The Nationalism of Mazzini: Secular Faith, Universal Suffrage, and Private Property

Taner Gokce 10/23/08

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Professor Neely
With the outbreak of the French Revolution to the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the age of nationalism was born. Indeed, up until the Congress of Vienna national movements were still in their infancy, but with the eruptions of revolution in France and Belgium in 1830, and then throughout Europe in 1848, the topic of nationalism came to dominate intellectual circles across the continent. Just because many Europeans were captivated by the idea of nationalism and the ever growing nationalist movements though, this does not mean that everybody had the same opinions about nationalism, and no doubt there were significant distinctions between different political and nationalist ideologies. It was during this age of nationalism that Giuseppe Mazzini rose to prominence, and there are few other historical figures that can match his importance or better epitomize the 19th century European nationalist movement. As a radical republican, Mazzini was a bitter opponent of conservatives, but he was also opposed to the slow and gradual change advocated by the liberals, as well as the complete transformation of society endorsed by socialists with the abolition of private property. Mazzini’s views on religion though, are perhaps his most interesting when we consider how he reconciled religious beliefs with nationalism. Like many radicals, Mazzini favored a secular state, but unlike many radicals he was by no means an ardent anti-cleric and in fact emphasizes the importance of faith in God and humanity for the success of not only Italian unification, but for all nationalist movements. Thus, according to his adherence to radical republicanism, the three most important aspects of Mazzini’s views on nationalism are his views on suffrage, his views on capital and labor relations, and his secular, but not anti-clerical views towards religion.
To begin, to some degree, liberals and radical republicans like Mazzini had some things in common. Both endorsed their support for public education, and constitutional government with the guarantees of equal treatment under the law, basic civic rights, and the protection of private property. In other regards though, there were sharp distinctions between liberals and radicals, and there is no better example of this division of opinion than over the size of the franchise. Liberals certainly supported many ideas from the French Revolution, but they by no means supported democracy or republicanism. While some liberals saw no problem with allowing most male property owners the right to vote, the majority of liberals believed that “only people possessing the ability to form an independent judgment should be eligible to vote” and “wanted to see the ballot limited to a small minority of the well-to-do.”\(^1\) To be sure then, there was a clear difference of opinion over the franchise in the 19\(^{th}\) century, and it depended on one’s political beliefs. On one end of the spectrum, conservatives were rigidly opposed to any form of constitutional government or expansion of the franchise; in the middle, liberals supported an expansion of the franchise, but generally “preferred an affluent following and a politics of reform” that supported gradual change rather than “one of mass support and political confrontation”\(^2\); finally, on the other end of the spectrum, radicals conspicuously supported universal male suffrage. Indeed, for Mazzini and other radical republicans, the guarantee of universal male suffrage was not only necessary, but absolutely crucial for the creation a unified Italy, or any nation state. According to Mazzini, there is “no true country without a uniform right” and there is “no true country where the uniformity of that right is violated by the existence of caste privilege and


inequality” (61). To Mazzini then, the right to vote should not be limited to the few and affluent, but should be universal (especially for all males), and he expands upon this belief by stating that “laws should be the expression of the universal aspiration, and promote the universal good. They should be a pulsation of the heart of the nation. The entire nation should, either directly or indirectly, legislate” (62). With such a statement, Mazzini makes clear his advocacy for universal suffrage – the laws of a nation should not represent the views and self-interest of an affluent minority, but represent the views and self-interest of the entire nation. Without universal suffrage then, the spirit or “pulsation” of a nation does not exist, and in turn, no unified nation state can truly exist without universal suffrage. This sentiment for universal suffrage was of course a major divergence in ideology between radicals and conservatives, but conservatives were by and large opposed to any and all national movement. The real break in ideology over expansion of the franchise was between liberals and radicals. Whether it be in France under the constitutional monarchy of Louis Philippe, or with the Germans of the Frankfurt Assembly, there were plenty of sincere liberal nationalists during this time period, but the fact that liberals insisted on slow and gradual change towards the ideals of the French Revolution⁴, and believed that of the franchise should be restricted to affluent property owners, while radicals, such as Mazzini, stubbornly supported universal suffrage, cannot be overstated.

Another nationalist view of Mazzini that differs quite significantly from the ideologies of liberals and conservatives was his view on capital and labor relations. With regard to capital and labor relations, this was another battleground more so between radicals and liberals, because both believed in the market economy and private property,  

