

GEORGE SCHÖPFLIN

## Nationhood, Modernity, Democracy\*

The modern nation is the central and most effective guarantor of democracy. For many, this proposition is challenging, provocative and perhaps even offensive. The world is full of idealists who believe in the superiority of universal norms that all should accept. My position is that this is utopian, possibly the road to dystopia, because all ideas, all ideals, utopias, ways of seeing or improving the world are culturally coded and, therefore, represent a particular and particularist perspective. And to impose my particularist perspective on another is the high road to despotism.

One of my underlying assumptions is that all cultures are communities of moral value – they create moral values and demand recognition as communities of value creation and worth.<sup>1</sup> And if we accept this proposition, then it follows that we place a value on diversity, however much we may dislike certain practices that other communities of moral worth pursue. This position, however, is directly challenged by globalisation and human rights normativity, for instance, and the world that we live in can be interpreted along this polarity.

Centrally, there is constant tension between universalistic and particularistic discourses. It would be sad indeed if either were to triumph over the other. Both are needed. Universalism threatens to become oppressive unless challenged by ideas external to it and the same applies to

---

\* Paper presented at the conference: “Manifestations of National Identity in Modern Europe” University of Minnesota, May 2001.

<sup>1</sup> Wuthnow, Robert: *Meaning and Moral Order: Explorations in Cultural Analysis*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987.

particularism. But since the Enlightenment, we in the West have tended to privilege universalism and universalistic discourses and have tended unconsciously to assume that what we think is what all right-minded people think. Not so. The world is infinitely diverse and various.

Our views of the world, however much they may assume the guise of representing the most enlightened approach, is nevertheless bounded. None of us is culturally innocent. If this is so, then the role of culture and cultural diversity must be accepted as having a positive role in sustaining values that are meaningful. Indeed, if there is one thing is universal, it is diversity itself.

In the argument that follows, I want to take a very close look at the relationship between political power and cultural community. This is the pivot of my argument, that this relationship is real, that political power rests on bounded cultures and that the very real attainments of democracy are determined, in significant part, by the cultural foundations of political power.

My starting point is the coming of modernity. Modernity is a much contested concept and has dimensions in politics, the economy, society and culture in the widest sense, not to mention psychology and other areas. In the context of nationhood, however, the central determinant is the transformation of the nature of power. To cut a long story short, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century the early modern state underwent a significant shift in its contours and capacities. It radically enhanced its power over the inhabitants of the territories it controlled and began a process of territorial consolidation to secure this new-found power.<sup>2</sup> This shift took place for a number of interlocking reasons, mostly to do with the introduction of new technologies of information storage, military potential and methods of organisation. The information revolution of the 16<sup>th</sup> century was, of course, the invention of printing in the previous century, the application of this technology to the recording capacity of the state, the possibility of larger bureaucracies and the corresponding emergence of increased numbers of people who were literate. The outcome was what we have come to know as the absolutist state.

These practices were paralleled by the rapid growth of the scientific sphere – scientific in the widest sense of knowledge – which was to find

---

<sup>2</sup> Breuilly, John: *The State and Nationalism*. In Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson (eds.): *Understanding Nationalism*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. 32–52.

full form in the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. By the mid-1700s, Europe was the home to a rising number of people with the literacy, the knowledge and the aspirations to constitute what today we would call an intellectual elite.<sup>3</sup> This was the Republic of Letters. Simultaneously, new trading and production patterns, equally reliant on literacy, were resulting in a growing accumulation of wealth in private hands. This posed a problem for the state. Taxing the newly moneyed entrepreneurial classes would appear to offer new opportunities for extending the power of the state, but it was already understood that taxation without a corresponding quid pro quo was ineffective, because people did not like to be taxed without their control. In England, this issue had already come to the fore during the 1640s and was a key aspect of the civil war. Similarly, as the state intensified its coercive capacity, it discovered that people did not care to be coerced without their consent.

