Pro and Con Theories on Nationalist Language as a Modern Means of Social Cohesion and National Unity

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Abstract. *Many scholars have approached nationalism as a particular political ideology most of them recognizing it as a product of modernity and as inseparable from it. This study begins by accepting this view, considering the spread of nationalism as part of a more extensive process of modern age. Nationalist language became, therefore, not only a means of communication but also a symbol of national identity, unity, modernity and political legitimacy. Most theories of nationalism are centred on the assumption that nationalism is a product of, and inseparable from modernity. Political language is considered by researchers an essential element of nation-building and a powerful force in shaping modern political ideologies. Language, in this respect, becomes a symbol of cultural continuity and the historical depth of the nation, which is essential for the construction of a cohesive national identity, the preservation and promotion of a national language being seen as necessary for maintaining the integrity and continuity of the nation.*

Keywords: *political language, nationalist language, national identity, social cohesion, social exclusion*

Introduction

Preserving and expressing a nation's culture, language serves as a primary means by which people convey meaning. Through its vocabulary, grammar and idiomatic expressions, a language encapsulates the unique values, customs and beliefs of a particular community. Human language is characterized by its cultural and historical diversity, with significant variations observed between cultures and across time[1]. Ideology and nationalism are coeval terms since their origins equally lie in the French Revolution. The term 'ideology' is usually located in Destutt de Tracy's (1754–1836) definition of it as the 'science of ideas' and Napoleon's disparaging use of it to describe his adversaries ('the ideologues'). It was the Napoleonic usage that really defined the term. While the meaning of nationalism remained broadly unchanged, the concept of ideology shifted meanings several times after its inception[2].

Nationalist language is a type of discourse that promotes the idea of the superiority of a certain nation, culture or ethnicity, emphasizing its unity and interests in comparison to other groups or nations and this type of language can include elements of national pride, but also

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[1] Evans, Nicholas & Stephen Levinson (2009), "The Myth of Language Universals: Language Diversity and Its Importance for Cognitive Science", *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, 429–492.

[2] Kennedy, Emmet, A Philosophe in the Age of Revolution: Destutt de Tracy and the Origins of 'Ideology' (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1978); B. Head, Ideology and Social Science: Destutt de Tracy and French Liberalism (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1985). As Freeden notes, his work has not been translated into English: M. Freeden*, Ideology*: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 129.

rhetoric that marginalizes or demonizes external groups, often using negative stereotypes. Nationalism, as a movement or ideology, can range from moderate forms that emphasize the importance of protecting and promoting the cultural and political values of a nation, to more extreme forms that promote the exclusion or even contempt for other nations or minorities.

In nationalist language, national pride can be encountered as a feature expressing a sense of belonging and appreciation for the culture, history and achievements of a people. Sometimes nationalism can lead to the marginalization or demonization of other groups, nations or cultures, which obviously leads to exclusion of others. Emphasizing the importance of the political and economic independence of a nation, this linguistic phenomenon leads to national sovereignty and it often calls for social cohesion and national unity strengthening internal unity which is vital for its creed.

In many historical and political contexts, nationalist language has been used to mobilize the masses, but also to justify conflicts and policies of discrimination or territorial expansion.

Nationalism defined a major change in thinking from ideas that dominated prior to the nineteenth century. Throughout a large part of the eighteenth century, people of a particular land saw themselves as subjects with loyalty towards some type of ruler, whether it be a king or an emperor[3]. The nineteenth century marked the beginning of a time when new nations were forming all over Europe because of nationalism and linguistic similarities.

Nationalist language theorists are those thinkers who analyze and develop ideas about how language is used to construct and sustain national identities, to mobilize populations for political purposes and to encourage feelings of inclusion or exclusion, by examining how nationalist discourse can influence collective perceptions of nation, culture, ethnic belonging and political authority.

