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Ethnicity and nationalism in Europe today

E.J. HOBSBAWM

David I. Kertzer,
William R. Kenan Jr.
Professor of
Anthropology at
Bowdoin College,
organized the plenary
session. Among his
books are *Ritual,*
Politics, and Power
(1988, Yale U. P.) and
Comrades and
Christians: Religion and
Political Struggle in
Communist Italy (1990,
Waveland P.; revised
edition of book
published in 1980 by
Cambridge U.P.).

Katherine Verdery,
Professor of
Anthropology at Johns
Hopkins University, is
the author of two books
on Romanian political
life and society:
Transylvanian Villagers
(1983), and *National*
Ideology under
Socialism: Identity and
Cultural Politics in
Ceausescu's Romania
(1991), both published
by the U. of California P.

Richard G. Fox,
Professor of
Anthropology at Duke
University, has authored
and edited several
books. Among his recent
books are *Gandhian*
Utopia: Experiments in
Culture (1989, Beacon
P.) and *Lions of the*
Punjab: Culture in the
Making (1985, U. of
California P.), a study of
the evolution of Sikh
ethnic identity.

Following recent custom, one of the plenary sessions at this past year's American Anthropological Association featured a distinguished non-anthropologist whose work has been influential in the anthropological community. This year's speaker was Eric Hobsbawm, who gave the major address at a session devoted to the nature of nationalism. In addition, two anthropologists – Katherine Verdery and Richard G. Fox – added their own comments.

Given the theme of the 1991 AAA meeting – Nationalism, ethnicity, race and racism – and the world events that have been absorbing so much of our attention in recent months, there could scarcely have been a more appropriate focus for the plenary session. The problem of nationalism in Europe, though, is not only a matter of contemporary political concern, for it also cuts to the heart of the anthropological enterprise. The allegiances that people form, the identities that they create for themselves, the histories that they construct, these are all central issues of anthropological concern. The increasing attention that anthropologists are paying to Europe not only promises to shed new light on the crucial events occurring there now, but also promises to make major contributions to the development of anthropological theory more generally. There can be few, if any, non-anthropologists whose work is as familiar to anthropologists as that of Eric Hobsbawm. The scope and influence of his writings have been breathtaking, from studies of the jazz scene, through his monumental three-volume history of the nineteenth-century (*The Age of Revolution, The Age of Capital and The Age of Empire*) to his several books on the history of labour and revolutionary movements. As historian Eugene Genovese has written, 'few if any serious historians ... have remained without a large debt to his work.'¹ Nor has his influence been limited to the corridors of academia. His penetrating analyses of contemporary politics have involved him in political debate throughout Europe. I can vouch that nothing of import happens today in Italy without some major newspaper publishing Hobsbawm's critique of unfolding events.

From his first book, his famed 1959 study of *Primitive Rebels*, to his most recent, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Hobsbawm's work is notable for its comparative character and its interest in the theoretical contributions anthropology offers to historical research. In fact, *Primitive Rebels* was based on a series of lectures at the University of Manchester that Hobsbawm gave at the invitation of Max Gluckman, and such chapters in that book as 'Ritual in social movements' clearly show the imprint of Gluckman and other British social anthropologists. My own interest in both anthropology and Italy was, in fact, given a big boost by reading *Primitive Rebels* as an undergraduate.

Hobsbawm's more recent works have similarly made major contributions to the dialogue between anthropologists and historians. His 1983 edited volume (with Terence Ranger), *The Invention of Tradition*, not only has made that phrase into a household word among anthropologists, but has also helped prompt an extremely important rethinking of the implications of the uses of history in our discipline. His volume on *Nations and Nationalism* (1990), influenced by such anthropologists as Ernest Gellner and Fredrik Barth, similarly advances this dialogue.

Eric Hobsbawm served for many years as professor of Economic and Social History at the University of London, and is currently Professor of Politics and Society at the New School for Social Research. His honours are legion. His lecture, given in Chicago on November 23, 1991, drew

close to a thousand anthropologists. It is reproduced here along with the comments by Verdery and Fox.

