

A new book makes a biblical argument for a world composed of independent nation-states. But would there still be room for liberalism?

Yoram Hazony and the New Nationalism

Samuel Goldman

Nationalism is experiencing something of a revival. Unfashionable and even taboo for about a quarter century after the end of the Cold War, legal defenses of national sovereignty, expressions of national loyalty, and even assertions of particularistic national identities have become an inescapable feature of political discussion in the United States and Europe. Although most evident on the right, nationalist sentiments have also found a place on the left. The so-called Lexit—Left Brexit—faction supporting Britain’s escape from the European Union is just one example.

Yoram Hazony is perhaps the leading theorist of this new nationalism. President of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem and long a mainstay of the Jewish intellectual right, Hazony has found a broader audience in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, *American Affairs*, and other influential publications. In occasional writings and an important forthcoming book, Hazony contends that developments

including the election of Donald Trump, controversial governments in Hungary and Poland, and Brexit suggest the possibility of a return to sanity after the experiments with transnational governance that became increasingly prominent after the fall of communism. He is not wrong but underestimates the challenges that a revival of nationalism in the twenty-first century must overcome.

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Despite its growing salience, nationalism remains forbiddingly difficult to define. Standard reference works suggest a web of meanings involving loyalty to one's people and the place in which they live, desire for their independence and prosperity, and efforts to secure those goals by political, economic, or cultural means. Nationalism, in this sense, is not so different from patriotism, except in its linguistic root. Where "nationalism" evokes the familial circumstances of birth—in Latin, *natio*—"patriotism" emphasizes its location—the *patria* or fatherland.

Yet the matter is not so simple. Precisely because they are political, these concepts have polemical as well as descriptive connotations. Patriotism is usually understood as a worthy sentiment, informed by knowledge and compatible with high moral principle. Nationalism, by contrast, tends to be associated with ignorance, conflict, and violence. Hazony rejects this conventional distinction. Nationalism, he insists, is a positive virtue, not a vice—or even a necessary evil. At the risk of pedantry, it is worth observing that the Latin term *virtus* alludes to what is fitting for a *vir*, or man. In this vein, Hazony writes movingly of learning nationalism at his own father's knee. The virtue in question is a kind of piety, comparable to the reverence that Aeneas, the personification of all that was best in Rome, shows for his father, Anchises.

But nationalism is not a personal virtue only. On Hazony's account, an appreciation for nationalism is also a distinctive virtue of the conservative intellectual tradition. In addition to defending nationalism against its cultured despisers, Hazony aims to rescue conservatism from the universalizing ideology that he associates with another of those famously problematic concepts, liberalism.

One reason for the eclipse of nationalism in recent decades—at least among the political, economic, and cultural elites of North America and western Europe—is that

it has found few competent theorists. This weakness is not only the result of changing intellectual fashions but also arises in part from the concept itself. Because nationalism is grounded in loyalty to one's own people and place, its advocates tend to eschew general arguments. In other words, they make particularistic claims about the meaning and prospects of this or that specific nation.

Hazony tries to overcome this tendency by presenting a defense of nationalism as such. He defines nationalism as "a principled standpoint that regards the world as governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course, cultivating their own traditions, and pursuing their own interests without interference." Hazony contrasts this vision of world order both with empire, which aims to impose a single regime on as much of the globe as possible, and with anarchy, which he describes as an absence of centralized, reliable coercion. The nation, on these terms, is a kind of midpoint between the political form that makes no distinctions among peoples or places and the unreliable security provided by extended families.

This conception of the nation is important because it is the basis for Hazony's rejection of claims that nationalism is tantamount to racism. He insists that because nations inevitably comprise many clans and "tribes," they are not based on common descent. However, the nation is unified around cultural characteristics that include a distinctive language, religion, and a shared history of struggle. Outsiders can join a nation when they adopt these characteristics. At the same time, the nation is entitled to decide when and whether it wishes to accept more foster children.

