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The Communist Experience and Nationhood

National identity was the original mass political identity of Central and Eastern Europe. When the first waves of modernization began to impact on the region in the 19th century, the local sub-elites turned to the newly emerging idea of nationhood as the instrument through which several tasks would be accomplished. Independence would be won from the ruling empires; new states based on citizenship would usher in an era of universal equality and freedom, coupled with prosperity and modernity, based on the model of the developed West; and in order to achieve this project, the sub-elites would seek to legitimate the existence of the nation by a mobilization of its potential members.

In reality, as experience demonstrated, it proved to be extremely difficult to construct citizenship on the basis of ethnic mobilization, but that is a separate issue in this context. Once the newly mobilized nation was actually in existence, it was argued, the empires could not deny them their freedom. This project achieved its aims with the outcome of the Balkan wars and at the Paris Peace Settlement with the creation of a belt of nation-states between Germany and Russia which in the interim had become the Soviet Union.

From this perspective, therefore, nationhood was a success and established its credentials in the eyes of the bulk of the population, which understood its relationship to the state, the nature of citizenship, in national terms. Once a particular ethnic group had been brought into national awareness, it would defend its existence to the utmost and, given the contorted history and power relationships of the area, would also see that existence as constantly under threat.

Yet even while national identities attained a primacy in mediating the relationship between the individual and state, other identities were also being constructed under the impact of political, economic and social change. One of these was class and the political movements founded on that basis, viz. socialism in its various aspects. This is not the place to rehearse the complex strategic and intellectual attempts made by socialists to deal with the phenomenon of nationalism, but the fundamental and irreconcilable contradiction at the level of theory between the two should be stressed. In essence, the nationalist position was that an individual's basic identity derived from culture, while a socialist's was that it derived from class.[1]

Consequently, when the intellectual descendants of Marx found themselves in power, they were faced with the problem of dealing with the national question at the level of policy. The reference in this context is, obviously, to Lenin. Lenin, having seized control of the Russian Empire, had to devise a policy that would contain the national communities that had reached various stages of maturity in the new state without their, in any way, endangering the power of the ruling communist party and the integrity of the state. In essence, Lenin's strategy rested on a number of assumptions and propositions.[2]

As a Marxist, he began from the general principle that class would invariably transcend all other considerations, including nationhood, but that this might take time. If national consciousness was a false consciousness, as the Marxists always maintained, then conditions would have to be constructed whereby false consciousness would wane sooner rather than later. Furthermore, at the practical level, the non-Russians had been helpful to the Bolsheviks during the Civil War and expected that the new state would reward them. To this end, Lenin decided that nations would be permitted to exercise a once-and-for-all choice to secede from the new state, something that was actually accepted in the case of the Finns, the Balts and the Poles (though the Polish-Soviet war could well have reversed this decision). In the case of the Georgians, their choice for independence was initially accepted by Moscow, but was then rescinded when the Georgian state was invaded and annexed by the Soviet Union.

As far as the other non-Russians were concerned, Lenin formulated the policy of 'national in form, socialist in content', the essence of which was that the language and culture of a particular community were less significant than the class content of its life. This proved in many ways to be a paradoxical step. The Soviet state embarked on a major effort of social engineering aimed at creating the cultural infrastructure of national communities that were at a very early stage of development. New nations were established, given languages, alphabets, cultures and so on, but under the strict control of the communist party. During the 1920s, these national communities became stronger in their national qualities than before and recognized the Soviet state as having been responsible for this development. To this extent, an overlap and even integration took place between local national identities and the Soviet identity.

Under Stalin, much of this was reversed. He saw these national communities as challenges to his concept of the hypercentralized power which he assumed to launch a highly idiosyncratic type of modernization, so that the newly built national cultures were severely battered during the purges. It is noteworthy that Stalin, despite using the most extreme measures in some instances, like mass deportation, was unable to extinguish these newly conscious national groups. Once mobilization into national consciousness had taken place, this could not be reversed.

Stalin, however, took his strategy further. Not only did he downgrade the role and status of the non-Russians, but he elevated the Russians to be 'the Elder Brother' within the Soviet Union. During the Second World War he came close to giving the Soviet legitimating ideology an overwhelmingly Russian national content. Khrushchev added his own innovation to the formula. Like Stalin, he had little patience for national differences and he looked forward to the time when they would disappear entirely.

Khrushchev proposed a three-stage pattern of development. Through industrializa-

tion, nations would 'flourish' and their socialist content and aspirations would intensify, making them ready for the second stage of rapprochement (*sblizhenie*). After a period of time, whatever national differences still existed would disappear and the merger (*sliyanie*) of the nations would create a single Soviet identity.[3] Khrushchev's project was visionary and misplaced and, even worse, it was perceived not as the enhancement of a Soviet identity, but as Russification, not least because it appeared that the 'new Soviet man' would, curiously, be Russian-speaking. There was only limited modification of this under Brezhnev; he deemphasized 'merger', implying that the stage of 'rapprochement' would last a very long time.