David I. Kertzer

I speak to you not simply as a historian who has been interested in the development of nationalism and has written something about it, but as part of my subject. For historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers in Pakistan are to heroin-addicts: we supply the essential raw material for the market. Nations without a past are contradictions in terms. What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against others is the past, and historians are the people who produce it. So my profession, which has always been mixed up in politics, becomes an essential component of nationalism. More so even than the ethnographers, philologists and other suppliers of ethnic and national services who have usually also been mobilized. In what terms do Armenians and Azeris argue about who has the right to Mountain Karabakh which, I remind you, is in Azerbaijan, but inhabited mainly by Armenians? In terms of arguments about the Caucasian Albanians, a people which no longer exists but which in the Middle Ages inhabited the disputed region. Were they more like, or unlike the Armenians who are there now? This is essentially a problem for historical research, in this case endlessly speculative historical debates. (I take this example from Nora Dudwick of the University of Pennsylvania). Unfortunately the history that nationalists want is not the history that professional academic historians, even ideologically committed ones, ought to supply. It is a retrospective mythology. Let me repeat yet again the words of Ernest Renan in his famous lecture 'What is a Nation' in 1882: 'Forgetting history, or even getting history wrong (*l'erreur historique*) are an essential factor in the formation of a nation, which is why the progress of historical studies is often dangerous to a nationality'. So a historian who writes about ethnicity or nationalism cannot but make a politically or ideologically explosive intervention.

Let me begin with a semantic query. If there is any standard criterion today of what constitutes, a nation with a claim to self-determination, i.e. to setting up an independent territorial nation-state, it is ethnic-linguistic, since language is taken, wherever possible, to express and symbolize ethnicity. But of course it is sometimes not possible, because historical research demonstrates conclusively that the kind of standardized written language which can be used to represent ethnicity or nationality is a rather late historic construction – mostly of the 19th century or even later – and in any case quite often it does not exist at all, as between Serbs and Croats. Even then, however, the ethnic distinction, whatever it may signify, is made. I spend my holidays in a cottage in Wales which is administratively and legally less distinct from England than Connecticut is from New York State. Yet even though in my part Welsh has not been spoken for a long time, and indeed

1. 'The politics of class struggle in the history of society: an appraisal of the work of Eric Hobsbawm', in *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*, edited by Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud, Cambridge U.P., 1984.

the natives have even forgotten the Welsh pronunciation of our celtic place-names, it would not cross my neighbours' minds that just living there makes me Welsh. Of course I must add that the concept of ethnicity is available to them, as it would not be available to my neighbours if I bought a cottage in Suffolk, unless they were antisemitic. There I would be just as much a stranger, but they would have to define themselves against me as natives against incomers, or in terms of social classification. This would probably be a less effective form of making collective distinctions than 'ethnicity', but I am by no means clear why.

Every separatist movement in Europe that I can think of bases itself on 'ethnicity', linguistic or not, that is to say on the assumption that 'we' – the Basques, Catalans, Scots, Croats, or Georgians are a different people from the Spaniards, the English, the Serbs or the Russians, and therefore we should not live in the same state with them. This is not, by the way, the case as yet in most of Asia, Africa and the Americas south of the Canadian border. I shall return to this point later.

Why then do we need two words, which help us to distinguish *nationalism* from ethnicity, though both are so closely identified today? Because we are dealing with different, and indeed non-comparable, concepts.

* * *

Nationalism is a political programme, and in historic terms a fairly recent one. It holds that groups defined as 'nations' have the right to, and therefore ought to, form territorial states of the kind that have become standard since the French Revolution. Without this programme, realized or not, 'nationalism' is a meaningless term. In practice the programme usually means exercising sovereign control over a, so far as possible, continuous stretch of territory with clearly defined borders, inhabited by a homogeneous population that forms its essential body of citizens. Or rather, according to Mazzini, it includes the totality of such a population: 'Every nation a state and only one state for the entire nation'. Within such states a single language, that of the 'nation' in question, is dominant, or rather enjoys privileged official status or monopoly. I observe in passing that probably not more than a dozen or so out of the 170-odd political entities in the world conform to even the first half of the Mazzinian programme, if nations are defined in ethnic-linguistic terms.