Expressed mostly in generalizations rather than in historical detail, Hazony presents his case for the nation in *The Virtue of Nationalism* as an essay in "foundational political philosophy." This procedure would seem to contradict his insistence that nationalism



Brexit is just one manifestation of a rising nationalism across Europe and the U.S. But what does it mean to be a “nation”?

appeals to an empirical understanding of human nature, rather than philosophical abstractions. Yet his argument does not emerge from the view from nowhere that he blames for the current disdain for nationalism. Instead, it is rooted in the Hebrew Bible, which Hazony numbers among “the first great works of the Western political tradition.”

Many readers will find this claim surprising. Not only the growing ranks of the religiously illiterate, but also many serious Christians and Jews balk at the idea that the Old Testament offers political lessons that can be applied today. Even conservative evangelicals, who insist that the Bible is authoritative in matters of personal morality, mostly hesitate to draw direct conclusions about the conduct of governments from biblical texts.

But Hazony is not engaging in the kind of “theonomy” associated with the Christian Reconstructionist movement. In his 2012 study *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, he argued that the Bible is not merely a record of irrational revelation that demands implicit

obedience; it also offers compelling *arguments* about the proper order of human society. In his new work, Hazony concentrates on what he considers the biblical argument for a world composed of independent nation-states. Even as it criticizes attempts to unify the human race, beginning with the Tower of Babel, the Bible promotes the unification of the Hebrew tribes into a single people living under a common legal authority within defined borders. For Hazony, the travails of the biblical Israel represent the paradigmatic case for nationalism in a period defined by the oscillation between empire and anarchy.

The Hebraic turn in Hazony’s account of nationalism is about more than textual sources. It is the basis for radical critiques of three competing understandings, not only of nationalism, but also of political philosophy itself. Perhaps because *The Virtue of Nationalism* is aimed at a broad audience, Hazony mostly restricts these critiques to the ample footnotes. But it is difficult to understand what he is up to—and what makes this book important—without making them explicit.

First, Hazony is proposing a reorientation of political thought away from Hellenistic and Roman influences. Despite the Latinate vocabulary in which arguments about nationalism are conducted, Hazony suggests that the philosophical schools that emerged from Plato's Academy and the Roman legal conventions with which they became intertwined are essentially imperialistic. Stoic cosmopolitanism and Ciceronian appeals to natural law, he suggests, culminate in visions of a united human race ruled by a single, rationally justifiable government. Although its origins were different from the megalomania of the pharaohs, this conception of world order leaves no greater space for the political independence and cultural self-determination of nations.

There are few Stoics or Roman lawyers still around to object to this indictment. There is, however, a long tradition of Catholic theorists who draw on their intellectual bequest to develop proposals for regimes that satisfy the needs of the Church's understanding of humanity. This tradition has not always dominated Catholic political or legal thought. But it has been used to justify great imperial projects in European history, from the earthly ambitions of medieval popes to the expansive claims of the Bourbons and Habsburgs. When Catholics like the French Gallicans asserted national autonomy, Hazony argues, it was because they were inspired by Hebraic models, especially the Davidic monarchy. Even when it is moderated by the divisions between the cities of man and of God, the idea of a universal church has undeniably imperialistic tendencies.

In addition to tweaking Catholics, *The Virtue of Nationalism* poses a challenge to writers who locate the origins of nationalism in the upheavals that followed the French and Industrial Revolutions. Influenced by Marx, "modernist" theorists contend that the formation of many nations we recognize

today was more contingent and recent than we realize. They argue that the emergence of nationalism reflected the military and economic imperatives of the nineteenth century rather than a primordial bond among a nation's members. Contrary to the vulgarization of their ideas represented by the recent *New York Times* video feature titled "National Identity Is Made Up," scholars like Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner did not assert that nations are arbitrary constructions that were made—and can be remade—at will. But they did insist that claims about historically continuous identities, values, and institutions were mostly based on wishful thinking.

