Encountering Nationalism

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Encountering Nationalism
21st-Century Sociology

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I dedicate this book to immigrant communities living in the USA who were affected by the nationalist backlash of September 11, 2001.
INTRODUCTION

Parades, Flags, and National Pride

September 11, 2001 has moved from the present to history. Especially for those living in the United States and in Afghanistan, the events will surely not be easily forgotten; an untold number of people lost their lives on September 11 and in its aftermath. Where were you when the planes hit the twin towers in New York City? How did you feel when a plane destroyed part of the Pentagon in Washington DC? When did you hear about the plane that crashed outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, killing all the people on board, including the hijackers? Where were you on October 7, 2001 when the United States started its relentless bombing of Afghanistan? How many Afghan civilians lost their lives in the war? Were you too young then to remember the details? “Stunned and bewildered” was how many people in the United States reported feeling immediately after the attacks. Some fervently hoped that no Islamic group had anything to do with the attacks; others were sure that it could not be anyone else. For many, at least initially, the scale of the devastation and its unexpected force made it difficult to give in to the grief and anger that were at the edges of the shock. Grieving would mean coming to terms with the extraordinary scale and deliberate, methodically planned nature of the devastation. For other people, anger was their primary response and means of coping. If the question “Why would anyone do this to us?” marked the bewilderment, then “How dare anyone do this to us?” registered profound anger at the attacks. Two sentiments were widely expressed within hours of the attacks: a deeply felt patriotism, and demands for retribution against the outsiders who were responsible. Others among us feared the retaliation against more readily available targets within the United States: Muslims, people from the Middle East, and all those groups who could be easily mistaken for them.
There are various ways of understanding the enormity and scope of these events, but little gives us better insight into the responses and actions following September 11 than the concept of nationalism. That nationalism was the idiom through which the events were interpreted is in little doubt. Within minutes of the news breaking, the violence was seen as an “attack on America.” Major television channels used variations of this phrase to headline their coverage; “Attack on America” was how CBS and NBC described their reports, while ABC used the phrase “America Attacked.” and CNN called its coverage “America Under Attack.” The language that we use to describe events shapes how we make sense of them while also reflecting how we interpret their meanings. Which is also to say that the events might be framed in a different way; that is, we might have interpreted them through a different lens or put a different twist on them.

Typically, most of us see our own nationalism as loyalty or love for country, i.e. patriotism, whereas nationalism elsewhere is likely to be associated with fanatical militancy. It seems easier to think of things that can be associated with nationalism – flags, wars, passports, place of birth or belonging – than it is to pin nationalism down to a definition. Like many other social concepts, such as racism or sexuality, nationalism is so deeply embedded in our lives and so self-evident that it makes any explanations seem redundant. Considered more broadly, though, nationalism refers to relatively recent beliefs and practices aimed at creating unified but unique communities within a sovereign territory. In this definition, such forms of community are thought of as nations and sovereign territory is associated with the concept of the state. (Given the interchangeable and confusing ways in which the three concepts of nationalism, nation, and state are used, the following chapter explores these concepts and their varied relations more carefully.) Sameness and difference are the foundations upon which nationalism rests: individuals in a nation are essentially similar and equal, but each nation and its people are distinct from others. Nationalism is seen to unify people and provide a sense of belonging to a community that takes precedence over all else, whether family, or ethnic or local group. It is believed that we realize our potential as individuals by virtue of belonging to this national community; in that, nationalism conjoins our individuality to the collective. Taken as a whole, the interests of the people of each community are seen as synonymous with the interests of the nation. Political maps exemplify how our notion of the world is represented through national and state boundaries. Each nation is seen as independent, with a sovereign territory that it has rights over, and the right to defend. We find nothing unusual about the fact that each
person has a nationality that affects whether she or he can exist in the
eyes of the state, or can work, travel, have rights, or be expected to take on
some responsibilities, and so on.

Taken together, these factors made it difficult for the attacks of Septem-
ber 11 to be seen as anything other than an attack on the (north)
American nation, its people, and its sovereign territory.¹ That the attack
on the World Trade Center represented an attack against international
trade and finance as much as it represented an attack against American
interests seemed only secondary. This language of an attack against
America, American citizens, and the American way of life set into motion
a groundswell of nationalism. The power of nationalism rallied people
together at a time of great uncertainty and anxiety. Even though we may
turn to our families, our friends, our co-workers, and other communities
that we belong to in moments of crises, coming together to share grief and
mourning with a national community was, at that time, just as important.
It was not uncommon for people to express privately and publicly that
they had never felt more “American” in their lives than at that time; they
felt connected to the national community of fellow Americans in their
grief and outrage.

