BENIGN NATIONALISM?
THE LIMITS OF THE CIVIC IDEAL

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The idea of a 'benign nationalism' is an emergent theme within contemporary social theory. It goes under the name of 'civic nationalism', or 'national identity', or 'constitutional patriotism', or even 'post-nationalism'. It presents itself to the world as enlightened, tolerant, reflexive, inclusive and rights-based. It prides itself on a realism which recognises the heterogeneity of nation-state – the mixed and hybrid populations they contain – as well as their necessity. It maintains, in the words of Michael Ignatieff, that a nation should be composed of 'all those – regardless of race, colour, creed, gender, language or ethnicity – who subscribe to the nation's political creed.' It visualises 'a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values.' It celebrates plurality and difference within the framework of the nation as a whole.

This new nationalism repudiates conventional nationalisms based on ethnic homogeneity, racial purity, blood, destiny or language, and indeed sees itself as providing the only reliable antidote to ethnic nationalism. Its core belief is, again to quote Michael Ignatieff, that 'the only guarantee that ethnic groups will
live side by side in peace is shared loyalty to a state, strong enough, fair enough, equitable enough to command their obedience. From this perspective, what is wrong with the world is not nationalism itself, for every people hunger for a home, but rather the wrong kind of nationalism. The new nationalism accordingly reformulates the key struggle of the age as one between those who believe that a nation should have a home to all, and that race, colour, religion and creed should be no bar to belonging, and those who want their nation to be home only to their own.

The new nationalism is opposed to the legacy of Marxism and the doctrine of internationalism. The link it sees between Marxism and the rise of ethnicity may be captured through an image drawn by the late Sir Isaiah Berlin. When he used the metaphor of a bent twig forced down so severely that, when it is released, it lashes back with fury. The basic argument is that when national sentiment is suppressed, as it is by Marxism and other forms of internationalism, a backlash comes with the irrespressible force that has been witnessed in some former outposts of the Russian empire. Internationalism and cosmopolitanism appear as the signs under which the plurality of national cultures is denied and a homogeneous image of global order is imposed in its place. In central Asia there was a modification of this pattern when reaction to the collapse of the Soviet empire involved appeals to previously suppressed Islamic transnationalisms.

Anti-ethnic and anti-Marxist, the new civic nationalism has caught the imagination of many intellectuals from many different countries and traditions. Its response to the collapse of communism on the one side and rise of ethnic nationalism and religious fundamentalism on the other affirms the interest of every citizen in respecting the authority of civic states in exchange for the state’s respect for the rights of its citizens. In this sense, it has made patriotism once again an acceptable term within the liberal-left intelligentsia after many years of neglect, scepticism or downright hostility.

The new nationalism is a contemporary doctrine situated within our own age, but it wears the clothes of a former age, especially of the eighteenth century. It appeals to Montesquieu, Kant, Adam Smith and Herder who, it seems, knew something about how to combine civic patriotism with cosmopolitanism, national pride with respect for other nations, and national belonging with individual rights and freedoms. Enlightenment, romanticism and empiricism provide the styles of dress in which the new nationalism enters the public arena – as well as the possibility of family rows between rival national traditions. For French enlightenment thinkers Montesquieu is the hero and
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Herder the villain. Within Anglo-Saxon empiricism, civic nationalism appears as a peculiarly British invention – based on shared attachment to the crown, parliament and the rule of law – which was successfully exported to other Western countries, except Germany, where a concept of nationhood defined in terms of the people’s ethnic characteristics began its ‘long and troubling career in European thought’. For German romanticists, Herder is the hero (often contrasted with Fichte) and the so-called enlightened ‘universalists’ are the villain. Small rivalries over which nation provides the ideal model for civic nationalism – France, Germany or Britain – do not obscure the common thread running through them: a return to a moment before the idea of an enlightened, tolerant, pluralistic and rights-respecting nation was corrupted by ethnicity on one side and internationalism on the other.

The Opposition Between the Civic and the Ethnic

Against the postulate of the new nationalism, that there is a fundamental opposition between civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation, I want to suggest that there is not only slippage from one to the other, but also displacement of the deficiencies of one onto the other. The watertight divide which civic nationalism sometimes attempts to construct between itself and ethnic nationalism turns out to be rather leaky.