This, in brief, was the Soviet project that was to be imposed on the newly integrated Central and Eastern Europe after 1945. While the Khrushchevian and Brezhnevian turns were relatively marginal, off-stage points of reference to East European policymakers, the Soviet doctrine did remain in the background and could be called on to justify policy changes.

The Project in Eastern Europe

The new rulers of Eastern Europe understood that they were engaged in a major enterprise of having to resocialize the societies they ruled in order to eliminate the 'false consciousness' of nationhood and to develop the 'proper' proletarian ethos. Buoyed up by their own revolutionary beliefs and using what they regarded as the appropriate revolutionary methods, the communist parties pursued a strategy of penetration, of seekng to impose the power of the party-state, which they understood as the repository of perfect rationality, to enforce their own utopian vision on a recalcitrant society. Essentially, the views, values, and beliefs of the masses were seen as reactionary and backward in as much as they did not serve whatever goals the party insisted on at the time. In overall historical terms, this was extraordinary in two respects. It reversed the broad assumption of European history that society was creative and the state was reactive. And in its attempt to construct a wholly homogeneous social entity, the party tried to eliminate feedback from all spheres.

For party ideologues, whose thinking was crude and simplistic, categories like national consciousness were relics of the past which could be rapidly liquidated. There was little problem with this approach at the level of words. Nationhood was termed 'reactionary' and 'bourgeois' and anything that the party did not like was simply tarred with this brush, which meant that it could have criminal sanctions visited upon it. Numerous victims of Stalinism suffered as 'bourgeois nationalists'. But the party believed that agitprop, repression and the threat of force would be sufficient to achieve its aims. With a minority, this effort was successful, but the majority complied rather than internalized the new system of values.

There were several reasons for this apart from the inherent implausibility of trying to construct a perfect system in so short a time or at all. The actual content of the new proletarian consciousness was very much at variance with what the majority understood to be authentic. Bonds of loyalty, the set of meanings through which the world was understood, cognitive categories and social identities were all colored by the experience of nationhood. Indeed, it could be argued that even at the height of Stalinism, the existence of states with national pasts and loyalties gave the new communist sys-

tems an unacknowledged foundation – communism in this sense was parasitical on nationhood. Post-war reconstruction, the overrapid industrialization, the massive demographic dislocation and overall social turmoil of the Stalinist period were made feasible because a sense of community with its roots in nationhood was already in place. Communism may have tried very hard to create a new identity, but it could not have undertaken its project without the prior work done by nationalism.

Yet the communists then set out to destroy these bonds of cohesion in the expectation that their own project would raise society to a 'higher' level of consciousness and thus establish a stronger community, because it would be rooted in equality and progress (as defined by the party). To this end, a twofold strategy was launched. Local histories were rewritten and the Soviet Union was made the acme of all achievement, the pinnacle of all that mankind had ever sought to create with the aim of erecting a new focus of loyalty. Quite apart from the absurd reductionism of this proposition as an ideal, its practical implementation was bound to fall far short of the high ideals. For what it is worth, that is usually the problem with utopias, that they have to be run by real people, not the theoretically defined constructs of Marxism.[4]

The rewriting of history had the objective of making it a-national, of doing away with the panoply of national heroes and other features that underpinned a sense of nationhood and replacing them with the 'people', an idealized and homogenized conception that proposed that the true actors of history were not kings and princes ('reactionary'), but ordinary people ('progressive'). In this sense, the party was retroactively rewriting the past as the history of the class struggle and claiming to be the true inheritor of whatever revolutionary activity could be scavenged by a careful, or possibly more accurately careless, scissors-and-paste job on the local national tradition. It escaped these protagonists of agitprop history that their methodology was not unlike the working methods of the 'bourgeois historians' that they affected to despise – they took the bits of history that they liked and ignored the rest. In a word, they wrote propaganda.

The other leg of this project was the glorification of the Soviet Union and, of course, its living embodiment, Stalin. This frequently descended into what would have been farce, had it not been backed up by terror. The Soviet Union, incorporating Russia, became the source of all the knowledge that mankind had accumulated, it was the source of all 'progress', technological invention, the ultimate exemplar of everything, because in effect it was perfect. The rationale of this enterprise was that communism was in the process of constructing a perfect society and this proposition was collapsed into the political decision that it already was a perfect system.[5] The Sovietization of Central and Eastern Europe was accompanied by Russification. Not only was Russian made a compulsory language in schools, but Soviet (Russian) cultural and scientific output was imposed on the local traditions, in an attempt to dilute and transform them and thereby 'perfect' them or, to use the tautologous expression favored then and later, 'further perfect' them. The entire undertaking was accompanied by a far-reaching restructuring of symbols and rituals, in the expectation that as a result the population would transform its system of values into one that corresponded to the desires of the new rulers.