Hazony responds to the modernists by shifting the dawn of western European nationalism back to the Reformation. Rather than responding to political democracy or economic modernity, he argues, nationalism was based on a "Protestant construction" of politics inspired by the renewed interest in the Hebrew Bible. According to Hazony, the "Protestant construction" achieved its greatest influence among the followers of Calvin, especially the English, Scots, and Dutch, as well as their American cousins.

It was the Protestant construction, Hazony argues, that "Anglo-American conservatism" emerged to secure. Religious in its ethics, empirical in its epistemology, and realistic in its anthropology, authentic conservatism regarded a world composed of independent nation-states as the best hope for a fallen race. Affirming the necessity of strong national government to discipline unruly tribes while resisting the imperial temptation, the giants of this tradition include Burke and Washington. Those are the heroes Hazony wishes us to associate with the virtue of nationalism, rather than dangerous tyrants like Napoleon Bonaparte.

Above all, however, *The Virtue of Nationalism* is a polemic against what Hazony calls “liberalism.” By this he means “a rationalist political theory based on the assumption that human beings are free and equal by nature, and that obligation to the state and other institutions arises through the consent of individuals.” On this theory, neither nations nor families have any inherent authority. Thus, they can be formed, abandoned, or modified as individuals pursue their interests—usually construed in terms of physical security and material prosperity.

In practice, of course, this argument could lead to the formation of nations as the most convenient vehicle for the pursuit of material interests. In principle, however, it suggests that truly rational human beings would establish the largest and most inclusive possible state. From its theoretical starting point in an anarchic state of nature, Hazony suggests, liberalism derives a virtually irresistible tendency toward empire.

Although they do not appeal to a state of nature in the same way, Hazony places “classical liberals” of Austrian background, including Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, under the same heading. And while Hazony’s case for nationalism will certainly find critics among global-justice advocates to his left, his most prominent targets are on what most readers will consider to be the right. In addition to libertarians who promote the free movement of capital and labor across borders, Hazony’s targets on the right include neoconservatives who dream of permanent American hegemony. More Bonaparte than Washington, they see their own nation as an avatar for the whole human race.

Hazony’s critique of liberalism in the name of conservatism is likely to be among the most controversial aspects of this book. That is regrettable, because it rests on a confusing and counterproductive use of terms. In short, what Hazony calls liberalism is more helpfully described as “rational constructivism.”

The terminological distinction is important because few of the original thinkers who knew and accepted the label of “liberal” were opponents of nationalism. On the contrary, liberals like John Stuart Mill argued explicitly that the nation-state was the best possible setting for the preservation of individual freedom and the practice of constitutional government. Hazony knows this and cites Mill’s *Considerations on Representative Government* with frequency and admiration. His definition of liberalism, however, requires Hazony to disassociate Mill from the concept that was associated with him in his own time and has come to define his intellectual legacy. It is a strange definition of liberalism that includes Ayn Rand while excluding not only Mill but also Benjamin Constant, Alexis de Tocqueville, and their masters and students, such as Montesquieu, Isaiah Berlin, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Raymond Aron.

Hazony tries to evade this difficulty by admitting that “Anglo-American” liberals have often been friendlier to nationalism than were their Continental brethren. But the name of Tocqueville alone indicates that European and Catholic thinkers were not categorically different from their English, American, and Protestant (or post-Protestant) interlocutors. So it makes little sense to pit liberalism categorically against nationalism.

It is not even clear that the classic social contract theorists were rational constructivists in the sense Hazony has in mind. Hazony echoes a common error by treating the social contract as a theory of historical explanation rather than as a kind of thought experiment. Locke and Rousseau knew perfectly well that existing societies did not develop on the basis of rational consent. Rather than asking how governments are established, the *Second Treatise of Government* and *On the Social Contract* respond to a different concern—how to determine the limits of citizens’ political obligations. Even

if their answers were misguided or have been superseded, the question they posed cannot be wished away.

