

‘MANAGING’ NATIONALISM

NATIONALISM IS A will-o-the-wisp. Now you see it, now you don't. Or, more precisely, now you see something reasonably definite, clearly demarcated from other things, and now you see it all over the place. Writers talk of British or English nationalism in the eighteenth century, a passion expressing hostility to the French. But nationalism only makes sense as a criterion of the proper composition of a modern state, and nothing of the kind was involved in British feeling against the French at that time. The term 'nationalism' is a problem because it has been used to cover both collective self-regard expressing itself as enmity to another collectivity, and a doctrine about the criterion for a proper state. The first meaning finds instances at many times and places, the second is modern.

With some exaggeration, one may say that these ambiguities of 'nationalism' were decisively clarified by Elie Kedourie.¹ Before Kedourie, nationalism lurked in every corner of history, discoverable in any collective form of self-assertion. After Kedourie, no careful thinker would attribute it to non-modern times and places. He showed that it was a doctrine 'invented' in the early nineteenth century. In his article on Kedourie in *New Left Review*, 'In Praise of Empires Past', Brendan O'Leary wants to dismantle this achievement.² His is a bravura piece, occasionally crawling pedantically along, at other times featuring intrepid logic-defying leaps, as when Kedourie's repudiation of prediction becomes a rejection of generalization *tout court*.

The issue here is one that needs keeping under review. For although Kedourie's basic judgement has mostly been accepted by students of nationalism, tendencies to recidivism continue to crop up. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, more or less accepts Kedourie's verdict, although without mentioning him, but the next moment can be found

toying with eleventh century ‘proto-nationalisms’. Kedourie wrote as a historian, which meant that he was interested in the circumstantial explanation of a certain way of thinking, and its antecedents. Like others, he numbered Rousseau and Herder among the latter, and added Kant’s theory of self-determination. But he argued that nationalism was a political doctrine that only took recognizable shape in response to the universalism of the French Revolution. He thought nationalism an essentially opportunistic response to various kinds of collective grievance: in his eyes, it had no ‘essence’ (*pace* O’Leary). It could espouse republics at one time or monarchies at another, and might quarrel or ally with other ideologies such as socialism, as the exigencies of the moment suggested to those who picked up or perhaps developed the doctrine. Nationalism was an instrument of practical action, not an explanatory philosophical idea. That was why an understanding of it had to be essentially historical. Most of its notions, moreover, take for granted the modern sovereign state; they make no sense in the mediaeval period or in oriental empires.

O’Leary contests Kedourie’s famous first sentence: ‘Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century.’ Strictly speaking, to be sure, in history no idea is ‘invented’—‘emerged might have been a safer term, and would have avoided O’Leary’s objection that an invention needs a single inventor, and Kedourie does not provide one. The real issue, however, lies in O’Leary’s attempt to turn Kedourie’s flank by asking: why can we not find nationalism in the American or French Revolutions? The answer to this lies in culture and style. The Americans had a grievance against the British government which they formulated not as the oppression of a culture but as a denial of rights. They were not even sure whether they were one nation or thirteen. The French dreamt of reviving the Roman republic; their language and attitudes appealed to the universal rather than the particular.

That nationalism emerged out of some of the enthusiasms of the eighteenth century is no doubt true. But when did it ‘crystallize’ in a vocabulary, a set of emotions, and a doctrine capable of justifying a certain sort of political involvement? Since Kedourie refers to figures like Kant, Schiller or Frederick the Great, O’Leary asks why he did not date nationalism back to them. The answer might be couched in the analogy

¹ *Nationalism*, London 1960.

² NLR 18, November–December 2002, pp. 106–30.

of a photographic plate: at what point has the image actually appeared? In trying to capture the coming into being of a new idea, I would not myself talk of 'catalysts' subsequently 'mushrooming', as O'Leary does. What he means by this mixed metaphor is, I think, that nationalism suddenly turns up all over the place in—and indeed beyond—Europe, from which he draws the conclusion that the 'real cause' of nationalism lies in 'specific historical developments', presumably the arrival of modern industry. He thus rejects diffusionism in favour of what one might call 'material causation'. The broad issue distinguishing these alternative explanations is that of history versus sociology. Kedourie's history of ideas interprets nationalism as a response by political actors, within the crucial contexts of collective grievance and the sovereign state, to changing events. O'Leary's sociology seeks to explain nationalism as a phenomenon 'unavoidably' and 'predictably' issuing from modernization. He personalizes this into a dispute between Kedourie and Gellner, who did on occasion discuss the issue.

