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Problems of Contemporary Nationalisms

Since we are here for many discussions relating to nations and nationalisms, it seems appropriate to frame what I have to say in terms of questions and problems rather than answers or solutions. But let me begin by stating three general common assumptions in which I do not believe. The first is that so-called globalization is a very recent phenomenon. The book I have just sent to press demonstrates, I believe, that it goes back to the 1880s, and is symbolized by the arrival of commercial transplanetary telegraphic communication. The second is that the current American world-hegemony is *sui generis* and is likely to be long-lasting. The third is that nations, as it were, transcend history. On the contrary, like other human institutions, they were born in a certain age and doubtless will become obsolete in another.

The problems I would like to raise with you come under the general rubric of human migration and its ambiguous consequences for the fate of nationalism. When in the wake of the devastation of what we now call, anachronistically, the First World War, the League of Nations was formed, sealing, however uneasily, the international legitimation of the Nation-State form over monarchy and empire, the broad, vague assumption was that every nation should have a home, and most of its nationals would stay in it. Poles would be born in new Poland, grow up, marry, and be buried there.

If they did move to France to work as plumbers, either they would fairly soon return, or they would marry French women, settle down, and become assimilated Frenchmen, or at least their children would so be. Today, this may seem a very superficial idea, but for a century it actually worked pretty well. Foreign workers bore the brunt of French industrialization, which is why France kept its wine-growing, cheese-making peasantry for so long. In fact the rate of migration and assimilation in France was proportionately higher than the United States, as Noriel's *Le Creuset Français* superbly demonstrates.

Nonetheless, the League was almost immediately faced with a simple-seeming problem, to which its committees could find no solution beyond one which unsettled Wilsonian assumptions. The problem was long in coming, but was precipitated by the huge breakthrough in female suffrage in the war's aftermath. For the first time in the 'West,' (and in Latin America) women were becoming what voting symbolized, real citizens of the nation-state. The problem that now arose was the legal status of women who in steadily increasing numbers married or cohabited across state borders, and eventually their children. For example, a French woman who married an Uruguyan, and went to live with him in Montevideo, usually wished to keep her French nationality, and the French state was under pressure to back her up. On the other hand, the progressive Uruguyan state of the period, wished her to become Uruguyan, and even more so her children. Traditional patriarchy – which assumed that males had permanent and unitary nationalities, while women had only impermanent and non-unitary ones – was now colliding with nationalism. The husband might try to insist on Uruguyanization, but he might also wonder about the advantages, economic and cultural, perhaps even political, if the family moved to France and became Frenchified. The League's committee came up

with the obvious, but unsettling, conclusion. Women could have, if the respective states agreed, which often they did not, dual nationality, and also their underage children. Where women led the way, men were bound to follow, effectively feminizing themselves according to older rules. Over the past eight decades, by hook, and often more by crook, dual nationality has become more and more common. Even so crushingly nationalist a country as the United States had, after World War II, to accept the new institution. This is why, after the fall of Communism, it was possible for American citizens to run for the presidency in Estonia and Cambodia, and a Canadian to try for the presidency of Poland. (Fortunately, perhaps, all these campaigns failed). The same principle has been at work in cases where Mexicans who have become American citizens, run, with variable success, for the mayorships of their fathers' pueblos in Guadalajara or Oaxaca.

Nonetheless, the theory of nationalism has on the whole ignored the implications of dual (legal) and multiple (usually illegal) nationalities marked by the passport. We continue, because nationalism-theory is still deeply contaminated by 19th century romanticism, to insist on the unitariness of nationhood. We have very little idea of what goes on in the minds of husbands, wives, and children in cases of mixed marriage and dual citizenship. Whatever it is, it is highly unlikely that in public, or even in answer of census questioners, they will fail to give a unitary answer. Duality is notoriously difficult for census-takers and their state masters. How should such people be counted? There are no 50%*s* in such documents.

But we can expect such trends to deepen. One sign of this is a curious invention of some EE states. Hoping to head off the trend, since there are Brazilians with Dutch husbands or wives working in the Netherlands, the Dutch state has enlarged the political status of 'permanent residents,' permitting them even to vote in all elections except at the 'national le-

vel.' The Dutch are famous for their dikes, but will these hold forever? What does it mean, legally, politically, and existentially, to have dual nationality?

Wilson would feel tortured today, even in Heaven. Meanwhile, Mexican-Americans, who vote in California for Arnold Schwarzenegger, have been made eligible to vote in Mexico's national elections, and the American State pretends not to notice.

The second conundrum is the political behavior and allegiance of the more recent migrants. I have written about this problem in some detail elsewhere, so will only suggest its outlines. Symbolically, it is summarized by a highly immoral experiment into which I coaxed some migrant Latin American colleagues a few years back. These colleagues had informed me of the existence of many 'chat-lines' linking migrant Colombians, Argentinians, Ecuadoreans, etc with each other. Mostly the chat was nostalgic – football, food, "girls (!)" and other banalities. I proposed that they gradually, very gradually, introduce words and grammatical forms everywhere known as those of the universally hated, and of course envied, Chileans. It was amazing to me how quickly and with what degree of paranoia, the chatline responded. "There is a spy or traitor in our midst." Would the same reaction have occurred if a Chilean tourist asked directions in Montevideo, Quito, or Buenos Aires? I strongly doubt it.

