

National and Urban Ways of Seeing



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NATIONAL AND URBAN WAYS OF SEEING

This short paper discusses the persistence of nationalism in framing the ways in which we understand what it means to be political. The paper begins by outlining what I describe as a nationalist 'way of seeing,' which involves understanding world politics as organised by the categories of 'us' and 'them' and ordered according to a linear and homogenous experience of time. I trace how two contemporary theorists, of cosmopolitanism and globalism respectively, allow this nationalist way of seeing to frame their understandings of political community and, specifically, their discussion of alternatives to nationalism. In the second part of the paper, I turn to a novel written by Hanif Kureishi called 'The Black Album' (1995), to discuss how literary texts set in cities might offer other ways of understanding political community. By troubling an experience of community as bounded and of time as linear, I argue that this novel allows us to discuss what an 'urban way of seeing' might offer for the task of developing non-nationalistic accounts of living with others.



Despite the many attempts at thinking beyond nationalism by way of the 'global' or the 'cosmopolitan' since the early 1980s, the idea that 'we' belong to a community that can be distinguished clearly from 'theirs' continues to dominate different ways of expressing who we are and how we understand our relationship to others in the world. This return of a 'heightened nationalism' seemed especially evident in the aftermath of the events of 11 September 2001 in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, when former President George Bush and former Prime Minister Tony Blair rejuvenated an orientalist understanding of the world as divided between those who are modern and those who are backward, those who have embraced progress and those who refuse to do so, those that are civilised and those that are beyond civilisation (Blair, 2007; Gregory, 2004). This portrayal of world politics carries echoes of colonial times, when geopolitical conflicts were understood as a battle between homogenous civilisations, arranged as if 'the world is an assemblage of sheep and goats, neatly partitioned off by national frontiers' (Paul Gilroy quoting George Orwell, 2004, p. 25). This nationalist way of seeing works not only by separating one country from another, but by separating an entire people from another people. More importantly for the argument I want to develop here, it involves framing those peoples according to a narrative of temporal progress, in which some are understood to be more developed, progressive and modern than others (Helliwell and Hindess, 2005; Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004). Much like the idea of the nation, this idea of ordering people according to a ladder of progress also belongs to the time of the Enlightenment, and to figures including Jean-Jacques Rousseau who represents one of the first figures to make the argument that men have transformed over time from a 'savage' to a 'civilised' state (Hutchings, 2008; Wokler, 1987). This narrative of progress continues to be hugely influential in framing our understanding of political life. For example, it often frames the ways in which we conceive of the relationship between a national and a cosmopolitan and/or global world.

In engaging nationalism as a *particular way of seeing*, I address the theme of *light* by way of the question of 'vision' in world politics (Agnew, 1998). Specifically, I want to ask how ways of seeing enable different ways of understanding what it means to live with others. Nationalism

forms a fairly recent way of understanding political community. It relies on the prior assumption of state sovereignty: that the borders between one political community and the next are distinct and solid, rather than porous and overlapping. The nation is imagined as sovereign in the sense that there is no higher, divinely ordained, political authority (Anderson, 1991; Calhoun, 1997; Gellner, 1983). The nation under nationalism also informs both a particular and a universal way of seeing: that is, all members of the community will understand themselves as sharing something in common and furthermore, understand themselves as partaking in a world of nations. Finally, this nationalist understanding of what it means to form a political community relies on an understanding of time as progressive and linear. As I will argue in the course of this paper, several attempts at thinking beyond the nation are nevertheless indebted to a nationalist way of seeing, as can be gleaned from the way in which this experience of time as linear is taken for granted. This makes it especially difficult for us to imagine what a form of political community *beyond* nationalism might look like.

The first part of this paper will develop this argument in relation to two different examples of engaging a cosmopolitan/global political order, by way of the works of Craig Calhoun and Manfred Steger. I examine how narratives of time as linear and progressive inform those works and thus contribute towards a nationalist way of seeing. The second part of the paper will ask how we might understand political community differently by engaging with other experiences of time through the site of the city. In this section, I turn to a novel by the British author Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album*, published in 1995 and set in late 1980s London, in order to consider how 'seeing like a city' (Magnusson, 2011) might open up other ways of imagining community.