From the point of view of civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism appears irrational, even pathological, as if the relation between them were one of light against darkness, reason against madness, tolerance against bigotry, freedom against authoritarianism, etc. Julia Kristeva, for example, analyses the rise of ethnic nationalism in psychoanalytic mode as the work of wounded souls who move from defensive hatred to persecuting hatred, making others the scapegoat of their own depression and suppressed conflicts. Michael Ignatieff ascribes the re-emergence of ethnic nationalism to a long-term crisis of national pride. But there is more to what is called ‘ethnic nationalism’ than this.

Hannah Arendt said in regard to her wartime commitment to Zionism something that we can all understand: that ‘if one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew’. Is this ‘ethnic nationalism’? The same can be said about the nationalism of other oppressed peoples: Africans, Catalans, Armenians, Indians, Irish, etc. The ‘we’ that resists is here the ‘us’ that has been abused. What is called ‘ethnic nationalism’ may be a battle cry in the face of injustice, and may offer its members a sense of humanity in an otherwise inhuman world. As Arendt put it,
'people cling to their nationality all the more desperately when they have lost the rights and protection that such nationality once gave them'.

The danger arising from this 'ethnic' response to exclusion is that it will mirror the inhumanity, violence and racism of those who excluded them. In Central Europe demand for national self-determination has led twice in this century both to bitter national rivalries and to the growth within political communities of internal divisions between 'state peoples', 'minorities' and 'stateless peoples' – the latter having no government to represent them, and thereby losing the very right to have rights. On the other hand, however, if the category of 'ethnic nationalism' is defined broadly as that which is not 'civic', and becomes a term of abuse given by civic nationalists to all those who are responding in kind to earlier indignities, then the sense of resistance which can give meaning to ethnic nationalism has no visible presence and can become a repository for the guilt and implication of others. At least 'ethnic nationalism' faces up to the negativity of the existing world.

The basic difference between 'ethnic' and 'civic' forms of nationalism is that in the latter case it is the state which defines the nation, while in the former it is the nation which defines the state. The latter may provide a recipe for ethnic exclusivity but this distinction can also point to the radicalism of 'ethnic nationalism' and conservatism of 'civic nationalism' in relation to existing states. It is not surprising that people who are deprived of rights by existing states become convinced that their freedom can only be attained with the establishment of their own government. The modern parish – refugees and displaced persons who have no state – become the visible evidence that belonging to a nation which does have its own state is the condition of possessing those rights which enlightenment purports to grant to every individual by virtue of his or her humanity.

From the perspective of civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism is a madness which can only be explained psychologically; but from the perspective of ethnic nationalism, civic nationalism may appear as an oppressive doctrine of privilege which forgets its own origins. It forgets that in most European countries we have experienced slippages of 'civic' into 'ethnic' nationalism – particularly in the age of imperialism, when ideas of nationhood became infused with concepts of racial, religious and linguistic purity. It forgets that the ethnic nationalism of oppressed peoples often only mimics the racialised nationalism of the colonial powers. It forgets the violence, internal and external, that goes into the formation and perpetuation of the 'civic' nation-state. And it forgets how much more violence infuses civic nationalism when it becomes a principle of unlimited, self-expanding power.
From the perspective of ethnic nationalism, civic nationalism too often appears as a conservative ideology which demands the loyalty of everyone to the existing order of nation-states, offers no solution to the stateless except to go 'home', and is only too ready to label those who reject this order as bigots.

Thus, in the dualism of 'civic' versus 'ethnic' nationalism, the latter appears to the former as backward, but the former appears to the latter as the bearer of a new 'orientalism'.13 To be sure, civic nationalists would wish to distinguish between their own ideals and the historical practices of the states which embody them, but can we simply go back to a civic idea of the nation as if the intervening history – including imperialism and its consequences – were merely an aberration to be rectified by talking, as Hannah Arendt put it, 'that which was good in the past and calling it our heritage, and by discarding that which was bad and thinking of it as a dead load which time will bury in oblivion'.14 The conclusion I would draw is not to sanitise our own history under the register of civic nationalism but open our eyes to the fact that 'we', the children of Enlightenment, are closer to 'them', the ethnic cleansers, than we would like to think. 'We' were implicated in what Arendt called 'the decline of the nation-state', when Western states became imperial powers, established structures and ideas of racial exclusion at home and abroad, and sometimes inconsistently supported a 'right of national self-determination' which was used to underwrite the rise of 'ethnic nationalism' elsewhere.15

