The Relationship Between the Nationalism of One Nation and the Rationalism of Liberalism

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The issue that I would like to raise in this article concerns the relationship between the epistemologies of the nationalism of One Nation and the rationalist tendencies of its liberal critics. I will maintain that the epistemologies of nationalism and liberalism are like the difference between different paradigms, so much so that to critique nationalism in the rationalist language of liberalism is to critique it in terms to which it is, for the most part, indifferent. Rather than being sensitive to the language of nationalism, to the meaning of the notions of ‘truth’, ‘rationality’, ‘myth’ and ‘emotion’ in the context of nationalism, rationalist analyses of nationalism tend to demonstrate a reductive imposition of their own assumptions about the nature of reality onto the everyday lived experience, of nationalism. This point is acknowledged by leading liberal rationalists such as Yael Tamir who, in the context of a critique of nationalism, maintains that liberals need to ‘rethink their beliefs and policies and seek to adapt them to the world in which they live’. Liberal rationalists have tended not to take into account nationalism’s own notion of the relationship between everyday experience, the language it uses to describe its experience and the assumptions of reality, which underlie its context. It is for this reason that, I shall maintain, rationalists are continually perplexed by the emergence of nationalism.

It must be noted that it is not my aim to ‘support’ nationalism (indeed a similar antipathy exists towards the language of liberalism from the side of nationalism) but to maintain that if we are to successfully engage with the phenomenon of nationalism, we must at the very least understand that the epistemology through which its adherents experience the world is qualitatively different from the epistemology through which it is critiqued. In turn this suggests that in the presence of nationalism we cannot take fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality, reason, truth, myth and emotion for granted but need to engage in a dialogue about fundamentals and not simply assume that we can critique the fundamental beliefs of nationalism while taking our own fundamental beliefs in reason for granted. Indeed the desire to reduce nationalism to our own epistemology amounts to an act of thought colonisation.

Nationalism and Rationalism

The first dimension upon which I would like to highlight the difference between a liberal rationalist and a nationalist epistemology is in terms of the notion of truth that operates in the respective discourses. Whereas rationalists tend to operate in terms of a notion of disengaged, analytical and objective truth, nationalists tend to operate in terms of a notion of truth as lived experience, as authenticity or sincerity. Whereas from a rationalist perspective truth is embodied in a series of abstract statements, from the nationalist perspective truth is revealed through one’s existential commitments. For the nationalist it is important to be ‘true’ to the fatherland or...
motherland — otherwise one is a traitor or a deserter. Whereas from the rationalist perspective truth is measured in terms of the abstract criterion of universal reason, from the perspective of nationalism it is in the risks and sacrifices that one is prepared to make in the name of one’s fundamental beliefs that the truth of one’s being is demonstrated. The way in which the notion of truth as authenticity functions in nationalism is evidenced in the following statements of a One Nation sympathiser. Contrasting Pauline Hanson with professional politicians he says: ‘We’ll have to hope Hanson does not get trained into the “doublespeak” of the professional politician. What we see now is what we get. She does not have a cultured rhetoric but we know what she means … She’s straight, up-front, and honest’.  

It is important to bear in mind that I am not claiming that Hanson is authentic but that the criterion of truth upon which many of her supporters relate to her is truth as authenticity. Some people may believe that she is quite inauthentic and insincere. The point is that the criterion in terms of which she as a nationalist is seen as being truthful or ‘false’ (that is, not genuine) is not an analytical concept of truth but an existential notion of truth, truth as ‘walking one’s talk’. It is in terms of this latter notion of truth that so many of the electorate feels that the integrity of professional politicians is open to question. Reflecting this view, the above Hanson sympathiser comments: ‘The fact is we don’t relate to gobbledygook, we don’t believe prime ministerial promises, we don’t believe there is objectivity in the media’. This statement reflects a questioning of the existential authenticity of professional politicians. This is indicated by the Hanson supporter’s use of the term ‘doublespeak’ to describe professional politicians, a term which suggests that speaking and doing may be and often are radically divorced from each other.