The Power of Nationalism and Nationalism as Power

The crisis of September 11 revealed the force of nationalism in the United
States in various ways. Political leaders urged people to come together as
Americans and do their part in this war against terrorism; patriotism was
used to mobilize the public to give blood, donate their money, and defend
the territory. At the same time, with few exceptions, national and local
political leaders repeatedly invoked the language of war and militancy to
console a grieving, anxious American people. The rawness of the initial
shock and anger gave way to a powerful rhetoric of American fortitude
and a demand for retribution. The spirit of nationalism and love of country
were used to build support for military strikes initially against Osama bin
Laden, the assumed initiator, Al-Qaida (the group inspired by and shelter-
ing him), and the Taliban, and later against Saddam Hussein’s regime
and other militant Islamic groups believed to support anti-American insur-
gency.² Numerous national and local political leaders used words such as
“evildoers” and “Muslim fundamentalists,” in order to identify the enemy.
It was not uncommon to hear news analysts and experts saying that
enemy groups hate America for its freedoms, its way of life, its material
superiority, and the rights that American women enjoy. If these attitudes
helped identify the enemy and its motivations, then it also helped characterize America as a free, open, and powerful nation. Exacerbated by prominent political leaders like President Bush and Senator McCain, this nationalist rhetoric was put into practice by the military on October 7, 2001 in the war against the Taliban government in Afghanistan, a war to prevent it from providing support to terrorist organizations.

That political leaders deployed the power of nationalism to political ends is indisputable. But it was also popularly expressed. Americans of various persuasions – conservatives, liberals, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, whites, Christians, Jews, Muslims, women and men – felt the tug of nationalism and, in numerous cases, responded to it. Ordinary Americans from all walks of life expressed their patriotism and their anger against the perceived enemy. Flags are a particularly handy way of showing one’s love for country to fellow citizens and to the enemy at a time of war. Vast numbers of homes, gardens, and cars were decorated with the red, white, and blue colors of the (north) American flag. In some neighborhoods in the country it was harder to find homes that were not marked by the national colors. Walmart reported that it sold a staggering 88,000 flags on the day after September 11 and businesses that make flags had a hard time keeping up with the unprecedented demand. Graffiti, clothes, and clothing accessories in red, white, and blue enabled people to wear the love for their country on their sleeve, as it were. Those who had never before felt this need to express their nationalism were moved by the extent of the national tragedy and looked to the national community for comfort and unity. Indeed, those who ordinarily feel ambivalently about nationalism responded to its power and its promise despite themselves.

There is no doubting the depth of nationalism’s influence. I once asked a friend, “What is most precious to you?” After due reflection, her response, which would probably be true for most of us, was, “My life.” That some of us would sacrifice our lives for the nation is a sobering thought. In fact, in his influential book, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (to be discussed in greater length in Chapter One), Benedict Anderson wonders why nationalism has the ability to make people love, die, and kill for their nation. The answer to this question is often more complicated; for example, in many countries it is men from the lower socioeconomic classes who are the foot soldiers who die and kill. But Anderson’s point is well taken; it is a rare concept that would elicit the sacrifice of the lives of people on a wide scale. This is a sobering reminder of the men and women in the US armed forces who lost their lives while defending the nation after September 11. They were later hailed as heroes and their lives commemorated as sacrifice for the national community.
If these observations indicate “the power of nationalism,” then they also compel us carefully to consider nationalism itself as a form of power. Nationalism may be awe-inspiring in its ability to connect and unify people at a time of crisis or allow political leaders to whip up public support for retaliatory action. But nationalism is an expression of power, more broadly conceived. Power is the ability to shape beliefs and practices. It is the foundation upon which human relations and social institutions are built. As a form of power, nationalism has some similarity to ethnicity, religion, sexuality, race, or the family in making us function in socially patterned and socially regulated ways. Frequently, scholars consider nationalism as power wielded by the nation’s elites and therefore see nationalism as a dangerous or ideological phenomenon. For example, some see nationalism as an ideology or a kind of false consciousness that is imposed on people despite their best interests. But others take the point of view that power exerts social control by both making things happen and preventing them; it is both productive and restrictive. This is what makes nationalism’s influence awesome: as a mechanism of social control it works by permeating our pleasures and desires, by enabling us as citizens, and by making it seem perfectly “natural” and “normal” that each person has a nationality. The passion, love, and devotion to country that is expressed by ordinary people, by writers, and by poets, are resounding reminders of how the spirit of nationalism is not simply inflicted but also desired.

