Nationalism and Universal Norms

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Context

The nationalist aberrations of the early 20th century serve as a constant reminder that nationalism represents a potential threat to humanity – that is, to reason and sensibility. However, despite earlier predictions of its inevitable extinction, expressions of nationalism have erupted throughout the world since the end of World War II. Nationalism seems to be a phenomenon that the world will have to live with. From this fact ensues a heighten interest in its study.

In the social sciences, two opposing camps have emerged regarding the nature of nationalism. The *modernists*, on one side, defend the idea that the nation and nationalism are creatures of the Enlightenment, dating from the 18th century. As a sub-group of modernism, one should mention, firstly, the Marxists (Eric Hobsbawm) and the neo-Marxists (Benedict Anderson), who contend that nationalism is a recent manifestation of the suprastructure resulting from a capitalist mode of production (Hobsbawm, 1999; Anderson, 1991). A second group, to which Ernest Gellner belongs, analyzes the nation from the perspective of the process of modernization, which leaves dominant "modern" nations and dominated "traditional" nations competing against each other (Gellner, 1983, 1994a, 1994b). A third sub-group is represented by Elie Kedourie, who, like Hobsbawm, was vehemently antinationalist (Kedourie, 1993), without, however, adhering to the Marxist theory.

On the other side, the *primordialists* believe that the idea of nation rests on a primordial need to belong to a community, and that this need is prior to modernity. This position evidently has anthropological bearings. It is not surprising that Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who had a considerable influence in many other fields, including literary theory, has defended such a position (Geertz, 1993). In this context, one can also mention Adrian Hastings, who criticizes the rather hard-to-defend thesis that the nation is an exclusively modern phenomenon (Hastings, 1997). As for Anthony D. Smith, his position tries to integrate both the modernist and the primordialist perspectives (Smith, 1998).

Description

Both camps assume that the idea of nation builds upon a pre-political sphere. Modernists belittle or completely reject this sphere for the sake of higher political goals, while primordialists defend the concept of nation as a necessary condition of social togetherness.

Drawing on the primordialists' position, one has then to establish the political sphere as a bulwark against the parochialism and bigotry that can arise from nationalism. From the perspective of the modernists, nationalism itself must be cleansed of any pre-political occurrences and reduced to a purely civic form. This antagonism between the pre-political and the political, between nationalism and civic law, is known as the opposition between ethnic nationalism and civic nationalism. In this opposition, a hierarchy is established where civic nationalism, which harbors the ideas of universal

norms and democratic rule of law, is clearly conceived as superior to ethnic nationalism, which insists on pre-political traits.

In the Canadian political context, and more specifically the Quebec-Canada debate, civic nationalism has gradually overridden ethnic nationalism, the latter being somewhat marginalized (the thesis of the "pure laine" nationalism is no longer seriously defended by any official instance or by scholars in Quebec). Civic nationalism, however, suffers from an important defect: while it can justify the elimination or – in its less extreme form – the "folklorization" of nations and nationalisms within the country, it cannot explain why this process should not extend to the continent and, ultimately, to the world (or, at least, to the Western world). If pre-political justifications have no place in a republican democracy, thus validating the repression of nations within its boundaries, how is this type of justification legitimate between countries?

But the most import problem related to ethnic nationalism arises from its apparent opposition to republicanism, which one can define by 1) the sovereignty of the people; 2) the active political participation of the people; and 3) a constitutional framework that protects the minorities from the tyranny of the majority. Even if one accepts nationalism as a necessary, albeit insufficient, condition for political community, how is it possible to conceptually bring it into line with the idea of republican democracy? Are these two concepts not contradictory? So much so, that one precludes the other? How is it possible to avoid some ill-assorted eclecticism or syncretism and bring the apparent contradiction to one coherent interweaving of complementary ideas? Such a harmonization of the two concepts has, as of yet, never been achieved. The debate seems to have been brought to a stalemate because of the opposition between ethnic nationalism, with its brand of pre-

