

Review Articles

After the Great War: Nationalism, Degenerationism and Mass Psychology

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of psychological language and discourses on the contemporary view of nationalism, an issue that has only begun to be studied in recent years (García-García, 2013; Sluga, 2006). On this occasion, the author focuses on two currents or schools that contributed decisively to the new view of nationalism after the Great War: first, degenerationist medicine and psychiatry, highly accepted in the European social and political debate since the late 19th century; second, and no less penetrating, the crowd or mass psychology of Taine, Tarde, Sighele, and, above all, Gustave Le Bon. After the Great War, as we shall see, nationalism was often represented as a form of degeneration, or a barbarous and cruel regression to a prior stage of development, embodied by the masses. This discourse and rhetoric was to condition the area of study for generations. In fact, the voices of medicine, psychiatry and mass psychology have not disappeared from the debate and continue to directly and indirectly influence the academic and popular comprehension of nationalism.

Keywords: nationalism, mass psychology, Le Bon, degenerationism, war

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At the end of World War I, a number of intellectuals and scholars who had suffered the devastating consequences of the conflict began to articulate a new and critical interpretation of nationalism, very different indeed from the one formulated by the ideologists and *prophets* of historicism in the nineteenth century. In line with this new view—that became established in the West a quarter of a century later—nationalism was no longer related to the awakening of the People to their history and destiny, their demand for independence or the expression of their own singularity. The historicist account of liberation and collective progress seemed to then turn into a drama of death and ravage, cruelty and mass crimes, war and apocalypse. According to these authors, nationalism had inspired “the violent expulsion of people from their homelands, justified campaigns of territorial conquest, signalled danger, restrictions on liberty, and not infrequently a threat to their very survival” (Alter, 1989, pp. 1-2).

From 1918 to 1945, the meaning of the word *nationalism* was also linked to the harmful effects of prejudice, ignorance and mental narrowness, the painful and deplorable effects of fanaticism, intolerance and the drive to war.

Although nearly all critics of the time continued to participate in the legitimization and naturalization of the ideology (e.g., taking for granted the antiquity of nations and the existence of national characters), the primary objective of their work was to denounce nationalism as a threat against world peace (Smith, 1986, p. 7). Philosophers, politicians, educators, moralists, sociologists, even historians—who for decades had spearheaded nationalism—were now quoting Le Bon and Freud to denounce its atrocious and inhuman consequences. Nationalism is not entirely logical or rational—according to the American historian Louis Snyder (1954), “it should be considered first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness, a psychological fact” (pp. 196-197). A significant number of intellectuals in the mid-century identified nationalism with extreme, intolerant and destructive ideas and behaviours that needed to be explained through psychology and condemned in moral terms.

The new view on nationalism among Western intellectuals has been pointed out by different authors (Alter, 1989; Anderson, 2000; Palti, 2001; Smith, 1971/1976; Tiryakian, 1989). Even so, not always has sufficient attention been paid to the medico-psychiatric language or rhetoric employed by the critics (see García-García, 2013; Sluga, 2006). In this paper I propose to analyse the presence and provenance of such language. Specifically, I shall focus on two currents or schools that decisively contributed to the new evaluation of nationalism: on the one hand, degenerationist medicine and psychiatry, very common in the European social and political debate of the late 19th century; on the other hand, the crowd psychology of Taine, Tarde, Sighele, and, above all, Gustave Le Bon. After the Great War, as we shall see, nationalism was represented as a form of degeneration, or a barbarous and cruel regression to a prior stage of development, embodied by the masses.¹

This article contributes to understanding the spread of fin-de-siècle medical and psychiatric sciences that were to make a powerful impact on different academic disciplines, political factions and ideological currents of the first half of the twentieth century (Burrow, 2000/2001; Hughes, 1958/1979). In fact, the rhetoric of degenerationism and the psychology of the masses has often been attributed to conservative or reactionary elites, or to the ideologists of German or Italian nationalism of the inter-war years (Gentile, 1982; Mosse, 1973; Sternhell, 1999). But this language is not circumscribed to certain countries, nor can it be reassuringly confined to the ideological sphere of extreme nationalism (Billig, 1978; Carey, 1992/2009; Pick, 1989). On this occasion I shall track the dissemination of the medico-psychiatric discourse among the ‘critics’, an important number of intellectuals, historians and academics of widely differing political affiliation—conservatives, liberals, socialists, pacifists—who championed the denunciation of nationalism at the end of the First World War.

But what is the ultimate relevance of this historical analysis? Why concern ourselves with the presence of psychological and psychopathological terms and ideas in discourses that were articulated almost a century ago now? And above all, why should it interest the social and political scientists who study the phenomenon of nationalism today? First, and counter to what one might think, the *voices* of medicine, psychiatry and mass psychology have not disappeared from the academic and public explanations of nationalism, particularly in times of war or territorial conflict (Carmichael, 2002; Ignatieff, 1993; Kecmanovic, 1996; Prager, 1998). The most widespread or popular theory of nationalism—according to Gellner—posits the existence of a series of obscure atavistic forces, the re-appearance of blood and territorial instincts in the human psyche: “ever latent... the loosening of bonds allowed the barely restrained monster to re-emerge” (Gellner, 1991, p. 128). Furthermore, as I shall point out in the final remarks of this paper, the explanatory models put forward by the psychology of the masses have had a particular repercussion and penetration—ideological, epistemological, methodological—in the way in which social psychology itself has traditionally studied nationalism.

Nationalism, War and Regression

If there is a core topic articulating the post-historicist discourse of nationalism, it is the idea of violence. For an increasingly greater number of intellectuals who had lived in the first half of the twentieth century, nationalism was closely related to conflict and war. “Nationalism promises not to unify, but to disintegrate the world; not to preserve and create, but to destroy, civilization”, said Carlton Hayes (1926) after the Great War (p. 133). For Hayes and many other authors, the history of nationalism foreboded new conflicts, exacerbated tensions and brought on disaster to a countless number of human beings. It led to “a grisly account of cruelty and violence” (Kedourie, 1960/1993, p. 135). Towards the middle of the century, the word nationalism became associated with a series of extreme, intolerant and aggressive behaviours conducted on behalf of the nation, and overlapping prejudice, xenophobia and racism.

