

All (Cautiously) Hail– and Scale–Community!

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In her essay, Jenna Bednar makes a powerful case and sets out a persuasive framework for refocusing public policy away from the market toward “human flourishing.” In this response, I build on one of the pillars of her framework – community – to showcase its potential to promote human flourishing at scale. I show how communities can promote human flourishing not just locally, but also at the national level. And yet, a focus on the progressive power of nationalism at once also cautions against the dangers inherent in the concept of community itself: that is, that all communities are necessarily bounded and unequal. In laying bare the exclusion and violence that communities can inflict on those beyond their boundaries, and/or down the ladder of “prototypicality,” nationalism is a dark, stark reminder for all communities, including at the local level, to be consistently vigilant to both their boundaries and gradations of belonging. The task that Bednar emphasizes of building mutuality and trust within communities must proceed apace with a commitment to both expanding and building healthy relations with those beyond their boundaries, and ensuring the web of solidarity encompasses all equally within the community.

In her elegant essay, Jenna Bednar makes a powerful case for reorienting the focus of public policy away from the market toward “human flourishing.”¹ Yet her roadmap for this shift away from capitalist democracy is strengthened by a reflection on our travels within its (far too thin) moral avenues. Within the interstices of neoliberalism’s prioritization of economic development, almost all states have, albeit to starkly different degrees, instituted some combination of policies to promote human development, whether it be social insurance, health, housing, education, or provision of other types of public goods. What are the conditions under which such policies have been more successful, or less? An exploration of this question reinforces Bednar’s emphasis on community. But it also pushes past the guardrails of scale that she erects around it. Drawing on my own and other work, I show how this pillar of Bednar’s framework can support human flourishing not just locally, as she suggests, but also at the national level.

We swim in the dark, taken-for-granted waters of neoliberalism. Its (deeply flawed) underlying assumption of *homo economicus* not only elevates economic over social development as our collective goal, but also structures how we understand the workings of the limited “moral” policies that have been sustained within the belly of neoliberalism. The shadow of the rational-actor model looms over explanations for both the distinct but related dynamics – the institution of social policy and popular engagement with such policies – that together generate social development. Social policy, for example, is seen to follow “naturally” from linked, linear processes of modernization and rationalization, or to be enacted by interest-maximizing political leaders when it advances their pursuit of political power.² Popular compliance is similarly seen to be most effectively induced through extrinsic incentives, carrots or sticks, that modify individual cost-benefit calculations. The dominance of such theorizing has obscured how a range of moral motivations drive both the top-down and bottom-up routes to social development.

Bednar points to an especially fertile source of such motivations: a sense of community rooted in place. For Bednar, solidarity around a place is powerful but, or perhaps precisely because, it is limited in its scale. The potential of community to sustain human flourishing is necessarily local, and should be accepted as such. Yet such circumspection undermines the historic power of the most salient of political communities of our post-Westphalian times: the nation. Nationalism’s reputation has been tarnished by its historic association with projects of discrimination and destruction. Yet as a territorial solidarity that generates a spirit of “fraternity,” a feeling of “attachment” and “love,” it also has significant constructive potential.³

Nations answer a basic biological need for group living. They also fulfill a psychological need for community as a source of belonging and validation. In Bednar’s framework, community is the wellspring for dignity. Nationalism transforms political-administrative territories into homelands. This homey feeling – the sense that this is *my* country, *my* people – weaves a robust web of mutual obligations.⁴ National solidarities forge, in John Ahlquist and Margaret Levi’s evocative terms, “an expanded community of fate.”⁵ They prompt a shift from a literally self-centered focus on identity to a community-centered focus: from *me* to a broader *we*. This *we-ness* motivates elites and ordinary citizens alike to work for collective welfare.⁶

Political leaders bound by the ties of national solidarity have been shown to be more likely to prioritize social welfare.⁷ National bonds forged during World War II motivated the passage of one of the most inclusive waves of welfare policies across Europe, including the founding of the United Kingdom’s National Health Service.⁸ My own research has shown how inclusive subnational solidarities drove the institution of more progressive social welfare policies in India.⁹ A similar dynamic has been delineated for Quebec and Scotland.¹⁰