Appeals to objective truth are no guarantee of existential authenticity. For any one familiar with social or critical theory it is well known that facts or statistics are always interpreted within a horizon of interests which structure the intelligibility through which the statistics are read. The notion of ‘doublespeak’ suggests that professional politicians, guided by rational calculative mindsets, are able to hide the interests or the agendas that are at stake in the ‘facts’ that they reveal. Professional politicians may have all the ‘objective’ truths in the form of statistical facts at their disposal, they may have all of the latest research evidence at their fingertips, but this does not prevent their authenticity in the form of ‘doublespeak’ from being called into question. In contrast Pauline Hanson whose factual inaccuracies have been paraded and parodied by the media — her inaccurate figures regarding Asian immigrants, for example — is seen by her supporters as sincere and true to her basic beliefs. She is seen by her supporters as not only representing but articulating their voice: ‘The more her opponents play the man … the more support this women will get because she’s straight, up-front, honest and reflects the genuine concerns a lot of genuine Australians have about a lot of genuine problems in this deteriorating society’.

Whether Hanson is or is not authentic is not my concern. The point that I am driving towards is that she is reintroducing into political discourse the dimension of authenticity. This is one of the dimensions upon which she is perceived as being appealing and this is a dimension that professional politicians operating in a rationalist society have been ‘legitimately’ able to suppress because truth as authenticity is not an objectivist notion of truth and therefore has no place in a public discourse governed by the rules of disengaged rationality.
I do not mean to suggest that we should ignore objectivist truth in the context of the nationalism of One Nation. What we need to understand is the role that statistical and other ‘objective’ facts play in the logic through which nationalist beliefs are formed. Statistical observations and rational argument do not form the basis for fundamental convictions but serve merely as justifications of an already established set of convictions. By the time One Nation proponents start quoting statistics their convictions about migrants are already in place. To counter their justifications is not to counter their convictions. Countering of their justification will not on its own lead to self-questioning but more than likely to reformulation of their justifications, perhaps looking to other areas to support their convictions.

A different mode of reasoning is necessary to counter ideological convictions, one that is responsive to the experience of threat that underlies the dynamics of identity formation. Ideological convictions are not formed on the basis of objective reason or fact but emerge out of the way in which citizens experience their lived conditions. It is as a way of responding to the contingencies of their day-to-day anxieties and uncertainties that the fundamental beliefs of citizens are formed. ‘They started putting the signs up in shops in bloody Chinese or whatever it is. How would I know? I can’t speak Mandarin?’ shouts one supporter of One Nation. His commitments are formed on the basis of an experienced helplessness. He feels that he can no longer get around his familiar world. This fills him with fear and fear is the source of very powerful commitments. No amount of correction of statistical data or analytically detached reasoning is going to destabilise the convictions born out of fear. The root of ideological beliefs does not lie in abstract rules of logic but in moods of uncertainty and threat to identity. Similarly, pointing out the strategic advantages of migrants for the good of the Australian economy as a whole — a position adopted by both liberal and labor politicians — is not going to speak convincingly to the anxiety of this and other One Nation supporters. For their beliefs and prejudices are not formed or maintained on the basis of perceived national economic advantage but in terms of day-to-day existential fears.

Of course we could as ‘good rational’ citizens point out that the above supporter of One Nation is ‘irrational’, that he is grossly generalising and that his fear is unfounded. But even this is not going to stop him or hundreds of other people grounding their convictions in their experience of fear. A mistake made by many opponents of nationalism is to think that by making the irrationalism of national sentiments visible and clear we thereby wipe it away. On the contrary, it is rationalism that here reveals its limitations. For rationalism does not know how to operate on the margins of reason in the sphere of dark and opaque fears. Making the same kind of point in the context of rationalist critiques of nationalism, David Miller has said that: ‘Philosophers, especially, will have great difficulty in coming to grips with the (logic) of national attachments. ... Philosophers are committed to forms of reasoning, to concepts and arguments, that are universal in form’ whereas nationalism is situated in a context of particularistic and embedded reason, a context which, according to Miller, is seen by rational philosophers as irrational.5

