

## The Problem of Nation-State in Democratic Politics

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I argue that in emphasizing the importance of national identity for democracy, scholars of nationalism, such as Craig Calhoun, overlook the significance of other non-nationalistic forms of solidarity also central to democracy, and the violence inherent in the idea of national identity. By bringing together postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha and postmodern political philosophers William Connolly and Saul Newman, I expose their theoretical limitations and attempt to uncover potential forms of social solidarity that can move democratic praxis beyond the confines of the nation-state.

**Keywords:** pluralism, nationalism, democracy, globalization, theology

The meaning of nationhood is a hotly debated issue in Western political theory. Despite its intrinsic ambiguity, however, most scholars agree that the idea of a “nation” is real enough to impact the world in a significant way, especially in a world where nations are supposed to align with states, as expressed in the common designation “nation-state.” In fact, most people who inhabit the world today naturally identify themselves as belonging to a nation. Quite often, this feeling of belonging arouses strong visceral attachments, which can be thought of as nationalism. As Craig Calhoun argues, in regards to the modern understanding of the nation-state, nationalism is the foundation of both “unjust prejudices and discriminatory practices” and “a form of social solidarity and one of the background conditions on which modern democracy has been based.”<sup>1</sup> For Calhoun, it is clear

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1

that nationalism is a crucial dimension of the world in which we live, although there is no consensus as to what a nation actually consists of.

While many intellectuals, such as Jürgen Habermas, promote globalization and are highly critical of nationalism, Calhoun laments that many of them are so blinded by their uncritical enthusiasm for cosmopolitanism and the possibility of a global democratic society that they are unable to see the intimate connection between nations and cosmopolitanism. For him, any theoretical and practical attempt to move completely beyond nation and nationalism inevitably leads back to assuming their existence, as exemplified by such phrases as “international affairs” and the sociological category “civil society.” In this paper, I argue that in emphasizing the importance of nation and national identity formation for democracy, Calhoun overlooks the significance of other non-nationalistic forms of solidarity also central to democracy and the violence inherent in the idea of national identity.<sup>2</sup> Bringing together postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha and postmodern political philosophers William Connolly and Saul Newman, I expose Calhoun’s theoretical limitations by showing how democratic energy often emerges from alternative social belongings at the periphery of the nation that frequently challenges the dominant social identity. I begin by analyzing Calhoun’s account of nationalism and cosmopolitanism and discuss why it is inadequate. Then, I proceed to discuss how Anderson’s understanding of nation neglects to account for what Bhabha calls the “subjective and performative aspect of national identity” that both

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<sup>2</sup> I am fully aware that the desire for firm foundations in democracy and politics is motivated, in part, by the internal paradoxes of democracy, which I shall discuss later in the section: “The Liminal Space.”

destabilizes nationalism and exposes its violence against minorities. Third, I critically examine Connolly's theory of pluralism and democratic praxis. In the process, I also discuss the significance of negotiating religious differences for moving beyond nationalism. Lastly, I push Connolly's project further by challenging the political theology of sovereignty and, in dialogue with Saul Newman, imagine new ways to conceive of democracy that are consistent with the spirit of Connolly's pluralism.

### **Nationalism and Democracy**

For Calhoun, "nationalism is not a moral mistake."<sup>3</sup> He laments that nationalism is too often associated only with atrocities committed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He argues that nationalism is also an important "form of social solidarity and one of the background conditions on which modern democracy has been based."<sup>4</sup> Calhoun points out that while it is easy to dismiss the evils of nationalism, most liberal cosmopolitans ignore nationalism's important political contributions. One of nationalism's contributions, according to Calhoun, is that it laid the foundation for democracy and other forms of social solidarities, precisely what liberal cosmopolitans celebrate. Therefore, Calhoun sees a degree of hypocrisy when liberal cosmopolitans quickly dismiss nationalism in exchange for their vision of global democracy or, at times, global citizenship.

In order to support his claim that nationalism made democracy possible, Calhoun appeals to the history of the idea of nation. *Nation*, for Calhoun, is a socially constructed idea and a relatively new sociological category. He writes, "But in

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 1

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

neither the Ottoman Empire nor the West were nations basic units of political organization before the rise of the modern state.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, Calhoun believes that the rise of nations coincided with the emergence of the modern state. According to Calhoun, prior to the realization of the modern state, “descent, divine authority, and sometimes simply military success” were the basic criteria of political legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> However, he explains that after countless religious wars and skirmishes between European empires, which ultimately resulted in the Peace of Westphalia, the idea of having a common culture and language became more central to the idea of political sovereignty. This change of affairs, Calhoun explains, increased the social mobility of many Europeans and therefore instilled in their minds a sense that they belonged to a nation made of more or less equal individuals. For Calhoun, nationalism, then, became a new discursive formation that “treated nations as the prepolitical bases for political legitimacy,” while it undermined the authority of rulers, gods, and military might.<sup>7</sup>