A famously funny version of this syndrome has been the brouhaha in the United States over the annual St. Patrick's Day parades in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. The committees in charge of these celebrations of Irish nationalism by Americans claiming Irish descent — spectral dual nationalities — angrily rejected the requests that fellow-Americans-of-Irish-descent who happened to be gays or lesbians be allowed to participate while affirming their sexual identification. The reason? In True Ireland the committees said, there were no

such perverts, which were produced by the English, anti-Catholicism, the EE, globalization, etc. Confronted by reporters with the fact that lesbians had won first prize for the best float in Cork's simultaneous St. Patrick's Day festivities, the committees, with great calm, replied that "Ireland" had been entirely corrupted by the EE, and "true Ireland" existed only in the United States. Fortunately, the Irish in "Ireland" find this stance ridiculous, and they make permanent fun of those American tourists who arrive every summer to tell the natives what 'real Irishness' involves. But the truth is, for such people. Ireland really has migrated to Philadelphia and Boston.

I do not wish excessively to generalize, because there are many, many exceptions, but I am sure that on the whole there is a worrying trend towards what I have termed long-distance nationalism, and its cousin, portable nationalism. To explain these terms, as well as the reasons for concern for their novelty, one has to begin with a contrast: émigré nationalism from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. There is a good deal of evidence that in this period nationalism first seriously crystallized far away from home. For example, in the mid-1880s, the Father of Philippine nationalism, the great novelist and political martyr Jose Rizal, wrote from Barcelona to an Austrian friend as follows:

Wir müssen alle der Politik etwas opfern wenn auch wir keine Lust daran haben. Dies verstehen meine Freunde welche in Madrid unsere Zeitung herausgeben; diese Freunde sind all Jünglingen, creolen, mestizen und malaien, (aber) wir nennen uns nur Philippiner. [We all have to make sacrifices for political purposes, even when we have no inclination to do so. This is understood by my friends, who publish our newspaper in Madrid; these friends are all youngsters, creoles, mestizos, and Malays, (but) we call ourselves simply Filipinos.]

What is strange here is the talk of unpleasant sacrifices (of true reality?) for political reasons, followed by the explanation that although these youngsters really *are* creoles, mestizos, and Malays (indios), they call themselves – i.e. in public, in imperial Spain — Filipinos. The cause of this political decision was the unnerving experience of finding that distinctions of enormous importance in the colony (racial status, pedigree, social class, maternal language, town of origin) had none whatsoever in the metropole, where ignorance of and indifference to, the distant colony was profound. In the eyes of ordinary Spaniards all these boys were “guys from the Philippines” i.e. Filipinos. The ‘sacrifice’ of which Rizal spoke was social equalization and cross-class, cross-language fraternization. A sort of the reprise of the earlier history of the Americas: People arriving in Madrid from Spanish America were called simply *americanos*; no one cared much about their racial make up or whether they came from Peru or Buenos Aires. In the North, colonials who thought of themselves as Britons were disconcerted to find in London that they were often not accepted as such, but rather as Americans. Gradually or rapidly, an objective identification became also subjective.

That this identification usually, in those days, had positive and usually progressive consequences can be explained by two circumstances. The first was that most such people had no intention of settling down in the metropole, which offered them neither successful careers, ways of becoming rich, nor social security. The second was that their state of origin was a colonial state, dominated and exploited by metropolitans. They had a political war to undertake back home, which had a clear objective: national independence and international recognition.

The circumstances of the huge migrations of the past three decades, however, are profoundly different. Of these circu-

mstances probably the single most important is that today almost everyone migrating comes from one of the 200 recognized nation-states, which are “their own”, and carry passports from these putative homes. The painful consequences are plain. Permanent migration may mean psychological guilt at abandoning the patria, which, after all, is represented in the UN; and the likelihood of experiencing in the country of migration (also in the UN) messages which come down to this: if you are unhappy here, why don't you go home, you have your own goddam country after all. At the same time, the attractions and abjections of migration have greatly altered, in an age in which global inequality is even steeper than Brazil's, and looks like increasing further for the foreseeable future.

