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Nationalism was the dominant political concept of the 19th century and is re-emerging as a major force in 21st century politics with the growing power of nationalist movements in the United States and Europe and the success of the Brexit initiative in the United Kingdom.

John Dewey addressed nationalism in more than 100 passages scattered throughout 20 volumes of the complete works from World War One through the aftermath of World War Two. The main outlines of Dewey's account of nationalism are already evident in his earliest statements, though he expands it in subsequent works. Significantly, nationalism is not mentioned in the first edition of *Ethics* (1908), but is discussed throughout all three parts of the second edition (1932). Nationalism *per se* is barely mentioned in *Democracy and Education*, but when placed within the context of his work during World War One, the book can fruitfully be read as a program for countering nationalism through education.

Dewey approached nationalism as a problem with conceptual, historical, ethical and educational dimensions. In this research note I indicate his main ideas regarding each dimension.

The Concept of Nationalism

Dewey approaches the *concept* of nationalism by relating the family consisting of ‘nation,’ ‘nationality,’ and ‘nationalism’ to the related concepts of society, the state (and polity) and culture.

Dewey sharply distinguishes the concept of ‘national’ from ‘social’ and ‘political’ but notes that they can be blended, as in political, cultural or social *forms of nationalism.* He emphasizes the importance of social bonds within national and transnational groups formed through communication, give and take. Democracy, in social

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terms, is deep and broad communication, and it’s conscious acceptance as the principle in settling conflicts. The spirit of science is essential in democracy, as differences are to be resolved through inquiry rather than force.

For Dewey the term ‘nation’ is used in two distinct senses: as a synonym for nation-state, or as a synonym for an ethnic group. The first converts ‘nation’ into a distinctly political notion, and nationalism into a synonym for patriotism—devotion to the state. The second or ethnic notion associates ‘nation’ with race and territory, but Dewey rejects both conceptual associations. The idea of race has no scientific support, and is used almost exclusively in political projects. Some nations, moreover, such as the Jewish nation, have existed without a national territory.2

Dewey opts for a cultural definition of ‘nation’—a group sharing a common life, language and literature, living together in communities of intellectual life, with moral emotions and common practices based on common transitions and hopes.3 But modern nationalism can be understood in two senses: as devotion to the state, or as devotion to the cultural group.

The History of Nationalism

All nationalisms arise from dissatisfaction. The Napoleonic spread of liberal social values through military conquest resulted in German nationalism after 1807 as Germans sought national unification for self defense. Italy similarly sought unification to rid itself of Austrian domination. Smaller national groups (e.g., Hungarians, Bohemians), chafing under imperial domination, similarly claimed the right to self-governance in their own sovereign nation states under the banner of nationalism.4

Nation consciousness took distinct forms in France and

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Germany. In France, the forces binding the nation included liberal values and the use of enlightened reason by citizens. The Germans developed a sharply contrasting notion of the nation as the trans-rational, mystical Volk bound by ties of blood (racial purity) and soil.5 Germans asserted a cultural basis for political and military nationalism, condemning French culture and its liberal conception of the individual citizen as “primitive sensuous animality.” By contrast they saw the German Volk as possessing ‘true’ individuality through intuitive merger with the Nation as the historical bearer of Absolute Reason. The assertion of cultural superiority was used to justify German domination of the French and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.6

Prior to World War One, nationalism did not exist in the United States—a multi-racial multi-ethnic nation. Our national ideal has been social—the deep and broad ties constitutive of democracy.7 The Chinese are devoted to their long-standing habits and traditions, but prior to the War had never had a strong central state.8 Chinese nationals who traveled for education or commerce could see China as a nation, a greater unity beyond their villages and regions. But they couldn’t convert this perception into political nationalism, as there was no central state to which they could transfer earlier loyalties;9 an effective Chinese state was (in 1920-21) a project for the future, which other nations should leave to the Chinese.10

After World War One, liberal and Marxist political theorists and economists predicted that increasing trade and international labor organization would lead to the decline of nationalism, but both were wrong: by the 1920s a new toxic militaristic nationalism spread

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rapidly. Science and technology were increasingly devoted to corporations and the military, which shaped national scientific agendas to further competitiveness. In America, cries of ‘America First’ paralleled the propaganda of totalitarian regimes of Germany and Russia. Even after World War II and the Hydrogen bomb, nationalism remains a potent force for global anarchy, chaos, and mass destruction.

The Ethics of Nationalism

The Two Sides of Nationalism

Dewey grants that nationalism has been a ‘two-sided’ ethical force, a “tangled mixture of good and bad.” On the positive side, nationalism was a “movement away from obnoxious conditions”: narrow parochialism and dynastic despotism. The buildup of nation states substituted a unity of feeling and freedom of intercourse over wider areas, putting an end to local isolations, and generated “a personal loyalty which had previously been found only among the members of small city states.”

