

**The Sovereignty of Persons**  
**Better Borders for a Bigger World**  
By  
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In a 1939 edition of *The Atlantic*, a French immigrant wrote an article entitled, “What Makes an American?” In it, the author says, “It may... be that in one or two hundred years historians will study this manifestation as one of the most extraordinary examples of mass neuroses that the world has known. Nationalism as we know it may pass, but for the moment it is more powerful than any other idea or even than any religion.”<sup>1</sup> The lexical definition, however, does not refer to *nationalism* as a neurosis more powerful than religion. Merriam-Webster defines it foremost as, “loyalty and devotion to a nation; especially: a sense of national consciousness,” but provides us with only a vague definition of what a *nation* itself is. The word can refer to a large area with its own government, or to the people in that area, or just to a people with no homeland or government at all, but are believed to share something else in common, perhaps a common history, religion, language, and culture.

What makes an American? Legally it means being born in the United States, or born to parents who are U.S. citizens, or becoming a *naturalized* citizen by passing a test. Yet, for many, legal citizenship and being treated as an equal among other Americans can be two different things. Just this week I heard of an African American man, an older fellow, who fears driving and gets a pit in his stomach whenever he sees a police car. He has good reason to be afraid, but, as a white man in our nation, my emotional response to being pulled over by a cop is mere annoyance. That’s a big difference, and our racialized criminal justice system is just one example of how being born in this nation is no guarantee all Americans receive equal treatment.

Also this week, the Godfather of the United States, the delusional Don, said transgender citizens are no longer allowed to serve in the military, ostensibly because it costs too much to pay for their reassignment surgeries. Such costs, however, are reportedly only a fraction of what the military already spends on Viagra. Many of our legislators also seem to have a problem providing women with birth control and other vital health services. So, there’s obviously more to being an American than just being born here, or being naturalized. Unofficially, being considered a true part of the American culture also means being the right color, gender, sexuality, and, increasingly, having the right religion, economic status, and political views.

There’s much that can be said of such inequality and disparity, but the point I want to make here is that the meaning of *nation*, and what it means to belong to a nation, even if it is “more powerful than any other idea,” remains ill-defined. Although it’s usually thought of as a place with clear borders, it soon becomes clear that in practice it has as much, if not more, to do with what those accepted as part of the nation have in common. Just being in it or from it, isn’t enough. To paraphrase historian and political theorist, Miroslav Hroch, national identity

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1939/03/what-makes-an-american/309021/>

is based on a relationship with a large social group that has an established social order, including elite and working classes; equal rights for all considered citizens; culture founded on a common language; and a shared awareness of a common history and common destiny that sets them apart from others.<sup>2</sup> In the continuing process of modernization, the nation struggles to reform itself by appealing to these same characteristics, by expanding equal rights and allowing more diversity. In other words, social reformation usually involves starting a national movement seeking what are already supposed to be national values, like equality for all citizens.

Here in the United States such movements aren't usually about creating new rights, but forcing the government to recognize rights already guaranteed in our national Constitution, as was most recently the case when the Supreme Court recognized that denying same-sex marriage is a violation of overarching laws that have existed since the founding of this nation. So even when we struggle to make the world more just, we often do so within the context of a nationalistic paradigm. We protest our own government, the very entity that partly defines us as a nation, in order to reform our nation. We join the counterculture to transform the very culture that defines us as a nation, or else join the resistance to prevent changes we believe threaten our established national values and interests. In short, even reformers often think and act nationalistically.

So how did we come to this? How did a species that started off identifying only with a small number of closely related kin in small nomadic bands come to feel related to millions of unknown people it considers part of its own nation? In his classic work on the subject, *The Idea of Nationalism*, philosopher Hans Kohn suggests nationalism grew of the natural human tendencies to "love [our] birthplace or the place of [our] childhood sojourn, its surroundings, its climate, the contours of hills and valleys, of rivers and trees,"<sup>3</sup> as well as our own language, customs, and native foods, and, at the same time, to feel threatened by things unfamiliar, alien, and foreign to us. Kohn says, "this feeling of strangeness" can cause us to develop, "sentiments of superiority, and sometimes even open hostility. The more primitive [humans] are, the stronger will be their distrust of strangers, and therefore the greater the intensity of their group feeling."<sup>4</sup>

It's not pleasing to think this paradigm, which today has become fundamental to how most people on Earth think of themselves, and how we think of most people, comes from wanting to do things our way and our fear of new ways. Is that what a nation is? A group bound together by fear and rigidity? Raoul de Rousey de Sales, the French immigrant I mentioned earlier, who came here in 1932 looking for a new home, then tried to figure out what it means to be an American, wrote, "In the seven years I have lived here," no question "...has interested me and puzzled me more."<sup>5</sup> So, after much consideration, he concluded, "there is a very important trait in the make-up of the American nationality which does not exist, I believe, in

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<sup>2</sup> Hall, John A., ed., *The State of the Nation: Ernest Geller and the Theory of Nationalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1998, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Kohn, Hans, *The Idea of Nationalism*, The Macmillan Company, New York, NY 1967 (1944) p. 4f.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *The Atlantic*, *ibid.*

any other. And that is the fact that America is a permanent protest against the rest of the world..."<sup>6</sup> This insight makes sense not only in terms of history, but may explain a lot about what's happening in our nation today.