For Calhoun, the concept of a nation-state was born partly because the idea of nation became closely associated with political sovereignty. As Calhoun makes clear, this is not to say that there was no violence involved with the formation of nation-states. In fact, powerful groups in a nation-state often “enforce cultural conformity, challenging both the individual freedom and the vitality that comes from cultural creativity.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Calhoun argues, precisely because nationalism is so intertwined with the way modern people understand political

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 3

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

legitimacy and social solidarity, it cannot simply be dismissed. For Calhoun, while nationalism is a “source of so many evils, it is also the framework in which the modern era produced history’s most enduring and successful experiments in large-scale democracy.”<sup>9</sup> For example, the relative success of the United States’ large-scale democracy would not have been possible, according to Calhoun, without nationalism.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, according to Calhoun, not only is nationalism important for intra-national affairs, it is also vital to combating the inequity of capitalist globalization. He writes, “while globalization has produced innumerable paths across state borders, it has opened these very unevenly and disproportionately to the benefit of those with high levels of fluid capital.”<sup>11</sup> For Calhoun, although liberal cosmopolitans celebrate globalization and the way it breaks down boundaries between people and cultures, globalization is also indisputably unequal and tends to benefit the wealthy. Like Hannah Arendt, Calhoun believes that human rights must become civil rights in order to be secured and enforced. For Calhoun, it is too rash to simply do away with state power, which is supported by nationalism, when there really is no international institution powerful enough and with the legitimate authority to shape world affairs or to enforce human rights without regard for national autonomy. Although he acknowledges that powerful states with strong nationalist sentiments “often unleashed violence and disrupted both lives and livelihoods,” overly weak states “often fail their citizens” when it comes to economic

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 4

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 48

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

development and law enforcement.<sup>12</sup> However, for Calhoun, these all seem to call for “better states” and not “an end to states.”<sup>13</sup> After all, as Calhoun points out, it is much more difficult for people who are seen as outsiders to bring positive changes to a local government than for the local people to transform their own government and to create a better state. Indeed, Calhoun believes that nationalist solidarities can be used to create better societies.

Some cosmopolitans, according to Calhoun, believe civil society is the answer to global injustices and not nation-states. Civil society constitutes institutions and organizations that are neither part of a particular state nor part of capitalist expansion. However, while Calhoun acknowledges the importance of strengthening civil society, he also recognizes that civil institutions depend on money and personal connections that often elude public accountability. He writes, “Except where states are able to regulate such organizations they are largely unaccountable and non-transparent. Civil society without a public sphere is not necessarily democratic.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, Calhoun argues, civil society, though important, cannot serve as a replacement to nation-states and global markets. In Calhoun’s view, the state is necessary to keep civil society accountable, just as civil society keeps the state accountable. He also understands that the state is not necessarily democratic and this is where nationalism becomes paramount. For Calhoun, democracy is possible partly because nationalism promotes “solidarity among citizens” and therefore

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

promotes “popular political participation.”<sup>15</sup> Calhoun accuses liberal cosmopolitans, who dismiss nationalism based only on the “bad nationalisms of fascism, ethnic cleansing, and war, and neglect,” for throwing out the baby with the bath water.<sup>16</sup> For Calhoun, nationalism is no different from other forms of solidarities, such as religion, because both are sources of exclusion and inclusive solidarity. Without nationalism, he argues, it would be difficult to understand what constitutes a society and a people. Consequently, it would be even harder to think about making a public demand of any kind. Calhoun is here, of course, not ignoring the need to transcend nationalism. Rather, he is pointing out that modern people cannot and should not simply leave nationalism behind, because it has so influenced the way we understand the world and how we relate to democratic politics.

At the same time, Calhoun is unwilling to simply leave nationalism the way it is. He hopes that a reformed kind of nationalism can become an important discursive tool for the shaping and reshaping of society. In order to reform nationalism, he believes a reformulation of what *nation* means is necessary. For Calhoun, the popular tendency to see *nation* as a primordial entity, and the academic habit to see it as a falsely constructed fiction are both misleading. To counter the former tendency, Calhoun points out that there is never anything natural about a group identity. For him, national identity is a created tradition, interpreted and reinterpreted by contesting groups with different political agendas. To address the modern liberal and civic nationalist understanding of nation as a purely constructed fiction, Calhoun points out that tradition is not something one can simply leave

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 7

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

behind and transcend, for that claim itself is a cultural construction just like a tradition. After all, no one exists in a cultureless vacuum.