The sense of the term contrasted with the criterion that had prevailed until then among the intellectual elites (Smith, 1971/1976, pp. 33-34). When the Great War ended, many Western politicians and intellectuals still trusted the virtues of nationalism to avoid the risks of a new world war. In fact, the American President Woodrow Wilson, and those who had negotiated the Peace Treaties, considered the idea of national self-determination one of the keys to avoid war (Mecklin, 1919; Zimmern, 1918). But other authors were prompt to establish an essential contrast between nationalist ideology and the ideals of internationalism, making the former responsible for the outbreak of the Great War. Liberal historians such as Hayes (1926) or G. P. Gooch (1924) pointed out that “narrow”, “aggressive” and “base” nationalism had been one of the main causes of the conflict. The same opinion was shared by many conservative, anarchist, socialist or pacifist intellectuals (Laski, 1932; Scott, 1926; Starr, 1929; Toynebee, 1915; Vaussard, 1924). For the writer and historian Maurice Vaussard (1924), nationalism was at the root of war, “the most serious problem at the time” (pp. 373-374).ⁱⁱ

Condemnation of violence and pugnacity of nationalism was also condemnation of their *history*, the narration of the past that had been taught for decades in the curriculum (Merriam, 1931/1966; Reisner, 1922; Scott, 1926; Starr, 1929). After the war, a series of intellectuals, government bodies and international institutions, usually fostered by the League of Nations, addressed the need to review the writing and teaching of history (Gooch, 1924; Réverdin, 1922; Taft, 1925; Whitehouse, 1924). However, for many other critics the problem of nationalism was deeper and more difficult to eradicate: it was an expression of the darker areas of the psyche, the survival of the wild beast inside civilized subjects. The power of destruction and brutality of the Great War had established the idea of *the inner beast*—very common at the end of the nineteenth century—, the worrying and disturbing presence of a barbaric and savage creature who, lurking in the depths of the subject, was constantly jeopardising the conquests of civilized society. According to the writer Stefan Zweig (1944/2001), the outbreak of the Great War had brought out from the depths of man dark, atavistic and mysterious forces, “the most primitive and unconscious drives and instincts of the human beast” (p. 286-287). In the view of the Spanish historian Rafael Altamira (1926), the war had triggered a reservoir of “primitive passions”, “barbaric legacies” and “ancestral instincts” (pp. 6-7, 12).

Linked to the ferocity of war, nationalism itself was criticised as a form of regression or throwback to the most remote past. Far from pointing to a supposed rebirth of the Nation, nationalism was connected with the irruption or re-appearance of irrational and barbaric drives under the conscience of the *civilized man*. Nationalism is the aggressiveness of that fearsome being, or, as Hanbury Hankin (1937) put it, “the caveman within us” (p. 151). Western civilization is no longer threatened by outside enemies or barbarians, but rather by “the barbarians within its gates”,

said the sociologist Charles Ellwood (1915) at the start of the Great War (p. 13). According to these and other authors, nationalism appealed to the urge of instinct, to the barbarism or the bestiality hidden beneath civilization (Hayes, 1931). Nationalism in general—and, above all, that which had led to the outbreak of war—was a return or evolutionary regression in the heart of modern, rational and civilized Europe. Thus, aside from a threat to peace, the ideology was considered obsolete, anachronistic, contrary to the ideals of progress and, of course, deeply irrational.

Not everyone gave the problem the same importance. For some authors, the irrational behaviour of nationalism was attributed to certain individuals, groups or societies, most particularly to a series of countries that had fought in the Great War on the other side of the trenches. In fact, this view of nationalism had been used as war propaganda to denounce the “barbaric” behaviour of the enemy. For example, for the English historian J. H. Rose (1916), nationalism was the result of the intolerant and aggressive instinct of Germany and the Baltic countries, an instinct that led back to “a state of lawlessness and bestiality” (pp. 200–201). But many authors did not think that the primitive instincts of herd, aggression and conquest were exclusive to hostile nations. For them, the barbaric instincts that had led to nationalism and war were embedded in human nature. In every one of us there is a disposition or inclination towards instincts that are at the bottom of the hatred between nations—as Bertrand Russell (1915) put it, “the brute within us” (p. 369). In similar terms, the Anglican philosopher and theologian William Inge explained the origin of nationalism as “the instinctive pugnaciousness of the *bête humaine*” (see Crook, 1994, pp. 137–138).

Indeed, one of the most widespread explanations of nationalism at the end of the war emphasised the existence or survival of a series of dispositions, trends or instincts, a biological substratum common to the whole species: hostility or fighting instinct (Pillsbury, 1919), territorial instinct (Mukerjee & Sen-Gupta, 1928), worship instinct (Rocker, 1937/1977), gregarious or herd instinct (Howerth, 1919; Scott, 1926). “A nation is a herd” and it is instinctively united against threats from outside enemies, whatever the cause, said the American pedagogue I. W. Howerth (1919, pp. 175–178). A nation is the result of imitation, the sympathy produced by likeness, and the natural hatred towards strangers, argued the French philosopher and pacifist Théodore Ruysen (1924). For many intellectuals, nationalism was a manifestation—deplorable and painful, but inevitable—of primitive tendencies deeply entrenched in the human species. Along these lines, the same authors who denounced the irrational and destructive effects of nationalism also participated in its naturalization: they turned the political ideology of their time into the biological legacy of the species.

Rhetorics of Degenerationism

Notwithstanding all the foregoing, combative and jingoist nationalism was not only described as an evolutionary legacy of the species, an expression of primitive instincts of humanity. In fact, the intellectuals at the time also used the language of degenerationism to condemn and curse the ideology. In this sense, nationalism was also presented as a pathological phenomenon, an execrable crime and moral perversion of civilization. We need to “regenerate” the ill and weakened body of old Europe from “the morbid hypertrophy of nationalism”, stated Toynbee (1915, pp. 488–490). The nationalist sentiment, morbid and perverted, said in turn Alfred Zimmern (1918), is “one of the festering sores of our time” (p. 100).