Nationalism, or rather, to use the more lucid 19th century phrase 'the principle of nationality', assumes 'the nation' as given, just as democracy assumes 'the people' as given. In itself it tells us nothing about what constitutes such a nation, although since the late 19th century – but not, commonly, much before then – it has increasingly been defined in ethnic-linguistic terms. However, I must remind you that earlier versions of the principle of nationality, which I describe in my book as the 'revolutionary-democratic' and 'Liberal', are not so based, although there are overlaps. Neither language nor ethnicity are essential to the original revolutionary nationalism, of which the USA is the major surviving version. Classical 19th century Liberal nationalism was the opposite of the current search for a definition of group identity by separatism. It aimed to *extend* the scale of human social, political and cultural units: to unify and expand rather than to restrict and separate. This is one reason why Third-world national liberation movements found the 19th century traditions, both liberal and revolutionary-democratic, so congenial. Anti-colonial nationalists dismissed, or at least subordinated, 'tribalism', 'communalism' or other sectional and regional identities as anti-national, and serving the

well-known imperialist interests of 'divide and rule'. Gandhi and Nehru, Mandela and Mugabe, or for that matter the late Zulfikhar Bhutto who complained about the absence of a sense of Pakistani nationhood, are or were not nationalists in the sense of Landsbergis or Tudjman. They were on exactly the same wavelength as Massimo d'Azeglio who said, after Italy had been politically unified: 'We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians', i.e. out of the inhabitants of the peninsula who had all sorts of identities, but not one based on a language they did not speak, and a state that had come into existence over their heads. There was nothing primordial about Italianness, just as there is not about the South Africanness of the ANC.

Ethnicity on the other hand, whatever it may be, is not programmatic and even less is it a political concept. It may acquire political functions in certain circumstances, and may therefore find itself associated with programmes, including nationalist and separatist ones. There are plenty of good reasons why nationalism thirsts for identification with ethnicity, if only because it provides the historical pedigree 'the nation' in the great majority of cases so obviously lacks. At least it does so in regions of ancient written culture like Europe, where the same names for ethnic groups persist over long periods, even though they may describe quite different and changing social realities. Ethnicity, whatever its basis, is a readily definable way of expressing a *real* sense of group identity which links the members of 'we' because it emphasizes their differences from 'them'. What they actually have in common beyond not being 'them' is not so clear, especially today, and I shall return to this point. Anyway ethnicity is one way of filling the empty containers of nationalism. Thus Sabino Arana invents the name Euskadi for the country of the people who had long given themselves, and been given, a collective name (Basques, Gascons or whatever) but without feeling the need for the sort of country, state or nation Arana had in mind.

In other words, nationalism belongs with political theory, ethnicity with sociology or social anthropology. It can take the state or any other form of political organization or it can leave it alone. If it becomes political, it has no special affinity for ethnically labelled politics. All it requires is that the political label, whatever it is, should make a disproportionately strong appeal to the members of the ethnic group. An extreme case, now long forgotten, is the appeal of the passionately non-ethnic Bolshevik party in the revolutionary period to the inhabitants of what has become Latvia. The prominence of some Lettish names in the last days of Soviet communism is a reminder of the days when the Lettish riflemen were to Lenin what the Swiss guards are to the Pope. There is Col. Alksnis on the hard-line side and Otto Latsis of *Kommunist* and *Izvestia* on the reforming side.

* * *

If this is so, why then the general European mutation of ethnic politics into nationalist politics? This mutation takes two forms, which have little or nothing in common except the need or desire to control state policy: national separatism and national xenophobia, i.e. being against foreigners by setting up 'our' own state, and being against them by excluding them from 'our' already existing state. The second variant I find more difficult to account for than the first, for which there are both specific and general explanations today.

But before I try to answer these questions, let me remind you once again that there are vast areas of the

globe, where ethnic politics, however embittered, are not nationalist, sometimes because the idea of an ethnically homogeneous population has been abandoned at some time in the past, or never existed – as in the USA – or because the programme of setting up separate territorial, ethnic-linguistic states is both irrelevant and impractical. The USA is once again a case in point, but the situation also arises in the majority of the decolonized Third World states. Whatever the bitterness of interethnic and ghetto conflicts in the USA, separatism is not a serious option, and serves no purpose for any ethnic or other groups.

