

Book Reviews

Julia Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 108 pp.

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Those readers familiar with modern literary theory and criticism will be acquainted with Julia Kristeva's writings. Born in Bulgaria, Ms. Kristeva, currently Professor of Linguistics at the University of Paris, did her studies in French literature in Paris and there became much influenced by Jacques Lacan. Like Lacan, Ms. Kristeva became a trained psychoanalyst and both her interest in semiotics and in psychoanalysis inform all her work. To these influences she has, from time to time, added Marxist political philosophy and, more important, a firm commitment to feminist theory, which crucially differentiates her literary theory from that of Lacan. In sum, Ms. Kristeva's credentials are such that her writings embody almost every currently fashionable approach to literary analysis. Like many modern theorists, she writes on a wide range of social issues and she has recently turned her attention to the question of nationalism, first in a more extended treatment of the subject in *Strangers to Ourselves*, and in this collection.

Nations Without Nationalism is a slight volume, comprising four essays or, more properly, a letter to the leader of the French anti-nationalist organization "S.O.S. Racisme," - "Open Letter to Harlem Désir" - and two essays (one of which serves as an introduction to the rest of the book) - "What of Tomorrow's Nation?" and "The Nation and the Word." The final selection is an interview with Ms. Kristeva on her novel, *The Samurai*, which bears only the most tenuous connection to the rest of the book and in which Ms. Kristeva and her interviewer, in language so abstruse and pretentious as to be painful, analyze the structure and purpose of the novel. Mercifully short (it is less than twenty pages long), the interview at least serves the purpose of warning prospective readers of what is in store for them in the novel itself should they wish a more extended treatment of the themes touched on in these pages.

The main portion of *Nations Without Nationalism* is devoted to a discussion of the problem of nationalism in the modern world. While Ms. Kristeva's essays were written with a French audience in mind and while she writes with specific reference to events in France, they are of course meant to have wider application. Despite this, however, there is very little of substance to this collection and the three entries that deal with the topic suggested by the book's title offer nothing in the way of serious historical or philosophical analysis of the idea of nationalism nor how one might cope with the dangers it poses either for present-day France nor for the rest of the world. To the extent that Ms. Kristeva offers an argument in these essays, it is that it is possible to reconcile nationhood with a respect for disparate values and that Europe is fortunate in being heir to certain universalist philosophies that, while acknowledging and accepting cultural variety, underscored the brotherhood of all men. Stoicism, the Augustinian notion of *civitas peregrina*, and Enlightenment conception of humankind, Ms. Kristeva contends, all upheld a universal, transnational principle of humanity which, while consistent with the existence of distinct nations, preached tolerance for social diversity ("confessional, linguistic, behavioral,

sexual, and so forth.") How can this reconciliation between the modern nation-state and a wide range of cultural differences be accomplished in the face of the bitter sectarianism that has polarized France in particular? Ms. Kristeva, who calls herself a "cosmopolitan," believes that tolerance of diverse values and the idea of nationhood are not incompatible if one has recourse to Montesquieu's notion of the *esprit général*, where one's loyalty is to the smaller grouping (in order of size, the individual, the family, the nation, the race, mankind) only if that loyalty doesn't conflict with ("is integrated into") loyalty to the larger. (I leave aside the fact that there are serious problems with this interpretation of what Montesquieu means by the term.) This entails, contends Ms. Kristeva, a respect for personal rights (by which Ms. Kristeva understands "personal values") and an appreciation of the interdependence of groups.

All this is well and good, but Ms. Kristeva never confronts the crucial questions raised by this claim. How is it possible to determine when such loyalties conflict? And what are the criteria for determining the costs and benefits that accrue to each of these groupings? Surely it is obvious that there is no clearer or more common instance of self-deception than the conclusions to which we are all prone, that what is best for the group, by a stroke of luck, happens to coincide with what is best for oneself and that all would benefit were one's values universalized. Nor are we told whether there is a limit to the diversity of values beyond which societies can no longer function. How "cosmopolitan" can one be? All these problems, of course, are, at least in principle, soluble were one to have recourse to the notion of a society based on individual rights, but Ms. Kristeva eschews this solution.