Let us dwell for a moment on the concept of *degeneration*. The term had been used by the early critics of the Enlightenment to caution against the ‘pernicious’ consequences of progress and modern life: “Everything is good

as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man”, Rousseau (1762/1979, p. 37) asserted. A century later, with the advent of evolutionary biology, and specifically Lamarck’s evolutionism, the debate on degeneration was not only a matter for writers, philosophers and prophets, but a capital problem for the clinical research of physicians and psychiatrists (Féré, 1889/1903; Lankester, 1880; Magnan & Legrain, 1895; Nordau, 1892/1902). By then, degeneration was being defined as the gradual loss of psychophysical and moral normality that affected, most particularly, the population inhabiting the major modern cities. Life in a great city is “devastating, dangerous for one’s physical and moral equilibrium”, argued Alfred Fouillée (1895, p. 815). With the growth of the large cities, Max Nordau (1892/1902) stated, the number of “degenerates of all classes” increases: the hysterics, insane, criminals, alcoholics, syphilitics, tubercular, etc. (pp. 55-57).

The psychopathological condition of the *degenerate* could include madness and hysteria, apathy and neurasthenia, tubercular and syphilitic infection, delinquent and criminal behaviour, addiction to alcohol and drugs and any other ‘depraved’ and ‘morbid’ manifestation of what many authors called “the low life in the city”.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, the discourse of degenerationism was necessarily vague and paradoxical. On one hand it referred to a series of ‘deviant’ individuals, marginal minorities and unfortunate and ‘dangerous’ social groups—the mentally ill, criminals, alcoholics, prostitutes, the destitute, etc.; on the other hand, degeneration was described as a widespread morbid process like a plague or infectious malady that affected civilisation as a whole (see Pick, 1989). In fact, the ‘scientific’ language of degenerationism—which never lost the moralising and disturbing tone of a prophecy—also encapsulated the worst fears of the turn-of-the-century conservative elites over the emergence of an urban ‘mass’ society.

Although at the start of the twentieth century experimental advances in genetics gradually discredited the concept of evolutionary degeneration, the degenerationist *discourse* was still used frequently in the social and political discussions of the time (Pick, 1989). This was true not only among the more conservative elites or among the ideologists of the new European right (Sternhell, 1978). For example, many inter-war liberal and socialist intellectuals began applying terminological, thematic and rhetoric resources of degenerationism for the moral condemnation of nationalism. Thus, nationalism also appeared as an organic, mental and moral disorder, as a disease, pathology, vice, evil, dementia, delirium, madness, infection, plague, virus, intoxication, germ, perversion and curse. After the war, said William McDougall (1920/1927), many authors had intensified their dislike of nationalism, which was described as “a kind of disease” and “the unfortunate liability to drunkenness”, as something essentially bad and reprehensible that needed to be eradicated in order to live in a world without wars or conflicts (pp. 177-178).

To begin with, quite a few intellectuals used the language of medicine and psychiatry to describe nationalism as a disease, dementia or neurosis. For the British historian Caroline Playne (1925), it was a social neurosis caused by the stress of modern life. For the social psychologists Mukerjee and Sen-Gupta (1928, pp. 263-267), nationalism was a kind of “dementia” or “mental blindness” that distorted relationships between peoples and led to war. Very similar ideas were pointed out by historian J. H. Rose (1916, p. 171) and writer H. G. Wells (see Earle, 1950). Indeed, political adhesion to nationalism was often described as a disease of the mind and the body; as a morbid, pernicious, harmful state. For Carlton Hayes (1926, pp. 246, 264) nationalism was an illness that required an “antidote” to be “cured”. For Harold Laski (1932, p. 26) it was a “disease” that threatens to infect all of humanity.

As turn-of-the-century degenerationism had done, the critics of the time took many of their terms from the field of epidemiology. Therefore, nationalism was presented as an epidemic or infectious disease, as a germ, virus, or bacteria, as the Plague of the modern age. This not only stressed the pathological nature of the doctrine, but also warned against its rapid spread by contagion. For example, the physicist Albert Einstein saw nationalism as a

virus, “the measles of mankind” (cited in Reicher & Hopkins, 2001, p. 53). The Hungarian writer Adam de Hegedus (1947) also referred to the ideology as “a contagious disease”, an epidemic even worse than the Black Plague that razed Medieval Europe (pp. 46-47). For many intellectuals of the time, the virus of nationalism had infected most of the European continent, wreaking havoc in the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and spreading to the Near East and India. Never before in the history of humanity had there been “an epidemic of moral perversity” as the one currently caused by nationalism, said the Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1929, p. 210).

At other times authors would resort to the language of toxicology and make nationalism appear as a gas, a poison, a drug or alcoholic beverage. Tagore (1917) himself also referred to it as “anaesthetic fumes” (p. 57); Rudolph Rucker (1937/1977, p. 713) described it as “mephitic air”; Carlton Hayes (1926, p. 271), as a “poison”; Paul Valéry (1931, p. 63) as a spirituous wine. At times, argued historian Frederick Schuman (1931, p. 520), “the heady wine of nationalism” perverts minds almost to the same degree as “opium” or “insanity”. Thus, the effects of nationalism are compared to the exposure, inhalation, injection or intake of toxic substances, especially those produced by the excessive consumption of alcohol. In certain places, said the social psychologist Daniel Katz (1940, p. 176), nationalism is more like “a weekend drinking debauch”. Indeed, like turn-of-the-century degenerationists had done, the critics of nationalism established a direct and explicit relationship between pathology and vice. Nationalism appeared then as a loss of temperance, as a perversion of judgement or corruption of norms, customs and values.^{iv}

Together with disease, madness and vice, the critics of the time compared nationalism to crime, making it responsible for countless offenses and misdeeds. Intense nationalism is to blame for every “crime” we regret, said Herbert Stewart (1917) when contemplating World War I (p. 616). During that period, and until after World War II, it was not infrequent for intellectuals to recover the words of Samuel Johnson and Lord Acton to highlight the criminal nature of nationalism. Nationalism is an excuse for dishonourable, even criminal, intentions, “the last refuge of a scoundrel”, said the British writer and journalist Hamilton Fyfe (1940, p. 243). The flag of the nation covers “every inhumanity, every disgrace and every crime”, stated the German anarchist Rudolf Rucker (1937/1977, p. 317). In any case, some of the epithets that were associated with the ideology also belonged to the semantics of nineteenth century criminology. Thus, similar to the *homo delinquente* and the degenerate criminal, nationalist behaviours appeared sinister, evil, despicable, vile, abominable, even demoniac. Nationalism is “the greatest universal evil” (Hegedus, 1947, p. 45); “a demoniac power over history and life” (Kohn, 1944/1949, p. 374).