To return to the main question. The specific reason for the wave of nationalist separatism in Europe today is historical. The chickens of world war I are coming home to roost. The explosive issues of 1989-91 are those created in Europe and, I am tempted to add, in the Middle East, by the collapse of the multi-ethnic Habsburg, Ottoman and Russian empires in 1917-18, and the nature of the postwar peace settlements in respect of their successor states. The essence of these, you may recall, was the Wilsonian plan to divide Europe into ethnic-linguistic territorial states, a project as dangerous as it was impracticable, except at the cost of forcible mass expulsion, coercion and genocide which was subsequently paid. Let me add that the Leninist theory of nations on which the USSR was subsequently constructed (and Yugoslavia) was essentially the same, though in practice – at least in the USSR – supplemented by the Austro-Marxist system of nationality as an individual choice, which every citizen has the right to make at the age of 16 wherever he or she comes from.

I don't want to document my thesis at length, but I will just remind you that Slovak conflict with Czechs, Croat conflict with Serbs, could not exist before 1918 when these peoples were put into the same states. Baltic nationalism, which had been the least of the Tsar's political worries and barely existed in 1917, was nurtured by setting up independent little states as part of the quarantine belt against the Bolshevik infection. Conversely, national issues which were serious or even explosive before 1914 have receded: I am thinking of the famous 'Macedonian Question', the Ukraine, or even the demand for the restoration of historic Poland. Ukraine (except in the formerly Habsburg part) and Macedonia showed no signs of wanting to break away until the USSR and Yugoslavia had been destroyed by other hands, and they found they had to take some action in self-defence.

* * *

It is therefore more important than ever to reject the 'primordialist' theory of ethnicity, let alone of national self-determination. Since this is an audience of anthropologists I hope that I may assume that this is an uncontroversial statement. It is the historians who need to be reminded how easily ethnic identities can be changed, as witness the nationalist animus against 'assimilation', so familiar in Jewish debates about Judaism. Early 20th century Europe was full of men and women who, as their very names indicate, had *chosen* to be Germans or Magyars or French or Finns, and even today the name of President Landsbergis and a number of prominent Slovenes suggests German parents opting for another collective identity. Conversely, a German anthropologist, Georg Elwert, reminds us that the concept of the *Volksdeutsche*, the ethnic German who, by the constitution of the Federal Republic, has a 'right of return' to his homeland as Jews have in Israel, is an ideological construct. Some of those who

have, like the east European Mennonites, were not Germans by origin at all (unless all speakers of Germanic languages are counted), but Flemings or Frisians. And the only East European settlers from Germany who actually saw themselves, among other things, as cultural and linguistic Germans – to the point of organizing the German schools teaching the standard German language – do not enjoy the 'right of return' except to Israel. They were the upper and middle class eastern Jews, whose very choice of surnames – Deutscher, Ginsburg, Shapiro – echoes unforgotten origins. Elwert even notes that there are Transylvanian villages where high German (as distinct from the Teutonic dialects actually spoken) was known before the Hitler period as 'Judendäitsch'. Such are the paradoxes of primordial ethnicity.

And yet there is no denying that 'ethnic' identities which had no political or even existential significance until yesterday (for instance being a 'Lombard', which is now the title of the xenophobic leagues in North Italy) can acquire a genuine hold as badges of group identity overnight. In my book *Nations and nationalism since 1780* I suggest that these short-term changes and shifts of ethnic identities constitute 'the area of national studies in which thinking and research are most urgently needed today', and I maintain this view.

