationalist integration is (presumably) met at that level.

But this strategy works liberal nationalists into a bind. First, having granted the cultural nationalist thesis, they are at a loss to explain how the functionalist requirements of liberal democracy could be met at the federal level. Their assumption, after all, is that ‘nationhood still functions as the basis for ... the solidarity and trust needed to sustain ... democratic rule’ (Kymlicka 2001: 238–9). Since this common nationality is precisely what the multination state lacks, its status becomes rather problematic on democratic grounds. The real site of democratic participation and legitimacy must shift downward, away from the federal political unit. In other words, multination federalism becomes, on this theory, a curtailment – and not an institutional expression – of democratic practice. Federalism and democracy become competing principles of legitimacy. Given the commitment to democracy, the result is that, as Kymlicka puts it, the very success of multination federalism sews the seeds of its own break-up (2001: 113–16).

Second, liberal nationalists are unable to provide reasons compatible with the cultural nationalist thesis for why this break-up should not happen. The liberal nationalist attempt to abandon the ‘one nation, one state’ view is completely unstable. So we find Kymlicka (2001:117) appealing to the ‘intrinsic’ cultural and spiritual ‘value of belonging to a country which contains national diversity’, which is to say that no reasons compatible with the cultural nationalist thesis are to be found within liberal nationalist theory itself. Again, in so far as liberal nationalists must portray federalism as a curtailment of democracy, the principles of multination federalism compete, rather than cohere, with democratic liberal nationalism.

Postnationalists, by contrast, are able coherently to provide a straightforward liberal democratic defence of the legitimacy of multinational political arrangements. The viability and desirability of multination federalist arrangements lie in their capacity maximally to meet the diverse demands
of citizens. These demands are often cultural demands, and sometimes they come from nationalist citizens. It is often perfectly legitimate to meet these (e.g. nationalist) demands within a liberal democratic framework (e.g. through federalist arrangements); but the theorist should not reify nationalists’ demands as if they represented objective systemic-functional requirements of liberal democracy. What is distinctive about postnationalist theories of social integration is that they pick up on the fact (which the cultural nationalist thesis denies) that different citizens may affectively identify with their common political institutions for very different reasons (Mason 2000): some because these political institutions give expression to a culture or nation they see as theirs, yes; but others because the state gave refuge to their fleeing parents; others because they believe those institutions embody legitimate, rationally defensible principles; still others simply because the state has enabled their material prosperity; and so on. The bases of liberal democratic social integration need not be the same for each citizen; it is not the case, as the nationalist thesis urges, that the bases of integration must be uniformly nationalist. This recognition of the diverse sources of liberal democratic integration allows postnationalist theorists to provide what liberal nationalists cannot: a coherent, democratically motivated theory of multinational democracy.

Such a theory could only be successful, of course, if the postnational thesis were true. I have tried here to remove one important source of doubt. The postnational thesis that social integration can bypass ethnicity and nationality by the cultivation of direct allegiance to legitimate political institutions has sometimes been challenged by pointing to the inevitable ethno-cultural particularities of all political institutions. I have argued that the inevitability of ethno-cultural particularity challenges postnationalism only if this particularity is inevitable because it is necessary to social integration, as the functionalist argument supposes. In point of fact, I have suggested, the functionalist argument depends on a theoretically implausible reification of ethnicity and nationality – one that propels a collapse of nationalism into ethnic nationalism to boot. If postnational projects of social integration are unviable, it is not due to the fact that their attempts to bypass ethno-cultural particularity will always fall short in practice. The question, then, is not whether but under what particular empirical conditions (institutional, cultural, economic, etc.) postnational democratic social integration is viable. Exploring this question further may help us understand why sometimes ethno-cultural heterogeneity undermines liberal democracy, and what might promote the viability of multiethnic, multinational and/or postnational democratic arrangements in places like South Africa, India, Canada, Spain or the EU.

