Philosophy and Nationalism [1992][1]

Nationalisms represent an important class of modern ideologies or of modern mythologisms. I am using the word „mythologism" to make it possible to discern two different ways in which relations between mythos and logos could arise and establish themselves. Mythologies arose on the basis of myths which started to strengthen their position and capacities within a changing world of myth. We may speak about myth as an originally integrated space or realm of a meaningful world where conscious life was possible. After a considerable time, none of the various myths was able to safeguard the necessary minimal unity or integrity of this mythical world, so that step by step more and more elements or components of human life and especially of the world of things, became in a way conscious but insufficiently integrated into the world of myth. In this way people's thinking, their lives and their world were split in two. The unbearable schizophrenia this situation developed had to be overcome in an acceptable way. Such a way was to give both the realm of myth as well as the emancipated or simply different realm of profane activities, events and things a new common basis, i.e. logos or more precisely the so called conceptual way of thinking. This was possible only through an ever further reaching „logicization", even of mythical meanings and structures. Myths made more and more logical became mythologies and, through further interventions of rationality, became philosophy and science. Certain relics of mythical ways of thinking and even of some mythical or even magical relations or structures were preserved and may be discovered in modern societies and even in their intellectual life today.

But we should observe as a quite different thing any remythologization or even remythization of already logicized phenomena. As a consequence of the long-term development of the European culture and mind, especially because of the process of secularization on the one hand, and because of the failure of the traditional metaphysics on the other, a new phenomenon arose, namely „the European nihilism" (as Nietzsche called it). The otherwise completely correct view that the so called „highest values" are „no things" has been understood in a wrong way, that they are, so to say, „nothing". And then, the most influential shock has come when — as a regrettable consequence of industrialization — masses of people, especially, but not only, those from the country, have become in many ways deracinated (déraciné) and have lost not only their environment, but even their actual identity. Only a small part of them could be brought back again to religion; the vast majority was already resistent to any religious apology for the state of their world. On the other hand, they became very sensible towards new ways of possible identification with other sorts of social communities. In this way, they were prepared for indoctrination through various new concepts, projects and ideologies; for instance, by socialist movements and trade unions, through high ideas of a new patriotism or, last but not least, through identifying themselves with their „nation", of course felt and understood

in a new way, opened up by some philosophers (like Herder and others) who reinterpreted this relatively ancient word. So we have to throw more light on this fundamental change in which new phenomena arose which I call mythologisms (or better logomythisms).

In history, we can discern three main concepts of a „nation". Apart from the very beginning in ancient times where nation simply meant „native people", we can distinguish two essentially different meanings of the word „nation". According to the first, originally „western „ meaning, the nation is a mass of people governed by a governor or a government and integrated into one state, of course mostly by use of power and violence. Already, in the relatively old period of the Roman Empire, it was possible for an Egyptian, a German, or a Jew, etc., to be born in a Roman-Egyptian, a Roman-Germanic or a Roman-Jewish family and so to be Roman by birth (as, e.g., was the apostle Paul), or to be rich enough to become a Roman citizen by purchasing this privilege, of course at great expense, for oneself and for one's family members. In this way it was possible for a Greek, a Jew or a German to be or to become a Roman. We can see a partly similar situation in the United States of our times. Not only immigrant Englishmen, but also German, Irish, Italian, Russian, Chinese people etc., can gain and have the same nationality, namely American. To be an American represented and even actually represents much more than to be an inhabitant or even a citizen of the state of Virginia or Louisiana, or more than being of a German, Irish or English etc., origin. In this sense we meet what we can call a political conception of a nation and of nationality, as well as the phenomenon of a so called political nation.