The National, the Cosmopolitan and the Global

The sociologist and critical theorist Craig Calhoun has written widely on the relationship between nationalism and cosmopolitanism (2002, 2007, 2008). He is critical of some cosmopolitanist literatures for failing to appreciate the *ties* people feel towards place, culture and language. As he puts it, it is insufficient to present individuals as able to opt in or out of their attachments; people are not abstract individuals who can decide whether or not to enter group formations. Rather we find ourselves *already part* of 'social contexts in which people are moved by their commitments to each other' (2002, p. 875). Calhoun makes many important points about how people do not precede their cultures but are formed through culture. But what is interesting about his work is the way in which he moves from this critique of a cosmopolitanism to conclude that *national attachments continue to matter*:

Imagining a world without nations, a world in which ethnicity is simply a consumer taste [...] is like imagining the melting pot in which all ethnicities vanish into the formation of a new kind of individual. [...] this produces an ideology especially attractive to some. It neglects the reasons why many others need and reproduce ethnic or national distinctions (2008, p. 437).

Calhoun presents the reader with a choice between a national or a cosmopolitan world – but I want to argue that this choice is made possible by a nationalist imaginary because they are ordered according to a homogenous, linear account of time. According to this framing, we can either choose to move forward to a world in which 'ethnicities vanish' or defend the status quo. This approach steers and limits the debates we can have about a cosmopolitical future as it can only appear in relation to the *loss* of the nation. It reveals a decidedly conservative position in that we can only choose to continue with the world as it is or opt for a world that threatens to destroy everything we have. The framing of the question allows for very little space to consider how else world politics could be organised. Thus whilst Calhoun makes several important points

about the limits of particular understandings of cosmopolitanism and their ability to take cultural attachments seriously, what is at stake is the way in which he concludes that cultural attachments *must* ultimately be organised on national terms. This analysis therefore leaves us unable to ask how we might understand cultural attachments outside of a nationalist frame.

The second argument I develop is with the international relations scholar and theorist of globalisation Manfred Steger, and in particular his book *The Rise of the Global Imaginary* (2008). Globalisation literatures represent a very different position on nationalism as these literatures generally aim to consider more seriously a form of political space beyond the nation-state. Writing in this vein, Steger argues that national identities have in large part *already* become 'destabilised' in the contemporary world (p. 10). Steger would therefore appear to present a very different position to Calhoun, as he is explicitly in favour of going beyond the nation. But what I want to argue is that both their attempts at thinking a future without nationalism are informed by a linear and progressive understanding of time, which in turn leaves us with an either/or set of options. For example, in Steger's case, the image of the future is tied into an account of 'mixture.' In this case, he heralds advances including an increase of dual citizenship, jet travel, new technologies, and cosmopolitan café culture as signalling the end of the nation. But what is problematic here is the suggestion that once upon a time we had a simpler and less complex understanding of identity. This framing ignores the fact that nationalism was in early twentieth-century Europe *formed* from the mass movement of people, such as at the end of the First World War and again at the end of the Second World War, when thousands were displaced from their originary homelands (Hobsbawm, 1990). But my argument is not based around empirics but rather around the political imaginary that contends there was a time in the past when identities were simpler, less fluid and less mixed. This way of the world never did exist; however, the idea that there can be such a thing as pure and separable identities forms a crucial element of a nationalist way of seeing. In narrating this shift from the national to the global, Steger makes it difficult to raise questions about other ideas of political community that jostled against the national. The national imaginary has of course been heavily resisted, fought and countered at repeated historical points and in various geographical contexts, but rather than pursue such moments, Steger presents this global world order as the only model of political community now available.

