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The Nationalist Thing Which Thinks: Notes on a Genealogy of Ultrationalism

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Preamble

Much has been written about nationalism, probably too much, and each day seems to bring more headlines and tragic stories about nationalist causes and ultrationalist atrocities. Everyone else's nationalism is a problem, while one's own intimate nationalist tendencies go unchecked.

The following is my self-understanding of the theoretical origins of ultrationalism – a topic that I have contemplated and researched for many years now. I have attempted to draft a speculative blueprint, which can be applied to any or at least most species of nationalism in the West and in the East. My leading assumption, which I don't consider controversial, is that what we now call "nationalism" has its imaginary origins in the West (Enlightenment thinking). From these Western roots, only some of which are outlined below, nationalism has, to me at least, grown into something not only dangerous but also politically indispensable.

The end of the Cold War failed to bring about the end of history as the liberal world order, and liberal democracies have failed to reign in the excesses and instabilities of global capitalist markets and to rid the new world order of primitive ideologies and political enmities. The threats to "forms of life," to the will to life, continue to exist. Stateless people and groups are exceptionally vulnerable to "disappearing." There can be no effective movement for collective self-preservation without the proper political determination.

1. From Radical Doubt to Transcendental Emptiness

It is easy to doubt the existence of Atlantis or Uranus, or strange creatures such as the penis-head fish. But in his 1641 *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes goes so far as to doubt the existence of his own body and any material objects around him. After entertaining the idea that some evil demon is tricking him with sensations of a false world, Descartes arrives at the bedrock of his famous thought experiment: his doubt itself, or "I think."

Ever since *ego cogito, ergo sum*, a cottage industry of "rational psychologists" have elaborated upon "I think" by considering the "I" a thinking substance distinct from the body. But for Kant, in 1781, this I is empty and indescribable:

Through this I, or He, or It (the thing), which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of thoughts = X, which is recognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates, and about which, in abstraction, we can never have



The thing which thinks³



Subjectivity without a subject.

even the least concept.¹

The I is an X, a metaphysically naked, transcendental placeholder, and only in the space of this X is freedom made possible. The world of phenomena must follow the so-called “laws of nature,” but the emptiness of the I, the nonphenomenal *cogito*, is somehow outside of nature, that is, space and time. It is the *noumenon*, the thing in itself.

The noumenon is a negative object of thought – our concepts only yield knowledge when they are related to phenomena. The thing in itself is the conceptual limit; it arises as the surplus of thought, the detritus of reason, like the “eye that cannot see itself.” Hence Kant’s famous observation: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.”²

2. What Am I, this Thing Which Thinks?

The noumenal I is an unnatural and frightening philosophical abstraction – a transcendental loneliness.⁴ The thing which thinks is always already an embodied and situated thing, which not only thinks but also *cares*. Thinking is a striving for knowledge, sometimes for hope, or occasionally for change. Skipping Hegel, we can approach the notion of the thing which thinks with Schopenhauer’s answer nearly four decades after Kant’s first *Critique*:

What Kant opposed as *thing in itself* to mere *phenomenon* – called more decidedly by me *representation* – and what he held to be absolutely unknowable, that this *thing in itself*, this substratum of all phenomena, and therefore of the whole of Nature, is nothing but what we know directly and intimately and find within ourselves as *the will*.⁵

This *will* inside each of us, and expressed in the proposition “I think,” is for Schopenhauer extra-moral, preconscious, and perpetually in a state of becoming. Ideas or actions are not followed because they are good, they are good because we *will* them. Everything in the cosmos – not only our transcendental selves – exhibits *will*. The magic of creation (*creatio ex nihilo*) happens in the transition from noumenon to phenomenon.⁶

For organic creatures, Schopenhauer sometimes calls the will the “will to life,” which can just as easily be described as the will to power. Heidegger states it succinctly: “To think is to will, and to will is to think.”⁷

3. The Mass of Metaphors

The “I will” as “I think” always already resides in a language. A prison house or a “house of Being,”

language is a straitjacket – an instrument for manipulating reality, and in some sense, the world itself. It is the condition of the possibility for Cartesian doubt. As thinking things, we use language, but we don’t create it; we are thrown into it. Thought without language is empty, and words without content are stupid.

Kant’s Copernican Revolution – to explain objectivity with subjectivity – hinges on the subject’s proper use of concepts and “categories” to organize the buzzing, blooming sensory world. This transcendental and thus mysterious mental process of understanding the world (what Kant calls the “transcendental schematism”) is similar to the creative processes we employ when we use natural language. Children learn language by using it; they do not learn by following a strict set of explicit rules. To explain processes such as these, Kant resorts to the imagination:

Synthesis in general [i.e., making sense of things] is, as we shall subsequently see, the mere effect of the imagination, of a blind though indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious.⁸

The transcendental faculty of the imagination is the condition of the possibility for us figuring things out at all, let alone our ability to use language, interpret texts, and of course, make art. How things in the world appear to us and what makes them significant is a function of language synthesized by the imagination. Language is by nature communal, and the imagination is guided by the will. As Herder asked in 1784: “Has a people anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech,” he continues,

resides its whole thought-domain, its tradition, history, religion, and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its one eternal good ... The best culture of a people cannot be expressed through a foreign language ... With language is created the heart of a people.⁹

4. Practical Consciousness

Just as we always already reside in a language, we always already think within ideology. Ideology is both a distorting mirror and an actual *imaginary* relationship with the real world. It distorts by obfuscating competing ideologies and by naturalizing its own mechanisms. Language without ideology is empty (the scientific ideal),

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and ideology without politics is blind.