The question then arose – how, to what extent and in what way would the state redistribute power in order to attain the consent of the governed. It is in this moment that we can see the origins of citizenship and democracy. Without consent, there can be no democracy, of course. In the Thirteen Colonies, this proposition generated the slogan of “no taxation without representation”. Note that this was an extraordinarily radical idea, one that ran directly counter to the accepted order of access to political power as the exclusive privilege of birth, ie. the aristocracy.

The first beneficiaries of the new concept of governance found that the combination of these forces – rule by a degree of consent, economic power in the private sphere, intellectual exchange – allowed them access to disproportionate power. This was Britain and the Netherlands, to some extent France before the revolution and Switzerland. But the picture also had its dark side. Rule by consent immediately raised the problem of dissent. What would happen if a significant group of people chose not to consent, to demand access to power of their own? Should they be able to establish a new state? In pre-modernity, when state power was looser, this was not a serious issue. States could arise and disappear – this was the fate of Burgundy, for example. But once power, people and territory came together as the central resource, no holder of power would willingly countenance its disruption.

---

<sup>3</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt: *Legislators and Interpreters*. Cambridge: Polity, 1987.

To cement these newly modernising states, therefore, something else was needed. Ideal-typically, to answer the problem of dissent, a shared culture had to be constructed which was sufficiently cohesive to preempt dissent and disruption. With modernity, no state would willingly countenance the loss of power and prestige that secession represented. The early modern state attained this by a combination of ethnic cleansing, oppression and assimilation of culturally deviant groups. France eliminated the Protestant Huguenots with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. England marginalised English and Irish Catholics; in the Netherlands, again, Catholics were held down. And the United States began its international career by ethnically cleansing about a third of its population, the Loyalists who remained committed to the British crown. This also points towards something else – the growing role of secularisation by the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Thus the modern state, in order to attain the degree of cultural homogeneity that would permit political heterogeneity, had to condense sufficient cultural power to make this act relatively risk-free. Sections of the population regarded as posing a potential risk had to be made to conform to a state-driven and elite-driven model of cultural and moral normativity. The state, therefore, took over some of the normative goal-setting that religion had performed until then and assumed the role of being the primary agent of coherence creation.<sup>4</sup> In exchange, citizenship offered access to political power and the wider world of literacy, education and choice.

The question then arises, could this newly devised state-driven set of norms be purely or overwhelmingly civic, requiring no solidarity of the type that we would define today as ethnic? Initially, the situation was unclear and the early narratives were certainly civic. The French revolution invented the “citoyen” and all the inhabitants of the territory of France were potentially members of the civic French nation, though there was always a preference for the language of the Ile de France, just as in England the language of London was preferred over, say, Scots. Could one be a citizen of France while speaking Breton? No. Similarly

---

<sup>4</sup> On the significance of coherence creation, see Eliade, Mircea: *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*. London: Penguin, 1954. and Pléh, Csaba: A narrativumok mint a pszichológiai koherenciateremtés eszközei. [Narratives as instruments for creating psychological coherence] *Holmi*, Vol. 8, Nr. 2 (February 1996) 265–282.

in Britain, the idea that one could speak Welsh in the public sphere and assume full civic rights in that language would have been dismissed as laughable until the 1960s. From the outset, therefore, non-civic elements were brought into nationhood and citizenship was conjoined with language, thereby necessarily importing the non-philological qualities of language into citizenship.<sup>5</sup> It is naive, dangerously naive, to suppose that a language can be neutral in this respect. However, this did not and does not mean that a state must be monolingual, but life is much easier if the civic world actually is monolingual.

