

ENGLAND IN EUROPE: REFLECTIONS ON NATIONAL IDENTITY AND CULTURAL THEORY

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Even the most hard-bitten old materialist has to concede that nations, more or less, happen when people imagine them to happen. Nations truly are imagined communities, creating new cultural formations. In this experiential sense *all* nations are historie. This I take as my starting-point.

However this is not to say that nations express a culture which in some mystical way is already present, ready and waiting to be retrieved. Many of the pioneer patriots in the heyday of the nationalist renaissances, at the end of the nineteenth century, wished that this were so, and resorted to any number of antiquarian stratagems in the hope of proving their point. The image of the ineffable spirit of a people present but unvoiced, on the cusp of awakening and the discovery of true nationality is indeed a common cultural trope. This is an explanation of national identity formed deep in the discourses of European idealist philosophy and is, to my mind at least, distinctly unnering in the sphere of practical politics. We need precisely to turn this idea around. Nations, rather, are one form in which modern cultures have been articulated.

Yet although nations constitute one form, amongst others, in which cultures are organized, they are —perhaps alongside religions— a peculiarly powerful force. To an intense degree national identity has been a matter of emotional and psychic organization far removed from other types of more transient, and more revocable, affiliation. There is an inescapability about national identity, most apparent exactly when attempts are made to escape it.

For this reason, perhaps, possession and dispossession of nationality have dominated the history of modernity. A world order built on identifiable, immovable nation-states was a dream incubated in the upheavals of the nineteenth century, shared by a constellation of political thinkers and practitioners who otherwise were opponents it was, importantly, a vision as common to the Americas as it was to Europe —the formative role of the New World reminding us of the inextricable links between nationhood, on the one hand, and modernity and progress on the other indeed, it was from the American continent that the politics of this vision became most tangible, late in the day, in the person of Woodrow Wilson.

Yet it hardly needs emphasizing today that this enlightened liberalism, imagining a benign confederation of harmonious nation-states, was essentially a product of nineteenth-century sensibilities. Nor does it need to be emphasized that, like many other aspects of a putatively enlightened rationalism, it was shadowed by darker, more murderous undercurrents. The slippage between a harmonious community of nations to a community of nation-states marks a shift of historic importance. For implicitly or explicitly it revives, in differing va-

riants, the essential distinction —absolute in Hegel and virtually unquestioned thereafter— constructed between historic and nonhistoric nations. In this scheme of things nations deemed unhistoric, as well as peoples characterized in relation to European and North American conquistadors as native or indigenous, were to be accorded —at best— a subordinate place in the historical process or —at worst— be removed from history all together.

Such thinking, by the beginning of the twentieth century, was concentrated in the intoxicating construction of the idea of «the white man» —the bearer of order and reason, able to command both those without reason (women, children, delinquents and subordinate races of all types) and nature itself. Within this reasoning Africans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas *had* no culture, so the dominance of the white man represented no more and no less than the coming of civilization; while those inhabiting Asia —Orientals— though possessing a rightful claim to culture were clearly condemned to a lower plane of civilization than that of the Caucasian. Deep within the very idea of western civilization lies this faith in the duties of historie nations to take in hand the process of history itself, whatever the cost. The designation itself proves self-confirming.

Nor do we need to be reminded that this distinction between those blessed with historic destinies, and those less fortunate, also was constitutive of cultural relations *inside* Europe as well. The fate of unhistoric peoples in Europe has been too terrible to contemplate. Warning between nation-states and nations has been —and still is— endemic to European history, and no Cartesian, final cartographic solution, with each people and ethnic and linguistic group accorded its own self-enclosed territory, and with each region championing its own fixed frontiers, will ever be able to resolve the matter. As I will suggest in a moment, the problem lies —rather— with the old historic nation-states and their inbred incapacity to free themselves from the will for territoriality.

