

# LINGUISTIC ETHNO-NATIONALISM: CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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In terms of current international relevance for the so called 'ethnic conflicts' raging in South Asia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere, the phenomenon of linguistic ethno-nationalism is an urgent case to study. What are the relationships between a language, its native speakers, and the cultural capital and the social reality they construct?

Linguistic ethno-nationalism asserts a consubstantial identity between a collectivity of people and the language they speak and transmit. The people in question share a strong sense that their language and their oral and literary productions—poetry, myths, folklore, epics and philosophical, religious historical, even scientific texts—are intimately, integrally, and essentially connected with them as owners, creators and sharers of that legacy. Such potent exclusivist identity, that overlooks and suppresses exchanges, borrowings and interactions between languages and their speakers and the migrations of peoples, becomes even more divisive and intense when the heritage of language is conflated with ethnicity and race, religion, territory and homeland.

Linguistic ethno-nationalism, a strong motivator and advocate of claims of collective entitlements and preferential policies in 19th and 20th century worldwide politics, has a weighty bearing on the double question of how a language relates to the world (to reality) and also how it relates to its speakers, the relation between words and things and between words and human beings. These are questions that engrossed both Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers of Europe as well as poets, grammarians, and religious reformers of many Eastern and Western Countries. It however, relates to many other issues regarding the interconnections between people, language, and the social and cultural worlds they construct and according to which they live and act that were not posited in earlier times and are critical to the expanded horizons of later times, especially in the epochs of nationalism and ethno-nationalism from the late 18th century to the present.

## Herder's Philosophy of Ethno-Nationalism

Johann Gottfried Herder<sup>1</sup> as the philosopher of 'Volksgeist', was Europe's most sympathetic 19th

century theorist of a historicist and romantic conception of 'ethno-nationalism'. He was "one of the leaders of the romantic revolt against classicism, rationalism, and faith in the omnipotence of scientific methods—in short, the most formidable of the adversaries of the French philosophes." Herder opposed the universalist stance, stemming from France in the 18th century, and its belief in scientific rationalism and progress. He was disenchanted with the terror and militarism that followed the French Revolution, including Napoleon's military humiliation of Germany. In short, Herder's conception of *Volksgeist* was in substance and spirit against the conception of the nation-state as a universal project and held in abhorrence the centrality that it gave the state as the organizer of life.

A recent commentator remarks that Herder's voluminous work, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (printed in Riga in the years 1784-91), "was destined to become the romantic manifesto of ethnic or Volk identity in Eastern and Central Europe, the bible of a nativist cultural rebellion against Frenchified cosmopolitanism and a political assault against the dynastic empires—Russian, Austrian, Prussian and Turkish—that had emerged in the medieval world."<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, Herder's ethno-nationalism held that the whole cultural life of a people is shaped from within the particular stream of tradition that comes from a common historical experience. This historicist perspective also inspired Herder to champion a people's particularist experience which gave it its 'organic' patterning:

Herder maintained that every activity, situation, historical period, or civilization possessed a unique character of its own; so that the attempt to reduce such phenomena to combinations of uniform elements, and to describe or analyze them in terms of universal rules, tended to obliterate precisely those crucial differences which constituted the specific quality of the object under study, whether in nature or in history.<sup>3</sup>

As might be expected, for Herder a people's language and its literature were integrally involved in the shaping of that people's cultural consciousness. He held that human groups are 'made one by common traditions and common memories, of which the principal link and vehicle—the



very incarnation is language'.<sup>4</sup> As Herder himself eloquently put it; "Has a nation anything more precious than the language of its fathers? In it dwell its entire world of tradition, history, principles of existence; it's whole heart and soul."<sup>5</sup> This is necessarily so because humanity thinks in words and other symbols; thought, feelings and attitudes are incorporated in symbolic forms, whether it be poetry, worship or ritual.

Thus, Herder's advocacy of the historical and cultural distinction stems from his view of ethno-nations, that they develop and employ different linguistic genres, and that nuances in linguistic use are pointers to different forms of collective experience.

Now, the remarkable feature of Herder's conception of Volksgeist, or of 'ethno-nationalism' in my jargon, was that while being deeply infused with historical, cultural, linguistic, collective memories and consciousness, it was, according to Isaiah Berlin, not political in orientation, and was totally opposed to the aggressive nationalism of the nation-state. Herder denounced every form of centralization of political power and the coercion and violence that went with it. 'Nature' creates 'nations', not 'states', and the basis of the state is conquest. Herder apparently did not forgive Rome for crushing the cultures of the peoples it had conquered. Rome's Holy successor was no better.

