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*NATION AND NATIONAL IDEOLOGY
PAST, PRESENT AND PROSPECTS*

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Nation and Nationalism

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There is a lot of talk about nation and nationalism, but every time one tries to give a definition, things become nebulous. All aberrations, all possible confusions derive from this very “nocturnal” substance of the concept. It is a subject about which a vast amount of nonsense is proffered. That is why a symposium trying to explicitate the vague, to find a geometry, an outline of the terms with which we work is more than useful, particularly as the subject is at the top of the bill. We permanently hear of conflicts whose substratum is connected to the fact of belonging to a certain nation, of interpreting nation in a certain way. We know very well how much the Balcanic conflict has cost us – and still does. Consequently, it is a very hot subject.

Strangely enough, for nationalists, the very acute nature of the problem is a reason to avoid it. As if discussing notions like “nation”, “national” and “nationalism” were the beginning of a betrayal. There is no room left for debates, delimitations, nuances. We must assume them in an adulatory manner as if they were unrationalizable realities. It seems to me that this does not lead either to conceptual or to behavioural clarity. No concept and no reality remain unharmed by idolatry. Not even God must be idolized. He himself expressly asks us *not* to do it. Idolatry erodes, compromises, creates chaos.

We must speak seriously about nations, but also flexibly, lucidly like about a reality that, although part of world history,

is in fact only an *episode* of this history. An enormous corpus of texts has been written on this subject, including sociological studies, etymological histories, etc. It is amusing to find out, for instance, that in Latin the word *natio* appeared with a rather pejorative connotation. *Natio* was a community of foreigners inside a city. When a number of foreigners coagulated and became a body that could not be assimilated by a community, they were called – *natio*. Much later, the word came to mean what we consider it means today. In the French world, for instance, *nation* meant the community of the elites of a state. As Joseph de Maistre put it: “The nation is the sovereign plus the aristocracy.” The rest are the people! The difference between nation and the people, in which the people takes over the pejorative connotation, *plebs*, while *natio* becomes, this time, the expression of “the best”, functioned until very late. It was only in the 18th century that one began to talk about nation in the sense it has nowadays. Nation is a concept that became possible in its current sense at the same time as the modern conception of the state and of the political organisation, which is quite significant. Consequently, we must refer to this term and to its history without solemnity, without pointless pathos; it is the first step towards clearing up problems. During our symposium, we wanted, among other things, to talk without any tenseness about something that is generally talked about with a certain amount of strain.

I believe that, within the limits of the Romanian space, the way in which orthodoxy – and the Christian idea in general – is associated with the national idea deserves an ample debate and is highly significant. It is a subject of utmost importance. There is a tendency to identify the national, in its ethnic sense, with the confessional. The Church had moments when it rightly amended this type of thinking. There is a heresy called *philetism*,

condemned as such in the 19th century, which consists in mixing faith and the ethnic. This tendency exists among Greeks, Russians and – to a lesser extent, maybe – in our country. To condemn this association as a heresy seems legitimate to me because, by definition, Christianity is a commitment of a universal kind.

The Apostle Paul says that our “homeland” is in heaven. If the true homeland is in heaven, then the contingent homeland, that of our earthly “passage” is relative (even if “providential”). If we turn to the texts, we notice that in the “cosmology” of original Christianity the angels are “responsible” for nations. There is a very powerful passage in the Septuaginta version of the *Deuteronomy* (32.8 – 9), in which God, the Creator, divides the “nations” according to the number of angels. The idea that nations have angels as protectors and representatives is mostly related to the Old Testament world (see also Daniel, 10, 13) although it appears in the *New Testament* too, i.e. in the *Apocalypse*. When two “nations” confront each other, the real, unseen battle takes place between their angelic “patrons”. The theme of ethnic groups is, in any case, very connected to the pluralism of the angels and the great novelty of the *New Testament* is that the office of angels is replaced by the office of Christ who subordinates the angelic hosts, putting them – we might say – out of work. Jesus is now the mediator between man and God, the tribes must refer to Him, there no longer is any need of angelic intercession. In other words, Christ is now the unifying principle who puts the multiplicity of angels between brackets. In each of His gestures and in each of His words, the doctrine of a type of community other than that of blood expresses itself, of a community of the *spirit* which is bound together by a universal, *super-ethnic* principle. The difference between the angel dominated world and that of Christ is the difference between the “legion” of nations and the

