

Orwell's nationalism vs modern political tribalism

A note by Emina Arella Haddlesey

George Orwell's essay "Notes on Nationalism" is one of Orwell's pearls of wisdom that I often refer to. Orwell distinguishes nationalism from patriotism, with patriotism being a devotion to a place or way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force it on other people.

Nationalism, by contrast, is inseparable from the desire for power. Orwell stated: "The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality." It is about identifying with a nation, race, ideology, or group, and believing in its superiority. Orwell uses "nationalism" not only for allegiance to a nation-state but also to any group loyalty. This can include religions, political movements, races, or even ideologies such as Communism, Zionism, Antisemitism, and Pacifism.

In considering the characteristics of nationalistic thinking, Orwell noted that there is usually a degree of obsession: Nationalists constantly think in terms of competitive prestige, and everything is judged by whether it helps or hurts the cause or group. The second key trait is instability: Nationalists often switch loyalties when it's convenient, especially if it serves their desire for power. For example, someone might be a pacifist in one context and a warmonger in another, depending on which group is involved. The third characteristic is an indifference to reality. Orwell explained: "All nationalists have the power of not seeing resemblance between similar sets of facts. A British Tory will defend self-determination in Europe and oppose it in India with no feeling of inconsistency. Actions are held to be good or bad, not on their own merits but according to who does them, and there is almost no kind of outrage – torture, the use of hostages, forced labour, mass deportations, imprisonment without trial, forgery, assassination, the bombing of civilians – which does not change its moral colour when it is committed by 'our' side." Thus, nationalists distort or ignore facts if they conflict

with their cause and will deny atrocities committed by their side and exaggerate those committed by enemies. This results in intellectual dishonesty and moral blindness.

Nationalism leads people to justify cruelty, double standards, and suppression of truth in the name of loyalty to a group or idea. It corrupts moral judgment, making it difficult to see issues clearly or act fairly. In a world marked by ideological conflict, Orwell urged people to be vigilant against the pull of blind allegiance and instead to hold on to reason, honesty, and individual conscience.

In today's political culture, political tribalism functions in ways eerily like Orwell's nationalism. Political tribalism refers to the tendency of individuals to identify strongly with a political party or ideological group, often to the exclusion of reasoned analysis or good-faith debate. Like Orwell's nationalist, the modern political partisan usually views political news not through the lens of evidence or ethics, but through the question: "Is this good or bad for my cause?"

Political tribalism manifests similar behaviours Orwell warned about, like selective outrage, whereby one may justify actions by one's own party that would be condemned if done by the opposition. Another characteristic of political tribalism is moral relativism, such as excusing dishonesty, corruption, or even violence if it serves partisan goals. The most modern manifestation of political tribalism, however, is found in echo chambers, which refers to consuming media that reinforces preexisting beliefs while dismissing contrary evidence as fake or biased.

Despite these similarities, modern political tribalism, while corrosive, operates primarily within democratic frameworks and often lacks the totalising ideological force that Orwell was targeting. Today's tribalists may shout, cancel, or distort, but they do not typically pose the threat of Orwell's nationalists. Furthermore, political tribalism is often more fragmented and divided across multiple identity lines, such as race, religion, class, or gender, whereas

Orwell's nationalism tends to be singular and total. Regardless, one can apply Orwell's reasoning to today's world and challenge or resist the seductions of groupthink.

The antidote to both nationalism and tribalism lies in a renewed commitment to truth, reason, and common principle. However, the forces of nationalism and modern political tribalism are deeply rooted in human psychology from our innate desire for belonging, identity, and certainty. This means that defeating those forces is not about suppression but making a personal commitment and decision to do so.