

The end of politics

Culture, nation and other fundamentalisms

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An end can be a goal or a terminus. The end in question here is both, as a matter of logic if not intention or accomplished fact.¹ The historical form I have in mind, in so far as it mediates expressly political claims, is paradoxical, implying the dissolution of politics in its central modern sense. It presents itself as culture, nation, even as a designated state. It is 'modern', and also 'global', though the distinction implied in that modifying term is not one I mean to underscore.

There is no doubting the reality of the several historical tendencies now commonly bundled in the topic of globalization. Much less certain is whether they subserve a simple logic, whether they are in equivalent senses necessary, or necessarily coordinate, whether they amount to an epochal break in modernity. The current conditions of international trade – in goods and more so in money – are indeed markedly different from those of the middle twentieth century. Viewed from the standpoint of 1910, they would seem less novel. Large-scale, long-range and long-term migrations of labour have been a salient and crisis-ridden feature of the past half-century, the more so as the pathways left by the old empires of Europe have been crisscrossed by new routes, cleared by newly mobile or newly displaced populations. An English observer around 1900 would not be unduly impressed by the scale of movement; would probably express alarm, in confidently racist terms, about the growth of dark-skinned settlements in the white heartlands; but would be struck above all by the extent of state regulation in this sphere, the sheer difficulty of migration and settlement. Looking some centuries further back, to the cradle of capitalism, to the great trading and colonizing ventures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and to the financial and technical innovations that made them possible, we might say about 'global' modernity that, really, there has never been any other kind.

The dominant political structure throughout this history has been the state – and, in the past century, the form that continues its course towards global saturation, the so-called nation-state. It is tempting to generalize too far about the weakening of the nation-state, in the face of the continuing internationalization of capitalist social relations, and corresponding easy to forget – as bourgeois politicians actively encourage us to forget – that the neo-liberal regime now dominant in the world economy has been installed by the acts of sovereign states. Such international regulatory bodies as there currently are exist and function only in and through states or groups of states, which are finally sovereign. It is not so much that the nation-state is being superseded, as that most states, or rather their ruling blocs, embracing capitalist priorities as non-negotiable, exercise their powers in the service of the pragmatic optimum, as interpreted by a very small number of states, the USA supreme among them. This is a sign of chronic crisis, not of an unequivocal fate called globalization. Its outcomes will be decided politically, in fields of conflict recognizable as states.

'The political' and the cultural principle

'The concept of the state', Carl Schmitt wrote in the late 1920s, 'presupposes the concept of the political.'² By the political he meant a practice defined by collective, public relations 'between friend and enemy', in the perspective of the extreme possibility, 'an existential threat to one's way of life'. Here, according to Schmitt, is a definition 'in the sense of a criterion and not as an exhaustive definition and not as one indicative of substantial content'. Nothing specifies the political except this figure of potentially lethal collective hostility. Any social antithesis becomes political if it intensifies to the point of grouping friends against enemies. Conversely, he maintained, the political 'can

derive its energy' from any social material: 'it does not describe its own substance'.³ Now, the state is properly the monopolist of the political. However, the process of modernity has entailed at least a partial disintegration of that monopoly. The antagonisms of civil society have assumed the intensity and therefore the titles of the political, and now enter into the sphere of the state itself, weakening, disorganizing, ambiguating the properly singular, cohesive exercise of sovereignty. Liberalism, whose self-cancelling ideal of politics is parliamentary conversation plus trade (both unlimited), was Schmitt's prime illustration of what he saw as the historic unravelling of 'the political' proper into so much 'politics'.

Here, manifestly, is a bilious, conservative rendering of what many would endorse as the struggle for democracy. And many on the Left might seize upon it as an unknowing anticipation of changes actual and desirable in our own culture and practice. It is difficult, looking back to Schmitt's theses on the concept of the political, not to think of Laclau and Mouffe, with their vision of proliferating new antagonisms and advocacy of a social indeterminate 'radical democracy'. For 'the political', so to say, read proletariat and party, for 'politics' the site of a new, algebraic hegemony. These are surely among the issues before us today. But I cite Schmitt now in order to draw attention to the historical actuality and pressure of a modern tendency, or tendencies, whose narrative precisely reverses his – or perhaps offers reverse confirmation of his historical judgement. Here, the address to 'politics', or the entry into 'politics', in Schmitt's pejorative sense, is motivated by the desire for a reconstituted 'political', or its equivalent. It is the form in which modern 'politics' turns on itself.

