

A LEGACY OF EMPIRE

BY G. M. TAMÁS

An idea very much afoot in Europe today—one that arouses political passions everywhere from Abkhazia to Scotland—is the notion of cultural and territorial autonomy. The idea is, in fact, a compromise between the old principle of state sovereignty and the new one of a separate ethnocultural identity of linguistic or racial groups. It was born in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire around the turn of this century, when people preoccupied with the decline of the supranational state (especially socialists) tried to save it by taking account of the emerging ethnic identities. These new and fractious identities were arrayed against the old baroque monarchy, whose legitimacy was upheld by the divine right of kings and by a notion of sovereignty heavily influenced by natural law: both theological convictions that seemed increasingly outmoded in an age of secularism and nationalism.

The wish to preserve a supranational state with no identifiable ethnic or class character, and at the same time the inclination to placate the awakening ethnic and regional consciousness, resulted in the idea of *autonomy*, an idea inherited by the post-Hapsburg successor states and, through the influence of socialist thought, by other European areas as well. But

this solution, while it worked in certain parts of Europe for a time, today proves to be a troubling inheritance. Not only is it ill-suited to nation-states (to those that have existed for centuries as well as to those that have emerged in the postcommunist era); it is a threat to their integrity and stability.

The great Viennese novelist Robert Musil once noted that there was only one nation in

Austria-Hungary, the Austrian nation, and it had no ethnic identity whatsoever. As an ethnic group, Austrians called themselves Germans and longed, when in a nationalistic mood, for the merger of Little Austria with Greater Germany: *Anschluss*. Nationalist movements are always filled with love for the mother country, but German-Austrian nationalism was filled as much with hatred for it. Still, the king-emperor Franz Josef I called himself *ein deutscher Fürst*, a German prince, because for a long time he hoped to restore

the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation finished off by Napoleon half a century earlier.

Musil, to my mind the greatest authority on the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, writes in his masterpiece, *The Man Without Qualities*, that the Joint Empire was supported by a strange alliance, a motley crowd of



Galician-Polish aristocrats, Bohemian-German landowners, the German-speaking bourgeoisie in the east (and only in the east), the officer corps, the Catholic Church, the Jews, and socialists.

These elements had a vested interest in the continuance of universalistic imperial power because they were, or felt themselves to be, surrounded by hostile aliens. Equal subjecthood obscured the fact that Galician peasants spoke Ukrainian, that the Bohemian indentured laborers spoke Czech, that the German-speaking gentile burghers hated the Jews, that the simple fellows who served as privates in the imperial army had difficulty understanding German commands, that the Protestant churches sided with destructive nationalist sedition, and that the workers' movement was fractured by ethnic tensions.

The socialists of Eastern and Central Europe were the first to realize that their emancipatory utopia had a potent rival in ethnic nationalism. Fin-de-siècle socialists—the only heirs to the Enlightenment apart from the imperial court and the upper echelons of the imperial bureaucracy—understood that if they wanted citizenship *à la française* to succeed imperial-universalistic subjecthood, they had to deal somehow with the emerging consciousness of ethnicity.

Ethnic nationalists in countries that were ruled by a foreign aristocracy and dynasty and a rationalist-universalist central bureaucracy set two goals for themselves: a restoration of ethnic or national identity, and the creation of an independent state led by a home-bred elite. Citizenship was to be defined not only by impersonal law and abstract obedience to the sovereign but also by cultural tradition, language, and racial stock. "Our kind" was to be predominant within the state, and it was to

give the state a specific cultural and racial hue. This emphasis on ethnic attributes was as alien to socialists as it had been to officials of the Joint Empire.

Socialists in Austria-Hungary and in the Russian Empire tried to identify the different demands of ethnic nationalists. They stipulated the right of each and every ethnic and regional group to preserve its language, cultural tradition, historical identity, and racial pride. *Cultural autonomy*, the brainchild of the great Austrian socialist thinker Otto Bauer, was intended to provide every ethnocultural group within a given polity the right to decide everything pertaining to its identity (education, the arts, the cult of national past) while remaining loyal to the supranational state as subjects or citizens, taxpayers, and soldiers. Laws were to be uniform everywhere within the future federal republic (or, failing that, in a federal monarchy), but taught and learned in various idioms. The struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat was and remained a universal goal, but it was to be synchronized with the liberation of the subject nations from the dictates of cultural oppression, from the forced imposition of alien ethnocultural identities masquerading as abstract discourses of justice, science, religion, and philosophy.

Thus, in the view of the Austro-Marxists, liberation and emancipation meant also the emergence of hitherto concealed cultures. These in turn would contribute, by means of an open dialogue made possible by a noncoercive society, to the new and variegated texture of the mental life of the New Man. Political obligation, civic duty, and the like need not extend, held the Austro-Marxists, to conformity with a culturally alien discourse.