Except for where the national spirit has been built up, public spirit is practically non-existent.

But on the negative side, nation states have been built up by and sustained through violent conflict. Internal unity and fellow feeling has been accompanied by hostility to the people of other nations. The devotion to the state as an object of worship has made the state into the post-imperial church. But “the ‘nation’ by which millions swear and for which they demand the sacrifice of all other

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loyalties is a myth; it has no being outside of emotion and fantasy.”

**Nationalism is a ‘Menace’ to Individual Freedom**

Nationalism is a “menace” to individual freedom; it constrains the give and take among peoples that leads to creative advances in all field; it demands a loyalty to the state superior to all other loyalties, and thus distorts the aspirations and opportunities of individuals. Peoples measure their national states by their power to expand. Thus individuals everywhere live under the pall of the threat of war, while war in itself is completely destructive of personal freedom—a “wholesale enslavement of entire populations.”

**The Ethical Challenge of Nationalism**

Nationalism has “gone so far as to detach individuals from their local ties, but not far enough to give them a new center and order of life.” The ethical challenge is developing the good, or social, aspects of nationalism into a new order, without furthering its evil political and cultural sides.

We must put an end to the state as an object of worship and recognize that the “nation” of political nationalism and patriotism is a “myth.” But historical cultural nations do exist as a fact - even though they are rarely the nations of political nationalism. It may not, however, be possible or advantageous for each national cultural group to have its own autonomous state, or indefinitely to retain their societal cultures intact. Cultural differences should be welcomed. The special good of each group should be extracted so that it will surrender into a common fund of wisdom and experience constituting the national spirit of America. The dangerous thing is

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for the different groups to isolate themselves, to live off their pasts, to keep themselves intact and then to refuse to accept what other cultures have to offer, so as thereby to be transmuted into authentic Americans. The idea of cultural uniformity is repellent. All national groups within modern nation states have to be ready to assimilate—not to some prior fixed cultural pattern or in a ‘melting pot’—but to one another.

Each national group in the modern nation state however, whether through incorporation or immigration, must have its own recognized cultural rights as may be consistent with general social unity: to sustain the national language and literature, moral outlook and religion, and in multinational states formed through aggregation of multiple national cultural groups, a degree of political autonomy.

The National Mystique vs. Public Spirit

Nationalism has created a “purely fictitious” conception of the national interest, a symptom of the absence of enduring and meaningful ties in the corporate state. Corporate and military elites use mystical devotion to the state for plunder and profit. Humans fall for this nationalistic propaganda because they have a “pathetic instinct” toward the adventure of living and struggling together, which daily life under modern corporate conditions does not satisfy. There is, however, a genuine national interest that the fictitious conception obscures: that those among us be “protected from pestilence, from unnecessary infection, that they enjoy a reasonable degree of economic comfort and independence, that they be protected from crime and from external invasion.”

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Science and the New Morale

To draw on the national spirit to address emerging problems, the prevailing aggressive culture of nationalism has to be replaced by a culture of science. Heretofore, science and science-based technology have been used primarily by corporations and the military as instruments of national competitiveness, leading to inevitable wars. Nationalism has shaped the scientific agenda, whether towards research affecting national economic superiority or military triumph. “Science” is now embedded in the prevailing “folklore” of aggressive nationalism because it is understood in the popular mind as providing new powerful means for existing ends including national military and commercial ascendency.

But science is also creating new kinds of individuals who seek to guide decisions through disinterested cooperative inquiry rather than force. Science is creating a new folklore—a “new morale” leading beyond the search for means to ends existing independently of science, to the creation of new desires and new ends. The value of science lies not just in getting us what we want, but in freeing our imaginations and our sense of power in achieving what was previously unimaginable—including a world without war. Such a world could be secured through global institutions featuring deep and broad communication and cooperative inquiry in problem solving instead of coercive force—in essence, a global democratic order. This new morale can, and must, be spread.

The Challenge of Nationalism to Philosophy and Education

This sets a challenge to philosophy and education. For Dewey the two are two sides of a single coin: philosophy is the general theory of education, while education in its broadest sense provides the means

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for fostering growth in accord with philosophical ideals.

**Philosophy**

Social movements are prior to philosophical reflection, but philosophical ideas have two important social functions. First, “ideas may run ahead of action” and “people who are acutely sensitive may feel movements that have a great future while they are still inchoate.” Second, philosophical formulations may help to clarify the aims of the movements, and provide social actors with intellectual justifications for their activities. Philosophical ideas enter history and shape new institutions as they are forming. “What was once an intellectual proposition becomes a sustaining part of a later state of culture.”

Nationalistic philosophies generate justifications for war. Hegel’s philosophy of history, in particular, ignores the simple fact that nation-states are a new invention. Hegel’s insistence that only one nation at a time can be the bearer of Reason and the fullest realization of God ignores the possibility that the nation, like previous forms of collective life, might be temporary and eventually give way to a genuinely international federation to which nations will be subordinated.