From this perspective, the idea of the civic contract as being the determinant of the nature of the modern state was always a legend, a self-serving narrative. Citizenship is a cold concept. Legal regulation, administrative procedures, rights and entitlements do not build solidarity and trust. Citizenship needs a cultural foundation and cultures have qualities of their own that cut across the ostensible goals of full and equal citizenship for all the residents of a state territory.<sup>6</sup>

The problem with basing civic rights exclusively on residence, taxation and obeying the law, as universalists like to do, is that it ignores the tacit norms, the implicit bases of consent. As children of the Enlightenment, we like to believe that we are possessors of a seamless universal rationality. This is a fallacy. It assumes either that cultures are so alike that all differences can be ironed out without any damage or difficulty, or that those who disagree with us are motivated by ill-will, ignorance or stupidity. The possibility that such disagreement may derive from the collision of different cultural norms is regarded with suspicion, given that no culture is easy with the relativisation of its own moral norms.

In reality, everything that we do is culturally coded and our own universalist assumptions are never culturally innocent. There are, of course, structural similarities and parallels, and it is the task of the social sciences to identify them, but beyond a given threshold, difference prevails.<sup>7</sup> If we ignore these differences, we end up imposing our norms on others; the name for this is imperialism. Hence in our understanding of

<sup>5</sup> Lotman, Yuri M.: *Universe of the Mind: a Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Bryant, Christopher G.A.: Civic Nation, Civil Society, Civil Religion. In John Hall (ed.): *Civil Society: Theory, History, Comparison*. Cambridge: Polity, 1995. 136–157.

<sup>7</sup> Elias, Norbert: *A szociológia lényege* [Hungarian translation of *Was ist Soziologie*] Budapest: Napvilág, 1998.

modernity and democracy, we must recognise the pre-eminent role of cultural norms and this brings us to the problematic of culture itself.

All cultures are collective; they include and exclude; they give us a particular set of identities; they allow us to make sense of the world; they offer us collective regulation and collective forms of knowledge; and they are bounded. These boundaries may shift but they will not vanish. They protect the culture in question and act as a filter through which new ideas are received and integrated. And all cultures rely on broadly similar mechanisms to keep themselves in being.<sup>8</sup> They engage in cultural reproduction and construct memory, a myth-symbol complex, forms of mutual recognition and the quest for acceptance of their moral worth as communities of value.<sup>9</sup> If threatened, they will redouble their efforts to protect cultural reproduction. Hence in our analysis of cultures, it is vital to recognise that cultural reproduction has a rationality of its own, one that certainly defies material rationality and utilitarian satisfaction. Indeed, whenever you hear a particular pattern of collective behaviour by another group being described as “irrational”, you can be certain that the speaker is making a statement about h/h own boundedness.

The problematic does not end there, however. If we can now recognise the relationship between citizenship and culture, and the central significance of cultural reproduction, it follows that the rise of the modern state, with some of its base in the realm of culture, simultaneously means a disproportion in power relations. Some states are evidently more powerful than others. This can be argued as a form of uneven development, though hardly in the Marxian sense. Put simply, the rise of several politically, economically and militarily powerful states in Europe in the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century threatened the cultural reproduction of other, less powerful communities. Once the early starters had been successful in condensing power around the political-cultural base, they threatened the cultural norms of other, less developed collectivities. The Napoleonic wars were at least in part about this phenomenon. The weaker cultural communities had no option but respond or vanish, and few of them were

---

<sup>8</sup> Barth, Fredrik (ed.): *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organisation of Culture Difference*. Bergen/Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969; Donnan, Hastings and Thomas M. Wilson: *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State*. Oxford: Berg, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Hankiss, Elemér: *Fears and Symbols*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2000.

prepared to face disappearance with equanimity. The patterns established then lasted and are still clearly recognisable.

The outcome was a frenzied race to construct modern – more accurately “modern” – cultures, cultural communities that could compete with the condensing power of the emergent modern states – France, Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden. The difficulty for the latecomers was that they lacked the political, economic and cultural resources of the early entrants to modernity and were, therefore, constrained, obliged to construct a modernity from their own, inadequate resources. Without modernity and without autonomous access to political power, which did not necessarily have to mean state independence, they were doomed and they knew it. The literature of the latecomers in Central and South-Eastern Europe, for instance, is full references to the fear of extinction.<sup>10</sup> This pattern then determines the history of Europe, as well as of nationhood, culture and democracy, until our time.

