

The Anti-Nationalist Legacy of Rudolf Rocker

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"On the banner of the International was not written 'Proletarians of all lands, kill each other!' but 'Proletarians of all lands, unite!'"

- Rudolf Rocker, "War: A Study in Fact"



When Rudolf Rocker's *Nationalism and Culture* was released in 1937, it was hailed by no less an assemblage of luminaries than Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, and Thomas Mann. The historian Will Durant called it "magnificent" and "profound," and even the *New Republic* gave it a positive notice. It was an unusual level of mainstream acclaim for a book of political philosophy by a German anarchist refugee, especially one published by a group called the "Rocker Publication Committee," a Los Angeles-based venture set up for the sole purpose of releasing *Nationalism and Culture*.

Yet in the years since, Rocker's work has settled into the obscurity for which it was perhaps always destined. Unlike *The Decline of the West* (1926), Oswald Spengler's meditation on the destiny of civilizations, to which it was compared at the time, *Nationalism and Culture* is rarely cited. Though it proposes and defends a comprehensive theory of nationalism, Benedict Anderson does not even acknowledge it in *Imagined Communities* (1982). Contemporary mentions of the book are largely confined to anarchist circles, and even there it is an awkward outsider, its humanistic cultural analysis and rich love of history out-of-step with the contemporary anarchist inclination to immolate all sacred things.

The eclipse of Rocker's magnum opus is hardly mysterious. It is a book that fits with few of our conceptions of how such books ought to be written, a book that deliberately scorns almost all prior wisdom, and a book whose very existence is difficult to square with common understandings about its time. Rocker is a German who mocks both Hegel and Hitler in equal measure, and who writes in the uncompromising and eclectic voice of the autodidact, shunning the toothless evenhandedness demanded of academics. And writing as an atheistic Berlin anarchist in 1933, Rocker offers living proof of his own contention that individuals must not be made prisoners of stereotypes about national spirit.

Nationalism and Culture is, primarily, a 600-page exploration of the origins and development of nationalism, and a scathing denunciation of the corrosive effect of national feeling on the human spirit. Yet it is one of those works, like *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Robert Burton, 1621), that springboard from their stated purpose to discourse on everything under the sun. Architecture is analyzed, socialism is defended, and Rembrandt's paintings are scrutinized at length. It is at once a treatise on the state's relationship with culture and a manifesto for an enlightened leftism. Most of all, it is a clear-eyed plea for sanity at a moment when nationalist and religious irrationalism threatened to swallow the globe. It could not be more relevant.

The humanistic standpoint of *Nationalism and Culture* is reflected in the author's cosmopolitan life. Born in Mainz in 1873, Rocker was not Jewish but spent almost his entire life in Jewish communities as an agitator and educator. During his twenty years in the East End of London, he edited a Yiddish paper, gave lectures in Yiddish, and was given the honorary title of "rabbi" by his devoted students. Rocker even recounts being chased through the streets by children shouting anti-Semitic slurs at him.

Rocker found nothing remarkable about the ease of his assimilation and believed he could have operated among the working class of any origin. But he felt a special kinship among the working-class Jews of London, whose combination of revolutionary ardor and love for education were in tune with his temperament. Even Emma Goldman pronounced herself puzzled at his affinity.

*Like most radicals of any era, Rocker spent time on the receiving end of harassment by the state. Imprisoned by the British government during World War I, Rocker gave his fellow inmates lectures with titles like "The General Conditions and the Various Intellectual Movements in Europe After 1848-1849." He also spent time composing his only novel, *The Six* (1938), in which the moral failings of six characters from world literature, from Hamlet to Don Quixote, reveal why unity among disparate peoples is the only path to the new society.*

*The premise of *The Six* exemplified Rocker's humanist bent, which involved drawing from the best practices of each culture to create a new, universal one. He remained influenced by the Yiddish novelists whose books he had taught to workers, and the libertarian inclinations he witnessed on lecture tours through the United States led him to write *Pioneers of American Freedom* (1949), a book that attempted to claim Lincoln for the anarchists.*

*It was *Nationalism and Culture*, however, into which he poured each ounce of his conviction and wide learning. Rocker penned the book in Berlin, during the Nazis' rise to power, and its original German publication was scheduled for 1933. After the Reichstag was burned, Rocker fled the country, taking with him only one possession: the just-completed manuscript of *Nationalism and Culture*.*

Rocker's thesis is straightforward: Nations are the products of states, rather than vice versa. They are manufactured to serve the goals of the powerful, to divide human beings and keep them from recognizing their common interests. Rocker argues this point with a litany of historical examples, from the Renaissance to "the stupid and stumbling provisions of the Versailles treaty."

But en route to this thesis, Rocker finds himself addressing the entire history of Western political philosophy; with a lawyerly precision, he takes a score of celebrated thinkers to pieces. Plato and Aristotle are witheringly castigated for defending slavery. He takes turns with Calvin ("a unique monstrosity"), Kant ("He knew nothing else but the stark, implacable 'Thou shalt!'"), and Hegel ("reactionary from top to bottom"). St. Augustine receives a brutal lashing for his efforts to extend the reach of the church, and Rousseau is singled out as the philosopher who most laid the groundwork for totalitarian perversities.

