

THE MEME OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Foreword

In my previous paper which explored the meaning of *Nation as Meme*,¹ I explored the substance of the term “Nation” which dominates the societies of the world today. I must confess that I did not, in that paper, treat of “Nationalism” as a popular movement within which the authority and power of the nation is wielded by the people or professed representatives of the people. It is this aspect which is treated by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities*² which describes the way nations and nationalism came into being during the last two centuries, narrowing the definition of the idea of “nation” to define those states that came into being through independence movements and revolutions during that time. Still, Anderson does corroborate my own thesis that the nation has no objective existence but depends on the meme in the minds of its members for existence.

In this paper I would like to extend this logic to nationality and the way the citizens of any nation view themselves and their fellow citizens, using some of the reasoning from Matt Ridley in *The Red Queen* and *The Origin of Virtue*.³ Ridley begins his analysis of the state of human society from a sociobiological point of view developed by Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*.⁴

National Movements Today

During the period after the First World War with the establishment of the League of Nations, it seemed that there was a tendency for mankind to unite into larger and larger political units, which led to a hope that there was some kind of utopian future, (albeit far in the future) when the world would be united under one government. It was a dream advanced by many idealists both extreme left and what later became the extreme right. The extreme rightists were thinking, in a sense, of world conquest in which the rest of the world would be absorbed into their own. This was perhaps most typified by Hitler's Nazism which saw the Germanic "Race" as the perfect culmination of natural evolution, and saw elimination of all divergent "races" as the ideal path to the perfect world. The leftist saw the people of the world rushing to join a society in which everyone was equal and all the energies of mankind were used to support a commonweal that would finally do away with the domination of the rich and powerful. This type of thinking was typified by Marxism and Communism, which saw humans as capable of complete altruism and selfless action when properly taught.

There were many who saw the vast colonial empires of the European powers as a means of civilizing and unifying a vast mongrel horde of miniscule tribes, absorbing those people into the self-proclaimed "advanced" nations. It seemed as though the world was indeed becoming smaller, at least in the sense that there were fewer political entities to deal with, and fewer borders to cross.

Japan embarked upon an ambitious route to expanding its own empire early in the century; incorporating Korea, then Taiwan, into its dominion; defeating the Russian bid to expand its own empire and even tearing off a piece of Imperial Russian territory, absorbing the southern

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half of the Island of Sakhalin. In its expansion into Southeast Asia in the early 1940s, Japan insisted that it was merely saving the Asians from the European Imperial powers; Britain, France and the Netherlands.

The false premises underlying all these colonial movements was that these politically unified societies were, in fact, losing their own cultural identities, and becoming part of the colonizing nation. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The colonizing nations themselves did not allow this attitude to prevail, for even though they awarded citizenship to the colonials, it was always second-class citizenship, which disallowed any possibility of equality with homegrown citizens.

When colonialism first began in the Americas, European citizens of the colonizing powers were sent to govern newly acquired territories and to properly channel any assets back to the homeland. But in a very short time, the immediate descendents of these citizens became "Creoles," or "mixed," even though there was no mixture in lineage. They were Creoles simply because they were born in the colony, and they had no possibility of achieving equal status in the case that they returned to the home country.

Thus it was that while the political power was concentrated in fewer and fewer governments, the people governed by these governments found an identity with a group that did not coincide with the boundaries of that government. This identity was strengthened by the very governments which were governing the people, as Anderson points out.

It was due to discriminatory actions of the colonial power that the unity of the people of the colony was emphasized and intensified. Even in cases where there had been no unity previously, forced unity under the colonizing power created one. This partly accounts for the existence of the nation of Indonesia, where none such had existed before the colonizing by the Netherlands of the many islands found there and

unifying them under one government. It can be said that in the case of Indonesia, however, the drive for independence in some of the areas is certainly due to an awareness of a previously existent unity although different from the present putative unified state of Indonesia.