It is now possible for the migrants, or their children, to have successful careers as scientists, lawyers, doctors, academics, media stars, athletes and even politicians in most of the really rich states. The same in different degrees applies to private enterprise. Since the time of Rizal and the end of Brazilian slavery, the slim nineteenth century state has been transformed, to differing degrees, into the welfare state, assuming responsibilities in the fields of health, education, housing, etc. far beyond anything in the 19th century. Very often sheer physical security is much greater than ‘back home.’ An EE passport takes one almost everywhere without too much suspicion, and few bribes and humiliations. For poor migrants, employment opportunities are vastly larger too, compared to the nineteenth century, caused by the graying of the low-birth-rate ‘Northern States,’ and changed job-expectations among young natives of these states. Even if these jobs are dirty and dangerous, they are far better paid than the same jobs back home. But the abjections are also obvious. Nothing shows this better than “tolerance,” which implies a one-sided “gift” from a superior, and can at any moment be withdrawn.

Crucially, it also implies, at least for the children of migrants, a demanded assimilation, even if this is rarely fully accepted by the natives. That this development can not always be attributed to racism and chauvinism is shown clearly by recent sociological work on the social fates of Black immigrants to the United States from Africa and the Caribbean. Parents make every effort to teach their children that they are Ghanaians or Nigerians, Bahamians or Trinidadians. But in school and on the American street, the same children are told – by Afro-Americans as well as Whites, to drop these ridiculous pretensions. In America, they are simply Black. The same thing is happening even to dark-skinned Puerto-Ricans, though they have some protection in Spanish.

In fact, children and adolescents have the hardest time of it, caught between the culture of the family and that of the school, between the mosque and the discotheque, the temple and the street. Born and raised in the migration, not 'at home,' natural citizens, rather than naturalized, they are unwilling to be treated as immigrants. They are in a position to make demands, also violently.

It is within this permanent complexity and perplexity that long-distance, or portable nationalism can come into play as a real problem. I am told by colleagues that if one goes to the Punjab in India, one will find plenty of male Sikhs who wear no turbans or beards, and have their hair cut short like most other Indians; but one will not find the same thing in Melbourne, where it is a brave, and usually ostracized, Sikh who dares to do something commonplace in the 'homeland.' One finds the same syndrome among overseas Croatian communities. The elders of these communities typically have a long obsolete, fanciful, romanticized view of the 'homeland,' often strangely combined with the 'Irish' view that the same homeland has been corrupted. Sustaining these visions in the country of emigration depends upon transmission, usu-

ally by highly authoritarian methods, to their children. Hence what one could even call a sort of fascistization of the homeland culture, and its heavy internal policing. Assimilation comes to such communities as a kind of treason.

In itself, the problem is painful. But it does not remain local. For people in the emigration their location offers opportunities for a new kind of political intervention. In the rich North, in the time of the worldwide web, they may have substantial financial means, which can instantly be deployed by electronic banking; they may be in a position to send weapons and explosives to comrades in the home country (and sometimes to use them locally at the behest of the same comrades). The internet allows them to bypass the newspaper, and constantly log on to 'restricted' nationalist circuits, closely controlled by servers. On these circuits there is no real distinction between rumor, fantasy and real news, and a heavy diet of repetitive nationalist clichés. The situation makes it at least possible to intervene in the homeland's politics, especially if these are fraught with conflict, in very dangerous, extremist ways. We have plenty of examples of this tendency – overseas Armenians, Turks, Hindu Indians, Srilankan Tamils, Ethiopians, Croatians, and so on. Young people, completely at ease with the internet, can find themselves enthralled by such possibilities of becoming a true Armenian in Chicago, even if they do not understand Armenian.

The whole problem can be surveyed summarily as follows. Contra President Wilson, and against the tendencies of nineteenth century 'noon-time' nationalist politics, we are observing an increasingly clear divorce between citizenship and nationalism, which has its schizophrenic aspects. The newly Canadian immigrant/or his children may be a lawabiding, taxpaying citizen of Canada, but has no interest in Ca-

nadian politics or history. He goes to work, takes his children to the community centre to play, perhaps even watches ice-hockey games; but in Canada he is still a nobody. But as night falls, and he goes to his computer, he enters another world, where he believes that he can be a kind of hero. This is the homeland he has left for good, or the one of his father that he has visited on one or two brief occasions. But he does not vote in his homeland, he pays no taxes, his kids do not attend its schools he can not be indicted by its courts, nor killed by its security services. He is also answerable to no one. He has taken his nation with him to Canada. He no longer needs its passport, though he may, if his new state permits it, take up dual citizenship.

Thirty years ago, the general assumption was that such problems would not be transmitted across generations. If the immigrant himself chose to live after dark in a fantastic homeland on the other side of the globe, the power of the new state and its cultural apparatus would ensure the assimilation of his children. Today, the doubts are many. The transformation of Northern economies, social structures, and demographic profiles seem to ensure the continuing demand for migrants from the rest of the world. The obverse of this is world-capitalism's devastation of many of their homelands, inter-ethnic and inter-religious violence, slumification and so on. I do not believe that so-called multiculturalism is yet much more than a placebo, since it is under-written by the always-conditional 'tolerance' of which I have spoken earlier. The nation-state is profoundly premised on an idea of homogeneity – of which common citizenship is the brightest side – and it may be that it will prove impossible to change this premise without giving up on the nation-state as we have inherited it.