So much for the aims of the communist project – the outcome was more than a little different. It did have consequences, but many of these were unintended and counterproductive from the standpoint of party goals. In fact, something approaching a communist identity was created, but it proved to be an animal considerably at variance with the aims of the party propagandists and strategists.

The communists' task was to bring into being the industrial proletariat in the name of which they had seized power (the Czech lands and East Germany excepted). This required a vast undertaking in terms of social engineering. Large numbers of people were constrained to abandon a rural existence and to adopt urban ways of life. This demographic shift was bound to be painful and the new urban masses had to be offered compensation for their travails. In material terms, this meant giving the ex-peasants a degree of existential security that they had lacked in the countryside. In ontological and symbolic terms, however, their loyalty to the system was to be cemented by the promise of an egalitarian utopia. They were to be integrated into 'socialism', a promised world of boundless plenty and the realization of their dreams of peasant salvation through a single act of transformation.

The difficulty with this endeavor was that the socialism on offer was highly reductionist. Instead of looking to replicate the complex variety of roles, identities, values and interests of modernity, it imposed a single, simplified idea of what the ideal socialist should be like. In essence, this personage, the mythical 'communist man', was to be a figure taken from the 19th century romantic if not indeed sentimentalized image of the 'worker'. The ideal was a male, manual worker, using relatively simple technology, working collectively with others. The image of Stakhanov, the Donbass miner who was to be ideal-type figure of 'socialist emulation', illustrates this proposition quite clearly.[6]

There was more to the new identity than that, of course. The communist modernization project impacted on every area of life, but it was an illusion, born presumably of the ideological assurance derived from Marxism-Leninism, that all previous identities would simply be wiped out by the inherent 'superiority' of the new system. In reality, there arose a highly complex, multi-layered interaction between what the communists wanted and the way in which different strata of the population responded. One of the key consequences of the reductionism of Marxism-Leninism was that the response to it was equally oversimplified and homogenized. The new system may have succeeded in wiping away most of the weak civil society that preceded it, but it failed in instilling a proper Marxist consciousness in society.

What the newly urbanized strata took from what was on offer was not the whole package, but what their cognitive categories enabled them to accept. This set of categories was informed by two older currents – the messianism and radicalism of the peasant mind-set and a sense of nationhood – and a newer one, fear and confusion.[7] In no way were these masses prepared for the trauma of urbanization, let alone for the uniquely harsh and overrapid implementation of the strategy insisted on by the communists. What came into being was a markedly particular type of identity, one born as much despite the new ruling values as in conformity with them. The essential features of this new identity were a collectivism, a dependence on the state coupled with a distrust of it and a mythicization of nationhood, which was interpreted as the repository of

the elements that the communist system denied society – freedom, prosperity, success and so on, adding up to a kind of myth of social harmony.

The disorientated populations sought to assimilate their new experiences into their cognitive categories and to reproduce in the new context whatever they could salvage from the old. A particular role was played in this process by the socialist enterprise, the enormous factories that were built in the endeavor to build a new 19th century industry in the 20th. At the very time when in the West giant workshops were being scaled down as less productive, communism glorified these factories as 'citadels of socialism'. In practice, they had a somewhat different role to play. They became a source of collective identities that strengthened the vertical bonds in the hierarchical relationships established under the system.

The individual depended on the state not only through the provision of collective consumption, but also through the employment process in a system where the state was effectively the sole employer. With this structure in place, it is understandable that the threat to dismantle these economically outdated mastodons in the 1990s was decoded as something far worse than the restructuring and deskilling that western heavy industry underwent in the 1970s and 1980s. It affected not only people's livelihood, but also their status, their self-esteem and their identity in a situation where there was no alternative source of employment (unlike the West) and no culture of unemployment. It is hardly surprising in these conditions that the temptation of ethnicity should be strong.

An alternative way of interpreting these processes is to see them as the immune reactions of society against the depredations of the overmighty state. Because these were societies which had traditions of a degree of autonomy and had in any case reached certain low levels of modernity, while they might have accepted the idea of a rational state, they resisted the imposition of the perfect state that accorded them a purely passive role. Their response was to develop autonomies where they could, using the system to enhance and expand their power and where appropriate to lean on nationhood as one of the props.[8]

Furthermore, dependence on the state tends to strengthen vertical relationships and thus undermines the horizontal links of community and solidarity. The hyper-étatism of communism predictably produced equally pronounced forms of dependence and individuation, in which interpersonal connections and interactions, other than those within the family and with very close friends, are laden with suspicion and distrust, with a zero-sum game mentality, to create an atomized society. In this context, the warm bath of emotion of ethnic nationhood appeared as a *deus ex machina*, a means of overcoming atomization at a stroke. But this was illusory, because ethnicity could only offer a momentary cohesion and was an empty vessel when it came to deal with the problems of resolving conflicts of interests.