While understanding nationalism as a tradition, Calhoun thinks it is “internally contested and subject to continual reshaping, whether explicit or hidden.”<sup>17</sup> In Calhoun’s terms, far from simply being a claim to homogeneity, nationalism is actually a site of discursive formation, where identity is negotiated and developed in different ways. Calhoun points to India as an example of this discursive formation. As a result of British colonialism, according to Calhoun, Indians combine a “rationalistic rhetoric of liberation” with a claim of “deep ethnic history” in their anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>18</sup> In other words, India’s nationalism is neither a purely pragmatic construction nor an attempt to uncover lost history. In fact, Calhoun argues that after the British left India, India’s anti-colonial nationalism opened up a rhetorical space which continues to challenge and reshape what nationalism means in India today. Because of Calhoun’s recognition of the importance of culture and nationalism and their intrinsic instability, he suggests that a public space must be opened for people to “engage each other in discourse—not just to make decisions, but to make culture and even to make and remake their own identities.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, for Calhoun, nationalism is not only an important foundation of democracy; it can also become a site of democratic contestation.

### **De-centering Nationalism**

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 62

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 63

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 116



While Calhoun is right to point out that nationalism is something to be reckoned with by serious theorists of cosmopolitanism, and that liberal cosmopolitans are often too quick to associate it with the worst atrocities, I disagree that it is one of the central foundations of democracy. It is true that democracy is based on the idea that political sovereignty belongs to the people, but the people, as Calhoun understands, never actually share a homogenous identity. This holds true even if national identity is shaped collectively through Calhoun's proposal of a public space, where culture and identity are contested. As Calhoun affirms, nationalism has to do with tradition, discursive practices, and interpretation. He is correct to acknowledge that at any moment, there are multiple parallel contested understandings of nationhood. But it is unclear why, if national identity is shaped democratically, its violence against those who do not fit in its mold would be attenuated. Some of the contesting understandings of nationalism are no doubt exclusionary, such as the right-wing affirmation that America is a nation of white Christians; some of these are probably quite inclusive interpretations of nationalism, as exemplified by the phrase "America is a nation of immigrants." I assume that there are many positions in between as well as beyond the two examples presented here. However, the hegemony of one view does not guarantee the erasure of the other. It is hard to see how a happy medium can be reached democratically, or even if such happy medium is desirable at all. Even if a society is willing to open up its national identity for contestation, it would not necessarily assuage the potential dangers of nationalism. Similarly, even if one grants Calhoun

that nationalism has a unique edge to move the masses into democratic action, one still needs to ask whether it is worth the risk of nationalism.

Indeed, depending on the political climate, different faces of nationalism gain prominence. At any moment, groups of people may hold different views of what nationhood consists of. When the political climate is especially toxic, these groups often mobilize against one another. For example, after 9/11, exclusionary nationalistic sentiments, especially against Muslims and other minority religious groups, grew significantly in the United States. In this case, nationalism fails to function as a social glue that binds people together. Certainly, even if nationalism can unify people for a common cause, this unity is often achieved by silencing marginalized voices.<sup>20</sup>

However, Calhoun asks a good question: ultimately, what justifies the existence of a society? Though Calhoun claims that it is nationalism, I think he may have given a better answer elsewhere in his writing. For instance, as I have discussed, Calhoun rejects both the claim that tradition and culture are purely artificial constructs and that they are naturally given and can be easily captured in dogma. I believe Calhoun's acknowledgement of the elusive nature of culture and tradition should be applied to society as well. Perhaps, like culture and tradition, a society is both constructed (with its own history) and something one always already

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<sup>20</sup> One may argue that nationalism is a necessary evil, because, after all, it ended the "wars of religions" and other forms of identity violence in the sixteenth century. However, as William Cavanaugh points out, the idea that the nation-state is the solution of anarchic violence is itself part of the self-legitimizing mythology produced by the proponents of the nation-state. In fact, for Cavanaugh, the imposition of a centralized administrative power is partly to blame for these "wars of religions" in the sixteenth-century. See William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

finds him or her-self a part of. Just as no one exists in a cultural vacuum, no one exists apart from a society, or community. Conceivably, it could be the will to live and live well with others, despite the irreconcilable differences that exist among people that make democracy possible. It stands to reason that there is something else at stake when it comes to social solidarity. Perhaps, nationalism need not be the main source of democratic sensibility. Perhaps, it is the need for a firm social foundation that leads to violent exclusions. It is also surprising that Calhoun does not notice that once he is willing to make nationalism a discursive space of negotiation, he undermines a nation's seeming primordially, thereby undercutting nationalistic sentiments.

