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*Liberalism, Nationalism and Practical Philosophy*

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**The Collapse of Socialism and the Ascent of  
Nationalism**

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*Summary*

*The author analyses the predictions of the demise of socialism in the works of H. Arendt, T. Parsons and R. Dahrendorf. He also enumerates the enduring elements on which nationalism has relied upon in modern intellectual history, defines nationalism and cautions against its dangers unless reined in by the state based on law.*

The tremors felt after the collapse of socialism and the ascent of nationalism have dramatically shaken the end of the twentieth century. Although it has been said that nobody could have predicted such a course of events, there were nevertheless many portents indicating that socialism had not been able to find a viable form of political survival or a workable economic organization. It thus failed in two fundamental areas which constitute modern age: it did not manage to protect political rights of individuals which had, since French revolution, been the axis of modern political structures and it did not manage to organize efficient production and its constant innovation.

First, the early predictions of the collapse of socialism will be analyzed (1). Second, the lingering elements in modern history of thought which nationalism relies upon will be pointed out (2). And finally, we are going to focus on its influence on the constitution of the Croatian political system (3).

1.

Among the major early insights into the untenability of the power system on which the entire political structure of the Eastern bloc rested was Hannah Arendt's theory about the difference between power (*Macht*) and might (*Gewalt*). In one letter from 1964 she outlined this difference which underlined all her later thinking: "Generally speaking, might always stems

from weakness. It is the last resort of those who have no authority (no consent or support of the people) to find a substitute. This hope, in my opinion, is futile. Due to the same reason it is dangerous to measure a country's might by its arsenal of coercion. That the excess of might represents one of the greatest dangers for the power of a community, particularly of a republic, is one of the oldest truths of political science".<sup>1</sup> The contemporary political science, according to Hannah Arendt, does not recognize the fundamental facts of life, such as power, potency, strength, authority, which relate to various aspects of life. The participants in political life, in accordance with the dominant category of authority in the understanding of the political, fall into two completely different groups: the rulers and the ruled, the superiors and the inferiors. This very division of the political body, accentuated by the concept of the sovereignty and the state, does not distinguish between the power and the might. Hannah Arendt further elaborates on this distinction in many variations. This is how she defines these concepts: "Power means a human capacity which does not solely include acting and doing, but acting in a community and communicating with others. Power is never an individual capacity; it is always a property of a group and exists only as long as a group sticks together. When we say that somebody "has power" it really means that they have been authorized by a certain number of people to act in their name. At the moment when the group which has enabled the power-wielder to rise to power and which has endowed them with that power disbands, their power also expires".<sup>2</sup>

Unlike energy or strength, power is not material or instrumental, it does not lend itself to measurement or storage. Power exists only in the realm of human cohesion from whence it can solely ensue. "As a matter of fact, power belongs to the essence of a state community, to all organized groups; might does not. Power by its nature is instrumental. Like all means and tools it also requires a purpose which directs and justifies its use".<sup>3</sup> That is why power is not vested in a monarch, let alone in an unscrupulous ruler, but only in people, or more precisely, in the support of the entire political body. Hannah Arendt is diametrically opposed to the thesis that power presupposes might; on the contrary, might destroys power. According to Arendt, a command coming out of a gun barrel is always effective but never results in power. From this she concludes that the system of coercion, such as communism was, cannot hold out: "Where might is confronted with might, the might of the state always prevails. However, this absolute power lasts only as long as the structure of power remains intact, as long as commands are obeyed and the police and the

<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Yung—Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt, Leben und Werk*, S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt/M., 1982, p. 564.

<sup>2</sup> H. Arendt, *Macht und Gewalt*, Piper Verlag, München, 1980, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

army are ready to use arms. If that is no longer the case, the situation suddenly changes. Where commands are no longer obeyed, means of coercion are senseless. When speaking of "obedience", when one decides whether to obey or not, the correlation command-obedience is totally irrelevant. Namely, the answer to this question depends solely upon the general "opinion" (Meinung) and on the number of those who more or less share this "opinion". It becomes evident that everything depends on the power behind the might".<sup>4</sup>

These distinctions point to the reasons of the disintegration of the communist systems of coercion. In the beginning they perhaps enjoyed the support of their citizens but gradually, despite the colossal means of coercion they had armed themselves with, they could not survive, since in time the trust and the consent of their citizens for such a type of communalism gradually dissolved. Eventually this huge might collapsed with a bang, and neither guns nor tanks could have prevented that. The systems of coercion become self-destructive in their perfection. The collapse of the communist systems of coercion was the consequence of the governments' loss of power, resulting from their citizens' loss of trust.