It is clear from our own historical vantage point that the sense of nation which motivated nineteenth-century liberals in Europe and the Americas was *abstract* in its universalism, encouraging belief in an unproblematic evolution of flourishing nation-states. For example, as the creole liberators in Spanish America quickly discovered —though were unable to theorize— the key fact which unhinged this idea of a shared and harmonious route to modernity and nationhood was the combined and uneven development of cultural relations brought about, most dramatically, by the processes of capital accumulation. The creole liberals asserted their own historicity as *Americans*. In devising their break with Imperial Spain —con-

sequent upon the arrival of the World Spirit on horseback in the figure of Napoleon in 1808— they also determined to cause the least possible social upheaval in a desperate attempt to forestall racial conflagration from below, brought about by black slaves and native peoples asserting, in turn, *their* historic destiny.

Furthermore, within the creole imagination there seemed nothing more natural than to seek common allegiance with white republicans in the North, in the newly formed United States. But, even by the 1820s as the Monroe Doctrine demonstrates, republicans in the North wanted no confederation as equals with republicans in the South: relations of economic power and dependency were already too far advanced. A continental American republic was not to be. Separate nations, carved out of a combination of inherited administrative regions and military contingency, emerged in conflict one with another. Military despotism became the order of the day. Economically the South became ever more bound to the North and to Europe. Divided and competing nation-states supplanted the idea of an indivisible American identity.

And so —throughout the globe during the nineteenth century— in different and historically variable ways, did the maelstrom of emergent national and ethnic identities cohere, a lived response to the dialectic of rapid regionalization/globalization brought about by the extraordinary restructuring of the world system. Thus not only do nations articulate the cultures of modernity: more precisely one might say that they articulate the *uneven development* of the cultural formations of modernity.

The intellectual provenance of an explanation such as this —with its emphasis on capital accumulation and combined and uneven development— should not be hard to discern. Its roots lie in the traditions of historical materialism. But it has to be said that in many important ways historical materialism itself shares with its epic contender, bourgeois liberalism, the will to devise an abstract universalism. It is symptomatic that Marx and Engels appropriated untransformed from Hegel the commonsense notion, as they saw it, of historic and unhistoric nations. The effects of this belief vitiate the intellectual system they produced, and are still with us today.

More particularly, though, it was within the Bolshevik cosmos that the abstract universal of the proletariat came to be most daunting. All the great Communist intellectuals of the early twentieth century believed that they could override nation with a higher commitment to the international working class. Historical realities, alas, proved more obdurate. Patriotism and allegiance to regional and ethnic communities turned out to possess much deeper emotional roots than the Bolshevik intellectuals had imagined possible.

Within this context it is worth recalling the individual biographies of this founding generation of Communists. They lived as archetypal modernist intellectuals, moving from countryside or backwater to the metropolitan centres, experiencing the journey from periphery to centre, criss-crossing Europe (and sometimes the Atlantic) from city to city —even in many cases dropping for a lifetime their inherited mother-tongues— creating in the process a dazzlingly cosmopolitan intellectual life and championing an emotional life of equal fluidity. The Polish Communists in particular scorned the petty, backward regionalism which characterized, as they saw it, the aspirations of the Polish nationalists and of those socialists who wanted a separate Polish socialist organization, gravitating instead to the imperatives of the German movement —just as, later, Georgians and Ukrainians gravitated to the imperatives of

Mother Russia. (1) Even with Gramsci it is sometimes difficult to spot the youthful Sard nationalist in the more mature deliberations of his prison writings.

In one sense, the rejection of the existential weight of regional, ethnic, national and above all Jewish identities by this generation of Communist intellectuals, in the hope of a more generous internationalism —however honorable we may choose to find this in principle— may also be said to have reflected the lived conditions of their own cosmopolitanism. It suggests less an *engagement* with the experiences of national identities than an utopian belief, or wish, that would disappear once and for all.

But no-one will gainsay the fact that national and religious identities have outlived, and indeed in part brought about, the downfall of the tradition of Bolshevism. Communism at the beginning of the twentieth century was formed as a defence against the national hysteria which drew Europe into the slaughter of the Great War; in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, at the end of the century, nationalist and religious movements are wreaking their revenge.