political (linguistic, cultural, historical, etc.) justifications, and civic nationalism, with its defense of a political union based on universal rights. Many authors who discuss the concept of nationalism in their work seem to struggle with establishing the adequate proportion, if any, that should be allotted to one or the other. In Quebec, for example, while Bariteau (1996) leaves no space for ethnicism, many others recognize the abstractness of a purely formal and law-based society. Seymour (1999) does allow pre-political elements to enter the argumentation, but he has difficulty eluding manifest contradictions. Bouchard (2000), for his part, adopts a balanced approach by incorporating elements of ethnicism and civic rights, but is not interested, as a historian and sociologist, in the philosophical problem of the conjunction of nationalism and republican democracy.

Thesis

I believe that an elegant solution to the problem of the colliding concepts of ethnicism and civic rights can be found in Habermas's theory of communicative action (Habermas 1985). However, the task of relying on Habermas in the question of nationalism is made more difficult by the fact that Habermas himself never developed a theory of nationalism. In fact, his concept of "constitutional patriotism" seems to come close to the notion of civic nationalism, while rejecting ethnic nationalism. While such a statement needs to be qualified, it remains that Habermas considers only superficially the question of nationalism, concerned as he is about overcoming the – in his mind – obsolete model of the Nation-State (Habermas, 1996).

The challenge is to develop a theory of nationalism using the main concepts of Habermas's communicative model of society, and to attempt to define nationalism as an objectification or, as it were, an incarnation of the very idea of republican democracy. In other words, I contend that democracy, when consistently thought through, necessarily implies an idea of nationalism. In this sense, the nation can be understood not only as an objective, although contingent, obstacle in a communicative space. It does not only hold that in the concrete process of self-reflection undertaken by a society through public discussion, constraints of pre-political nature will necessarily occur, thereby differentiating the group engaged in a common communication process from others that are objectively excluded. Such a position is not incompatible with, say, that of Benedict Anderson. While Benedict Anderson was concerned with highlighting, from the perspective of cultural history, the importance of modern communication in the production of the nation, my project will attempt to develop the idea of political communication from a philosophical perspective, one that includes its practical as well as its theoretical side. The thesis is that, far from simply opposing one another, nationalism and republicanism are conceptually bound together, the latter leading necessarily to the former in its concrete application.

Let us come back to the idea of an "incarnation" of democracy. Generally speaking, I understand democracy as a political organization, which opens a public space in which public discussions are central to forming public opinion and will. In this sense, such issues as the concentration of the press or access to the public sphere by marginalized groups are considered more important than the questions of representation in parliament and of polling systems, even though these questions are undoubtedly

relevant. In this idea of democracy, the pivotal concept is "communication". I will therefore speak of "communicative" or "deliberative" democracy. Communication has become such a central concept in democracy because the latter has always rested, or claimed to rest on rationality. In an effort to avoid its subjectivist aporias, rationality has been defined, most notably by Habermas, in intersubjective terms. Following this, rationality – or rational democracy – can be realized through communication, i.e. through discussions that follow strict universal rules (Habermas, 1981).

With the idea of communicative democracy in hand, one can, in theory, reject all types of pre-political determinations as irrelevant, making nations obsolete. Since reason is a universal attribute of mankind ("the most evenly distributed thing in the world", will say Descartes), it doesn't matter what race, religion or creed one belongs to. One only has to adhere to the idea of democracy in its communicative form – that is, a political culture of public discussion or deliberation – to enable the cohesion of a grand community. Most Anglo-Saxon, and Western societies in general, are built on such a theoretical construction, and Habermas himself envisages statehood in this way.

However, this theoretical construction is completely blind to practical and factual considerations. For any factual communication to succeed, one must, for example, speak a *common language*. In other words, a public space is a shared space that requires a shared language. This requirement of commonality may, admittedly, be compensated for by the introduction of an interpreter. In a broader public and political context, however, this type of compensation comes up against tough pragmatic restrictions that impede its feasibility. In Canada, for example, despite some efforts to bridge the French and English

cultures, their relation is still best characterized by the idea of "two solitudes"[1]. In fact, given the presence of the First Nations of Canada, one would have to speak of the "many solitudes" in Canada.