Accordingly, in his essay on *Evolutionary universals in society* (1964), Parsons asserts that modern capitalism has lost the intensity of open class struggle. By means of social stratification it gave legitimacy to the disparity in salaries based on the functional allocation of social tasks; by means of monetary economy it unraveled local social ties and established an extensive network of social relationships. Besides, it is exceptionally important that modern capitalism created a universalist system of rights, the major creation of modern age. And finally, capitalism created "democratic associations" by means of which it was possible to give legitimacy to certain political decisions. According to Parsons these are the "evolutionary universal" whose creation enabled modern capitalism to survive. Of course, societies incapable of innovation become ossified and are consequently doomed. This fact prompted Parsons to conclude that totalitarian communist organizations would not be able to embrace democracy and its political and integrational capacities.

"My prognosis", he writes "is that the communist organizations of the society will prove unstable, will not adapt to electoral democracy and will not create a pluralist party system, but will relapse into politically less effective forms of organization. This assertion relies, not in the least, on the fact that communist parties everywhere emphasized the necessity for their subjects to be educated for the new society. In time, its legitimacy will surely be undermined if party leaderships are not willing to trust the people that they allegedly educated. To trust people implies handing over to them a part of political responsibility. This can only mean that the

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

monolithic and unified party must finally give up on its monopoly of political responsibility" (Parsons, *op. cit.*).

The breakdown of party monolithism brought about the weakening of the party's integrational force in the society which marked the beginning of the disintegrational processes which it could not check.

The similar prognoses, despite his criticism of Parsons, were made relatively early by Rolf Dahrendorf in his theory of social conflicts. He claims that social conflicts make the living core of a society, while peace represents its death. Conflicts are not dysfunctional but always give rise to the new and the better. It is possible to classify social systems according to whether they allow and encourage social conflicts and how they channel them. Consequently, in totalitarian systems (such as Stalinism), which suppress social conflicts, the conflicts nevertheless come to a head.

"In modern totalitarian societies based on ideological state parties, the risk is, primarily from the point of view of the rulers, that the only sanctioned organization, the state party itself, will become the source of the oppositional developments and revolutionary conflicts". This claim might have been tested on numerous Eastern bloc state parties. In a strictly centralist system, "mediatory" alliances and institutions which could mobilize the potential for conflicts, channel them and creatively use them, are lacking.

My thesis is that only in the light of the collapse of socialism can we adequately assess the prospects and the dangers of nationalism. Nationalist movements, though genuinely hostile towards communist dictatorships, are in danger to adopt many elements of the same system. That is why the breakup of the Eastern bloc and the ascent of nationalism should be discussed jointly.

## 2.

The causes of the breakup of the Eastern bloc could have been foretold. This process went hand in hand with the boom of nationalism. The trend has provoked major conflicts not only in the newly liberated countries; in Western democracies nationalism has also become a contentious issue. It is only too natural that nationalist tendencies have taken root in postcommunist countries. It is generally known that the sole integrational force in communist countries was the party, which had its own state, i.e. its army, its courts and its media. This completely destroyed the civic culture of participation in political life as well as any individual entrepreneurship in economy. When Yugoslavia was on its last legs, it used to be said that its sole integrational force was the Federal Army; the situation was similar in other communist countries. Hannah Arendt has taught us that political power cannot be based on guns. The nationalist movements have

proved remarkably powerful in the newly created circumstances, which requires theoretical explanation.

The major incentive for a comprehensive assessment of modern nationalism came from English-speaking countries: Britain, USA and Canada. In Canada one periodical devoted only to the problem of nationalism is published.