Thus we now inhabit a cultural world in which the rational underpinning of both the liberal and the inherited Communist philosophies has been sent spinning. Modernity, it seems, will neither usher in a harmonious community of nationhood, based on equality and mutual respect, nor will it abolish the affective ties which constitute nationhood. Indeed, at the very core of the experience of modernity lies the unevenness of its advance, at once propelling us into an enthralled encounter with the terra incognita of the modern while *at the same time* summoning an antiquarian iconography often of an invented type— which psychologically at least promises to pull us away from the abyss, back to the imagined certainties of an earlier age. It is this dialectic, with national consciousness often at its pivot, which Perry Anderson has in mind when he notes that «In post-Communist or post-colonial societies, the arrival of the modern typically triggers the archaic as compensation — the queues in Moscow lengthen for McDonalds and St Basil's alike» (2).

My reflections up to this point have obviously been general in form, and necessarily display too reckless a view. By inclination and temperament a historian I find it more congenial to deal in rather more concrete terms. With this in mind, I'll turn my attention to England —and pick up, as well, Andersen's reference to the specificities of post-colonial societies; though it is not St. Basil's which looms large in England —McDonalds, of course is another matter— it is striking the degree to which the modern and the antique cohabit in the national culture, and give *momentum* to the processes of national identity.

England prides itself on its historic status as a nation. While other European nations lay claim to a vulgar nationalism, manifest in the tawdry hyperbole of the capital's monuments, England, we know, possesses only the mystical qualities of

(1) This denigration of Poland was to have cataclysmic effect. According to the report of one British Communist, D.F. Springhall, in September 1939 the Secretariat of Comintern expressed the collective opinion that «it would not be regarded as a terrific misfortune if Poland were to disappear from the scene». And effectively, once more, the Polish nation-state did just that Francis King and George Matthews (eds), *About Turn. The Communist Party and the outbreak of the Second World War*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1990, p. 54.

(2) Perry Anderson, Nation-states and national identity, *London Review of Books* 9 May 1991

«Englishness» —an indefinable matter of *being*, incapable of systematic explanation, and beyond the powers of foreigners either to comprehend or to emulate. And of course while other nations might construct their ancestry back to mythical historical events, the English (so we learn) are so historical that theirs is a narrative which is coeval with nature itself, the origins of the nation sunk deep in the soil and mulch of the countryside —to the degree that, within these discourses, the idea of the nation, literally, becomes naturalized. By a strange, deconstructive twist history —real, lived history— is actually abolished in this scheme of things. The nation becomes nature, and history disappears.

We might refuse, or rail against, these perceptions. We might, quite justifiably, show them to be wrong-headed. But these —and a thousand other equally banal ideas and everyday cultural practices— have formed the English as English.

Indeed, in terms of the symbols and narratives which constitute the public sphere, this recurrent idea of Old England has in the recent past become more concentrated. England now capitalizes on its history: tourism is one of the more advanced sectors of the British economy; more people labour in museums and theme parks and the whole gamut of the tourist industry than in both car production and mining combined; and it is, revealingly, the most high-tech and knowingly post-modernist media which organize and package England and its antique past. Wide-eyed visitors from North America and Japan can now be transported to Elizabethan banqueting halls or Dickensian pubs and immerse themselves in the practices of an old nation. For a grizzled post-Bolshevik there is perhaps a touch of madness here. Even so, a significant sector of British (and, indeed, multinational) capital is given over to producing the national past, and this raises a series of complex questions about the subjective forms in which the public and private manifestations of the nation and its past *become* memory.

However, this is not to suggest that the idea of Old England is hegemonic, effortlessly implanted in the commonsense of the people. Far from it. In fact, the sentimental schlock of the theme-parks and of the bulk of media representations co-exist with cultural forms working in quite contrary directions. My argument is precisely that the imagined community of England is in deep crisis. For reasons which I shall explain at the end this is a crisis which I welcome. But first I should note some of the defining factors which have instigated this implosion: the incubus of Empire; the re-racialization of England; nationalist pressures from the subordinate nations of the United Kingdom; and the embarrassed, halting involvement with federal Europe.

