Woodrow Wilson versus Lenin: Preliminary thoughts on plurality and nation

The idea of the nation state had come to seem outdated, but we now find ourselves observing the growth of nationalism in both eastern and western Europe and so we are observing the return of a certain way of thinking, a set of categories, for explaining the world. But maybe this is only the resurgence of something that had been thought about too little in the recent past. Let us recall what was associated earlier with the idea of the "nation", namely the forces of political self-determination, social integration and cultural identity.

Political self-determination

Let us begin with the first, the emancipatory aspect. In the French Revolution the ideals of freedom, equality, fraternity (or else, solidarity) were held to hold for all, that is for all citizens of a nation, and were set against the predominance of the social caste of the nobility. This introduced to the world the idea of the **sovereignty of the people**, and in the subsequent 19th and 20th centuries this sovereignty was appealed to by all who were prevented from having their say in politics and public affairs. This was reflected in the gradual introduction of universal suffrage, with its extension to men without landed property and eventually to women.

On the international scene the **right to self-determination** found its expression in the idea of the nation. In the new dispensation at the end of the First World War, with the demise of the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg empires, new states were created, such as the Czechoslovak Republic. This break in European history deserves more attention than it is generally accorded, for when the continent was given its new political order, the new borders were far from being "natural". The Paris Peace Treaties of 1919/20 were the outcome of specific political strategies. If the historian Eric Hobsbawm is to be believed, parts of the Fourteen Point Plan of US President Wilson had the purpose of frustrating Lenin's international appeal to the socially suppressed classes of all countries by playing the national card. The intention was that the nationalist movements with their anti-Bolshevik tendencies would form a barrier, organised in national states, against the spread of the socialist revolution (Hobsbawm, Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991).

Social integration

Hence the political programme of achieving a settlement between the **poor and the rich** was not left to history, but was to be dispensed in the context of the national states. These states offered not only the framework for the democratisation of societies, but also for the social foundations of democracy. This was literally necessary for many, but the gradual formation of national states took place as modern western industrial societies were emerging, whose social cohesion was soon to be shattered. Of course, these processes took place in the individual countries differently and on varying time-scales. But in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and elsewhere, the workers' and women's' movements struggled not only for political involvement, but also for social rights such as protection against the vicissitudes of unemployment, ill-health and old age. These struggles resulted, after the Second World War, in the emergence of the social market economy in many western European countries.

Cultural identity

The complexity of the political and social dimensions of the concept of nation have not yet been adequately explored. Part of the appeal of the concept of "Nation" is its cultural aspect and the answers proffered with respect to identity, belonging, history and social rules. To

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cover these associations, the concept of a *Kulturnation* was created in nineteenth and twentieth century Germany and in some countries of central and eastern Europe. This reflects an experience which is still with us today: Anyone who has spent some time living outside their native country, or indeed has moved abroad permanently, will feel the need to work out where they stand with respect to such matters. The questions they give rise to can prompt such people to find their own footing in the face of a sense of foreignness – and this may apply also to people who stay put, but find themselves surrounded by migrants.

There is another aspect that comes into play, namely, that when "nation" is understood as a cultural entity, the understanding of society that is communicated comes close to that of "**community**". Consequently, the idea of nation comes to be identified with a sense of belonging, manageable points of reference and a feeling of being "safe". And indeed – is this not something that, in the face of fragmentation, economic insecurity and the absence of people who can be blamed easily – represents an attractive vision? Is it not a consolation to belong, if only in a somewhat abstract sense, to a group, especially in a cold, indifferent and confusingly diverse world?

However, the borders with nationalism are fluid – and so the borders of making oneself absolute and so disqualifying others, and minorities in particular. **Nationalism** possesses the features of a "**black utopia**"; resentment and discontent are discharged in the apparently safe reference to authorities and "fixed" norms; this relieves people of the need to be their own man or woman and to resist. The repressive nature of "nation" is displayed in the anger at "others", these being those who are weaker, be they "backward" Muslims, the socially excluded, lesbians and gays, or simply people with a different opinion. It seems easier to despise Roma than to demonstrate before banks. Certainly, this is what makes out the otherness of the Other.

Nation and plurality

We cannot avoid seeing the notion of nation as it interpenetrates aspects of plurality. It is not only the fact that the concept has been and continues to be interpreted very differently in the various countries: it is also the fact that the creation of "uniform" nations has often been accompanied by the violent flattening of national or cultural differences. France, that is considered the best example of a homogenous nation, was a multicultural patchwork until well into the 18th century, and indeed in some parts, in the 20th century, too. It is said that at the time of the French Revolution, only 30% of the population at most actually spoke French! The wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s bore brutal witness of how the unity of nations is manufactured politically – and be these nations ever so small.

The astonishingly obstinate habit of thinking in terms of the nation state is challenged daily in present-day societies by the colourful reality of different languages, cultures and life styles. The predominance of the nation state is moreover being diminished by the transfer of decision-making powers to **supra-national** bodies such as the European Union and **international** organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Democratic control

It is time to fill the three key aspects of the notion of the nation, namely political self-determination, social integration and cultural identification, with new life to fit the changed circumstances. The European Union and above all the international organisations are in

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urgent need of democratisation. Their power reaches far into societies and they determine, albeit indirectly, the life of individuals, but the possibilities of the citizenry to have a say are the more diminutive the more international the organisations are. The more influential the latter are, the greater the absence of democratic influence.

The example of German history shows that the establishment of the nation state was associated with the ambition to merge the sphere of action of economic players with the realm of politics. In a situation where there are finance and production chains that operate extremely transnationally, the task is to reassert the primacy of the politics and to subject the power in particular of major corporations in the financial and real economy to democratic controls. It is of little help here merely to internationalise the hegemony of nations. The trick is, rather, to pave the way for democratic rights, a fair world economy, cultural plurality and social balance. As with the national and social movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, the power of all citizens is needed for this; they – we – are the people who shape society, whether we do this actively, or by failing to act.

If we want to rise to the challenge of increasing nationalism in Europe and find answers that go beyond a simple rejection of nation and nationalism, the difficulties with cultural and "national" differences should be understood as social questions, rather than as a (meanwhile fragile) social solidarity being culturally charged. *Social questions are not suited for cultural struggle.* The implementation of uncertainty through the marketing of almost all areas of life, the loss of faith in the future, the growing gap between rich and poor, and much else besides, require more subtle analyses and action strategies than can be developed in discussions among the converted on integration – to the extent that integration is culturally encoded. Nonetheless, cultural differences must be taken seriously, understanding and empathy are needed to build bridges between people whose values, experiences, historical reference points and etiquette are very different. Cultural differences can be riveting, and they can also be exasperating – but there is no good reason to mystify them. It is possible to deconstruct – i.e. see how they emerged, and see what lies behind them – by comparing education systems, looking at the historical strata, and contrasting conceptions of democracy and cooperation, different discussion cultures and ways of handling conflicts. Seen this way, culture is rather political.

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