In Germany, particularly after its unification, a vehement debate has been going on about the significance and the role of nation and nationalism: on the one hand, nationalism is defined as an ideology of national intolerance and aggressiveness, and on the other, the importance of the nation is stressed, for the time being central for the homogenization of the community, the foundation of the democratic political constitution and its functioning. The debates range from the hard-core antinationalism of Peter Glotz or Dieter Oberndorf to the extreme nationalism of Arnulf Baring, Michael Wolfsohn or Ernst Nolte. These debates are of particular interest to us since we are under the sway of German cultural sphere.

The role of the nation and nationalism will be outlined in several steps: first, the spiritual and historical foundations of modern political communities will be defined (a); this will be followed by the enumeration of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of modern society (b); and, finally, the notion of nation and nationalism will be defined.

*(a) Which is the spiritual and historical position of the modern political community?*

They are secularized communities within which individuals have to shape their communal life through their actions and the use of their reason. This process in its essence "removes magic from the world" and enables a full development of men's creative powers. The secularization of the world is the denouement of modern political conceptions of the last remnants of Christian thought. The new motto is: "Have courage to use your own intellect" (Kant). People must get out of their adolescence, for which they are alone to blame. Adolescence is the inability to use our intellect without somebody else's help. Who would not recognize these words as the parting words of another period, called enlightenment!

Benedict Anderson, the authority on nationalism, suggests that the history of nations is possible only after the three traditional concepts have been done away with: first, that the access to ontological truth is possible only via a certain language; second, the concept that a society is a naturally formed community under the rule of a dominating center i.e. a monarch; and third, cosmology and history have to be separated. This means that the primordial unity of the world and people has disap-

peared.<sup>5</sup> The project of modernity exists in the definitive “secularization of the world” and is developing within the immanence of the reason. This project puts people into a completely new situation. They have to sustain themselves on their own and from within themselves. This required a totally new interpretation of both the individual moral living and the communal living. Entirely new concepts of human society emerged which have proved efficient up to present day.

In this joyous celebration of reason and the human capacity for survival we can hear rumblings of entirely different tenor: Burk, Tocqueville and Heidegger and Vogelin, just to mention a few.

The starting point of Heidegger’s famous interpretation of modern metaphysics is “that thinking, in its new place, has from the start been determined by the superiority of consciousness and, consequently, the superiority of humans”.<sup>6</sup> The final stage of that process he sees in Marxism: “Namely, Marxism gives precedence to production: the social production of society (society produces itself) and the self-production of people as social beings. According to his opinion, Marxism represents today’s thinking since in it the principle of self-constitution of people and society rule”.<sup>7</sup> And then Heidegger pronounces his judgment on the whole process: “The self-preservation of people poses the danger of self-destruction”. This is followed by the conclusion: “With Marx, the state of ultimate nihilism was reached”.<sup>8</sup>

If we read this sentence *politically*, “it means that politics has been turned into a way of self-preservation”<sup>9</sup>. This has, as a matter of fact, shaped modern way of thinking.

Another theoretician who had some interest in politics was Eric Vogelin. In his book, *The New Science of Politics*, he arrived at an apocalyptic and fascinating diagnosis. According to him, the root of all evils lies in the triumph of the reason, in the realization of the ideals of the enlightenment. The evil of modernity is called gnosis: Stalin and Hitler were the extreme variants of the revolt against God and religion. The disregard for the revelation hurled people into the abyss of the totalitarian rule. Mass movements are led by the ideologues of the twentieth century. The precipitous descent of modernity into totalitarianisms is the result of the twentieth century. Vogelin goes on to claim: “The massiveness of this his-

<sup>5</sup> B. Anderson, *Nacija: zamišljena zajednica*, Zagreb, 1990, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> M. Heidegger, *Vier Seminare*, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt/M., 1977, p. 125.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125; *idem*, *Holzwege*, p. 201, *Seinsfrage 1955, Nietzsche I, II*, 1961.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

torical phenomenon must be given much thought to, if we want to understand the massiveness of the gnostic tendencies of our time".<sup>10</sup>

Vogelin thinks that the lack of belief led to vicious and predatory behaviour in concrete social situations. In the postscript of his last letter to Alfred Schütz of January 1st, 1953, Vogelin sets forth (referring to Heidegger) an extreme thesis: "Heidegger, who in his later works parted ways with his beginnings in existential philosophy and romanticism, formulates this problem extremely uncompromisingly: 'Who does not believe, cannot think'".<sup>11</sup>

From the standpoint of modernity and its spiritual and historical position, there is an ambivalent view of nationalism. On the one hand it is considered a restriction imposed on the self-constituting mankind while on the other it is considered a collective subject, i.e. the cumulative power of unified individuals.