⁴ By ideals of the French Revolution we of course mean liberty, equality, fraternity, and republicanism.
but they were divided over the role of government in the economy. In fact, Mazzini speaks at length of his bitter resentment towards liberal ideology, and in particular the liberal theory of rights. He denounces liberals for galvanizing the masses into believing liberal doctrine would lead to the material well being and comfort of all, and contests that liberty and rights can only be exercised by an affluent minority who alone have the ability to effectively utilize them. Indeed, the theory of rights offered by the liberals promised much to the people, and it cannot be denied that during this time period “sources of social wealth and the mass of material means of happiness” continued to increase, but this was not satisfactory for Mazzini, and he correctly points out that the “fresh impulse given to industry and commerce resulted, not in the well being of the many, but in the luxury of the few” (8-9). To Mazzini then, the liberal notion of liberty and rights was an illusion, no more than a bitter irony. He reproached liberals because he believed prosperity was something to be enjoyed by all, not something to be selfishly guarded and exclusive to the few. The point Mazzini stresses is that the idea of liberty for all is shipwrecked when only the few have the means of properly executing their liberty and rights, and the problem is that men of position and affluence became so preoccupied with their liberty and rights that they cared not for the rights of others, and indeed when their rights “clashed with the rights of others, the result was a state of war…relentless war in which those who possessed means inexorably crushed the weak and inexpert” (10-11). Mazzini blames the liberal theory of rights for educating men in “selfishness and the exclusive greed of material well-being,” destroying the community of faith, and generating moral anarchy. Despite his antagonism towards the liberal theory of rights though, he does not insist on the complete renunciation of those rights, but cautiously
advises that material interests should be endeavored as a means, not an end for the well-being of a nation. Education for example, depends upon a certain level of material comfort. In fact, material improvement was central to Mazzini’s nationalist view of universal suffrage. The purpose of material improvement was not so much that the “one thing necessary to man is that he should be well housed and nourished, but because you [the people] can neither acquire a true consciousness of your own dignity, nor achieve your own moral development, so long as you are engaged…in a continual struggle with poverty and want” (15). This brings up an interesting break within radical ideology, specifically speaking, difference of opinion between republicans like Mazzini, and socialists and communists like Saint Simon and Karl Marx. Mazzini was certainly critical of liberal doctrine, but he nonetheless never repudiated private property or the prospects of unprecedented economic growth fostered by modern capitalism. Indeed, it was only through private property and capitalism that the material conditions of the masses could improve, and through this general increase in material comfort the masses could better educate and improve themselves to become more virtuous citizens, informed voters, and participate in the both the politics and direction of the nation. Whereas communism represents “the annihilation or absorption of the individual in the social whole…incapable of realization except upon a trifling scale, as in the Christian Monasteries and Convents”, the republicanism of Mazzini called for a strong, active, interventionist government that protected the individual and his rights, but also acted as a balance ensuring the rights of the masses from the excessive wants and desires of the wealthy. Crucial to the success of an alleviation of antagonisms between capital and labor
though was faith, and Mazzini’s nationalist views on religion are perhaps his most intriguing.

As a radical republican, it would be generally be assumed that Mazzini was hostile to religion, but unlike the majority of liberals and radicals, religion and faith in God acted as the lynch pin for Italian unification, and national movements across the continent. To Mazzini, the principle duty of any nationalist movement was to “convince men that they were all sons of one sole God, and bound to fulfill and execute one sole law here on earth; that each man is bound to live, not for himself, but for others” (15). The “germ” of nationalities was ordained by God, and accordingly, Mazzini believed that nations should be created from geographical conditions created by God, not by man-made borders which were created by ambitious and bellicose Kings of politicians. The key to success to Mazzini’s nationalism was faith, and “the watchword of the faith of the future is [was] Association and fraternal cooperation towards a common aim” and by laboring for one’s country on the right principle, one labors for all of humanity (57). Furthermore, Mazzini stresses the need to love your country, and how a nation “is our Home [Italy], a house God has given us, placing therein a numerous family that loves us, and whom we love” (59). What makes such remarks by Mazzini so interesting though is that Mazzini was an austere adherent of secular government, and in fact vigorously argued for the dissolution of the Papal States for Italian unification. Unlike most liberals, and most other radicals, Mazzini was not hostile, (or at least not overly hostile), to religion, and actually depended on religion for the fruition of Italian unification. For a nation without religion, without God, Mazzini believed that there would be no sense of moral law, and “without morality, without a spirit of sacrifice…you [Italian or any
national movement in general] will never realize the true Great Revolution you and I alike desire – a revolution, not the offspring and illusion of irritated selfishness, but of religious conviction” (142).

In conclusion, Mazzini’s most important and compelling views on nationalism were his radical republicanism and belief in universal suffrage, his belief in reconciliation between capital and labor through an interventionist government, and his secular, but not anti-clerical views towards religion. Important to note is how intertwined all these beliefs were. Mazzini stresses faith in God, self-cultivation, self-sacrifice, association and fraternal love as a means of achieving universal suffrage and alleviating capital and labor antagonisms; by achieving universal suffrage, the masses can participate in politics and the direction of a nation, and better mediate differences between capital and labor; by better mediating differences between capital and labor, the material conditions of the masses will improve to the point where they can better educate themselves and cultivate their souls, which in turn leads to more virtuous citizens, and more informed voters and political participants. All these aspects of Mazzini’s nationalism are reinforcing, and cleverly articulated, but this goes without saying that Mazzini had his critics. Whether it be a Metternich who opposed nationalism in general, an incredulous Count Cavour when it came to the expansion of the franchise to the poor and uneducated masses, or Karl Marx arguing Mazzini’s ideas represent no more than the idea of a middle-class republic with nothing for the proletariat, all of them had their reasons for disagreement with Mazzini. Nonetheless, the patriotism of Mazzini cannot be refuted and his dedication to the cause of political and social change, as well as Italian unification are of immense importance. One need no more than look at the United States to witness the influence of
Mazzini: America has universal suffrage, a mixed economic system with minimal capital and labor antagonisms⁴, and we are a secular nation, but not hostile to religion. Thus, as a politician, Mazzini was master class; as a defender of nationalism, he was a patriot of unparalleled veracity and originality, and deservedly so he will remain as one of history’s heroes during the age of nationalism.

⁴ It must be clarified that by mixed economic system, the author intends to point out that America does not rigidly follow all the principles of laissez-faire. We have a Central Bank that controls the supply of money, labor unions are legal, the unemployed and disabled receive aid from the government, the poor have access to welfare benefits, and the elderly receive social security. By no means have antagonisms between capital and labor completely disappeared, but in historical context this antagonism has become quite docile.