Moreover, a common language is often not sufficient for factual communication to succeed. Sometimes, *world-views* can be so divergent as to render any communication arduous to a point that discussion may enflame conflicts instead of solving them. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a case in point. Even in less extreme cases, as in the relations between First Nations and the dominant white culture in Canada, for example, true communication is made much more difficult due to fundamentally divergent world-views. Thus, no genuine commonality can be reached.

In some cases, *history* itself is a great enough obstacle for communication. Let us consider the Serbs and the Croats. These two cultures speak a common language: Serbo-Croatian, the result of a compromise between different dialects – following the "Vienna Agreement" of 1850. Yet, the dismemberment of Yugoslavia was a violent affirmation of national distinctiveness. Serbs still vividly remember that Croatians formed an alliance with the Nazis and oppressed the Serbs during the Second World War[2]. When emotions run high, a factual communication is made much more difficult. That is not to say that time could not heal the wounds that make reunification unlikely today, but one must recognize the existence of a present day factual obstacle to political discussions.

So, if communication should be the fundamental concept in democracy, then one recognizes that democracy needs to be bound by pre-political determinants that will make it factually possible. It is a matter, here, of identifying the factual and practical conditions

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[1] In reference to Hugh Maclennan's novel *Two Solitudes* (Toronto, New York and Des Moines, 1945).
[2] This is by no means an exhaustive account for the schism between Serbs and Croatians. One would also have to add many other historical and religious factors.

that make democracy possible (such as language, world-views, history, etc). The abstract idea of democracy is of itself insufficient. This is where the concept of "nation" comes into play. In the context of communicative democracy, a nation will be a factual space that will allow factual discussions, the result of which will be a sense of commonality. This sense of commonality will form the ground on which the resolution of conflicts will have a reasonable chance of success. Obviously, even in a linguistically homogeneous space, conflicts of opinion will arise. However, one will be able to rely on the communicative potential of the public sphere to resolve any contention. The situation is markedly different where communication itself is hindered. It is hard to expect a deep sense of commonality between two linguistic communities with their pursuant different cultural references. The affirmation of difference in a context of limited communication will thus make it more difficult to solve conflicts.

To be sure, the reason for the formation of nations is not *external* to democracy itself, in the sense that pre-political determinants unduly interfere with consensus-seeking and democratic deliberation. It is rather *internal* to the idea of democracy, since democracy requires communication, and communication can be realized by, among other things, use of a common language.

This model has the advantage of being able to explain why the claims of universal rights were voiced for the first time in a context of nationalism: that of the French Revolution. In 1794, the French were shocked by the fact that a mere twenty percent of the population of France could speak French[3]. It was then decided to eliminate the patois of France and to universalize not only the rights, but the French language as well. This

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[3] See "Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir le patois, et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française" by Grégoire, available on the Web at http://www.chez.com/buan1/gregoire.htm.

Frenchificaton policy was not conceived in opposition to universal rights, but as a means of actualizing these rights. Indeed, how can a citizen participate in political life if he does not speak the language of the public sphere? Thus began the tremendous efforts to rid Alsace from its Germanic language, the Northwest from Breton, the Southwest from Basque, etc. In the history of Canada, the Anglicization policies followed a similar pattern, as does the more recent effort by Quebec to Frenchify – although less violently – its territory (while respecting, one must add, the existence of its English minority).

To be sure, this paper does not defend any type of violent standardization of peoples. It doesn't even attempt to justify separatism or sovereignism since models of multi-national states could provide for the cohabitation of nations. The purpose of the argumentation was to establish the concept of nation within a discourse of universal rights and to show that, not only do they not oppose one another, but that one is a factual condition of possibility for the other. The construct of a nation, although contingent (in that it can take many forms contingent upon the given context), is not arbitrary (in the sense that communication must be actualized in a given context if it is to become concrete). At best, this argument can be used by minority nations to help justify the recourse to nation-sustaining legislation in a context of universal rights.

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