Nationalism, then, does not necessarily have to be one of the most central components of democracy, but merely one among many. I believe Calhoun is right to argue that nationalism provided a (projected) pre-political base for political legitimacy. Nationalism may even contribute to the maintenance of that legitimacy for many people. However, it is clearly not the only basis. How much does nationalism contribute to democracy? People are most often moved into political action because of an issue that is important to them. For example, the promotion of LGBTQ rights is a clear catalyst for political action.<sup>21</sup> Yet, it has very little to do with nationalism, though LGBTQ solidarity is itself a kind of imagined community. The ground of solidarity, in this case, would be collective oppression. Nationalism is

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<sup>21</sup> Some might object that LGBTQ rights are still civil rights and therefore nationalism is necessarily assumed. However, when one finds oneself in a society with unjust practices, what is important is working with the existing institutions to bring about change when the prospect of creating a better institution is absent. This can be done even if one understands state borders to be completely arbitrary.

merely one among many possible sources of solidarity. Furthermore, many LGBT activists do not usually question the coherency of the idea of a people or nation. Political legitimacy is not a matter of concern for them. In fact, they often organize for the sake of making the political institutions that they are a part of more just. Many do not find it necessary to question whether these political institutions are legitimately grounded or whether they actually belong to such institutions. I imagine that most people do not. Therefore, contrary to Calhoun's claim that there is often a need to justify political belonging through nationalism, it is very often unnecessary in democratic politics. I am not arguing that nationalism does not matter. Rather, I am simply pointing out that Calhoun's focus on nationalism and national identity formation neglects to account for other more important forms of solidarity that do not fit his framework of democracy based on nationalism. Nationalism is not always necessary to prove the legitimacy of political institutions or the maintenance thereof. Even if one understands the political institution to be completely arbitrary, for instance the anti-state anarchists, one can still work within the institution to bring about change before radical revolution takes place. This means the state institutions are, to a certain degree, liberated from the need for a coherent national identity.

In addition, to focus on the centrality of nationalism, unless when referring to anti-colonial nationalisms in some cases, is often to give credence to the hegemonic discourse of the powerful.<sup>22</sup> When speaking about the discursive formation of nationhood, it is also important to ask the question of who gets to be heard and who

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<sup>22</sup> Even in anti-colonial struggles hegemonic forces are still often operative. See Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: A Historical Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).

is silenced. Certainly, just as in politics in general, discourses about nationalism rarely take place equitably. Therefore, the hegemonic idea of a national identity often serves the interests of the few over the many. Calhoun believes that nationalism can come from the top as well as from the bottom. But in actuality, how often does the nationalism formed from the bottom become the norm of the society at large? Calhoun speaks about a public space where culture and national identity can be contested and reshaped. However, even if such a public space existed, there is no reason to think that views would be equitably represented. Just as white and wealthy Americans dominate the political sphere through their corporate donations and influence over the media, they will also do so in the public sphere of cultural contestation. Ironically, Calhoun is aware of the inequality of capitalist globalization. Why then does he assume the cultural sphere would operate any differently?<sup>23</sup> Unless a mechanism is in place to prevent such inequality, nationalism will quite often become a manipulative tool of the plutocrats. Under these circumstances, the existence of this public space is not able to attenuate the antagonism between differing nationalisms. At the same time, even if national identity can be formed collectively through rigorous public contestation, what happens to the end product? Unlike democratic decisions, culture cannot simply be imposed on the minority if they lose the contest. Calhoun does not provide an answer to this question.

### **Nation As Imagined Community**

Throughout Calhoun's account of nationalism, he periodically invokes Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" to support his arguments. However,

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Mignolo argues that capitalist globalization is always accompanied by cultural imperialism. See Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

in his account of nationalism, Anderson likewise fails to recognize what lies at the periphery of print-capitalist nationalism or what Homi Bhabha calls the “performative element of people’s daily lives.” Anderson believes nations are “imagined communities.” For Anderson, nations are 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.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, the nation depends, to a significant extent, on human imagination. Yet, the nation is real enough that many are often willing to make serious sacrifices in its name.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Anderson argues that the nation is always “conceived as a deep horizontal comradeship.”<sup>26</sup> This means members of a nation often imagine themselves to be equal in status and in solidarity with other members regardless of the inequalities that actually exist in the given nation. Similar to Calhoun, Anderson believes the nation is also a recent development that coincides with the rise of the modern state. However, unlike Calhoun, Anderson does not discuss nationalism’s continuity with previous forms of ethnic solidarity. Rather, Anderson claims that modern nationalism replaced older forms of social identities, such as religions and dynastic realms.<sup>27</sup> What brought about the shift, according to Anderson, is the advent of print-capitalism.

Print-capitalism, according to Anderson, is the boom of standardized publishing that coincided with the Protestant Reformation in Europe.<sup>28</sup> During the

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York, NY: Verso, 2006), 6

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 7

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 12-21

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 38-39

early sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation, in conjunction with the printers' need to maximize their audience, popularized the vernacular European languages. Anderson argues that as Latin, the sacred language, declined, other vernacular languages became acceptable religious and administrative languages. Consequently, governments began to use vernaculars to do state businesses. For Anderson, print-capitalist "gave a new fixity to language," which naturalized the syntax and grammar of the printed language. This, according to Anderson, created the condition for a common language.<sup>29</sup> In addition, print-capitalism also "created languages-of-power" that dominated and eventually delegitimized other vernaculars.<sup>30</sup> As a result, language standardization became a reality in many parts of Europe.