The surge of nationalism in the United States after September 11 tells us much about its functioning as a form of power. Power shapes our individual selves. Not surprisingly, Americans were widely called upon to do their duty to national interests in the aftermath of September 11. In an interview on CNN, the Republican Senator from Virginia, John Warner, called upon every person to think of himself (sic) as an agent. He clarified that this did not mean spying on one’s neighbor, but reporting odd behavior. Indeed, the Christian Science Monitor reported that 435,000 tips of “anti-American activity” were received post-September 11. In one case, the FBI investigated a tiny art gallery in Houston that was opening an exhibition on US covert operations and government secrets. In another case cited in the article, a 60-year-old retired telephone worker was approached by the FBI about political views that he had aired at his gym. Consider also what happens when intelligence work on behalf of national interests is mixed with racism and xenophobia. Passengers on a commuter train in Rhode Island reported a fellow passenger to the police for “suspicious behavior.” As it turned out, his turban and brown skin were what constituted his suspicious behavior in the eyes of the other
passengers. If the weeks and months following September 11 give us some insight into how nationalism as a form of power can make some things happen, then they also indicate the pitfalls in the beliefs and practices that are set in motion.

Clearly, power permeates our interpersonal relations and gives us unequal access to material and nonmaterial resources. A chief characteristic of nationalism is that each nation is internally unified, but this belief is fraught with the reality of differences among citizens. When politicians speak of the American nation or the American people they can do so by sweeping important differences of class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, geography, or religion between millions of people under the national rug. Furthermore, we expect that the people of a nation are equal, or ought to be equal if they are not. But this is the fundamental flaw of nationalism: although the nation may be seen as a community of equals, inequalities are rife. Not only do aspects such as race, class, gender, place of birth and belonging, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion make people different but these aspects also explain why not all citizens are treated equally. These inequalities are not simply incidental, but are a routine part of our lives; they are built into the social and legal infrastructures. All kinds of people may be (north) American citizens, but racism and xenophobia filter who truly belongs and who is denied full rights of inclusion into the national community.

Creating internal frontiers: racism and xenophobia in nationalism

The point that I am leading up to is the anti-Muslim violence that came within minutes of the tragedies. Racial verbal and physical assaults occurred immediately. These assaults were against Muslims of diverse origins, people of Arab origin, Sikhs, Hindus, Iranians, and Christians who were visibly different. A Pakistani family’s house was burned down in Sacramento; the Islamic Institute of New York received phone calls threatening that the streets would be painted in the blood of its school’s students; in Gary, Indiana, a man fired more than 21 shots from an assault rifle at an American of Yemeni origin; an elderly Sikh man was beaten with a baseball bat; and another Sikh man was shot dead at his gas station in Mesa, Arizona. The list is too long to complete, and it appears that many of the physical and verbal assaults were never reported for fear of further retaliation. Sikh men wearing turbans were especially targeted because they looked like Osama bin Laden in the eyes of their assailants; this, despite the fact that Sikhism is a different religion from his. While
some lamented the fact that assailants could not tell the difference be-
tween a Sikh and a Muslim, between an Arab and a South Asian, the
scope of the violence forced otherwise distinct groups to identify with the
widespread victimization. At the very least, the confusions between
the enemy and immigrants protected any group from being singled out.
Attacks against Jewish Americans were also reported later.

Why were racism and xenophobia so swiftly expressed? Lessons learned
after the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 did
temper public reaction momentarily. At that time, immediate speculations
that it had to be the work of Islamic terrorist groups were proven wrong;
terrorism turned out to be of a white, Christian variety. But on September
11. 2001 any restraint quickly disappeared upon reports of Middle-
Eastern sounding hijackers. Racism and the xenophobia against people
perceived to be Muslims, foreigners, and others were swiftly expressed
because these sentiments already existed. There is a deeprooted history
of anti-Islamic sentiments in the United States that can be traced back to
black nationalism and its links to Islam. The violence of September 11
catalyzed rather than caused the racism. Furthermore, the racism and
xenophobia were not merely expressed against brown- or olive-skinned
women and men; this time, they were charged by the vigor of nationalism.
Anecdotal reports suggest that in some cases perpetrators of racism saw
their crimes as acts of patriotism. A 75-year-old man in Huntington, NY,
tried to run over a Pakistani woman in the parking lot of a shopping mall.
The man reportedly screamed that he was “doing this for my country.” He
then followed the women into a store and reportedly threatened to kill her
for “destroying my country.” The racism and xenophobia in the aftermath
of September 11 was the other side of nationalism and patriotism.