Those nations whose historical memories are most potent, actively constituting the-past-in-the-present, are as a rule the old imperial nations. It is the magic of these nationalisms, in particular, which has «turned chance into destiny» (3). The contemporary configuration of European national identities, and the relations between them, cannot be grasped without attending to the all-important fact of the realities of these imperial pasts, and no more so than in the case of England.

While at the formal, public or conscious level of the nation —if I can be permitted such a term— unadorned narratives of

(3) The phrase is Benedict Andersen's: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Verso, London, 1983, p. 19. The revised edition of 1991 should also be consulted. For those who know the book, it will be clear how influential it has been for me.

Empire can appear increasingly redundant, and may often become objects of ridicule, imbricated in the unconscious of the nation —in unnoticed daily practices and rituals, in how the English imagine themselves as gendered and ethnic subjects, in the shifting practices and processes of individual and collective memories, the legacies of Imperial England are still active. For the English, nation and Empire are inseparable. End of Empire may have occurred through the 1950s and 1960, providing the pretext for all the presumptuous and pompous imperial iconography to lose its spell, appropriated as pastiche within the commodified relations of an increasingly joky popular culture, but this provides no reason to suppose that the native culture of the English as a whole has itself been decolonized. A national culture works as much as by amnesia — or perhaps more accurately, by successive displacements of collective screen memories— as it does by a positively inscribed iconography. In this deeper sense, the «who we are» as English and the culture in which we feel «at home» (a suitably domestic idiom, this) are not merely quaint conceits, but the products of a historical culture *formed* by Empire —by Marx's «nightmare of history».

Although perhaps too obvious an illustration, the experience for us of Mrs. Thatcher has been instructive. It has been extraordinary the degree to which a supposedly discredited sense of national identity has been paraded through the closing epoch of the twentieth century and clearly (if not always predictably) touched a popular nerve. To live through those days when Britain was at war with Argentina, when an unashamed, recidivist xenophobia seemed as natural and homely as a cup of tea, was indeed unnerving, forcing us to come to terms with an idea of the nation which many had believed had gone forever. And no one personifies more dramatically the forms in which a nation assumes the dynamic of the modern and the antique than Mrs. Thatcher herself, the foremost proponent of what has come to be called in Britain «reactionary modernization».

Second, and closely related both to the legacy of Empire and to the political career of Mrs. Thatcher, is the re-racialization of England. End of Empire and the contraction of England coincided with the historic rendezvous between the indigenous white English and the peoples of the former colonies, particular from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. This re-enactment of the primal colonial encounter between black and white, on the territory of the metropolitan homeland itself, forced the members of the declining nation to imagine themselves, in a new way, as white. Of course, the discourses of Empire and nation had always been racialized. But in post-war Britain this took novel and more intense forms, triggered both by the realization that older, more global imperial identities could no longer hold, and by the *proximity* of black immigrants in the neighbourhoods —relations between metropolis and periphery, very suddenly, becoming visible.

In a word, a new racist configuration emerged, in which proximate «alien» cultures were deemed to be undermining the very essence of the inherited national culture. The nation itself was reimagined as a specifically white community —Old England's modernization taking place through the syntax of racism.

Third, in the 1970s nationalist feeling in Scotland and Wales, and sectarian strife in Northern Ireland imposed a terrible strain on the unity of the British state —causing some to predict the break-up of Britain. In the event, or at least to date, this has not happened. Even so, the weakening of London's power,

consequent upon greater integration in Europe, may yet work to accelerate secession of England's last satellite nations.