You will most probably know Friedrich Schiller's play Wilhelm Tell where the birth of the Swiss nation is presented in a dramatic form. There we hear at a certain moment the declaration: „We wish to be one single people (or nation) of brothers" (Wir wollen sein ein einig Volk von Brüdern"). Of course, the Swiss nation is a special case, because it arose consciously as an „Eidgenossenschaft", based on an idea, on a common project accepted by free individuals and small groups of people of different languages and different origin. Most of the big western national states were founded from above and by the use of power and violence, even if they were also inspired by the same idea of a unity of tribally different people. Herder especially, who is largely co-responsible for the spread of the tribal or also organic idea of nation (sometimes also called a „cultural" one), criticized the western type of national states because of their unnatural origin and because of their being founded on violence.

On the other hand, there is another way of conceiving nation, namely a nationalist one. We are only able to speak precisely about nationalism from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, even if its roots are much older and its period of incubation much longer. A certain difficulty arises out of the fact that there are profoundly different forms of nationalism and even more ways in which they are interpreted and evaluated in various contexts and from differing points of view. We can simplify our problem by limiting ourselves to only some of its aspects and by at least partly excluding some others which we are not interested in. So we shall not discuss, e.g., the details of the rise and history of the modern idea of a nation, nor various trends and effects of nationalist movements in politics, even if it could be very interesting to ask, e.g., why sometimes and under certain conditions nationalism is narrowly connected with liberation movements and a liberal political orientation, whereas in other cases it reveals extremely conservative and even reactionary qualities. It can be left- as well as right-oriented, it can be expressly democratic, but also antidemocratic. It can mean will to more freedom, but it can also suppress minorities as well as

struggle against „the others" and especially against foreigners as against enemies. So it could seem to be possible to understand a nation as a naturally given superorganism, or also as a collective personality (Johannet, „personnalité collective"), the behaviour of which depends on different occasions, on necessities, on historical development, on traditions and traditional forms of acting and reacting, as well as on feelings and reflected feelings of the so called national identity. But it could also be possible to understand it in a Hegelian way as a spiritual principle or as a manifestation of the „objective spirit", as he calls it, „objektiver Geist" (but we find it also in Renan, Treitschke and others). Though there are such profound differences which were produced by different ways of social and political development under different conditions, the original basis of the nationalist ideologies is a certain quasi- or pseudo-naturalist approach to nation. „Natio" originally means „birth", so nationality is something already given to every man at the moment of his being born. In this sense, everybody obtains his own nationality by birth, phusei. Nobody among the scientists accepts this hypothesis, or better, this ideological construction, but it still lives on — illegitimately — in modern societies.

Social psychology can make us understand how individual men and families tend to form smaller or bigger groups, tribes and societies of tribes, not only because of material and social needs rationally conceived but almost instinctively, and that means : with a necessary reverse side of cautiousness, suspicion or even hate in regard to „the others". But it does not make clear why such very large groups as nations should represent an integrated whole of all smaller groups and not only a mutually interacting aggregation of them. There is no real continuity between family, small groups of families, tribe and coexisting and collaborating groups of tribes on one side, and a so called „nation", not based on political grounds, on the other. Such a „nation" is only supposed and „felt", it is nothing really or even naturally given, but primarily a hypostatical, mythologistical or ideological construction. No nation in this nationalistic sense grew up naturally, phusei, no nation is founded on primary feelings; all feelings of the so called national identity are only emotive reactions to such ideological constructions, impressed upon the real variety within a society. They are what we can call „abstract feelings". We could actually adopt the meaning of Huxley and Haddon (1940) that a nation is a „society united by a common error as to its origins and a common aversion to its neighbours", but at the same time they represent a powerful force influencing the present, and probably, at least for a considerable length of time, even the future history of the world.

This is a really astonishing fact. It was necessary to develop some ideas, some new conceptions, to make possible a general acceptance of them by masses of people who lost their roots and their identity. And such deracinated people changed or helped to change those ideas into an ideology powerful enough to found real nations in quite a new sense, nations which never existed before but which began to become real and existent. The reality of modern nations is an important proof of the potentially immense influence of ideas, right or wrong. Nationalism became something like a surrogate or substitute for religion, an „Ersatzreligion". Even if we know very well and acknowledge such an historical origin of nations, and even if we are most sceptical about thoughts on „national character", nations and national feelings are something real, they are a matter of fact.