But the line between “us” and “them” that seems to be characteristic of
nationalism is rarely sharp, and more often than not is unstable. Even
though nationalism, racism, and xenophobia can draw lines between
insiders and outsiders, between foes and friends, between the American
people and the Taliban/Afghans, the divisions are far more ambiguous
and complicated. Initially, most political leaders’ references to the moral
attitudes and ties that make people Americans made little allowance for
some Americans being Muslim. But a few days later they started to
cautions people against persecuting Muslims and brown-skinned, foreign-
looking people. Attempts were made in political speeches to remind audi-
ences that America included all manner of people – even Muslims and
Arab Americans.

Recognizing that the racist and xenophobic attacks after September 11
were about the internal frontiers of nationalism, President Bush and
others attempted to revise these boundaries. He and other leaders spoke out against the racism and xenophobia that was fairly widespread across the nation. The President, for example, visited a mosque in Washington DC to make the point that retribution was being sought not from Muslims in general but from groups of Muslim terrorists. Nonetheless, rather than diminishing the interior boundaries between “real” Americans and brown-skinned immigrants, these political leaders differentiated between “good” immigrants and “bad” immigrants. Even though “good” immigrants were partially incorporated into the national community, the distinctions between “real” Americans and “good” immigrants remained intact. In one of his many speeches delivered to Congress after September 11, President Bush reminded his fellow Americans not to pick on those who look different from them. At first glance, this was an important statement coming from the President, but the limits of liberal attempts to include people in the national community were equally vivid. References to his fellow Americans and those different from them once again distinguished between Americans who represent the norm and those who do not because they seem different. Simply trying to include different people into the national community without redefining the national community as inherently diverse ended up re-emphasizing the distinctions between “regular” Americans and those who, regardless of their birthplace, will always remain outsiders in many respects because of their race and religion.

Another important reason to complicate the distinctions between “us” and “them” that seem so central to nationalism has to do with the impact of nationalism on American Muslims, and Arab-American immigrant groups, and others who were targeted in the aftermath of September 11. What complicated the positions of these groups is that anything less than unequivocal support for American nationalism and American foreign policy was considered akin to sedition and, moreover, support for the terrorists. Particularly for relatively recent immigrants this was not easy to negotiate. Most immigrants are tied to American soil because of a variety of factors: livelihood, property, lack of alternatives, desire to raise their children in America, desire to belong to the American national community, among others. Not surprisingly, many such groups condemned the violence of September 11 in no uncertain terms and rallied behind (north) American nationalism. I received a number of personal emails from South Asian friends and family members urging each other to stand up and be counted. A coalition of Muslim advocacy groups urged Muslim doctors to help in efforts at the World Trade Center site and encouraged Muslim Americans to donate blood. Arab and Sikh taxi drivers in New York City
offered free rides to people who were attempting to track down loved ones feared lost in the attacks. Reportedly, these taxi drivers also clearly displayed the American flag and carried messages such as “God bless America” to show their patriotism and also to avoid harassment and assault. That such groups would identify with the American national community is not unusual. What is noteworthy, however, is that these groups were unable freely to express any reservations about the war against Afghanistan for fear of retribution. The ongoing threat of physical and verbal violence against Muslim Americans, Arab Americans, and South Asians narrowed the possible responses from immigrants and citizens of color. Paradoxically, these groups became both collaborators in the surging nationalism, patriotism, and jingoism and the targets of the underside of nationalism, in the form of racism and xenophobia.

**Institutional power of nationalism: quelling dissent**

By now, it is surely clear that power is hardly limited to relations between individuals but also is institutionally exercised. That nationalism can move people to act in certain ways, give pleasure, fuel retribution against others, create and enforce social laws, govern who has the right to enter and exit national boundaries and who is entitled to the benefits of citizenship, gives us some measure of the expansive scope of nationalism spanning interpersonal and institutional realms. Its institutional forms lend force to the inequalities between individual people. We may downplay the racist, homophobic, or sexist behaviors of individuals by saying that they spring from ignorance or misplaced anger. But when representatives of the law or the Church or immigration laws enforce these viewpoints, racism, homophobia, or sexism become far more powerful. If the positions of leaders like President Bush and Senator John Warner give us some indication of the role of the legislative arm of the state in supporting expressions of nationalism, then the passing of the Patriot Act in the aftermath of September 11 is a sobering example of the power of institutions to enforce nationalist beliefs. Writing about the act, Patricia J. Williams questions the unprecedented merger between intelligence agencies and law enforcement sanctioned by this act. She worries that the expanded power granted to law enforcement agencies, coupled with lowered standards of accountability, could seriously compromise civil liberties and promote paranoia.