Berlin selects three cardinal ideas from Herder's thought, which while they went against the main stream of thought of his time, nevertheless have exercised great influence for two centuries. These ideas Berlin labels as Populism, Expressionism, and Pluralism. Populism is the belief in the value of belonging to a group or culture, which for Herder at least, was not political, but was to some degree anti-political and different from, even opposed to, nationalism. Expressionism is the doctrine that "human activity in general, and art in particular express the entire personality of the individual or the group and are intelligible only to the degree to which they do so."<sup>6</sup> The works of human beings and the objects they create cannot be detached from their makers and are part of the living process of communication between persons. (This orientation corresponds to what I myself have called 'participation' in my book *Magic, Science, Religion and the Scope of Rationality* [1990].)

The third cardinal idea is Pluralism, which is the belief firstly in multiplicity of values and moralities, and secondly, in the possibility of the incommensurability and incompatibility between them which may be equally valid and defensible in their context. Such a pluralistic and even relativistic conception repudiates the classical notion of ideal man and of an ideal society as incoherent and meaningless. These Herdian ideas are "incompatible

with the central moral historical, and aesthetic doctrines of the Enlightenment."<sup>7</sup>

Let me underscore the point that Herder's conceptions of 'organic' peoples, internally constituted and set apart from the external universalism of the Age of Enlightenment, necessarily foregrounds the notion of 'cultures' as historically constituted and is opposed to the notion of Culture hitched to a unilinear development of progress in Universal History culminating in European civilization. Herder's focus on social process and practices which shape specific and distinct 'ways of life' is also for many anthropologists the effective point of reference for cultures in a comparative sense and its necessary entailments of plural cultures.

### Distortions of the Romantic Hederian Vision

**H**erder's vision of a people fused into some kind of organic whole by historical memory, language and literature and cultural productions was, as we have underscored before, not a conception of a political nationalism coupled to a territorial bounded state but of pluralistic "cultures" of "organic" collectivities following their own historical development.

But it took only a certain twist for this notion of a distinctive people to be transformed in the hands of National Socialism and its Fascist Nazi propagandists to a demonic philosophy of Aryan racial superiority and to discrimination against allegedly dangerous and sinister minorities living among majority populations and their expulsion from the fatherland or their extermination in death camps. The politicization of ethno-nationalism and the imposition of an ethnonationalist state representing an intolerant majority on a pluralistic terrain spawns violence and warfare. Though Hitler and his associates were the arch exponents of this pathological philosophy of racial superiority and special destiny, leading eventually to imperial expansion and subordination of "inferior" peoples, some of these same attitudes and conceptions of ethno-nationalism have been operative among many of the ethnic nationalities of Eastern Europe and the former USSR, and are today breaking out in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Rumania (which are in the process of fragmenting) and in many of the previous Soviet republics among which the Armenian-Azerbaijani hostilities are the most vicious.

Among the many horrors of the Nazi Regime is one that touches us as academics and scientists intimately, namely the practice of 'racial hygiene' under whose banner, practitioners of bio-medical science, genetics, biology and (biological) anthropology actively participated in



sterilization, in terminal experiments of bone grafts and limb transplants, and in medical and final solutions to the "Jewish question," handicapped children, psychiatric patients, all in the name of propagating and maintaining a pure and superior race.<sup>8</sup>

The 'organic vision' of Nazi racial science is given an unforgettable literary exemplification in Siegfried Lenz's *The Training Ground*.<sup>9</sup> Herr Zeller, the owner of a nursery receives a directive that all his oak seedlings, one hundred thousand of them, should show proof of German pedigree. To Zeller's chagrin, the dealer from who he had bought seed corn, and who he expected would give a guarantee of approved stock, had gone to Rumania and bought seed there at a favorable rate. Although the Rumanian oak seedlings and the pure German stock could not be told apart, Zeller was ordered to uproot and destroy his young trees. He uprooted them, loaded them on a trailer, and set fire to them in front of the town's council offices. Zeller was muttering to himself as the flames gained height, crackling, spitting, throwing up sparks: "Never trust any one who preaches genuineness and purity, the apostles of purity bring us nothing but disaster."<sup>10</sup>

So it seems that the flower garden of Herder's ethnic collectivity can become in certain contexts the poisonous swamp of intolerant ethno-nationalism.

Eastern Europe, allegedly undergoing liberation and liberalization through the introduction of democracy and market economy, has already spawned the horror of recently liberated minorities in turn discriminating against and expelling and killing their own minorities living within their newly-formed national republics. Yugoslavia is a case in point that illustrates these issues. Yugoslavia was artificially constituted from two unwieldy empires, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman. Since the second world war, Yugoslavia, a satellite of the former USSR, was held together by a centralized communist party regime.<sup>11</sup> When the communist regime collapsed in 1990, the country reasserted the fact that it was actually a mosaic of different nationalities, religious allegiances and different historical pasts. (I am using Yugoslavia as a parable to contemplate our own situation in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in South Asia).