I put this argument not to support any light-minded relativism, as if there is nothing to choose between civic and ethnic nationalisms, still less a generalised cynicism, but rather to provoke a more troubling conclusion than the doctrine of civic nationalism contemplates: one which challenges our 'own' innocence. My argument is that civic nationalism not only observes but also surrenders to the fact that membership of a nation-state is the precondition of the right to have rights, and that rightlessness is the fate of those who have no nation-state. Like ancient Greeks, its protagonists conclude that their particular interests are preserved in the interest of the polis and they become patriots for fear of the barbarism beyond the city gates. In the modern world, however, it seems to me that their attachment of rights to the polis is a dangerous principle – not only for the excluded, but for all whose rights become dependent on the state. What is given with one hand can be taken away with the other.

There is another conclusion possible: that nationalism in all its forms is a danger to human rights, and that the right to have rights must be guaranteed by humanity itself.16 I take my cue from this line of thought.
The difference between civic and ethnic nationalism means that they are both forms of nationalism. To understand their difference we need also to comprehend their identity. Nationalism is a modern political doctrine which emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Its basic principle is to uphold the national interest or national identity over all other interests and identities as the ultimate ground on which political judgement is based. The doctrine necessarily looks two ways: on the one side, it elevates the nation over the individual, declaring that, if necessary, it will sacrifice private interests and identities to the national good; on the other side it puts the interests of the nation before those of humanity as a whole or any larger international entity. First the nation, then your personal concerns; first the nation, then the interests of humanity – this is nationalism's order of priorities.

Can nationalism ever provide a good or valid criterion for action? We may fight for justice, or for equality, or for an end to poverty, or for freedom from colonial rule, or for human rights, or for an ecologically sound planet, but elevating the nation as such as a supreme value – and this is what making an 'ism' out of the nation does – surrenders our judgement to something which may be a force for freedom, democracy and culture one day but for terror, conquest and xenophobia the next. Nationalism is a fickle beast. In its best moods it liberates human beings from colonial oppression and unites people previously fragmented, but it also excludes those deemed not to belong and demands the active assent of its 'own' nationals. It attracts us through images of home, hearth, warmth and love, but it displaces emotions which belong to our personal lives onto political life, and thereby robs both of their value. As the former West German President, Gustav Heinemann, once said: 'I love my wife, not my country'.

Nationalism promises a touch of humanity in an inhuman world, but at the cost of what Hannah Arendt called a 'worldlessness', whereby humanity retreats behind the walls of the nation and clings to nationality as the foundation of its rights and security. Such humanity is clearly bought. It purports to put idealism before particular material interests, but its subordination of many voices to the one voice of the nation or to the singular will of the people lends itself to the prioritising of one interest over all others. It celebrates the plurality of nations over totallising conceptions of global reason, but without confronting the consequences of this form of pluralism. As Kant once put it,
cause which does not truly concern them, while he need not himself incur any danger whatsoever.\textsuperscript{8}

Nationalism is a fact of the modern world which cannot simply be willed away, but its claim to be either a natural or rational expression of political modernity serves only to invalidate other political arguments.

Ernest Gellner laid open the core nationalist myth that nations are a natural or rational way of classifying people.\textsuperscript{9} He argued that if nationalism is a political principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent, it is logically possible that it could be impartial, pacifist, sweetly reasonable, but it is unlikely – not least because there are more potential nations on earth than viable states which could satisfy their aspirations. I think that Gellner was right, but I cannot accept his conclusion that, while intellectuals comprehend that nationalism is mythic, the people need such myths and that nationalism is our modern fate. Nationalism has a more chequered history than this image allows: it rises and falls, it is always in conflict with other political views, its particular brand of mythic violence may be as troubling for the ‘people’ as it is for the ‘elite’. It can serve a noble cause, but this does not mean that in itself it can ever provide a valid criterion for action. I would rather resume the search, which is as old as nationalism itself, for more genuine universals and a less violent pluralism.