Pros and cons in nationalist language theories

Benedict Anderson (1936–2015) was a British academician and theorist of Irish descent, best known for his influential work in the field of nationalism and identity studies. He is most famous for his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), in which he explores the concept of the nation as an "imagined community". Anderson supported the idea that nations are "imagined" in the sense that, although the members of a nation do not know each other personally and do not have direct contact, they share a sense of belonging and a common identity, constructed through language, symbols and institutions, such as schools and the media: "The language of nationalism... is a language of belonging, a language of the nation and a language of solidarity, which helps to make the nation imagined. It transforms the idea of a group of people into a community with a collective identity"[4]. According to Anderson, the spread of a common language, facilitated through print media or books is crucial to the creation of a sense of shared identity among members of a nation, language allowing individuals to conceptualize their place within a larger community, despite the fact that they may never meet most of the others in that community[5]. A solid concept in Anderson's work is "print capitalism", the idea that the rise of printing technologies, especially the printing of books and newspapers and the spread of literacy

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[3] Gipson, Haley (2023), "A Language of Nationalism", in *Michigan Journal af German Studies*, March 26

[4] Andreson, Benedict (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso: London/New York, p.17

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 18

played a significant role in the development of nationalism. In the 17th and 18th centuries, print media began to standardize and spread languages across large geographical areas, which in turn helped to forge national identities: "These print-languages laid the bases for national consciousnesses in three distinct ways . First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication..."[6]. Before the spread of mass printing, local dialects and languages were fragmented and limited to specific regions. Through the circulation of newspapers and books in specific national languages, people were able to consume a shared narrative, which helped create a collective consciousness and a sense of belonging to the nation, and thus nationalist discourse mediated through print contributed to the sense that people were part of a larger, unified political and cultural entity. Anderson discusses how the rise of nationalism led to the imposition of "official" languages, often at the expense of regional dialects or minority languages. Nationalist discourse, driven by political and cultural elites, sought to create linguistic unity within the nation. This linguistic homogenization was an important part of nation-building efforts, as it facilitated communication and the spread of nationalist ideas across diverse populations. However, Anderson acknowledges that this process can be exclusionary, as it marginalizes those who speak minority languages, and nationalist language, in this sense, not only promotes unity but can also create divisions by prioritizing one language over others.

Anderson notes that nationalists often use language to invoke a sense of common history and destiny, drawing on myths of ancient origins, heroic struggles and shared cultural achievements this symbolic use of language helping to reinforce the idea of a nation as a unified and enduring entity, even in the face of modern political or social challenges.

In his views, nations are not natural or fixed realities, but historical constructions that have been formed in the context of modernity. Anderson was also a professor at Cornell University in the United States and had a particular interest in the history and politics of Southeast Asia, his book on nationalism having a significant impact on social science studies, especially in understanding the process of the formation of modern states and national identities. In addition to his academic work, Anderson was also a political activist, involved in movements for human rights and democracy, especially in the context of politics in Asia. As he traces the rise of the nation-state throughout history, Anderson continually returns to language, literacy and publishing technology as main factors that allowed people to imagine themselves as members of communities and then claim political identities and rights based on those communities.

He shows how the spread of common languages allowed people to see their shared interests and, eventually, organize revolutions. And he concludes that, because dialect can stand in for identity and publishing can connect people who will never meet face-to-face, language is a crucial but by no means the only medium for people to imagine and create national communities[7]. Anderson discusses the concept of the "imagined nation" and how language, particularly through mass media, constructs collective images of nations that are not always tangible but are still perceived as shared realities.

Ernest Gellner (1925–1995) was a British philosopher and anthropologist, widely known for his work on nationalism and its relationship to modernity, being often associated with the idea that nationalism is a product of industrial society and the modern world, rather than a natural or

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[6] *Ibidem*, p. 44

[7] *Ibidem,* p. 70.

timeless phenomenon. His ideas about nationalism were influential in the field of social sciences, particularly in understanding how nations are formed and maintained in the context of political, cultural, and economic changes. One of Gellner's most significant contributions was his theory of the relationship between nationalism and language, particularly in his book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983). Gellner argued that nationalism is fundamentally a product of the modern age, emerging with the advent of industrialization. Thus, Ernest Gellner famously argued that nationalism is the direct, or indirect, consequence of industrialization with its new division of labour[8].