Later, Anderson comments, print-language also changed the way Europeans understood the world. For Anderson, the most dramatic change was the way people understood time. Again, Anderson deemphasizes the continuity between past and present, but insists upon the differences of epochs. For Anderson, then, there is a clean break from understanding time as "simultaneity-along-time,"<sup>31</sup> which is Anderson's way to describe how medieval religious people understood time to be governed by divine providence. This means what happens from day to day is metaphysically linked to sacred history or something preordained. Later, according to Anderson, this kind of simultaneity-along-time was broken down by print-capitalism's "homogenous, empty time," a way of understating time as contingent,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 44

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 45

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 24

coincidental, and measured by calendar and clock. What made this new way of imagining time possible is precisely the standardization of print language. The most powerful examples are the novel and the newspaper. Anderson insists that while the novel reinforced the idea that time moves in a linear and predictable pattern, the newspaper ensures that everyone reading the same things at the same time turns into an imagined community. Homogenous, empty time, for Anderson, allows people sharing the same language and reading materials to imagine themselves as moving through history together. This, he argues, is a prerequisite of nationalism.

### **The Liminal Space of a Nation**

Anderson's account of print-capitalism and homogenous, empty time, has many merits. Among them is this account's ability to successfully explain what made it possible for people to imagine themselves to be in a community called a nation with people they have never met and likely will never meet. However, the fixity and homogeneity emphasized in this account also leaves out other kinds of solidarities and the constant contestation of that fixity by minorities.<sup>32</sup>

In Homi Bhabha's essay, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," he challenges the idea of homogenous, empty time, and complicates the pedagogical or top-down effects of the national imagery. For Bhabha, nationalist narratives function on two different levels: pedagogical and performative.<sup>33</sup> On the pedagogical level, a nation is assumed to be primordial and beyond the need for justification, while on the performative level, by using the word

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<sup>32</sup> Minority, in this essay, means those marginalized by the hegemonic nationalist discourse, even if they are, in some cases, numerically the majority, such as women in certain patriarchal societies.

<sup>33</sup> Homi Bhabha, "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation" in *Nation and Narration* ed., Homi Bhabha (New York: Routledge, 1990), 298-299



*nation* people also paradoxically call the nation into existence. For example, the United States Constitution begins with “We the people,” which simultaneously assumes the prior existence of a nation and creates it. Before the declaration “we the people” was made, the subject “we” did not yet exist. Yet, at the same time, the declarative “we” also assumes the primordality of its subject. According to Bhabha, nationalist narratives, therefore, represent “the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population.”<sup>34</sup> This means the nation is always an unstable imaginary permanently challenged by the existence of minorities who reside at the border.

Due to the tension between the pedagogical and the performative, and the paradox between the act of assuming the nation and calling it into existence, national identity always resides at the liminal space between the forces of homogenization and pluralization. The people, especially minorities, of a nation repeatedly challenge nationalist narratives. Bhabha takes the agency of minorities in a nation seriously. He writes, “Once the liminality of the nation-space is established, and its ‘difference’ is turned from the boundary ‘outside’ to its finitude ‘within,’ the threat of cultural difference is no longer a problem of ‘other’ people. It becomes a question of the otherness of the people-as-one.”<sup>35</sup> This means, for Bhabha, the real problem of nationalism is not that it excludes people on the outside of national boundaries, but the idea that there can be one people at all. Consequently, Bhabha

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 297

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 301

contends that minorities who reside within national boundary are often the most vulnerable to the totalitarian forces of a national imagery.

Coming back to the idea of homogenous, empty time, and Anderson's example of reading novels, Bhabha brings to attention the different conceptions of time within a nation. Simultaneity-along time does not simply disappear when homogenous time emerges. Similarly, people read, react, and interpret novels and newspapers differently. The performing of these national "rituals," like reading newspapers, can actually challenge, rather than necessarily reinforcing, the national narrative. This is especially true for the minorities who think and read differently. For example, when a Muslim-American reads about the rising anti-Islam sentiments in the United States, her reaction hardly reinforces the national imagery. One of her most immediate concerns is probably her and her community's safety. According to Bhabha, national identity is, in reality, undermined simultaneously both by people on the outside of the arbitrary border and on the heterogeneous inside. In the Muslim-American's case, the act of reading the newspaper actually destabilizes nationalism.

### **Beyond Nationalism**

What Bhabha does not discuss in his essay, however, is that the minorities who live at the margins of national identity also create forms of solidarity that challenge what Calhoun considers "national solidarity." For instance, although there is no homogenous Asian-American identity, their collective marginalization, between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, actually ignited a trans-Asian solidarity that challenged the predominant white nationalism. This is not to say, however, that

Anderson is wrong to incorporate concepts, such as homogenous, empty time. Rather, Anderson's account is simply incomplete.

