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What is the place of theories of nationalism in a transnational age ?

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For most of the twentieth century, nationalism was the paradoxical reality which Marxism- particularly in its dimension as a stadial and predictive historical model- failed to address. After what might be called the ‘short’ twentieth century, the period between 1914 and 1989, drew to a close, it began to become apparent that nationalism was to become the paradoxical reality in a new historical phase, that of globalization, just as it had been in the age of Marxism. This brief paper sets out to address the persistence of nationalism, the equally persistent fashion of ignoring the implications of its longevity or denying them, and the limited success offered by theories of nationalism in offering an account of these phenomena because of a frequently occurring bias to the metropolitan, cosmopolitan and transnational in the accounts they offer.

In what might be seen as a part of the first phase of the transition from Marxism to globalization, the nationalities question was as prominent as it had been on the eve of the publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* in 1848. The nationalities problem of the Austro-Hungarian empire recrudesced in the slow collapse of Yugoslavia, which- after witnessing the emergence of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia (and Kosovo), has culminated (to date) in the restoration of Montenegrin independence in 2006. The ‘Oblast of Cetinje’ of 1922, the ‘Zeta Bannovina’ of the 1930s and the Socialist Republic run from Titograd alike dissolved, and the state that Mirko, the Grand Duke of Grahovo, would have recognized a century and a half earlier, came back into being. In 2004, the Royal Standard of King Nikola I formed the basis for the new national flag; in 2011, the

Royal Family of Montenegro were again recognized by its government. The population of this old new state is less than half that of the Glasgow travel to work area.

In the process of Montenegrin independence, as with the process of independence in other countries, it seems that previous struggles with Serbia and the Ottoman Empire ultimately counted for more than the stadial modelling of state development, whether carried out by Whig or Marxist historians or by social scientists. Places, boundaries, memories, loyalties and faith all shift more slowly than the models used to describe them either noted or predicted. The history of the Balkans, and specifically Serbia's historic role as a local 'great power' which had long been held in check by Austrian and Ottoman regional hegemony, were better guides to the end of Yugoslavia than politicians, diplomats or political analysts. In 1992, the present writer heard a mediaeval historian in Inverness state that Serbia's role in the disruption of nation formation in the Balkans would only end with the deployment of international air power over Serbian territory. In 1999, NATO took his advice, though they had never heard it. It struck me then, as it does now, that the predictive power of detailed historical knowledge in these questions far outperforms the ability of cultural or nationalist theory, or any historyless social science data, to do what it claims: to provide a coherent account of the phenomena it sets out to explain. Rather, it tells its audience what they already want to hear. Mediaeval historians tend not to endorse modernist theories of nationalism: as Susan Reynolds argued in *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe (900-1300)* in 1984 (2nd ed. 1997), the mediaeval idea of a kingdom differs little from the 'nation' of the present age.

Globalization is the second guarantor of the end of nationalism. As Ulrich Beck has argued in *The Cosmopolitan Vision* (2006) and elsewhere, and as has been observed with rather less rigour in the media, there is a trend towards intellectual analysis of the borderless activities of intellectual and technological elites, based on research often carried out from within those elites themselves. Against what he calls ‘methodological nationalism’, Beck advances (borrowing from Billig (1995)) the concept of ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ which is marked by the emergence of multiple loyalties and cultural mixing. While some of this cosmopolitanism is programmatic, much is passively absorbed as the by-product of trends in global consumerism and flows of capital, including human capital. The borrowing of Billig’s concept of ‘banal nationalism’ is instructive. As a contemporary concept which appears to imply the exact opposite of the use it is put to by Beck, it reveals that once again nationalism is the underlying paradox of globalization, the identification of ‘proximities over distances and distances within proximity’, as Beck has put it in another context (Pittock (2003), 1 ff.). This violation of the historic pattern of spatial relationships seems to be an invitation constructed by the media and now virtual reality to join a new global community. It is part of Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’ (1989). Yet since Fukuyama’s updated version of Hegel proclaimed the collapse of Marxist stadialism and the triumph of a borderless Western democracy, the following states have become independent:

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, East Timor, Eritrea, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, FYR Macedonia, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Moldova, Montenegro, Namibia, Palau, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