Gellner in his *Nations and Nationality*⁵ defines a "State" as that which has a monopoly on legitimate use of force within any political entity. Thus the state only can exercise judicial, police and military power. It follows that groups under colonial rule are never states but subject "nations" only, a situation labeled intolerable for the subject group by Gellner. Other intolerable conditions would include having rulers who are not part of the group being ruled, such as often happened in the Middle Ages in Europe where marriages rather than area of birth often determined the ruler of a country.

The Biosociological Basis of Nations

The idea of the Selfish Gene⁶ as first proposed by Richard Dawkins in 1976 has become the accepted premise for much further progress in the thinking concerning the development of humans and human society. The gene is considered "selfish" because only the course of natural selection that leads to the benefit of the replication of a gene will be followed. Anything detrimental to the replication of a gene will, perforce, remain unselected. This is also to say that the gene works only for itself, never sacrificing its own replication for that of any other gene. Thus evolution works only for creating the progeny of any particular biota and is never altruistic. There are various conditions, which may effect the course of evolution, among them the natural environment, and competition among various forms of biota or among biota of the same species.

When this is applied to the primates, and to humans, it means that they too work only for their own reproduction, albeit with a survival

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strategy⁷ that includes cooperation among many humans. This cooperation, however, must work for the benefit of the individual human's genes and their reproduction and is not an altruistic duty that has been placed on the individual by society. The question of whether natural "group" selection is possible has been developed and settled by Dawkins⁸ and others in the negative. The basis of any cooperation, or any apparently altruistic action among biota can be discovered in the benefit found to the replication of the genes of the acting subject. The discussion of kinship selection by Dawkins and others⁹ has reinforced this "selfish" aspect by showing that any sacrifice of self by, for example, a mother or father, etc. has its basis in the replication of the genes by the one who is apparently being altruistic.

The question, therefore, is simply how does the group, the community, benefit the individual. There are many living things that form societies, in fact the simple necessity of finding partners in any bisexual species necessitates a community of some kind. There are, however, communities of insects, for example, which interact on huge scale, with many specialized tasks carried out within the community. Bees are specialized as workers, drones, queen, etc. in each hive, while ants often have similar organizations by which they maintain the community and reproduce. And even though there is no chance for a worker bee to reproduce, since it is a female and the only reproduction in a hive is by the queen, the care it gives to the larvae is in the interest of the survival of its own genes. This is because any larva contains half of the genes of any worker bee in the hive.

This type of kinship selection does not work for human communities any larger than the immediate family, though larger communities which have a limited gene pool will be influenced by those genes in selection of activities beneficial to the community rather than other, unrelated communities. However, there still must be some benefit

to the individual to cooperate with a large, unrelated community. If the cooperation is substantial and voluntary, that is if it requires a large expenditure of energy, the benefit to the individual must be commensurate. But if the conclusions of Dawkins, Ridley and others are correct, the benefit must in some way benefit the genes of the individual.

Benefits of Belonging to a Large Community

First of all, the community supplies a large gene pool through which the individual can reproduce without being restricted to the genes of kin, which could entail a risk of concentration of defective genes. It also supplies a large number of candidates for selection as partners. In most communities in the animal world selection of mates in order to achieve the best possible gene selection for one's offspring, selection is made (most often by the female) to find the best possible mate gene-wise. Sometimes this will mean selecting the strongest male, at others it may mean the selection of the owner of the most colorful tail feathers, an indication of the health of the male.

In human society the factors that influence selection by the female may include strength, readiness to care for offspring, wealth or high probability of success leading to the ability to take care of mate and offspring. For the male, whose genetic interests are aimed more at number of offspring, that is the volume of genes transmitted rather than the quality, beauty and youth, indications of the ability to bear offspring usually influence the selection most.¹⁰

Secondly, the benefit of cooperating with a group can be found in the support of the welfare given to the individual by the group. This can mean, for example, supplying things necessary for subsistence to one who is temporarily in need. In the days of hunting and gathering, it was unlikely that one hunter was always successful and so there was undoubtedly a system of distribution. The successful hunter would

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distribute the fruits of his hunting with the agreement that when not successful he could share in the success of others. There was, of course, the cooperation necessary in hunting a large prey, such as a mammoth, when those taking part would share in the success, (or failure).

