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Orwellian Nationalism as the Liberal Democratic Convention¹

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Introduction

Within *'Agnostic Egalitarianism: Lectures on Liberal Democracy'*, Jiwei Ci reveals the egalitarian's implicit appeal to fairness as a procedure for revealing nature to be concealing a capitalist form of the good (2017:5). Within a justification of what natural features are merit worthy, and so deserving of societal reward, is an agnostically motivated deference to fair procedure of discovery. A procedure's fairness cannot be ascertained internally though, so it must be judged against some (arbitrary) normative convention: a form of the good. That convention, for liberal democracy, is capitalism. Hence, the egalitarian appeal to fairness collapses into a valorisation of capitalism. In implicitly holding a distinctly capitalist form of the good, liberal democracy necessitates the existence of fair inequality at the expense of true equality of outcomes. Whilst I agree that this characterisation captures *most* modern liberal democratic thought, I argue that it does not fully account for the entirety of liberal democratic reality. With one small structural alteration, however, the theory gains far greater explanatory power, lessening the gap between theory and practice that Ci recognises and allowing the theory to accommodate many more of the modern West's idiosyncrasies. Importing George Orwell's notion of 'broad-Nationalism' in capitalism's place will achieve this, preserving capitalism as one nationalism – indeed the dominant nationalism – amongst many nationalistic conventions. To properly explicate this, in the first section I briefly reproduce the relevant parts of Ci's underlying theory, detailing how capitalism is justified as the overarching 'natural' convention that agnostic fairness appeals to before highlighting, in section two, where capitalism in this picture falls short in terms of explanatory power. In the final part, I then reconstruct Orwell's broad-nationalism in its place, displacing capitalism to be one (dominant) nationalism amongst others. Understanding capitalists as a subset of nationalists, I conclude by showing how this addition can explain more about modern society than a conception of capitalism alone.

§1 Fairness, Nature, and Capitalism

For greater clarity when it comes to my later point of departure, it is worth concisely reconstructing Ci's argument as it appears in *'Agnostic Egalitarianism: Lectures on Liberal Democracy'* (2017). He begins by recognising the inherent tension between liberalism and democracy; the "passion for inequality-generating success" granted by liberal freedom on the one hand, and the egalitarian "passion for equality" of persons that sits beside it (ibid.:3) – passions that seem to contradict one another. To avoid this, the egalitarian passion is forced to plead what Ci characterises as an 'agnostic' ignorance on three counts, weakening the definition of equality. In doing so, its agnosticism creates equally 'fair' – but not truly equal – procedures for discovering a) who should be declared fit to rule, b) who should take the better places in society and, supposedly, c) what each person should consider to be the 'good'. These procedures are justified as being fair on account of their respectively resultant brevity, fluidity and flexibility, along with

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their being open to all – all *equally* play by the same rules. This renders compatible the egalitarian desire for equality with the liberal desire for freedom-dependant inequality, by redefining equality as fairness.

In treating everyone as equally qualified on these three counts, both fairness and competition (i.e. inequality), are generated. In the first case, all have *equal political rights*. Even though those that rule do so from a minority (government), this is fair because they are selected through fair voting procedures and can only hold the unequal political *power* over others for a fixed term before the competition begins again. Hence, the inequality is tempered by its brevity. On the second count, all have *equal opportunity*. Those that hold unequal economic *power* fairly competed in the social ‘game’ to get there and could be beaten by another at any moment, so it is not a fixed inequality. Inequality is thus rendered acceptably fluid. Finally, all have *equal liberty*. Accordingly, the received view says that this allows each to fairly pursue their own cultural *goods* – that is, we are tolerant of a plurality of goods insofar as a good does not infringe upon the freedom of others to hold their own good; a Rawlsian priority of the right over the good². There is supposedly no one good that dominates.