The positions of Calhoun and Steger are significantly different: the former is suspicious of 'cosmopolitan dreams' and insists that the nation continues to form the best model of political community; the latter is instinctively suspicious of nationalism. But what is striking is that both analyses rely upon an experience of time as progressive and linear. Consequently, I argue, both narratives rely upon a nationalist conceptual toolkit in trying to make sense of the possibilities of political life beyond the nation. This indicates the persistence of nationalism in framing the ways in which we are able to understand political community. In both accounts, community is defined by commonality in a bounded political space. This suggests the difficulties of prising open the question of imagining a future beyond nationalism. The next section of this paper argues that the task of developing a robust critique of nationalism relies upon being able to acknowledge a plurality of temporal trajectories, reflecting a different understanding of living together. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, we need to acknowledge heterogeneous practices of seeing, which recognise 'that the field of the political is constitutively not singular' (2008, p. 148). This is why I turn to the city. But before I do so, I want to look briefly at how this narrative of a simpler understanding of identity in a time gone by appears in the work of the Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This is important in order to appreciate something of the historical legacies of this way of seeing.

The Nation and the City

Born in 1712, Jean-Jacques Rousseau cannot be described as a 'nationalist' as he was writing before the French Revolution and would not recognise the form of 'popular sovereignty' that we now associate with the nation as a constituency that provides legitimacy to the state (Bartelson, 2001; Wokler, 2000). Nevertheless, Rousseau is an important theorist for a study of nationalism because of his portrayal of modern life as constituted in relation to the *loss* of community (Berman, 1983; Connolly, 1988). Rousseau presents an understanding of the modern world as full of discord, noise and continual flux and yearns for a sense of unity and stillness that will keep such discord at bay. He craves a return to a simpler and uncomplicated political community. What is problematic about this view of the world is not only that such a state of purity and tranquillity never existed but that it works to establish a *choice* between a world of unitary or mixed identities. For example, in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1992; first published 1755), Rousseau depicts the state of nature as tranquil, calm and without significant movement. Although he goes on to describe how men have no choice but to leave the state of nature and come together to form political communities, this image of the state of nature forms a recurring dream for him. Nothing in everyday life can be as perfect as the state of nature that we have left. As we go further into the state of society, we encounter difference, discord and deterioration. The key point that I want to draw attention to, for the purposes of this argument, is the way in which this foundational story establishes an account of political life as torn between a state of *purity* and *mixture*. It is this way of thinking that continues to inform many political texts, as I have argued in relation to the works of Calhoun and Steger. We are presented with a choice between a time of identity and a time of difference, and a claim that we have fallen/progressed from one of these states to the other. This makes it difficult to consider forms of political community outside of the nationalist choice of *either* unity *or* difference.

Unsurprisingly, Rousseau hated the clutter, noise and movement that formed part of an urbanising society. Yet, despite castigating the city, he was aware that there was something about the city that was instructive in learning what it might mean to live in common. As the political theorist Mira Morgenstern argues, Rousseau was *both* deeply pessimistic *and yet intrigued* about the changes that life in a modern (and urbanising) world would bring (Morgenstern, 2009). It is for this reason that he sends his ideal pupil, Émile, to be educated in Paris. However, in order to ensure that he maintains an authentic and untainted life, Rousseau insists that '*Émile will be in, not of, the city: he will participate in the activities of society without being defined by them*' (Morgenstern, 2009, p. 169, my emphasis). Émile, like Rousseau, eventually returns to a life in the countryside so as not to be tainted by the 'black mores' of the city, but the city nevertheless introduces Émile to the question of living together. It is this question of how we might live together that I want to wrest back from the answer that we are presented with under nationalism: that we must live together with our own like. In his defence of purity, and of a logic of 'us' and 'them,' Rousseau offers an early expression of a nationalist way of seeing.

