The warmth of nationhood

– and the chill winds of nationalism

Which peoples have the right to draw a line around themselves and constitute a sovereign state? This most pressing of contemporary questions has been remarkably little discussed by political philosophers. Perhaps this is not so surprising. Even at its best, political philosophy can have an air of unreality. Philosophers debate the nature of justice in an ideal society, but their audience inevitably lives in the real world of flawed institutions conditioned by sectional interests and vested powers. Even by philosophical standards, however, the discussion of political boundaries is likely to appear utopian, for such matters are not normally governed by any institutions, flawed or otherwise. So what is the point of analysing the precise propriety of territorial claims, when those with the most guns will draw the lines where they wish, right or nay?

The topic carries a further disincentive for philosophers. In the modern world, disagreements about state boundaries almost always arise because of the failure of states to line up with nations, in the sense of groups sharing a common culture, language and memories. Yet the idea that national affiliation should determine your rights and obligations as a citizen can seem at best arbitrary and at worst unjust. To philosophers with universal and rational inclinations – and you can hardly be a philosopher without some such inclinations – it is hard to accept that accidents of birth should in themselves determine where I am allowed to live, whom I must pay taxes to, which benefits I can enjoy, and which armies I must fight for.

There are exceptions, however. Stephen R. L. Clark, the idiosyncratic but widely respected Christian anarchist Professor of Philosophy from Liverpool, speaking earlier this month at a conference at the King's College Centre for Philosophical Studies in London, on Nations and Citizens, began with the simple fact that humankind falls into groups who understand each other better than outsiders do. For Clark, the nation is best understood on the anaalllogy of the family, as a collectivity who share stories and ancestors, albeit ancestors they cannot always name. What is more natural than that people should want to join cause with those of common background? Certainly, as Clark observed, it is odd that accepted wisdom should fête "national liberation movements", but scorn the idea of "nationalism".

The conventional pantheon of philosophical authorities offers little backing for such sentiments. *Faute de mieux*, Clark turned to G.K. Chesterton, whom he commended as a more sympathetic figure than is normally credited. Thus Chesterton: "The first principle is that nobody should be ashamed of thinking a thing funny because it is foreign; the second is that he should be ashamed of thinking it wrong because it is funny." For Clark, this thought is central. Nationalism need not be chauvinism. "My nation, right or wrong" makes as much sense, said Clark, as "My mother, drunk or sober". Rather, Clark's nationalism is the view that different peoples are very different indeed, and for this reason ought to be able to go their separate ways.

Clark's thoughts were echoed by the sociologist Anthony D. Smith. For Professor Smith, it is just as well that nationalism is morally acceptable, since he thinks it also sociologically inevitable. In a world which has rejected centralized empires, the idea of nationhood provides the only cement which can bind together the modern sovereign states. Of course, nationalistic sentiments can also have a "dark side". Neither Smith nor Clark wanted to play down the terrors that have been perpetrated in the name of nationalism. But for Smith there are nationalisms and nationalisms. In particular, he distinguishes a "civic" brand of nationalism, based on a voluntary association of those who embrace the same mores, from the "ethnic" variety which is grounded in a genealogical conception of citizenship, and which he admits can easily degenerate into the fanatical pursuit of purity.

Smith followed Clark in emphasizing that nationalism is ideally an even-handed doctrine. We will allow you your rights and practices, if you will allow us ours. But it is possible to doubt whether many real nationalisms live up to this ideal. As Ernest Gellner once observed, "nationalism has often not been so sweetly reasonable, nor so rationally symmetrical", not least because the "political effectiveness of national sentiment would be much impaired if nationalists had as fine a sensibility to the wrongs committed by their nation as they have to those committed against it."

Even if we free ourselves from such cynical doubts, there are other purely philosophical difficulties facing any defence of nationalism. Onora O'Neill, Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, and emphatically a philosopher of rational and universal inclinations, raised the question of why there should be conventional boundaries at all, in the sense of political arrangements which require the world to be parcelled into a number of non-overlapping territories. The existence of cultural and historical communities does not in itself explain this, since cultural communities inevitably do overlap. You can simultaneously take pride in being Cornish, English, British, and even European. Even divisions which do seem exclusive are not always clear-cut, as O'Neill, who takes her identity to be both Irish and Protestant, reminded us. Nor did O'Neill see any principled reason why justice should best be served by mutually exclusive nation-states. For O'Neill, questions of justice arise whenever interactions between people create potential conflicts. But in the modern global village, human interactions repeatedly overflow the boundaries of states. To limit the administration of justice to the confines of states will thus inevitably create injustice, most obviously by placing "foreigners" in the category of those to whom we owe no obligation, but also by obscuring the fact that different groups within a single state will often have different needs and aspirations.

The moral O'Neill drew from these reflections was that a just world would be governed by a nested structure of authorities, influenced by cultural and national affiliations, perhaps, but none claiming absolute internal sovereignty over any territory. Interestingly, this was pretty much the conclusion that Stephen Clark had reached by a quite different route. One question, however, was whether any human beings really want to forego the warmth of an exclusive nation-state for the sophistication of a cosmopolitan confederation. Well, we were told by Misha Glenny, until recently the Central Europe correspondent of the BBC, that Bosnian Muslims and Macedonians in the former Yugoslavia certainly do, since they form just the kind of small communities who have little prospect of happy accommodation within a conventional nation-state. Glenny painted a grim picture of the former Yugoslavia and other erstwhile satellites of the Soviet empire. If there is a lighter side of nationalism, we are unlikely to see it on the map of eastern Europe for some time.