My line of approach to this question is indirect, passing through problems in cultural theory and the history of thinking about culture more generally. Specifically, I want to return briefly to the concept of metacultural discourse.⁴ Summarily defined, metacultural discourse is discourse in which culture addresses its own generality and conditions of existence. It is the generality of social sense-making that is put in question, not merely this or that cultural form or practice. That is one indication of the prefix *meta*-. The other is reflexivity – and not in the truistic sense that no discourse on culture can itself be anything other than an instance of culture. Metaculture is reflexive in the strong sense that the subject-position of the discourse is itself a normative intuition of the cultural. What speaks in such discourse on culture is culture-as-principle, as a general principle of social authority.

And the strategic impulse of metacultural discourse is to assert this principle against the prevailing form of general social authority, namely politics. In *Kulturkritik*, which has been characteristically liberal or conservative in sensibility but can also be spoken from the Left, it is politics as such that is subordinated and disarticulated as valid authority. In the later case of Cultural Studies, the false or deficient authority is the actual or imputed politics and ethos of the Left. In either case, the innate drive of the discourse is to overcome politics as an authoritative social form, in the name of a truly fundamental principle – be that elite or popular in substance. These intellectual histories are not my concern here. What I want to retain and emphasize are the conceptual morphology of metaculture, its typical form, and, so to say, its habitus, its characteristic strategic disposition. Culture, valorized as principle, enters the contested field of social authority in order to transform it, to displace the prevailing form of general authority, politics, in a higher, truly general interest, which is itself.

Among the various objections that have been raised to this thesis, the simplest and potentially most damaging is this: is there really any discourse on culture that is not itself metacultural?⁵ I believe there is, that this theoretical discrimination is at least meaningful, even if vulnerable on other grounds. But that does not exhaust the interest of the challenge. I am more taken by the thought that the *morphology* of metaculture, while not common to all discourse on *culture*, is shared with other discourses of far greater historical range and import. Religion was historically a marked presence in *Kulturkritik*. Present as commitment, sometimes; as theme, more often; but above all, and quite generally, as a model, faded but not forgotten, of inclusive authority and mission. (That tradition has done much to shape the figure of the intellectual as trustee of the common good, as prophet or witness.) Just a little reflection on that historical connection prompts a more pointed observation: this morphology is also that of fundamentalism.

Logics of fundamentalism

When I say 'fundamentalism' I am grouping the relevant varieties of Islam, but also Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism as cases of a single trans-religious category. Given that, there is a basic distinction to make. Fundamentalism, at a minimum, promotes an ideal of ethical submission to scriptural authority and, more often than not, to a priestly order that interprets it. The logical entailments of this disposition are absolutist and exclusivist: the holy book is the necessary

and sufficient code of the virtuous life. However, the practical force of these entailments is often, and necessarily, limited. Beyond the household, where it may rule implacably, beyond a kinship group or immediate faith community, virtue must make accommodations. Other ethics, which may be pragmatically far stronger, must be acknowledged; there are civil laws to observe; the given political choices may be unacceptable, or ethically indifferent, or, worse, self-contradictory. In many circumstances, fundamentalism can be reduced to inwardness and selective social self-reservation, ostentatious or subdued. Theology and doctrine typically allow that course, and may even enjoin it.

The symmetrical alternative to inwardness and self-reservation, fundamentalism as outwardness, is not merely public engagement, including intervention in politics.⁶ It is not enough for ultra-evangelicals in the USA to ignore or deny the implications of modern biology, however vociferously; they must reinvent their particular creation myth as science and thus impose it as an educational requirement for all. It is not enough for the fundamentalists among Britain's Catholic minority that abortion is not an officially privileged moral option; true to the historic Integralism of the Church, they would simply outlaw it as a choice. The relevant political models would include the clericalism of southern Ireland in the 1950s, or – a more ambitious case – the Islamic Republic of Khomeini's design. The object of political fundamentalism is not merely policy or governmental office; it is a constitution, a form of state.

My concern here is with a certain political form and its implicit logic, not with estimates of concrete historical probabilities – I emphasize this. But form is one of the constituents of the concrete, and the logic seems clear. Militant fundamentalism asserts a cultural principle – now theological – not merely in but against politics as such, seeking to strip that social authority-form of its finality. In Schmitt's terms, it seeks to reverse the course of modernity, subordinating mere politics to a version of his singular, univocal master-subject, the political. In other terms, it is a reactionary modernism whose political end is the ending of politics.