The strong emphasis on *fairness* in the three counts above operates to redefine the egalitarian desire for equality in such a way that it can be reconciled with the “staggering” inequality of outcomes that is allowed by, and indeed produced and necessitated by, these three equalities of opportunity (ibid.:5). If we will not strive for equal outcomes, we can at least start equally and play fairly. As Ci argues though, “fairness is the virtue of procedures rather than outcomes” and so begs the question “fair according to what?” (ibid.:17). There are multiple standards against which we can rule whether a procedure is fair or not. In agnostic egalitarianism, this standard turns out to be “a set of *fair* discovery procedures designed to reveal what powers, successes, and influences people deserve by virtue of their *natural* ability and industry” (Ci, 2014:45). This is not, although it may seem like it, a recourse to ‘nature as fairness’ though, but an implicit appeal to one *convention* of interpreting nature among many. After all, something is fair only within the rules of a convention and we must choose that convention as conventions, by definition, are artificial and unnatural. “Fairness is a subordinate or derivative value, not an independent one,” that has specific meaning only “in the context of a larger value that frames it” (ibid.:49). To liken conventions to a game, the rules of cricket would translate poorly to a game of chess. How would one move a chess piece unfairly according to the rules of cricket? We must pick one convention and play by its rules, artificially deciding to hold some features as more important for success than others.

In the game of liberal democracy, this convention *seems* to be fair representation of nature. Fairness would be ensured through equality of opportunity and political rights to control for ‘unfair’ variables such as the *social* lottery, whilst revealing those ‘fair’ individualities and competitive advantages that derive from the *natural* lottery. However, any form of life, of which liberal democracy is one such a form, will evidently favour some natural characteristics over others. The game has rules and some players will naturally benefit from or fit those rules better than others and vice versa. Consequently, “those who have ended up more successful could well not have done so in the context of a different convention” (ibid.:47). They would have lost the game, had the rules, or convention, been otherwise. To value the rules as fair or unfair is thus to appeal to something beyond the rules, beyond fairness as a concept. Fairness means different things to different games. In this sense, any convention or form of life that we use to judge the fairness of nature is *arbitrary* with regards to fairness. One convention cannot be fairer than another without appeal to some other, normatively substantive *good* by which we can normatively judge fairness. Rather than agnosticism

² See Rawls, J. (1988) for more. Ci explains that this was achieved through the historical processes of democratic ‘levelling’ and liberal ‘neutralisation’ of values. For details, see (Ci, 2017:10-14).

towards the form of the good then, Ci shows us that there is actually a convention – a good – underpinning our judgement of fairness. This good, accordingly, underpins the entirety of liberal democracy itself.

The good, he argues, that dominates liberal democracy is not nature. In fact, he believes it is substantively *capitalist*. As Ci puts it, “liberal democratic agnostic egalitarianism, in apparently deferring to nature, is actually deferring to capitalism” through its appeal to the capitalist convention as the indicator of fairness (ibid.:48). Those features that naturally make one a good capitalist only serve that end fairly *insofar as the convention deciding what natural features are fair is capitalism itself*. Instead of fairly ‘revealing’ one’s natural talents for accumulating capital, it is in fact selecting that talent and *defining* it as merit-worthy within the capitalist system, whilst obscuring itself behind the façade of an appeal to nature alone. In doing so, “capitalism pursues its substantive, capital-centred rationality under the cover [...] of the liberal democratic principle of priority of the right/freedom over the good” (ibid.:51). The priority of freedom over the good, however, is evidently lost when capitalism is inserted in freedom’s place: instead, it is freedom *constrained* by and subordinated to capitalism. The corollary of this is that if we want to criticise capitalism’s infiltration of freedom, we must make a countering normative claim against its place as a form of the good. The strength of an agnostic starting position is lost. This said, it is not clear that capitalism is truly the sole convention at work within liberal democracies.

§2 The Explanatory Power of Capitalism

Accepting that freedom is accordingly constrained, we must ask ourselves, “what is the capitalist good?” and consider it, duly and charitably tempered by agnostic egalitarianism, with regards to the reality we see in liberal democracies today. Does a recourse to capitalism as the convention underpinning our societies adequately explain what we see in the world? Can a purely capitalist convention do enough explanatory work? I maintain that it does not. To begin with, let us interrogate the capitalist good and examine how it would shape who succeeds in a society if it was our fundamental good and convention for fairness.