The most striking characteristic of the new identity was that it effectively excluded any idea of citizenship. Logically, given that communism should be seen as an attempt to construct an alternative civilization, it rejected the received heritage of European political praxis, that the relationship between the individual and the state should be regulated by a series of institutions and recognized rules. Instead the new order was based on the proposition that no distinction should be made between the public sphere and the private world of individual action, that the public sphere as represented by the party-state should encompass and penetrate all aspects of society, including its system

of values.

The idea of popular participation through citizenship, that the individual citizen be accorded some access to power, which has been one of the central features of European development at least since the Enlightenment, was changed by a form of words – backed up by the full coercive apparatus of terror – into participation in the communist utopia. This exacerbated an already uneasy relationship between the individual and political power. The pre-communist systems had been characterized by an over-strong state, the *Obrigkeitsstaat*, legitimated by tradition and charisma, in which power and privilege had been very unevenly distributed. This bred a certain suspicion of the state, of politics and, indeed, of 'the city' where these mysterious activities were practiced. There was resentment too that the state should take away the hard-earned gains of society through taxation.[9]

The communist construct was the apotheosis of the étatist tradition. It erected an impenetrable and capricious public sphere above society, over which the individual had no control, but which he regarded as exercising unlimited power over him and which claimed to have the right to do so in the name of a perfect ideology. All this was made worse by the sense that this experience was doubly alien. It was alien in that it had its roots in 'the city' but equally so because it was seen as having its origins in Soviet Russia. The proof of this particular proposition could be seen during the Hungarian revolution of 1956, where the street fighters were overwhelmingly made up of workers motivated by anti-Russian sentiments, as well as a rather vaguer commitment to freedom and democracy.

The Weakness of the Public Sphere

The nature of the relationship between the individual and the public sphere, one of the key constitutive elements of the newly forged communist identity, was marked by several features that have tended to endure in one form or another into the post-communist period. As Jowitt has persuasively argued, there was no shared public identity between society and power.[10] The public world and the private sphere were not only rigidly separated in popular perceptions, but different moral codes applied to one's behavior in them and traffic between the two was governed by dissimulation, the avoidance of party directives and by fear. Likewise, there was no shared medium of public discourse by which communication could be understood on the same terms by those who were sending and those who were receiving. Instead, there came into being communication by rumor, credulousness, the belief in conspiracy theories where every effect must have been caused deliberately and the attribution of mysterious power to one's opponents. This has been characterized as 'a chronic mode of semi-hysterical (pre)political speech',[11] which frightens, divides and angers those who share in it and whose insular, atomized, privatized worlds are strengthened in consequence. Correspondingly, anything resembling civil society, in which the relationship between the public sphere and the private is clearly regulated, relatively transparent and where the individual does not, on the whole, take the view that the world is moved by mysterious, malign forces, is feeble.

When a society has been compressed into this unwanted and alien identity, it inevitably takes on some of its features, even while it rejects others. The difficulty for the

societies of Central and Eastern Europe was that they had, indeed, sought modernity as understood in the West, but while they were unsure about what was the best route to reach, a minority apart, they clearly did not want the Marxist-Leninist road, the communist modernization was what they were given.

To this complex should be added the impact of constant shortage. The cultures of Central and Eastern Europe were in any case heavily influenced by the 'limited good' value system that regards both material and symbolic goods as existing in a given, unchanging quantity, so that one person's gain is another's loss in absolute terms. It should be stressed that this proposition applies not merely to concrete items, but also to relationships, status, connections and so on. The economic system that came into being under communism, Kornai's shortage driven economies, perpetuated this state of affairs, reinforced it and added new patterns of relationships by enrooting them in urban areas and through the patron-client networks of the new bureaucracies based not necessarily on traditional prestige, but on newly created relationships, many of which had their origins in the quest for goods and interests.[12]

Once again, the impact of this situation was profoundly negative from the perspective of constructing citizenship, because instead of recognizing and internalizing the formal values of the public sphere, individuals came to see it as a screen behind which 'real' processes took place. But matters were more complex than that. Where the opportunity existed (or exists), ethnic networks were generally understood to be secure in the face of the system, precisely because members of different ethnic groups could use group solidarity as a channel of communication and distribution. This development strengthened ethnic identities both because they had goods to deliver and because they offered boundary protection against other competing ethnicities, something that was especially important when the state was seen as having become ethnicized.