Slovenia and Croatia were originally part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Serbia part of the Ottoman Empire. Yugoslavia had in 1990 six republics and two autonomous provinces. An ethnically diverse country of some twenty four million people, the main ethnic groups are Slovenes, Croates, Serbs, Muslim Slavs, Albanians and Greeks (in Macedonia). Croats and Slovenes are Roman Catholic; They also in large measure collaborated with the German Nazi regime during the

second world war. The Serbs are affiliated with the Eastern Orthodox Church, and sided with the Communists in the War, and afterwards came to dominate the Communist government that was established. The Croats and Serbs speak a common language but use different scripts-the Roman and the Cyrillic, respectively. The memories both groups have of the second world war are bitter, and with the break of Yugoslavia today, the Serbs and Croats are aggressively following their aggrandizing policies in the name of ethno-nationalism, opposing each other and also participating in the dismemberment of Bosnia.

There are many divisive allegiances and interests that plague the different ethnic peoples and the multiple republics of Yugoslavia. What I want to highlight here is that while Yugoslavia's ethnic groups have their geographical concentrations in different republics, (Slovenes in Slovenia, Croats in Croatia, Serbs in Serbia), sizeable numbers are also dispersed outside these boundaries and constitute significant minorities elsewhere. The largest ethnic group, the Serbs, who dominate the federal government and are concentrated in Serbia, have however some 50,000 of their people located in Slovenia and a much larger number 2,000,000, living in Croatia, most of them in its southeast. (The mix of ethnic nationalities in the republics and provinces other than Slovenia, Croatia and Serbia is greater.)

I need not rehearse here the recent parliamentary elections in the republics, and the declaration of independence by Slovenia and Croatia, which have repudiated communism, the resistance put up by pro-communist Serbia which controls the national army to secessions, and the Serbian invasion of Croatia allegedly to secure interests of fellow Serbs in danger there and on whose behalf Serbia demanded special guarantees. Now consider what is at stake in Kosovo province in Yugoslavia, ridden with tensions between Serbs and Albanians. Serbia has also annexed this province, where Albanians outnumber Serbs by more than 10:1. And most recently, the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina has exploded in violence as it pursues its independence in the face of resistance offered by Serb-led army garrisons. Bosnia and Herzegovina have the deadly mix, in a total population of 4.3 million, of Muslim Slavs, who make up 44% of the population, Roman Catholic Croats, who make up 18%, with the remainder, Eastern Orthodox Serbs, constituting 31%. The UN peacekeeping troops have already arrived to defuse the strife in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but so far with little success. Serbian troops, both local and governmental are now engaged in attacking Sarajevo and driving out or decimating the Muslim Slavs. There are also signs that old enmities are breaking out in Macedonia. I have no space here to give other illustrations such as



the warfare between Christian Armenians and Shiite Muslim Azerbaijanis relating to the interstitial Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous region, in which Armenians outnumber the Azerbaijani, but which is administratively assigned to the Azerbaijani Republic. The back and forth cycles of violence recently peaked in the attack on Khojaly city in which scores of Azerbaijanis were killed. I can, however, project from the dissensions in Yugoslavia these general points about the out-break of ethno-nationalist politics at the very time of the dismantling of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the USSR.

What I want to do is to remind you briefly of the problems engendered by ethno-nationalism. The repudiation of communist authoritarianism and the alleged right of 'self-determination' of ethnic-nations to form their own new nation-states do not automatically usher in the victory of Democracy (with all the conventions and guarantees of equal citizenship of all members of a territorial state that go with it), even though electoral politics and representative government are introduced. In Eastern Europe, where there is a plurality of ethnic-nationalities in most polities, there is the grave danger that, under the cover of so called democratic electoral politics that sanction the rule of the majority, majorities (previously minorities within larger republics) now threaten to discriminate against, and to dominate and inferiorize, their own minorities. (Similarly, the repudiation of the communist centralized 'planned economy' does not automatically bring into new bloom a 'capitalist market economy' as that is understood with its conventions and institutions.) In Yugoslavia already the problem of 'minorities within minorities'—that is the discrimination against minorities in the newly independent republics which were formed to affirm the legitimacy of ethno-nationalism—has produced ideological justifications that remind us of the dangerous transformation of Herderian conceptions into the 'racial' rhetoric of the Third Reich.