Both were friends of mine (as indeed, I hope, is O'Leary), so we are not entangled here in anything excessively personal. I happen to agree with Kedourie, and have had my say in criticism of Gellner. O'Leary's interpretation of all of this does, however, need some clearing up. His criticism of Kedourie seems to be the complaint of a partisan of nationalism, for whom it is an understandable and on the whole admirable phenomenon. In this light, Kedourie becomes a conservative exponent of the benefits of empire, whose outlook can be traced to his social origins as a Baghdadi Jew growing up between the wars. In denying that there was an appearance of nationalism prior to the nineteenth century, possibly outside Europe too (in South America, for example), Kedourie—so O'Leary claims—sought to 'place the blame [for it] squarely on German romanticism'.

Kedourie may, of course, have got various things wrong. But to attribute to him a desire to blame the emergence of nationalism on an aesthetic movement is so wild as to suggest a wider animus. Thus we learn that Kedourie's *Nationalism* 'shares some of the confusions of Oakeshott's epistemology, in which philosophy has no impact on the world, whereas practical ideas or ideologies do'. I believe Oakeshott was right about this, but that is an argument for another occasion. O'Leary, however, goes on to speak of Oakeshott's 'contempt for, and fear of, intellectuals', which is not even a plausible caricature. Kedourie is further patronised

as writing ‘a loyal Oakeshottian essay’, and as one who in the fifties was ‘loyal to the Allies’ recent war effort’. Since loyalty is an emotion, not an argument, the intention seems to be to diminish Kedourie’s rationality. By the time we discover that Kedourie’s historical analysis fits ‘comfortably the temperament of an observant, quietist and educated Jew from Baghdad, outraged at Zionism and Arab nationalism’, it is fairly clear that O’Leary’s sociology of knowledge has run out of control.

What is O’Leary’s basic concern? He wishes to establish nationalism as a freestanding political response to modernization, and to push its beginnings back to the point where any ‘element’ of the doctrine can be found before the nineteenth century. Thus he attempts a *reductio ad absurdum* by first dating its arrival to Kant, whom Kedourie had fingered as a philosophical godfather of the doctrine—and then, since Locke developed a notion of self-determination a couple of generations before Kant, why not all the way back to Locke? For that matter, of course, we can find verbal formulae that might suggest the idea of democratic self-determination even earlier, say in Algernon Sidney, so why not a seventeenth-century origin for the doctrine? Kedourie himself was later to suggest that the nationalist passion for religious and cultural uniformity was a recurring theme in European politics all the way back to Theodosius. So why did he have to say nationalism was a nineteenth-century invention?

The answer is that the meaning, and hence the occurrence, of nationalism depends on context. Attempts to clarify this type of question used to distinguish between influences, which are specific, and affinities, whose abstract character can transcend times and places. Locke in talking about self-determination was concerned with ethics and agency, Algernon Sidney about an aristocratic republic. A historical identity is not a word, or a form of words, but human action and utterance responding to a context, and contexts are specific to the time. One may indeed, as Gellner did, generalize social situations and try out a sociology of nationalism. Both approaches may yield interesting results. But O’Leary has other fish to fry. He wants to set nationalism up as a phenomenon in political science which may be studied—indeed ‘managed’—in a more or less scientific kind of way.

Against Kedourie’s view that nationalism is characterized by an ideological style of politics, O’Leary remarks: ‘Nationalists have generally

been this-worldly, intent on the revival or renewal rather than the eradication of their own cultural traditions; they have celebrated and sought to reinforce their own civil societies and have campaigned for their own states'. Some no doubt fit this description, some not. But O'Leary is concerned with the practical question: 'Can nationalism be managed and expressed in ways that achieve stability and world order in a form compatible with constitutionalism and democracy?' That was something Kedourie believed impossible. For myself, I doubt it. In another place O'Leary can be found toying with the statistical conditions under which federalism might be the solution to nationalist tensions in states within existing boundaries. Canada hasn't broken up, at least not yet, but the Balkans don't look so manageable, Indonesia and other places in Asia are worrying, Lebanon is only just recovering from an earlier bout of managed consociationalism and as for Africa . . . We can all keep our fingers crossed. If nationalism is an epiphenomenon of some such social condition as modernization, then the conditions for its management may be discoverable and put to work. If on the other hand, nationalism is a class of doctrine whose outcome and implications are as unpredictable as everything else human, then the sceptical historian may be a better guide to its character than the political scientist.