Institutional attempts at quelling dissent were another aspect of the power of nationalism after September 11. In the wake of the discussion on
the appropriate retaliation against terrorist groups and the Taliban, then accused of sheltering Osama bin Laden, critical or alternative positions were dismissed as anti-American. What I suggested before about minority groups' inability to freely express sentiments contrary to majority public opinion was more widely true for groups that questioned US foreign policy or advised against the bombing of Afghanistan. From conservatives to liberals, from Democrats to Republicans, the scope of acceptable positions became narrower in the first few months after September 11. In the mandate given by the Congress to the President to declare a war in response to the violence, there was only one representative, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, who declined. Reportedly, she was subjected to death threats as a result of her position. Again, what is unusual about this is that political dissent was quelled by charges of anti-Americanness; it would have been seen equivalent to inciting anti-American hatred. At its extreme, political dissent from US foreign policy or the popular public response was assumed to indicate sympathy with the terrorist groups. Rather than provoking healthy discussion and difference of opinion on a matter of crucial importance, nationalism prevented such differences.

Nothing better illustrates how the spirit of nationalism can be used to silence political differences than the task of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), which was founded in 1995. As its mission statement lays down, this organization is dedicated to academic freedom, quality, and accountability. But Lynne V. Cheney, wife of Vice-President Dick Cheney, Senator Joe Lieberman, and other members of government joined together in targeting the academy for failing to participate in American patriotism and, worse, for inciting anti-American sentiment in students. A report on ACTA, published in November 2001, accused universities of “failing America” by refusing to take unequivocally patriotic stances. President Bush’s comments that there is no neutral ground, that governments and people either concur with or are against the United States, provided the political outline for the report. Citing selected comments from professors and deans at various universities in the nation, the report summarized its concerns in these words:

Rarely did professors publicly mention heroism, rarely did they discuss the difference between good and evil, the nature of Western political order or the virtue of a free society. Indeed, the message of much of the academe was clear: BLAME AMERICA FIRST.

There is much that can be said about the ACTA report. Never mind the glossing over of the differences among the positions taken in the academy.
Never mind, also, the fact that the academy is supposed to foster critical thinking and not easily capitulate to public opinion or state policy. Instead, I would like to draw attention to three points. First, giving the events and aftermath of September 11 due consideration by looking at history, contemporary politics, or America’s role in the Cold War is not akin to blaming America. Second, there may not be neutral ground in this conflict, but serious and broader understandings of these events complicate simple distinctions between “good” and “evil.” The moral equivocation among some academics might have occurred because they see victims on both sides of the conflict. Third, since when did expressing political difference come to signify sedition? Some would argue that disagreeing with state policy and popular public sentiment is a deeply American tradition that can be traced back to the revolutionary war against British colonialism. Yet the report on ACTA simplifies a complex situation, and its identification and criticism of individual professors, deans, and groups in the academy in the name of patriotism threatens and silences different perspectives.

**Cornerstones and Contradictions of Nationalism**

One question that I often pose to students when we discuss nationalism in the classroom is “How do you identify nationalism?” Invariably, much of the discussion pivots around flags, maps, language, and intangible but influential ties between members of a national community. Isn’t it strange, then, that despite the tremendous force of nationalism, it seems both very specific and very abstract? As noted earlier, it’s not just that most of us have an easier time coming up with examples of nationalism than its meaning; rather, the symbols and rituals of nationalism are what give it shape in day-to-day life. Clearly, at moments of crisis, symbols such as flags at half-mast or the memorable photograph of the crew at the site of the World Trade Center hoisting a tattered flag as an act of defiance and fortitude, are the specific instances that gives shape to the nationalist spirit. In general, however, symbols such as flags, and repetitions throughout the media of national community and national interests, and the national map displayed on television weather reports, are a few of the ways in which we are constantly reminded of the American nation. Notwithstanding state institutions that enforce law, defend territories, and collect taxes, the intangible spirit of nationalism relies on its constant reiteration. Symbols such as the flag, together with a national language and depictions of the national character not only
butress the power of nationalism, but also are the very expressions of nationalism as a form of power.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of American nationalism post-September 11 was a disavowal of its nationalism. However paradoxical this may sound, the widespread opinion was that what was being witnessed in response to September 11 was patriotism, not nationalism. In a radio conversation regarding the recent rise of nationalism in the United States, a news commentator corrected me, saying that patriotism (good nationalism) rather than nationalism (the retrogressive variety) is what is true of American society. By implication, nationalism, in all of its dark and negative connotations, exists elsewhere. Somehow, nationalism has come to be associated with an unpredictable force more closely associated with the Third World and thus to be condemned. These differences between the First and the Third World, between “good” and “bad” nationalisms, and about nationalism as a progressive versus a retrograde force, plague discussions of nationalism. Taking issue with such divisions, an important commentator on the commonplace nature of nationalism, Michael Billig, says that this approach ignores the proliferation of nationalism in the West, seeing it as a property of extremists, guerrilla groups, and propagandizing states. He writes,