Today, while there is no large-scale hunting society extant, the world of economics and trade offer many more complicated fields for cooperation toward success. Cooperation among individuals has been extensively studied and researched, and the indications are that it is indeed the individual who must profit from cooperative action in any field. This has been demonstrated by the Prisoner's Dilemma, a game in which the benefit to the individual can in the end only be achieved through cooperation between the participants.¹¹

A third, not unrelated benefit of a large community to the individual is that through the distribution of labor people become able to specialize in a field and trade with others for their necessities. Or they may specialize in one particular aspect of a large task or project and share with the others the fruits of that cooperation. This cooperation, of course, would be balanced by the size of the return for cooperating. Gellner presents a clear example of cooperation in trade among the aborigines of Australia before the interference with the system by Europeans. There were a series of tribal groups which had a trading relationship, at one end of the line, spear points were made and traded for sea-shell instruments found at the other end of the trade line on the coast. As each of the trade items were traded away from the point of origin the price in terms of barter went higher, being bartered for about an equal number of the opposite item in the middle, and reaching a price of about five to one at the points of origin. Along the route, each tribal unit was making a profit from the trade, which only proves the rule that there could have been no trade at all unless it was profitable.

In other words, whether the communal activity is politics or

economics, the profit must be commensurate with the invested capital and/or energy.

Thus, it would seem that the oft-quoted statement by President-elect John Kennedy at the 1961 presidential inaugural ceremony, "Ask not what the country can do for you, but rather what you can do for your county," is somewhat unrealistic since the motive for being members of any group, including the nation, is self-interest. It would seem that the motives for working to advance the national cause can only be to the extent that it is advantageous to the individual.

Imagined Nation

A nation is one type of group, albeit huge. It is impossible for any member of a nation to know all the other members. This is probably true of the smallest nation in the world, the Vatican, which has a citizenship of between seven and eight hundred (and a birth rate of 0%). All these citizens, however, must imagine themselves to be members of the group, no matter how large. In order to do this they must presume to know what the other citizens know, have common values, and be in contact with the current events in the nation. In other words, communication is a *sine qua non* for membership in the group.

This communication is achieved through the means of the media, both written and visual, and it therefore presumes a common language. Benedict Anderson refers to print language¹² as one of the major factors in the development of the Nationalist movement. This was before the advent of extensive radio and TV coverage of world events, but the requisite of the language having to be "common" is no less true than for the written word. It is in this way that the citizen finds the position of a "true" citizen, and is absorbed by it.

Again, Gellner sees common language as one of the formative factors in the creation of nations and nationality. He even suggests that

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there are potentially as many nations as there are languages in the world. He says that he was told there are as many as 8,000 different languages in the world,¹³ and therefore there are potentially 8,000 different states. There are various reasons, however, that the majority of such potential states do not come into being, among them being inertia, lack of numbers or of strong cultural ties, etc.

Self Identity

The person who sees him- or herself as “belonging” to a particular group becomes a “member” of the group. What is involved in this membership, or what is the motive for becoming a member, may be different according to the type of group involved. It may only be pragmatic, such as being the member of a school where you are learning the practical needs to make a living. Or it may be an emotional thing such as belonging to the fan club of a pop star or of a baseball team. In any case, to feel oneself to be a member of a group it is necessary to be aware of the group, of other members in the group, and to have an awareness of the values of the group as a whole. Beyond this, they have some sense of loyalty to the group, that is to say they recognize some kind of duty which obliges them to act in accordance with any rules that the group might develop. That is to say, there must be a kind of homogeneity in any putative group to which a person belongs in which all members are, in some way, alike.