Maybe nations are based on errors and abstract sentiments; maybe their history is to a very high degree falsely remembered and interpreted sometimes founded on mistakes, sometimes on prejudices or even frauds. But they exist. We have only to think over the possibility of improving their state, not to neglect them or

simply to deny their right to exist. And we have even to do something more than that: we have to understand why people identify themselves with their nation, and then to offer them another, acceptable way to react in their situation. There remains only one profound question: is it really possible to improve not only the given conditions, but the nation itself? Is a nation something which could or even should be improved? Do some criteria actually exist according to which we could evaluate the way a nation is going ? Are such criteria something special for every individual nation, or are they something which all nations should share and respect in common? Some authors doubt whether the idea of a nation and a nationality is able to be understood and interpreted as a positive ingredient within the future development of any civic society and of mankind as a whole. Too many of the catastrophes of the last century were narrowly connected with national and nationalistic quarrels and antagonisms. Today, we see terrible events, e.g., in Yugoslavia or in some parts of the former Soviet empire. Does there exist any possibility of improving the role of nations and nationalisms in our future world ?

It will obviously depend on our evaluation of the ideological or mythologistical origin and „nature" of newly established modern nations and modern nationalisms. But how should we understand ideologies? Is it that ideological thought and speech are indirectly adequate to certain group interests, but are not quite accurate in what they directly think and speak of, or, on the contrary, is it that they are apparently quite accurate in what they openly express, but profoundly false and dangerous in their indirect, not openly expressed intentions and connotations? We have to discern two kinds of conscious intentions, namely those oriented to things, to objectlike realities, and then the much older ones oriented to situations, activities and events. The latter represent today a remnant of old myths, i.e., of old mythical thinking and behaving. After the famous invention of concepts and conceptual thinking, and after their development by the ancient Greek philosophers, myth remained unable to react with its own means to conceptual arguments. The only possibility that remained was a certain acceptance of logos, as we have seen already, but originally under a predominance of the mythos. So in Hellenism, we find many mythologies and even philosophical myths using notions and concepts, but not using them correctly. It seems to be very probable that philosophical thinking may already have ceased to exist in this period. These new myths represented a deep danger not only to philosophy and philosophers, but also for Christians, who first regarded every philosophy with suspicion, but who acknowledged very soon that the only efficient method of resistance is to adopt the best possible philosophy to shield oneself from philosophical myths, especially from gnosis. Plato was, as it were, „baptized" and became the first Christian philosopher, though ante Christum natum. Later the same was done with Aristotle. So, philosophy was saved for the following times. And it was this survival of philosophy which made possible the rise of ideologies after the rise of so called modernity. Of course, even ideologies have their older roots. Christian heretical movements often developed modes of thinking which were very similar to modern ideologies. There are reasons, however, for only speaking about ideologies after the break down of the old feudal societies and the decline of the strong control of the church over people's modes of thought and expression.

Thus, ideological thinking is based on „false consciousness", but in a sense slightly different from that of Marx or Feuerbach. An ideology is — or better: must be — adequate to some mass interests, but need not be adequate to subjects it directly and simply refers to. We can therefore legitimately criticize such a form of thinking, but without any real influence on its relevance for its believers. The

real importance of an ideology does not consist in its being theoretically correct, but in fulfilling its ideological role. Any critical theory is able to disclose various faults and errors in an ideology, but only in theory, as it remains unable to convince the ideologically thinking masses. Their reasons for accepting such an ideology are completely different from the theoretical ones. For an ideology, the objectifying intentions are of no prior interest, whereas theories and theoretical thinking are not concerned with any non-object-oriented intentions. From the ideological point of view, any theory is of second rate interest only, because it has nothing to do with real situations and real social and political events, but with mere logical constructions. Ideologies respond — like old myths — to basic needs of men. If they do not, they simply collapse and disappear. Human needs are never purely subjective; they are real. Ideologies do not respond to these needs by speaking about them, but by speaking about quite different things, often in an inaccurate way, or even in a way completely wrong from a theoretical viewpoint.