In traditional societies, kinship groups and local communities were the primary sources of social cohesion. However, in industrial societies, the need for a unified system of communication and education became central to sustaining modern economies and bureaucracies, thus the idea of nationalism integrated in modernity being generated[9].

According to Gellner, language plays a central role in the formation of national identity. In pre-modern societies, different groups spoke various dialects and languages, but the rise of modern industrial society demanded a standardized form of communication. Nationalist movements, therefore, sought to promote a single, standardized language that could be used for education, administration, and social integration. This language, often referred to as a "national language", became a symbol of national unity and language became a unifying force. Gellner also emphasized in his pretious work the importance of education in the process of national integration, arguing that the rise of mass education systems in the 19th and 20th centuries was essential to spreading a common language and creating a shared sense of national identity. The educational system, controlled by the state, taught citizens the standardized language and conveyed the values of the nation, promoting loyalty and cohesion.

Nationalism, in Gellner's view, required a degree of cultural homogenization and considered that the spread of a single national language often involved the suppression or marginalization of regional languages and dialects. This process, while promoting national unity, also led to the erasure of linguistic diversity in some cases. Gellner argued that this standardization was necessary for the functioning of modern states but could also lead to tension and conflict when multiple ethnic or linguistic groups felt that their identities were being suppressed, fostering the idea that cultural homogenization was essential in unifyng a nation.

For Gellner, nationalism was not just an expression of cultural identity but also a political tool or instrument used to gain power and influence. The promotion of a unified language helped create a sense of shared history and destiny among people, making it easier for political elites to mobilize support for the nation-state. Therefore, Gellner's theories suggest that nationalism and language are deeply interconnected in the modern world and the rise of standardized languages, fostered by state-controlled education systems, was a fundamental element in the creation of modern nations. Language, therefore, became not only a means of communication but also a symbol of national identity, unity, and political legitimacy. To conclude we may review that Gellner considers nationalism as a product of modernity, and language plays an essential role in standardizing education and creating a common culture that supports the nation.

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[8] Jonathan M. Acuff (2010), "Modernity and nationalism", in R. A. Denemark (Ed.) *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, Oxford/Boston-Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

[9] Gellner, Ernest (2006*), Nations and Nationalism*,(2nd ed.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p. 22.

Another theorist noted for his ideas and debates on the nationalist language is *Anthony D. Smith* (1939–2016), a British sociologist and historian renowned for his work on nationalism, particularly his focus on ethnic nationalism and the role of culture, symbols, and language in the formation of national identities. One of his most influential books on the subject is *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (1998), where Smith critiques and compares different theoretical perspectives on nationalism, especially those of modernists (such as Ernest Gellner) and ethnonationalists. He argues that nationalism is not simply a product of modernity, as some theories suggest, but also has deep historical roots in pre-modern ethnic communities, which he refers to as *ethnies*[10]. Another main book by Smith is *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (1986), in which he elaborates on the idea that modern nations have evolved from earlier ethnic groups and that cultural continuity, including shared language and traditions, plays a crucial role in the formation of national identities. Both of these works are central to understanding Smith's contribution to the study of nationalism and the role of language, culture and ethnicity in the formation of national identities[11]. While Smith does not offer uncritical praise of nationalist language, he does suggest that nationalist language plays a significant and often positive role in the development of modern nations.

