

What is the meaning and importance of nationalism politics essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This essay aims to explore the meaning and importance of nationalism.

Firstly, it will briefly outline the meanings of both the nation and nationalism and then it will give a working definition of both. Secondly, it will discuss how nations form and develop and then go onto explore some of those forms in more depth, taking into account the complex nature of nationalism. Finally it will discuss nationalism's relationship with ideology and its significance.

Firstly, what do we mean when we talk of a nation? There is no single definition of the term nation; however it can loosely be described as a community or group of people who share a homeland and a feeling of solidarity over such factors as culture, language or territory. Various Scholars in this field offer their own definition of a nation but this essay will use the following:

“ A nation is a group of people who feel themselves to be a community bound together by ties of history, culture and common ancestry. Nations have ‘ objective’ characteristics that may include a territory, a language, a religion or common decent (though not all of these are always present), and ‘ subjective’ characteristics, essentially a peoples awareness of their nationality and affection for it (James Kellas, 1993: 3, cited in Hoffman and Graham, 2009)”.

Secondly, what is meant by the term nationalism? Nationalism refers to the body of thought or beliefs held about the nation by its people (Hoffman and Graham, 2009) and how their collective actions and attitudes acknowledge the utmost importance of the nation (Heywood, 2003), subsequently achieving or sustaining the moral, cultural and/or political outcome of their

country (Miscevic, The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, online). Again there are various definitions of the meaning of nationalism; Guibernau defines it as:

“ The sentiment of belonging to a community whose members identify with a set of symbols, beliefs, and ways of life and have the will to decide upon their common political destiny (Monstserrat Guibernau, 1996: 47, cited in Hoffman and Graham, 2009)”.

This definition embodies the three broad goals of nationalism identified by Smith, which are, national identity, unity and autonomy (Smith, A, 2010). Shared symbols and beliefs provide a feeling of national identity and unity and the political will of the people encourages autonomy.

Now we have a working definition of what a nation is we are better able to explore how they form or develop. There is a general agreement within this field that nations develop over time and are formed and shaped by a variety of cultural, political and psychological factors (Heywood, 2000). As noted these factors include, sharing a common language, history, memories, traditions, stories, myths and also territory and laws (Smith, 2010). These factors play a part in the cultural, psychological and political development of a nation because from these shared histories, territories and laws, emerges a sense of collective identity, consciousness or loyalty within a group of people (Heywood, 2000).

However, how these common factors and subsequent sense of collective identity comes in to place is debated. For example, Anderson views the nation as culturally man-made, through such factors as language and a <https://assignbuster.com/what-is-the-meaning-and-importance-of-nationalism-politics-essay/>

shared sense of time. He defines nations as “imagined communities”, perceiving them to be subjective rather than objective, because members of a nation do not interact with all others face to face but instead identify with each other through shared narrative, events and media. Moreover, even the boundaries, authorities and class distinctions within our nations are perceived and limited by our imaginations (Hoffman and Graham and Goodwin, 2010)

Hobsbawm gives a similar yet arguably more objective or tangible explanation of a nation; he perceives it as a socially constructed phenomena and believes that many ‘modern’ traditions were invented by the ruling classes – in the form of agents of the national state, i. e. the police, school teachers and the military – to create a false sense of collective identity between the masses, for the purpose of manipulation and social control (Hobsbawm, 1992). He drew a distinction between pre-modern traditions and those created during the lead up to the great war of Nineteen-fourteen; claiming that the former were based on religions and regional languages and had no political input; and the latter was created to unite the masses in order to gain power and territory during times of war (Smith, 2010).

However, Smith argues that these theories underestimate the importance of emotional bonds and moral will, believing that a nation is not just a social construct but is formed with a mixture of cultural, social, and political influence (Smith, 2010).

Therefore it is clear to see how the various loyalties and attachments regarding these beliefs, customs and symbols create different forms of

nationalism. These different forms can broadly be categorised under two broad variations; ethnic (or cultural forms) which include linguistic and religious forms of nationalism, and civic (or political forms) which include liberal and socialist forms of nationalism (Smith, 2010). The distinction between civic and ethnic nationalisms is attributed to Hans Kohn who argued that 'Nationalism is a state of mind' meaning it develops within its own context and from surrounding factors (Kohn, 1994). To Kohn Western forms of nationalisms were based on a rational association of citizens bound by common laws and a shared territory. Therefore to Kohn Western nationalism is voluntaristic, whereas in contrast, Eastern forms of nationalisms were based on a belief in common culture and ethnic origins, therefore having a more organic structure (Smith, A, 2010, Heywood, 2003). However Kohn's critics have argued that his writings are far too simplistic and overlooked exceptions such as Ireland whose people are divided by religions; i. e. Protestant and Catholics; and rule, i. e. Irish Republic and Northern Ireland (Smith, 2010).

In order to gain a better understanding of the various forms of nationalism this essay will now explore one form of nationalism from each broad category in more depth. Firstly it will explore liberal (civic) nationalism, arguably the oldest form of nationalism (Eatwell and Right, 1999). Then as contrast it will follow through to explore linguistic (cultural) nationalism.