Capitalism is quantitative in nature. Its primary concern is with the ceaseless accumulation of capital. In this regard, it is not necessarily concerned with the qualitative particulars of the individual who accumulates it. Capitalism does not *inherently* require discrimination on account of race, ethnicity, gender, sex, disability, nationality, culture, political views or any other distinguishing feature of a person or group – except their capital. As Ci makes clear, “the fight against discrimination in favour of fairer equality of opportunity” is entirely compatible with capitalism, as capitalism has no intrinsic reason to either aid or undermine this struggle so long as capital can continue to be accumulated (ibid.:53). Capitalism is, after all, only directly concerned with societal inequality in terms of wealth – people’s positions within the fluid and quantitatively measured hierarchy of class, dictated by their affluence. Class aside, it could hypothetically operate successfully with total equality of opportunity, if this produced more capital. As this would predict, we see many businesses today that support struggles for social equality if doing so is positive for their brand image, or at least not incumbent upon their pursuit of capital accumulation. Indeed, many investment banks – those most maximally capitalist of institutions – have programmes explicitly intended to ensure diversity and avoid discrimination. Discrimination can lower productivity and so capital accumulation. This has only become more important as capitalism has swept the world via globalisation, offering a larger, but more diverse, workforce to those business that capitalise on the opportunity.

However, looking at recent events in modern liberal democracies, there have been political moments and narratives that capitalism alone cannot adequately explain. Ci does, to a small extent, accommodate this. He points to “the influence of tradition or culture or other contingent circumstances” that may give

reasons to act which are extraneous to capitalism itself (ibid.:53). Nevertheless capitalism, as the base good or convention, must fundamentally drive who is successful, or not, in society if it is truly the sole good of our liberal democracies. People should only fairly succeed or fail if they do so under the convention of capitalism. I will consider two examples that may give pause to this idea; the British exit from the European Union ('Brexit') and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Together, these point to motivations beyond that of capitalism alone and should lead us to a discussion of how this can be accommodated within Ci's theory.

Let us begin by examining Brexit. The referendum's successful 'leave' campaign that led to Britain triggering Article 50 and withdrawing from the EU was focused predominantly on the issues of economy, sovereignty and immigration. The economic argument clearly serves a distinctly capitalist agenda – rationale was given for leaving based on the money Britain would save from contributions to the EU and the increased potential for free trade beyond what were perceived to be the EU's restrictive regulations and damaging artificial monopolies and tariffs. Let us grant this is compatible with the capitalist good and leave it aside. The other two reasons are not so clearly capitalist in nature, though, and deserve closer analysis.

Given the encroachment of economic systems into the entirety of politics, it is true that the sovereignty and immigration debates cannot be altogether unwound from capitalist motivations. Nonetheless, the character of these two debates was not predicated upon distinctly quantitative economic reasoning concerning capitalist fairness, but instead on the qualitative differences between Britain and the Continent and British and European citizens. The primary motivation was not capitalist. Slogans appealed not to quantitative reasoning, but to an aspiration to 'Take Back Control' and preserve 'British Jobs for British Citizens' (Hall, 2016; Maris, 2016). Sovereignty may enable greater governmental flexibility and control over the economy, yet the underlying ambition is not, I argue, the proliferation of capital but instead independence and self-determination. It rests on a perceived difference between British values and European values. Any talk of values is not quantitative, though, but *qualitative*. One value cannot be weighed numerically against another outside of a chosen convention within which we are measuring. Thus, values must be considered on a normative and qualitative basis. This is a point Ci acknowledges (Ci, 2017:47). In effect then, the quantitative rationale of capitalism can only provide us with part of the picture.

Perhaps it will be argued that this is an example of persuasive political rhetoric that *obscures* an underlying capitalist form of the good. Although it may appear to be a qualitative appeal to values, this is only because it serves some deeper economic purpose. Does this hold up to scrutiny? Britain, in leaving the EU, will lose access to its largest trading bloc and the European Single Market. Millions of jobs will be affected by the decision, with hundreds of thousands lost. It will cost millions of pounds to evaluate and rewrite or repeal every European law and guideline. In the long term, newfound sovereignty may be economically beneficial. In actuality, we can only speculate about the potential losses or gains. Uncertainty is not conducive to stable markets and currency, however, so let us withhold judgement on this count and assume that Britain will come through unscathed – neither better off nor worse off, economically. This a large assumption, but one I am willing to grant.