What I have argued so far is that the debate between the national and the cosmopolitan/global is often an empty debate, as both sides assume a similar understanding of political community as formed through *either* sameness *or* difference. What then might be gained by turning to the site of the city to explore other potential imaginaries of living with others? In this final section, I want to outline what literary texts on the experience of urban life might offer to the task of seeing community. Firstly, I argue that such writings trouble an understanding of time as linear and homogenous (Shapiro, 2010; Frisby, 2001). As Michael Shapiro describes in his book *The Time of the City*, disorderly city life evokes fragmentation and, as such, complicates the progressive,

orderly geography of a community of nation-states (2010, p. 26). It presents another way of seeing – where ‘things are in flux’ (Magnusson, 2011, p. 9). Secondly, I want to claim that the depiction of difference in some urban literature goes beyond the logic of purity versus mixture. Rather, difference is understood as a constitutive condition and, I argue, a creative force that informs other ways of living with others. To expand on this point briefly, we can draw on the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s work on political community (1991, 2003). For Nancy, relations with others are essential to the possibility of all identities, and any understanding of identity as a ‘pure substance’ relies upon obscuring that relation. He is therefore critical of Rousseauist dreams of purity. But he is also critical of cosmopolitanist celebrations of difference. This is because, as he puts it, it makes no sense to ‘celebrate’ mixture as there has never been anything ‘pure’ that one could or should ‘mix’ with some other ‘purity’ (Nancy, 2003, p. 280). In order to get away from this false choice between purity and mixture, Nancy contends that we should think of cities as the locus of a melee: ‘of crossing and halt, of entanglement’ (p. 277). This offers us another way of seeing political community, as it avoids the opposition between identity, stability and stillness on the one hand and mixture, turmoil and difference on the other hand. In allowing us to move away from understanding identities and differences according to an oppositional and linear logic, it enables us to explore what it might mean to imagine community beyond nationalism.

An Urban Way of Seeing?

A city doesn’t need to be identified by anything other than a name, which marks a locus, the locus of a melee, of crossing and halt, of entanglement and commerce, competition, release, circulation, scattering of lights (Nancy, 2003, p. 277).

In this final section, I want to turn to an example of a literary text that narrates this experience of the city as a melee, using Hanif Kureishi’s novel *The Black Album* (1995). This novel takes as its subject matter the tension between liberalism and fundamentalism in the context of late 1980s London, when Ayatollah Khomeini had pronounced his fatwa upon Salman Rushdie and the IRA was actively placing explosive devices across the capital. Although it is set in a different historical context, the novel is relevant in the context of London’s position in the ongoing transnational geographies of the War on Terror and its marked inequalities. As critic Sara Upstone (2008) argues in her reading of the novel, it was published 10 years before the London bombings of 7 July 2005, and yet appears almost prophetic of those events. The novel engages with the idea of the city as a site of difference and with the violence of nationalist ways of seeing. It does so by articulating a politics of difference in a genre unhindered by a ‘groupist’ model of thinking (Brubaker, 2004), which assumes that people fit into neatly bounded groups that travel together in time. For example, the novel’s main character, Shahid Hasan, lives in a bedsit in Kilburn, north-west London, in a house ‘filled with Africans, Irish people, Pakistanis and even a group of English students’ (1995, p. 1, my emphasis). Hasan moves across London’s streets and boroughs and its differing racial as well as class landscape and is transformed by the city. London is thus also a central character for this novel and carries the potential to bring about change. Reworking a longstanding theme of modernity (Frisby, 2001), as well as a central theme in several of Kureishi’s other novels and screenplays including *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985), Shahid arrives in the city to seek another way of being and seeing. The city presents the potential for him to become someone else or, at least, to encounter a future that is open and beyond what he might have previously been able to imagine. It appears as a place that offers a refuge beyond predetermined identity categories: ‘He figured it would be easier to get out, out of this whole thing, whatever it was, and disappear into the city’ (1995, pp. 57–8).