The actual fortunes of political Islam over the past thirty years have been a moment in the history of post-coloniality, in the Arab world and widely in Africa and Asia, and also in the metropolitan centres of the West. As a historical phenomenon it is neither autonomous nor singular in political function or social attachment. Among these functions and attachments, however, one seems particularly pertinent: political

Islam as a late form of post-colonial nationalism. I say 'late' because the earlier struggles for independence and popular reform in the Muslim world were the work of mainly secular forces – from Algeria to Syria to Yemen to Iran to Indonesia. The pan-Arabist ideals of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s put Osama bin Laden's fantasy of a united caliphate in a different perspective. It is worth recalling also that the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan – a disaster, it is true – was launched in aid of an indigenous Communist revolution under siege from the countryside. Political Islam is a contingency, not a civilizational fate. These historical observations suggest a further step in the formal analysis: if political fundamentalism can easily function as a form of nationalism, what might that fact imply about nationalism generally, as a political form?

The national principle

The question does not bear upon the democratic principle of national self-determination, which is as valid today as it was a century ago. I have no wish, no need, to overlook the variety, internal heterogeneity and changeability of national movements. My concern is with nationalism as such, as a form of political desire. My suggestion is that nationalist discourse generally shares its morphology with fundamentalism (and, for what it may matter, with metaculture) and with observable and damaging political effects. The substance of the grounding principle in this case is the nation, which, in turn, has at least two varieties. The first and more familiar is the *ethnos*, a presumptive community of descent. Civic nationalism disavows this principle, but in the name of what? A nationalism that does not sponsor some image of collective identity cannot bind and sublimate the class, gender and other relations that constitute the objective social reality of its people, and must fall into incoherence and political incapacity. In reality, I would argue, constitutionalism can function as a kind of *in vitro* ethnicity. The United States is the historic prototype of purely civic nationality, and there a kind of constitutional fetishism underpins an ideology of 'Americanism' as chauvinist and threatening as any ethnic-nationalist romance. In France, the role of historic republicanism offers an interesting and highly relevant case, to which I will return. For now, let me stay with the question of political form, and its self-contradictory implications for the people-as-nation.

The historical association between national movements and democracy is a very close one. Yet nationalism as such is tendentially anti-democratic. This must be so inasmuch as any individual acquires discursive legitimacy as one of the people only in acknowledged



purpose. It is little wonder, then, that the integrity of these things can seem to be the ground of order as such. Of course, these primal formations are no less historical than any other. A language is the element in which we experience all our social relations, and it bears all the marks of this. A landscape, as territory, soil or habitation, embodies a history of political, economic and kinship relations. Religions have been the master-codes of mundane moral probabilities and choices, entitlements and obligations. They are as much social relationships as industries, markets, railways and parliaments. Pick apart

the structures and practices that make up a national society and you will find everything except a distinct reality called the nation. Yet there can be no doubting its historical force – which may, as Nairn believes, be modern fate.

The nation, the Right and the Left

Two varieties of political reasoning can be inferred from these considerations. The more common, and seemingly the more realistic, is to argue that since the nation is precisely the site on which conflicts of social value are played out, the Left must learn to turn its ambiguous meanings to its advantage.⁹ But some general critical observations come to mind. The Right has normally enjoyed a natural advantage on the terrain of the nation, which historically has been the motif by which it ex-nominates its reality as the political representative of property and order. The history of the later twentieth century has if anything rendered the national still more resistant to socialist refashioning. The national stories of Europe, for example, as we hear them today are inseparable from the history of modern warfare. All, or most, feature episodes of life-or-death struggle for survival. In this sense, the political appeal of the nation, in times of greatest stress, is both to a first point of reference and to a last resort. Popular nationalism is very often just that: a politics of the last resort. And it is worth remembering that the fiercest, most destructive ethnic nationalisms of our own years, in Europe, Africa and

ing the transcendental moral identity of the national.⁷ Democratic options, lawful or not, have legitimacy only if they fall within a putatively national range – that is, if they are consistent with prevailing hegemonies in social relations, whose familiar epitome is nationality. Anyone who has lived this aporia at the sharp end will know just how intimate and how practical a predicament this can be, in everyday life as much as in politics. But what if the discursive universe of nationality has no habitable outside? What if, as Tom Nairn has put it, ‘nationality is simply the fate of modernity’?⁸ Let us assume that it is so, and then inquire how socialists – the Left more generally – might orient themselves in a way that is both principled and practical, and overall self-consistent.

