

The peaceful xenophobes

by Eric Kaufmann

Two new studies of empire and nationalism should make us think again about conflating xenophobia, nationalism and aggression

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For Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism and War

by Stephen Saideman and William Ayres (Columbia University Press, £20.95)

Day of Empire: How Hyperpowers Rise to Global Dominance--and Why They Fall

by Amy Chua (Doubleday, £16.95)

Intolerance towards minorities and belligerence towards other nations are usually regarded as two sides of the same coin. Yet this Nazi-centric interpretation does serious injury to a historical record in which tolerance has often proved the handmaiden of "missionary" imperialism, while xenophobia has constrained expansionist energies. Now, at a time when politicians and academics like to stress the importance of outward-looking, tolerant, "civic" nationhood, it is a distinction eminently worth chewing over.

In many big modern states, like Britain and America, the downplaying of majority ethnic identity has allowed internal "others" to be included, but has also placed more pressure on political elites to define national identity against external "others." In other words, rather than basing national identity on the particularity of who we are, the game becomes one of evangelising our identity to the world. Other countries, of course, may not be interested in such evangelism, in which case a coercive approach to spreading this identity--be it liberalism, socialism, Christianity or Islam--becomes necessary, increasing the potential for international conflict. Iran, Britain and the US are archetypal "missionary nationalists" of this type, while Estonia, Poland or Wales fall into the opposite ethnonational category. (Some nations can combine both strands to differing degrees.)

It seems to be no accident that many of the world's historically tolerant nations, like France, America, Britain, Russia, Holland, Turkey and Iran, were once empires, while less tolerant ethno-nations have emerged from among the vanquished. Ex-empires could draw upon a political tradition of multicultural rule to legitimate themselves. The formerly conquered, however, lacked traditions of statehood and had to rely on ethnic characteristics for political legitimacy.

These notions are nicely encapsulated by two recent books. In *For Kin and Country*, Stephen Saideman and William Ayres contend that xenophobic nations are less likely than tolerant ones to fight to reclaim lost territory in neighbouring states. By contrast, Amy Chua claims in *Day of Empire* that the tolerant have always been the most successful empire builders, while xenophobes have been punished by dissent and imperial decline.

Where xenophobia rears its head, Chua notes, imperial expansion grinds to a halt. At any given moment in history, she argues, human capital resides in a diverse array of peoples. The winning power, in order to outpace its rivals, must therefore attract the best and brightest without regard to religion or ethnic origin. Alexander the Great, for example, harnessed the naval talents of Phoenicians and Cypriots. Multiculturalism reached to the top in Rome, where emperors from Hadrian onward hailed from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Later, Genghis Khan's empire became the largest in history. Its multicultural success contrasted sharply with the sectarianism and xenophobia prevailing in medieval, antisemitic Europe. Whether discussing Xerxes's Persia, the inquisition or the inward turn of Ming China, the death knell of empire coincided with a period of intolerance and cultural conformity.

Chua counsels the US to avoid such a pitfall and to keep its golden door open to immigrants. Britain, meanwhile, is offered as an example of a multicultural empire which surmounted English, Scottish and Welsh differences, but failed to extend its offer of citizenship to non-white dominions like India--something that could have launched a truly global United Kingdom.

On the other hand, Saideman and Ayres point out that xenophobia reined in a number of potential inter-state conflicts that could have engulfed post-communist eastern Europe. Numerous potential irredentists--those seeking to reclaim lost territory--threatened to fill post-Soviet space. Hungarians could have incorporated adjacent Hungarian-settled lands in Slovakia, Romania or Serbia. Albanians could have reunified with Kosovo and pursued the dream of Greater Albania. Russians might have claimed territories where ethnic Russians were numerous. Yet, in all these cases, nationalists who pushed an irredentist agenda--like Zhirinovskiy in Russia, or the Greater Romania party--were punished at the polls. Why?

The authors argue that the content of nationalism matters: ethnic nationalists like Hungarians or Romanians are less likely to annex multiethnic territory because it may dilute their own homogeneity. By contrast, the more "missionary" Serbia and Russia had long traditions of governing multiethnic empires. This meant that the Serbs under Milosevic were unconcerned with diluting ethnic Serbianness and thus sought to hang on to the largely non-Serbian territories of Bosnia, Kosovo and Vojvodina, while Serbian ethnic cleansing in Bosnia was tactical rather than ethnonational. Russia was likewise content to subsume its identity within the multiethnic Soviet one. But when the USSR broke up, a recessive, xenophobic Russian nationalism emerged, focused more on the threat from internal minorities than the need to reclaim lost non-Russian republics. This calmed Russian revanchism.

American history neatly exemplifies the tension between xenophobic peace and tolerant imperialism. No state could be admitted to the union unless it had an Anglo majority and, on this criterion, most of Latin America failed the test. This placed a check on America's "manifest destiny" after the Mexican-American war of 1846-8, limiting expansion to sparsely populated areas. When America's first overseas imperial expansion took place in the Caribbean and Philippines after the Spanish-American war of 1898, McKinley's imperialism was opposed by Anglo-Protestant ethnic nationalists like Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, who exclaimed: "Are we to bring into the body politic eight or ten million Asiatics, so different from us in race and history that amalgamation is impossible?"

As the nation became more tolerant, it became more imperialistic. The postwar demise of anti-Catholicism was accompanied by the more assertive anti-communism of the 1950s. Among the beneficiaries of the new American tolerance were an Irish Catholic senator, Joe McCarthy; a part-Jewish presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater; and the nation's first Catholic president, John F Kennedy, who refused to criticise McCarthy.

Later, Catholics and Jews formed the backbone of the neoconservative movement which crested in the 1990s and 2000s, advocating the use of US power to spread liberal democracy. Throughout this period, the US grew more tolerant of internal ethnic diversity. Just as anti-communism allowed Catholics and Jews to prove their patriotic credentials, today's war on terror allows those from non-European backgrounds--like Francis Fukuyama, Alberto Gonzales or Fouad Ajami--to be as nationalistic as anyone else. It further enables illegal Hispanic immigrants to be portrayed as hardworking patriots who enlist in large numbers for the Iraqi war effort. Neoconservatism therefore serves as a politically-correct form of nationalism which transfers aggressive energies from the inside out. Contrast this picture with the anti-immigration, anti-globalising but anti-imperialistic stance of Pat Buchanan, Ron Paul or the paleoconservative wing of the Republican party. They are the equivalent of the xenophobic Russian Slavophiles who balk at expanding into neighbouring Islamic "stans."

Most people abhor both xenophobia and imperialism, but we may have to face the fact that the two exist in tension, with most nations leaning one way or the other. Ethnic nations may be xenophobic, but are pacific when it comes to inter-state relations. Missionary nations are tolerant of minorities, but imperialistic towards the world.

In the end, a world of xenophobic Ming Chinas would have been a lot more peaceful than the bloody clash of cosmopolitan empires which characterises most of human history. But the lot of minorities and heretics would have been far worse. In the overall scheme of things, it is difficult to know which to wish for.

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