Ms. Kristeva seems to appreciate the fact that as our personal freedom becomes more and more restricted and our sense of self more fragmented, we tend to take refuge in identifying ourselves not so much as individuals but as members of some national or religious group. But she appears unable to translate this notion into a coherent theory of social diversity that is rooted in limiting the coercive powers of the majority. The extension of government activity into areas once considered distinctly private has transformed what otherwise would have been regarded as purely personal issues into those requiring political solutions. As a consequence, modern social democracies require far more homogeneity in the values embraced by their citizens than did the liberal regimes of the nineteenth century.

Finally, an ever-expanding social welfare system forces a nation's population to subsidize its immigrants, which encourages them to distrust those whose life-styles are markedly different and who espouse distinct values. Can there be any doubt that the primary reason why most Americans (I am not speaking of the more rabid nationalists, who never represented more than a small minority) were prepared to accept an open immigration policy a hundred years ago while today they overwhelmingly support strict limitations on immigration is that immigrants are immediately eligible for the whole range of government benefits, including welfare? And the provision of these benefits are themselves a reason for attracting some immigrants, who have no real wish to integrate themselves into their new home, but only seek to take advantage of its state-provided largesse. Nor do new immigrants need to adopt the values of the nation to which they are immigrating. Assimilating themselves to the prevalent value scheme is no longer necessary since governments now shield us from the costs of offending many of those values.

It is, I think, important to underscore that what most people today object to - despite much of the rhetoric to the contrary - is not differences in language, dress, cuisine, or culture, but rather the refusal by some groups of immigrants to both adopt the prevailing rules of courtesy (without such social life becomes impossible) and to respect the boundaries that demark the private sphere of others, including their property.

Equally important, and thoroughly neglected in these essays, is the direct contribution made by governments themselves to the more virulent manifestations of modern-day nationalism. Much of what passes for nationalist sentiment today is contrived by governments for immediate political ends. Nothing binds a group together more than common hatreds and no institution is better able to animate these hatreds than the state, whose control of the media, at least among third-world nations, is almost total. And even when the propagandistic efforts of governments are comparatively benign and seek only to create a common heritage with which to bind the nation's citizens together, the ultimate effects are pernicious since these efforts rely on a falsification of history and appeal to enthusiasms that themselves encourage a distrust of the foreign.

Yet, despite these weaknesses and Ms. Kristeva's almost impenetrable prose, her discussion of nationalism occasionally touches on a point that strikes the reader as insightful. For example, she notes that women have a particular predilection for nationalist sentiments and the hatred of foreigners, which she relates to "the biological fate that causes us to be the *site* of the species" that chains women "to *space*: home, native soil, motherland." Women are by nature conservatives, Ms. Kristeva contends, who distrust change and seek to perpetuate prevailing social arrangements, no matter how oppressive. "The very recent studies that are beginning to be published," she writes:

show to what extent a society based on the rudimentary satisfaction of survival *needs*, to the detriment of the *desires* for freedom, could encourage the regressive sado-masochist leanings of women and, without emancipating them at all, rely on them to create a stagnation, a parareligious support for the status quo crushing the elementary rights of the human person (p.34).

Equally illuminating are her remarks on the nature of French nationalism. Ms. Kristeva observes that, more than any other nation, the French tend to equate the national and the cultural and notes that "foreigners experience more strongly than elsewhere the scorn and rejection that is inflicted upon them by a civilization sure of itself" (p.38). This notion is certainly confirmed by impressionistic evidence. No one who has spent any time in France can have failed to notice that the French tend to regard the rest of Western society, and particularly American society, with disdain, if not contempt, in part, no doubt, because they cannot accept with good grace the fact that the United States, as crass and materialistic as it is, is the dominant world power. American supremacy above all rankles because Americans appear to have only minimal sensitivity to the things associated with living well. And shouldn't those who know what the good life is and how to live it rule the world? That France is a second-rate economic power and that she has, three times in the last hundred and fifty years, proved herself militarily inferior to her eastern neighbor only adds to her humiliation. In light of this, it is no wonder that so many of the French are offended and incensed by the invasion of immigrants from the Maghreb.

Barring the rare penetrating observation, however, *Nations Without Nationalism* is devoid of real interest. Readers with a genuine interest in the problems posed by nationalism in the modern world will find very little of value in Ms. Kristeva's conclusions on the nature of national loyalty and intolerance of cultural diversity nor on her superficial interpretations of French political life.