It is in this vibrant existential space outside of the confines of universalist forms of reasoning that nationalism festers and thrives. Indeed the more rational — the more disengaged — rationalists become, the more nationalism can thrive. For to challenge it on detached rational grounds is not to challenge it in terms that it respects. We witnessed an example of this on television recently where Hanson’s advisor,
David Oldfield, dismissed the reasoning of a history professor as academic and detached from the day-to-day lives of Australian citizens. Here David Oldfield in particular and One Nation in general are not even challenged by what rationalists believe to be a challenge to their position. They take it as axiomatic that detached reason is not finely tuned to the contingencies of everyday life. Making this point in terms of a rationalist feminism Angelika Bammer has said: ‘One of the most painful lessons that feminists have learnt from the struggle for reproductive rights is that we cannot cede the language of emotion (longing, pain and fear) to those on the political Right while we try to make do with an abstract language of civil rights’.6

Furthermore, it is dangerous to reject the fears underpinning One Nation’s development as irrational. They are fears that form part of any ‘multicultural’ or ‘melting pot’ society. The meeting of strangers, a part of the fear of migrants, always bring elements of stranger fear and anxiety — and excitement — with them. Sociological and psychological literature is full of references to the threat played by the strangeness of the other in anticipating the destabilising of my own identity. Indeed, Zigmund Bauman has claimed that nationalism arises as a response to an anxiety experienced in the face of the stranger. David Allen in a book called Fear of Strangers has shown how the exclusivity of ethnic identities is formed in terms of what he calls ‘stranger-fear’.7

We cannot assume that the norm in the meeting of strangers is simply feelings of good will or, as rationalists may have it, an emotionally neutral or indifferent state of mind. For the otherness of the others’ way of life puts my way of life in question. In the experience of the other, a decentering of my worldview and power is experienced. This is very often a frightening experience. This point is most vividly made by Bauman who maintains that in the meeting of the stranger: ‘Our unconscious customs and habits have been shown to us in a distorted mirror of sorts. We have been forced to look at them ... to stand at a critical distance from our own lives’.8 In principle, the stranger could be the most well disposed of people and yet still be seen as threatening: ‘Even if we could be certain that the presence of strangers hides no threat of aggression ... we are aware of being constantly gazed at, watched, scrutinised, evaluated; the “privacy” of our persons has been pierced, infiltrated, violated. ... As long as we stay within the field of their vision, we have to be on guard’.9

Modern history is full of stories of people who advocate liberal tolerance and respect for others in principle but when it comes to reflecting on their limitations and biases in the face of the experience of the other, they become dogmatic and defensive. This point is elaborated by bell hooks whose concern is to highlight the difference between disengaged or decontextualised beliefs in racial tolerance and the anxieties that emerge in the contingencies of practice: ‘Many folks found that as they tried to respect “cultural diversity” they had to confront the limitations of their training and knowledge, as well as a possible loss of authority. ... All of a sudden, professors who had taken issues of multiculturalism and cultural diversity seriously were backtracking expressing doubt’.10

What needs to be addressed is the extent to which proponents of multiculturalism have nurtured citizens to respond in proactive ways to the fears engendered in the meeting with strangers. Simply demanding that our children show respect and tolerance for the cultures of others does not in itself teach them how to respond to the fear very often experienced in the meeting with the other. In fact it does prepare
them for the experience of threat in the face of the other, thereby not providing
them with the terms through which to expect or understand this experience of
being threatened. An ideal of a multicultural society which does not nurture citizens
to deal with the fear experienced in the face of the other is an empty ideal. In order
to deal justly with the fears that so often find security in nationalist-type sentiments,
we need a mode of reasoning and a pedagogy that is attuned to the logos of the
anxiety of otherness. Otherwise this becomes a terrain for the likes of Pauline
Hanson and fellow nationalists who are not ashamed to appeal to the uncertainties
of people in their everyday world. An abstract and scientific rationalism is not very
good at appreciating the fears and uncertainties that form a vital part of a
'multicultural' ethos. For, as already suggested, rationalism legitimises itself by the
ways in which it detaches itself from the concerns of everyday life — something
that ordinary citizens do not do. They are always interpellated by a style of reasoning
that is attuned to their every reality.