There are good reasons why ethnicity (whatever it is) should be politicized in modern multi-ethnic societies, which characteristically take the form of a diaspora of mainly urban ghettos, combined with a sharp increase in the occasions for friction between ethnic groups. Electoral democracy produces a ready-made machine for minority groups to fight effectively for a share of central resources, once they learn to act as a group and are sufficiently concentrated for electoral purposes. This gives ghettoized groups a lot of potential leverage. At the same time, for reasons both of politics and ideology, and also of changing economic organization, the mechanism for defusing interethnic tensions by assigning separate niches to different groups, atrophies. They now compete, not for comparable resources ('separate but equal' as the phrase went) but for the *same* resources in the same labour or housing or educational or other markets. And in this competition, at least for the disadvantaged, group pressure for special favours ('affirmative action') is the most powerful weapon available. Where, for whatever reason, participation in elections is low, as in the USA today, or traditional mass support weakens, as in the US Democratic and the British Labour parties, politicians pay even more attention to minorities, of which ethnic groups are one variant. We can even see pseudo-ethnic groups being invented for political purposes, as in the attempt by some on the British Left to classify all Third World immigrants as 'Black' in order to give them more leverage within the Labour Party for which most of them vote. So the new 'Black sections' of the party which have been set up will include Bangladeshis, Pakistanis, West Indians, Indians and presumably Chinese.

* * *

Yet the core of ethnic politicization is not instrumental. What we see very generally today is a retreat from social into group identity. It is not necessarily political. One thinks of the familiar nostalgia for 'roots' which makes the children of assimilated, secularized and anglicized Jews rediscover comfort in the ancestral rituals and sentimentalize the memories of the *shetl* which, thank God, they have never known. Sometimes when it calls itself political it is so only by semantic



A defaced poster of Gorbachev in Vilnius, Lithuania, outside the parliament, 15 January 1991. Among the objects pinned up by indignant citizens are Soviet passports, money and a medal. Photo: Alik Kaplitz. © Associated Press.

innovation, as in the phrase 'the personal is political'. Yet, inevitably it has a political dimension. But under what circumstances does it become politically separatist?

Miroslav Hroch has tried to answer this question for contemporary Central and Eastern Europe by comparison with 19th century small-nation linguistic nationalism. One element he stresses in both cases is that it is a lot easier to understand language demands than the theory and institutions of democracy and constitutional society, especially for people who lack both political education and political experience. But more crucially he stresses social disorientation:

In a social situation where the old regime was collapsing, where old relations were in flux and general insecurity was growing, the members of the 'non-dominant ethnic group' [in English in the original German text] would see the community of language and culture as the ultimate certainty, the unambiguously demonstrable value. Today, as the system or planned economy and social security breaks down, once again – the situation is analogous – language acts as a substitute for factors of integration in a disintegrating society. When society fails, the nation appears as the ultimate guarantee.

The situation in the ex-socialist societies and especially in the ex-USSR is clear. Now that both the material framework and the routines of everyday life have broken down, now that all the established values are suddenly denied, what *is* the citizen of the USSR, what can he or she believe in?

Assuming the past is irrecoverable, the obvious fall-back positions are ethnicity and religion, singly or in

combination. And ethnicity turns into separatist nationalism for much the same reasons as colonial liberation movements established their states within the frontiers of the preceding colonial empires. They are the frontiers that exist. Only more so, for the Soviet constitution itself had divided the country into theoretically ethnic territorial sub-units, ranging from autonomous areas to full federal republics. Supposing the union fell to pieces, these were the fracture lines along which it would naturally break. It is a curious joke of history that it was Stalin who gave Lithuania its capital city (between the wars it was in Poland), and Tito who, in order to weaken great-Serbian chauvinism, created a much larger Croatia with a much larger Serbian minority.

However, let us not – or not yet – infer mass nationalism from separatist movements in all cases. So far the Yugoslav civil war has been waged mainly by activist minorities plus the professionals. Has it yet become, will it become, a real peoples' war? We don't know, but there are at least 2.8 million Yugoslav families – those who produced the 1.4 million mixed marriages, mostly Croat-Serb, for whom the choice of an exclusive ethnic identity must be a complex matter.

* * *

If the roots of ethnic politics in social disorientation are plain in the ex-socialist countries, the same social disorientation is found for other reasons elsewhere. Is it an accident that Quebec separatism became a major force at the end of a decade during which the Quebec birth-rate had virtually halved and (for the first time) fallen well below that of Canada?¹ The decades since 1950, the forty most revolutionary years in the history of human society, should lead us to expect a massive disintegration of old values, a collapse of old certainties. The 'nation' is not as obvious a fall-back position everywhere as it is in those parts of the globe whose frontiers were drawn on Wilsonian-Leninist lines after 1918, and neither is that old-time religion. But it is one such position, and the demonstration effect of central and eastern Europe naturally encourages it, where local conditions are favourable.