Let us put this ambivalence aside for the time being.

*(b) Modernity is defined by two opposing forces: one is centrifugal and the other centripetal.*

The centrifugal or emancipatory tendency centers round the concept of a "civil society" (Hegel). "In a civil society", writes Hegel, "everybody is a purpose to themselves, everything else is nothing to them" (§ 182). However, that "selfish purpose in its realization is conditioned by universality" which "establishes a system of comprehensive interdependence" (§ 183). Hegel calls this system the external state, the state of necessity and intellect. This, basically work-related interdependence releases us from the ties based on origin, family, religion and nation. Only after such an emancipation from individual circumstances are we able to act as human beings. Only then can people be themselves, only then can the universal exchange of goods occur. A worker becomes the symbol of the equality of people and the measure of political constitution. This process is never-ending and tends to embrace the entire society and the whole world. The world society is possible solely on such a base. However, it has been proved that the self-constitution of the working process as the sole basis for the universal unification of people is not possible. This universality, founded on private interest, cannot bring about common purpose. Relations among people petrify since they are reduced to the process of balancing private interests. The erosion of solidarity ensues; it cannot be recompensed with the welfare state, insurance state or the night guardian state.

<sup>10</sup> *Merkur*, 1952.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Vogelin, Alfred Schutz, Leo Strauss, Aron Gurwitsch, *Briefwechsel über "Die neue Wissenschaft der Politik"*, Freiburg, 1953, p. 98.

Although, as Dahrendorf says, “the industrial production forces are no longer within the realm of a national state, the power of the political should not be underestimated”.<sup>12</sup> The functions of certain deeper ties can today to a large extent be taken over by the national state. There is simply a limit to the possibilities of multicultural assimilation. In this a strong ambivalence is also displayed: on the one hand the interdependence is gaining momentum, and on the other, our rights, our freedom and the mutual personal recognition can be attained only within a smaller area. And that area is still the national state. So, even if the world state were possible, it need not be realized in order to preserve the variety of humanity.

The tendency of emancipation can be considered as a big success for modern society only when not directed against the spiritual forces that have made it possible. In other words, centrifugal forces make sense unless they represent an obstacle for the return of people to their historical existence.

### (c) *The concept of nation and nationality*

I accept the division into nation and nationality which was elaborated by Bernhard Peters. He defines nation “as a form of a symbolic or imaginary community which does not necessarily coincide with the form of collective identity, in which members of modern societies are regarded as citizens, i.e. as members of a legal and political system”.<sup>13</sup> From this he draws the following conclusion: “Nations in this sense are communities that can refer to one, already established organization”.<sup>14</sup> It is a form of collective identity which was either created by a state or it emerged within a state.

The modern state has shaped political unity in a specific manner, put a lid on religious civil wars, rationalized relationships, caused changes in economic, social and cultural medieval institutions. It gave more permanence, solidity and spiritual cohesion to political unities. With the formation of national borders there emerges the national will as a strong political bond, the center (i.e. the capital), the seat of the supreme authority is formed, the state becomes the sole agency with the legitimate right of coercion, the function of law changes, sovereignty becomes the central feature of the state, modern administration is formed and the public is created. Most significantly, the emergence of national opinion may be attributed to the state. The concept of nation, a consequence of the function-

<sup>12</sup> R. Dahrendorf, *Merkur*, 1994, Heft 9/10, pp. 757–765.

<sup>13</sup> B. Peters, *Die Integration moderner Gesellschaften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M., 1993, p. 192.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.



ing statehood, was mentioned for the first time in the works of Leibnitz and Fenelon. It is no wonder that the concept of nation and nationality first made a breakthrough in France, the first modern state in human history, and that the first guru of nationalism was J. J. Rousseau. The concepts of state and nation, statehood and nationality are inseparable. The latest events have shown that the most stable political unities are those in which the state and the nation coincide.