Liberal nationalism began with the French revolution (Vincent, 1995) and is compatible with liberal values as it places importance upon, among others, human rights, equal nations and a voluntary approach to citizenship. At the core of national liberalism is the concept of self-determination and a world of

<https://assignbuster.com/what-is-the-meaning-and-importance-of-nationalism-politics-essay/>

nation-states, moreover, it opposes foreign oppression and advocates sovereignty. Liberal nationalists believe these principles are a remedy for a peaceful and harmonious world (Heywood, 2003).

It is widely suggested that the first liberal thinker to fully advocate nationalism was J. J. Rousseau, who supported the principle of the general will of the people and its association with individual freedom. His theory has helped to shape a liberal nationalism built on ideas of a democratic government (Hoffman and Graham, 2009). For Rousseau it is democracy that links liberalism and nationalism, it provides a middle ground by giving equal opportunity to the individual and providing a 'just' outcome in the majority vote. Rousseau influenced other thinkers such as Mazzini, who founded 'Young Europe' which helped to promote nationalism throughout Europe (Heywood, 2003) and Mill's theory on 'free institutions' and the right to self-government (Goodwin, 2010).

However, critics of liberal nationalism point out the contradictory relationship between the principles of liberalism, which places priority on the individual (Heywood, 2003), and Nationalism which places priority on the collective (Hoffman and Graham, 2009). Pointing out that even a liberal democracy by its nature of the majority vote promotes in-equality within a nation; as the majority vote divides the nation and dismisses the individual rights of the minority, rather than creating a unified sense of collective identity (Hoffman and Graham, 2009 & Goodwin, 2003).

Goodwin (2003) argues that the equality advocated by national liberalism is a myth and goes onto claim that liberalism assumes that people choose to

be in, and take part in, a political nation; whereas in fact many peoples loyalties are placed in a culturally perceived society, rather than a socially or politically constructed one. For example when Czechoslovakia was created after WW1 it contained a fusion of two major ethnic groups who subsequently realized their aspiration for two separate nations on linguistic principles (Heywood, 2003 and Kedourie, 1993). This then leads us into Linguistic nationalism.

Linguistic nationalism is mostly attributed to the German philosophers, Herder, Humboldt and Fichte, who advocated language as central to the character of the nation (Encyclopaedia of nationalism, 2001). These ideas were established in resistance to the French Revolution and its ideas of equality and popular sovereignty (May, 2008). Fichte (1762-1814) argued that only Germans retain their original language – and with influence from Humboldt and Herder’s writings – asserted that if the German language is superior to all others, then so is the German nation (Kedourie, 1993). Such ethnocentric ideas and the emphasis on language has, in its extreme, led to political issues for which men were prepared to kill each other, for example Nazism; therefore language can be an important feature of ethnic and national identity. Nevertheless the importance of language to national identity is debated, for example, Renan argues that language is not essential to national identity when he says: “ language may invite us to unite but it does not compel us to do so” (1990: 16, cited in May, 2008). Moreover, Britain as a multi-cultural society is an example of how various ethnic groups can share a language and still maintain their own customs, beliefs and traditions.

As noted, national identity develops with multiple influences, but moreover it changes throughout history, as varying importance is placed upon different loyalties depending on the political context and economic circumstances surrounding them (Grosby, 2005). For example, for much of its history, the Islamic Middle East – whose people's loyalties are predominantly religious – abided by varying laws derived from varying interpretations of Islamic law. This was seen as an obstacle to the formation of a strong economic and unified nation-state and so new laws were introduced – which were not directly taken from Islamic law – in order to create trade between different regions and strengthen the economy (Grosby, 2005). Islam is still predominantly religious, however this is an example of how loyalties can shift and national identity can change through the manipulation of laws by political governments whose aims are to achieve power or economic gain.

Germany's history is an example of how nationalism can be expressed and manipulated through more than one loyalty; politically (German national socialism) and culturally, through linguistic nationalism, (unification of German speaking people). Nationalist movements in the Nineteenth Century prompted various attempts by German nationalists and political powers to unite all German speaking people, living in different countries, in order to gain territory and power and form a single linguistic nation.

Now the complex nature of nationalism has been explored we can consider its association to ideology. It is widely agreed that nationalism is not a political ideology in itself but rather a doctrine, because it fails to encompass a full system of beliefs and lacks the utopian ideal that ideologies desire.

Rather its unpredictable and chameleon like character lends itself to <https://assignbuster.com/what-is-the-meaning-and-importance-of-nationalism-politics-essay/>

different forms and subsequently it has been adopted by various political ideologies in varying degrees and contexts (Hobsbawn, 1992 and Goodwin, 2010). Nationalism in its different forms can be inclusive or exclusive; it can promote self-determination, the freedom to pursue ones own will; or chauvinism, by promoting excessive or prejudiced loyalties and it can be manipulated for the purpose of secession or irredentism (Heywood, 2003). The dissolution of Czechoslovakia in nineteen ninety-three is an example of secession and self-determination. Conversely, the bringing together of the Jewish people and the creation of the state of Israel, after WW2, provides an example of irredentism and also chauvinism by Nazi Germany (Spartacus Educational, online)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, does nationalism matter? In its desire for political independence it has shaped history (example). In its excessive or superior form it has fuelled conflict, ethnic cleansing and wars and helped to shape and reshape the political map. It has helped to build strong nations and dissolve others. Politicians use the sentiment of nationalism as a powerful tool,

Israel <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WWisrael.htm>

Czechoslovakia <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WWczech.htm>