The communicational aspect of ethnic group solidarity is particularly significant. One of the key functions of ethnicity is to offer not merely a rational-contractual but also an affective environment for communication and action. Members of an ethnic community have different expectations from non-members, believe that they understand each other better, can decode non-verbal communications more efficiently and deal with one another with a higher level of trust. From this perspective, the shortage culture of communism unintentionally reinforced ethnic ties, with self-evident consequences for post-communism.

Verdery offers some instances of how this worked.[13] Thus where an ethnic cleavage already existed, people would tend to allocate scarce goods to 'special friends' who were more likely to be of the same ethnicity than not; that would tend to reinforce perceptions of clannishness and reinforce boundaries. People sensitive to ethnic boundaries would thus be made more conscious of this by the allusive, ambiguous language of mobilization in which communications were structured, in which it was assumed that everything had meaning, that every effect had a cause (i.e. excluding chance, accident and coincidence), in which national motifs were seen whether they were there or not and in which the nationalist language of discourse was the one that could penetrate the private sphere, whereas the Marxist-Leninist metalanguage could not. Hence where the party tacitly or explicitly used nationhood, mobilization would intensify. At the core of this proposition is that, in essence, because nationhood itself was a cultural good in short supply, people – members of nations – hoarded it whenever and wherever they

could.

The core features of communist modernization have already been alluded to – they constituted a simplified and distorted understanding of 19th century industrialization, but in the process of building this 19th century industrial world the communists also introduced mass literacy, education and the beginnings of a modern infrastructure of communications, including electrification and transport. For the first time in the history of the area, the state had extended its power and its metalanguage over virtually the whole of society (some strata, the poorest and weakest, remained below and beyond state power, but this does not affect the thrust of the argument). Furthermore, the communists achieved something that had eluded their predecessors – they solved the problem of rural overpopulation, albeit by a brutal shock therapy (a phrase that had not gained currency at the time).

The system was hierarchical and top down, but this was not wholly unacceptable to the newly urbanized peasant masses, for whom the party-state fulfilled the role of their former rural masters. And in as much as the system made provision for their existential needs, it was tolerated and collective consumption was grudgingly accepted. In addition to this, it would be a mistake to see the communist system as having been static. While as far as the distribution of power was concerned it remained unchanged at the level of theory, some of its strategic targets were modified with the years.

The redefinition of communism as an ideology no longer committed to pure egalitarianism, the acceptance of stratification (of a 'non-antagonistic' nature) and the turn towards the tacit adoption of consumerist goals of the 1960s constituted a considerable reorientation. These did not, and given the nature of the system, could not add up to a shift towards citizenship, but they did provide for greater possibilities for individual autonomy than before and to that extent empowered society. This dispensation, with its particular patterns of one-sided distribution of power, goods, status and language persisted until the collapse of the communist system.

The development that perhaps had the most far-reaching implications for the construction of identities under communism was the failure of integration into a civic identity that would allow individuals to live in harmony with their new urban environment. Whereas in Western Europe the trauma of modernization took place against the background of a *longue durée* pattern of urbanization, which had established codes of morality and behavior through which newcomers could make sense of their new and often threatening experiences, Central and Eastern Europe had lacked this. Urban development had been sparser and cities had been much less effective in integrating the rural population into urban modes.[14]

The communists set about the building of an urban lifestyle essentially in too short a space of time, without adequate urban resources and with too narrow a scope. The few older cities that existed, like state capitals, were surrounded by semi-urbanized peripheries, not unlike the *bidonvilles* and *favelas* of the Third World, while smaller towns were swamped by the rapid building of sprawling, soulless housing estates. This pattern of urban development was not something restricted to the 1950s, but continued up to the very end of communism. The population of Bratislava, for example, more than doubled between 1968 and 1989, leaving behind an urban development disaster that has implications for the social and political identities that currently emerge there.

These new identities, then, are an uneasy amalgam of elements brought from the transcendental village community and the unreal, romanticized myth world of the communist identity, which was superimposed on the former. The combination is characterized by insecurity, an absence or weakness of the cognitive categories appropriate to the social, political and technological realities with which individuals have to cope and a consequent tendency to decode impressions and interpret meanings by inappropriate criteria. In this ontological void, nationhood came to provide a surrogate, a set of keys to the wider world.