The end of history has been the beginning or renewal of history for 29 independent states (or more if you count state divisions). Moreover, within Canada a referendum for the independence of Quebec has been lost by the narrowest of margins (1995), while even in Beck's cosmopolitan heartland of the European Union, Belgium is a flag of convenience for Flanders and Wallonia, the Spanish Government dare not allow Catalans to vote on their future, Scotland in its mild and crabwise way begins slide out of its union with England, while many other secessionist and autonomous movements are active. If sociological cosmopolitan theory exists to explain society, what is its explanatory or predictive value? Fukuyama's implausibly optimistic thesis has fallen under the roadside bombs of Iraq and the intractability of the Afghan resistance to occupation. So much for the ineluctable triumph of borderless Western democracy: civilization is not butter, and it cannot be spread by the sword. But the globalizing thesis still remains intact. Edmund Burke may have thought the nature of things a sturdy adversary, but it is no obstacle to the creation of cultural theories, though it still is needed for scientific ones. There is-as I will argue in the rest of this paper- in truth a distaste for nationalism among many in the academic community, a distaste which expresses itself (even, as we shall see, among theorists of nationalism) in claiming that the phenomenon which surrounds them does not exist, or that it is the product of false or primitive consciousness. Those who take nationalism seriously are not infrequently accused of bias, but can there be a greater bias than is evident in offering accounts of reality which do not correspond to it, let alone begin to explain it? That is not to say that there is no cosmopolitanism and no globalization, or that these are illegitimate phenomena into which to enquire: simply that one size does not fit all. Nationalism rests on particular histories and theories on general trends: and

theorists of nationalism often find the huge amounts of discrete datasets difficult to manage. And they do not always try.

To begin with, the high-level explanatory categories which are adopted as premises are not themselves neutral descriptors. To take 'globalization', the term does not usually refer to a 'cosmopolitan' process whereby different traditions are hybridized or fused: instead it is normally a shorthand for the ubiquity of American or American related soft power in business systems, commercial penetration, media, the use of English and so forth. Although this can hybridize with local or compatible value systems, it often does so imperfectly (California is both a highly mobile society and one where racism remains a major perceived problem). Where the gap between the local system and soft Americanization is too strong for hybridization to take place, resistance can be fierce. There is numerically vestigial though highly activist resistance from the old ideological Left and from environmentalists; but the resistance from Islam, which among major religions makes strong and particular demands on lifestyle and business conduct, is much stronger. The guilt-free consumerism that 'globalization' brings in its wake is incompatible with Islam: but Islam is not quite alone. Religious believers who do more than acquiesce in the tenets of their faith, but instead defend them, are incompatible with 'globalization'. Their statements of values leads to hostility in Europe to Catholics, in the Anglican Communion to African bishops and in the West in general to Islam. Frequently, these believers are described as out of date or even 'mediaeval' in their beliefs: a sure sign that beneath the cosmopolite dress of globalization lurks the cloven hoof of stadialism, where some societies are more advanced than others, and the United States is the most advanced of all. 'Globalization's cosmopolitanism is not a free and equal hybridity, a rainbow of human value: it is the willingness to be subsumed under the sign of a relatively

narrow set of cultural practices which are strongly associated with the transnational power of major corporations and their parent culture. The strongly presentist judgements of social science not infrequently follow the pattern of that power. Since the financial crisis of 2008, we have seen increasing interest in questions such as whether democracy is positive for economic growth, and renewed interest in the German way of *Mittelstand* in company and market formation. These are quite simply likely to be responses to Asian growth, the strength of German manufacturing and American indebtedness. New interests, new received wisdoms, new paradigms are brought to the fore by new conditions. The end of history has survived a major economic downturn as badly as it has weathered Islam.

Banal cosmopolitanism then turns out, like globalization, to be a rather unstable concept, its claim to stability being reliant on the end of a history which is clearly all too renewable. There are other concepts with which it does not fit-and that may be true of Billig's 'banal nationalism' itself, because the authority of banality is undermined by the increasing banality of authority. The application of a range of approaches-not least among them classical rhetorical theory- indicates that authority is a wasting asset in Western societies. If that is the case, does the official routine reinscription of the ideology of nationality work any more, or is it too a wasting asset? Is the quotidian unity of the nation-state as unstable as the inevitable spread of globalization, internationalism and cosmopolitanism? How else can Spain and Great Britain find it so hard to present themselves as nationally unified to their minority nations? And what is the point of doing so anyway, when Catalunya effectively has embassies abroad and Scotland possesses a longstanding international identity as a nation?

