

MULTIPLICITY OF NATIONALISM AND ITS SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

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It is generally believed that nationalism is a very powerful force binding all social groups sharing nationality. Some pioneering theorists of nationalism argued that diverse forms of social conflicts originating from class divisions, gender discriminations, etc., could be overcome by the social unification brought about by nationalism. This paper tries to challenge this conventional wisdom by revealing multiplicity of nationalism, as it was espoused by various social groups with heterogeneous interests, and its various, sometimes contradictory, social impacts depending upon social circumstances in which it is activated.

For this purpose, this paper first of all examines theoretical discourses on nationalism as espoused by such prominent scholars as Ernest Gellner, Anthony Smith, Benedict Anderson, Tom Nairn, and Rogers Brubaker, among others. By classifying their theories of nationalism into four categories, primordial, structural, constructivist, and post-modern, this paper tries to identify the multiplicity of nationalism. Through this theoretical discussion, this paper will testify the fact that nationalism is advocated and strengthened by various social actors with heterogeneous motives and purposes. Being motivated by diverse interests, nationalism was never homogeneous, but rather heterogeneous and multiple. Even when the nationalists argue for nationalism, its meaning and the people included in the category of nation was not identical. The definition of nationalism varied and the dividing line between “them” and “us” was drawn differently, and sometimes changed over time, by different scholars and peoples.

More importantly, nationalism possesses diverse social impacts depending upon social situations in which it is actualized, as it denotes multiple meanings and heterogeneous categories of the nation. In this paper, I will argue that the multiplicity of nationalism includes four types of dichotomy along which nationalism can vacillate: social integration vs. disintegration, individual freedom vs. repression, and violence vs. tolerance. This paper will investigate how nationalism accompanies these contradictory features in its social manifestations.

Social Integration vs. disintegration: It is true that nationalism oftentimes works for the cohesion of members of the nation by weakening social divisions. When nationalism was manipulated by the economic ruling class and political elites to legitimate their domination, however, it bred social conflicts and disintegration since the lower class developed their own version of nationalism.

Individual Freedom vs. Repression: Nationalism as it originally emerged in the French Revolution worked favorably to foster individual freedom. This is very well represented by the cultural ideology of the revolution: freedom, equality, and fraternity. It may hinder the development of human freedom, however, if an individual is not fully separated from the traditional collectivity. Total mobilization of an individual for the national purposes, like the war or economic development, sometimes includes an “enforcement” of the collectivity to make an individual participate in this grand cause even when he or she is not sympathetic to it.

Violence and Tolerance: The two most important social factors related to this duality of nationalism are political democratization and uneven (or unequal) development. If nationalism is combined with undemocratic political system, its manifestation will likely to encompass a lot of violent practices. The hegemonic class will violently suppress the resistant in the name of nationalism. Also uneven development of world capitalism resulted in the violent aggression of the advanced nations toward the less developed ones, as the former needed its colonies for its economic development. This is also applicable to the domestic situation, in which the economic ruling class suppresses the lower one for the national purposes. This negative aspect of nationalism is much more serious in a society where social inequality is prevalent.

Based on these theoretical discussions, this paper also endeavors to detect the peculiarity of nationalism in Korea in its modern period. Ever since Korea was divided into two parts after its liberation from the colonial rule, the divergence between the nation and the state made the ruling elites of South Korea develop the statist nationalism with elements of social disintegration, exclusion and repression, and violence. In contrast to this kind of nationalism, the challengers to the political rulers devised their own version of nationalism with opposite characteristics. It was historical coincidence that nationalism as a ruling ideology showed this peculiarity, which arises from its accidental connection with the dictatorial regime and economic developmentalism during the Syngman Rhee (presidential term: 1948-1960) and Park Chung-hee (presidential term: 1961-1979) period, the two most important and dictatorial presidents of South Korea.

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