Smith's theories on nationalism and language are deeply tied to his broader conception of nations as "ethnic communities" or "ethnies" which are rooted in shared historical experiences, myths and symbols, believing that language is a fundamental tool in defining and perpetuating national ethnic identity.
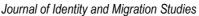
Smith's work on nationalist language and discourse is primarily based on his understanding of nationalism as a cultural phenomenon that is rooted in the preservation and promotion of ethnic identities and his views on language are particularly relevant to his concept of "ethnic nationalism", which stresses the role of cultural markers such as language, religion, and traditions in the formation and maintenance of national communities. Smith argued that nations are essentially extended ethnic communities or *ethnies*, which are formed around common cultural traits, including language. For Smith, language is not just a tool for communication but an essential marker of ethnic identity. The shared use of language helps to create a sense of belonging and continuity within a group, as it links individuals to a shared history, mythology and collective memory. In this sense, language is central to the construction of national identity and ethnic communities should enjoy shared languages as well.

Smith emphasized that language plays a crucial role in connecting modern national identities to their historical roots and ationalist movements invoke a "common" language to link contemporary populations to ancient or mythic ancestors. Language, in this respect, becomes a symbol of cultural continuity and the historical depth of the nation, which is essential for the construction of a cohesive national identity, the preservation and promotion of a national language being seen as necessary for maintaining the integrity and continuity of the nation. The theorist viewed nationalism as being deeply intertwined with myths and symbols that help to unify people, stating that nationalist language often invokes these myths, whether historical narratives about the nation's origin, struggles or triumphs, or cultural symbols like folklore, national anthems and rituals. These symbols, conveyed through language, reinforce the emotional and cultural ties that

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[10] Smith, D. Anthony (1998), *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism, Routledge, p. 78.*
[11] Idem (1986), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, p. 124.

bind the members of a nation together. By using language to evoke these myths, nationalist discourse serves to reaffirm the group's identity and foster loyalty. Maybe because languages are now so deeply intertwined with nationalist projects, we have become much more emotional about language and languages than people may have been in the past. This is true even of academic research, where there can be significant pressure to bring our emotions into our research, too[12]

While Smith emphasized the cultural and ethnic dimensions of nationalism, he also recognized the political role of nationalist language, nationalist leaders and movements using language to articulate a vision of the nation-state and defining who belongs to the nation and justifying, at the same time, political actions such as independence movements or territorial claims. Political discourse within nationalist movements is often framed in terms of the defense of the nation's language, culture and heritage, positioning these as under threat from external or internal forces (e.g. colonization, globalization or minority groups). Smith's theory of nationalism includes a recognition that language can also serve as a tool of exclusion and by defining the national language as central to the identity of the nation, nationalist movements can marginalize those who do not speak it or who speak a different dialect. As the previous theorists did, he agrees that this process can lead to the exclusion of minority groups or the imposition of cultural conformity, language becoming a boundary marker that determines who is part of the nation and who is not, sometimes leading to tensions and conflicts over identity and belonging. Smith also explored how nationalist movements often seek to revive or preserve a national language, especially when it has been ignored or suppressed by colonial powers, imperialism or globalizing forces. The revival of a language is seen as a form of resistance to cultural domination and a means of reclaiming the nation's cultural and political autonomy and this is mainy evident in post-colonial contexts, where former colonies seek to revive indigenous languages as a part of their national identity and decolonization process.

As we may notice, Anthony D. Smith's theories highlight the profound connection between language and nationalism and for Smith, language is not just a medium of communication but a powerful symbol of ethnic identity, continuity and cultural belonging. Therefore, nationalist discourse uses language to construct and reinforce national myths to promote unity and to delineate the boundaries of the nation. His work suggests that nationalism is as much about the preservation and promotion of culture and language as it is about political sovereignty, with language serving as a central tool in both the construction and defense of national identity.

Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) was a British historian, widely regarded as one of the most influential Marxist historians of the 20th century, his work spanning a wide range of topics and including the history of labor movements, nationalism, the rise of capitalism and the development of modern political ideologies. Hobsbawm's scholarship was characterized by a focus on the social, economic and political forces that shaped the modern world, generally framed through a Marxist lens. In his works on nationalism, Hobsbawm states that nationalism is often a modern construction, and language is a central element in creating national myths that are transmitted across generations. Hobsbawm, in his work on nationalism, mainly in *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (1990), explored the role of language in nationalist discourse, arguing that while language is often a significant marker of national identity, it is not necessarily the primary driver of nationalism. He pointed out that many nationalist movements

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[12] Piller, Ingrid, (2021), "Can we ever unthink linguistic nationalism?", *language on the move*, 4 october

emerged in multilingual societies, and linguistic uniformity was often an outcome rather than a prerequisite of nationalism.