Considering nationalism as a perverted and despicable ideology, as a diabolic evil, leads us to another similarity with the degenerationist discourse: the continuous assessment of the doctrine in moral and religious terms. After the war, nationalism was judged as a doctrine that encouraged ambition and collective aggression against other nations with no limit or moral restriction whatsoever. Nationalism fosters “egotism”, “hatred”, “vainglory” and “vice”, according to the American sociologist Herbert Miller (1924, p. 184). It is an ideology without moral foundations or limits, stated in turn the Italian politician Luigi Sturzo (see Vaussard, 1924, p. 279). Furthermore, to assess the doctrine, moral categories are often taken from a religious view of the world. So, they talk about the evil of nationalism, its vice and its excesses, its depravity or moral degeneration, its sins: pride, envy, selfishness, avarice, vanity, hate... In the view of the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen (1917/1964), loyalty to the homeland conceals “any multitude of sins” (p. 40). In the words of Carlton Hayes (1926), “nationalism inculcates neither charity nor justice; it’s proud, not humble (...) its attainment involves tribal selfishness and vainglory” (p. 125). The nationalist belief, concludes the American historian, is “evil” and should be “cursed” (Hayes, 1926, p. 246).

Frequently, the evil of nationalism is described with a strongly prophetic burden, almost always apocalyptic. In fact, evil appears in these cases in capitals, as if it were a supernatural or divine punishment, as Evil (in the biblical sense) or a curse. “Nationalism is the curse of our time”, repeated many intellectuals between the wars, from Gooch or Hayes to Wallis and Huizinga.^v Some authors just remembered Lord Acton’s (1862/1959) gloomy prophecy on the doctrine of nationalism: “its course will be marked with material as well as moral ruin (...) so that a new invention prevails over the work of God and the interests of humanity” (p. 329).^{vi} Others readapted Biblical metaphors and figures to outline an equally terrifying picture of its consequences: “By my life have yellowed steeds galloped all of Revelation, revolution and famine, inflation and terror, epidemics and emigration (...) the worst of all the plagues: nationalism (...) a barbarity as no other seen before” (Zweig, 1944/2001, p. 13).

In short, the *evil* of nationalism was fought with various thematic, rhetoric or argumentative resources, but nearly always using the various meanings of malignancy that had been coined by degenerationism. First, evil is understood as a condition or disorder (disease, madness, infection, epidemic), as a pathology to be diagnosed, prescribed, treated, cured. Second, but no less important, the malignant nature of nationalism was understood as evilness or vileness, that is, as an immoral doctrine that should be condemned outright (malevolent, perverted, despicable, vile, abominable or sinister). And third and last, the evil of nationalism is described with a strong prophetic sense, as a divine plan or curse. Thus, critics of the ideology often became prophets of the apocalypse. Even Kedourie, many years later, would find the precise admonishing tone in this quote of the Romantic poet Heine:

There will be Kantians forthcoming who in the new world to come will know nothing of reverence for aught, and who will ravage without mercy, and riot with sword and axe through the soil of all European life to dig out the last root of the past (Kedourie, 1960/1993, pp. 83-84).

There is a final issue that is worth highlighting. As mentioned above, the critics between the wars saw nationalism as the modern representation of absolute evil: as pathology, wickedness and curse. Even so, despite their declared opposition to nationalism, many of these authors participated at the same time in its legitimation based on various additional rhetoric distinctions. For example, some put forward the existence of *good nationalism*, virtuous and reasonable, a nationalism countering the previous one and, therefore, respectful of other nations and humanitarian values (see Greenberg, 1937; Zimmern, 1918). Other authors—perhaps the majority—classified nationalism as a whole as a malignant, immoral and warmongering doctrine, but they grouped under the term *patriotism* peaceful, virtuous and benign manifestations of the nation’s sentiment and loyalty. For example, Stewart (1917), Partridge (1919), or Altamira (1929) distinguished between good patriotism and evil nationalism. Likewise, Harold Laski (1925/1967) praised patriotism as a genuine instinctive expression of kinship with the homeland, far more rational and tolerant than nationalism (p. 232). In contrast to the artificial, aggressive and pathological ideology of nationalism, said Hayes (1926), patriotism is love of one’s country, “a peculiarly natural and ennobling expression of man’s primitive sentiment of loyalty”, that lacks in any case any vanity or hostility towards foreigners (pp. 274-275).

With this kind of distinctions or analytical typologies, intellectuals often tried to justify and *naturalize* the bond with the homeland, presented as benign patriotism, while *condemning* intolerant and aggressive nationalism as an outside evil, a hazard of other peoples or countries (Billig, 1995). However, despite the attempts to project upon others the problem of nationalism, many intellectuals between the wars continued warning about the risks stalking any form of patriotism. As an instinctive and genuine expression of love for the homeland, patriotism “may stray into devious paths”, stated Laski (1925/1967, p. 221). Patriotism “is easily susceptible of perversion to malevolent forms and base uses (...) to blatant hostility toward other nations”, said the social psychologist Bernard Ewer

(1929, p. 403). For these and other authors, loyalty or love of the homeland is a natural and noble sentiment that could and often did *degenerate* into nationalism and chauvinism. Patriotism “is frequently perverted” in the interest of unjustifiable wars, said Luther Bernard (1944, p. 296). Or, in the words of W. D. Wallis (1929), it “degenerates” into narrowness of view and the loss of virtue, into “the great curse of nationalism” (p. 819).