If we accept these two conceptions, namely of a nationalist idea of nation and of modern ideologies, we shall understand two very important things. First, nationalist ideologies need not be true to have influence, and they cannot be deprived of their influence by being criticized from the scientific or theoretical point of view. Second, even if „nations" in the nationalist sense are mere ideological constructs or hypostases, the fact that masses of people do identify themselves with their nation makes these originally hypostatic nations into social and historical realities. Here we may ask : why do people identify themselves with such hypostatical constructs ? Again, we can repeat that it is a relic of ancient times, based on the mythical orientation of archaic men to so called archetypes. But this is only a theoretical, a conceptual comment. The problem is that the mass of people is not, or is not yet, interested in theoretical thinking. It is necessary to find a socially and politically efficacious approach to them as well as a passable and viable way for them how to overcome the national ideologies they share. Obviously, this cannot be done by denying the importance or even the reality of nations but rather by offering an even more appealing though at the same time, even theoretically more acceptable approach to them. I have no definite solution, of course. But I can mention two points based on two examples, one known from the history of the prophetical tradition of ancient Israel, the second from the last two centuries of Czech history.

The most important contribution of ancient Israel was, in my view, the invention of the so called anti-archetypes. Mythical archetypes are to be imitated, and more : one should identify oneself with them. But if you want to identify yourself with an anti-archetype, you find it impossible, because you are referred back to yourself. If you want to imitate Abraham (actually Abram) and leave „your country and your kindred and your father's house" and go to an unknown country, then you cannot do precisely the same, because Canaan was unknown to Abraham, but not to you. If you want to do the same, you have to go to a new country which is unknown to you. If we should apply this invention to our problem we have to be oriented not backwards, to a nation already given, but forwards, to a nation in becoming, not to a nation which is, but to a nation which should be and how it should be. Our loyalty should be aimed towards the unborn future, not to the given past, and especially not to any falsely assumed past.

The second example shows a more concrete solution of this problem in a situation of the Czech political scene in the last two decades of the 19th century. The Czech „nation" nearly ceased to exist, the Czech language was nearly forgotten, only country people spoke in a very reduced, very primitive Czech. Since the end of the 18th century, a national renaissance was begun by intellectuals like Dobrovský, who published the first modern Czech grammar — in

German, of course —, or like Jungmann, who published the first modern dictionary where Czech terms were interpreted in German. Towards the end of the 19th century, some people started posing questions as to whether the preservation of a separate Czech nation with a special Czech language was worth fighting for. In 1886, one author, signing „H. G.", published an article in the fortnightly periodical Čas in which he asked : would it not be culturally better to join an advanced, powerful and civilized nation instead ? Masaryk, who was one of the chief inspirators and contributors of that journal, was suspected of the authorship of this article, and he and his collaborators were viewed as „national nihilists". Actually, the author of the article, entitled „Our Two Questions", was H.G. Schauer. Masaryk was far more of a realist. He accepted the new situation where more and more people were able not only to speak but even to write and read in Czech and where a new nationalist ideology of the Czech nation had arisen according to the romantic ideas of the German philosopher Herder, but he never accepted nationalism as such. For him, the question is whether or not the political, cultural and spiritual life of the nation is well oriented. It is so, according to him, only if it is good enough to be seen as appropriate to every other nation in the world. He formulated a slogan : the Czech question is a world question; i.e. it must have an importance and value for the whole world — or it is no question at all.

