



# LIBERAL NATIONALISM

Yael Tamir

## LIBERAL NATIONALISM

STUDIES IN MORAL, POLITICAL,  
AND LEGAL PHILOSOPHY

*General Editor: Marshall Cohen*

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*Yael Tamir*

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This book has been composed in Adobe Palatino

*To my parents*

ADA AND YEHUDA TAMIR

*who educated me to believe that  
to be a Zionist means to respect individuals,  
their rights, and their national aspirations,  
and to my daughters*

CARMEL AND TAL

*who I hope will choose to respect  
the same values.*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My interest in liberal nationalism arose out of a process of self-reflection. Between 1977 and 1982 I was very active in the Israeli peace movement (Peace Now) and in the civil rights movement. In the course of these activities I was frequently required to justify the complex position held by supporters of the peace movement, and to vindicate its moderate version of national commitments as a legitimate Zionist approach. My attempts to explain these views made me aware of the vulnerability of the liberal nationalist position, forced to contend with the censure of both liberals and nationalists.

This book is the fruit of many years of personal political involvement, which eventually led me to a concern with the theoretical dimensions of liberal nationalism. I am grateful for the opportunity to spend three years doing graduate work on this subject at Balliol College, Oxford, and I am deeply indebted to the college for their support and for awarding me the Domus Scholarship.

When I embarked on this project, nationalism seemed almost an anachronistic topic. During my years in Oxford I exhausted a stockpile of phrases in answer to the comment, "How interesting!" (Oxfordese for "How weird!")—usually uttered after I reported I was writing a thesis on nationalism. In the years since, the situation has changed so radically that it is almost impossible to try and make sense of the political reality without giving thought to the pursuit of national ideals, and it now goes without saying that nationalism merits scholarly concern. The mostly aggressive character of the recent nationalist revival, however, placed me once again on the defensive, and I am now busy drawing up a new list of replies to "How interesting!"—apparently evoked by the term "*liberal* nationalism." In this book I try to show that, although it might be seen as an impossible match, liberal nationalism is a far more pervasive view than is usually assumed.

When writing the doctoral dissertation from which this book later developed, tutors and friends were generous with their guidance and advice. Sir Isaiah Berlin devoted a great deal of time to discuss with me the thesis developed in this book. His comments and criticism were invaluable, and I am grateful for the skillful and humor-

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ous way in which he led me to see my argument more clearly, and to accept that many questions would remain unanswered. After reading the final version of this book I have come to realise how deeply I have been influenced by his work and his temper as a philosopher. Alan Montefiore has closely followed my work over these years, and I have found his guidance and unlimited patience enormously helpful in confronting the philosophical complexities of the questions surrounding this work. His personal friendship and attention were very helpful in some of the hard periods I went through during these years. My tutorials with Steven Lukes introduced me to a whole range of questions in sociology and political science that I might otherwise have left unattended. I deeply appreciate his generous invitation to the European University in Florence and his willingness to read the final draft of my dissertation after he had left Oxford.

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It is customary to end acknowledgments by thanking one's family, and with good reason. Sharing one's life with someone engaged in writing a book is not, to put it mildly, a pleasant experience. Lonny, Carmel, and Tal patiently endured the closed door of my study and gave me the love and support without which this book could not have been written.



## LIBERAL NATIONALISM



## INTRODUCTION

There is no route back from reflectiveness. This phenomenon of self-consciousness, together with the institutions and processes that support it, constitute one reason why past forms of life are not a real option for the present, and why attempts to go back often produce results that are ludicrous on a small scale and hideous on a large one.

—*Bernard Williams*

As we entered the final quarter of the twentieth century, there was a widespread assumption that the age of nationalism was over, that we were on the threshold of a postnational era. It is now clear that this assumption was wrong. National movements are regaining popularity, and nations that had once assimilated and “vanished” have now reappeared. Estonians, Latvians, Corsicans, and Lombards awake from the long slumber that communist regimes or Western European nation-states had forced upon them, flex their muscles, and set out to march under the banner of national independence. These attempts to turn back the historical clock are often marked by bloodshed and by a violation of the rights of neighbouring nations. In their enthusiasm to regain their national identity and acquire recognition and self-respect, national activists often overlook the changes that have taken place in the surrounding political, economic, and strategic circumstances, and fail to realise that national slogans have become obsolete. The era of homogeneous and viable nation-states is over (or rather, the era of the illusion that homogeneous and viable nation-states are possible is over, since such states never existed), and the national vision must be redefined.

The twenty-first century is unlikely to see nationalism fade away. Liberals, whom some had viewed as the great winners of the twentieth century, must come to terms with the need to “share this glory” with nationalism, and probably with religious fundamentalism too. Liberals then need to ask themselves whether national convictions matter to their way of thinking, to their values, norms, and modes of behaviour, to their notions of social justice, and to the range of prac-

tical policies they support. In other words, they must rethink their beliefs and policies and seek to adapt them to the world in which they live.