A nation is not a primordial given; it is not even one permanent variable among others, such as labour or sexuality. It is the discursive creation of nationalism – a way of imagining a social order, including all (I emphasize *all*) the historical social relations that compose it. It is a complex of stories, imageries, ideas and rituals that binds them. Nationality is intuitively compelling, and it is not hard to see why. Language, land and religion are normally privileged, in one ratio or another, in national culture, as offering primal tokens of continuity, first and last things, fatality. A language – always *this* language, not language in general – initiates us into sense, and most of us will never speak another nearly so well. For most of human history, a rural landscape and a religion have been the universal but always local first experience of world and

Asia, have been born out of the exhaustion of other forms of the politics of last resort: anti-colonial revolution and socialism – whether as historical communism or as social democracy.

This general claim can be extended to include the case of militant right-wing xenophobia, which is now noteworthy in all the larger states of the European Union, and numerous of the smaller ones. These states, now bent on creating a new, mutually advantageous transnational framework for capital accumulation, appear no longer to be what they always claimed to be: not bourgeois states, but the political armature of the people, the nation. It is understandable, then, that popular disaffection tends spontaneously towards nationalist solutions. And a symmetrical case can be made for those most vulnerable to such solutions: those European populations normally lumped together as ‘ethnic minorities’ – migrants and settlers from Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and, more recently, Eastern Europe. If ethnic and/or religious particularism seems to be becoming more rather than less pronounced – as it certainly is in Britain – this is in part because the host states have tended to act not as their liberal constitutionalism suggests they must, but precisely as *nation-states*, whose official moral universalism is in practice a blessing reserved for their own kith and kin. Reviewing all this, I cannot see how the Left can hope to move forward on the ground of national identity.

However, there is an alternative line of political inference – one that can be elaborated and made practical on the condition that the inference is indeed political. I return here briefly to the question of meta-cultural discourse. In so far as this is more than an issue in intellectual history, it is because the critical argument rests upon a strong, restrictive concept of politics. The restriction, I have said, is not one of the social content of politics; it does not concern what is or is not a proper political demand. As Schmitt, no friend of new social movements, maintained a long time ago, any social antagonism may become political. While not sharing Schmitt’s own understanding of ‘the criterion’ of the political, I strongly agree with him that the criterion is a formal one.¹⁰ Politics is the form of the struggle to determine the totality of social relations in a given space. There is no space here to expand on the elements of that definition. What is important is to emphasize its implication. Political practice so understood is non-expressive, in Althusser’s general sense: it cannot be rendered back into its cultural conditions of existence, from which it differentiates itself as a *mode* of social action devoted to achieving practical states of collective affairs. As a value-bearing practice,

of course, politics can have no existence outside the realities we summarize as cultural. But it is typically a practice *across* the given terms of the cultural formation it inhabits, transforming (in an etymologically exact sense) even where it appears merely to translate value into demand. Discrepancy is thus the necessary reality of the culture–politics relationship. The belief that a political programme can simply express an associated cluster of cultural values leads logically to one or other of two untenable positions: an authoritarian monoculturalism – some kind of fundamentalism – or a self-frustrating libertarianism. Either *only one thing goes* or *anything goes*: two forms of the desire to put an end to politics, full stop.

Marianne and the veil

This is abstract, and peremptorily stated, I know. But it might offer some practical indications for the Left, as we make our way in the crises of nationalism and ethnic particularism, fundamentalism and its secular others today. Let me recall a recent episode in the cultural politics of global modernity, one of a kind that is becoming staple experience for many of us – the 1989 controversy over the wearing of the *foulard*, a form of the Islamic veil, in French secondary schools. French law forbids the display of religious tokens in state schools. Nevertheless, certain young women of North African descent took to wearing the *foulard*, and persisted in the face of official instructions to remove it. There was protest in the name of republican values, involving teachers among others, and so the crisis was detonated. The given terms of the controversy were cultural – or, we might more pointedly say, these days, ‘civilizational’. The Enlightenment secularism of the French republic versus the traditionalism of pietistic settlers, or, in another perspective, the paradoxically monoculturalist universalism of the republic – France’s distinctive variety of nationalism – versus the claims of postcolonial difference. But there was no consistent resolution to be had in those terms, as the alternative descriptions suggest. Culturally, the Left could only be self-divided in the case. In my own view, the teachers who protested at the *foulard* proved mainly that even enlightenment has its fundamentalist bigots. And yet the benevolent multiculturalist alternative – which would have greater resonance in Britain – is liable to the opposite error: a relativism that is not only self-contradictory but which no one finally believes in. Conflicting cultural traditions could be equally valid only if all were basically *invalid*.

