

The Suppression of Nations

by Theodore Dalrymple



This essay is part of [a *Law and Liberty* Symposium](#) on Yoram Hazony's [The Virtue of Nationalism](#).

I first encountered the Moslem world as a callow and ignorant youth half a century ago. I recognised at once that it was very different from the world I had hitherto known, but it never crossed my mind for a single instant that it ought to be made similar to or identical with my own world. Nor did it occur to me that at least some of the people that I met thought that my world ought to be made similar to or identical with theirs simply because they believed themselves in possession of a universal religious truth valid for all mankind. As far as I was concerned, then, east was still east and west was still west, and never the twain would clash.

[In this short and incisive book](#), Yoram Hazony points out the similarities between Islamism and liberal internationalism

which have indeed resulted in an almighty clash. By contrast, he is in favour of a muscular but scrupulous and open-minded particularism—that is to say, he endorses a certain kind of nationalism.

In his account (with which I fundamentally agree), liberal internationalists start out with certain premises which they hold to be true for all places and all times and proceed as if polities were to be constructed of pieces of Lego, with certain abstract rights in the role of Lego's interlocking pieces of plastic. What is to be constructed is less clear, though we often hear of *the European Construction* or *the European Project*. If you ask someone in favour of the latter what the construction or project is, he will almost certainly reply "Permanent peace on the European continent and no more World Wars."

For such people, politics is matter of a utopia to be reached, not the finding of solutions to concrete problems as and when they arise. In fact they seek the abolition of politics, what Engels described as the administration of things rather than the government of persons. They do not notice, or at any rate pretend not to notice, that their "project" is inherently imperialistic. Not only does it necessitate the suppression of nationhood in Europe against the express wishes or even capacity of the vast majority of Europeans, but there is no logical reason why the European Union should stop at Europe's (rather indistinct) borders—rather the reverse. That the Union should be *European* implies that there is a border between the European and the non-European, but the pan-Europeans are against borders, for the elimination of borders is the official *raison d'être* of the whole project. Borders, after all, are supposed to be the cause of wars. The European constructivists are, as Mr. Hazony points out, Kantians, followers of a man whose scheme of universal peace ought to appear laughably shallow to anyone who has seen more of the world than is visible from a regular walk on the same route

day after day through eighteenth century Königsberg.

On one occasion, the then head of the European Commission, Juan Manuel Barroso, let fall the true nature of the European Union. It was, he said, an empire, albeit an empire of an entirely new type. He said that for the first time in history nations had agreed to pool their sovereignty, though to what end he did not say. An examination of his remark bears out Hazony's criticism of liberal supranationalism as being dangerously dictatorial.

First, Barroso conflated nations with national governments at a certain brief historical moment. Second, he forgot that whenever and wherever such pooling had been put to nations' electorates, it had been rejected. There was probably no European nation that had been in favour of the establishment of the common currency. Nonetheless, the European leaders went ahead with it, as if public approval of what they were so momentously doing were unnecessary, indeed irrelevant. M. Macron once said that, if a referendum such as Britain's had been held in France on the question of Europe, the majority of the French would have voted the same way: an *aperçu* that did not for a moment give him pause or cause him to wonder whether *ever greater union* was quite such a good idea. After the British Government made it clear that Brexit would occur, a cartoon in *Le Figaro*, the French newspaper, showed two French peasant types in berets looking across the channel and saying "They do things completely differently over there. They act on the results of a referendum."

Hazony quotes the great theoretician of European supranationalism, Jürgen Habermas. It is not difficult to imagine the psychological origins of Habermas' attachment to supranationalism: born three and a half years before Hitler's coming to power and just short of sixteen when the war ended, he concluded (and he was far from alone in his conclusion) that Nazism was an exacerbated form of nationalism and that therefore all forms of nationalism could be, or were, larval

forms of Nazism. The only way to ensure that nothing like Nazism ever arose again in Europe was to abandon all forms of national feeling and replace it by something that he called *constitutional patriotism*, in other words attachment to the formal rules of a constitution based upon universal human rights such as that to six weeks' paid holiday a year, non-discrimination against approved minorities, etc.

There are obvious problems with this idea, not least among them that is psychologically implausible that much emotional loyalty could ever be felt by any substantial group of people towards an agglomeration of abstractions such as a Habermasian constitution. This is simply not how human loyalties are formed, as Hazony points out.

Hazony argues that Habermas and his acolytes are mistaken when they claim that Nazism was a form of nationalism. There are two poles in his typology of European polities, the nationalist and the imperialist. The former is far the more circumscribed, in which a state (large or small) claims sovereignty over a delimited portion of territory and a population that shares a language, traditions, religious beliefs, culture and so forth. Imperialists believe that they have the right and even the duty to conquer other lands and peoples, often on the pretext, honestly believed or not, that it is for their own good. The resultant empires impose their laws, their conceptions, their values, on an assortment of peoples, though in practice the empire almost always, whatever its supposed justification, serves the interests of ruling minority.

Hazony's typology is obviously schematic and he is fully aware that the peoples of the world do not fall neatly into nations with monolithic populations within clear geographical boundaries. Because nationalists claim sovereignty over limited lands and populations, they are inherently inclined more to defence than aggression. They want to preserve themselves rather than to expand. By contrast, imperialists

recognise no limits; empires have boundaries imposed only by their own incapacity to expand. Hitler's Germany was thus imperialist rather than nationalist, from which it follows that attempts to prevent Nazism by undermining nationalism is doomed to failure.

Here I am not utterly convinced by Hazony's analysis. Nazism was surely both nationalist *and* imperialist. It wanted to establish a universal hegemony, but in the name of supposedly superior and uniquely valuable nation. Other nations could participate as subalterns in the hegemony, in proportion to their resemblance to the German nation.

Notwithstanding my slight disagreement with Hazony's description of Nazism, I think he is right to espy an inherently imperialist tendency in the vision of Habermas and in all similar political visions. Habermas believes that his constitutional patriotism represents an evolved and higher form of political arrangement than a comity of competitive and sometimes conflictual nation states; his scheme is the morally ultimate form of political organisation of the world.

According to Hazony, the belief in a supranational order which is now very common among European elites accounts in part for their otherwise inexplicable hostility to and fury against Israel. The latter is a European state, but instead of subscribing to European supranational pieties, it pursues its national interest with determination and without apology. It is particularist rather than universalist and is, therefore, a kind of conceptual anti-EU. Believers in universalism can brook no opposition or derogation from their principles, and Hell hath no fury like a universalist contradicted.

As a European state, Israel is held up to a different standard from Arab states, Iran or Turkey, because European states have supposedly now reached a higher ethical stage, that of national altruism rather than national egotism, a stage which those of lesser breeds without the (moral) law, still mired in

egotism, have not attained. It turns out that it is rather more difficult to disembarrass yourself of feelings of superiority than at first might have been supposed.

Hazony's view is deeply anti-utopian. He does not propose that a comity of nations, each pursuing its own interests, is the answer to all man's political problems or conflicts. He claims only that it is better than the alternative, that is to say universalist or supranational doctrines that claim to offer a full and final settlement of mankind's woes, but which in practice necessitate the rule of self-proclaimed and (more likely than not) self-interested philosopher kings who will have no sense of personal limitation and who will be infatuated with their own virtue.

First published in the