\textsc{Marxism and Internationalism}

The new nationalism rejects Marxist, liberal and other ‘internationalist’ critiques of nationalism on the grounds that they fail to understand the imperatives of national identity. They are said at best to ignore the need which individuals have for a sense of belonging, and at worst to suppress all manifestations of national belonging. In practice, however, at least in the post-war period, Marxism has been characterised not so much by ‘anti-nationalism’ as by, on the one hand, an extreme national chauvinism on behalf of the ‘mother country’ of communism, Russia, and on the other by an assimilation to certain kinds of ‘Third World’ nationalism; all this in the name, but only the name, of ‘internationalism’. Many anti-colonial nationalist movements have utilised justifications of a Marxist kind, and actually existing Marxism, even when it denounces particular anti-colonial nationalist movements and regimes, and yet have not given any less priority to national liberation struggles. Socialism was often seen through a basically nationalist lens; as Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson have both observed, though from different
viewpoints, the proclivity of post-war Marxism has been to 'swallow nationalist assumptions whole'.

The idea of two nationalisms, one basically good and the other bad, was originally a Marxist doctrine which made a certain sense at the time of its formulation - when the world was divided between colonisers and colonised - but increasingly turned into an arbitrary distinction closely related to Russian foreign policy interests. The 'nationalism of the oppressed' became that nationalism which allied itself to Russia in the Cold War. Internationalism got a very bad name when it became the disguise under which the Soviet government justified all manner of imperialist expansions of its own. Just as the name of 'cosmopolitanism' turned sour after the French revolution, when it was used to justify French imperial conquests, so too the name 'internationalism' turned sour after the Russian revolution when used to justify the subordination of all other national interests to those of Russia. In both cases, the idea of a 'universal nation' - a nation whose particular interests are identified with the universal interests of humanity as a whole - extinguishes all dreams of a genuinely cosmopolitan order. If 'Marxism' was a factor in the growth of ethnic nationalism, it was not in the manner of Isaiah Berlin's 'bent twig', but because the real content of official and often unofficial Marxism was thoroughly nationalist. This is perhaps one reason why 'cosmopolitanism' was employed as a term of abuse which Stalinists threw at Jewish and other dissenters.

ENLIGHTENMENT AND COSMOPOLITANISM

There was a current within Enlightenment thought that prioritised the interests of 'humanity' over those of the nation. In France Montesquieu put this position with famous eloquence when he wrote:

If I knew something useful to my homeland and detrimental to Europe and to Humanity, I would consider it a crime... All particular duties cease when they cannot be accomplished without offending human duties... The duty of a citizen is a crime when it leads one to forget the duty of man..."^49

In Germany, Kant looked to a time when war would eventually lead states to abandon their 'lawless state of savagery' and enter a federation of peoples in which every state, even the smallest, could expect to derive its security and rights 'not from its own power... but solely from this united power and the law-governed decisions of a united will'. Wars between nations, he believed, would eventually compel humanity to overcome narrow definitions
of national self-interest, introduce a ‘universal cosmopolitan existence’, and enforce cosmopolitan law upon nations.

What did Kant mean by this term ‘universal cosmopolitan existence’? A federation of free states whose aim was to secure peace by common agreement but which would not be equipped with the interests of a single global power. International laws which prevent one state from forcibly interfering in the constitution and government of another. Laws of ‘universal hospitality’ which grant strangers the right to be treated with civility when they arrive on someone else’s territory, and which prevent states from treating newly-acquired territories as ‘ownerless’ and their native inhabitants as ‘nothing’. Laws which prohibit what are now called ‘war crimes’, ‘crimes against peace’ and ‘crimes against humanity’. Most of all, universal cosmopolitan existence requires a recognition that the peoples of the earth have, as he put it, ‘entered in varying degrees into a universal community where a violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere’.