The issue is clearer-cut if we evaluate the immigration argument. Immigrants contribute more tax to the UK economy than their British-born counterparts and, indeed, also expect less from the state (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014). From a capitalist rationale, immigration is beneficial for the economy. The economic argument for immigration simply does not cohere with the notion of capitalism being the sole liberal good – something more must be at play, something qualitative, not quantitative, that drove the

British Public's decision. This turns out to be a form of discrimination. It is a value judgement regarding the social value of immigrants, beyond their economic value, looking at their country of origin, or race, to discriminate on quantitatively irrelevant grounds. Evidently, as the Leave Campaign was successful, this is a powerful argument that motivates sweeping political opinion across the country.

This considers the immigration issue from a national perspective, but we can also look at it from the point of view of individuals to the same effect. The fear seems to be that of a non-British worker displacing a British worker, under the assumption that they will accept lower pay for the same work. The minimum wage is set by the Government though, so this argument holds little water unless it insinuates that a foreign worker may work illegally, or that British employers would pay illegally. Consequently, it is either a criminal problem (in both cases) or a problem with the normative values of British companies, which is not a problem to do with immigrants per se. Capitalist fairness operates on the assumption of equal opportunity though, and one set of workers playing the game unfairly – by working illegally – disqualifies them from consideration as equal players. Further, immigrants working for less would actually serve the free market economy, increasing competition in capitalist terms and increasing the profits of British companies whilst decreasing their costs. This is a problem with enforcement of the rules, not with the rules themselves and so I will discount it.

Let us now turn to President Trump's election. Many of the same issues of discrimination ran throughout his campaign, specifically targeting immigrants from Mexico and the predominantly Muslim Middle-Eastern states. Most useful to our debate will be an examination of the so-called 'Birther Controversy' which Trump first entered into in 2011, though. This is the accusation that the then President, Barack Obama, had not been born in the United States, therefore undermining his legitimacy and the legality of his Presidency. This appealed to a "right-wing fringe of voters who formed the early base of his support when he launched his presidential bid" (Reuters, 2016). It was an accusation levelled against his Presidential opponent, Hillary Clinton, too, as Trump insinuated that it was the Democratic candidate herself that started the rumours (ibid.). These claims continued despite a lack of any evidence, and despite the release of both a short and long-form copy of the birth certificate in question.

This is again, in effect, a qualitative distinction. Insofar as it is a political issue of legality, the motivation behind such accusations are distinctly qualitative in nature, in that they are concerned with Obama's citizenship, not his wealth. The same holds true if the question is one of racial discrimination, not legality. The fairness in question is distinctly non-capitalist and is the fairness of a different convention altogether: identity politics, not capitalist politics.

Taken with the prior example of Brexit, these two issues give us room to critique the scope of the argument for a capitalist good or normative convention as that which underpins the liberal democratic notion of fairness. As a convention, it certainly holds a large amount of explanatory power, but nonetheless is not watertight or all-encompassing. How does capitalism come to bear on the 'fairness' of anti-immigration sentiments, or the desire for state sovereignty and the birther controversy? These appear to be different considerations of fairness that are in tension with, or even contradict, capitalist fairness. Whilst capitalism can no doubt give poor and approximate answers to these questions, I believe that by importing Orwell's broad concept of *nationalism*, Ci's theory of liberal democracy can be imparted with even greater explanatory power, depth and room for nuance than it already achieves.

§3 Orwellian Nationalism

If capitalism is to be replaced as the natural convention to which liberal democracies implicitly appeal to for fairness, its replacement must explain more whilst still preserving the benefits that capitalism brought to the theory. Although Ci reveals that liberal democracy has little justification for choosing capitalism as its good, a liberal democratic *theory* cannot do the same; it must describe that convention which possesses the most explanatory power. In George Orwell's essay, '*Notes on Nationalism*,' he takes up and expands the traditional definition of nationalism, contrasting it with patriotism, to cover not just national boundaries, but any political group or ideology. According to Orwell, nationalism is "the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests" (Orwell, 2014:300). This is the convention that I propose would best replace capitalism in Ci's theory.