Both the imperial and the socialist solutions to the problem of ethnicity stem from the late-Enlightenment teaching on citizenship.

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According to this teaching, citizenship is determined by an equality of rights, by sovereignty residing in the people, and by a symmetrical relationship to the state. Both the universalistic monarchy and universalistic socialism fought the separateness of the estates and all forms of aristocratic, parochial, or regional privilege, which they viewed as potential excuses for resistance to benevolent central rule. By divorcing ethnicity from citizenship, Austrian socialists hoped, ethnic nationalism would be removed from the sphere of politics and nationality kept separate from citizenship. The body politic of the future was to be a loose federation of "nations"—i.e. ethnocultural groups. (And without the socialist vision, one should note, contemporary East European ethnic nationalism would never have become so apolitical, so oddly noncivic and anti-authoritarian, as it is now.)

Although World War I blew the Austro-Hungarian Empire to pieces, the legacy of the universalistic empire, along with the later Austro-Marxist emendations, was inherited by the Soviet Union. It is easy to forget that what appears today as a fossil of a societal and cultural monster was originally mapped out as a utopia designed to liberate mankind. The Soviet Union accomplished what had been thought to be the utopia of Hapsburg socialism. It created a uniform political order and a symmetric relationship of all subjects to central power, and it successfully separated ethnicity and politics. In all Soviet republics, autonomous territories, and other localities, one could everywhere find the same political discourse, the same system of symbols, the same activist, mobilizing, futuristic ideology—translated into hundreds of languages. Ethnic, even tribal, folklore was celebrated by myriads of choirs and dance troupes; naive odes to the Supreme Helmsman and Little Father of All His Peoples were sung in hundreds of languages; an official popular literature ("ethnic in form, socialist in content") was executed, under orders from above, by Artists of the People. In each federal or autonomous republic, ethnocultural uniformity was im-

posed—for a long while, even ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan had to learn Kazakh. Ethnic tradition was considered to be the outer garment of socialist man, as indeed it was. The Communist Party fostered the creation of local elites, composed, for the first time in many cases, of people drawn from a region's ethnic majority. The party thus provided a way of preferment and advancement to people who, under the tsars, had been considered rebellious and disloyal serfs. And precisely because the road to ethnocultural self-assertion led through the Communist Party and its auxiliaries, many ethnic demands being voiced today in the old communist bloc hearken back—albeit unconsciously—to the Stalinist system of privileges granted to ethnic elites. This fact alone poses a serious obstacle to those who are trying to promote the universalism of modern liberal citizenship in the states of the former communist bloc.

What we are witnessing today in Eastern and Central Europe is a repoliticization of ethnicity based on criteria that were instituted by the Soviet system. After all, if possession of a distinct language, folkloric tradition, and shared sense of identity is sufficient reason for cultural and territorial autonomy, then why not for independence? When the heady wine of socialist utopia evaporated from the poisoned chalice of Soviet "federalism," what was to hold the tribes together? When the belief in the divine right of kings vanished under the impact of the bitter experience of trench warfare in 1914–18, the old continental empires were shattered beyond all realistic hope of repair. (Hapsburg or Romanov nostalgia is a toy for the intelligentsia only.) When—to quote the idiotic formula of Soviet "social realism"—the "socialist content" (communist-futurist utopia) disappeared from the "ethnic form," the guardians of this "ethnic form," the political, ideological, cultural ruling strata of the federal and autonomous republics, people such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia and the war criminal

Radovan Karadzic from Serb Bosnia (both poets, typically) wanted to fill that “form” with national content, that is, national independence, ethnic or racial purity, and a politics inspired by the great ethnic narrative culled from ancestral folk epics. It is interesting to note, however, that the new ethnic states claim to deny their ethnic-autonomist origins and to embrace an assimilationist view of citizenship. But the claim is a charade. The new ethnic statelets, born from older Soviet-style autonomous regions, are all trying to annihilate everything alien within their borders, exactly as the successor states of the Hapsburg Empire did with their minorities after World War I.

The legacy of the former empires, cultural autonomy combined with territorial autonomy, can also be found in countries that were not part of the communist bloc. In Spain, for example, the regionalist-autonomist movements, such as those of the Catalonians and Basques, are movements of the Left that were reinvigorated by the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent ferocious persecution by Franco. All, moreover, are indirect legatees of Hapsburg socialism.