“Our” nationalism is not presented as nationalism, which is dangerously irrational, surplus, and alien. A new identity, a different label, is found for it. “Our” nationalism appears as “patriotism” – a beneficial, necessary and, often, American force.”

Building upon this theme, the position I take is that nationalism is both “here” and “there,” it is both progressive and retrogressive, and it carries both possibilities and dangers.

Another paradoxical cornerstone of nationalism is that each nation is thought to be fundamentally unique. It is held that all nations are constructed on the basis of a single model but each nation is somehow unique. Culture, language, history, tradition, race or notions of racial stock, religion, sexuality, and attitude to women are among the chief ways in which nations are distinguished from one another. But since these differences between nations are established in relation to one another, like any other national identity, American national identity is given shape against what it is not; after September 11, Afghanistan provided the mirror image – the opposite – of American national identity. From the American perspective, if the differences between the two nations were differences between good and evil, between morality and malevo-
lence, then religion, race, and, most of all, women crystallized their unique and opposed national identities.

**Women as markers of national identity**

The war against Afghanistan and the ruling Taliban was partly justified by the American national state as a war against a reprehensible regime, as measured by its support to terrorists and its oppressive treatment of women. If the men were characterized as evil, warmongering, fundamentalists, repressive, and irrational, then Afghan women were characterized as oppressed, passive, and abject victims. These characterizations did not take into account the history and origin of the Taliban and their repressive measures, or the ways in which Afghan women both colluded with and resisted the Taliban. Despite the fact that the Taliban seized control over most of the country in 1996 and a wide range of international feminist and human rights groups had expressed significant concern about the increasingly harsh control of women, there was little attempt by the United States to hold the Taliban accountable; on the contrary, state officials were reportedly attempting to strike deals for an oil pipeline with the Taliban. Soon after the start of the US military’s bombing of Afghanistan, though, Afghan women’s status was in the limelight. The discarding of the veil by some Afghan women after the surrender of the Taliban in key areas was mistakenly seen as a sign of their liberation and an endorsement of US intervention in Afghanistan. As the interim government was established, depictions of Afghan men as brave, proud, and resilient, and Afghanistan as a nation under siege started to emerge. What is striking is how characterizations of Afghanistan seem tied to US foreign policy.

Yet again, these characterizations of Afghanistan in the United States tell us more about American nationalism and national identity. Parallel to the more abject images of Afghan women and men were more potent images of American women and men. In response to the common question “Why do they hate us?,” the freedom of American women was repeatedly cited. Political leaders and news commentators and analysts who took this point of view suggested that the freedoms that American women have access to are objectionable to fundamentalist and terrorist groups. Never mind the similarities between the lives of elite women in Afghanistan and in the United States; there is no denying the differences in the lives of most women in Afghanistan and those in the United States. Yet freedom and repression are relative terms that do not acknowledge
that women’s fundamental rights to freedom from poverty, freedom to make reproductive choices, the right to earn wages comparable to men, the right to basic health care are embattled in both countries. The parallel representations of the heroes in the aftermath of September 11 have almost exclusively been men in their roles as firefighters, as policemen, as soldiers, and as political leaders. As one insightful interviewer of the men and women working at the World Trade Center crash site noted, the attacks of September 11 were seen as attacks against American masculinity; not surprisingly then the scores of women who actively supported the work at the site were ignored in favor of the icons of American masculinity.