In sum, with the vague, imprecise and paradoxical language of the prophets of *degenerationism*, the intellectuals between the wars angrily announced the worrying and disturbing presence of a terrible evil almost always embodied by other nations, but not unknown in their own. The sins and vices of nationalism threatened to spread across the planet like the Plague of our time.^{vii}

Nationalism and Crowd Psychology

Moreover, if *nationalist* behaviours were atavistic and degenerate, pathological and criminal, as well as irrational, extreme, aggressive, inhuman, cruel, contemptible, such behaviour was similar to that of the *mass* or *crowd subject*, as described in the last third of the nineteenth century by Taine, Tarde, Sighele, and Le Bon. At the end of the Great War and during the following decades, quite a few scholars, experts and essayists used the concepts and notions of crowd psychology to criticise the nationalism of the time. Although it originated in intellectual circles, argued the German sociologist Max Boehm (1933/1949), aggressive nationalism has its true strength and importance “through its appeal to mass instincts” (p. 231). What is pathetic about nationalism, stated in turn the pragmatist philosopher George H. Mead (1929), is its great similarity to the behaviour of unaware crowds (see pp. 402-403, 393).

Linked to the turn-of-the-century literature of degenerationism, the psychology of the multitudes had emerged from the fears of the elites in regard to the social and political transformations and the birth of a new urban society—the so-called ‘mass society’ (Giner, 1979). In fact, the traditional elite could not remain indifferent to the expansion of egalitarianism, nor to the incorporation of the middle and working classes into political life. They were alarmed to witness the increase in the number of strikes, street demonstrations and, from 1890 onwards, the mass May 1st celebrations in the principal European cities (Barrows, 1981; Ginneken, 1992; Simon, 1990).

The age we are entering will truly be the ‘era of the crowds’... the voice of the multitudes has become preponderant... [their] grievances are presented with increasing frankness, in a quest to completely destroy the current society to take it to primitive communism (Le Bon 1895/1931, pp. 17-19).

With a markedly elitist approach, the ‘mass psychologists’ did not hesitate to adopt the terms and concepts of psychiatry to account for the ‘irrationality’ of the multitudes (Nye, 1975). Or, in other words, they extracted the conduct of the masses from its social and political context and dealt with it from a clinical and pathological perspective (Apfelbaum & McGuire, 1986; Geiger, 1977). Thus, by establishing an inevitable nexus between the behaviour of the multitudes and the irrational conduct of the savages and the insane, mass psychologists set aside the reasoning or arguments displayed by the multitudes to justify their protest. In the words of Susanna Barrows (1981), the aim was to “rationalize a refusal to listen to dissident voices, a deep-seated reluctance to evaluate proletarian movements on their own terms” (p. 191).

Thus, the individual forming part of a crowd becomes impulsive, a being in a previous stage of evolution, a barbarian. Le Bon (1895/1931) argues that in a multitude there is always the inhibition of the higher mental functions

and the stimulation of the lowest ones. The members who form it are guided by instincts and unconscious mechanisms: emotional contagion and extreme suggestibility. Individuals belonging to the crowd are not in control of their actions:

Vanishing of the conscious personality, predominance of the unconscious personality, orientation through suggestion and contagion of the feelings and ideas in a single sense, tendency to transform the suggested ideas into actions; such are... the main traits of the individual within a crowd. He is not the individual himself, he is an automaton in whom the will does not govern... The individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will (Le Bon, 1895/1931, pp. 40-41).

While Le Bon sought to alert the conservative elites to the powerful irruption of socialist parties and movements—often resorting to an apocalyptic language (Giner, 1979; McClelland, 1989)—it did not take the liberal and left-leaning elites long before they were using the same ideas for more ‘progressive’ causes. For example, to denounce the support given by the popular classes to expansionist and war-mongering policies. We find a clear precedent of this in John A. Hobson’s critique of the events that led to the Boer War. Whatever the political, financial or military reasons and interests to provoke the conflict, argued Hobson, the popular approval and enthusiasm for the war were not caused by any rational decision. Instead, the whole nation “became a great crowd, and exposed its crowd-mind to the suggestions of the press” (Hobson, 1901, pp. 18-19). The main argument of *The Psychology of Jingoism* by Hobson was based on the concepts and assumptions of degenerationism and crowd psychology by Le Bon:

The neurotic temperament generated by town life seeks natural relief in stormy sensational appeals, and the crowded life of the streets, or other public gatherings, gives the best medium for communicating them. This is the very atmosphere of Jingoism. A coarse patriotism, fed by the wildest rumours and the most violent appeals to hate and the animal lust of blood, passes by quick contagion through the crowded life of cities...[Jingoism] is a collective or mob passion which, in as far as it prevails, makes the individual mind subject to a control that joins him irresistibly to his fellows...[The] possession by the passion of Jingoism of the mass-mind of a people intellectually disposed like that of Great Britain presents a subject of incomparable interest for psychological study (Hobson, 1901, pp. 6-9, 12).

A few years later, a significant number of scholars and intellectuals across the political spectrum—conservatives, liberals, socialists, pacifists—used the reductionist schema of crowd psychology to explain the origin and development of World War I. According to these authors, civilised countries or nations had suspended their higher capability of moral judgement and responsibility, reasoning and critical thinking. The most modern and cultured peoples had turned overnight into *irrational and barbaric crowds*, into *criminal masses ready for war*. The usually aware, reasonable and harmless citizens, warned the American educator I.W. Howerth (1919), united and yielded to the collective and unaware power of the crowd, and lent themselves to committing crimes and atrocities characteristic of savage tribes (see pp. 180-181). The mental processes of a whole people were transformed, asserts the philosopher and pedagogue Everett Martin, and the whole nation becomes a homicidal crowd. “The classic example of the killing crowd is, of course, a nation at war” (Martin, 1920, pp. 108-109).