Nationalism has also been shown to spur societal compliance with state policies. The institution of social policy is an essential but insufficient condition for human flourishing. The COVID-19 pandemic has foregrounded the critical importance of securing popular cooperation for the success of social initiatives. Public health policies – social distancing, quarantining, masking, or getting vaccinated – like other critical state interventions including taxation and military conscription are only as effective as the extent to which people come onboard. States have, through history, used various types of coercion to extract such compliance. Yet not only is coercion normatively problematic, it requires significant state capacities for surveillance and punishment, and yields varying, often limited gains and, even when effective, can provoke backlash and leave a trail of mistrust that can derail future state initiatives. Encouraging (quasi) voluntary popular compliance is as essential as it can be elusive.¹¹ A rich scholarship has moved past the preoccupation with rewards and punishments to showcase the moral reasons that encourage people to comply.¹² One powerful reason is the deep ethical obligations associated with membership in a shared national community. National loyalties have been shown to encourage people to vote, pay taxes, and volunteer for military service.¹³ In my own forthcoming work, I show how differences in the strength of the affective bonds of nationhood explain variations in compliance with state vaccination policies in China and India in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁴

And yet, inasmuch as nationalism opens us to the possibilities of communities at scale, it also cautions against the dangers inherent in the concept itself: that all communities are necessarily bounded and unequal. Every in-group has an out-group; and within the in-group, more “prototypical” members sit above those with “second-class status.” For all its progressive potential, nationalism has historically laid bare, and continues to exemplify, the exclusion and violence that communities can inflict on those beyond their boundaries and/or down the ladder of prototypicality. Through this shadow, nationalism spotlights the need for all communities, including at the local level, to be consistently alert to and critically interrogate both the boundaries and gradations of belonging. Who does and, more importantly, does not belong to the community? And do all those who belong do so equally? It serves as a stark reminder that the task of building mutuality and trust within communities, which Bednar emphasizes, must proceed apace with a commitment both to expanding and building healthy relations with those beyond their boundaries, and to ensuring that the web of solidarity encompasses all equally within the community.

This is hard, necessarily unfinished work, but it is essential. We live in a world where nationalism is driving aggression and violence against ethnic minorities within and across national borders. Putin’s Russian nationalism has driven the brutal invasion of Ukraine. White nationalism and Hindu nationalism incubate

ecosystems of violence against African Americans in the United States and Muslims in India, respectively. And yet these are not inevitable fallouts of community, or even of nationalism. Extensive social psychological research shows that in-group love and out-group hate are not reciprocally related.¹⁵ In-group positivity can be associated with out-group attitudes ranging from mild positivity, indifference, and contempt to, only under certain conditions, hostility.¹⁶ Similarly, while no community is perfectly equal, some communities are less hierarchical than others. Even within nationalism, there are important historical examples of working to cultivate nonconflictual, if not necessarily noncompetitive relations with outsiders, and commitments to multiculturalism that seek to include minorities on equal footing.¹⁷ Inasmuch as it showcases the scalable power of communities, nationalism thus equally alerts us to the fullness of the labor entailed in (safely) harnessing their potential.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jenna Bednar, "Governance for Human Social Flourishing," *Dædalus* 152 (1) (Winter 2023): 31–45.
- ² Democracies are more likely to promote human flourishing through this key mechanism because, unlike authoritarian contexts, political elites are accountable to and can be punished by voters at the ballot box. This same strategic logic undergirds arguments about the importance of the structure and nature of political competition. Parties and leaders in more competitive elections and two-party competitions are seen to be more likely to enact policies for provision of public (versus club) goods, because, compared with their counterparts involved in less competitive electoral races and situations of multiparty competition, they cannot rely only on the support of particular groups to win elections. Instead, they need to build more broad-based electoral coalitions. Within arguments that emphasize the strength of social democratic parties, one set focuses on ideology and organization, but another centers a more instrumental calculation about such parties' reliance on the electoral support of the working class and the poor who would benefit more from redistribution of material resources.
- ³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Books, 1991); John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Gov-*