Notes

1 Kedourie (1993), long a standard work, is representative in this regard.
2 For a sympathetic survey, see Moore 2001; for a critique, see Abizadeh 2002.
3 For a critique, see Balakrishnan 1996.
4 For a nationalist critique, see Bonin 1997.
5 For a survey, see Mulhall and Swift 1999.
6 He begins by speaking of ‘societal cultures’, and then concludes that political institutions inevitably recognise ‘particular ethnic and national groups’ (Kymlicka 1995: 111, 115, emphasis added).
7 Smith (1988: 11) makes this explicit. For a searching critique, see Zubaida 1989.
8 This is not the only possible normative conclusion: another is that minority groups should be gradually assimilated by the majority. For a critique of Kymlicka that appeals to this possibility, see Mason 2000: 120–6.
9 So it is rather odd that Kymlicka (2001) has recently appealed to the functionalist argument vis-à-vis societal culture.
10 By ‘non-political’ I mean a quality not constituted by state institutions. Note that this non-political basis for solidarity can be caused by the operation of political institutions; the point is that regardless of its causes, citizens can cite a reason for solidarity among themselves that is not mediated by their allegiance to political institutions.
11 The first obtains where people ‘believe that there is some special reason why they should associate together, such as that which might be provided by the belief that they have a common history or distinctive culture’. The second obtains if and only if a person ‘identifies with most of [the polity’s] major institutions and some of its central practices, and feels at home in them’ (Mason 2000: 127–9).
12 For a critique, see Abizadeh (2002). This is why Virolı’s (1995) position is not cultural nationalist: he thinks that the non-political basis for solidarity can lie in shared history. My account does impute the nationalis thesis to him because he bases social integration on a non-political solidarity as I have defined it. As Keitner (1999: 348) argues, Virolı tends to ‘conflate (civic) nationalism and state patriotism, trying to harness the pre-political bonds of solidarity characteristic of nations while associating these with the institutions of the state.’
13 This language is not restricted to cultural nationalists. See Virolı (1995: 175, emphasis mine): the ‘political values of democratic citizenship that citizens share are not universalistic constructions of impersonal reason, but are or are perceived and lived as cultural values. They are not attached to an abstract liberty or an abstract justice, but to a way of life informed by those principles.’
14 Schnapper (1994: 104) herself cites Anderson and notes that many have accused the nation of being abstract ‘dans la mesure justement où elle est construite par la volonté des hommes, où elle ne se mesure ni ne se perçoit directement’ [precisely to the extent that it is constructed by the will of men and can be neither directly measured nor perceived].
15 Cf. Mussolini (1956: 457): ‘Noi abbiamo creato il nostro mito. Il mito è una fede, è una passione. Non è necessario che sia una realtà. È una realtà nel fatto … che è fede, che è coraggio. Il nostro mito è la Nazione, il nostro mito è la grandezza della Nazione! E a questo mito, a questa grandezza, che noi vogliamo tradurre in una realtà completa, noi subordiniamo tutto il resto’ [We have created our myth. The myth is a faith, a passion. It is not necessary that it be a reality. It is a reality by the fact … that it is faith, that it is courage. Our myth is the nation, our myth is the grandeur of the Nation! And to this myth, to this grandeur, which we want to translate into a complete reality, we subordinate all the rest].
16 Nietzsche: the establishment of ‘the state’ represses our animal instincts, above all ‘Dieser gewaltsam latent gemachte Instinkt der Freiheit, … dieser zurückgedrängte, zurückgetretene, ins Innere eingekerkerte und zuletzt nur an sich selbst noch sich entledende und auslassende Instinkt der Freiheit’ [this instinct of freedom forcibly made latent … driven back, suppressed, imprisoned within and finally only discharged and released upon itself] (1980: 325, II, §17; cf. II.22).
17 There is a more obvious problem with this strategy as well: it does not avoid the practical problems facing the ‘one state, one nation’ view. The same factors that may make secession impossible – territorial intermingling, or too many nations for each to acquire a viable political unit – might make sub-state national political units impossible as well.
18 Kymlicka, for example, simply expresses ‘surprise’ at the ‘resilience of multination federations’, which he is forced to leave unexplained (2001: 116). This problem, of explaining integration
and solidarity in the absence of a common national identity, has visibly haunted Kymlicka’s most recent work since endorsing the cultural nationalist thesis.

19 As Kymlicka (2001: 314) puts it: ‘minority nationalism promotes democracy at the level of the self-governing nation, but renders democratic co-operation more difficult at the federal level’.

References