Historians consider the Age of Nationalism a modern phenomenon that only began with the French Revolution in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Certainly, there were Empire builders long before this, but, on the heels of the Enlightenment, Nationalism, a devotion to one's country, emerged, replacing loyalty to religion or monarchy, to become the perfect vehicle for pursuing the now romanticized idea of cultural expression and self-determination. Most the nations in the world today emerged between the French Revolution and the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often in opposition to other nations. Again, as de Sales, wrote, "A Frenchman once said that nationalism is a certain number of illusions shared by a group of men and women concerning their origin, combined with a common hatred for any other group of men and women sharing another set of illusions."<sup>7</sup> The fact compounds the problem that each nation believes itself better than all the others. As Kohn puts it, "each nation has developed its own interpretation of history which not only makes it feel itself different from all other nationalities but give to this difference a fundamental, and even metaphysical, meaning. The nationality feels that it has been chosen for some special mission, and that the realization of this mission is essential to the march of history, and even to the salvation of mankind."<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, Kohn believes nationalism is rooted in much older and nobler principles, originating among the ancient Greeks and Jews. It was the Jews, he says, who were the first people to demonstrate a historical consciousness, meaning they felt unified by what they experienced together in the past and by their common hopes for the future. It was this historical consciousness that later evolved into a national consciousness, into the Jews seeing themselves as a nation of people—not because they shared one land, because their kingdom was divided and most often occupied; not because they had all descended from one patriarch, Abraham, because they were comprised of peoples from all over the region; and not because they belonged to one tribe, because they were from many tribes. They did not view themselves as being *in* a nation, but *of* a nation, bound together in a covenant which, Kohn says, "was not concluded between God and the kings and leaders of the people, but between God and the whole people, every member in complete equality."<sup>9</sup>

Eventually, however, some wanted to "be like all the nations," and established monarchy, leading to systems of inequality, of powerful and oppressed, rich and poor, nobles and servants. The prophets then arose as counterculture, calling upon the Jewish nation to become something more by returning to its original belief in equality, and, in so doing, according to Kohn, discovering something universal about us all, "the concept of humanity,"<sup>10</sup> the notion that every person has value and should be treated with kindness and respect. Being Jewish was no longer, for them, even about restoring the covenantal

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kohn, *ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 17

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

relationship among Jews, but establishing it among all people. “Aren’t you the same to me as the children of Ethiopia, oh children of Israel,’ the Lord says. ‘Haven’t I freed you from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?’”<sup>11</sup> Here the prophet Amos reminds Israel that God’s love is universal, extending to all humanity, and thinking only of the welfare of one’s own nation is small minded. Similarly, it’s written in Isaiah, “Blessed be Egypt, My people, and Assyria, the work of my hands, and Israel, My inheritance...”<sup>12</sup> I will make you a light of the nations, that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”<sup>13</sup> Notice this new vision of the prophetic counterculture was to expand the concept of the Nation from one chosen people with a centralized government, to the people of the entire world, to all nations, including their historic enemies, the Egyptians and Assyrians.

Something similar happened to the Greeks, who didn’t begin expressing a national identity until around 600 BCE, when they were at war with Persia and began drawing a distinction between themselves and the Barbarians. “Here again,” Kohn says, “the opposition of something outside the group seemed first to have aroused the realization of its own cohesion.”<sup>14</sup> It would be more than a century, he says, before, “The Sophists broke through the narrowmindedness of Hellenistic nationalism and proclaimed the equality of men by nature.”<sup>15</sup> The Greeks, who believed in equality, so long as was reserved for other Greeks, didn’t care much for the idea foreigners were their equals, including its philosophical triumvirate, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, all of whom considered such inequality part of the natural order.

Nevertheless, while Alexander the Great, Aristotle’s most famous student, was out conquering the world for Hellenes, the name of his Greek nation, something changed for him and he became guided by what Kohn calls, “a new idea of humanity which made not only the Panhellenic basis of his campaign but also the whole traditional Greek concept of nationalism a thing of the past.”<sup>16</sup> Despite Aristotle’s instruction that he should be leader of the Greeks and master of everyone else, Alexander turned to the philosophy of Zeno, who said, “all the inhabitants of this world of ours should not live differentiated by their respective rules of justice into separate cities and communities but that we should consider all [people] to be of one community and one order common to all.”<sup>17</sup> Like the Jews before him, Alexander’s idea of nationalism had become universal in scope, a vision of one world with one humanity.