The overall outcome of the imposition of the communist systems on Central and Eastern Europe was, therefore, to create a set of public identities that were marked by major fissures and contradictions. Thus although these societies were pressed into a variant of modernity, they did not have available the choice, the complexity or the change that modernity implies in the West. Society found itself in, as it were, a cheap copy of the real thing. The strategies it developed to deal with this unexpected transformation, as has been argued in this paper, have had an indelible influence on perceptions of the state, of politics and of society's own role and identity in its relationship with both the state and the nation.[15]

When looked at from the perspective of identities under communism, the majority nation had no alternative but to define itself against the party-state. To this end, it constructed boundaries, regarded itself as a separate moral-cultural entity and essentially behaved as if it was a minority, because it was deprived of the power to generate its own strategies and was narrowly confined by what it perceived as an alien body. Thus even though numerically, society constituted the majority, sociologically it was a minority and thus acquired some of the characteristics of minorities.

This history of having been deprived of power has contributed to majority national behavior under post-communism, in that majorities behave as if they were in mortal danger of extinction, given that they felt that they had been repressed in their quality as nations, that they have survived only by the skin of their teeth and that they must continue with this, otherwise the threat would revive. Where a community has lived with the sense of threat, it will go on looking for external dangers, whether they exist or not; indeed, they will create them and sometimes end up the victims of a self-fulfilling prophecy, that the feared threat actually becomes a real one.

Where communist party rule began to be diluted, to be 'nostrified' or brought closer to the national aspirations of the community, this attitude was to some extent eased, but only marginally so, because the nation could never be secure of controlling its own destiny as long as the ruler legitimated itself by a non-national ideology, viz. Marxism-Leninism. It was the unacceptability of the combination of nationalism and Marxism that gave rise to the major confusion of national agendas.

The party, never considered the proper agent of nationhood, was nevertheless acting in this fashion, which polluted nationhood at the same time as affording the party a limited degree of popularity. No one could be certain as to whether a particular initiative by the party with a national content was authentic or manipulative. The resulting uncertainty generated anxiety about the identity of the nation and content of nationhood. Both of these factors have come to play a major role under post-communism.

Ceausescu's Romania provides a good illustration of these processes. Ceausescu sought to appropriate Romanian nationalism and use it to legitimate his rule, but the outcome after an initial period of popularity was to make Romanians unsure about what exactly the content of Romanian nationhood was. At the same time, where the nation could define itself against other ethnic groups, it would do so, not least because it was encouraged in this by the party (e.g. Hungarians versus Romanians, and Hungarian concern over the minority in Transylvania; Romanians versus Hungarians and the fear of dismemberment).

For the ethno-national majorities their distorted national identity mediated between them and the state all the same. It created an uneasy relationship, because the gap between the *pays réel* and the *pays légal* was wide and in many respects unbridgeable. People identified with the state, but disliked what it was doing. They expected the state to perform certain tasks like protecting the nation and were irritated when it failed to do so. When party control over the state weakened, as it did at various times under communism, real social aspirations came to the surface. In retrospect, and to an extent this was apparent even at the time, what is so significant about these periods of weakened party rule – Poland and Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, Croatia in 1971, Poland again during Solidarity – is that these aspirations were highly homogeneous and highly unrealistic.

Society defined itself as the nation in opposition to the Soviet Union and its local agents, the party, and conceptualized political action as a confrontational, one-to-one relationship, in which zero-sum games dominated and in which society held the moral high ground. Furthermore, it sought to reinterpret the party's monopoly control of the language of politics into its own more nationally determined mind-set. Thus whenever parties made symbolic concessions to nationhood, these were decoded as gestures likely to lead to the fulfilment of aspirations associated with nationhood, like freedom, which was not, of course, on the agenda. If the party was involved in a dispute with another party which could in any sense be given a national coloring, the opportunity was seldom missed. Thus when in the 1960s the Hungarian party acted as the willing agent for the Soviet Union in its dispute with Romania, Hungarian opinion tended to see this not as a part of an arcane conflict over Marxism-Leninism, but as a coded reference to the fate of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania.

Furthermore, however much society may have disliked communist rule, its members were inevitably socialized into some of its ways, either positively or negatively. It is a standard proposition that contestants assume one another's features. So it was with the state-society conflict under communism. Communism used the ideology of perfection to legitimate itself and thereby to arrogate total control of power to itself, so society correspondingly defined itself as a single, more or less organic whole superior in its authenticity and morality to the party. One of the most pronounced examples of this was in the Solidarity program in Poland, which was formulated on the tacit assumption of a very high degree of homogeneity derived from an autostereotype of a seamless Polish nation to which the party-state was alien.

Society and the State

What society was unable to learn as long as it was locked in this intellectually sterile

confrontation was either to deal with the state in a positive way, that is to say not assuming that the state's sole purpose was to exploit society, or to deal with itself in any way other than to assume that any deviation from the norm, any variation in opinion, any diversity was a mortal threat to it, whether intellectually or morally.[16] This, indeed, has been the most baneful legacy of the communist experience – the extreme difficulty that post-communist societies have in coming to terms with the diverse interactions that their particular pattern of modernity generates. The communist form of modernity may be a gravely distorted one by western criteria, but it still is a form of modernity in terms of communications, literacy, consumption and aspirations, yet it finds it very difficult to deal with the complexity that this modernity generates. The central problem is that the habits of reductionism, which are informed by nationalist perspectives, have deep roots, with the result that mentalities and the realities of complexity are at odds.