We are now in a position to see the quality of modern nationhood from a perspective that is different from the conventional view that privileges citizenship and universalism over culture and particularism, preferring to screen out the latter. Next, a few words on the relationship between culture and ethnicity. All cultures create identity, but not all identities are ethnic. Some identities are completely transient, others are restricted or contingent, yet others are partial. The particular qualities of ethnicity, however, demand further scrutiny. Ethnicity, and I am using the word in its European sense not in its North American meaning of hyphenated identity, is to be understood as a culturally dense set of shared meanings that create provision for making the world coherent and meaningful. A world of meanings is one of collective narratives which tell us what the world is about, what is positive and what is negative, why things happen and how we should behave. Without such meanings, the world is incoherent and terrifying. Individuals are left isolated and unable to cope. It follows that we all have both individual and collective identities. It is, again, naive to suppose otherwise.

Thus ethnicity is the web of meanings through which we understand and recognise one another and the world in which we live. It exists both in the explicit and the implicit dimension, in that ethnicity is part

---

<sup>10</sup> Kohn, Hans: *Nationalism: its Meaning and History*. Princeton: van Nostrand, 1955. gives several examples.

of the code through which we can take certain ideas, certain forms of knowledge for granted. When we say that something is “sensible” or that it is “common sense”, we are tacitly referring to the ethnic forms of knowledge that we all have. There is nothing inherently reprehensible in this. The problems arise in the relationship between ethnicity and political power and that, as I have been arguing, is an inevitable and ineluctable aspect of modernity and thus of mass access to power through democracy. Nationhood, then, is constructed at the intersection of cultural reproduction and democratic political power.

The instruments of identity construction are complex, but may be unravelled by using some of the insights of sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. My approach is post-Durkheimian. As far as I am concerned, collective identities are constructed and real for those living in them. A brief summary of these processes of identity construction yields something like this: collective and individual identities impact on one another reciprocally. There is a continuous construction of both the individual and the collective self and some of this is implicit or occluded. Reflexive processes relativise our sense of identity, but do not eliminate them.<sup>11</sup>

A collective identity constructs a thought-world and a corresponding thought-style; these organise modes of thinking and the style of articulating them. Identities are anchored around a set of moral ideas, signifying that identity raises issues of “right” and “wrong” and that this is collective. The absence of moral regulation produces anomie, loss of identity and self.<sup>12</sup> The collective self is a collective identity. It creates collective forms of knowledge, it provides answers to a whole range of problems which exceed the capacity of the individual, like that of individual responsibility and remoteness of cause and effect. Collectivities are engaged in cultural reproduction and protection of the collective boundary. These is undertaken by reliance on a myth-symbol complex, boundary markers and filters. Crucially, the collective identity creates and sustains a discursive field which holds meanings steady by establishing a plausibility structure.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Douglas, Mary: *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986; Giddens, Anthony: *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> Durkheim, Emile: *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: Free Press, 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Berger, Peter: *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday, 1967.



Benedict Anderson's theory of imagining a collective existence functions implicitly by relying on the theory of discursive fields.<sup>14</sup> These discursive fields offer the individual stability and security and are the foundation for communication, as well as for providing a sense of identity over time. Crucially, the continuous definition and redefinition of identity requires an ongoing normative debate.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of such debate, norms are simply imposed on the weaker party.

And given the significance of discursive fields in sustaining collective existence, it is hardly surprising that all identity groups seeks to minimise ambiguity and to establish as far as possible a single, unchallengeable sense to utterances. Collectivities rely heavily on the production of monology – the elimination of ambiguity – whether of the thought-style or at the moment of receiving external ideas. It is equally clear that such monology is under perpetual challenge both from within and from outside. Monology cannot be sustained, but is a continuous endeavour of collective existence.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, collective identities give the individual's life a meaning beyond the individual lifetime, they are a way of constructing the past and the future. However, identities may be fractured by, for example, the impact of change (political, economic, technological) which bring the existing construct of meanings into doubt. The outcome can be a devastating crisis for the collective in question.