Both the friends and the enemies of nationalism sought to capture the populist high ground. For the friends of nationalism, cosmopolitan rationalism is itself a particular culture, and its advocates simply cultural imperialists who are insensitive to other peoples' traditions. Their opponents retorted that nationalisms are invariably ideologies promulgated by the intelligentsia, and taken up by the masses only in so far as they answer to other needs. Ian Buruma, commenting on Asian nationalism in the panel discussion at the end of the conference, observed that the frequent expression of anxiety about the erosion of Thai identity is invariably phrased in impeccable English by Bangkok intellectuals, yet notably absent from the mouths of the villagers who are the ostensible objects of concern.

According to Glenny, the Balkan tragedy is itself best understood as the result of a sustained history of elite agendas. There is no question, of course, but that mass nationalism in the region is now an autonomous and terrible force. However, the divisions are neither immemorial or ethnic, but consequences of the intense imperial conflicts generated when the Hapsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires met. And even the religious and cultural differences which are the present-day traces of these imperial conflicts did not lead to armed violence until as late as 1941. Were it not for the ideologists and politicians, from Woodrow Wilson onwards, who saw the nation-state as the only possible receptacle of political aspirations, suggested Glenny, a federal Yugoslavia would still be a workable proposition.

The last word went to G.M. Tamás, who as a Hungarian Member of Parliament and the Director of the Institute of Philosophy in Budapest is as well placed as anyone to comment on the resurgence of nationalism in eastern Europe. Professor Tamás reminded us that the east had long been a repository of hope for western intellectuals. Until recently, of course, these hopes had been founded on the left, among those who looked to the east to demonstrate the superiority of socialism. Now those fellow-travellers have been replaced by those on the romantic right who look to the new ex-dissident regimes to display the virtues of organic nationalism. But Tamás suggested that the hopes of these new optimists are as likely to be dashed as those of their socialist predecessors. In Hungary, as in most other ex-communist states, the dominant strain of nationalism is no longer the democratic and modernizing force which throws out external dictatorships, but the ethnic chauvinism which places utopian ideals of territorial purity above any constitutional niceties.

After the conference, Tamás told a story that was unsettling to British ears. Apparently the youths of the chauvinist Hungarian right often sport the Union Jack alongside their native insignia of fascism – not out of any Anglophilic sentiment, but simply as the international badge of shaven-headed mayhem. This may mean nothing much, but it made me wonder how long these relatively comfortable islands will remain insulated from the chill nationalist winds blowing from the east.

DAVID PAPINEAU

The Royal Mail – as it continues to be called – has just issued a set of ten new stamps, featuring what it brazenly describes as "children's all-time favourite literary characters from books and cartoon strips", all depicted "presenting a gift to a friend".

The Mail has adroitly avoided pigs, now a prohibited species in children's literature according to PEN (NB, February 5). But there is a parrot, a bear, a badger, a toad, a mole, two rabbits, and a snowman. Yet in all other aspects, the issue is a PC disaster. There are no main female characters included (Violet Elizabeth's coy pose behind William's head is a blatantly negative stereotype). Nor are there any positive representations of people of different ethnic origins (moles don't count, Aladdin has wrongly been made whiter than white). Tweedledee-and-Tweedledum stereotypes identical twins as people without individuality; the Big Friendly Giant is a size-ist caricature; Father Christmas is offensive to people of other faiths; and mortar-boards and capes wrongly suggest that private education is the norm. As for Long John Silver – this is hardly a positive image of disability, is it?

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Another attempt to define the best contemporary literature is made in the second edition of the British Council annual, *New Writing*, *New Writing 2*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and Andrew Motion (380pp. Minerva/British Council. Paperback, £6.99. 0 7493 9853 1.)

Described in the preface as "a much-needed outlet" – rather an unfortunate echo of Kinsey there – "an international shop window", and "a stimulating, variegated, useful and reasonably reliable guide to the work emerging from Britain", *New Writing 2* is rather a muddle – unavoidably perhaps. Andrew Motion's introduction, making the necessary claim that the contents are genuinely "new", not just "recently-produced", is by no means the least intriguing composition included. Only one page long, it is perhaps best read as poetry. "In the last quarter of the century we can see that the long fuses lit by the Modernists are still alight. Bunting has been given the credit he deserves. Young writers have opened themselves up to Continental and international influences."

It would have made a magnificent subject for a triptych by Max Beerbohm, this, or perhaps Francis Bacon. On the left, Modernists lighting the long fuses; on the right, younger writers opening themselves up to Continental and international influences; and, in the centre, dominating the composition, Bunting, being given the credit he deserves.

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These, maintains Motion, are "the changes which help to shape what is 'new' in contemporary writing." However that may be, the editors have certainly not been swept away by the cult of youth. The most substantial item is a long opening story by John McGahern. Other equally well-established writers are represented (Ted Hughes, George Mackay Brown, Fay Weldon, P. D. James) and there are a number of stodgy fillers.

Interspersed, there is a fair amount of new work, some by fairly youthful and healthy writers, although only Helen Simpson and Esther Freud are represented from the twenty blushing laureates of the Best of Young British Novelists promotion.

Work for consideration for *New Writing 3*, to be edited by Andrew Motion and Candice Rodd, should be sent, double spaced and accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope, to *New Writing*, Literature Department, The British Council, 10 Spring Gardens, London SW1A 2BN, by April 1 (All Fools Day).

D.S.

"The warmth of nationhood." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4690, 19 Feb. 1993, p. 14. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200538061/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=TLSH&xid=fadc8407. Accessed 3 Dec. 2020.