The fourth element determining the crisis of the nation turns on the protracted involvement with Europe itself. The decision for Britain to seek entry into the European union was taken swiftly but belatedly at the end of the 1950s, in response to the combined effects of decolonization and the collapse of the so called special relationship with the US. It was a decision made by an extremely narrow group of state technicians, existing at the apex of the power bloc. It represented for these figures, as I see it, the means by which the federal state of the United Kingdom could be saved—even if national sovereignty and the national-popular will were to be compromised. It represented state versus nation, in which embattled patriots gave their all in defending the nation's political and cultural sovereignty.

The reverberations were protracted and complex, and don't require attention here. All that need be noted is that while it was essentially the issue of Europe which was the catalyst in breaking up the *longue duree* of Thatcherism, the matter is not yet settled. But it should also be conceded that the defenders of the nation, hostile in every respect to Europe, were right in their perceptions of the enormity of the threat. European political federation threatened precisely to dismantle the unity of the British state, and to unhinge nation from state.

The dialectic which exists at the heart of Conservatism—destroy in order to conserve—is nowhere illustrated to better effect than in the antagonisms unleashed inside the party over Europe. The bulk of the conflict has been couched in terms of political sovereignty—in which, for the opponents of Europe the eccentric, freedom-loving English will soon be in thrall to the bureaucrats of Brussels, and the historic liberties of the nation which survived the threat of Nazi invasion will be destroyed, stealthily, by Delors.

But it is not only, and perhaps not even supremely, a question of political sovereignty. Behind the debates on Europe lurks a more fundamental question about the conditions of existence of national cultures. This has nothing to do with the fate of the English sausage, as determined by Brussels. It is rather the fact that nation-states are fast beginning to lose their grip as cultural organizers.

In a remarkable book Benedict Anderson has suggested that the emergence of nations as imagined communities depended upon the existence of print capitalisms, creating a common (written) vernacular. He also alludes, in passing, to the significance of the radio in the making of revolutionary national identities in the twentieth century (4). However, what so-

me care to discern as a postmodern culture brings radically new forms. An unimaginable leap into a new phase of globalization/localization; the further compression of space and time; the dominance of the image; the proliferation of satellite media which exist beyond the control of national governments—all suggest that while nations as imagined communities may yet intensify, the nation-state no longer possesses the hegemony it could once command. And indeed, federal Europe—or at least, an imagined rather than an actually existing Europe—provides an alternative model.

Although this may sound too polemical, the disarticulation of the old, «historic» nation-states of Europe—whatever dangers it may bring—is a precondition for the coming into being

of a more fluid, less territorially bound federation of nations and ethnic groups. The Treaty of Rome may at last be undoing the Congress of Vienna.

What this entails, I think, is a radical displacement of sovereignty. On the one hand, the archaic, centralized sovereignty of the established nation-states will have, eventually, to give way to a succession of competing, subordinate national and ethnic communities within a larger federated structure.

On the other, political leaders will have to come to terms with the fact that the various dispossessed and those effectively or voluntarily disenfranchised from the internal workings of the nation-state may not choose to become part of the nation. For long, the established prerequisites of political organization have supposed that subordinate groups aimed, ultimately, to become citizens and fully incorporate themselves into the public nation. This has formed the very basis of a rationalist political project. But, without elaborating too much here, it is apparent that this rationalism is also in crisis, and that new, local forms of sovereignty, based on evolving (and imagined) ethnic and cultural identities may actually compete with the claims for centralized authority inscribed in the idea—not just of the nation-state—but of the nation too.

Such a phenomenon, of course, strikes orthodox social-democrats dumb, instilling in them a mute incomprehension. It's a conception of politics which turns on the recognition that, although the nation may yet constitute a uniquely powerful imaginative community, it holds no monopoly. Other identities, based on racial, ethnic or gendered «communities»—which break the nightmare of European history and imagine more concretely and creatively a vernacular, more accommodating, futurism—may yet hold greater promise: once, that is, we have freed ourselves from grip of the historic nation-state. Those of us formed in historic nation-states can, I fear, overdose on history.

(4) Ibid. He cites particularly Indonesia and Vietnam. Mention should also be made of Algeria: see Frantz Fanon, «This is the voice of Algeria» in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, Earthscan, London, 1989.