Theories of nationalism often have a difficult time with all these issues. If we examine

Gellner's model in *Nationalism* for national emergence, we can note his identification of five stages, which are based on a stadialist historical model, with its roots in the French Revolutionary era. Its roots are in the Congress of Vienna; it moves through 'the first nationalist rising... that of the Greeks' to Versailles and beyond to the 'nationalist virulence' of the 1930s (Gellner (1998): 41, 45, 49).

This is a powerful model. It shares with many theories of nationalism an idea of the centrality of the French Revolutionary era. But it clearly-almost without examining it in any detail-gives rise to a number of problems. First, it is a victim of its own European historical period in supposing the nationality is ethnic: here Gellner is Herderian as befits the French Revolutionary era, but he is not American. The Thirteen Colonies came to independence in the 1780s, but they did so as a Republic based on institutions, not *Volkisch* sentiment- and the same can be said of (Quebec aside) the gradual convergence of Canada between the Confederation of 1867 and the accession of Newfoundland in 1949. Nationality of origin is not nugatory in the United States, but it hardly meets the criteria for ethno-cultural particularism. Secondly, agitations against dynastic empires do not have to be based on such sentiment (the Austrian example is clearly over-influential on Gellner, possibly due to his Czech origin), nor do dynastic polities have to be multinational: Catalonia fought Spain in the early eighteenth century on constitutional grounds, and the Stewart dynasty in Scotland was viewed by many as isomorphic with Scottish independence. The idea that there are 'minorities' to be assimilated or persecuted also-like the whole tone of a model which sets nationalism up as a challenge to the status quo, as if existing borders were not the product of previous nationalisms-reinforces a bias against the subject ostensibly being investigated. Not only is Gellner's Stage 4

‘Ethnic Cleansing’ (Gellner (1998): 44-45), but his descriptions of nationalism as a phenomenon can hardly be said to lie within the boundaries of academic discourse. Nationalism is associated with ‘anger’, ‘bitterness’, ‘enormous suffering’ and linked to the Nazis. Chapter 8 is even called ‘The murderous virulence of nationalism’ (8, 59, 102). Moreover, Gellner claims that ‘in many societies and many historical periods, nationalism is conspicuous by its absence’ and that nationalists fail ‘to cope with this fact’, a fact demonstrated only by its being asserted. Gellner claims that ‘the frequent absence of nationalist turbulence in the human past does indeed provide the nationalist with a problem’, as if ‘turbulence’ alone was the mark of nation formation (7-8). Few societies were more stable for longer than Ancient Egypt, and the sense of being Egyptian comes through strongly from ancient texts, just as the sense of being an Israelite does. The tomb of Seti I depicts four peoples of the world: Syrians, Nubians, Libyans and Egyptians in an early predecessor of the *Volkertafel* of the sixteenth century; similar depictions with different nationalities can be found in the palace of Rameses III at Medinet Habu. Gellner’s model-forgivably in the light of his personal history-is far too tinged with reading history backwards from the Nazis to the Balkan conflicts of the nineteenth century. He does allow for other developmental models, but does little to explore them. His statement that ‘backward populations...have a clear interest in secession’ shows that his view of nation formation is at root both stadialist and pejorative towards nationalism as a category (35).

In Nations and Nationalism since 1780, Eric Hobsbawm argues that nations develop top-down with the masses the last to be affected by national consciousness: nationalism is consumed by the populace, but not produced by them, and is implicitly

contrary to their interests. Hobsbawm places the rise of nations as no earlier than 1800 and their apogee even later (1870-1950, and to some degree 1918-1950): in doing so, he neatly aligns nationalism with European empires, both World Wars and the Third Reich, a very good example of how to frame memory in a manner which emphasizes the toxicity of the historical category which one is investigating ('nationalist *and* racist' is a Hobsbawmian conjunction). In arguing, for example, that *nación* does not appear in the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy until 1884, Hobsbawm chooses his examples carefully: 'Of Inghland the nacion Es Inglis man thar in commun' dates from 1300 and 'Be cause I am a natyff Scottish man' from Blin Hary's Wallace (1470), an explicitly nationalist text (Hobsbawm (1992): 2, 14, 73, 131 ff; Pittock (1999): 21).