This sense of “belonging” to a homogenous group, however, becomes much more central when the person identifies with a nation, and defines himself by that identification. Today it is not only unthinkable that a person have no nationality, having a national identity is considered a “right,” and something that is universally desired. The Charter of the Rights of the Child promulgated by UNICEF indicates as one of the inalienable rights of children, “the right to a national identity

and national language.”¹⁴ In the field of psychology, “personal identity” is a property necessary for the psychological well being of the human, and many kinds of mental illness are ascribed to the lack of identity, or sometimes, the confusion caused by having several identities such as may occur in schizophrenia. And one of the basic types of identity is a national identity. A national identity is thus considered much more vital to a person than membership in a fan club, it is rather considered to be the basis on which the person orientates himself or herself in the world.

It would therefore seem that the nation has taken over many of the aspects of social contact that were formerly more concerned with kinship, in which the relationships between persons in the group had a genetic origin. It is however, impossible for an individual to be, in any meaningful sense, genetically related to a group that is the size of a nation. Sociobiologically speaking, while kinship relationships can create apparently altruistic activity since there is commensurate genetic benefit, groups larger than a family can only create altruistic activities if the genetic benefit is forthcoming in the guise of, for example, economic profit and therefore wellbeing for the individual. This condition is certainly not true for the nation as a whole, nor even for most nations. The individuals who profit economically, or in other ways which would benefit their genes by belonging to such a group are relatively small, often times miniscule.

What then is the factor that creates these nations to which almost everyone today belongs? What is it that not only creates the nation, but the fierce loyalty to it, considered the just due to the nation by its citizens?

In actual fact, “nationality” is not dependent upon the choice of an individual. In today’s world people rarely “choose” their nationality. Possibly only in the case of naturalization¹⁵ is a conscious choice made. The child is born into some nationality, and there is agreement among the

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nations of the world that any person “must” have a nationality to allow them access to any kind of protection or support supplied by the state, even by states other than their own. It is, for example, impossible to apply for citizenship in Japan if the one applying does not have a certificate of citizenship from another state. In a sense, you must have a nationality even to gain a nationality.

Most nation states see nationality as entailing duties toward the state by its citizens as well as duties of the state toward the same citizens, and in that sense, claim a kind of “ownership” toward the citizen. While many states allow multiple citizenship, when there is any conflict of interest, it is an absolute requirement of nationality for the citizen to decide in favor of the state in question or receive extreme punishment as a traitor. This, of course, is true in the case of any conflict between nations, but it is also true in more mundane situations such as tax requirements, obligatory military service, and passports.¹⁶

Not only are people presumed to desire a nationality in order to know who they are, the state demands a nationality as proof of having human existence. As difficult as contacts within any particular society can become for one recognized as alien to that culture, being stateless is an almost unthinkable disaster socially. An allegorical tale of a man without a shadow was written by Chamisso, an emigre Frenchman in Germany during the Napoleonic period. In the novel, when his acquaintances detected his aberrant shadowlessness, they then shun him. The shadow was indeed the symbol of nationality and it shows how a man without a nation defies the recognized categories and provokes revulsion.¹⁷

The modern necessity of belonging to a nation, is not therefore a matter of free will. While there is a certain amount of coercion practiced by the nation in the handling of its citizenship, since the nation is, in effect, managed and maintained not by kings, nor dictators nor tyrants, it

is a product of the citizens themselves. Yet it is one certainly not always profitable to its individual citizens.

I suggest that the primary factor in inducing the members of a nation not only to “pledge their allegiance” to a nation, but to be prepared to work for the good of the nation, even to their own detriment, is the meme of nationality.

To reword some of the arguments I have made previously,¹⁸ if, biologically speaking, the activity of the gene may only occur in seeking the replication of itself, it will not choose any action which is not beneficial, such as sacrifice of self for whatever reason. But man has achieved development of an activity not purely biological; that is, “culture.” The human society has evolved not only biologically, but, with the advent of communication techniques, specifically language, has progressed with an intricacy and speed which would be impossible only by natural selection which must count progress only in terms of generations. The unit of transmission in natural selection is the gene and, analogously, the unit of transmission and replication in culture is the meme.¹⁹ The term, invented by Richard Dawkins (pronounced “meem” to rhyme with “gene”) indicates an element in the mind of the human, which is transmitted to other humans, in a sense, replicating itself in another human’s mind. Successful memes, as successful genes, are those which are able to replicate themselves frequently and at a rate which will maintain or increase their existence. Memes such as “God” or “Religion”, have maintained themselves in human society over almost the whole history of human culture, while others appear and rapidly disappear such as the frequent fads and fancies in popular culture.