Nationalism, in the extended sense in which I am using the word, includes such movements and tendencies as Communism, political Catholicism, Zionism, Antisemitism, Trotskyism and Pacifism. It does not necessarily mean loyalty to a government or country, still less to *one's own* country and it is not even strictly necessary that the units in which it deals should actually exist.

(ibid.:301)

The key idea is that nationalism, thus defined, is a wide-ranging concept that includes many political outlooks and offers far greater flexibility as a convention than capitalism alone does.

This is the first of five explanatory strengths that I argue Orwell's broad-nationalism encompasses over and above those of capitalism alone. Secondly, and following from its breadth, is the fact that nationalism can take a positive or negative form (ibid.:300). In this sense, it does not always require loyalty *towards* a cause or group, but can also include loyalty *against* a cause or group, an example of which might be nationalistic antisemitism or racism. Capitalism as a convention is much less flexible in this regard.

We can conceptualise the third point in contrast to patriotism, which Orwell characterises as distinctly defensive or passive. Patriotism on this view is the belief, often tied to the love of a place, that one's own way of life is the most desirable. However, the patriot does not force their way of life onto anyone who holds differing opinions, unlike those caught in the grip of nationalism, which is "inseparable from the desire for power"³ (ibid.). Nationalism is active, inspiring those in its grip to seek the success and expansion of their cause, or, in the negative, the failure and obstruction of another cause. In this way, "the abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, *not* for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality" (ibid.:301). This gives it the potential to be a distinctly *qualitative* convention, in contrast to capitalism's quantitative drawbacks, as prestige is a subjective judgement. Coupled with the following point, success can be measured quantitatively, but also qualitatively, depending on the nationalism one subscribes to, making nationalism again more flexible than capitalism as a convention.

Fourthly, as communism is included as a form of nationalism by Orwell, it is no stretch to include capitalism as a kind of nationalism too. Nationalism and capitalism are not mutually exclusive, as nationalism can structurally accommodate capitalism. Indeed, "a nationalist is one who thinks solely, or

³ This is strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche. He argues that "life itself is the will to power... [and] there is nothing to life that has value, except the degree of power" (Nietzsche, 1968:55).

mainly, in terms of competitive prestige”, which bears considerable similarity to capitalism’s inequality-generating need for competition (ibid.:301). In short, nationalism readily accommodates capitalism, as well as capitalism’s fluid hierarchy of high- and low- earners. This preserves much of the explanatory benefit capitalism lent to Ci’s theory.

Finally, one point lends nationalism far greater scope as a convention than capitalism, and is the most compelling reason that it should displace capitalism as the convention underpinning our theory of liberal democracies. As stated earlier, fairness, rather than a simple and unproblematic recourse to nature, is in fact an appeal to one arbitrary normative convention. Ci posits capitalism as a *singular* totalising convention that underpins liberal democracy, but nationalism allows for *multiple*, even contradictory nationalisms to be held simultaneously by one agent or group: “several kinds of nationalism, even kinds that cancel out, can coexist in the same person” (ibid.:314). This, I will argue, is its greatest strength. Crucially, taken with nationalism’s drive for success, this means that nationalism predicts and even allows for the central tension in liberal democracy to persist; simultaneously striving for an egalitarian equality on the one hand and an agnostically justified capitalist inequality on the other. It allows for individuals to cling firmly to both passions, holding both liberal and democratic nationalisms, despite their apparent contradiction.

These points will become more compelling if we consider how these features of nationalism lead it to fare in competition with capitalism regarding the political events introduced earlier. If, as a convention, it holds more explanatory power than capitalism when applied to empirical examples, I argue that this should lead us to reject capitalism in nationalism’s favour. To be clear, what I am contending is that nationalism, in Orwell’s sense of the word, should occupy the structural position that capitalism holds in Ci’s theory of agnostic egalitarianism. In doing so, it will not only better explain and describe the events introduced earlier, but will do so whilst *also solving the apparent contradiction that defines liberal democracy*. This cannot be emphasised enough. Displacing capitalism to be only one, admittedly dominant, nationalism amongst others allows for contradiction between those nationalisms and so preserves a limited form of liberalism’s agnosticism towards the good; reintroducing a truer multiplicity of goods, less constrained by capitalist logic. The fairness of capitalism thus becomes one subjectively normative fairness amongst many. The appeal to nature can consequently entail different qualitative standards of fairness, as ‘fairness’ depends on each agents’ personally held, subjective nationalisms. This does not preclude many agents sharing one nationalism, say, capitalism – indeed, as Ci shows, capitalism is a powerful value-system that exerts influence on many people in liberal democracies. The benefits of this will be made more acute with aid from our earlier examples.

