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Book Review

Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community.

By Bernard Yack,

University of Chicago Press, 2012, 344pages.

Reviewed by: Yu Nishijima, *Sophia University*

This volume is a book on nationalism theory, which has been read widely in recent years. Bernard Yack is a Canadian-born professor, and a political philosopher at Brandeis University (United States of America). He has tried to reconstruct concepts regarding nationalism through the approach of political philosophy for the purpose of moderating moral problem that are caused by nationalism. This book has two parts: the first part is to criticize conventional concepts of nationalism studies. The second part is to offer a better approach to the problem with nationalism. It also suggests that we have to get along with nationalism for the time being. This book review argues that the content of the volume and Yack's theory share similarity with the principle of cosmopolitanism rather than contrast with it.

In traditional nationalism theory, the concept of nation was considered in light of politics and culture. However, Yack proposes an alternative concept of nation, that is a community based space, in which people share cultural heritage. Argued by Yack: "National communities, I shall argue, grow out of the way in which we imagine these contingencies of intergenerational friendship and loyalty (p.15)". He emphasizes that: "it [the national community] is shared cultural inheritance, rather than shared cultural

practice (p.68)". Shared cultural inheritance—such as language, symbol and memory—suggests that there is no need to follow cultural legacies of their predecessors(Ch.3, p.186). When loyalty of a cultural community politicizes, Yack considers it to be nationalism (Ch.5&6). In other word, politicization is understood as the problem with nationalism, not a component of the concept of the nation.

The problem with nationalism, according to Yack, does not originate in primordial feeling, but is rather: "the combination of national loyalties with beliefs about the nation's rights and obligations creates moral problems that each lack on their own (p.216)". He considers mutual concern and loyalty in national community positively. When disagreement occurs between insiders and outsiders of the community, they compose a relationship as "friend and enemy", which I think is like a political concept suggested by [Schmitt 1932]. The problem with nationalism emerges when relationship as "friend and enemy" arises and becomes violent. Yack argues that this problem arises because there is an idea that: "nations should be allowed to have the final say in the arrangement of their political affairs (pp.225-6)". Although it is not possible to deny the right to self-determination of the people, the principle of national-self-determination is what creates the problem with nationalism inadvertently. This problem is an issue which is repeatedly mentioned in philosophical nationalism theory.

Yack approaches the problem as the following: "the right of national-self-determination has come to be identified with the right to popular sovereignty (p.245)". The difference between national-self-determination and popular sovereignty is that: "defender of popular sovereignty the house they seek to master is the politically bounded territory within which they happen to reside, while for nationalists it is the place or places that loom large in the cultural heritage that binds the members of their community (p.246)". Popular sovereignty, argued by Yack, is regarded as the right to self-determination of the people, which also includes outsiders, who live in the territory of the state contingently. In other word, the people are not just belong to a national community, but happen to be present together perchance in a

political area, those people are attributed with political right to self-determination. In this case, it will be difficult to form a relationship as “friend and enemy”.

Yack offers ideas to moderate the problem with nationalism rather than deny the nation and state (Ch.11&12). His ideas would be positioned in the liberal nationalism theory, such as thoughts from Tamir, Miller, and Kymlicka [Tamir 1993, Miller 1995 and Kymlicka 2001]. However, Yack’s theory is different from their theories because he proposed the concept of contingency in his volume.

“Contingency” or “Contingent of Birth”, which Yack uses often, is the most important concept in this book. The concept of contingency, unfortunately, have not been well studied in the nationalism theory. Yack refers that: “the term contingency to refer to things that are neither chosen nor necessary...Obviously, we do not choose the particular range of social relationships into which we are thrust by the conditions of our birth” (p.14). His concept of contingency is similar to Rorty’s concept of “liberal ironist” [Rorty 1989]. Rorty refers the sense that people belong to the community is tinged with contingency. I think, the contingency that Yack and Rorty share in common is a principle of cosmopolitanism because cosmopolitans think it is not important for people to belong to a particular nation. They would suggest that “you might also belong to A-nation, B-nation, or C-nation etc. Therefore, there is no need to love the only nation that you belong”. Yack’s theory, can be understood by the concept of liberal within liberal nationalism theory, which is replaced by the thought of ironical liberal, proposed by Rorty. In other word, the principle of contingent cosmopolitanism enters the concepts of nation and nationalism. We do not need to follow a predecessor's culture, because people are born to the nation *contingently*. Moreover, “national-self-determination” has been re-understood as “popular sovereignty”, which suggests that political self-determination should be interpreted by people who *happen to be present together perchance*. The reason why Yack reconstructs those concepts is that the contingency has been taken into nation and nationalism. Although Yack clearly distances himself from cosmopolitans, his theory furtively takes the principle of contingent cosmopolitanism, at least in part.

It is necessary to enhance the understanding of the concept of contingency, in order to deepen the theory of Yack. But Yack does not consider the similarity between cosmopolitanism and contingency. His discussion about cosmopolitanism concentrates only on criticism of anarchism. The suggestion abandoning the state, in which cosmopolitanism presents, is not the major issue for the Yack, because he argues, for nation and nationalism, not for *raison d'etre* of the state. Critics would have had more fruitful discussion on criticism about cosmopolitanism of contingency, from Yack's point of view, can be introduced to their discussion. In fact, Yack's volume approaches the problem with nationalism from a new perspective on contingency in contrast with views from past theories. Yack's ideas give us a lot to think about nationalism, which is how to consider the nation and nationalism. Also, he inspires us on how to moderate the problem with nationalism.

Reference

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Yu Nishijima

Graduate School of Global Studies, Sophia University.