The meme of nationality has successfully maintained its position within human society by developing into a “memplex” (a complex of memes) which carries a heavy load of cultural values with it. In a sense, the memplex of nationality is similar to that of a religion which

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maintains itself in one way by attaching high negative value to any suggestions of doubts made by the faithful, and by attaching a very positive value to self sacrifice. In the same way high negative values are attached to any suggestion of allegiance to another group, (belonging, for example, to any group advocating the overthrow of the government); any acts of civil disobedience; any acts of disrespect toward symbols of the nation (flag, national, anthem, etc.) or to its history, (legends of heroism, or heroes themselves). On the other hand, high values are placed upon service to the nation, performing rituals in praise or respect of the nation, and, of course, martyrdom, that is, dying for the country. In terms of biological benefit, to die for any reason is counter-productive since the genes are made incapable by the fact of dying to replicate further. But there may be cases of kinship selection which would lead to death, and there may also be some biological advantage in risking death if it leads to better mate selection or some other reward beneficial to the genes. For the meme, on the other hand, sacrifice of one vehicle of transmission, that is, the human mind, may be fully consistent with the meme's natural objective of maintaining and furthering its replication through reinforcement by way of examples of heroism and bravery. The meme resides in the minds of all the citizens of a nation, that is, all who claim the nationality of that nation.

Thus it can be said that the current human condition of belonging to huge communities not related by kinship which have the power of life or death over the members of the group is not the survival strategy that would be naturally selected by the gene. The formation of communities with so many members who can not communicate personally and yet exercise the power of life or death over the members would only be possible genetically if it was beneficial to the replication of the genes of the individual. Huge colonies of insects do exist, but the size of these groups and activities are due to kinship selection. Among mammals,

groups certainly do exist as survival strategies, with territorial boundaries and stratified societies. Man's primate relatives usually have social structures that often appear in human societies as well. They do not, however, form huge groups in which other members of the group are mutually unknown. This, of course, would be an impossibility for any group unable to communicate over distance and would demand not only language, but written language, i.e. "print language" as it is called by Anderson. Print language, an extension of culture, perhaps has a genetic base in the tendency of humans to have the power of speech and communication. The genetic tendency towards increasing power and wealth would work toward increasing the size of the group, but there could hardly be a gene for "nation" since this necessary condition of the emergence of print language is too recent to have become universal genetically in the short time it has existed.

Human culture, as I have mentioned above, evolves at a much faster rate than the gene would, since it is not limited by mutations occurring only at the time of replication in a new generation. And, by definition, the basic element in the replication, the transmission, of human culture is the meme.

Groups of primates, chimpanzees or gorillas, for example, form groups for mutual protection and material support as well as for increasing mating opportunities, so the tendency to form groups is certainly a natural one which is gene-based. However, the extension of this tendency to include groups so large that they can only exist "on paper," so to speak, and control the destinies of its members, must be attributed to something else, a survival strategy gone berserk perhaps.

Survival Strategy for National Identity

The above arguments present a solution to the problem of why humans would willingly ally themselves to huge, imaginary social

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structure such as nations which may in fact be as detrimental as beneficial for them as individuals. The other problem not quite completely elucidated is "how" humans are induced to believe themselves members of these imaginary structures.

With the rise of nationalism the power base of the state became popular rather than hereditary, and today nations see themselves as cultural entities. These entities seek borders coincidental with the extent of the culture, and the failure to have the borders so coincide is the cause of much strife in the world today, that in Palestine, the former Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland, to name a few. Nationalism assumes as ultimate values the "inalienable" rights to cultural unity, territory and self-government. These rights are objective so all other cultures must observe them as correct, no recognition given to a possible conflict of interests. In other words, a culture/nation carries the same type of value set as a confessional religion, demanding that its members believe in a certain concrete image of the nation, with its territory, membership and customs. Those that so believe and act according to those beliefs are patriots, those not doing so are, at best, foreigners, at worst, traitors. The parallel with religion is obvious, the true believer achieving sainthood and the one who rejects those values eternal damnation. They are indeed cultural values and the particulars necessarily vary with the history, environment, type and size of population, etc. but the basic assumption, that there are objective and inalienable rights to unity, territory and self-government, are common to all nations.

