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### The Dangers of Nationalism

Nationalism—an individual’s identification with their own nation and its interests—has remained a prominent aspect of inter- and intra-societal interactions, dictating everything from internal governance to wide-scale political conflict. It would be no exaggeration to state that this concept has shaped the majority of the world’s current sociopolitical climate. Nearly every war and every conflict has its roots in nationalism, an ever-present and seemingly ever-evolving aspect of our lives. In his book, *Imagined Communities*, political scientist Benedict Anderson poses a theory that nations—and by extension, nationalism—are social constructs created by humans to better organize themselves by their shared goals, language, and ethnicity. However, Anderson also argues that even if nationalism itself is a fabricated concept, this does not mean its political effects are any less tangible. Likewise, Mohsin Hamid’s novel *Exit West* focuses on the ramifications of nationalism on a modern-day society. When Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” is applied to *Exit West*, it further elucidates the novel’s claim that nationalism is most often weaponized to the detriment of migrants, immigrants, and refugees, while postnationalism has the opposite effect, inspiring cooperation and actual—as opposed to imagined—community.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson emphasizes that the existence of nations as political entities is due to their illusions of unity. A nation, he claims, “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6-7). Many people are convinced that they share similar interests or beliefs by virtue of simply belonging to the same nation (although in many cases, this couldn’t be further from the truth—think of how divided

America's political climate has been in the past several years). This can also be applied to the "shared nationhood" a person experiences when their country participates in an event such as the Olympics, during which an individual's sense of solidarity with their countrymen becomes all the more palpable. However, Anderson also takes care to explore the "colossal sacrifices" of nationalism, namely the "fraternity that makes it possible ... for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (7). People do indeed kill in the name of nationalism—a topic that is explored throughout *Exit West*, from the militants in Saeed and Nadia's city that quash citizens under their oppressive regime, to the nativists in London who threaten to drive out by any means necessary the so-called "invaders" seeking refuge in their city. Ultimately, these ideals trail back to a centuries-old, but finally unsustainable, "us-versus-them" mentality. While nationalism may have its benefits—such as uniting citizens and bolstering confidence in the face of adversity—it seems that, more often than not, it is turned back against the very people it claims to protect.

Anderson establishes the nationalist narrative as having long-lasting consequences, despite being socially constructed—a sentiment that adheres to the way Hamid's character Saeed approaches nationalism throughout the progression of *Exit West*. Upon arriving in Great Britain, Saeed's desire to "be among [his] own kind" seems understandable; at first glance, he and his countrymen appear to share more similarities than, say, Saeed and a Nigerian refugee (Hamid 114). As such, Saeed's inclination towards his countrymen indicates his assumption that they share the same experiences and will thus be able to seek comfort in one another. This is indicative of Anderson's claim that nationalism is an *imagined* community, because Saeed assumes—imagines without examining—an affinity with people he has never met because they are his countrymen. In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson consistently calls attention to underlying divisions between individuals who supposedly share a common bond. If nationalism is indeed a fabrication, then Saeed's similarities to his fellow citizens are no more profound than any other superficial

coincidence. Perhaps some of their experiences may be shared, but this can be dismissed as a mere accident—after all, “it is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny” (Anderson 12).

Saeed may perceive his companionship with his countrymen as a means of strength and community, but ultimately his loyalty feeds into his fear of his fellow refugees. Encouraged by his new friends to arm himself, “Saeed accepted a pistol ... and in his heart he would not have been able to say if he took the pistol because it would make him safer from the nativists or from the Nigerians, his own neighbors” (Hamid 116). This literal weaponization of Saeed’s nationalism indicates how the fear and strife between the nativists and migrants, as well as the hostilities between the refugee groups, occur because people tend to group themselves by their country of origin. The nativists’ campaign to “reclaim Britain for Britain” arises from a fundamental lack of understanding about the refugees, which is similar to Saeed’s limited amount of awareness regarding his fellow refugees (Hamid 100). Saeed’s inherent wariness and distrust of the people around him isolate him from potential friends and allies. He immediately assumes the other refugees are “sizing him up” and makes little effort to better acquaint himself with them, instead assuming the worst—that they mirror “the fury of the [London] nativists advocating wholesale slaughter” (Hamid 118). Much like Saeed, the nativists are driven by nationalism to defend their home turf, perhaps while being influenced by some primal urge to root out those they perceive as threats. When the London nativists threaten mass violence against the people huddled away in their city, what they fail to realize is that these “invaders” are just as terrified and frightened as they are. Nationalism forces them to automatically view the refugees as “others,” erasing any semblance of empathy that might have otherwise allowed them to connect to the migrants on a more profound level.