As illustration, consider the philosophy of political ethnonationalism propounded by Franjo Tudjman, who is currently President of Croatia. In a text published in English in 1981 under the title *Nationalism and Contemporary Europe*,<sup>12</sup> Tudjman binds the *narod* (ethnic nation) explicitly to the *state*; the ethnic nation is imaged as a collective individual defined by shared physical substance, a far cry from the theory of individualism that is the cornerstone of the West European nation-state. This collective ethnonationalism entails the view that all persons share in one homogenized ethnic identity. The rights of political self-determination are vested in the collectivity, and it is this collective entitlement that constitutes national sovereignty. The positing of a "total

national sovereignty" of this kind is the high road to nation-state chauvinism.

Tudjman's own words are unambiguous about *narod* as the amalgam of collective homogeneity and sovereignty. He writes:

Nations... grow up in a natural manner... as a result of the development of all those material and spiritual forces which in a given area shape the national being of individual nations on the basis of blood, linguistic and cultural kinship.<sup>13</sup>

And again:

Every nation, no matter what its size or character, has the natural and historic right to its sovereignty and its place in the human community, just as the individual has in society... only a free and sovereign nation, like a fully developed and free human being, can give its full contribution to the world.<sup>14</sup>

Tudjman's views are not unique or peculiarly Croatian. Many other ideologues of different ethnic affiliations saying similar things can be cited. Tudjman's major opponent, President Slobodan Milosevic of Serbia, also rallies his people in the name of an inflammatory ethnic nationalism. Milosevic, and his Serbian associates, in their latest assault on the Muslim Slavs of Bosnia and Herzegovina (who comprise 42 percent of the population), have begun to preach the deadly policy of "ethnic cleansing"—that is the slaughter and driving out of Muslims so that in the end there will be only Serbs in areas that were once mixed. The Serb strategy is aimed first at forcing Muslims out of mixed towns, and then isolating the remaining pockets of Muslims. As of July 31, 1992, some 700,000 people have been driven out of Bosnia since the war began earlier this year. The horrors perpetrated in Bosnia in the name of ethnic cleansing should twinge the consciences of other ethno-nationalist groups in other countries who in the name of a fictive racial purity or of being equally fictive sons of the soil or of an invented exclusive homeland drive from their midst, neighbors of a different ethnic identity. What is ironic and myopic about these assertions of ethnic homogenization and cleansing as fact and as a nationalist goal is the occurrence of numerous mixed marriages, and mixing and borrowings of tradition between one another, in the East European milieu. "Even in the most homogenous republic, Slovenia only 73 percent of the children listed on the 1981 census issued from 'ethnically pure' Slovenian marriages, while in the most bitterly contested areas of Croatia (e.g., Eastern Slavonija) as many as 35 percent of the 1981 children were from mixed Serb-Croat marriages."<sup>15</sup>



Or again, as Hobsbawm has devastatingly put it: "the genetic approach to ethnicity is plainly irrelevant... The precise mixture of pre-Roman Illyrians, Romans, Greeks, immigrant Slavs of various waves of central Asian invaders from the Avars to the Ottoman Turks, which make up the ethnicity of any people in Southeastern Europe, is an eternal matter of debate."<sup>16</sup>

Despite the facts on the ground, advocates of ethnonationalism of the Tadjman and Milosevic kind, in so far as they are determined to impose ethnic homogenization as a nationalist goal, will be faced with three choices: "the territorial truncation of the state [i.e. secession], or the expulsion of disloyal minorities,"<sup>17</sup> or their genocide.

As historians we may easily show up the pretensions, inventions, and fictions of ethnonationalist separateness, boundedness, and continuity, but the theoretical task awaits us to subjectively understand and to chart the social practices and communicational processes by which ethnonationalist claims and identities are repeatedly constituted and replicated in many parts of the world, and used as charters for political action.

#### Notes

1. Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder, Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976) p. 145.
2. Frank E. Manuel, "A Requiem for Karl Marx," *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, The Exit from Communism 121.2 (Spring 1992):12-13.
3. *Ibid.* p. 145.
4. *Ibid.* p. 165.
5. Cited by Berlin, *op.cit.*, p. 165.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
8. For an informative discussion see, for example, Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
9. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1991, translated by Geoffrey Skelton. The novel was originally published in Germany in 1985 under the title *Exerzieplatz*.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 385-92.
11. Underestimating the power of nationalism and ethnicity as a militant psychic force in modern political consciousness was the flaw in the Marxist vision of man that, more than any other deficiency, sapped the vitality of the doctrine in Central and Eastern Europe. Manuel, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
12. Boulder, CO: Eastern European Monographs, 1981.
13. Tadjman (1981), p.10. I am indebted to Robert M. Hayden's "Constitutional Nationalism in Yugoslavia, 1990-1991," a paper read at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Nov. 23, 1991, Chicago, for these quotas.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
15. Hayden, *op.cit.*
16. Hobsbawm, *op.cit.*, pp. 63-64.
17. Hayden, *op.cit.*, quoting from Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974), p. 134.

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