The United States is too new a nation for its national experience to give rise to a philosophy of history. “Our history is too obviously future.” We need a philosophy that “articulates and consolidates” ideas inherent in our social practices, and clarifies and guides future endeavors. The depth and width of human intercourse is the measure of civilization. An American philosophy must make the freedom and fullness of human companionship the aim, and intelligent cooperative experimentation the method—both in our internal affairs and in international relations.

Writing at the end of World War Two, Dewey puts this idea

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in more universal terms, stating that the philosophical ideas underlying nationalism are mixtures of incompatible ancient and modern elements. He prescribes that philosophy must “purge” itself of unmodern elements, by “facing the things in modern life that are genuinely modern” and liberating them from the “burden of old and incompatible institutions (such as the sovereign nation) that are weighing them down.”

Creating a thoroughly modern philosophy will require an intellectual “revolution.”

**Education in the Formation of Nation States**

Popular education has been the primary means for building up national consciousness in Prussia, Austria, and France. The United States did not face the same inter-national struggles as the European nations. In the colonial period the American states used the schools to build a foundation of knowledge for citizens. The movement in America that corresponded to 19th century European Nationalism was the common school movement of the 1830s-1850s, which was social rather than political; it was aimed at assimilating immigrants and making education and opportunity available to all. Education was seen as a patriotic necessity, the salvation of the Republic. But American patriotism did not yet degenerate into rigid nationalism, as the Republican mission included the provision of asylum for the oppressed from other nations. The pursuit of the democratic ideal through education, furthermore, was not seen as demanding any specific instructional programs or methods.

In the early 20th century the social mission of American elementary education demanded the incorporation of science, as the spirit of investigation. Progressive educators saw that in the modern world all trades and occupations depend upon science; they proposed

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an education through occupations which would in itself provide an introduction to science.\(^{41}\)

**Nationalism and Indoctrination**

European nation states invented “definite techniques” of propaganda and indoctrination to lead their citizen subjects both to national identification and hostility towards ‘aliens.’ After World War One, The United States followed suit. As a result, Dewey notes in 1937 that “our schools have been guilty of a great deal of indoctrination of a bad kind—indoctrination into nationalism, miscalled patriotism.” Returning to his distinction between devotion to the state vs. devotion to the genuine national interest—the interest in the well-being of our co-nationals—Dewey adds that “everybody ought to have public spirit, but the indoctrination of patriotism has given us a narrow, vicious type of nationalism” instead.\(^{42}\)

**The Anti-Nationalist Educational Program**

So what should educators do about nationalism? In his major 1916 essay “Nationalizing Education” \(^{43}\) Dewey says they should withstand the clamor for political nationalism based on hysterical excitedness and the imposition of mechanical patriotic drills. Instead they should emphasize the distinctly social dimension of education. The United States has an international, interracial character. Democratic education should first promote tolerance and respect for all groups, and recognize specific contributions made by each national group.\(^{44}\)

Dewey then adds a second, more robust social feature. Beyond contributions of the different groups, we need to emphasize a characteristic that all foreigners recognize in America: the openness and friendliness of our people. This social feature of the American character was bred through opportunity on the expanding frontier.

\(^{43}\) Dewey, MW 10: 203-211.
But as the frontier period has ended, those who could join together in friendship when subduing nature might well turn to subduing one another. To prevent inter-ethnic conflict and violence, the schools must create conditions for inter-group friendliness. The virtues of self-esteem, forbearance, well-wishing which were largely unconscious products of frontier circumstances must now become the “conscious fruits” of education. “To nationalize American education is to use education to promote our national idea—which is the idea of democracy.”

Dewey developed this second feature into the comprehensive educational program of *Democracy and Education*. Children from all ethnic and racial groups in the neighborhood or district are to be brought together and set to work in cooperative activities or occupations, addressing problems and seeking to achieve common ends. Their differing perspectives become both important elements of subject matter as well as ingredients contributing to success. They build forbearance and mutual respect, self-esteem and fellow feeling, while also acquiring the capabilities—intellectual and social—of adult life.

Dewey returns to the problem of democratic education in the late 1930s. The comprehensive aim of school education, he said, has become the subordination of the individual to the nation; schooling in totalitarian Germany and Russia, and also in America, has become indoctrination in nationalism and patriotism.

Dewey acknowledges that education needs some frame of reference or it is bound to be aimless. In place of nationalism, Dewey again offers democracy, but notes that democracy is not a fixed ideal. “The problem of education in its relation to the direction of social change is all one with the problem of finding out what democracy means in its total range of concrete applications: economic, social, domestic, international, religious, cultural and political.”

Education at all levels must be organized around investigations to discover what democracy concretely requires and how to make progress in realizing it.

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