If Hazony's story requires a villain, the more appropriate candidate is Kant. In the book's best section, Hazony shows how Kant's profound suspicion of egoism led him to regard nation-states as merely a transitional phase in human development, which would culminate in a cosmopolitan world order. For Kant, this was not so much a historical prediction as a moral imperative. In Kant's view, there is no moral basis for loyalty to our own countrymen, their ways, or their land. And because there is no moral basis, there is no basis at all. Not coincidentally, Kant also strove mightily to extract Christianity from its Hebraic origins. He even wrote of the "euthanasia of Judaism" as a step toward human brotherhood.

The long shadow of Kant is important for understanding the anti-nationalist dimensions of what Hazony calls "classical liberalism" but is known in the German-speaking community as *ordoliberalismus*. Developing from the late nineteenth-century reaction against Hegel's more historical and nationalistic understanding of political order and galvanized by the First World War, liberals in the Kantian tradition sought to identify general rules that would prevent the twin threats of tyranny and anarchy. On the domestic level, this meant the rule of law and representative, if not especially democratic, government. On the international level, it meant limits on national autonomy, in case peoples should refuse to pursue liberal policies. Such arguments proved especially appealing to Austrians, who had seen the relatively stable Habsburg Empire collapse into feuding and illiberal nation-states.

This intellectual milieu produced the criticisms of nationalism found in works like Mises's *Liberalism* and the outright advocacy of international federation seen in Hayek's

1939 essay "The Economic Conditions of Interstate Federalism." After the Second World War, elements of their arguments were built into treaties that constructed the European Union. (In his recent study *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism*, historian Quinn Slobodian describes this branch of the liberal tradition as the Geneva School, distinguishing it from American, British, and French currents.)

The irony is that in the English-speaking world, followers of Hayek and Mises—whether they call themselves classical liberals, libertarians, or conservatives—have been among the leading critics of the European Union and other attempts to establish an international liberal order. Hazony, for example, approvingly quotes Margaret Thatcher's famous 1988 Bruges speech in defense of "willing and active co-operation between independent sovereign states," as opposed to a United States of Europe. But Thatcher numbered Hayek among her most important teachers.

My point is not that the counternationalist tendencies that Hazony attacks in liberalism are imaginary. On the contrary, they continue to exercise a powerful influence on European legal and regulatory institutions and, by means of John Rawls's revival of Kant in *A Theory of Justice*, on Anglophone academic philosophy, too. Yet it is a fallacy of composition to present rational constructivism as synonymous with liberalism. It is also a tactical error for nationalists, who have little to gain from excluding potential allies among liberals who, like Tocqueville or Mill, regard the nation-state as the political form best suited to the freedom of individuals and communities.

Nonetheless, the issue Hazony raises is too important to reduce to disputes about intellectual history or conceptual definition. At its core, he offers a substantive argument about the best way to organize human affairs. He endorses nationalism as "a principled stand-

point that regards the world as governed best when nations are able to chart their own independent course, cultivating their own traditions, and pursuing their own interests without interference.” Is he right to do so?

Because I count myself among those pro-national liberals whose existence Hazony barely acknowledges, I find nothing to object to in this statement. To be sure, it is subject to prudent interpretation. But the same is true of all political maxims, including those that enjoin us to cherish and preserve what is our own. The central insights of liberalism are that tradition is not infallible and that persons deliberating in good faith are unlikely to reach agreement about how or whether it is to be upheld. The central insight of conservatism is that history and experience are more helpful guides to answering such questions than is theoretical reflection.

The problem with the post-nationalism or cosmopolitanism descended from Kant is that it inverts these assessments. On the one hand, it presents reason as superior to experience. Because of its impersonality, pure reason is less likely to be corrupted by individual or group interest, leading to arrangements that favor the part over the whole. Even if independent nations are practically unavoidable, on this view, they are only a necessary evil. Were men fully enlightened, we could do away with division and conflict.