Challenging Emotion

To challenge nationalism we need a mode of reasoning that is capable of operating
in dark and opaque spaces, that acknowledges the power of fear and develops
proactive ways of responding to it. It must be a form of reasoning which does not
reject the everyday in the name of epistemological clarity and coherence but one
which appreciates the relationship between everyday anxieties and the process
through which beliefs are formed and maintained. The nationalist reasons, responds
and commits himself not in abstraction but in the context of the tensions and demands
of everyday living. As Argyrus and Schon have pointed out, reasoning in abstraction
and reasoning in the context of everyday living follow different logics: 'the technology
of rigorous research works best when it does not deal with real-time issues — for
example, when scholars take years to study a decision that took several hours to
make. This technology of rigorous research is based on diagnostic techniques that
ignore or cannot cope with properties of effective action under real-time conditions'.
But it is under what Argyrus and Schon call 'real-time conditions' that nationalism
operates. Its writings and reflections are not the product of detached rigorous
research but of the experienced need to cope with the demands of everyday existence.
These 'real-time' conditions do not include only the need to make a living, but the
entire spectrum of contingencies faced by the human being, including death and
illness. Nationalism, as many others have noted, is responsive to a different notion
of existence from that which underlies liberal rationalism and marxism. For example
Gary Gerstle maintains that rather than being responsive to a liberal criterion of
rationality or a marxist vision of economics as the basis of 'truth', nationalism is
rooted in an attunement to finitude. Reinforcing his argument, with reference to
Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, he maintains: 'Nationalism addresses
the question of death. Membership in a nation offers citizens the possibility of
transcending their own finitude'.

In the face of the anxiety of finitude, it is of no use to preach the gospel of
economic determinism or epistemological rationalism: ‘People may find in their
“nation” answers to, or at least solace regarding, their own misfortunes. And this
suffering arises not so much from economic deprivation as from our vulnerability to
disease, injury, deformity, and ageing. Apostles of the Enlightenment — marxists
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and liberals alike — have been reluctant to address ... the inescapable, terrifying fact of mortality. That these concerns are not included within the framework of marxist and liberal concepts of truth, meaning and significance is of no consequence to nationalism. On the contrary, it is liberalism and marxism that need to re-evaluate themselves in the light of the concern with finitude: ‘The need to transcend human finitude will certainly outlive the current stage of capitalism. And radicals and liberals must begin to appreciate this abiding need if they want to regain their moral authority in the world’.14

This suggests that to fault nationalism on economistic and epistemological grounds is to fault it on grounds in terms of which it does not evaluate itself; it is in terms of the logic of habitus that we must respond to the nationalist. Calhoun makes this point in another way by maintaining that the logic of nationalism is rooted not in epistemological needs for accuracy but in the existential need for habitus.15 It is the anxiety of homelessness, the threat that underlies lack of identity that defines the horizon in which nationalism makes sense. Only when being is already experienced as meaningful can we be concerned with epistemological truth but when the issue is one of the anxiety of meaninglessness, the issue of epistemological truth takes a back seat.16 The same point is made in a different way by Anthony Smith who maintains that the nationalist’s commitment to his history is not based on detached empirical and, we may add, rational analysis but is rooted in the ‘yearnings for an ideal community’.17 Reinforcing this point, Anderson maintains that nationalism is a response to issues revolving around the anxieties of the contingency of human existence.18

Much of the perplexity in rationalist critiques of nationalism can be accounted for in terms of the tendency of rationalists to take their own assumptions for granted in the face of nationalism. This point is made by many commentators including Gertrude Himmelfaub who says: ‘Liberals find it difficult to credit the fact, and the force, of nationalism because it violates some of their most cherished assumptions: that people are rational individuals with universal interests and aspirations; that nations are nothing more than an aggregate of individuals; and that nationalism is irrational, parochial, and retrograde’.19 This point is reiterated in the following observation from Berlin: ‘As for the nationalists ... they were written off as irrationalisms — and with Nietzscheans, Sorelians, neo-romantics, out of account’.20 Reinforcing this perspective Ross Poole has said: ‘Too easily nationalism has been assumed to be a form of unreason, a pathology which is not worthy of and is perhaps unavailable to the techniques of philosophy’.21