This is a less ‘totalising’ image of cosmopolitanism than any recipe for imposing singular, homogenising norms over a plurality of national cultures. Kant’s optimism that the spread of republicanism and commerce would make possible this ‘universal cosmopolitan existence’ was certainly misplaced, but his cosmopolitan convictions – in favour of overcoming national parochialism in all its forms – expressed the universal spirit of Enlightenment as much as any appeal to civic nationalism. This spirit was present in the early stages of the French Revolution, when the ‘sovereignty of the nation’ expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen indicated the struggle against absolutism and birth of popular sovereignty, rather than French nationalism. As Kristeva reminds us, for a brief period during the French Revolution there was a notable lack of nationalistic sentiment. Decrees were passed offering French citizenship to all foreigners who had resided in France for five years and had some means of subsistence; societies and newspapers for foreigners were encouraged; the use of force against other nations was disavowed; support was given to revolutionaries from other countries to rid themselves of their own absolutist rulers; and certain ‘benefactors of mankind’ – including Tom Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Wilberforce and even Jeremy Bentham – were awarded honorary French citizenship.

To be sure, this new dawn did not last. As revolutionary wars were launched in the name of the universal nation, so too xenophobia became an internal political force. Foreigners were held responsible for whatever went wrong: military defeats, economic problems, political crises. The clubs and newspapers of foreigners were disbanded. Even Tom Paine, ‘citizen of the world’, the man
who signed himself 'Humanus', was imprisoned and eventually expelled. When revolutionary terror was directed at those deemed to put their particular interests before the people, it was aimed especially at foreigners.

CIVIC NATIONALISM AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Civic nationalism stands for a liberal-democratic state based on popular sovereignty which inwards respects the rights of individuals and associations of civil society and outwards develops co-operative and friendly relations with other nations. Why, then, is it necessary to assert this kind of nationalist or patriotic attachment? Why assume that such an argument is needed, and that liberal democracy by itself is insufficient?

One answer is that the cold rationality of liberal contractarianism is not enough: we are emotional as well as rational beings, and the stirrings of the flag, the anthem, the military parade, the pomp and ceremony of the nation, are as important for solidarity as any utilitarian calculus. By itself, it seems, liberalism is too rational, too bloodless, too cold. Emotions are certainly a vital part of any analysis of nationalism, and more widely of politics in general, but what place should they have in our understanding of common membership in constituted polities? The 'emotional' is not the only thing we can talk about when trying to go beyond the rational — we are also symbolic, imaginative, poetic and metaphorical beings — but in any case it is a dangerous principle to place feeling and enthusiasm rather than reason at the heart of our political commitments.

The idea of civic nationalism points to the insufficiency of liberal democracy, and is invoked when rational self-interest and commitment to liberal values do not suffice. I would suggest, then, that the re-emergence of civic nationalism is not only a response to the fail of communism and rise of ethnic nationalism, but also to the pressures currently placed on liberal democracy both by disintegrative political forces and by social factors such as unemployment and poverty. The idea of civic nationalism offers in this context an emotive source of political cohesion and the hope that a 'strong but equitable' state will keep ethnic violence at bay. This is the source of its strength as an Idea. But it also engenders faith in the state rather than critical reflection, and a sidelong of social questions rather than a determination to tackle them. In the name of nation building, it may tell workers not to strike, activists not to mobilise, the disaffected not to riot and the unemployed to look harder for work. In matters of foreign policy it may speak the language of 'national interest' over all
wider concerns. To ethnic minorities it may demand allegiance to the existing nation-state as a precondition for acceptance. Finally, to resurgent conservative nationalism it offers a more enlightened alternative, but its instincst is to concede ground.

Civic nationalism appears benign to the extent that it acts as an antidote to the dangers of both ethnic nationalism and a so-called 'internationalism' that refuses all forms of nationalism except its own. It is not, however, the only antidote on offer, and among its side-effects I would include the following: it confronts 'ethnic nationalism' on the latter's own nationalistic ground: it utilizes the term 'ethnic nationalism' ideologically as its other: it downplays supra-national solidarities in favour of a certain kind of patriotism; it subsumes social reform to national unity; and it promotes faith in the state rather than a critical and reflective political culture. At bottom, civic and ethnic forms of nationalism are not so alien from one another as they at first sight appear: there is kinship between a politics based on patriotism and what Rorty has called the 'politics of difference', based on internal divisions within the nation. Not only does the bifurcation of nationalism into benign and malign enemy camps – whether on the basis of the old substantive distinction between the nationalism of the oppressors and the oppressed, or on the basis of the new formal distinctions between ethnic and civic nationalism – deny the equivocation which runs through nationalism itself, but its moral division of the world between 'them' and 'us' robs the world of all political profundity.

