

Nations without ideologies?

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Nations without ideologies?¹ [1992]

I don't share the conviction, we live in a time in which ideologies definitely die. So I shall slightly change the theme of my contribution: would nations exist even without any ideology, and how will they? To be able to solve this problem, we have first to make just a little clearer what we mean by „nation“ on one side and by „ideology“ on the other.

Apart from the very beginning where nation meant simply „native people“, there are two basically different meanings of the word „nation“. In the first one, originally the „western“ one, the nation is a mass of people governed by a governor or a government and integrated into one state. In old times of the Roman Empire, it was possible to be born in a Roman family and so to be Roman by birth (like apostle Paulus, e.g.), or to be rich enough and to become a Roman citizen by purchasing this privilege for oneself and for one's family members. So it was possible for a Greek, Jew or a German to be a Roman. We can see a similar situation in the United States of our times. Not only immigrated Englishmen, but also German, Irish, Italian people etc. can gain and have the same nationality, namely American. To be an American represents much more than to be an inhabitant or even a citizen of the state Virginia or Louisiana, or than to be of a German, Irish or English origin. In this sense we meet what we can call a political conception of a nation as well as a phenomenon of a political nation.

You probably know Friedrich Schiller's play *Wilhelm Tell* where the birth of the Swiss nation is presented in a dramatic form. There we hear in a moment a 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 under use of power, even if they were also inspired by the same idea of a unity of tribally different people. Herder, who is corresponsable for the spread of the tribal or also organic idea of nation (sometimes called a „cultural“ one), criticised 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. About nationalism, we can speak since the second half of the eighteenth century only, 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 how 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 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 super-organism, 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 was also possible to understand it in a Hegelian way as a spiritual principle or, as he calls it, „objektiven Geist“ (we find it in Renan, Treitschke and others more). 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 naturalist approach to nation. „Natio“ originally means „birth“, so nationality is something given to every man in the moment of his being born, already. In this sense, everybody obtains his own nationality by birth, FYSEI. Nobody among the scientists accepts this hypothesis or better ideological construction, but it is still living – illegitimately – as a „common sense“ 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

¹ Lecture delivered at a symposium on nationalisms in Barcelona, 26.–27. November 1991.

conceived but nearly instinctively, and it means: with a necessary backside of a cautiousness, suspicion or even hate in regard to „the others“. But it doesn't make clear, why any of such very large groups like 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 group 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, mythical or ideological construction. No nation grew up naturally (FYSEI), no nation is founded on primary feelings, all feelings of the so called national identity are only emotive reactions to such ideological constructions, pressed on 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 we know very well that nations and nationalities really exist and that they represent a powerful force influencing the present, and probably at least for a more or less longer time even the future history of the world.

Even if we know very well and accept the historical origin of nations and even if we are most sceptical about thoughts on „national characters“, nations and national feelings are something real, they are matter of fact. May be, nations are based on errors and abstract sentiments; may be, 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 existence. And we have to do even something more than that: we have to understand why people identify themselves with their nation, and then to offer them another, an 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 actually exist some criteria according which we could be able to evaluate the way a nation is going on? Are such criteria something special for every individual nation, or are they something which all nations should share and respect in common? Some authors are doubting if the idea of nation and nationality is able to be understood and interpreted as a positive ingredient within the next development of any civic society and of the mankind as a whole. Too many of the catastrophes of the last century were narrowly connected with national and nationalistic quarrels and antagonisms. Does there exist any possibility of improving the role of nations and nationalisms in the coming future of our world?

And now, how do I understand ideologies? Ideological thinking and speaking is adequate to certain interests, but it is not quite right in what it directly is thinking and speaking of. We have to discern two kinds of conscious intentions, namely those ones oriented to things, to object-like realities, and then the much older ones oriented to situations, activities and

events. The latter ones represent today a remnant of old myths, i.e. of old mythical thinking and behaviour. After the invention of concepts and of conceptual thinking and after their being developed through old Greek philosophers, the myth remained unable to react with its own means to conceptual arguments. The only possibility has been found in a certain acceptance of LOGOS, but 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 me very probable that the philosophical thinking could stop to exist in these times, already. But these new myths represented a deep danger not only to philosophy and philosophers, but also for Christians, who first regarded with suspicion every philosophy, but who acknowledged very soon that the only method of resistance efficient enough is to adopt the best possible philosophy to shield oneself from philosophical myths, especially from gnosis. Plato was something like „baptized“ and became the first Christian philosopher, though ante Christo. Later the same has been done with Aristotle. So, philosophy was saved for the following times. And it was this overliving of philosophy which made possible the rise of ideologies after the start of the so called modernity. Even ideologies have their older roots, of course. Christian heretical movements often developed modes of thinking which were very similar to modern ideologies. But there are some reasons why to speak about ideologies after the break down of old feudal societies only, as well as after the decline of the strong church control of the ways of men's thinking and expressing their thoughts.