Moreover, aside from presenting the nation in arms as an unaware mass or crowd, many authors accused nationalist ideology and propaganda of the tragedy. As shown with the unexpected irruption of hysteria and hatred in the Great War, stated the historian and pedagogue Mark Starr (1929, p. 17), “racial antagonism and mob passions” can be triggered against foreigners based on the teachings of nationalism. Along these same lines, the social psychologist Floyd H. Allport held that the fallacies of nationalism were the main recourse of warmongering elites

for total control of people's thinking and action. "It is hard to conceive of any other device by which, in modern times, rulers and publicists could stampede millions of people into a war" (Allport, 1927, pp. 299-300). Appealing to mass emotions, to crowd psychology, said later Louis Greenberg (1937), nationalist doctrine promotes intolerance, chauvinism and provincialism, and it is the main cause of wars (see pp. 14-16, 19-20).

In fact, the idea of a mass, mob or crowd gradually became a kind of analogy to describe the very nature of nationalism. Nationalism is "a chronic agitation" in relation to the life and honour of the nation, said the American political scientist M. S. Handman (1921), "an agitated and agitating concern" (pp. 104-105) in which the actions of the leaders of the war are imitated by everyone to repel the enemy. In the field of international relations it had not been possible yet to introduce the restraints of reason and "the mob conditions often prevail", asserted the sociologist Luther Lee Bernard (1936, p. 615). The critics of the nationalist ideology look at the majority of the population with pity or disdain, as rabble, said William McDougall (1925), as "a herd that is swayed by irrational prejudices and passions", under the driving power of its primitive instincts, and deceived with chimeras (p. 46).

In other words, the *subject of nationalism* was, by definition, a copy or reflection of the *subject of the crowd*, and its characterization owed a lot to the picture established three decades earlier by crowd psychologists: degradation of reason, disappearance of conscience, emotivity, impulsiveness, primitivism, extreme suggestibility, irresponsibility, amorality, criminality, brutality, sadism... Although many intellectuals by then distrusted the racial bases of collective behaviours and criticised Le Bon's belief in a superindividual mind ("the mass mind"), they often agreed in describing nationalist or jingoistic masses as irrational, irresponsible and primitive. For example, historian Rafael Altamira (1926, 1935), close to the pacifist objectives of the Carnegie Foundation, spoke of masses or crowds that were ignorant, gullible, impulsive, subject to all type of suggestions and primitive passions. Along these same lines, Hamilton Fyfe (1940) referred to the masses who had cheered the start of the Great War as unreflecting, credulous, stupid, emotional, suggestible, and hysterical. No crowd has initiative, declared the English writer and journalist. They all need "the consuming, fiery faith that can move mountains" (p. 258).

References to the literature of the masses and, in particular, to its best known author, are common. A group of men united for the nation is hardly ever more reasonable than its individual components, argued Salvador de Madariaga (1934). The Spanish writer and diplomat was inspired by the book *The Crowd* to denounce not the labour movement and the class struggle, as Le Bon had done, but the nationalist mobilisation and the war of the homelands. While each individual separately can be reasonable, he said, most of the time a united national group causes "the manifestation of animal forces that, restraining the power of reason, transform a handful of men into mobs and even into a pack of hounds" (pp. 48-49). The extreme nationalism of our time is very similar to the descriptions by Le Bon, "the hypnotization of the masses by the leader and the suppression of intelligence and morality by mass emotions", repeated the sociologist Frederick Hertz (1944) years later (p. 16).

Furthermore, if nationalists behave as members of the mass (as a being suspending higher mental functions, descending on the ladder of civilization and becoming a barbarian), it is also because a *minority of agitators and demagogues* have captured their will: scheming politicians and diplomats, greedy capitalists, entrepreneurs of the war industry, unscrupulous journalists, jingoist intellectuals... These are, according to the most common interpretation, very specific *economic and political elites* that derive some benefit or advantage from manipulating crowds, and use psychological laws of suggestion and propaganda. Nationalism may remain in suspense for years but it breaks out "as soon as political agitators arrive with their suggestions", stated the British nationalist Hanbury Hankin (1937, pp. 137-138). Men of State and scheming politicians "can readily play upon the national

pride and cerebral weaknesses of the citizens by their public statements and discourses (...) through the newspapers”, declared sociologists [Jerome Davis and Harry Barnes \(1927, p. 179\)](#).

For these and other authors, *press propaganda* was the main resource for the devious suggestion of nationalism. The political scientist Charles Merriam denounced the constant use of propaganda that had “a hypnotic effect” on masses of readers who were to be influenced over and over again. “Journalistic repetition is in some ways reminiscent of the beat, beat, beat of the drum in the primitive tribe” ([Merriam, 1931/1966, p. 312](#)). Likewise, Hamilton Fyfe and Carlton Hayes criticised the dissemination of this type of press, taking for granted their readers were irrational and credulous. “...where nowadays is the commoner who can escape the newspaper with its incessant and insistent nationalism?”, asked [Hayes \(1926, p. 80\)](#). In any case, and by emphasising the usual gullibility and *suggestibility* of readers, they all implied something else: the irrational and unaware behaviour of *crowds* could be extrapolated to the behaviour of *publics*, and of any other collectivity not requiring face-to-face or direct social interaction. Something which had been repeatedly suggested by crowd psychologists: “...a whole people, without any visible crowding, can become a mob under certain influences” ([Le Bon, 1895/1931, p. 31](#)).