Some may argue that liberals should rather engage in a struggle against the national phenomenon, offer a universalist alternative, and rely on persuasion and education to eradicate national feelings. Although this attempt to manipulate individual preferences rather than meet them is obviously paternalistic, it could be viewed more favourably were we to agree that national aspirations are ultimately evil and there is nothing in them that merits our respect. But is this indeed the case? Even when viewed from a liberal perspective, nationalism advances an important claim, which can hardly be dismissed as manifestly and utterly irrelevant, false, or morally reprehensible. This is not to say that certain types of nationalism are not morally repugnant, but the same could be said of almost any political theory. The oppressive and at times murderous nature of people's democracies, the malicious neglect of the poor and the needy that follows from a rigid adherence to free-market libertarianism, clearly show the horrific results of pushing even the most virtuous of ideas to their logical end. National ideas have indeed fueled some of the most devastating regimes of this century, but they have also inspired some of its most glorious moments, when the struggle against colonialism and imperialism was waged in the name of national self-determination.

This work is an attempt to demonstrate that the liberal tendency to overlook the value inherent in nationalism is mistaken, and to explore ways in which nationalism might contribute to liberal thinking. This could prove to be a rewarding venture, particularly if it provides us with a better set of tools with which to confront some of the bitter conflicts tearing our world apart.

The treatment of nationalism and liberalism in this book is not symmetrical. Liberalism is taken as the starting point, and there is no attempt to justify the set of liberal values in light of which this work aims to reflect on, evaluate, and structure a theory of nationalism. In the pursuit of this task, it breaks away from the liberal tendency to describe nationalism as resting merely on irrational (some say primitive) fears of "the stranger," as motivated by a morally irrelevant attraction to what is familiar and similar, by an unscrupulous desire for power, or as an excuse to grab advantages for one nation at the expense of others. These elements obviously have a role in the understanding of nationalism, but they fail to exhaust the reasons for

its appeal. Underlying nationalism is a range of perceptive understandings of the human situation, of what makes human life meaningful and creative, as well as a set of praiseworthy values. Liberals are challenged to accommodate those worthy elements, and lend substance to national values within the boundaries of liberalism.

My attempt to introduce national values into the liberal discourse is motivated by an ongoing personal commitment to pursue a national vision while remaining faithful to a set of liberal beliefs. I have consequently refrained from taking a frequently offered piece of advice suggesting I renounce the concept of "nationalism" in favour of a less emotionally loaded term, such as "people" or the much discussed "community." Although resorting to a less controversial and less pejorative term might have made my position more acceptable, I thought it would be wrong to bypass the concept of nationalism. Liberals who give up this term and surrender it to the use of conservative political forces, or note the difference, to chauvinist and racist ideologies, alienate themselves from a whole set of values that are of immense importance to a great many people, including liberals.

MacCormick excels in conveying the problems faced by liberals who are also committed to a national cause:

Whether 'nation' and 'nationalism' are antithetical to or compatible with 'individual' and 'individualism' is a question of acute personal concern for me. I have been for a good many years a member of the Scottish National Party, and yet remain in some perplexity about the justiciability of any nationalistic case within the terms set for me by the other principles to which I adhere.<sup>1</sup>

Liberal nationalists confront a whole range of questions: Should I prefer my liberal beliefs to my national commitments? Are both intrinsically valuable because they reflect different aspects of my personality? Is it really the case that my liberal values reflect rational thinking and the exercise of choice, while my national attachments are part of the emotional, inexplicable allure of the mysterious word "my"—"my" people, "my" culture?

If the conflict between liberalism and nationalism is, as Gellner describes it, "a tug of war between reason and passion,"<sup>2</sup> liberals might feel obliged to give liberal values priority over national convictions. But if this description is simplistic and misleading, there may be no easy way of ranking these two sets of values. Liberals

might then have to acknowledge that a wide range of incommensurable and incompatible values and norms are relevant to their life, and seek a reasonable compromise.

This book suggests that the liberal tradition, with its respect for personal autonomy, reflection, and choice, and the national tradition, with its emphasis on belonging, loyalty, and solidarity, although generally seen as mutually exclusive, can indeed accommodate one another. Liberals can acknowledge the importance of belonging, membership, and cultural affiliations, as well as the particular moral commitments that follow from them. Nationalists can appreciate the value of personal autonomy and individual rights and freedoms, as well as sustain a commitment for social justice both between and within nations.

Certain tensions between liberal and national values are, however, inherent. Some of these values lead to incompatible policies and many such conflicts, explored in the final chapter, are not the outcome of "a logical incomparability between duties abstractly defined, but between the actions they require in a given situation."<sup>3</sup> In other cases, liberal and national values are incommensurable, that is, there is no single scale on which they might be measured and compared. How can we determine which will be more valuable to the individual's well-being—a wide range of civil liberties or membership in a flourishing cultural group, full-scale autonomy, or a deep sense of belonging?