William E. Connolly shares Bhabha's concern about Anderson and Ernest Renan's understanding of the nation. Unlike Calhoun and Anderson, Connolly highlights different non-nationalistic kinds of solidarity central to democracy. In *Why I Am Not a Secularist*, Connolly discusses the ambiguity of the word *nation*. Like liberal cosmopolitans, Connolly is quite critical of nationalism. Unlike Calhoun and Anderson, for Connolly, race is what inspired common religion, language, and other cultural factors to be the "visible signs" of a nation.<sup>36</sup> However, Connolly contests, when one examines history carefully, the idea of racial purity cannot be sustained, and notes that what counts as a race is never easily defined. He writes, "Today, race is widely understood to be a fable through which a people might consolidate its unity rather than the paradigm of what collective unity as such looks like."<sup>37</sup> Connolly rightly points out that the quest for racial purity, after all, is nothing more than a dubious imaginative construct. This is why, for Connolly, race cannot possibly serve as an identifying factor for a nation without doing violence to racial minorities. Furthermore, in agreement with Bhabha, Connolly believes religion and language also fail as identifying factors because a common religion and language are never shared among all the constituents in an imagined nation.

As I mentioned above, Calhoun believes a nation is often thought of as what gives the state its sovereignty and democratic legitimacy. At the same time, for

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<sup>36</sup> William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 74

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

Connolly, the commonalities demanded by a nation are not always shared among all the constituents in a pluralistic democratic state. According to Connolly, “a nation is something that has been or will be but never is at any existing moment.”<sup>38</sup> This is why coercive exclusionism is often inevitable when nationalist sentiments become prominent. Affirming a collective national memory also fails to solve the problem. For Renan, Connolly says, “nationhood is founded on shared memories of sacrifice and a common will in the present.”<sup>39</sup> However, according to Connolly, Renan recognizes that memories could be “rendered uncertain by critical history”; therefore, appeals to shared memories must be highly selective. For Connolly, using selective memories as a firm foundation for a national identity is to forget that a nation is ultimately founded on “arbitrary” and exclusionary violence, because a nation is often artificially and violently carved out of regions originally shared by diverse people in history.<sup>40</sup>

Connolly struggles to find the coherence of such a foundation for a nation, because unity based on forgetfulness is often “crossed and cracked” by the presence of minorities that defy such amnesia.<sup>41</sup> To support his claim, Connolly gives contemporary examples of pagans residing in a “predominantly Christian culture,” and children of slaves who continue to live in a state that previously enslaved their ancestors.<sup>42</sup> In both of these cases, for Connolly, forgetfulness fails, because the past persists in haunting the present through these couriers of history. Connolly believes

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 85

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 75

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 76

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. This is similar to Bhabha’s discussion of minorities at the liminal borders of national identity.

this is why people who have strong nationalistic sentiments are often quick to define enemies within the state, in order that they may purge these outsiders from their nation.<sup>43</sup>

Connolly rightly argues that nationalism, because of its violent nature, is intrinsically at odds with democratic values, such as liberty and equality. For instance, a monolithic national identity has never been and never will be coherently actualized in reality. However, as Connolly suggests, “its [nationalism’s] most fervent advocates today imagine it to be something that has been lost, must be (re)instated or both.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Connolly is correct in suggesting that nationalism’s promise of future unity is “defined less by positive exemplification than by marking a set of constituents who deviate from it in need of assimilation, correction, punishment, or elimination.”<sup>45</sup> Because there is really no non-arbitrary criterion in marking these deviant constituents, the violence nationalism brings against its victims conflicts severely with the ideals of democracy. In this case, Calhoun’s idea that national identities can be made more equitably in the public space is rendered questionable.

### **Religion and Territorial Unitarianism**

In *Pluralism*, Connolly addresses the problem of multiculturalism in a liberal democratic society in response to the dangers of religious forms of nationalism. Although Connolly’s discussion is mainly about religion, it also applies to other forms of social communities as well. One of Connolly’s greatest contributions is to

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 77

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 85

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

highlight the fact that people belong to many communities simultaneously. Therefore, nation is merely one among many imagined communities that can incite democratic participation. Connolly defends a pluralistic solution to the reality of religious diversity, mainly in response to what he calls “territorial unitarianism.”<sup>46</sup> Territorial unitarianism, according to Connolly, is the drive towards a “religiously unified nation-state.”<sup>47</sup> In other words, territorial unitarianism is a more religious form of nationalism. Connolly’s concern about territorial unitarianism is intimately related to his criticism of the idea of a single national identity. Similar to nationalism, religious faiths, such as Christianity, can often have totalizing and exclusionary tendencies.