- ernment (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1875); and Ernest Renan, *What Is a Nation?* (Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing LLC, 1882).
- ⁴ Yael Tamir, *Why Nationalism?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019); and David Miller, *On Nationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- ⁵ John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- ⁶ In theory, such we-ness can extend beyond the nation, supranationally (like in the case of the European Union) and possibly globally. Indeed, as much as our identifications are not zero-sum but potentially mutually reinforcing, such above-nation solidarities are compatible with and could even strengthen national allegiances. And yet, research has shown the relatively limited power of evocations of more universal, as compared with national, identities. See Irene Bloemraad, Fabiana Silva, and Kim Voss, “Rights, Economics, or Family? Frame Resonance, Political Ideology, and the Immigrant Rights Movement,” *Social Forces* 94 (4) (2016): 1647–1674, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sov123>.
- ⁷ Etzioni Amitai, *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics* (New York: Free Press, 1988). This is in line with a growing body of evidence that shows how models of political actors that function purely as egocentric maximizers predict legislative outcomes poorly.
- ⁸ Richard Titmuss, *War and Social Policy: Essays on the “Welfare State”* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958); and Nicola McEwen and Richard Parry, “Devolution and the Preservation of the United Kingdom Welfare State,” in *The Territorial Politics of Welfare*, ed. Nicola McEwen and Luis Moreno (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2005), 41–61.
- ⁹ Prerna Singh, *How Solidarity Works for Welfare: Subnationalism and Social Development in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Prerna Singh, “Subnationalism and Social Development: A Comparative Analysis of Indian States,” *World Politics* 67 (3) (2015): 506–562, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887115000131>; and Prerna Singh, “We-ness and Welfare: A Longitudinal Analysis of Social Development in Kerala, India,” *World Development* 39 (2) (2011): 282–293, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2009.11.025>.
- ¹⁰ Daniel Béland and André Lecours, *Nationalism and Social Policy: The Politics of Territorial Solidarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- ¹¹ Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Margaret Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ¹² See, for example, Tom R. Tyler and Jonathan Jackson, “Popular Legitimacy and the Exercise of Legal Authority: Motivating Compliance, Cooperation, and Engagement,” *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 20 (1) (2014): 78–95, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034514>; and Margaret Levi, Audrey Sacks, and Tom R. Tyler, “Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimizing Beliefs,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (3) (2009): 354–375, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764209338797>.
- ¹³ Aram Hur, *Narratives of Civic Duty: How National Stories Shape Democracy in Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2022); Katharina Gangl, Benno Torgler, and Erich Kirchler, “Patriotism’s Impact on Cooperation within the State: An Experimental Study of Tax Compliance,” *Political Psychology* 37 (6) (2016): 867–881, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12294>; and Kai A. Konrad and Salmai Qari, “The Last Refuge of a Scoundrel? Patriotism and Tax Compliance,” *Economica* 79 (315) (2012): 516–533, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0335.2011.00900.x>.

- ¹⁴ Prerna Singh, “Moral Vaccination: States, Societies and Public Health in China and India,” book manuscript in progress.
- ¹⁵ For a review, see Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, “The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (3) (1995): 497–529, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497>.
- ¹⁶ Marilynn B. Brewer, “In-Group Bias in the Minimal Intergroup Situation: A Cognitive Motivational Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 86 (2) (1979): 307–324, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.86.2.307>.
- ¹⁷ A healthy drive for national distinctiveness has in fact been fueled by important contributions in art, literature, music, cinema, architecture, cuisine, and the protection of the environment. Distinctions and competition between nations have been the lifeblood of sports. A list of more progressive nationalisms is inevitably contested but arguably includes Switzerland, Burkina Faso, Senegal, pre-Modi India, Tanzania, Botswana, Lebanon, Papua New Guinea, Mexico since the 1980s, post-apartheid South Africa, and pre-Bolsonaro Brazil.