Ideologies are not simply background ideas that guide our behavior in the world. They are also material, manifesting themselves in physical actions such as shaking hands or queuing. In Althusser's Marxist theory, a special type of social entity employs ideology: the beautifully named "ideological state apparatus."¹⁰ The state is the most powerful ideological state apparatus – more so than the local Masonic lodge or art museum – but it functions primarily through the use of physical violence.

Ideological state apparatuses train our bodies and minds.¹¹ Symbolic violence is superficially more sophisticated than physical violence, and sometimes more difficult to see. Both physical and symbolic violence inspire us to "operant conditioning." We don't simply learn to follow the rules, we embody them in "know-how." As Althusser puts it, "The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing."¹² When ideology is effective, we want in. We become ambitious:

In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses a will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality.¹³

Without mentioning ideology by name, Heidegger calls it "the implementation of the will of the state, that is, of the people."¹⁴ So-called "highly successful people" have not gamed the system. An ideology has birthed them. For Althusser the dominant ideological state apparatus is the educational system. Nationalist and ethnic ideologies, especially in East Asia, emphasize the family apparatus, which has been and is being expanded into the politicized, extended family. "Nature raises families;" writes Johann Gottfried von Herder, "the most natural state is therefore also one people, with one national character."¹⁵

5. Politics and- National Salvation

The state espouses its own ideologies while being the site of many competing ideologies, some of which may be expressly opposed to the state and the status quo. Ideologies become properly "political" when they make Carl Schmitt's well-known distinction between friends and enemies. In our private lives, we each have our own personal enemies, but private animosities are not properly political. The political is necessarily public and always involves one group opposed to another group in a

potential life or death struggle:

War follows from enmity. War is the existential negation of the enemy. It is the most extreme consequence of enmity. It does not have to be common, normal, something ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid.¹⁶

Religious, moral, nationalist, or economic ideologies may become sufficiently political, if they can successfully group people into friends and enemies and inspire them to actual or potential violent conflict. Religious fanaticism in itself is not necessarily political. The religious fanatic becomes politicized once she is willing to die fighting the enemy. No community is a political unit in Schmitt's sense unless it has drawn the friend-enemy distinction, and its members are willing to engage in real war. "Each [political] participant is in a position to judge whether the adversary intends to negate his opponent's way of life," Schmitt explains, "and therefore must be repulsed or fought in order to preserve one's own form of existence."¹⁷

In other words, politics is necessary, because political entities exist. The existence of a state presupposes the existence of other competing states, and in those competing states, if one is not a friend, then one is an enemy. Schmitt warns that

if a people no longer possesses the energy or the will to maintain itself in the sphere of politics, the latter will not thereby vanish from the world. Only a weak people will disappear.¹⁸

In and of itself, class conflict is now an unfashionable reason to make international war. Religion was once a significant politicizing force, with a clear differentiation between believer and heretic, but after the dawn of political theology, it is now the nation. Even Samuel Huntington uses Schmittian terms in explaining that "cultural identity defines the state's place in world politics, its friends, and its enemies."¹⁹ The greatest imaginary unit with which to designate the friend-enemy distinction is the nation. "Indeed," Benedict Anderson concludes, "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time."²⁰

Nations are not identical to states, and nationalist ideologies on occasion oppose official state ideologies. States usually, but not necessarily, administer a physical territorial area. Nations can and do exist without territories, but the accumulation or settling of a

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“national territory” (a homeland) is usually a key feature of any nationalist schema. There are currently a few *nation-states* in the world, such as Japan and North Korea, and they both employ various ideological state apparatuses to preserve and promote their political status as such.

Even if the nation does not yet have a geographical territory, it someday will. This ideological attitude reflects a committed and healthy (for the sake of the nation) optimism – a transcendental positivity (a will to life) and a vigorous materialist vision of the earth. Fleeing the vacuum of transcendental loneliness, the nationalist as ultranationalist finds comfort and protection in the settlement. The ultranationalist sees herself in the earth. Thus, following Schmitt,

Every important change in the image of the Earth is inseparable from the political transformation, and so, from a new repartition of the planet, a new territorial appropriation.²¹

The nation, as a shared body or history of culture, language, ethnicity, and even cuisine, is a malleable and volatile concept (the nation = X). Benedict Anderson famously calls them

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“imagined communities,” but it is precisely in this imaginary domain (the transcendental schematism) where nationalism draws its power. In 1922, Mussolini put it this way:

We have created a myth, this myth is a belief, a noble enthusiasm; it does not need to be reality, it is a striving and a hope, belief and courage. Our myth is the nation, the great nation which we want to make into a concrete reality for ourselves.²²

“In the same speech,” writes Schmitt, “he called socialism an inferior mythology.”²³ Mussolini may have been executed and his corpse defiled, but his ideological framework has legs. Liberal democracies have failed to inspire the imagination, and liberal capitalism is a boring myth. Even Islamic fundamentalism can work wonders with a nationalist agenda. When Mussolini talked about “striving,” “hope,” and “courage,” he was really dressing up the notion of the will to life, or simply the *will*.²⁴ British historian Elie Kedourie sums it up nicely:

National self-determination is, in the final analysis, a determination of the will; and nationalism is, in the first place, a method



The ultranationalist.

of teaching the right determination of the will.²⁵

The decisionism of the will is historically impure, tainted and mystified by various ideological complications, especially universalist conceptions such as liberal humanism or socialism. In other words, the will as *political praxis*, as political volunteerism, is ideological. The state as a repressive apparatus constricts the imagination and is by nature a limiting concept.²⁶ The will is better suited to the open-endedness of the idea of the nation. The state is repressive, the nation expressive. States build while nations grow.

For Schmitt, politics gives us the possibilities for “authentic” existential self-realization embodied in war or struggle, and nationalism driven by the imagination is the most effective method of politicization:

Only in myth can the criterion be found for deciding whether one nation or a social group has a historical mission and has reached its historical moment ... In direct intuition the enthusiastic mass creates a mythical image that pushes its energy forward and gives it the strength for martyrdom as well as the courage to use force. Only in this way can a people ... become the engine of world history.²⁷

Or we can say with Kant that conflict and war make the will to a life of reason possible.²⁸ Nationalism is a myth just as much as capitalism is a myth or an ideology. Believing in and living the myth are signs of humanity – of being the X that thinks.²⁹ The nationalist can see beyond her own nation and can even empathize with those of other nationalities, while the ultranationalist is securely locked within her own hermeneutic circle. This shouldn't be seen as some kind of moral failure. The ultranationalist can act just as morally as any apolitical creature (Nietzsche's “last man”), but she has the advantage of being “extra-moral” and actively participating in the “states of exception” called “war.”³⁰

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James T. Hong is a filmmaker and artist based in Taiwan and the USA. He has produced works about Heidegger, Spinoza, Japanese biological warfare, and racism. With Taiwanese producer and curator Freya Chou, he is currently filming a documentary about nationalism and disputed territories in East Asia.

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1
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allan W. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 414 (A 346/B 404).

2
Ibid, 193–194 (A 51/B 75).

3
Cropped still from Voice of America, original location here <http://www.voanews.com/content/gunmen-seize-police-station-in-east-ukraine/1891931.html>

4
Slavoj Žižek problematizes the idea of the noumenal I in *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 9–17.

5
Arthur Schopenhauer, “The Will in Nature,” in *Two Essays by Arthur Schopenhauer*, trans. unknown (London: George Bell and Sons, 1889), 216.

6
“For in every emergence of an act of will from the obscure depths of our inner being into the knowing consciousness a direct transition occurs of the thing in itself, which lies outside time, into the phenomenal world. Accordingly the act of will is indeed only the closest and most distinct manifestation of the thing in itself,” in Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation, Volume II*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1887), 407.

7
Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 59.

8
Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 211 (A 78).

9
Johann Gottfried von Herder, “Materials for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind,” in the *Internet Modern History Sourcebook* <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1784herder-mankind.asp> Herder purportedly coined the term “nationalism.”

10
Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

11
My brief summary of Althusserian ideology absorbs Pierre Bourdieu’s account of *habitus* and *doxa*. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

12
Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 175.

13
Louis Althusser, “Marxism and Humanism,” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 234.

14
Martin Heidegger, *Nature, History, State*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 64.

15
Johann Gottfried von Herder, “Governments as Inherited Regimes,” in *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings*, trans. Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 128.

16
Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 33.

17
Ibid, 27.

18
Ibid, 53.

19
Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 125.

20
Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 3.

21
Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea*, trans. Simona Draghici (Washington, DC: Plutarch Press, 1997), 38.

22
Quoted by Carl Schmitt in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 76. Schmitt has been described as a “proto-fascist,” and while his legal theories are consistent with fascism, it would seem that all national revolutions are inherently proto-fascist.

23
Ibid. US diplomat Richard Holbrooke famously called Serb nationalist sentiment “historical bullshit.”

24
For an extended reading of Heidegger’s use of the “will,” see Bret W. Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

25
Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 76.

26
For Heidegger, the nation exists *within* the state. See Heidegger, *Nature, History,*

State, 43.

27
Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, 68.

28
Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), see Fourth Proposition.

29
See Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20–28.

30
The ultranationalist can be seen as a variation of the “partisan.” See Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Press Publishing, 2007).

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