homogeneity of a spiritual communion that is born from sharing the same mystery. This is Christ's novelty. Why do I insist? Because it is in the very name of Christ, that so many nationalist abuses have been and are committed. A Christian who exalts the principle of nationalities is a Christian who is still very close to the cult of angels and very far from that of Christ. Personally, I see a contradiction between genuine Christianity and nationalist excess and I am amazed every time I see people who, on the one hand declare themselves fervent Christians and, on the other hand, talk about God as if He were somebody from their own village. This type of confusion must be overcome, I think. The modern world – insofar as, after antiquity, Christianity is also a religion that sets up modernity – is a world in which communities of the spirit should come first. This does not mean that being part of a nation is meaningless and that “politically correct” behaviour calls for the abolishment of its ensigns. Being part of a nation is a given, as are blue eyes, height, etc. It has a meaning and creates responsibilities. It is not incidentally that one is born within a certain nation, there is a sign of destiny in this circumstance, there is a historical communion with the others, there is, above all, the formidable community of language which is a deep tie for the members of the same community. And each nation has a *part* in world history which, if it remains unfulfilled, leaves an important slice of this history vacant. National identity is therefore almost a natural fact, with which one must compose minute by minute. So, I do not think this subject can be dismissed with a vague, colourless discourse. But I do think that assuming a national identity must be a *creative* offensive and not a trivial tribal competition.

Since one can talk about the “emergence” of the national idea, of nations, then one can also think that they might

disappear at a certain moment. In my opinion, we are still very far from it. The national spirit, the problem of national identity are extremely alive, and not only in the Balkans, as it is always said. And not only in Romania. On the contrary, it is alive everywhere. Even in the most developed countries, when one reaches this point, rhetorics and “national” commitment rapidly come into their rights. The French never shy from talking about their being part of the great French nation, and neither do the British or the Germans with regard to theirs. Americans are also extremely proud of their Americanness, which is, in fact, motley if we take into account the origins. As I said before, I do not believe that the national feeling, the sense of national identity is on the eve of its disappearance. In this respect, a certain communitary or globalizing demagogy is rather utopian, many steps ahead of reality or sometimes parallel to it. The clearest evidence is the reluctance that even great European nations feel towards the idea of a factitious European entity, towards the idea of a unique currency. The fact that the referenda about the mechanisms of European unification have imprevisible results shows how strong nations still are, in fact. And I believe that this is a good thing, because their diversity is the “salt” of the earth. A world that becomes uniform, an “entropic” world that is globalised in a sterile variant, is a world in which nobody would want to live. Globalisation is good, if I can drink Spanish wine in Transylvania and Transylvanian wine in Madrid. If globalisation means that we should all drink a communitary rotgut, then it is not something to be wished. And I do not think that the strategists of globalisation, the rational and wise ones, dream of this.

The mother tongue is, I think, the most powerful illustration of what being part of a nation means. Speaking the same language, taking for granted an episode of communication is

an extraordinary coagulating agent. Even if you have nothing else in common with somebody, sharing the essential means of communication, opens up the possibility for further developments of the relationship. On the other hand, the native language, the mother tongue is an instrument for the maximal intellectual performance of which a human being is capable. No matter how well you speak other languages, you are one or two degrees below your level when you use them. There are very few people who are truly bilingual. At least my feeling, when I do not speak Romanian, is that I am rather stupid...

From my point of view, the most legitimate and important form of patriotism is to have a good knowledge of your language and to use it as an optimal instrument of self-expression. A language that is well known and well used is, for me, the sign of an intimate, deep and true commitment to the country in which one lives. That is why I am extremely, almost hysterically irritated by the patriotic speeches held on TV or in Parliament by people who speak bad Romanian. If you do not even learn your own language well out of love for your country, your rhetoric is purely ornamental. I would suggest, as a criterion for genuine patriotic feelings, the ability to use the Romanian language well. Those who are not able to do it I distrust, whatever they may declare.