

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION  
Brookings Cafeteria: Where does nationalism come from?  
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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts that have them. I'm Fred Dews.

From its emergence in 16<sup>th</sup> century England, nationalism has been behind nearly every significant development in world affairs, including the American and French Revolutions of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the authoritarian fascism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, it's a mass phenomenon in China and has gained new life in the United States and Europe in the guise of populism.

On today's show, Liah Greenfeld, professor of sociology, political science, and anthropology at Boston University, talks with Brookings Institution Press director Bill Finan about her new book, *Nationalism: A Short History*. She explains her broad definition of nationalism, Shakespeare's role in shaping the language of democracy and modernity, and how modern notions of "white nationalism" are not nationalism at all.

Also on the program, Senior Fellow David Wessel looks at why the Federal Reserve may indeed cut interest rates and allow inflation to rise.

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And now, here's Bill Finan with Liah Greenfeld.

FINAN: Fred, thank you. And, thank you, Liah, for taking the time to talk to us about your new book, *Nationalism: A Short History*.

GREENFELD: Thank you for having me.

Until I read your book, I used to think about nationalism the way Justice Potter defined pornography -- I know it when I see it. But, your book taught me it's a far more complicated concept

than any simple, single definition or caricature I have of it. But, even having said that, is it possible to make a broad definition of what nationalism is?

GREENFELD: Yes, it is possible. It is possible to make such a broad definition and, in fact, necessary, because people usually don't understand what a very important force this is. It is basically the cultural framework of everything modern of modern society.

And, what makes it this cultural framework, it is a new perspective on the reality. It contains a completely new perspective, new image of reality, first of all, of social and political reality. And, our consciousness, the consciousness of four modern people is, in fact, national consciousness. What is this new image of reality? It is the image of humanity, naturally divided into sovereign communities of fundamentally equal members.

It is very different from the consciousness that existed before it, that is, before the sixteenth century. And, it is, as you can see from that very definition, sovereign communities of fundamentally equal members. It is essentially the definition of democracy. So, this is the definition of nationalism. It is the cultural framework of democracy.

FINAN: You define it in the book in such a broad an encompassing and world-changing moment, too. And, as you mentioned, it begins in the sixteenth century, and you begin, actually, by using Shakespeare to explain the emergence of nationalism. And, you focus on a few of his plays. Why are those plays, the ones you cite, so useful to understanding nationalism's emergence?

GREENFELD: Shakespeare was clearly a genius, and more or less single-handedly -- certainly more than any other single individual -- he captured the essence of modernity, which was, in fact, the essence of nationalism, and he created the language for it. Modern English is very much in debt of Shakespeare.

Very many of the concepts in modern English, language which emerges in the sixteenth century, it is very different from the English that existed before. It is the language of nationalism. It gives us the

terms to discuss this completely new reality. It's reality imagined in a completely new way.

And, being a genius such as that, Shakespeare was actually the first in his plays to capture the essential experiences of nationalism. He didn't explain them historically, also theologically, but he captured them. And, in his plays, from Richard II -- the historical plays -- from Richard II to Richard III, basically, right -- and there are many, many things between, all the Henrys are there, Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI.

He somewhat anachronistically defined for us the difference between political reality as nationalism projects it and political reality as was perceived through the feudal pre-nationalist consciousness. So, one can study those historical plays and see the difference in mentality, the difference in attitude, the difference in the relations between the rulers and the ruled, and you see how all of those develop from Richard II to Richard III.

You can also see the projection and the capturing of the experiences of modernity. That is all based on nationalism in his great tragedies. But, this is a different conversation.

FINAN: Right.

GREENFELD: But, Shakespeare is a wonderful source for the understanding of modern reality.

FINAN: One of the most important ideas to emerge from your book, for me, was the idea of how individual -- how the idea of the individual inequality emerged from or in concurrent with the idea of a nation. Can you talk about how that happened?

