

WHAT IS POSTNATIONALISM?

TEY MARIANNA NUNN

Postnational, as a theoretical construct, does not mean that nationalism has ended. On the contrary, postnational coexists with the national. They are inseparable. Postnational discourse takes culture, society, government, politics, and the economics of an individual nation and inserts these components into an increased regional, continental, hemispheric, and global perspective narrative. A postnational construct, while shared, is complex as it straddles, blurs, and shifts borders.

DR. TEY MARIANNA NUNN is the Director of the Museum and Visual Arts Program at the National Hispanic Cultural Center, Albuquerque, NM.

DONALD E. PEASE

Postnational iterations of the relations between peoples and the condition of belonging cannot be understood apart from the drastic changes in the geopolitical economy effected by globalization. After globalization disembedded social, economic, and political processes from their local contexts and facilitated their generalized extension across vast global expanses, the nation-state could no longer serve as an operative model either for the regulation or the disruption of these processes.

But the postnational does not operate on its own. It is a construction that is internally differentiated out of its intersection with other unfolding relations. When it is articulated to the conceptual needs of global relationships caused by shifts in the world economy, the term “postnational” describes the effect on the nation-state of the new global economic order which no longer finds in it a vehicle appropriate for the accumulation of capital or the regulation of labor.

Tropes of postnationalism inhabit the global imaginary constructed by the ideologues of global capital as well as the left political movements mounted in opposition to its spread; they inform the projects that would facilitate globalization from above and the grassroots organizations which would resist such incursions.

The one model demonstrates how a single complex system tightens its grip on the most distant of global backwaters; the other model brings a more complex system into view that is at once decentered and interactive. The former depends on transnational capitalism and the global economy, the latter on peoplehood and imagined diasporic communities.

The difference between the “postnational” of the international left and the “postnational” of the international business class depends upon where the “post” in the postnational comes from and through which conceptual relays the postnational gets transmitted. Because globalization goes above the nation-state and goes below it at the same time, the postnational might be described at once as what has come after the national but also as what has established a kind of resistance nationalism. The temporal dimension of the postnational sits in uneasy tension with a critical dimension that would activate a process of disengagement from the whole nationalist syndrome. This latter aspect comes into existence through a critique of the nationalist hegemony.

The tension between its temporal and critical aspects results in ambivalent significations for the postnational that become discernible in the following series of questions: Does the post in the postnational describe a definitive epistemological rupture or does it indicate a chronological divergence? Is the concept intended to be critical of or complicitous with the consecration of the globalist hegemony? Is the postnational the time after nationalism or is it a different way of experiencing nationalism? And what are the implications of the postnational for contemporary geopolitics and the politics of subject formation?

Social theorists of the standing of Jürgen Habermas and Arjun Appadurai have underscored the importance of thinking postnationally at this historical moment. But it is difficult to square Habermas' belief that enlightenment universalisms can meet this challenge with Appadurai's commitment to diasporic pluralisms.

Promoting the value of what he terms constitutional patriotism, Habermas has described citizens with postnational identities as those who can critically reflect upon and thereby transcend their particular national traditions in favor of universal values.¹

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But in elaborating the notion of constitutional patriotism, Habermas has failed to distinguish between an abstract idea of community in which adherence to the terms of the political constitution might comprise a sufficient bond of solidarity, and the actually existing diasporic communities whose members lack constitutional guarantees for their political and economic rights. The postnational identity Habermas recommends might have confronted few difficulties in a postwar Germany where the memory of the Holocaust elevated the need to question national traditions into a quasi-patriotic duty. But constitutional patriotism fails to exert imaginative purchase on the consciousness of the Haitian refugees in Miami or on that of the Nicaraguan laborers in Tucson for whom the collective experience of historical discontinuity continues to evoke traumatic memories.

Members of diasporic communities are not necessarily attached to any national territory but are part of a delocalized transnation composed of deterritorialized and extraterritorial peoples who may (or may not) remain loyal to their nations of origin, but who are ambivalent about their loyalties to the United States. Arjun Appadurai has called for imaginative projects that would enable such groups to renegotiate their links to diasporic networks and which would enable them to replace patriotic loyalties—no matter whether to a nation or to a constitution—with loyalty to a nonterritorial transnation. The incapacity of deterritorialized groups to think their way out of the images which the nation-state has authorized might itself explain much global violence. If cultural nationalists have only created new versions of what they had resisted in many of the new postcolonial nation-states, this vicious circle can only be broken, as Arjun Appadurai has observed, “when a postnational imaginary is forged that proves capable of capturing these complex nonterritorial postnational forms of allegiance.”²

DONALD E. PEASE is Professor of English, Director of the Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth College, and author of *The New American Exceptionalism* (2009).

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¹Jürgen Habermas, “National Unification and Popular Sovereignty,” *New Left Review* 219 (September/October 1994): 3-21.

²Arjun Appadurai, “Patriotism and Its Futures,” in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 166. For an excellent discussion of globalization from below, see Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization

and the Research Imagination,” *Public Culture* 12 (Winter 2000): 1-20. “But a series of social forms have emerged to contest, interrogate, and reverse these developments and to produce forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilization that proceed independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system (and its international affiliates and guarantors). These social forms rely on strategies, visions and horizons of globalization on behalf of the poor that can be characterized as ‘grassroots globalization’ or, put in a slightly different way, as globalization from below.”