The other kind of response was to ask what social relations are at stake here, and what political judgement

can be brought to bear. Is this act a gesture of defiant self-respect by a member of an ethnic minority in a racist society? Is it a young woman's symbolic defence against the aggressive sexuality of male adolescents? Or is she wearing the *foulard* in obedience to her father or other community elders? Are there elements of all three, as might easily be the case? How, then, to find a position? In the Marxist tradition, where such questions were fiercely debated in the early twentieth century, one answer for a time won precedence over its rivals. National and kindred ethnic conflicts should be settled on democratic terms, by the consistent application of the principle of self-determination. This still seems to me the best basis, perhaps the only one, on which to make principled, practical and self-consistent judgements on nationalist and parallel claims and demands – be they ethnicist, confessional or even professedly enlightened. The principle of self-determination is, of course, associated with the Enlightenment value of personal autonomy, but it cannot self-consistently be reserved for those who subscribe to that moral cosmology. Likewise, it does not imply substantive cultural endorsement of those who must be defended in its name. In the case in question, we can then say that we assert the right of young Muslim women to wear the *foulard* in school, if that is their wish, because in the given conditions of the Fifth Republic the objectively dominant term of the controversy is racism. French colonialism and its metropolitan afterlife have reduced the secular humanism of *la République* to aporia, from which it can be redeemed only by far-reaching social and constitutional reform. On the same general grounds, and within the frame of such a programme of reform, we also support any woman in that situation who resists the traditionalist demand for customary modesty, which is one form of the patriarchal regulation of younger people, and women of all ages – in short, another kind of offence against the principle of self-determination.

This kind of political response is 'largely a negative one', according to Lenin, who has been the undeclared point of reference in much of what I have been saying. The response is 'negative' in that it begins and ends with the question of self-determination. As he wrote in his *Critical Remarks on the National Question* (1914), it is a 'bounden duty to stand for the most resolute and consistent democratism on all aspects of the national question'. However, 'this is the limit the proletariat can go to in supporting nationalism, for beyond that begins the "positive" activity of the

bourgeoisie striving to fortify nationalism.... Combat all national oppression? Yes, of course! Fight for any kind of national development, for "national culture" in general? – Of course not.'¹¹ It seems to me important, crucial even, to reaffirm – or rediscover – Lenin's reasoning, and to translate it for the more complex range of conditions that now constitute the national question in his intentionally inclusive sense. And it is crucial, too, to see in this case an illustration of the specificity and autonomy of political judgement proper, to understand that 'negativity' as the cultural askesis that political practice normally entails. The Left is not ideally placed to take on the prevailing political forms of global modernity, but it will help if the forms of its political engagement are indeed political.

Notes

1. This is a lightly revised script of a talk given at the *Radical Philosophy* conference Look, No Hands! Political Forms of Global Modernity, London, 27 October 2001. Parts of it were first aired in an earlier paper, 'National Culture and National Identity', for the Miliband–Lipman Trust conference, Nationalism and the Left, Leeds, April 2001.
2. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (1927), University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996, p. 19.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 38.
4. Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, Routledge, London, 2000.
5. See in particular Stefan Collini, 'Culture Talk', *New Left Review* 7, January–February 2001, pp. 43–53 – a critique to which I hope to respond soon.
6. The distinction between 'inward' and 'outward' varieties comes from Herbert Marcuse's 'The Affirmative Character of Culture' (1937, in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972, pp. 88–133), where it characterizes liberal and fascist culture respectively.
7. Compare Hardt and Negri's more drastic claim that 'the people' is the culminating form of modern 'sovereignty', which is inherently oppressive: 'Every nation must make the multitude into a people.' *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2000, pp. 101–5, at p. 103.
8. Tom Nairn, *After Britain*, Granta Books, London, 2000, p. 199.
9. For one distinguished case among many, see Aijaz Ahmad's political writings on India and Pakistan. *Lineages of the Present*, Verso, London, 2000.
10. Schmitt not only doubted the possibility of a pacified politics; he viewed it with anticipatory regret as a thinning of the moral texture of existence (*The Concept of the Political*, p. 35). Debatable pessimism is one thing, romantic brutalism quite another.
11. V.I. Lenin, *Critical Remarks on the National Question [and] The Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1971, pp. 22–3.