As with all values, these nationalistic values are absorbed very early and usually unknowingly. These values are transmitted by parents, of course, but more forcibly by the schools where the child is educated.²⁰ They are reinforced by the media communicating the rites concerning commemorative events, the national holidays, and any competitions/conflicts with rival nations or cultures. The child and, perforce, the

adult, is therefore not only quite sure of right and wrong in terms of his culture/nation, but is unlikely to question in any way the acts of the nation *vis-a-vis* other cultures/nations. In this way, the meme of culture protects itself from disintegration in the same way that the religious meme of confessional religions do, damning even the doubt.

Conclusion

National identity is today apparently universal, and looked upon by most as necessary to even the psychological welfare of the human being. It is difficult, however to understand how belonging to a community which must first be “imagined” before it can even exist, can be so necessary to the human psyche. It seems that the necessity has been created by the meme of nationality itself. The creation of a mental environment in which “nationality” is assumed to define what any individual is. A person without nationality is thus condemned to only a “shadowless” existence on the periphery of human society. For the meme of nationality this is the perfect environment for its continued replication.

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Footnotes:

- ¹ Guerin, T: *Nation as Meme*: 比較文化論叢 ; Sapporo University, March, 1999.
- ² Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities*: Verso; 1983.
- ³ Ridley, Matt: *The Red Queen, Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature*: Penguin Books; New York, 1993 and *The Origins of Virtue*: Penguin Books; New York, 1997.
- ⁴ Dawkins, Richard: *The Selfish Gene*: Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1989.
- ⁵ Gellner, Ernest: *Nations and Nationalism*: Cornell University Press; Ithica, 1983.
- ⁶ *The Selfish Gene*.
- ⁷ Dawkins, Richard: *The Extended Phenotype*. Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1982.
- ⁸ Group Selection and Kinship selection, Dawkins.

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⁹ *The Extended Phenotype.*

¹⁰ Beauty is not only associated with youth, but is also highly associated with breasts and buttocks and wide hips, indications of ability to bear young. There is some indication that women whose waists are thin in comparison to their hips are emphasizing the width of the hips and therefore the superior ability to bear. Ridely, Matt: *The Red Queen.*

¹¹The game is played by two persons, called “prisoners,” who are being questioned by police. If one informs on the other he receives clemency, and for the purpose of the game, two points. If neither of them inform on the other then they both receive a reduced sentence or one point, but if they both inform then they both go to jail and neither receives any points. It has been determined through extensive computer simulations that in order to win over a continued playing of the game, the best strategy is to do whatever your opponent has done on the previous trial. This results in both continuing to settle for one point each. Ridely, Matt; *The Origins of Virtue.*

¹²*Imagined Communities.*

¹³*Nations and Nationalities.*

¹⁴Charter of the Rights of the Child; UNICEF

¹⁵The term “naturalization” seems to indicate that the person so choosing is somehow adapted to the social climate of the nation of which he or she is becoming a citizen. The Japanese term “*kika*” (帰化) indicated that the person is somehow “returning” to the nation, perhaps the source nation of the world.

¹⁶Until recently, the U.S. Passport indicated the places where the bearer was not allowed to go to. In the past this has included North Korea, North Viet Nam and Cuba.

¹⁷Gellner, p. 6.

¹⁸Guerin, T.; Nation as Meme

¹⁹For a thorough definition and discussion of the meme see *The Selfish Gene* by Dawkins or *The Meme Machine* by Susan Blackmore.

²⁰Gellner sees education as one aspect of the modern industrialized nation which must be carried out by the state, the requirements being too vast compared to the previous local agrarian economies.

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