From this brief sketch, it should be clear that identities and identity construction are a complex and often sensitive area, one that is frequently misunderstood, and the insensitivity of external actors with greater power than the community in question can have far-reaching negative consequences. The coming of modernity was a crisis of this kind for latecomers; and this process is continuous, given the dynamic, rapidly changing nature of the world today. National communities which think that they have adapted successfully to the demands of modernity discover that the goalposts have been shifted without their participation.

---

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas, Mary: *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Dentith, Simon: *Bakhtinian Thought: an Introductory Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995; Holquist, Michael: *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*. London: Routledge, 1990.

This now brings us to the next set of problems. We have become accustomed to the sensationalist accounts of ethnicity of journalism, seen at this popular level as an unmitigated evil, and reinforced by our own inclination towards seeing our norms as universal which leads us to undervalue or devalue the norms of others. We marginalise the role of solidarity in the construction of democracy overwhelmingly because we in the West have been fortunate enough to live in solidly established democratic societies.

If we turn now to Central and South-Eastern Europe where new democracies are being constructed, it is far too easy to believe that these are unsuccessful or are solely operated for the benefit of ethnic majorities or sustain their thin democratic practices only because of the pressures of the West. A deeper analysis of nationhood produces a different conclusion. The central problem for the political communities emerging from communism a decade ago was the scarcity of materials from which to build democracy and, second, the problem – still a problem – of trying to build a democratic order that goes with the grain of cultural expectations.

The grain of cultural expectations is a metaphor, of course, and the central problem for the post-communist region was to establish a social base for a democratic order, one that goes beyond surface compliance. In Central Europe, this has been broadly successful. There is both elite and popular acceptance of and support for democracy and there has been some movement towards the acceptance of the diversity and complexity that modernity produces, and towards giving some of this diversity a political representation. Of course there are flaws and failures, and these are picked up and exaggerated by the Western press, but the overall trend is set to fair.

What the West – to be precise, the dominant states of the West – finds very difficult to understand and, therefore, to integrate into its perception of the region is the phenomenon of cultural insecurity. The mainstream history of Europe and the West has been written from the perspective of the successful actors and these have been the larger states. But there is another history, one written from the standpoint of the small state. This putative alternative viewpoint would give us a quite different picture. It would show, for example, that the dominant powers in Europe have consistently ignored the narratives of the smaller cultural communities and stigmatised them as provincial or irrational.

If one looks at the past through eyes of the Central or South-East Europeans, the past is often malign and under the control of other, external forces.<sup>17</sup>

This phenomenon, this sense of seeing oneself as marginal, on the periphery, has been an enduring aspect of the region.<sup>18</sup> But the smaller states of Western Europe are not significantly different. Their central concern has been to match the capacity of the large states in condensing cultural and political power in order to develop their own domestic models of modernity. Scandinavia has been successful on the whole, as have the Low Countries and Portugal. But the experience of Central and South-Eastern Europe points in the other direction.

Now this factor is relevant to the present day, because it helps to explain the role of ethnicity in the politics of the region. Given the preeminence of the larger states, the Central and South-East Europeans have repeatedly had to live with the experience of having externally developed models of modernity foisted on them, often enough without a second thought as to their own norms and imperatives. Communism was the most extreme of these externally-driven modernisations, but there have been many others in history, including modern history. Indeed, the reception of democracy and integration into the European Union has certain structural similarities with earlier transformations. Not unexpectedly, the sense of being at the mercy of external forces impels these communities, or at any rate some members of these communities, to retreat into their cultural citadels, into a cultural isolation, for fear that otherwise their cultural reproduction will be at risk. It is this fear for the continued existence of the community that underlies resonance of ethnic and ethnicised discourses. It is not the whole story, of course; the acceptance of democratic norms has been genuine, but the lack of time to construct their own responses and the impatience of the West have had their consequences.