However, according to Peters, "nationalities are such communities or movements that are only beginning to voice their demands for an independent political status — whether in the form of an independent state or a special form of political autonomy. The legal framework for this may already exist or it is established when the need arises. The grounds for such a collective demand and the collective identification of a particular community or a movement is most often some sort of *ethnic* identification".<sup>15</sup>

So, in this case nationalism precedes the state and the statehood and occurs as a reversal of the historic process and is analogous to similar processes that happened in the states which have already achieved statehood and nationhood. Here we are not dealing with nations-latecomers but more with states-latecomers that have, due to a variety of reasons, failed to come into existence.

Modern nationalism is two-faced: on the one hand, it is a result of state functioning, and on the other it can foster the creation of a state or autonomy of an ethnicity. When discussing nation, two concepts are most often used. One is the so called German concept of nation based on the origin and the language (*Abstammung und Sprache*), according to which a nation is preordained regardless of whether its members want it or not. An individual is predestined to belong to a nation, regardless of their will, and can only function from it. The other is the French concept of nation which is based on individual consent to belong to a nation. That concept of nationality includes only those individuals that want to belong to a nationality. As Renan so aptly said: "L'existence d'une nation est un plébiscite de tous les jours".

Regardless of this division, nation and nationality are highly dependent on a state: where the state based on law preceded national homogenization a high degree of universality was achieved which served as a bulwark against the excesses of nationalism. Where there was no state based on law, nationalist movements turned into vicious dictatorships.

In today's complex societies a plethora of factors influence the stability of a system. The creation of legal structures was the requisite base for the modern state. The national principle limits the number of citizens as

<sup>15</sup> Peters, *ibid.*, p. 193.

well as the universality of modern natural law. The merging of the principles of the state based on law and the national state occurred immediately after the collapse of monarchies. In fact, the state was able to generate universal mobilization only on the basis on national consolidation. Nation, as the foundation of democracy, has insofar played the key role. Namely, it creates homogeneity and solidarity essential for the functioning of democracy. Democracies evolve within a state with the nation as the most powerful source of generating solidarity, both horizontal and vertical. Today not a single state can do without nationality as the foundation of homogenization but different states have different needs regarding the mobilization of the national principle. My opinion is that nation is to play a major role in the creation of a community's common purpose for a long time to come.

### 3.

After the demise of the communist party in Croatia, nationalism proved its mettle in the homogenization of people. Only those parties that made use of nationalist elements had some political chance. The aggression of Serbia fortified this national homogeneity which thus became an all-embracing base for the country's defense. From this high degree of national homogeneity horizontal and vertical solidarity evolved, but this ebbed away as the aggression subsided. Although the structure of the national state developed rapidly, the development of the state based on law has been rather slow. There are reasons for that:

1. The entire society has been strongly politically constituted. The political constitution has brought about a polarization into friends and enemies which has created tension in the society. In the communist system only the Catholic church was outside the system. All other spheres of life were under the party's thumb.

After the fall of communism and the ascent of nationalism, a new party took over the role of the state party. Because of such close ties between the party and the state, all the spheres of life have been trying to get in line with this tendency. Instead of the autonomy of various spheres and the differentiation of complex societies, new dependencies arose.

2. The process of transition from the system of social to private ownership has lasted much too long and has given rise to a sort of criminalization of the society. The leading political forces are in a position to manipulate people and resources. The entire industrial sphere once again depends on politics. This holds true for education, science and judiciary as well.

3. There is, as before, the danger of opportunism among intellectuals. The chronic existential insecurity has thwarted the creation of the elites who would not only want to serve but would, and could, lead.

4. This situation has been overshadowed by the war which has been going on in Croatia or which has, at least, been a constant threat. This has been an obstacle in the process of the democratization, although this should not prompt us to jump to a conclusion that authoritarian governments are stronger than democratic as is sometimes claimed.

5. The situation in Croatia depends on the leading political and intellectual establishments of the West. However, so far their efforts have amounted to no more than fumbling and groping in the dark. Their indecisiveness has only aggravated the process of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the creation of the new states.

We might conclude that nationalism has played a significant role in the destruction of communist dictatorships. However, without a continuous development of legal and social instruments there is the risk of slipping back into an authoritarian or totalitarian rule.

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