According to Connolly, humans now live in an age when the interactions between disparate faiths are accelerating and intensifying. Within each faith, Connolly argues, there is an inherent tendency to demonize others. Faith, as Connolly defines it, contains two different dimensions. One of the dimensions, the “vertical dimension,” deals with “embodied feelings, habits of judgment, and patterns of conduct below direct intellectual control.”<sup>48</sup> According to Connolly, faith reaches far beyond the confines of rationality and doctrinal reflection into the visceral registers of human existence; therefore, when it is violated, the whole being of the person is “rattled.”<sup>49</sup> Since, in accordance with Connolly’s definition of faith, no one is really free from some kind of faith, faith is therefore “ubiquitous.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 29

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 25

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 26

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 28. For example, a scientific atheist can have faith in the existence of the laws of nature or that life is ultimately worth living.

Connolly argues that one's faith needs other faiths to provide it "with needed contrasts through which to demarcate itself."<sup>51</sup> However, Connolly observes that alternative faiths can also threaten one's own faith when the contrast becomes incommensurable. When this happens, Connolly says, an alternative faith would cause one to "anathematize it as inferior or evil and can usher into being the demand to take revenge against them [people of other faiths] for internal disturbances they sow."<sup>52</sup>

Living at a time when people of disparate faiths are forced to engage with one another, Connolly believes unity between faith and state could lead to great perils, such as "persecution, forced conversions, refugees, boat people, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and worse."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, for Connolly, territorial unitarianism must be avoided. He believes that the cultivation of a "bicameral orientation" towards religious faith is paramount to respecting individual faiths without falling into the trap of territorial unitarianism.<sup>54</sup> A bicameral orientation means that each person must "cultivate" their faith "in the company of others in the first instance."<sup>55</sup> Connolly argues that before anyone could learn how to properly engage with another religion in the public sphere, the participants must understand and accept the reality of diversity and "the impossibility of generalizing territorial monism peacefully in a world marked by such plurality."<sup>56</sup> Connolly recognizes that pluralism could not survive without an intention to eradicate the desire for

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 27

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 31

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

territorial monism through the practice of coexistence. For Connolly, this would not be institutionally forced by the government; rather, this resistance against monism is a democratic virtue to be cultivated by education, social activism, and interreligious engagement.

Second, Connolly suggests that communities of faith should begin to develop a “relational self-modesty” that is primarily motivated by the will to undermine faith’s propensity for active intolerance. Third, a generous ethos of engagement must be negotiated between faiths, in order to create an environment of civil discourse.<sup>57</sup> For Connolly, this bicameral orientation could not work unless it is also developed viscerally, that is, transforming the way people “feel” about differences. Connolly believes when citizens are able to see the profound contestability of their convictions, then productive political engagement can take place. Connolly gives LGBT activism in the United States as an example of how bicameral orientation is cultivated. For Connolly, as LGBT activists work to pluralize sexual and gender norms, those who are straight also begin to de-universalize their sexual sensibilities by their encounter with others that are different from them.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the marginalized others of society, can, through activism, make a claim on the cultural and political center, in order to transform the dominant social norm.

Contrary to many critiques of pluralism, Connolly argues that the affirmation of bicameral pluralism does not preclude citizens from holding real convictions. For Connolly, one need not give up his or her beliefs; rather, one merely needs to recognize that it is possible for others, given different circumstance, to believe in

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 30-31



different things. Connolly recognizes that cultivating a positive reaction to something one is used to resenting is no simple task. On the other hand, Connolly argues, as one continues to practice this way of thinking conscientiously, then “it begins to sink into the visceral register that promotes conduct on its own and also flows into conscious beliefs and judgments.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, Connolly believes that the conscious cultivation of a bicameral orientation towards faiths will help rewire one’s mental and visceral processes to the point that positive reactions to differences become automatic.<sup>60</sup>

According to Connolly, with a bicameral orientation towards faiths underway, an ethos of political engagement can be negotiated between religious groups. This negotiation, for Connolly, would naturally resist requiring everyone to draw from the same moral source, such as the Bible. Instead, multiple sources of morality would be respected. However, a question arises. What can one do, politically, about the people who refuse to engage in this way? Connolly answers: “Not much, at first.”<sup>61</sup> He argues that one must “seek to inspire” those who refuse to engage, by looking for sources in their tradition that would support such engagements. Of course, this tactic may fail to convince everyone in the end; however, enough people may see the perils of cultural monism and opt for a bicameral ethos of engagement. Second, Connolly proposes that one should “acknowledge publicly the comparative contestability of elements” in one’s faith.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 33

<sup>60</sup> Connolly’s solution may require further elaboration. For example, while it may be reasonable for the powerful to cultivate an ethos of generosity, the same ethos may undermine minorities’ ability to assert their voices in the public space.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 35

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

This does not mean, however, Connolly's pluralism is weak or benign. If tolerance is threatened by violence and intolerance, Connolly suggests militant action would be necessary.