However, separatism is exceptional in Europe outside the ex-Soviet zone. National xenophobia shading into racism is almost universal. And it poses a problem which I cannot solve. What exactly is being defended against 'the other', identified with the immigrant strangers? Who constitutes 'us' poses less of a problem, for the definition is usually in terms of existing states. 'We' are French, or Swedes, or Germans or even members of politically defined subunits like Lombards, but distinguished from the invading 'them' by being the 'real' Frenchmen or Germans or Brits, as defined (usually) by putative descent or long residence. Who 'they' are is also not difficult. 'They' are recognizable as 'not we', most usually by colour or other physical stigmata, or by language. Where these signs are not obvious, subtler discriminations can be made: Quebecois who refuse to understand anglophones who talk in a Canadian accent, will respond to anglophones who talk with a British or US intonation, as Flemings who claim not to understand French spoken with a Belgian accent, understand French French. I am not sure how far, without these visible or audible marks of strangeness, 'they' would be recognized by cultural differences, though in racist reactions much is made of such things: how good Frenchmen are insulted by the smells of North African cooking, or good Brits by that of curry emanating from their neighbours. In fact, as the global expansion of Indian and Chinese restaurants suggests,

xenophobia is directed against foreign people, not foreign cultural imports.

It would be tempting to say: what is being defended against strangers is jobs, and there is a certain truth in the proposition. The major social base of European racist movements such as the French National Front appears to be in the native working class, the major activists or such movements appear to be working class young men – skinheads and the like – and a long era of full or virtually guaranteed employment ended, in western Europe during the 1970s, in central and eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s. Since then Europe is once again living in societies of mass unemployment and job uncertainty. Moreover, as I already observed, the social mechanisms which assigned each group different and non-competitive niches, are eroding or are politically unacceptable. The relatively sudden rise of xenophobic parties, or of the xenophobic issue in politics, is largely due to this.

* * *

Nevertheless, this is clearly only part of the answer. What is being defended is not simply the position of individuals in group A against challenge by outsiders. If this were so we would not find the genuine uneasiness about an influx of strangers (or outside influences) which cannot in any realistic sense threaten the members of the group as *individuals*, for instance the insistence by sections of the US citizens that English – of all languages – has to be given protection against migrant languages by the grant of an official monopoly of public use. In some sense it is the idea of ‘us’ as a body of people united by an uncountable number of things ‘we’ have in *common* – a ‘way of life’ in the widest sense, a *common* territory of existence in which we live, whose landscape is familiar and recognizable. It is the existence of *this* which the influx from outside threatens. Virtually every single item on the list of what ‘we’ as English, French, Germans or Czechs are said to have in common, can be acquired by immigrants who wish to do so, except physical appearance, where this differs very markedly from the norm of the receiving population. (This is one of the things that makes racism so hard to eradicate.) Moreover, some of the countries where xenophobia has been politically mobilized very powerfully are, like France, also countries which in the past received, even encouraged, and successfully assimilated mass immigration to an extent almost comparable at times to the USA: Italians, Spaniards, Poles, even North Africans. Some countries which are very much exercised about the alien danger actually have very little immigration. Indeed they do their best not to have any. This is the case of the Scandinavian countries – I am thinking of Finland and Iceland in particular – though the prevailing liberal ideology in those parts makes it embarrassing to admit to this form of intolerance. Finland virtually makes permanent immigration impossible, but until the collapse of the USSR it could hardly be described as a clear and present danger. On the contrary, Finland is, as it has long been, a country mass-producing emigrants.

I am not, of course, denying that societies may exist within a specific set of habits and ways of life, which may be destroyed or transformed by, among other things, excessive immigration. Emotionally, most of us can understand the sentiments of the Pyrenean village which decided to block its public water-fountain, so that not even the thirsty cyclists touring the region should have any incentive to pass through it. It would be disingenuous, even for those of us who take another view, to pretend that we do not know what made an

intelligent British traditionalist like Enoch Powell call for a halt to mass immigration some 20 years ago, and what made British governments of both parties follow his lead. What is more, all of us apply the same criteria when it comes to saving our own favourite environments, human or non-human, from ‘being ruined’ by too many people or the wrong kind of people. The point is not whether some places, or even some regions and countries should be, or could still be, protected from the disruption by change of their ancient collective character, but whether this is what modern political xenophobia is actually trying to do.