**Approaching Nationalism**

Reflecting back on the events of September 11, 2001 and its aftermath helps realize that the power and pitfalls of nationalism are not just limited to (north) America. Lest the discussion on September 11 and American nationalism give the misleading impression that nationalism is a factor of crisis and unusual events, I want to note that these moments of crisis merely make nationalism more visible and present in our consciousness. Developing this approach, Billig compellingly turns our attention to the everyday, ever-present but less visible forms of nationalism that are deeply ingrained in our consciousness. In the United States, countless numbers of flags usually hang unnoticed and anthems are routinely sung at sports events. The President of the country typically ends speeches with “God Bless America,” thereby calling on God to serve the national order. Billig uses the term “banal nationalism” to make the point that nationalism is neither unusual nor uncommon but a humdrum part of our daily lives. Indeed, he puts his finger on a central characteristic of nationalism: its ordinariness, which attests to its power to make itself seem part of the “natural” environment of societies. Therefore, the intangible, elusive nature of nationalism might be an indication not of its insignificance but of its extensive reach.

The look back at the aftermath of September 11, 2001 surely also clarifies that nationalism is neither inherently good nor inherently bad. As a belief system that has considerable consequences in our lives, nationalism is not innately a positive force nor is it innately a problem. On the contrary, nationalism emerges as a complex set of beliefs and practices that defy facile moral characterizations. Nothing less than a nuanced and even-handed approach is called for under these circumstances.
There is good reason to be critical of nationalism as a coherent, stable belief system. If, indeed, nationalism is based on networks of power that produce the illusion and reality of unity despite the differences between people, then looking for the contradictions gives insight into the workings and mis-steps of institutional forms of power. Examining the contradictions of nationalism following September 11, its promise of patriotism as well as its positioning of minority and immigrant communities allows us to challenge its influence. Rather than capitulate to its seduction, we are better able to see both how it can play a powerful role by uniting vast numbers of grief-stricken Americans while simultaneously making other groups vulnerable. The study of nationalism, then, has to be done thoughtfully. It is not to say that we cannot entertain the question that nationalism is genuinely shared by a group of people or questions of national history and culture, but all these need to be explored through a critical lens.

The classifications of nationalism are no less questionable. By that, I refer to national identities, differences between nationalism and patriotism, differences between insiders and outsiders, and distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. We need to take a skeptical approach to these categories for three reasons. First, national identities do not have any inherent essence, but are defined in relation to each other. In some ways, national identity is defined in opposition to another; as mentioned, before the fall of the Taliban American nationalism was characterized in diametrical opposition to that of Afghanistan. That these definitions of themselves rather than any innate or fixed notion of American identity tells us the importance of taking a thoughtful approach to the classifications of nationalism. Second, as we explored above, differences between national identities or between insiders and outsiders are hardly fixed. The interim, United States-backed government in Afghanistan and the presence of “good” immigrants in the United States indicate that classifications of nationalism are unstable and not simply twofold. In subsequent chapters, as we consider nationalism’s links to colonialism, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, I will suggest going beyond the superficial differences between the colonizers and the colonized, women and men, or hetero- and homosexuality. Third, a skeptical approach to classifications related to key concepts explored in the following chapters should also help us remain critical of the inequalities that frequently exist between categories. National identities, women and men, the colonizers and the colonized, do not simply acquire meaning in relation to one another; they are also unequal classifications.
Currently, the central challenge facing nationalism is the rise of ethnic political movements that struggle for greater autonomy within the confines of an existing state or seek to forge an independent state. Sometimes violent and bloody, these movements threaten to destabilize existing national states and an international order, or splinter these states into myriad unviable nation states. Yet the implications of these trends are less than clear. To what extent do these movements signal a tension between the model of nation state – one people, one territory – and the reality of most national states: many competing and unequal peoples living within a unified political territory? Did the wave of newly independent states at the end of formal colonialism mark the end of the revolutionary potential of nationalism? And, therefore, do these contemporary ethnic political movements point to the more repressive and regressive aspects of nationalisms? What do these movements portend for the future of nations and their states? Also, to what extent are these political and separatist movements exacerbated by the changing role of the national state amidst cross-border flows of people, finance, trade, and information? Alternatively, the question is whether these movements appear to be more violent and intransigent as a result of our analytical tools. In effect, what may have changed is our perspective on nationalism; in other words, we are now more likely to discern the violent, exclusionary nature of nationalism.

