



## **The Limits of Nationalism**

Chaim Gans

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Chaim Gans is a cosmopolitan liberal with a keen sense of the importance of national culture and identity. In this book, he attempts to find a new place for nationalism within a liberal world order. The proposed theory is an innovative response to the competing pressures of globalism and particularism in the modern world, which does not shirk difficult issues such as national self-determination, homeland rights and immigration policy.

A great strength of *The Limits of Nationalism* is the conceptual clarity of Gans' discussion. He makes a series of enlightening analytical distinctions that contribute to existing debates as well as creating the space for his own particular version of liberal nationalism. Three distinctions are particularly interesting. First, he neatly distinguishes two 'families' of nationalism, namely, 'statist nationalism' and 'cultural nationalism' (p. 7). Statist nationalism claims that 'in order for states to realize political values such as democracy, economic welfare and distributive justice, the citizenries of states must share a homogenous national culture' (p. 7). The 'national culture is the means, and the values of the state are the aims', so for statist nationalism it really does not matter which national culture a state promotes (p. 7). Cultural nationalism claims that 'members of groups sharing a common history and societal culture have a fundamental morally significant interest in adhering to their culture and sustaining it across generations. This interest warrants the protection of states' (p. 7). It is the existing culture that matters and the state is a means of protecting it. Gans' aim is to defend a liberal version of cultural nationalism.

The second distinction that he makes is between three theses of cultural nationalism. The 'adherence thesis' claims that 'people have an interest in adhering to their own national culture' (p. 40). The 'historical thesis' claims that people have an interest in the continuation of their culture beyond their own lifespan (pp. 39, 49). The 'political thesis' claims that these interests 'must be protected politically' (p. 58). Gans reviews the leading 'freedom-based' and 'identity-based' arguments for cultural nationalism, concluding that they may justify the adherence thesis but not the historical thesis. People might 'have an interest [that should be protected politically] in adhering to their national culture because it is a component of their identity', but what interest do they



have in the continuation of that culture indefinitely into the future after their own death (p. 50)?

Gans suggests an 'endeavour-based argument' for the historical thesis (p. 40). An important part of the meaningfulness of life comes from the hope that our actions 'have an impact in the world outside [us] ... [and] in the world beyond [our] own lifetimes' (pp. 52–53). If we live our lives within national cultures, it is in those cultures that 'individuals' endeavours have a chance of leaving their mark' (p. 54). My 'impact in the world' disappears with the 'extinction' of my culture (pp. 52, 54). Moreover, '[such] extinction casts a shadow on the value of [our] endeavours at the time they are undertaken and the meaningfulness of [our] lives when lived' (p. 54). We have an interest in the continuation of our national cultures because (1) we have an interest in having a meaningful life; (2) having a meaningful life involves having an impact in the world; and (3) (typically) having an impact in the world means pursuing or contributing to projects that have meaning within a particular (and continuing) national culture. Gans' defence of the historical thesis is certainly worthy of closer inspection — and he is undoubtedly right that something beyond the standard arguments is needed — but both (2) and (3) deserve more critical attention than he gives them. For example, what does it mean to have an 'impact in the world'? Is it necessary that my culture continue forever for my actions to be meaningful? Why does the longevity of my culture add meaning to my actions? Does the meaningfulness of my actions depend on them being remembered (or valued or understood) by future generations?

Gans uses his defence of cultural nationalism as the starting point for a sophisticated theoretical discussion of the proper political response to cultural nationalism. Again, he introduces some useful distinctions. He argues that there are different ways of protecting a national group's interest in its own future. The standard — 'statist' — conception claims that 'the right to self-determination should be institutionalized by independent statehood' (p. 67). However, this kind of 'state-seeking nationalism' is to be contrasted with 'sub-statist' and 'inter-statist' nationalisms (p. 68). Sub-statist nationalism understands the right to self-determination as 'a right within the state ... [not] a right to independent statehood' (p. 68). Moreover, it is not a right of majorities within a state but rather 'a right to which each national group in the world is entitled' (typically in their 'historic homeland') (p. 68). Inter-statist nationalism recognizes that national groups are not bound by state borders but that the cultural identity of diasporas usually depends on their continued connection with their homeland. Therefore, inter-statist nationalism provides special rights or privileges to those living away from their historic homeland (e.g., rights to vote on matters of national — not state — interest; and the allotment of 'a portion of [a state's] immigration quotas to those immigrants who, for nationalist reasons, wish to live where their nation enjoys



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self-determination' (p. 135)). Gans argues against statist nationalism, connecting it to four types of injustice: intra-state injustice; global injustice; intra-national injustice and oppression. In its place, he defends a sub- and inter-statist version of cultural nationalism.

*The Limits of Nationalism* is a clear and concise statement of an innovative theory that makes a significant contribution to ongoing debates about liberal nationalism. Gans has developed a genuinely creative 'solution' to one of the most difficult theoretical and practical problems of our time. Some liberals and some nationalists will not like Gans' proposals, but both should learn much from a critical engagement with his arguments.

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