Rocker also elaborates his objections to Marxism and to materialist philosophies that overemphasize the role of economic motivations in determining the course of history. So much, says Rocker, depends on the will to power; even capitalism does not operate according to the pure pursuit of profit, which is only one manifestation of the desire for domination. The emergence of Amazon.com, a profitless behemoth whose modus operandi is simply to devour all things, would not have surprised Rocker a whit.

*Rocker spends a great deal of time attending to scientific racism arguments, an understandable focus considering the conditions under which he wrote. Albert Jay Nock, a favorite of libertarians from Ayn Rand to William F. Buckley, has his essentialist theories of Jewish Oriental origin demolished. Rocker elaborates the theories of various "race astrologers," and gives arguments against them that could have been reprinted almost word-for-word upon the release of *The Bell Curve* (Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, 1994) or Nicholas Wade's *Troublesome Inheritance**

(2014). "The essential error of every race theory, the reason for their inevitably false conclusions," Rocker states, is that they simply cannot prove the genetic determinism they claim; nor will they ever, for it is ideas like the nation that determine so much of human life, and "external race-marks have nothing to do with the intellectual and moral qualities of" humans.

Rocker does get around, in *Nationalism and Culture*, to discussing both nationalism and culture. Nations, for him, are ever unnatural and imposed from above. They do not spontaneously emerge from the people, but are put in place in order to serve political or economic ends; counterintuitively, nations appear only among dissimilar peoples, not similar ones. Rocker examines their rhetoric to show how leaders from Robespierre to Mussolini gave the state a religious character, and tracks the arbitrary processes by which nations combine and dissolve. It is only by historical accident that Californians are not a nation and Chileans are. He also points out the cynicism with which nationalist sentiment is exploited by the owning class, despite the fact that "the love of his own nation has never yet prevented the entrepreneur from using foreign labor if it was cheaper and made more profit for him."

To buttress his theory, Rocker undertakes a sweeping analysis of art, intending to show that the more a work of art reflects the soul of the nation, the less it reflects the soul of the artist, and thus the more compromised it is. He offers a compare-and-contrast study of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, including a warm tribute to the Mona Lisa, where "in this profoundest emotion of the man and the artist there breathes no breath of national feeling." He loves the Italian Renaissance, but aims to reclaim it from those who would dare to see it as Italian. Art does not follow national trends, Rocker insists, and succeeds only when it opposes them. We can appreciate art because it awakens our human feeling; thus great art could have no national limitations, for if it is great it can be appreciated universally.

Rocker's remedy for national divisions is international socialism. But he fears factionalism among the left, and critiques those who march under its banner without fighting for its values. Rocker's description of the capitulation of socialist parties reminds one of the modern Democratic Party or of New Labour, who "have everywhere shown themselves incapable of guarding the political legacy of the bourgeois democracy, for they have everywhere yielded up long-won rights and liberties without a struggle."

Its disparate lines of inquiry make *Nationalism and Culture* shaggy and occasionally exasperating. Rocker's mind meanders here and there, though its prose and ideas are always clear. Further, despite Rocker's mountain of evidence, his lack of nuance and too-easy conflation of God, king, and nation, weaken his case. (One might grant the occasional overstatement to a man who saw Brownshirts out his window as he wrote.)

But for all that Rocker might blur or get wrong, it is also astonishing what he gets right. He condemns Hitler, the Soviet Union, religion, and capitalism with equal vigor; he distrusts all ideologies that ask us to place something above our shared humanity. If he is mistaken in his theory, he is perfect in his temperament. He imbues one with an outlook that can be turned toward all earthly affairs. One can anticipate precisely what this honorary "rabbi" would feel about the present-day Palestinian situation: a firm rejection of nationalistic sentiment on all sides, aghast at both militant Zionism and the brutal authoritarianism of Hamas. It is a lesson that might well be absorbed by a left that occasionally lets support for the Palestinian political cause drift into a romantic nationalism.

Yet despite the achievement of this blueprint for a humanist left, Rocker is forgotten by all except anarchists. After the initial acclaim, *Nationalism and Culture* quickly slipped out of print. (Today, AK Press sells an edition.) Rocker has been the subject of a short biography, 1997's *An Anarchist*

“Rabbi” by Mina Graur, and is occasionally referred to by Noam Chomsky. But he is largely absent both from discussions of nationalism and from the pantheon of leftist heroes.

The neglect is unfortunate, for Rocker’s work is both a vital contribution to the literature on nationalism and an elegant historical document. After all, here is Rocker, as chaos envelops Berlin, crying out for faith in human beings and the rejection of the state. Here is Rocker, tracing the ghastly history of Europe up until his moment and yet daring to express optimism at a moment of terrible darkness.

In our own time of rising national sentiment, of the UK Independence Party, Golden Dawn, and Marine Le Pen, Nationalism and Culture has much to teach the left. It is simultaneously an exposition of anarchist philosophy, a history of the world, a theory of the nation-state, and an indictment of power-worshiping sophistry and all human tyrannies. It is a declaration and an exemplar of how to think clearly, how to love language and culture and humanity, and how to approach a troubled time without falling into the snare of fatalism. Rudolf Rocker’s humanist philosophy is a gift bequeathed to all; the “rabbi” that so enchanted the poor tailors of East London should continue to enchant us today.