So, ideological thinking is based on the „false conscience“, but in a sense slightly different from the Marx' or Feuerbach's one. An ideology is – or better: must be – adequate to some mass interests, but needn't be adequate to subjects it directly and simply refers to. It could be legitimately criticised, therefore, without

any 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, whereas it is unable to convince the ideologically thinking masses. Their reasons why they accepted 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 don't care of 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 don't do it, they simply fall and disappear. And human needs are never purely subjective; they are real. But ideologies don't respond to them by speaking of them, but by speaking of quite different things, and often by speaking not correctly enough of them, or even by being completely wrong from the point of a theoretical view.

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 criticised from the scientific point of view. And, 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 nations makes these originally hypostatic nations to 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 mythical orientation of archaic men to the so called archaetypes. But it is only a theoretical, a conceptual comment. The problem is that the masses of people are not or 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 national ideologies they share. Obviously, it is not possible to do so by denying the importance or even the reality of nations but by offering an even more appealing but, at the same time, 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 prophetic tradition of ancient Israel, the second one from the Czech history of the last two centuries.

The most important contribution of the old Israel was the invention of the so called anti-archaetypes. Mythical archaetypes were to be imitated, and more: one should identify oneself with them. But if you want to identify yourself with an anti-archaetype, 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 onwards, 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 to the coming future, not to the given 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 XIX. century. The Czech „nation“ nearly stopped existing, the Czech language was nearly forgotten, only country people spoke in a very reduced, very primitive Czech. Since the end of the XVIII. century, a national renaissance has been started by intellectuals like Dobrovský who published the first new Czech grammar – in German, of course -, or like Jungmann who published the first new dictionary where Czech terms were interpreted in German. Towards the end of the following XIX. century, some people started posing questions of whether the preservation of a separate Czech nation with a special Czech language was worth fighting for. One author, signed „H.G.“, published in the fortnightly periodical „Čas“ in 1886 an article where he asked: would it not be better culturally 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 authorship of the mentioned article, and he and his collaborators were observed as „national nihilists“. Actually, the author of the article entitled „Our two questions“ was H. G. Schauer. Masaryk himself was far more 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 arose according the romantic ideas of the German philosopher Herder, but he never accepted nationalism as such. For him, the question is if the political, cultural and spiritual life of the nation is well oriented, if it is good enough to be observed 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 don't count any ideological constructs and take earnestly only real things, then we have to acknowledge not only very different traditions within one single nation but also the fact of the commonly shared language. During the first weeks after the political change in our country, striking students invited various people for speaking with them in their schools and faculties. At one occasion like that I was surprised being asked what I am thinking over the meaningfulness of our national existence. I didn't want to support any form of nationalism, and so I replied by an understatement: the meaning of 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 who are very advantageous for philosophical thinking, and languages who have neutral or even negative impact on its way 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 existence of probably an intermixture of all possible peoples, „nations“ and races. I should prefer to understand „nation“ in the political way, but it probably will take time to reach this goal. So it remains only to underline the plurality of cultural and spiritual traditions within every single nation. Nowhere only one single national tradition exists. Languages are of first rate importance for the mankind, in my view. All other differences remain on historical grounds and have nothing to do with any „natural“ qualities of masses of people, or they are purely individual.

I do not accept the idea of national states (i.e. nationalistic states) in any form. We have only two possibilities: 1) to interpret nation in the originally western sense, 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 in various cultural and spiritual, religious and philosophical etc. traditions united by a common language, only. Nations as ideological constructs seem to have no longer future in the next millenium. But not because ideologies will die but because the level of all sorts of thinking will be – must be ! – higher. Ideologies have to be unmasked, but it is possible among people only who are able to be critical and who are not interested not to be critical in special directions.

It is more a European than a global vision, I am afraid. But I shouldn't like to offer proposals to Eskimos what to do in tropical weather, being a central European. Thank you for your interest as well as patience.