What critics who reject nationalism in these ways take for granted is the belief that their own criteria of reason, rationality and pathology have been commonly accepted as the terms which to analyse nationalism. Critics of nationalism seem to assume that nationalists share their rationalist assumptions sufficiently to be able to take them for granted in their analyses of nationalism. This taken for grantedness has given rise to what Berlin sees as a ‘curious failure of vision on the part of otherwise acute social thinkers’.22 Berlin maintains that the problem with liberal readings of nationalism is that they are insensitive to the everyday realities out of which nationalism emerged: ‘It seems to me that those who, however perceptive in other respects, ignored the explosive power generated by the combination of unhealed mental wounds, however caused, with the image of the nation as a society of the living, the dead and those yet unborn ... displayed insufficient grasp of social reality’.23
This same critique of disengaged approaches to nationalism can be made in terms of the function myth plays in rational and nationalist discourses. Nationalism has often been criticised as myth and calls have been made for its de-mythologisation. This, for example, is the position of Hobsbawm who characterises nationalist writings as ‘exercises in programmatic mythology’. But from the nationalist perspective myth is not something to be ashamed of. It is the basis of meaning and commitment. It is only in terms of a disengaged rationalist perspective that myth is something to be avoided. In fact there are many psychotherapists who are calling for a remythologisation of the being of the human. This is the view, for example, of Rollo May who, speaking about scientific and industrial being in the twentieth century says: ‘Our myths no longer serve their function of making sense of existence, the citizens of our day are left without direction or purpose in life, and people are at a loss to control their anxiety and excessive guilt feeling. People then flock to psychotherapists or their substitutes, or drugs or cults, to get help in holding themselves together’.

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

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

In general the problem with liberal rationalist and marxist critiques of nationalism is that they fail to situate the beliefs of the nationalist in the context of its life world or what Heidegger calls ‘average everydayness’. From an Heideggerian perspective, beliefs are not decontextualised entities but are embedded in and developed against the background of an average everyday horizon of intelligibility that is not itself explicit. This background gives the set of beliefs its particular meaning and sense. To appreciate these beliefs we need to appreciate the background of this life world. Therefore, against a rationality which would treat the nationalist’s beliefs as independently existing sets of propositions to be criticised in their own right, we must maintain that these beliefs have meaning and sense against the background of an average everyday life world. And against a marxism which either avoids the life world or reduces it to the material conditions of existence, we shall maintain that the life world is more than the material conditions of existence, that it includes finitude and thus contingency and that materiality is but one aspect of finitude. We cannot assume that the only meaning that contingent phenomena have is a material meaning.

To appreciate views in the context of their life world does not mean surrendering the voice of critical or reflexive reason, for we can focus on the relationship between the life world of the nationalist and the explicit beliefs of the nationalist. But this
is the theme for another article. In general the problem with liberal rationalist and marxist critiques of nationalism is that they fail to situate the beliefs of the nationalist in the context of its ‘average everydayness’. From an Heideggerian perspective, beliefs are not decontextualised entities but are embedded in and developed against the background of an average everyday horizon of intelligibility that is not itself explicit. This background gives the set of beliefs its particular meaning and sense. To appreciate these beliefs we need to appreciate the background of this life world.

**Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been firstly, to suggest that we need to raise fundamental epistemological questions in terms of which both nationalists and liberal rationalists experience the world if we are to get a constructive dialogue between the two going. Secondly, it has been to maintain that we need to find ways of responding to the fears and uncertainties which underpin nationalism in a more effective way. To do this we need to find a way of reasoning that does not constitute itself by refusing the contingencies of the everyday but is responsive to the everyday without, however, losing itself within the everyday. In order to counteract *One Nation* we need to understand the anxieties of the lived realities that make *One Nation* seem attractive. It is not by refusing to confront these anxieties that we defuse them, but by listening to them that we may find more creative and reflective ways of responding to them. There has been much written on the role of power and interest in the forging of political allegiances. We need also to confront the pivotal role played by insecurity and uncertainty in forming political identities. It was Nietzsche who pointed out the relationship between power and fear.

**Endnotes**

3 ibid.
4 ibid.
9 ibid., p 66.
12 G Gerstle, ‘Capture the flag’, *Tikkun*, vol 6, no 2, 1991, p 78.
13 ibid.
14 ibid.
16 This point is made by Bruce Wilshire who says that ‘only meaningful beliefs and assertions have a chance to be true’. B Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University*, New York, 1990, p 99. This indicates that the issue of sense precedes that of epistemological truth. My argument is that nationalism must be seen in the context of the logic of sense and not that of epistemological truth.
21 ibid., p 340.
22 ibid., p 341.
23 ibid., p 352.
26 ibid., p 25.