To begin with, nationalism’s multiplicity means that it can better explain the myriad of political issues both Brexit and Trump’s campaign touched upon. As explicated earlier, the Brexit debate orbited around three main issues: the economy (distinctly quantitative), as well as sovereignty and immigration (both quantitative *and* qualitative). Under the capitalist convention, it is impossible to adequately motivate all three debates, given that the issues cannot be reduced to capital accumulation-related concerns alone. The same goes for Trump’s Presidency and its focus on ethnic discrimination against Mexicans and religious discrimination against Muslims, both qualitative forms of discrimination that capitalism cannot easily criticise. Within Orwell’s conception of nationalism, however, the voters for both Brexit and President Trump could be far better understood. We can imagine the ‘Leave’ voter in Brexit holding three nationalisms: capitalism, British nationalism (in the non-Orwellian sense), and a form of xenophobia. These would explain their voting preferences far better than capitalism alone can. Not only that, but the fact that the latter two nationalisms might undermine purely capitalistic considerations is totally

compatible with the theory. In the Trump supporter's case, something similar works – perhaps Islamophobia, anti-Latino sentiment, and a (misplaced) anti-establishment nationalism, underwritten by capitalism. Further, the strong desire for power that motivates nationalism would explain why nationalists can pursue their aims with such fervour; they sink their individuality into their causes, internalising them. Capitalism, being purely quantitative, has no such explanatory mechanism.

Most importantly, relating to this, I reiterate that nationalism allows for the accommodation of contradiction and self-delusion. These pathologies of modern politics are seen throughout the examples offered above, and manifest themselves on all sides of the political debate. But, as Orwell explains, nationalism is not “mere worship of success [...] having picked his side, [the nationalist] persuades himself it *is* the strongest, and is able to stick to his belief even when the facts are overwhelmingly against him. Nationalism is power hunger tempered by self-deception” (ibid.:301). Applied to the Birther Controversy, we can see how the facts become irrelevant to the individual caught up in racist nationalism – even the release of a short- and long-form birth certificate was not enough to halt the conspiracy. This also fully explains how proponents of liberal democracy can believe that they value equality, even when necessitating inequality through capitalism, without resorting to claims of there being a gap between theory and practice. Further, it allows for the behaviours that are self-destructive from a capitalistic view that can arise around isolationist and separatist political movements – those who are blinded to the capitalist reality of their political decisions. Huge losses of capital pursuing what capitalism would term as irrational courses of action can be accommodated and explained by nationalism. All this, whilst preserving those explanatory benefits that capitalism brings to the theory. The clear point is that the theoretical nuance and breadth that Orwell's nationalism provides far outweighs that of capitalism on its own. For this reason, I hold that it should replace capitalism as the central convention of liberal democratic theory.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have argued that subsuming capitalism under the new convention of Orwellian nationalism successfully broadens Ci's theory and grants it far greater explanatory power, whilst preserving the benefits that capitalism (as a convention for uncovering nature) brought to the theory. In this way, the majority of the theory is left untouched – a testament to its cohesiveness and success. The structural change proposed is relatively small and easily made. Situated in capitalism's place, whilst retaining capitalism as one nationalism amongst many, nationalism allows liberal democratic theory to accurately explain far more of the modern political phenomena we see today. This is made possible by the five strengths it has over capitalism: nationalism is more flexible, can encompass positive or negative formulations, gives a clear motivation with its active desire for power, still accommodates capitalism and, finally, allows for contradiction in multiplicity. With the illustrations of Brexit and President Trump, it is clear how these benefits manifest in concrete political examples. For these reasons, I argue that I have compellingly shown the benefits of displacing capitalism, in favour of nationalism, as the key theoretical puzzle-piece within agnostically egalitarian liberal democracies. Finally, with liberal agnosticism shown to really be a defence of numerous subjectively held nationalisms, the theory gains far greater explanatory power and utility.

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