GREENFELD: Well, yes. In fact, you're absolutely right. Equality, perhaps, is the core idea. It is certainly the core idea of democracy, right, that emerges in nationalism. So, before nationalism, the world -- the social world was imagined as created by God on a particular plan, you know, and the plan was to divide human beings into fundamentally three completely different orders, orders that were as different as today we believe species of life. Biological species are different.

And, those orders were functional orders. They were like different organs in the collective body,

and the body itself was fundamentally religious. So, the upper order was the very small military stratum, and those were people who were supposed to defend the Church, right? So, this was the military nobility.

But, then, there was the order of clerics, of clergy, and their function was to mediate between God and humans on Earth. And, this also was a rather small order. And, then, there was a huge order, huge stratum, maybe 90 percent of the population, of common people. They were called the laborers, laboratorists, and their function was, essentially, to support those two upper orders, to see to the survival of their social body.

FINAN: And, there was no chance of --

GREENFELD: Everything --

FINAN: I was just going to say and there's no chance of crossing in from one order to the next or ascending to the highest order if you're at the lowest order.

GREENFELD: Well, they were imagined as having different blood, you know, just like we imagine chickens and horses to have different genes, obviously, right? So, it was impossible. It was simply inconceivable for a person to be born, let's say, a peasant, and then somehow become a nobleman. It was simply inconceivable. And, they couldn't.

It was inconceivable that somebody who is a peasant could do things that a nobleman could do. It would be like expecting to ride a chicken or to expect a horse to lay eggs. And, to be born a chicken and then you grow up to be a horse, I mean, one simply could not conceive of that. So, it was somewhat different with the order of the clergy, but it wasn't that important, because they were supposed to be celibate, so they didn't reproduce the social structure, didn't participate in the reproduction of the social structure.

There was absolutely no possibility, not only no legitimacy but no cognitive possibility for social nobility. Everyone had to be stay put where one was born. So, there was no choice, no freedom on the

part of the person to choose one's identity. One's identity was completely, completely prescribed, prescribed more or less genetically, biologically, where you were born. You are what you are born.

And, there was nothing, no other possibility for individual initiatives. And, obviously, the rights and the respect due to different orders were completely different. Nobody owed any respect to the huge order of the common people, absolutely not. It was not their right to expect respect. At the same time, the nobility obviously expected respect. This was their privilege. And, in this they were completely different from the common people.

So, when we think about equality, for us equality is a natural desire and right of every human being. But, this is a very, very recent conception that comes only with nationalism. The sentimental principle of social order before nationalism was inequality. So, a just society would be a society which is, in a very rigid and orderly way, inescapable way, an unequal society in which people are treated unequally in accordance with the way they -- with where they were born.

DEWS: Let's take a short break to hear another installment of Wessel's economic update.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel, and this is my economic update.

The Federal Reserve has not cut interests rates yet, disappointing President Trump, who has been loudly calling for lower rates. But the Fed sent a strong signal that it expects to cut rates later this year, perhaps as soon as the end of July, because of what Fed Chair Jay Powell called "crosscurrents in the economy." One of those "crosscurrents" is the Fed believes prices are rising too slowly. It wants more inflation.

Now, to those of us who have been around the Fed for a few decades still find this jarring. After all, the whole point of having an independent central bank like the Fed is to resist inflation. But we live in unusual times. The Fed's mandate is maximum sustainable employment and price stability, and it defines price stability as 2 percent inflation. But it has been unable to get inflation sustainably up to 2 percent for years. It got pretty close last year but lately, inflation has cooled off. The underlying pace of

inflation is around 1.7 percent to 1.8 percent. That wasn't anticipated and it's causing some angst at the Fed.

Why is that? Does anyone really want prices to go up more? Well, yes. First of all, the Fed is looking not only at prices, but wages, which have been slow to rise despite very low unemployment. The Fed believes that its credibility with the public and the markets depends on delivering on its objectives, 2 percent inflation. If it doesn't, people might overreact when something happens – a weather-related spike in food prices or a plunge in oil prices. The Fed wants people to be confident that it will keep the economy stable with inflation around 2 percent. If it can't deliver, people doubt its commitment and capacity. What's more, too much inflation is a problem, but too little inflation brings the economy uncomfortable close to deflation, falling prices. Once that happens, as Japan demonstrates, the economy can struggle and borrowers can have a hard time paying back loans. And if inflation gets too low, interest rates get really close to zero...and that limits the Fed's ability to cut interest rates in a recession.