Arguing that national values should be acknowledged and respected, rather than dismissed as inherently groundless and irrational, entails a move toward greater moral complexity and more frequent collisions between rights and values. At best, these could be resolved by untidy compromises aimed at alleviating harm and suffering. Tidiness is not a proper end for heterogeneous societies, says Berlin; there are no perfect answers to social problems, and the pursuit of absolute solutions too often leads to oppression or bloodshed.<sup>4</sup> The search for a theory of liberal nationalism, which renounces the ultimate pursuit of one set of values at the expense of the other, is an attempt to avoid this peril.

The starting point of this work is a set of beliefs endorsing individual rights and liberties, affirming the right of individuals to equal respect and concern, and presuming that governments should be neutral and impartial vis-à-vis individual interests, preferences, and conceptions of the good, propositions endorsed by most contemporary liberal theorists. As far as the national dimension is concerned, this book does not embark on a descriptive account of the political,

historical, sociological or economic circumstances that brought nationalism about, or allowed its development as a global force. It presents nationalism as a way of thinking about human nature and about a world order, from which prescriptive implications for moral and political thought might be derived.

My inquiry concerning the foundations of liberal nationalism, begins with the basic methodological postulate of every political ideology—a portrait of human nature. The idea that there are universal features that characterise human nature might seem more plausible to liberals than to nationalists. Yet, the nationalist emphasis on the importance of particular circumstances for the construction of personal identity does not contradict the universalist view of human nature. On the contrary, nationalists can endorse this notion and claim that, by nature, individuals are members of particular human communities. Outside such communities they cannot develop a language and a culture, or set themselves aims. Their lives become meaningless; there is no substance to their reflection, no set of norms and values in light of which they can make choices and become the free, autonomous persons that liberals assume them to be. Being situated, adhering to a particular tradition, and being intimate with a particular language, could therefore be seen as preconditions of personal autonomy, although they could also be perceived as restricting the possibility of choosing elements that are constitutive of personal identity, such as communal and cultural affiliations and a basic set of values. But would national, religious, and cultural movements be so fearful of conversion and assimilation were it not clear that individuals do indeed have a choice in these realms?

The first chapter discusses cultural choices in great detail, asking whether culture can be a precondition of reflective thinking and the exercise of choice, while in itself remaining an object of choice. It is argued in this work that although cultural choices are neither easy nor limitless, cultural memberships are not beyond choice. In this sense, the view of culture and communal membership developed here differs from the perfectionistic and collective approach generally adopted by communitarians, in that it cherishes openness, reflection, and individual choice.

Claiming that individuals can choose their communal affiliations does not imply that they approach their membership superficially, or that they consider it irrelevant to their self-definition. Several elements, although constitutive of our personal identity—religious beliefs, political affiliations, professions, and styles of life—are nevertheless subject to reflection and choice.

This emphasis on the elective aspect of personal identity has important implications for the theoretical understanding and the practical realisation of cultural and national rights, which are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Rights are viewed here as meant to allow individuals to lead a life which, on reflection, they have come to value, rather than a life imposed on them by history and fate. It makes no sense to ensure individuals the ability to adopt a culture they despise, or to belong to a community they do not wish to be members of. The right to culture is meant to allow individuals to live within the culture of their choice, to decide on their social affiliations, to re-create the culture of the community they belong to, and to re-define its borders.

Notwithstanding the individualistic dimension of this argument, liberal nationalism recognises that culture and membership are communal features, whose worth can be fully enjoyed only together with others making similar choices. A right to culture thus entails the right to a public sphere in which individuals can share a language, memorise their past, cherish their heroes, live a fulfilling national life.

This approach presupposes a cultural definition of the term “nation,” in which the nation is seen as an “imaginary community.”<sup>5</sup> The concept “imaginary community” is used here, following Anderson, to describe a community too big to allow for direct personal relations among all its members. The boundaries of such a community and the notion of recognition that follows from it, are products of its members’ ability to “think the nation” by the power of their imagination. Hence, rather than implying false beliefs or misrepresentations of reality, “imaginary” implies that, unlike the family, the tribe, or the people, the nation exists only when its members consciously conceive themselves as distinct from members of other groups. This “illusive” definition makes it hard to draw clear distinctions between a nation and other types of cultural communities. Less harm is likely to be caused, however, by accepting an ambiguous definition of the term “nation,” which might lead to the inclusion of groups that would be left out by a stricter one, than by excluding borderline cases.

If culture, in its widest sense, is what holds a nation together and preserves it as separate from others, then the existence of a nation as a distinct social unit is contingent on the presence of a public sphere where the national culture is expressed, where an individual feels free to “develop without repression those aspects of his personality