In this respect, the intellectuals of the ‘20s and ‘30s used the *lack of definition of basic concepts* of Taine, Le Bon, or Siguelé to articulate the rhetorical criticism of nationalism and conjure the ghost of the war. On the one hand, the regressive masses of nationalism were described as temporary human groups, as maddened, violent and feverish crowds committing all type of outrages in the streets, squares or trenches: the European masses cheered the start of the conflict in August 1914, the xenophobic mobs that persecuted and hounded ethnic minorities, the homicidal crowds given over to savagery on the battlefield... On the other hand, the same critics often expanded the meaning of the term “mass” to cover the majority or all of society, under ordinary circumstances. Thus, masses would not only appear as temporary groupings, as transient crowds in extraordinary moments of social life. Rather, the unaware masses of nationalism are everywhere, as if the “harmful” and “evil” ideology had filtered throughout the social body, and threatened all of its institutions. Taught at school, indoctrinated through military instruction, preached by the press and from the rostrums, personified in the national State, symbolised by the flag, stated [Hayes \(1926, 1931\)](#), nationalism is a creed professed and practiced usually by the masses (1926, p. 197; 1931, pp. 317-318).

Therefore, without abandoning the imprecise language and tone of admonition and fatal omen of degenerationism and mass psychology, the intellectuals of the time implied no one was immune to the drums of war of nationalism. No doubt, some countries were considered more nationalistic and quarrelsome than others; some individuals and pressure groups, more jingoistic and warmongering than the rest. But all individuals and groups, all peoples and nations can become sooner or later, during a serious future crisis, barbaric and degenerate crowds, hysterical and homicidal multitudes, mobs occupying the streets and squares of civilised Europe in order to celebrate, once more, the return of war.

Final Remarks: The Long Shadow of Le Bon

In the previous pages I have analysed the presence of pathologizing language in the debate on the nationalism that emerged at the end of the First World War. But what interest can there be in this type of revision? And why concern ourselves today with psychological terms and ideas in the inter-war discourses? In this final section I

would like to emphasise the influence and penetration of this literature in the subsequent explanation of nationalism and, particularly, in research conducted in the realm of social and political psychology.

While the reception of 19th-century medicine and psychiatry has often been circumscribed to certain conservative or reactionary elites, their dissemination cannot be confined to such an extent (Billig, 1978; Carey, 1992/2009; Nye, 1975; Pick, 1989). During the period between the wars, and contrary to what has so often been stated, Le Bon's book on crowd psychology did not just become a reference work for the ideologists of the most extreme nationalism (Gentile, 1982; Mosse, 1973; Sternhell, 1999). Its premises, arguments, simplifications and fallacies were also used by many other politicians, academics and intellectuals, even those who championed the critique of nationalism.^{viii} As I have tried to demonstrate, the intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s readapted the old notions of crowd psychology to explain the origin and evolution of the Great War and remind their generation, as a fateful omen, of the real possibility of the tragedy repeating itself. With the memories and regrets of war in mind, before the prediction and threat of a new worldwide conflict, the intellectuals and scholars of the time articulated new explanations of nationalism based on the rhetoric of atavism, degenerationism and mass psychology.

But they would not be the only ones to do so. These terms and notions were to be used again by intellectuals, scholars, politicians and journalists to announce, proclaim, explain or regret many other wars that ravaged the territory of modernity. In fact, the *voices* in medicine, psychiatry and mass psychology still can be heard, particularly in times of war and territorial conflict, or when accounting for what Billig denominates "hot nationalism". Thus, during the 1990s we encounter these types of explanations in academic circles and the media to describe the wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, and Azerbaijan (see Carmichael, 2002; Ignatieff, 1993; Kecmanovic, 1996; Prager, 1998; Sluga, 2006). There is again talk of an atavistic, calamitous, almost demonic force, of a beast sleeping inside every man which awakens in the atrocious wars of nationalism. In Western media and scientific books, nationalist movements are presented as a "virus" or "epidemic disease" that has to be healed, as the result of an irrational collective mentality instigated by an elite of "irresponsible agitators and demagogues" (Hroch, 2000, pp. 608, 615; 1992, p. 11; see also Nairn, 1997).

Despite the new sociological paradigm that has dominated expert literature in recent decades (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 1971/1976), the language of psychiatry and mass psychology remains present in the debate. With references to the former Yugoslavia, the Azeri-Armenian conflict and Rwanda, the political scientist Carol Prager (1998) speaks of "the dark side of nationalism", its "barbarous", "monstrous", "pathological", "criminal" and "evil" character; its "psychosis" and its "dementia"; and the "vicious tactics" used by leaders to transform an independent citizenry into an infuriated mass of men, capable of committing all kinds of outrages (pp. 445-448). Likewise, the political scientist Ilya Prizel (1998) explains turn-of-the-century nationalism in Poland, Ukraine, and Russia as a natural consequence of the rise of the "mass man" (pp. 417-418). And, along the same lines, the psychiatrist Dusan Kecmanovic (1996) speaks of "a kind of hypertrophied and perverted national feeling" (p. 42) and of the realisation of "a rule of evil" (1996, p. 150). "Nationalism is, so to say, a metaphor of mass" insists Kecmanovic (1996, p. 104), quoting Le Bon and Freud.

In regard to the specific contributions of social psychology to the study of nationalism, Le Bon's imprint has been far more profound—and perhaps more invisible. In fact, the explanatory models put forward in the late 19th century by the psychologists of the crowds have had a particular repercussion and penetration—ideological, epistemological, methodological—on the psychosocial research conducted decades later.

First and foremost, there is the parallel to experimentalism. As we have seen, the psychology of the crowds always disregards the individual's social and political context. The conduct of a member of the mass is artificially removed from its ideological and cultural environment, or its historical time. The "man from the masses", argued [Ortega y Gasset \(1929/1983\)](#), is an individual without roots, without history, without identity, without memory of the past, a being who "vegetates while fictitiously suspended in space" (p. 109). It is not hard to establish some link and continuity between the individual in the crowd and in the lab ([Danziger, 1992, 2000](#); [Parker, 1989, 1990](#)); between the dehistoricised members of the masses and the "depopulated pages of social psychology" ([Billig, 1994, 1998](#); see also [Torregrosa, 1985, 1998](#)).^{ix}

Second is the influence or penetration of elitism. As well as removing the collective conduct from its natural context, mass psychologists analyse it from the clinical and pathological perspective: the *voice* of the urban multitudes who were conquering the status of citizenship was debased by its irrationality and compared to the expression of the savages and the insane ([Apfelbaum & McGuire, 1986](#); [Ginneken, 1992](#)). We have seen how Le Bon's scientific elitism was assumed in one way or another by many inter-war intellectuals and academics from different fields or areas of knowledge, history, pedagogy, sociology, political science. Even so, in none of these areas did elitism have the impact it attained in academic social psychology: on the one hand, owing to the incorporation of experimental or lab methods (which disregard the individual's *voice* or language), on the other hand, owing to the extensive research on propaganda and social influence, group fallacies and collective fictions, national prejudices and stereotypes (which again places the accent on the population's irrationality and malleability; see [Allport, 1932](#); [García-García, Ramírez, Álvaro, & Torres, in press](#); [Moscovici, 1985](#); [Ramírez Dorado, 1992](#); [Samelson, 1978](#)).