So, he considers nationalist language as a marker, not a cause. In his book he highlighted how national languages are often modern inventions or standardizations rather than organic, ancient entities, considering that the process of codifying and imposing a national language was frequently tied to state-building efforts, such as the creation of official dictionaries and grammars[13]. Therefore, nationalist languages are modern constructions. Another idea we remark in his work is that nationalist movements have frequently used language to consolidate identity, sometimes even artificially promoting or reviving languages to serve political ends (e.g., Hebrew in Israel, Irish in Ireland).

Hobsbawm also noted that nationalism did not always demand linguistic homogeneity explaining that many national leaders and intellectuals in the 19th century spoke multiple languages, and some nationalist movements functioned effectively in polyglot societies. He criticized the idea that nations are naturally formed around linguistic communities, showing instead how political and historical factors played a decisive role in shaping national identities.

Hobsbawm made significant contributions to understanding the role of political language, especially in the context of nationalism and explored how this type of language is used to construct identities, forge national unity and justify political power. He argued that language is not just a passive reflection of national identity, but an active tool in the creation of national myths, symbols and narratives. Political language, as he saw it, plays a crucial role in shaping people's perceptions of their collective identity and in defining the boundaries of the nation-state. Hobsbawm also pointed out that the emergence of national languages and standardized forms of communication were fundamental to the spread of nationalist ideas. As these languages were promoted in schools, media and state institutions, they helped solidify national cohesion and the sense of belonging to a unified political community. In this sense, political language is an essential element of nation-building and a powerful force in shaping modern political ideologies. So, while Hobsbawm is more widely recognized for his analysis of nationalism, his work also sheds light on the profound impact of political language on society and the ways it intertwines with the development of modern states.

Joseph Roth, an Austrian-Jewish writer, in one of his stories, *The Bust of the Emperor (1935),* expresses reflections on the roots and expansion of nationalism, in which he states that the nation is an 'invented or created' structure. His works often reflect his critical stance on nationalism and the use of language in fostering national identities. Roth was deeply concerned with the rise of nationalism in Europe, especially during the interwar period, which led to the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. One of Roth's most well-known novels, *The Radetzky March* (1932), touches on themes related to nationalism, the decline of empires and the role of language in shaping national identity. In his works, Roth often expressed skepticism about the idea of a singular, exclusive national language that could unite people, his writing reflecting a nostalgic longing for the multilingual, multicultural world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where various languages coexisted and people were less bound by rigid national boundaries[14].

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[13] Hobsbawm, Eric (1990), *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality, (second edition), Cambridge University Press, p.9.*

[14] Roth, Joseph (2002), *The Radetzky March*, 3rd Print edition, The Overlook Press, p. 10.

Roth believed that the fragmentation of empires into nation-states and the rise of nationalist language was a force that contributed to division and violence, rather than unity. He criticized the reduction of cultural and linguistic diversity into monolithic national identities, seeing it as a source of exclusion and conflict. For Roth, language, in its nationalistic form, became a tool of exclusion that could define people in a restrictive and divisive way, instead of celebrating the rich diversity of human experience.