In fact, fear of the alien today is rarely a traditional nationalist defence of old ways of life against the foreign virus. This form of cultural xenophobia was indeed common in the 1950s, mainly in anti-American versions – some of us remember the campaign against ‘coca-colonization’ – but that battle has long been forgotten. Culturally, the most militant gangs who beat up immigrants in the name of the nation belong to the international youth culture and reflect its modes and fashions, jeans, punk-rock, junk food and all. Indeed, for most of the inhabitants of the countries in which xenophobia is now epidemic, the old ways of life have changed so drastically since the 1950s that there is very little of them left to defend. It actually takes someone who has lived through the past 40 years as an adult to appreciate quite how extraordinarily the England of even the 1970s differed from the England of the 1940s, and the France, Italy or Spain of the 1980s from those countries in the early 1950s.

And this seems to me to be the clue. This is the point of contact with separatism, or the rush into fundamentalism (as we see it, for instance, in Latin America). All are comprehensible as symptoms of social disorientation, of the fraying, and sometimes the snapping, of the threads of what used to be the network that bound people together in society. The strength of this xenophobia is the fear of the unknown, of the darkness into which we may fall when the landmarks which seem to provide an objective, a permanent, a positive delimitation of our belonging together, disappear. And belonging together, preferably in groupings with visible badges of membership and recognition signs, is more important than ever in societies in which everything combines to destroy what binds human beings together into communities. A recent documentary film, *Paris is Burning*, presents a population of the most marginalized, excluded, anomic individuals imaginable: black drag queens in New York. Nothing is more touching and sad than to see how these people – cast out and despised by everyone including their kin, living in and for their regular ‘balls’ where they compete to dress up to act out, for a moment, the roles they would like to play in real life, and know they can’t – reconstruct their own human groups. In these so-called ‘families’, each with an invented family name, each with a senior ‘mother’ who takes responsibility for the rest of the group, individuals can feel that they are not entirely weak and alone.

But for those who can no longer rely on belonging anywhere else, there is at least one other imagined community to which one can belong: which is permanent, indestructible, and whose membership is certain. Once again ‘the nation’, or the ethnic group, ‘appears as the ultimate guarantee’ when society fails. You don’t have to do anything to belong to it. You can’t be thrown out. You are born in it and stay in it. As Eugene Roosens says in *Creating Ethnicity*, the book which, with Frederik Barth’s *Ethnic Groups* I have found par-

ticularly helpful: 'After all, nobody can change "the past" from which one descends, and nobody can undo who one is'² (Well, of course you can change, or at least invent a past – but they don't know it.) And how do men and women know that they belong to this community? Because they can define the others who do not belong, who should not belong, who never can belong. In other words by xenophobia. And because we live in an era when all other human relations and values are in crisis, or at least somewhere on a journey towards unknown and uncertain destinations, xenophobia looks like becoming the mass ideology of the 20th century *fin*

de siècle. What holds humanity together today is the denial of what the human race has in common.

And where does that leave you anthropologists whose very name commits you to some conceptual universalism? And us historians, who are not only being told that only Blacks or Whites or Basques or Croats can properly understand the history of these respective groups, but to invent the sort of history that they want to 'understand'? At least it leaves us, it should leave us, the freedom to be sceptical. No good will come of it, but it won't last for ever. □

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1. Gerald Bernier, Robert Boily et al. *Le Québec en chiffres de 1850 à nos jours*, Montreal 1986, p. 28.
2. Newbury Park, 1989, p.16.