The doctrine of modernism is important in this and similar frameworks of memory as it allows culpability to be ascribed to nationalism. It allots nationalism a historical moment (whether that is Bhabha or Gellner's French Revolution or Anderson's print revolution), instead of being a force of nature, a natural state towards which people naturally tend. In this context, statements such as 'It is better for us to die in battle than to see the misfortunes of our nation' (1 Maccabees 3:59, New Jerusalem Bible) and 'as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule' (Declaration of Arbroath 1320) have to be ignored, reinterpreted beyond what language can bear or simply attributed to an 'elite', as if the documents of the American Founding Fathers, the Girondins or Young Ireland were the product of demotic authenticity.

In his essay on 'The Origins of Nations' (1989), Anthony Smith argues that the five features of a civic nation are 'an active, assertive and politicized community', 'clearly

demarcated territory’, a ‘homeland’; economic autarchy, common laws and education in ‘national values, myths and memories’ (Smith (1989): 349-56). Here then is a nation on all these counts summed up in two lines from over 2, 400 years ago:

Ω ΞΕΙΝ ΑΓΓΕΛΛΕΙΝ ΛΑΚΕΔΑΙΜΟΝΙΟΙΣ ΟΤΙ ΤΗΔΕ ΚΕΙΜΕΘΑ ΤΟΙΣ ΚΕΙΝΩΝ
 ΠΗΜΑΣΙ ΠΕΙΘΟΜΕΝΟΙ

(O Stranger, announce to the Spartans that here we lie, obedient to their laws).

Simonides (556-468BC) (or pseudo-Simonides’) epitaph for the Spartan dead stresses belonging (as witnessed by the outsider, the stranger), the nature of the community belonged to (‘Sparta’), sacrifice for that community and the binding nature of the legal and customary obligations which made the sacrifice at Thermopylae both imperative and typical of what it is to be ‘Spartan’ (‘Laws’ is an imperfect translation, but ‘orders’ is a worse one, with its incorrect implications of a military chain of command).

Is Sparta a multi-kingdom dynastic monarchy, or is it closer to a nation state? It did of course have strong racial self-definition and also a distinct language in Laconian Doric (its descendant Tsakonian is still spoken in the Peloponnese). But the antiquity of Simonides’ sentiments are closer to much older definitions of nationalism than those fashionable today: those of the Breton Ernest Renan, for example, who argued for the importance of the legacy of memory and shared sacrifices (popularly held, not imposed by an elite) to the definition of nationality as a ‘solidarity’ which transcends (though it may engage) issues of race, religion and language.

In concluding this essay, I would wish to emphasize three things. The first is that ethno-linguistic particularism is-although important to many kinds of nationalism-clearly inadequate as a basis for a fully-fledged theoretical account of the phenomenon, and that more traditional or nuanced accounts such as those of Renan, Smith or historians of mediaeval law or communities have more comprehensive validity. Secondly, nationality is by its nature particular, even if not particularist or essentialist in ethno-cultural terms: hence attempts to overlook individual histories in constructing general theory are at risk of a carelessness with regard to relevant details. It is not good enough to simply invoke 'nationalism' as a general category then claim that it is not a near-universally observable phenomenon without alluding to a vast multiplicity of examples, but such empty assertions have been regarded as acceptable from the most highly respected scholars in the area. Time and again in predicting the course of modern nationalism, regional history has proved a better guide than global theory. Thirdly, theorists of nationalism are often guilty of a kind of metanationalism, conceiving themselves as being independent of nationality. Yet we all belong somewhere, or long to: such is the human condition. In claiming to stand apart from nationality while often reflecting adversely on current threats to state integrity, many theorists surreptitiously endorse the status quo. Their nation is not a nation: it is normality; your nation, my nation on the other hand, may just be an irridentist region in the grip of a delusive post French Revolutionary fervour cynically manipulated by its elites. Thus do elites perpetuate themselves by deprecating the existence of 'elites' as a category in the objectified world of enquiry to which they pretend. Nationalism is for many of its theorists not a neutral category, but the 'other'; as for the validity of the borderless cosmopolitan realm, the tensions in Europe in 2012 within and between

nations tell their own story. Whatever the theorists say, the nature of things remains a sturdy adversary.

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