If we take no account of ideological constructs and take earnestly only real things, then we have to acknowledge not only very different traditions within the one nation, but also the fact of a language shared in common. During the first weeks after the political change in our country, striking students invited various people to speak with them in their schools and faculties. On one such occasion I was surprised to be asked what I thought about the meaningfulness of our national existence. I did not want to support any form of nationalism, and so I replied by an understatement : the meaning of the existence of a Czech nation consists in making the Czech language able to go on living and so to enable at least some philosophers to think in Czech and out of Czech. (I spoke to students of philosophy.) There are differences between languages that are very advantageous for philosophical thinking, and languages that have a neutral or even negative impact on its mode and quality. So I am decidedly against any nationalist conception of nations, but at the same time I am convinced that different languages should be cared for, protected, cultivated or at least conserved, even in the future when there will probably exist an intermixture of all possible peoples, „nations" and races. I should prefer to understand „nation" in the political way, but it will probably take time to reach this goal. So it remains only to underline the plurality of cultural and spiritual traditions within every single nation. Nowhere does only one single national tradition exist. Languages are, in my view, of first rate importance for mankind. All other differences are historically grounded as well, or otherwise are purely in dividual or contingent, and have nothing to do with any „natural qualities of a mass of people.

I am unable to accept the idea of national states (i.e. nationalistic states) in any form. We have only two possibilities: 1. to interpret nation in the original Western meaning, and so to conceive it as a state which gives the same possibilities to all its members, i.e. citizens; or 2. to let it dissolve into various cultural and spiritual, religious and philosophical, etc., traditions, united only by a common language. Nations as ideological constructs seem to have no longer a future in the next millennium. Not because ideologies will die out, but because the level of all sorts of thinking will be — must be! — higher. Ideologies have to be unmasked, but this is only possible among people who are able to be critical and able to avoid being uncritical in spite of their special interests.

It may seem to be more a European than a global vision, I am afraid. But we should remember, at least, two important points. First, nationalism is originally a European invention, based on ideas of certain European philosophers. So it is a duty, a moral and spiritual obligation of European philosophers of today and tomorrow, not only to unmask the repellent and dangerous face of any nationalism, but to make it possible to reinterpret the conception of a nation in a way acceptable for men, such that they can be loyal to their broader European nation rather than to any „nation" conceived in a nationalistic way. And secondly, European philosophers of today should realize the considerable spiritual and cultural power of ideas and conceptions, be they right or wrong, and so should accept their share of responsibility in the face of the coming future. It would be right and profitable, I am convinced, if we could accept an idea of a new vocation of Europe and Europeans not only in front of their own future, but in front of the future of all men living on this planet now and in the coming centuries. Just as Masaryk was convinced that the „Czech question" is to be understood as a world question, so too the European idea (perhaps without this name) should be comprehensible, plausible and even acceptable and sympathetic to any inhabitant of our planet, a planet that every day grows smaller.

There is possibly nothing more dangerous for our world than a European nationalism. But if we do not want any European nationalism, we must not compromise ourselves with any form of intra-European, i.e., even more particular nationalism, of our bigger or smaller „nations" understood in a nationalistic way. We need deep understanding for a plurality of cultural and spiritual traditions, but such traditions have to be accepted on the basis of moral, conceptual and spiritual decisions and never on the basis of birth. Nationalism provokes in any true philosopher a will to rethink and reinterpret this powerful but dangerous idea in a critical, reasonable way, and so to respond to one of the most important challenges and tasks of our times.

SUMMARY

Unlike the rational political conception of a nation state, the nationalistic view is not so much an idea as it is an ideological construct, based on a certain pseudo-naturalistic approach to community life. In order to explain the success of nationalistic „mythologisms", one has to understand them as surrogates or substitutes for an integrated religious or mythical world view for the great mass of people who have lost their identity and their roots. The real importance of such an ideology does not consist in its being theoretically correct, but in its producing an abstract, often mistaken feeling of a so called national character. Nationalist ideologies, however, need not be true to have influence, and the fact that masses of people do identify themselves with their nations, easily turns their hypostatical constructs into social and historical realities. There is accordingly a social and political urgency for finding efficacious ways in order to overcome the danger of national ideologies. This will not succeed by denying their importance or reality, but only by understanding the rationale for diverging spiritual traditions meeting each other and by accepting their plurality on the basis of moral and conceptual decisions.