So, why the inflation surprise? Why aren't wages and prices rising as expected? That's a question a lot of economists are pondering. There are several possible explanations. Perhaps globalization has made it much harder for anyone to raise prices. Or, maybe its technology. The rise of online, other online retailers, makes it easier for consumers to shop around. Or, maybe the gig economy is a factor. Maybe the unemployment rate is a misleading measure and there are still enough workers on the sidelines or part-timers who are willing to work longer hours that employers don't have to raise wages to get workers. Or, maybe it's connected to the waning clout of unions and the rising power of employers.

It's not only a US phenomenon, it's global. Inflation in Japan and Europe also has been stubbornly below their central banks' target. So, watch the inflation rate, and it will tell you whether the Fed is doing its job and whether it's going to have to cut interest rates soon in order to reach its

objectives.

FINAN: The book is rich in discussing the rise in nationalism throughout the world, and so I'm going to not do it justice with the questions I'm going to be asking. Because, you also credit the history of nationalism -- in your history of nationalism, you credit with the birth of capitalism empire cultural achievements, including modern science, most of this happening in England in which nationalism was born.

And, then, there's also the nationalism that emerges in France and which is different from the British nationalism. And, you go on to talk about Russian nationalism, too. But, I wanted to bring our focus back to the United States, where we have our own form of nationalism. And, there's a quote from you where you write there's an unbroken continuity between English and American nationalism. And, I wanted to ask, what constitutes that continuity?

GREENFELD: Well, English nationalism, the original English nationalism was individualistic and civic. There are other types of nationalism, and this depends on how the nation, the community of the nation, is imagined and what are the criteria of membership in the nation. Now, in England, because of all this interesting development with the Wars of the Roses and the rise of the new aristocracy, nationalism reflected exceptional individual experiences.

And, for this reason, the emphasis in this new perspective, this new consciousness, was on the individual. The nation, therefore, was conceived -- this sovereign community of fundamentally equal members, which was also equated with the people, -- the people before nationalism was defined as the common people, that is, as the lower classes, as the rabble, the plebs.

But, then, after the Wars of the Roses and the destruction of the feudal aristocracy, physical destruction of the feudal aristocracy in England, members of the people, of the lower classes, kind of, by default, became upwardly mobile. They had to rationalize this for themselves, and their rationalization took the form of the equation of the concept of the people, this rabble, with the concept of nations,



which at that time meant a very exclusive elite.

So, they basically said, oh, the English people is [sic] an elite, and this made all the Englishmen equal. All the English individuals, members of this community, now could be whatever they wanted to be in this community. Because, they were interchangeable, they were fundamentally equal. And, the nation was conceived of as a community of such individuals. And association of such free individuals, individuals free to decide what actually they want to do, and at the same time individuals who were sovereign, who were self-governing, and, therefore, capable in participating in the government of the community.

So, they were a nation itself, and the word people were plural nouns. They responded to the pronouns of we and they. And, you can see this in the founding documents in the -- in American-sounding documents. We are talking about the people as we the people, not as single, collective individuals, as it happened in so many later developing nations.

FINAN: Right. I see. I was going to also ask you -- there's a line later in the book, too, about American nationalism, and it intrigued me, and I'll quote it. You say about American nationalism that it remains the main source of social cohesion in the United States and the main stimulant of unrest in it. That appears to capture this moment in time so well. Can you explain why this contradictory hold on us?

GREENFELD: Well, it is because we believe very strongly, perhaps more strongly than any other nation, any other people, in the values of equality and freedom, the equality of individuals, all individuals, and freedom of every individual to decide what to be, what to do with one's life. So, those are our values, and they are the most important element of cohesion in our society.