In his essays and journalistic writings, Roth also explored the rise of anti-Semitism and nationalism, seeing the former as often intertwined with the latter. He believed that nationalist rhetoric and language were used to create an "us versus them" mentality, where minorities, particularly Jews, were excluded or vilified. In essence, Roth's view on nationalist language was one of caution and critique, because he saw it as a tool for creating divisions rather than fostering the kind of cosmopolitanism he cherished in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Literature based on Monarchy, is written in, during or about the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and provides a great opportunity to analyze the becoming of nations. Royalty and monarchy, representing the political community opposing the nation, were held together by acknowledging the status of its subordinates and by being capable of taking in anyone because they were only concerned with having their dominance accepted. This antithesis shows 'the dark face of the nation as well for a nation cannot remain an open community and it is not capable of accepting others without trying to assimilate them, because it came into being when fighting wars against other nations and therefore cannot imagine itself without borders'. The myths of the nation and the symbols which keep them alive are also on today's agenda: nationalism resurrects from time to time, new nations are born, or old ones restate their identities[15]. The dark side of nationalist language as well is that it lends itself to xenophobia or to the exclusion of minority groups. Nationalism and its specific language are closely conected, because language acts as a powerful tool for expressing cultural values, preserving heritage and fostering a collective sense of belonging, and the use of a common language can foster a sense of shared identity and cultural heritage among people within a nation. Nationalist actions often express the promotion and preservation of a national language as a symbol of sovereignty and unity. This connection can sometimes lead to linguistic policies aimed at elevating the status of a particular language over others, reinforcing national identity and pride. Although most scholars argue that nationalism is indissociable from modernity, others argue that modernity provided only a catalyst for pre-existing groups to seize power or negotiate power-sharing arrangements through representative leaders. For some authors, nationalism was no mere chaperon of modernity, but a tool used by elites to consolidate their power, while imposing their modernizing views and spreading the ideology of progress among the masses[16].

Conclusions

Theories surrounding nationalist language are complex and multifaceted, with both proponents and critics offering various perspectives on its role and impact. Benedict Anderson and Anthony D. Smith agree that nationalist language plays a central role in unifying diverse groups within a nation, creating a sense of shared identity and fostering social cohesion.

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[15] Roth, Joseph (1986), *The Bust of the Emperor,* Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 183 pag.
[16] Conversi, Daniele (2014), "Modernism and Nationalism", in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 17(1):13-34, Routledge, DOI:10.1080/13569317.2012.644982.

Nationalist language, through the standardization of speech and written forms (especially through print), helps to create a common cultural framework and identity, even among geographically dispersed populations who may never meet. This shared language enables individuals to imagine themselves as part of a broader, unified community, leading to stronger social solidarity and national cohesion. Eric Hobsbawm, to some extent, says that nationalist language plays an essential role in the construction of modern nation-states arguing that nationalism, expressed through language, is an instrumental force in the creation and solidification of nation-states. The establishment of a unified national language helps define the political, cultural and social boundaries of a nation, creating a sense of common belonging. It can also serve as a tool for building national institutions and fostering civic participation, but on the other side he states that nationalist language is used to manipulate public opinion and construct myths that distort history for political purposes.

The theorists whose works have been mentioned and analyzed in this study contributed to the understanding of how nationalism is tied to language, both in everyday discourse and in national and international politics. Language not only reflects national identity but also actively shapes it through symbols, myths and narratives that are essential for the cohesion of a nation. Nationalist language can indeed be considered a modern means of social cohesion and national unity, particularly in the context of modern nation-states. The role of language in nationalism has become more prominent in the modern era, especially since the 18th and 19th centuries, as political systems evolved and the idea of the nation-state gained atraction. Nationalist language serves as a powerful tool to shape and promote a shared identity by creating a common frame of reference and allowing individuals to feel part of a larger, unified community.

Nationalist language in many circumstances operates by defining who belongs to the nation (in-group) and who is considered "other" (out-group). And while this can foster internal unity, it can also be exclusionary, emphasizing linguistic, cultural or ethnic differences that create divisions with external groups or minorities within the nation, the use of this language evolving over time, influenced by political, social, and historical shifts. This topic will certainly be a crucial one for a future study, especially as it plays a significant role in shaping social dynamics, political discourse and identity. Nationalism relies on this division to create a sense of unity and belonging within the nation, while simultaneously constructing the "other" as different, foreign or even threatening, this aspect of nationalism having far-reaching implications, both historically and in contemporary settings.

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