Connolly's pluralist model does not set clear boundaries, other than a commitment to social justice and mutual agonistic respect. In this respect, Connolly's proposal can be applied to a variety of political contexts with very different demands, especially when new international powers, such as transnational corporations, are becoming more and more powerful.<sup>63</sup> With a bicameral orientation, different religious groups or non-religious organizations are able to more effectively form new networks of solidarities in order to address transnational problems, such as human trafficking and environmental degradation, regardless of cultural and creedal differences. As Connolly correctly points out, every person simultaneously belongs to a variety of networks.<sup>64</sup> For example, one can simultaneously be a citizen of a country, a member of a transnational religious organization, and an LGBT activist. Some networks are transnational by nature, even if it simply means having friends or family in a different country. However, the fact that people often have transnational associations does not necessarily legitimize or lead to the formation of a cosmopolitan global order.

### **Connolly, Political Theology, and the State**

Although Connolly is not fully aware of it, his project of pluralism challenges the coherency and legitimacy not only of the nation, but also of the state. In other words, as political theorist Saul Newman points out his essay "Connolly's

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 148-149

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 62

Democratic Pluralism,” democracy calls for a new political theology beyond that of state sovereignty.<sup>65</sup> In the essay, Newman suggests that democracy should not be seen as “a regime or series of political institutions—such as parliament or constitution. Such a definition not only confines democracy to the limited liberal capitalism form that prevails today but, more fundamentally tie it to the principle of state sovereignty.”<sup>66</sup> Rather, for him, democracy should be understood as a horizon of “infinite perfectibility” that invites challenges to the established institutions.<sup>67</sup>

While Connolly points out the arbitrariness of nations, there is no reason to stop there. I agree with Newman that a critique of nationalism must also include a critique of the state. One of the preconditions of the development of Connolly’s ethos of generosity is that the hegemonic norm is destabilized from a demand from the outside. For example, without the demands of the Civil Rights movement, the establishment would not have had much need to open itself up for contestation. In other words, democratic praxis not only challenges the social identity of the dominant group, it also questions the legitimacy of the institutions in place. Therefore, the ideal of democracy always stands in tension with state sovereignty and overflows the capacity of existing institutions. Drawing from Jacques Derrida’s idea of “democracy to come,” Newman exposes the intrinsic violence of the modern notion of state sovereignty. “[T]he sovereign,” Newman argues, “is simply the secular image of God, embodying the same idea of the One, the point of unicity, indivisibility and absolute authority—the authority that is grounded in itself

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<sup>65</sup> Saul Newman, “Connolly’s Democratic Pluralism,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10, no. 2 (2008), 227-240

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 234

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 236

alone.”<sup>68</sup> For Newman, sovereignty brings democracy to an end in order to assert its absolute authority.

In order to provide an alternative political theology that is more consistent with democracy, Newman replaces the decisionism of the one God with Derrida’s weak “messianic promise.” This always-coming messiah opens up the current democratic horizon for new self-reflective emancipatory politics to emerge.<sup>69</sup> For Newman, this new political theology calls for a continuous engagement with the state and the creation of anarchic organizations to help democratic politics move away from the confines of nation-states. Indeed, true democracy is always anarchic, for it will always escape the confines of the nation-state.

## **Conclusion**

Connolly is neither a liberal cosmopolitan nor a dogmatic supporter of the nation-state. In fact, while Connolly’s pluralism resides in-between the two, the possibility of an in-between position eludes Calhoun’s dichotomous account of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. As Bhabha and Connolly point out, nationalism, far from being an adequate source of political solidarity, actually foments violence against minorities. I have argued that nationalism cannot serve as an adequate ground for collective political action: there are always multiple contesting nationalisms struggling against one another in a democratic society, especially between majority and minority groups. Some of these nationalisms may achieve hegemony over others, but that does not guarantee the erasure of minority voices. In fact, if political solidarity were based on nationalism, then minority voices would

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 235

<sup>69</sup> For a full discussion of Derrida’s democratic messianism see *ibid*, 235-239.

always be undermined, if not violently oppressed. Connolly's description of the foundations of political action serves as a more realistic account. For Connolly, there are always groups with different political interests competing with one another in a democratic society. Therefore, in his model, democratic cohesion is sustained, not by nationalism, as Calhoun claims, but by an ethos by which these competing groups engage with one another politically. Taking the multidimensionality of human existence seriously, Connolly's pluralism provides an alternative way of understanding politics that transcends the easy divide between nationalism and cosmopolitanism and paves the way toward the formation of new solidarities unexplored by standard dichotomous models. However, Connolly's model stops short of challenging the state. As Newman points out, the development of alternative political theologies are necessary to call for the development of new democratic institutions that transcend the narrow confines of the nation-state and its theology of sovereignty.

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