But, it is precisely those values, you know, the emphasis that every individual should be treated as equal to every other individual, and every individual has the same freedom to be whatever he or she desires to be. That is very divisive. It creates constant competition, right?

FINAN: Mm-hmm.

GREENFELD: Precisely those values that hold us together. They, at the same time, put us constantly in competition and in a very savage competition with each other, right?

FINAN: Yes.

GREENFELD: Exactly the same values that create the sentiment of envy and make the sentiment such a powerful force in our society, pitting groups of individuals against each other, constantly. Because, there is never complete equality, but for us equality is such an important value that we cannot tolerate any inequality. All I'll say is it's such an irritant for us, for Americans, that we feel we must do everything to immediately correct every particular inequality that we see. And, that is, of course, very, very divisive.

FINAN: I also want to ask --

GREENFELD: We are unable to see behind all that. We are unable to see the common good, precisely because those are our very important values. We're perfectionists in that. We are perfectionists in our nationalism.

FINAN: Perfectionists in our nationalism. There's another term that's been flooding about in the United States, too, this idea of white nationalism. What does it mean to its adherence, and is it actually in nationalism?

GREENFELD: Well, you see, every specific nationalist has to be studied in its specificity, that is, you have to talk to people who believe themselves to be white nationalists, and only after talking to them and analyzing what they're saying, they -- people who believe themselves to be white nationalists, you can make generalizations about this particular nationalism. Just as I was doing about English nationalism and French nationalism and Russian nationalism, this is all based on the primary sources of, you know, describing people or written by people who consider themselves those kinds of nationalists.

So, I have never talked to somebody who is a white nationalist who believes himself or herself to be a white nationalist. So, I cannot tell you empirically what it is. From what it seems to me, it is rather a projection of certain people who do not want nationalism, American nationalism, to be defined on the basis

of belonging to a particular majority, group, in the American population, the only common characteristic of which is the color of their skin.

In fact, the color of skin is not a characteristic which in itself produces an identity. Identity is never based on its physical characteristic. Only when a certain physical characteristic is assigned cultural significance, only then an identity can be based on that characteristic. So, physical characteristics in themselves are not important. They do not produce an identity.

FINAN: So, it sounds more like a racist ideology more than a nationalism.

GREENFELD: Well, in fact, it is a racist ideology in the sense that, if it is true as it seems to me, you see, I never talked to anyone who says, hi, I am a white nationalist. But, I talk to people who believe that there is white nationalism and who do not think well of it. So, it is a racist ideology on the part of those people, because they think that the color of one's skin can produce an identity. If --

FINAN: Liah, -- oh, go ahead. I'm sorry.

GREENFELD: If it does produce an identity, you know, anyone who would believe oneself to be a white nationalist would be a racist, yes. And, anyone who believes that the color of skin can produce an identity would be a racist. That is true. Now, this would be, actually, a type of nationalism which is very different from the original American nationalism, which is individualist and not an ethnic nationalism.

In Germany and in Russia, you had from the very beginning the development of an ethnic nationalism, where membership was defined by blood, by physical characteristics. In America, originally, nobody would consider physical characteristics a criterion of membership in the nation. And, our laws, for example, they're still completely blind to physical characteristics. The laws are blind.

Somebody who wants to become an American has the right to ask for the inclusion and usually would get the inclusion in the American nation. In fact, we are a nation of immigrants. All of us are voluntary Americans. We are not born Americans. We are not born with certain physical characteristics. We are Americans because we want to be Americans.

FINAN: Yes, the sweepings of every country, as Joyce once said. The book itself is a fascinating account of how nationalism has emerged and defined a modern world or is the definition of the modern world. I'm appreciative of you writing it for the Press. I think it gives an eye-opening understanding and appreciation that nationalism isn't something that was of the past, that it's always here, that it always will be, you think. You said you weren't willing to project into the future.

And, I want to thank you for taking the time today to talk to us about the book and giving us a little slice of it, giving us a discussion. This was nice.

GREENFELD: Well, thank you very much.

FINAN: I enjoyed the conversation.