If the foregoing provides something of a picture of the attitudes of national majorities towards the state, the relationship between ethnic minorities and the state is markedly different. While majorities could regard the state as 'their own', even if it did not correspond to how they would like to be, minorities were in a much more sensitive position. They could not identify with the state in the same deep-rooted affective way as majorities, because the state was constituted around the moral and cultural codes of the majority. If the gap between minority aspirations and state provision is too wide, disaffection can result and the chances of stability are thereby reduced. The communist state made matters worse by insisting on its strategy of reductionism and homogenization, which bore particularly hard on ethnic minorities. From the communist perspective, the minorities question was supposed to have been solved by the 'principled' application of Leninist nationalities policy, which in practice meant that minorities were to accept formal provision and be content with that. Anything else was interpreted as a challenge to the leading role of the party and subject to political and other repressive sanctions.

What was curious about this communist strategy was that it ended up as supportive of nationalism in a roundabout way. Precisely because communism had no intellectually satisfactory answer to the problem of nationhood and nationalism,[17] it was left with verbal solutions which meant little more than defending the status quo. The status quo in this context meant that after the end of monolithism,[18] existing national majorities would be given something of framework within which they could find some satisfaction for their aspirations, at least at the symbolic level. But what this communist approach neglected completely was that nationhood, in common with other political categories, was dynamic and subject to change, so that by freezing nationhood in the state in which it found it, it helped to conserve it.[19]

This is not to suggest, as should be clear from the argument marshalled so far, that nationhood did not change at all, but its adaptation was impeded as far as power relationships within national communities were concerned and were left with largely the same preconceived heterostereotypes with respect to other ethno-national groups. Indeed, the level and intensity of communication as between different ethno-national communities in Central and Eastern Europe were low to minimal. On this basis, it was possible for a tacit alliance between communists and nationalists to come into being after 1968, when the ideological vitality of communism was undermined by the suppression of the Czechoslovak reform program.

This process was in any case intensified as the communist regimes began to exhaust

their enfeebled legitimacy and they turned more and more towards trying to rely on nationalism. This contributed to undermining that legitimacy in the medium term by eroding the communists' credibility, given the inherent incompatibility of the bases of communism and nationhood, but the shift by communist parties did impact on national identities.

It brought nationalism in through the back door like a rather unwelcome relative, one that could not be turfed out because he had a special hold over you. The relationship between communism and nationalism, in fact, was based on mutual deception and self-deception. Communists could not use nationalism, as I have been arguing, without undermining their own credibility, so that when they did, they damaged themselves and nationalism by muddying the agendas of both. Yet at the same time nationalists did themselves little that was good by getting into bed with the communists. Here the mechanism of deception was slightly different. Because the promise of nationalism was vague, because it appealed to the affective dimension of politics, because it controlled a penetrating but unaccountable language game, it tended to imply that more was on offer than was really the case and its propositions could never be tested. It was not falsifiable in the Popperian sense and that was its attraction.

The promise of nationalism was implicit but seductive – being rid of the alien Soviet presence, freedom, prosperity, modernity, being like the West and so on. Yet nationhood in its ethnic dimension plainly could not deliver on any of this, only the complex of interactions mediated through institutions, the functioning of an effective market, political competition, self-limitation, feedback and reciprocity of rights, in a word the bundle of concepts associated with citizenship, could bring this about in the real world (as distinct from the myth world derived from ethnicity). But as long as the pressure of communism remained in being to impede the emergence of civic ideas, the misty teleology of nationalism was the sole alternative and helped to keep alive the identity which was the token of something other than what the intellectual and ethical void that communism was becoming kept suppressed.

After the Collapse

Hence when communism collapsed, these political systems found themselves in a difficult if not indeed impossible situation. Communism was brought down because it had lost its effectiveness and its legitimacy, thereby being no longer exemplary and binding; the West had taken over that role. It followed automatically that in the moment of the collapse, democracy, the ideology of the victor in the civilizational contest that was the Cold War, was the sole alternative. Democracy was received suddenly, without preparation and arrived into a political, economic and cultural arena where the fit between its requirements and what was on offer on the ground was poor. The proposition that democracy would operate smoothly upon introduction was an illusion and it took a while for this illusion to evaporate.