Comment: Hobsbawm in the East

In his erudite and stimulating essay, Hobsbawm distinguishes nationalism, as a political programme, from ethnicity, which can become tied to such programmes but is not so automatically; and he asks, under what circumstances do nationalism and ethnicity become superimposed? Let me refer to this superimposition as *ethno-nationalism*. Specifically, why are they superimposed in Europe now? He notes two forms of their superimposition: separatism, which is happening mostly in the East, and xenophobia, which is happening all over. His answer (inevitably oversimplified, in this brief summary) to his important question appears to be that contemporary ethno-nationalism results from social disorientation, 'the fraying, and sometimes the snapping, of the threads of what used to be the network that bound people together'. As *social* identities have ceased of late to be meaningful, people retreat into *group* identities, so as to defend their way of life and find belonging. In short, his answer hinges on a sort of group psycho-dynamics, in which identity and belonging are important antidotes to a situation of 'anomie'.

I understand my task in this comment as assessing the relevance of his account for the post-Soviet bloc and suggesting the significance of ethno-nationalism in that bloc for Europe's emerging order. Let me begin by saying that any account emphasizing disorientation has a broad and fertile field in Eastern Europe (not to mention among those specializing in the region!), and ethno-nationalism is undoubtedly a result. The phenomenon has, however, numerous other causes: that is, East European ethno-nationalism is *overdetermined*. Two of its other main causes are the history of the region's nationalisms, and aspects of Communist party rule – particularly the 'economies of shortage' that put a premium on any mechanism by which competitors for scarce goods could be excluded. Having treated these at some length in a recent book,¹ I will not belabour them further here. I would like instead to focus on the place of ethno-nationalism in the supposed transformation of socialist systems into 'democratic', market-based societies. For this purpose, however, I need to explain what I mean by the construct 'nation'.

We often think of 'nation' as an element of *identity* – as in the expressions 'national identity' or 'ethnic identity'. While identity does enter into nation and ethnicity, I prefer a somewhat different emphasis, which brings out better, I think, the significance of these concepts for the post-socialist transition. I see 'nation' as an element of the relation between state and subject, understood as a *cultural* relation.² More specifically, I see 'nation' as an ideological construct that has been essential to assigning subject positions in the modern state. Professor Hobsbawm's book shows nicely that the construct 'nation' has historically subsumed several

different forms of this relation. Its two most important forms have been 1) a relation known as *citizenship*, in which the nation consists of collective sovereignty based in common *political participation*,³ and 2) a relation known as *ethnicity*, in which the nation comprises all those of supposedly common language, history, or broader 'cultural' identity. The state-subject relation emphasizing common political participation arose in Western Europe and the USA; the one emphasizing common ethnicity and language arose in many places, most especially in Eastern Europe.

I would like to add to these a third form of cultural relation between state and subject, the one that *socialist* rule sought to construct – sometimes even using the expression 'socialist nation'. It emphasized neither citizenship nor ethnicity but a quasi-familial dependency I will call (for lack of anything better) 'socialist paternalism'. Instead of political rights or ethno-cultural similarity, it emphasized a moral tie linking subjects with the state through their rights to a share in the redistributed social product. Subjects were presumed to be neither politically active, as with citizenship, nor ethnically similar to each other: they were presumed to be grateful recipients, like small children in a family, of benefits their rulers decided upon for them.⁴ The subject disposition this produced was *dependency*, rather than the *agency* cultivated by citizenship or the *solidarity* of ethno-nationalism. Sharing a kinship-familial metaphor, socialist paternalism and ethno-nationalism as state-subject relations enjoy a certain affinity with one another.

To see 'nation' as an ideological construct tying subjects to the state highlights two things. First, it focuses our sights on *contestation*, which shapes *all* ideological constructs and the subjectivities they form; this sensitizes us to look for differences in the way national ideas are expressed and to ask who is arguing what, and why. Second, it emphasizes the tremendous stakes of this contestation in the East – fiercer now than ever – as the end of socialism brings not just 'ethnic conflict' but the promise of a new, non-paternalist cultural relation between subjects and state. This new relation will influence the prospects for both democracy in the East and also the region's integration into the EC.

* * *

In the remainder of my comments, I will suggest a couple of ways that post-socialist 'democratization' and 'market reforms' intersect with ethno-nationalism in Eastern Europe. I ask *who* finds the national idea appealing and how the collapse of other social identities may connect with nationalism – Professor Hobsbawm's main point. My examples come primarily from Romania, where we find both xenophobia *and* potential separatism, in the form of Romanian fears that the Hun-