However, this point of view is far from the one that Nadia maintains throughout the novel, in part because of her disdain for her home country. Nadia’s lack of national loyalty contrasts with how those with nationalistic tendencies or ideas of purity often take a turn towards violence. Her reluctance to associate with her former fellow citizens demonstrates a fundamental difference

between her and Saeed's relationship to nationalism: while he manages to find comfort in it, she does her best to turn away from it. It is evident that she is eager to leave behind her old life. When Saeed refers to the group of refugees from their country with whom he identifies, she claims that they are "not like [her]" and refuses to associate with them (Hamid 114). Even before their homeland was engulfed by violence, the most common word that Nadia used to describe her life there was "stifled"; her personal freedom as a woman was often hindered by the societal norms that dictated her behavior. As such, she directs her attention toward the many possibilities that await her, rather than looking back upon a group of people, an imagined community, with whom she feels no connection. It is this mentality that allows her to easily meet new friends and find kindred spirits as she and Saeed travel from place to place. While Saeed regards the Nigerian refugees in London with a sort of suspicion, Nadia makes an effort to meet with the members of their council and earns their respect: "Among the younger Nigerians Nadia acquired a bit of a special status ... and so the younger Nigerian men and women and the older Nigerian boys and girls ... rarely said anything [taunting] to her" (Hamid 111). One of the complexities that Nadia grapples with during this section of the novel is the realization that there is "no such thing as a Nigerian": the people she interacts with encompass such a broad range of backgrounds and languages that it seems impossible and impractical to classify all of them under a single label (Hamid 110). As such, this concept is representative of postnationalism, which is the process during which an individual's national identity loses importance when compared to their global or local identity. Throughout this section of the novel, Nadia is shown to possess a much more nuanced understanding of her new companions' circumstances and identities, which allows her to empathize with them more fully.

In contrast, Saeed's fixation on his past home and life set him apart from Nadia. He gains comfort from praying with "our own kind," men from the country they fled, and even "[thinks] of his father" while doing so (Hamid 113). During their discussion about the refugees, Nadia poses the question, "What makes them our kind?" (Hamid 114). When considering *Imagined Communities*,

this statement becomes all the more significant. Apart from the fact that they hail from the same country, what is there that unites Nadia—who had felt constantly repressed by her former home—and someone like Saeed, whose beliefs better align with his country's mainstream views? However, it is ultimately Nadia who reminds Saeed that he shares more in common with her in their personal relationship than with his countrymen. Although he seeks comfort in their company, he can do little to restore the past he has left behind by clinging to them. In fact, it is Saeed's nationalistic behavior that contributes to his fear and suspicion of the other refugees. As such, it is Saeed who embodies the concept of nationalism throughout the novel, while Nadia represents the idea of postnationalism.

While nationalism may be an imaginary social construct, this in no way absolves it from having real-life consequences, as explored by Hamid throughout the novel. Human society has suffered time and time again at the hands of nationalism and its long-term effects (see: every dispute in human history over territory or some slight against a nation's reputation). Although it may have a small number of benefits for the citizens of the country it pertains to, nationalism is an inherently isolating ideal that causes people to "other" individuals from nations that are not their own—or in more extreme cases, view them as the enemy. This often results in said individuals resorting to violent methods of defense. This trend has been all too common in recent years, with many people finding the sheer amount of undisguised hostility towards refugees and immigrants both fascinating and disturbing. If we as a collective society want to find ways in which we can prevent these ideals from spreading and causing more harm, our first step should be to dismantle the nationalist ideologies that perpetuate a lack of empathy and understanding.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed, Verso, 2006.

Hamid, Mohsin. *Exit West*. Penguin Books, 2018.