On its disappearance, however, it grew clear that the existential and ontological void could not be filled by citizenship because the institutions needed for citizenship and the political culture necessary to make those institutions function properly were absent.[20] The communists had done their work of destruction well. There was only one force in the field, the one that the communists could neither eliminate nor house-train, namely

nationalism. As I have argued, nationalism in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe existed overwhelmingly in its ethnic dimension; the civic dimension was weak to non-existent. The result was that post-communism acquired features and a character of its own, one that can be summed up as 'democratic in form and nationalist in content'.

Indeed, many of the problems besetting Central and Eastern Europe under post-communism can be helpfully approached from the perspective of content. What is to be the nature of citizenship, of democracy, of civil society, of rights and duties, of individual and collective provision, together with a host of other questions of a constitutive kind? The difficulty of finding an answer lies in two interacting fields – the legacy of communism and the nature of ethnic identities.

Over and above the discussion so far, it should be understood that while communism was widely perceived as an alien and as a failed system, it did nevertheless function in real terms. Among its residues is the proposition that people derived at least a part of their identities from communism, whether directly or in opposition to it. Public achievement, for example, career patterns, distinction, intellectual attainments were all in some form or another linked to communist institutions. The relationship between the individual and the state is another area of contradiction. The communist system brought into being a dependence on a state that was not trusted yet desired. The individual looks to the state for provision in both material and symbolic terms and depends on it for status, even while in the absence of a clearly defined public sphere he distrusts it. That state disappeared with the end of communism and the new legitimating ideology of liberalism, democracy and the market are perceived as profoundly threatening as unknown and unknowable. The disappearance of the structures constructed under communism has left a gap, which many are seeking to bridge by using ethnicity, but ethnicity is inherently incapable of substituting for the state.[21] The result is confusion.

The communist past, as is now evident, cannot be wiped out. The consequences of the distorted modernization – not least the transformation of the countryside, the introduction of mass literacy and a modern communications system – are irreversible, however uncomfortable this may be for those looking to eradicate the legacy. One way is to turn to the pre-communist past, glorify it and try to promote a view of the nation that is at odds with its own consumption patterns, ways of life and aspirations. The populist calls for a 'true' revolution have their origins here.

The difficulty of the protagonists of ethnicity is that these transformed societies do not have a clear sense of exactly what they want themselves. They do want change, but there is no agreement as to the speed and scope of change. At the same time, much to the chagrin of nationalists, these semi-modernized societies do accept some of patterns of modernity as imported from the West – in technology, consumption and leisure, for example – and reject attempts to revive an archaic past. The appeal of modernity and existing reality are in conflict with the differentiation demanded by ethnicity. This inner contradiction in the content of nationhood leaves nationalists no alternative but to seek to strengthen the boundaries of ethnic communities rather than infuse them with a new content that would provide meaning to decode reality. Indeed, the more the patterns of life of different communities come to resemble each other, the more the protagonists of ethnicity have to insist on the differences.

This is the process which informs the frantic insistence on nationhood that has been

the single most defining feature of post-communism. In real terms, the material ways of life and aspirations of these various different ethnic communities are not particularly different. But the sense that the communities should be different, in order to establish their legitimacy and survival under perceived threats of extinction, accounts for their determination to defend the moral codes that they believe their cultures to represent. The outcome is to have dragged these societies into a *cul-de-sac*. From this perspective, the bloodshed in former Yugoslavia differs only in degree and not in kind from what is happening elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe.

The insistence on the defense of the ethnic boundary by using whatever means are at hand does, of course, result in enhancing the general confusion, given that ethnicity cannot provide adequate answers to questions of citizenship and promotes greater instability. There is a serious threat that the state can end up being ethnicized, that ethnic and social minorities are finding themselves marginalized and rejected by the state in which they live and which denies them citizenship rights (e.g. the Russians in Estonia or Latvia) and that in turn reacts back on the majority which sees conspiracies everywhere and creates enemies where there were none before.

Conclusion

Post-communism, therefore, deserves its name. Its character is an uneasy mixture of elements of the past and of the different visions of the future that are on offer and which society is finding extremely difficult to place in a cognitive framework that would allow it to bring into being the social and political solidarity that could become the foundation for the democracy in the name of which communism was toppled. The pressure from these various different ordering principles is what underlies the problem of building a stable democratic order under post-communism. The emphasis on boundaries and national symbolism generates powerful affective responses, but these are insufficient to provide for the demands for meaning and to answer the challenges that these societies are facing in a period of great turbulence.

The attempts to create political communities relying largely on ethnicity will produce not a western style democracy, but may well engender types of collectivism that can become the breeding ground for populist-authoritarian systems that will take these societies away from the western model to which they aspire. They will tend to promote thought-worlds that cannot confront the impact of globalization in communication and consumption, which is liable to result in a renewed salience of ethnicity, thereby intensifying the negative spiral in which post-communism finds itself. Thus the likelihood is that instability will persist until the contradictions described in the foregoing are overcome.

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