In any case, small states and small cultural communities suffer certain disadvantages that large states seem quite incapable of understanding, or so the history of the last two centuries would suggest. On the one hand, access to power is clearly more direct in a small state – any-

---

<sup>17</sup> Glenny, Misha: *The Balkans 1804–1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers*. London: Granta, 1999. argues this forcefully in the case of South-Eastern Europe.

<sup>18</sup> Milosz, Czeslaw: *The Witness of Poetry*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

thing below a population of 20 million is small – because the number of levels of representation is fewer. It is easier for individuals to make their mark. And the members of the elite come to know one another well. As against this, it is much more problematical to generate the kind of cultural density that large states can do, indeed do so without any conscious effort. As a result, small states are more exposed to external influences and need stronger barriers to protect their cultural norms. This necessarily leads them to adopt practices that are supportive of ethnicity and ethnic discourses, even when this flies in the face of the human rights normativity that large states have elaborated. It would help, if the larger states practised a measure of self-limitation, held back and tried understand the needs of smaller communities. But they do not do so. Nor do they engage them in normative debate, which is essential if the parties are to internalise values rather than merely react passively. Power implies responsibility, but political actors can find this responsibility difficult to discharge when it comes to other actors whom they do not recognise as fully equal.

An example from current events. It is clear to anyone who knows the dynamics of ethnic cultural reproduction that no amount of cajoling or bribery or threats will produce the kind of ethnic cooperation in the Kosovo or Macedonia that the West is seeking to attain in the name of multiculturalism. This is not because the Albanians, Serbs and Macedonians are obstinate, recalcitrant or ill-intentioned, but because Western projects pay scant attention to their cultural fears. The best that can be attained at this time, in order to secure the minimum, is the institutionalisation of parallel societies, but the West will not hear of this. The outcome is continued insecurity all round and no amount of Western money or pressure will change this. The local actors will pay lip-service to what they think the West wants to hear, but that is as far as they will go.

The proposition so far has been that the state acquired new power in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, that to exercise that power efficiently, it had to develop a reciprocal relationship between rulers and ruled and the redistribution of power was most effective within a relatively homogeneous culture. This indicates that from the outset, ethnicity – shared culture – was an integral part of democracy and that modern nationhood cannot be conceived of without the collective cultural norms condensed by the state. All this suggests that a high capacity state reliant on a web of shared cultural norms is a necessary condition for citizenship.

The problem at the start of the new millennium is that the established states of the West, which have constructed successful democracies, are coming under pressure from two disparate but conceptually related directions. From within, the explosion of civil society and the proliferation of civil social actors – lobbies, pressure groups, charities, semi-state agencies, identity movements, entitlement claimants etc – are transforming the nature of the relationship between rulers and ruled.<sup>19</sup> Not only is party politics weaker, but the authority of the central state bodies is declining. The state is losing its capacity to condense cultural power in the way that it could even in the very recent past. If it continues to lose this capacity, it could endanger civil society itself, as civil society without state regulation and enforcement of the rule of law rapidly becomes uncivil, as has happened in Russia.

Simultaneously, the power of the state is being eroded by globalisation.<sup>20</sup> The consequences are likely to be an unexpected transformation of politics. Parallel to the growth of civil society, there could well be an increase in ethnic identification. States, finding that their capacity to condense civic power is under challenge, could come to rely more heavily on ethnic or ethnicised discourses. Large states are becoming smaller in the context of globalisation. This does not have to be a disaster for democracy, as some fear. There are well-tried instruments for regulating inter-ethnic relations. But what is beyond doubt is that the universalism of the cultural great powers, the belief that the French or British or American way of doing things is proper for everyone, will come under threat and the diversity of cultures, articulated as ethnic identity, will find ever stronger expression.

---

<sup>19</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt: *In Search of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Urry, John: *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-first Century*. London: Routledge, 2000; Bauman, Zygmunt: *Globalization: the Human Consequences*. Cambridge: Polity, 1998.