**Locating this Book**

This book is primarily directed at readers curious about the meaning of, and matters related to, nationalism. I do not assume ready familiarity on the part of readers with the concepts of nationalism, nation, or state. My intention here is to render the meaning and importance of these concepts intelligible through clear prose and useful examples. By bringing together these varied and sometimes competing insights across a range of disciplines my purpose is to inform rather than to persuade. Yet no doubt my “take” on nationalism will filter through the pages of this book and readers will consider whether they disagree or agree. Since this book will be more widely distributed in the United States and Western Europe, I have concentrated on examples that more easily resonate with a range of readers in these settings. At the same time, examples and discussions relate to contexts outside the Euro-American context and I hope that, where possible, this book will be of interest to readers elsewhere. For this reason, I have tried to mix internationally publicized matters of nationalism with examples that are less widely known.
In a nutshell, this book is an account of nationalism and its central aspects. The quick version is that even though there is considerable debate about the lasting power of nationalisms and nations, they continue to have great impact in our lives. To do better justice to the beliefs and practices of nationalism, this book-length account is devoted to examining its important facets. Yet neither this book nor any other can provide a complete overarching understanding of nationalism; in the most optimistic case, we aim to do our best. Nationalism is too broad and wide-ranging a concept to allow any author to capture neatly its complexities, contradictions, and diverse trajectories. But this is true of a wider field as well: knowledge is by its nature incomplete and ongoing.

Knowledge is biased as well as partial. The overview of the various theoretical perspectives in Chapter One helps make the point that theoretical approaches are less objective statements of fact than they are disciplinary and personal ways of understanding and analyzing a concept as complicated as nationalism. If there is one thing that these approaches illustrate, it is the point that there is no single account of nationalism or no single way to tell its story. On the contrary, the disciplinary perspectives and the way scholars conceptualize power with respect to nationalism produce multiple, competing accounts of nationalism. Indeed, the variety of lenses produces a range of insights and incongruences. As the discussion in Chapter One will indicate, sometimes it is not clear that investigators are looking at the same concept. If there are those who laboriously work on nationalism in order to find a comprehensive, useful theory of it, there are others who argue that no single theory of nationalism could be useful, because just as there are many nationalisms there are numerous explanations.

Perhaps the breadth and the complexities of nationalism explain the substantial body of literature that has emerged since the early 1970s attempting to answer questions about the definition and meaning of nationalism, its origins, its crucial aspects, and its links to broader social processes such as capitalism, colonialism, as well as their cultural and political consequences. Not surprisingly, as a topic of inquiry it cuts across several disciplines. The origins and history of nations around the world, the area of international relations, cultural and political forms of nationalism, links to the state, racism, fascism, ethnic conflict, gender, sexuality, genocide, immigration, diaspora, are only some of the aspects that are considered by various disciplines. Political science, sociology, international relations, history, women’s studies, literature, and anthropology are the disciplines that typically engage with questions of nationalism. Analyzing the concept of nationalism from any single disciplinary perspective is no
easy task either, nor is it always useful. Where the boundaries between these disciplines are very strictly observed, the study of nationalism seems analogous to the blind men of fable who tried to describe an elephant through its individual parts. This also explains why the bulk of the literature on nationalism based in political science, international relations, and, to some extent, sociology continues to ignore the links between nationalism and gender. In political science and international relations, along with the omissions there are also insights about the role of the state and the institutions that enforce nationalisms.

Given the sheer breadth and depth of aspects of nationalism and the fact that issues cannot be neatly divided as a political science or a sociological matter, the trend in the study of nationalism is toward interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinary studies on nationalism are important for another more compelling reason: some of the most groundbreaking and fruitful insights on nationalism come from work that cuts across disciplinary perspectives. In this book I borrow from numerous areas of study in order to make sense of nationalism. Nonetheless, my background is in sociology and women’s studies, and that will shape my approach and argument here. Sociological insights about the links between personal and collective matters, about the importance of understanding group practices and patterns, about paying attention to the influence of social institutions are no doubt useful to any study of nationalism. Feminist insights further enrich the contributions of political science, international relations, anthropology, colonial studies and history toward a critical understanding of nationalism. Our societies remain at odds owing to inequalities of class, gender, race, sexuality, and ethnicity, among other factors. Perhaps no group has more effectively contributed to the nuances of nationalism’s flawed promise of a united community than international feminist scholars. While I draw upon the insights of modernist approaches to nationalism, my approach is strongly shaped by postcolonial and feminist criticisms of modernist theories; this will become clearer in the following chapters.

As befits a feminist sociological perspective, I should complete this introduction by locating my subjective position on nationalism. I grew up in India, which became independent from British colonialism and was partitioned from East and West Pakistan in 1947. Coming of age in the 1980s, my middle-class urban-educated cohort was shaped by the legacies of nationalism that had led to political sovereignty as well as forging of the two separate nations of India and Pakistan. We were heavily influenced by the idea that over and above our class, ethnic, regional, religious, and caste differences we were all Indian, that our individual and communal interests were synonymous with national interest, and the progress of each group