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What is Nationalism?

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It's no secret that anarchists don't like states. In fact, we anarchists are generally defined by our rejection of, and opposition to state institutions, such as governments, police, and prisons. But while opposing these physical manifestations of the state is certainly an important part of anarchist practice, anarchist critiques of the state go much further, and include the underlying social relationships and ideologies that have historically been used to create states, and to uphold their authority. One of the most important of these concepts is nationalism. So what is it, exactly, and what do anarchists have against it?

Well... basically, nationalism is a kind of social glue that holds together people of different ethnic, tribal, linguistic, religious and cultural groupings into a single defined population, linked to a specific geographic territory. The problem with nationalism is not necessarily that it's a glue - there are plenty of examples of organic nationalism, based on shared culture, language and history, and in fact, many anarchists have been heavily influenced by, and have even participated in struggles motivated by nationalism, such as the resistance waged by Indigenous nations against their colonial oppressors, or the establishment, in 1929, of the Shinmen Autonomous Zone

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<https://sub.media/video/what-is-nationalism/>
a transcription of the sub.media film short of the series "A is for Anarchy"

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by Chinese, Korean and Japanese anarchists fighting against Japanese imperialism. The problem with nationalism lies in its tendency to mask social contradictions among a population, thereby allowing for the reproduction of hierarchies, which in turn end up producing a new state structure. Which is another way of saying that nationalism is a force that groups people together in a way that tends to maintain the division of the human race into competing states.

In countries with strong state institutions, nationalism is more commonly referred to as patriotism, and everyone is conditioned from a young age to believe that loving your country is one of the most important, natural things you can do. In school we are forced to stand every morning for the national anthem, and taught a heavily sanitized version of our nation's history. We even celebrate its birthday every year... with fireworks no less.

Because nationalism is so ingrained into our lives, customs and beliefs, many people would be surprised to learn that it's a relatively new thing. While some countries, such as China, have existed as a more or less unified territory for thousands of years, others, such as Italy, have been around for less than 150. And lots of states are even younger than that.

For most of human history, nation states simply didn't exist. Instead, the world was split up into city-states, ruled by kingdoms and empires, whose borders were in a constant state of flux. Back then, most people lived simple lives as farmers, and had very little contact with what we now understand as the state. And because languages were mostly passed on orally, many different dialects flourished and existed side by side.

Although nationalism emerged in different parts of the world at different times, the development of the modern nation-state is often associated with the early development of capitalism, and European colonial expansion beginning in the 16th century. The race to plunder the world of its land and resources kicked off an intense competition between

kingdoms in Europe, leading to the proliferation and gradual consolidation of states with clearly defined borders.

In the so-called “New World”, settlers from a variety of European nations forged new collective national identities, born of the shared experience of racial domination over Indigenous nations and enslaved Africans.

During the mid-19th century, many states first began introducing centralized education systems, further facilitating nationalist indoctrination, and helping to eliminate remaining linguistic and cultural differences. In extreme cases, such as the Residential Schools system in so-called Canada, this practice amounted to full fledged genocide.

Not content with their pillage of the Americas, European colonialists carved up Africa and the former Ottoman Empire into arbitrarily defined states, which in turn produced nationalist strong-men who brutally massacred linguistic and ethnic minorities, such as the Tuaregs of North-west Africa, and the Armenians and Kurds in the Middle East.

Nationalism relies on grand, unifying narratives to bind populations together in pursuit of a common destiny. Whether this assumes the form of the individualistic pursuit of the so-called American Dream, or the Nazis’ pursuit of the Third Reich, whether the heavily militarized ethno-religious protectionism of Israel, or the totalitarian self-reliance of North Korea’s Juche, nationalism provides an ideological framework for the manipulation and social control of large groups of people. It provides a sense of collective belonging, and unity of purpose, while simultaneously helping to justify the massive application of state violence towards perceived “others”. Human history is awash in blood justified in the name of nationalism, from ethnic cleansing and genocide, to aggressive wars launched in defense of abstract, emotion-laden concepts, such as freedom, or the glory of the fatherland.

Rather than limiting ourselves to the narrow perspective of nationalism, anarchists put forward the competing concept of

internationalism. This flows from the realization that borders and nations are artificial constructs meant to divide us, and that struggles for freedom and dignity waged anywhere in the world are deserving of our solidarity and support. That rather than fighting and dying in wars for the sake of the rich and powerful, oppressed people should unite to wage war against our common oppressors. And finally, that for humanity to reach its full potential, and come together to confront the problems that we face as a species, we require nothing less than a global revolution.