RAY HERNÁNDEZ-DURÁN

Recent definitions of postnationalism have centered on four variables seen as distinctive features of this phenomenon: one, economic practices, such as international trade and the internationalization of markets, e.g. NAFTA; two, the shifting of political agency from local or national to international entities, e.g. the United Nations, the European Union, etc.; three, the supranational circulation and influence of media through conduits such as news and social networking sites on the Internet; and four, mass immigration patterns from less developed world regions (e.g. Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia) to more technologically advanced, socially and economically prosperous countries (i.e. the U.S., Canada, and nations in Western Europe). In addition to being regarded as constitutive of postnationalist tendencies, these variables are also identified with recent world events. Pointing to the factors motivating the introduction of postnationalism as an idea into current thought, Stephen Shapiro stated, “The recent call for postnationalism responds to . . . key post-1989 developments,”¹ Although this observation may be valid, the actual phenomenon to which this term refers must be scrutinized with a broader temporal lens.

In relation to such analogues as globalization and transnationalism, postnationalism is both a process and a state depending on whether one adopts a diachronic or synchronic approach. From a deeper historical perspective, postnationalism can be viewed as a symptom or condition of larger globalizing patterns of development. As such, it is helpful to think of postnationalism not simply as a condition but as an extended process whose trajectory can be traced back to what has been framed as the early modern period and to Western European colonial expansion, beginning in the late fifteenth century following Columbus’ arrival in the Caribbean. The subsequent integration of the Western Hemisphere into the incomplete, pre-existing world order challenged dominant epistemological frameworks with significant, long-lasting ramifications in the political and economic

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spheres of imperial domain. Throughout the long colonial process, starting with the four centuries of Spanish domination in the Americas followed by the gradual displacement of the latter as a global power by the British in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the establishment of transoceanic and transcontinental commercial networks and markets not only coexisted with but facilitated the rise and success of modern nation states.

A question that arises in terms of the seemingly antipodal designations, postnational and national, concerns the hypothetical end of nationalism as we understand it. Recent discussions suggest that although the two terms may be antithetical they are not polarities or antonyms. When examining modern nationalism as a political framework and localized form of consciousness in relation to processes of globalization, its utility to governments and capitalist corporate entities becomes clear as an apparatus that effectively regulates labor, the flow of capital, and market practices. We note the continued relevance of nationalist expressions on a popular, regional level while the postnational takes prominence in multinational, corporate-governmental spheres. National and postnational are thus not entirely distinct but are interrelated resembling gradations on a scale in which globalization and nationalism are polar elements that simultaneously structure and delimit a coherent system. Confusion arises when one approaches national and postnational as states instead of as coeval tendencies in a larger historical process. Early modernity and modernity can be seen as Eurocentric historical-cultural markers identified with the advent of proto-national state formations and, most importantly, globalization via European exploration, conquest, and settlement, and the gradual consolidation of trade routes, refinements in labor organization and modes of production, and a more effective distribution of goods and capital. With the hegemonic dominance of certain European political centers, and eventually the U.S., over this global network and its movements, we observe the foundation for the gradual definition of the so-called “First World” nations in opposition to the “Third.” This oppositional construct, imbalanced and hierarchical, continues to structure the discourse and practices of the current global order in spite of attempts to characterize it as a level playing field and claims of the random effects of capital by postcolonial theorists, such as Arjun Appadurai. Colonialism, as a process through which labor, resources, revenue, and goods are siphoned out of subjugated, allegedly marginal, world regions and channeled into foreign European economic and

political circuits are a basis for the advent of modernity reflecting Walter Mignolo's astute proposition that colonialism and modernity are two sides of the same coin.

The relevance of early modernity, globalization, and (post/trans)nationalism as organizational-analytical categories to fields such as art history is found in the registered effects of such expansive and otherwise effusive phenomena in the material and visual cultures of populations across the globe. The politically and economically motivated translocation of peoples across vast geographic expanses; the transcultural effects on local cultural production of transposed ideas, practices, and forms; cosmopolitan developments in taste and consumerism across various social sectors; and the simultaneous distribution of locally produced materials to other world regions, among other things, exemplify this dynamic not only in the contemporary context, where it is decisively marked but, too, in the past where it is just as evident. Ibero-American colonial arts as, arguably, the earliest global art forms in the modern sense stand as formative material iterations indexing the interpolated nature of emergent nationalist frameworks and globalizing tendencies. With such a historical understanding, one is better equipped to recognize postnationalism not as an absolute, static category solely anchored to the present but as an element of recent manufacture, which is part of a protean dynamic that has been gradually shaping the world we inhabit and the manners in which we have been engaging it for at least the past five hundred years.

RAY HERNÁNDEZ-DURÁN is Associate Professor of Ibero-American Colonial Arts and Architecture in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of New Mexico.

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¹ Stephen Shapiro, "Reconfiguring American Studies? The Paradoxes of Postnationalism," in *49th Parallel: An Interdisciplinary Journal of North American Studies*, ed. Department of American and Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham, UK, Issue 8: Dislocations: Transatlantic Perspectives on Postnational American Studies (Summer 2001).