Lastly, there is the direct influence on the categories of analysis. An aspect of the mentioned elitism is the differentiation—not always a clear or precise one—between those who do and those who do not succumb to the ills of nationalism. Without abandoning the moralising intention and the language of medicine and psychiatry, inter-war intellectuals made reference to a natural and benign nexus with the nation, a healthy, peaceful and rational *patriotism* defined by its opposition to mass *nationalism* (which, in contrast, was defined as irrational, pathological, and violent, as described earlier). This opposing analytical division or category has often been used in empirical social psychology, from the classic research of [Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford \(1950\)](#) to the most recent studies on different forms of nationalism and patriotism by [Kosterman and Feshbach \(1989\)](#), [Schatz, Staub, and Lavine \(1999\)](#), and [Roccas, Klar, and Liviatan \(2006\)](#) (see also [Bar-Tal, 1997](#); [Blank & Schmidt, 2003](#); [Hagendoorn & Pepels, 2000](#)). In one way or another, social psychologists have sought to demarcate two dispositions or states of mind, two different and opposing ways of connecting with the national group: on the one hand, that of those who connect in a critical, responsible, and tolerant manner ("patriotism"); on the other, that of those who attach themselves to the group in an unquestioning and unconditional way, who scorn the outgroups, are bigoted, intolerant, and accepting of violence ("nationalism").

I would like to add two final thoughts about these categories of analysis. The first one refers to the difficulty of capturing through them "the many variants of national ideology and the multitudinous forms of action which stem from it" ([Reicher & Hopkins, 2001](#), p. 35; see also [Brown, 1999](#); [Hopkins, 2001](#)). To what extent are the concepts and methods employed by social psychology for the study of nationalism not still being erected on the elitist neglect of the individuals' language—the *voice* of the actors—and on an excessive abstraction from the social and political context of their actions ([Condor, 2001](#))? And, in this regard, to what extent do the *echoes* of the old crowd or mass psychology not endure in our reports, scales and experiments?

The second thought is no less important, and connects with one of the aims of this article. In spite of the empiricist focus of the discipline and the related dominance of the experimental method, we should not forget the history of the concepts we use (Bizumic, 2014). In this particular case, we cannot forget the semantic trail or footprint of a set of analytical categories (nationalism vs. patriotism, pseudo-patriotism vs. genuine patriotism, blind patriotism vs. constructive patriotism) which, in addition to psychological constructs and assumed mental dispositions, have in the past hundred years been discursive and social categories, rhetorical and political resources of a Western elite that could no longer speak of the ‘natural’, virtuous and reasonable attachment to the nation without recalling, lamenting and distancing itself from the cruel and sinister legacy of the war.

Notes

- i) In relation to the literature of the 1930s and ‘40s, authors such as A. D. Smith (1971/1976, 1998) and U. Özkirimli (2000) have pointed out the moral tone of the typologies and categories of analysis used by researchers. However, barely anything is said of the psychological language they employed. In this regard, see the works of Sluga (2006) and García-García (2013).
- ii) All translations from books in languages other than English are my own.
- iii) There are numerous studies from this time that carry the mentioned expression in their title. For example, in Spanish there are publications such as “La mala vida en Roma”, by Niceforo and Sighele (1902); “La mala vida en Madrid”, by Bernaldo de Quirós and Llanas (1901); “La mala vida en Barcelona”, by Bembo (1912); “La mala vida en Buenos Aires”, by Gómez (1908).
- iv) The language of vice is constantly filtering into the discourse of critics: nationalism “vitiates international law” (Krehbiel, 1916, p. 141); “corrupts good relations between nations” (Greenberg, 1937, pp. 14-16); “perverts the morals of the whole population” (Tagore, 1917, p. 57). See also Carr (1945, p. 11); Wallis (1929, p. 819); Zimmern (1918, p. 53).
- v) Gooch (1924, p. 6); Hayes (1926, p. 246); Wallis (1929, p. 819). On Huizinga, see Snyder (1968, p. 29).
- vi) After the outbreak of the world wars, references to Acton’s work multiplied, as for many he was the true prophet of nationalism. See Carr (1945, p. vi); Hayes (1926, p. 255); Hegedus (1947, p. 48); Herbert (1920, pp. 89-91); Mumford (1922, p. 317); Russell (1915, p. 376); Zimmern (1918, pp. 20-21). “Lord Acton’s verdict (...) seemed prophetic, temperate and fair”, Kedourie (1960/1993) said later (p. 134).
- vii) On the imprecise and paradoxical language of degenerationism –speaking at the same time in the first and third person plural- see Pick (1989). As we will see now, something similar could be said about the language of crowd/mass psychology.
- viii) Although the influence among the former (who incorporated Le Bon’s ideas on “race”, the “soul of race” and “the collective soul of the mass”) was greater than among the latter (see Nye, 1975; Ginneken, 1992). Even so, we should not forget the influence on the critics. As Giner (1979) states, “The Crowd” was the first ideological bestseller of the modern era (pp. 102-103).
- ix) As stated by J. R. Torregrosa (1985), experimental research often deals with an abstract, mechanical and passive conceptions of the individual, a model of a man without history, “artificially disconnected from the contexts in which he is made and in which he socially operates” (p. 56; see also Torregrosa, 1998; Reicher, 2014).

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