Shahid is initially drawn to a model of community based around sameness. He describes his new friends Riaz, Chad and Hat as 'the first people he'd met who were like him' and to whom 'he didn't have to explain anything' (p. 57). But eventually, Shahid pulls away from this crowd, and from their fundamentalist politics and belief in purity. We are presented with momentary glimpses of the kind of community of differences presented by the city – where differences do not add up to a coherent whole but rather remain fragmented. As Shahid comments in the aftermath of a bomb going off at Victoria station: 'The proximity of others comforted him: they all sat guarded, scared, wet. Such a tragedy was the closest a city like London could come to communal emotion' (p. 103). It is through these micro encounters that Shahid finds himself increasingly torn between accounts of a pure identity and the everyday melee of the global city. The city complicates the clear-cut perspectives of both the fundamentalists *and* the liberalism of the college lecturer. For example, when his on/off girlfriend, and lecturer, Deedee Osgood asks him, with regards to Riaz, Chad and Hat: 'Don't they scare you?' he shakes his head and says: 'Some people have anger and passionate beliefs. Without that nothing could get done.' When she asks in reply whether he has anger and passionate beliefs, he responds: 'The thing is, Deedee, clever white people like you are too cynical. [...] Why would you want to change anything when you already have everything your way?' (p. 110). But faced with the force of the city, orderly ideas about 'us' and 'them' begin to unravel. He opts for an uncertain life with Deedee and learns to give up on dreams of pure autonomy. This is not a pain-free process, and it requires a leap of faith on Shahid's part: 'He had never relied on anyone before' (p. 275). But there is also no avoiding the ways in which the city places too much pressure on unified and bounded categories of identity: 'The problem was, when he was with his friends their story compelled him. But when he walked out, like someone leaving a cinema, he found the world to be more subtle and inexplicable' (p. 132).

The International Relations scholar Michael Shapiro argues that novels, films and the 'arts' in general help us consider other ways of thinking the political (2010). Kureishi's novel makes such an intervention by addressing different ways of seeing and of understanding political community, which is less about subscribing to a model that is already familiar to us, and more about daring to embrace disjointed models and alliances of political belonging. In large parts, the novel seeks to address the cultural alienation that this young second-generation British citizen faces. He cannot follow his sister-in-law, Zulma, who finds her home by embracing Thatcherism, 'because the new money knows no colour' (Kureishi, 1995, p. 87). He cannot follow his mother's lead and her refusal to acknowledge that racism exists (p. 73). But in its conclusion, this novel is not about finding where one fits in but about the dangers of subscribing to solid identity groups, and about learning to inhabit another kind of political space – one that is not pure. The desire to 'fit in' animates most of the central characters – but it is a desire that has destructive effects. So for Chad, for example, who says 'I am homeless. [...] I have no country,' Deedee replies, 'you're not missing much' (p. 108). The point is that this promise of a straightforward contract between culture, territory and identity in a common time and space makes Chad feel like an outcast and fuels his anger. But for the reader, it appears as a dangerous fantasy.

In these ways, *The Black Album* engages with the question of how we might imagine political community. In doing so, the novel has fallen victim to the critique that it is overly didactic, and this is a valid point. Although it tries to write against 'purity,' it too easily equates purity with religion, and therefore fails to address questions about faith and spirituality (for example) as part of the melee of urban life. However, in its depiction of London as a city that in part shapes its characters, and offers the characters another way of seeing, the novel includes a portrayal of different temporalities that cannot all be brought together into a homogenous unit. It allows us to imagine space 'as the sphere in which distinct narratives co-exist' (Massey, 2007, p. 279).

Community is not understood as something that is at risk of being lost, or as a promise that can guide us into the future, but as constitutive heterogeneity, and as what we already have on display in a global city. This, the inexhaustible difference, disagreement, and melee of urban life forms the very stuff of politics – the stuff that nationalistic approaches to politics ultimately seek to suppress. The city as melee does not offer a picture of ‘happy cosmopolitanism’ nor does it suggest an absence of violence. But it does form an irrepressible, creative force that enables us to glean other ways of understanding what it might mean to live together.



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Insights

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