On the other hand, Kantian approaches suggest that because they are impartial, the dictates of reason are wholly authoritative. He who disobeys reason disobeys humanity itself. The particularist or nationalist, therefore, is not merely a dissenter whose freedom to err must be tolerated. He is a criminal against humanity who must either be eliminated or, in Rousseau’s notorious phrase, “forced to be free.”

Just as the nation-state as an institution stands somewhere between the unappealing alternatives of empire and anarchy, the political theory of nationalism mediates between

rationalism and traditionalism, individualism and collectivism. It seeks to expand our loyalties beyond personal relationships, including relationships of blood, while restricting them to a scale compatible with self-government. Appeals to interest are an element of this project—clans and tribes more often unite into nations because they fear a common enemy than because they embrace unity as a good in itself. As it is sanctified by time, however, arrangements that were originally just convenient can become a source of meaning in their own right.

One can observe such a transformation in the rhetoric of Abraham Lincoln. In the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln did not speak solely of a “proposition that all men are created equal.” Instead, he spoke of a people descended from common ancestors who devoted themselves to its demonstration. Ultimately, it does not matter whether one describes Lincoln’s position—which is not based wholly on consent to philosophical ideals nor on the mere accident of birth—as patriotism or nationalism. For Americans, creed and culture, liberalism and nationalism, are inseparable.

Yet Lincoln’s example also reminds us of the dark side of nationalism, which is not limited to the threat it poses to the freedom and independence of other nations. Nationalism imposes a heavy cost on internal diversity and pluralism—including the freedom and cultural peculiarities of the “tribes” that make up the greater nation. Hazony acknowledges that “what is needed for the establishment of a stable and free state is a majority nation whose cultural dominance is plain and unquestioned, and against which resistance appears to be futile.” Elsewhere he admits that this dominance is not merely social. It includes forms of coercion ranging from mandatory education, to limits on expressive and associative freedoms, to military conscription, to wars that devastate regions and wipe out generations of young men.

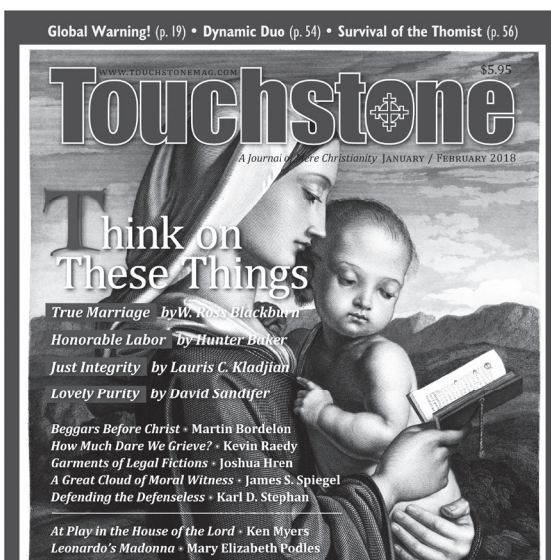
There is a relatively small, if disproportionately influential, cadre of consistent globalists or transnationalists. But for most citizens of this country and its closet counterparts, I think, the obstacle to nationalism has more to do with the means than with the end. It is easy to endorse the idea of nations able to chart their own independent courses, cultivating their own traditions, and pursuing their own interests. The silent assumption is that those courses, traditions, and interests are conceived as one prefers. It is when we have to decide between competing conceptions of the nation that the dilemmas become acute. Does nationalism apply to the America of Trump or of Obama; the Britain

of Brexit or of Blair; the Israel of Jerusalem or of Tel Aviv?

Hazoni continues to do a service in reviving the theory of nationalism at a moment when its empirical manifestations have become impossible to ignore. He also presents a model of engaged political philosophy—learned yet accessible, spirited but not excessively hostile. Valuable as it is, though, *The Virtue of Nationalism* is only a prolegomenon to the questions of who decides what the nation is—and, as the forerunners of liberalism asked, what means they are entitled to use to enforce their decision. To answer these questions, we need other virtues, including prudence and justice. †

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