Throughout Europe, we find yet another aspect of the emerging ethnic national politics, and it too is of socialist origin. I am speaking here of the regionalist movements, such as the Scottish Nationalist Party in Great Britain and the Northern League in Italy, that have been encouraged directly or indirectly by the European Community. The “federal” bureaucracy in Brussels and Strasbourg tries, quite naturally, to weaken the authority of national decision-making bodies, especially national parliaments and supreme courts, and it has found a precious ally in the form of regionalist movements. The Scottish Nationalist Party and the Northern (formerly Lombard) League both pretend that their scission from Great Britain or the Italian Republic will pose no problems and may even pass unnoticed within a united Europe. Other ethnic and religious minorities pin similar hopes on the improbable unifica-

tion of Europe. Even the European states themselves have postponed the granting of cultural rights to their minorities on the grounds that a future unified Europe will make “all this” of no importance.

The European Community is the creation of a special brand of French socialism, not that of the streets or of the factories but that lesser-known variety that reigns supreme in the hushed corridors of the Council of State or the old Ministry of Planning, a kind that is taught at the *École Nationale d'Administration* and in every *grande école* in Paris to Gaullists and leftists alike. It is basically the old Bourbon-Bonaparte idea of politics as administration, *gestion*. The administrator, or *gérant*, of public affairs is a member of the ruling, truly aristocratic *crème* of high bureaucracy, a worshiper of Reason, state intervention, and planning—thus a figure reminiscent of the old, Spanish-Austrian civil servant of the Hapsburgs, who typically received his education at the feet of learned monks.

The elevated, elusive, and secretive world of progressivist French civil servants retains the old imperial belief in the shape of the state as a fortuitous product of expediency and historical accident. The advantages of a larger market and the possibility of rational governance unencumbered by querulous parliaments are of such importance to their subtle minds that they will, when necessary, make concessions to the irrational rump of obsolete, ancient statehood. With similar condescension, they will also deign to protect national culture and tradition for the delectation of connoisseurs and the feigned admiration of domesticated philistines. Socialist utopians always wanted us to believe that, in a free society, government will be administration, since the question of the good life and of a good polity will be settled by a philosophy that understands human needs and can mold society accordingly. The EC version of socialist centralization and planning regards the plurality of cultures and ethnicities precisely as if

they were part of what Hegel called “the wrong infinite.” There is no necessity, hence no dignity, to cultural expression. The benign *gérant* of human affairs will provide funds for the upkeep of the ethnographic zoo, knowing full well that cultural diversity, as an expression of ethnicity, has nothing to do with serious politics, just as tradition has nothing to do with serious economic and social science.

Socialism, by its very nature, is incapable of delimiting or defining the body politic (for socialist liberation is deliverance *from* politics, and the end of all politics). So any peculiarity, anything specific expressed by one or another technique of human imagination, will be seen as contingent. At least while socialism still had a utopia, that belief presupposed a link between the community and something outside it (the Grand Project). The imperial faith linked the community to the divinely anointed monarch. But the contemporary state of affairs—which I shall call, for want of a better term, postsocialist socialism—affirms only the abstract, empty identity bordered by difference, difference bordered by identities, a human condition shown to be nothing but contingency contiguous to other contingencies. Politics and polities based upon such identities can multiply indefinitely and infinitely—and will, until a new idea of the state is found or discovered.

To recapitulate, then: The principle of cultural and territorial autonomy—a limited self-government in some areas of public life without pretensions to statehood, independence, or full sovereignty—was invented for the sake of reforming the crumbling supranational empires before and during World War I. The principle was implemented by means of revolutionary socialism in the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav federation and for quite a long

time worked surprisingly well. But the abandonment of the supranational socialist state after the democratic upheavals of 1989 left only the possibility of the creation of new nation-states.

The odds that these new nations will successfully reform themselves along the lines of the older nation-states of Western Europe are not great. The reason is almost paradoxical. For while the old nation-states were much more closely tied to ethnicity, folk traditions, racial pride, and other tribal affiliations than either the Hapsburg Empire or the Soviet Union was, they were also committed to a liberal politics of rights, equality, tolerance, and universalism. This commitment to liberal ideals, while far from perfect and often little more than a cover for domination by the majority culture, did at least provide a limit to raw tribalism and a check against centrifugal tendencies. In Central and Eastern Europe, however, in the lands of the former empires, the absence of such powerful, countervailing ideals has allowed, or at least encouraged, the disintegration of nation-states along strictly ethnocultural lines. The fatal combination of the contradictory principles of nation-states and of ethnocultural autonomy are quickly destroying the state as such. Combined in Eastern and Central Europe with a generalized contempt for institutions of any kind, a profound distrust of the law, and the collapse of all spiritual and secular authority—and inspired by a well-founded suspicion of the intentions of ethnic majorities and nationalist governments—ethnocultural autonomy, which seemed to have a conservative aspect in its commitment to tradition and custom, is today the mightiest weapon of nihilism.