To date, this supranational vision has not been achieved, and it often seems we remain far from establishing a sense of global humanity with freedom, and justice, and equality for all. Today, nationality, which Kohn says, “is but a fragment of humanity” still “tends to set itself up as the whole.”<sup>18</sup> Today we remain in a struggle between what he calls, “faith in the oneness

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<sup>11</sup> Amos 9:7

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 19:25

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 49:6

<sup>14</sup> Kohn, *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

of humanity and the ultimate value of the individual,” and, “fascism, the uncompromising enemy of Western civilization... in which humanity and the individual disappear and nothing remains by the nationality, which has become the one and the whole.”<sup>19</sup> Hans Kohn, a Jewish-American historian, was born in Prague in 1891, became a POW in a Russian prison for five years during World War I, and published, *The Idea of Nationalism* in 1944, at the height of World War II. Yet even after all he’d experienced, he still believed in the possibility that someday the Age of Nationalism will end and be replaced by the universalism envisioned by people like the Hebrew prophets, philosophers like Zeno, and leaders like Alexander. For this to happen, he said, “The individual liberty of [humankind] has to be organized... on a supranational basis.”<sup>20</sup>

But if it hasn’t happened 2500 years after the Hebrew prophets and Alexander the Great first imagined such a possibility, what makes anyone think it can or will ever happen? Not only do I believe it will happen, even after the illegitimate election of an authoritarian despot like Trump, who’s by-hook-or-by-crook theft of the White House through years of gerrymandering, of disenfranchising Democrats by means of a racist criminal justice system, the purging of hundreds of thousands of democratic voters from the rolls, racist voter ID laws, and apparent collusion with the Russians to interfere with the election, I believe the Age of the Individual is inevitably upon us. The election of a xenophobe by a minority of the electorate may itself serve to prove how pressing that ancient fear of others, of strangers and their strange ways, is for many in our nation, and why, out of desperation, they are drawn to an authoritarian leader who promises to put America first.

This, I believe, is a reaction against changes already upon us. Today, unlike any other time in human history, the entire world has become interconnected through technology. There is no longer a world to conquer or lands to be discovered. We went to the moon and discovered the whole hoop of the world, then came back and spun a world wide web around it that connects us all. As philosopher Peter Singer points out in his book, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, today we are one world with one atmosphere, one economy, one law, and one community. “Until recently such thoughts have been the dreams of idealists,” he says, “devoid of practical impact on the hard realities of a world of nation-states. But now we are beginning to live in a global community.”<sup>21</sup>

As historian Yuval Harari explains, twelve thousand years ago there were many thousands of different human communities living on Earth, few of which knew of each other. Two thousand years ago the number of these “dwarf worlds,” as he calls them, had shrunk to a few hundred. Five hundred years ago, he says, “90 percent of humans lived in a single megaworld,” which included not thousands, not hundreds, but only four distinct societies, the Mesoamerican, the Andean, the Australian, and the Oceanic worlds. And, “Today,” he says, “almost all humans share the same geopolitical system... the same economic system... the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Singer, Peter, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Yale University Press, U.S. 2004, p. 196.

same legal system; and the same scientific system...”<sup>22</sup> So we have already become one community living on Earth. “From such a vantage point,” Harari says, “it becomes crystal clear that history is moving relentlessly towards unity.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite our new reality, however, nationalism remains the dominant paradigm, though it's no longer adequate for considering what we have become, one world. Those who do grasp it are the environmentalists worried about global warming, and transnational corporations that have figured out how to evade regulations by not belonging to any country. We're increasingly taking small steps to move us in the right direction, beginning with the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, after World War II gave us an inkling of just how small our planet really is. Given the superpowers involved control most its decisions, however, the UN isn't yet a potent force for global democracy. We also have the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the International Criminal Court, along with international agreements like NAFTA, the KYOTO Protocol, and the Paris Climate Agreement, and important NGOs like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Oxfam International, all of which are a start, but reflect the same imbalance of power as the mostly impotent UN does. Nor do we yet have an international system in place for regulating out-of-control transnational corporations.

This is so, I believe, because the inadequate nationalistic paradigm we're still stuck in doesn't allow us to take the next giant leap for humankind, the leap from national sovereignty to human sovereignty, in which every person is considered a citizen of the world and has equal rights upon it, including where they choose to travel and live, and by having a voice and vote in any decisions that impact their lives. The next giant leap means freedom, and democracy, and security, and plenty for every person, not just those within the imaginary borders of our own culture-states, often at the expense of everyone else. The next giant leap means transcending the “fragment of humanity” nationalistic devotion considers the “whole,” to “faith in the oneness of humanity and the ultimate value of the individual.” The next giant leap means overcoming our fear of others by realizing there are no others. It means shifting our loyalties from the countries we identify with, to the principles of freedom, and democracy, and equality, we identify with. It means an end to the brief Age of Nationalism, and the emergence of an Age of Global Community in which all people live according to these principles. It means identifying not with our nation, but with our species. The next giant leap for humankind means transcending race, gender, sexuality, religion, countries, ideas, economics, culture, language, or anything else that keeps us apart. The next giant leap for humankind means becoming one people, one world.

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<sup>22</sup> Harari, Yuval Noah, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2015, (Kindle version), loc., 2607.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 2562.