Excluded from this opposition are the speculative possibilities manifested especially in the breaks, warps and distortions of our political experience. In thinking about such possibilities – those which Walter Benjamin termed the 'immanent absolute' of our political experience – we should avoid the trap of now devaluing nationalism absolutely, as if it no longer has any normative or ethical content whatsoever. Such reactive inversion of nationalist sentiment does not take us much further in our understanding of what nationalism is. In addition, it tends to pathologise nationalism as the folly of others, and thus not to recognise it in oneself.

If one pitfall lies in the absolute devaluation of nationalism, another related pitfall may lie in the absolute overvaluation of cosmopolitanism. This is the beginning of another story, but we cannot assume that cosmopolitanism – however conceived – is free from the equivocations which unsettle nationalism. Cosmopolitanism is not a miraculous panacea and cannot be above the contradictions of our political world. It certainly attracts me (and many others) more than any nationalist creed – not least because it has been a name of abuse aimed at the homeless parish who is refused, or refuses, participation in national communities, and
also because 'homelessness' now increasingly appears as our contemporary fate. Yet the history of 'internationalism', that it was put into the service of a great power and used by it to crush little powers, should make us hesitate to put our faith in cosmopolitanism as its 'purer' predecessor and possible heir. The movement from 'internationalism' to 'cosmopolitanism' symbolises the need to escape from a sullied past, to turn 'universality' and 'humanity' from abstract ideas observed only in their violation into an actual presence, and to identify with the victims. But faith in the cosmopolis, no less than faith in the polis, conceals the violence of its own abstraction and raises its own equivocations. After all, it could be said that the contemporary peri-patetic corporate capitalist is one role model for cosmopolitanism, or that totalitarian regimes persecuted Jews because they saw in 'Jewish cosmopolitanism' a rival to their own supra-national ambitions. Cosmopolitanism has the great virtue of making us think about the limits of every form of nationalism, but what is needed is a less transcendent understanding of the possibilities immanent within modern political life. We could at least make it a rule of thumb for present-day politics that we cannot escape equivocation, contradiction, ambiguity, anxiety etc wherever we look – either through the discovery of a new concept or the rediscovery of an old.

NOTES ON CHAPTER 13


3 Ibid., p 185.
5 See, for example, Julia Kristeva, Nations without Nationalism (New York: Columbia University Press. 1993).
6 Ignatieff, Blood and Belonging, op. cit., p 4.
7 Berlin, 'Two concepts of nationalism', op. cit.
8 Kristeva, Nations without Nationalism, op. cit.
12 The imagery comes from Arendt, Totalitarianism, op. cit., Preface, p viii.
13 Arendt, Totalitarianism, op. cit., ch. 9.
14 Arendt, Totalitarianism, op. cit., ch. 9.
19 Kant, Political Writings, op. cit., p 47.
20 Kant, Political Writings, op. cit., pp 107-8.
24 I think that this is a problem which Jürgen Habermas gets himself into when he declares in the name of a post-metaphysical concept of the political that whatever value it had in the past in the pursuit of anti-colonial struggles and in the building of welfare states, ‘nationalism’, normatively speaking, ‘is now dead’, and in the same breath declares that ‘constitutional patriotism’ is alive and well. See Habermas, Between Facts and Norms (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), Appendices 1 and 2.
25 See, for example, the defence of cosmopolitanism in Martha Nussbaum’s contribution to M.C. Nussbaum and J. Cohen (eds), For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996). She argues that in the battles between civic and ethnic forms of nationalism, as they have been waged in the USA, ‘what we share as both rational and mutually dependent human beings was simply not on the agenda’. This is a crucial point to make, but it does not follow that we should therefore identify this sense of common humanity with the particular doctrine of cosmopolitanism.

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PEOPLE, NATION AND STATE

The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism

Edited by Edward Mortimer with Robert Fine