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## LEFT, RIGHT, AND NATIONALISM

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In 1848, when Marx was penning his famous manifesto, a specter, he felt, was haunting Europe. Marx thought this was the specter of communism, but we since learned that it was the specter of nationalism: the period, indeed, went down in history as “the Spring of the Nations.” It is not hard to understand why Marx mistook one for the other: in 1848, socialism, communism and nationalism generally stood for the same thing, communism was the most radical form of nationalism and nationalism was, fundamentally, a movement of the left.

Today, it appears, the same specter – the specter of nationalism – is haunting Europe and the rest of the world. Rather than being confused with communism, nationalism of Europeans (if only by origin) is now often referred to as “populism” and believed to be a movement of the right. What happened? Has nationalism changed sides? Has it changed its very nature? Or did what was left in 1848 become right today?

This essay’s answer to these questions is complex: Between 1848 and today nationalism became a global phenomenon; already in 1848 it existed in three very different types, as it does now; as then, its appeal rests on endowing personal identity with dignity to the extent no other cultural framework or form of consciousness does; its spread implies the spread of democracy; nationalism is still very ill understood, and its tight connection to democracy, in particular, is even less understood today than it was in 1848. Characterizing nationalism as left- or right-wing does not help us to understand nationalism but, instead, obfuscate it. These concepts emerged in the framework of nationalism and because of it; they have no meaning outside this framework. Very early on in the history of their use, they became cultural tropes, that is, absolutely self-evident truths which require no analysis and admit of no questioning, left standing for good, and right for bad. As such, they have been deployed by various national

intelligentsias to characterize the dominant intellectual position and its opposition. Positions of intelligentsias using these concepts would differ depending on political circumstances, and the concepts would attach to different political agendas. Left and right, therefore, do not have specific referents, their only permanent element is evaluative.

The first part of the essay briefly sketches the history of the relationship between left, right, and nationalism between the French Revolution and WWII in Continental Europe. The second part continues with tracing it in the rest of the Western world between the Cold War and today.

I The familiar terms of “left” and “right” first acquired their political meaning in 1789, at the start of the French Revolution. This pivotal event, which, in many ways, inaugurated the Age of Nationalism, was the first collective expression of national consciousness in France, while France itself was the first society into which this new spirit was imported from Britain, where it was born. The Revolution was inspired by nationalism and represented an attack on the pre-national form of the social order – *ancient regime* – and the social consciousness on which it was based. This, old regime, social consciousness was religious, monarchical, and hierarchical, thus presupposing the obedience of the secular world to divine authority, differences of fundamental nature between social strata, and corresponding differences in rights between them. In distinction, national consciousness is secular, democratic, and egalitarian, presupposing popular sovereignty and an egalitarian community of identity, inclusive of the entire population of the country. Because England, where this consciousness emerged, called such community “nation,” “nationalism” is the name for the related complex of phenomena.

The use of “nation” and related terms became common in France only in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, discussions of the proper constitution of society (that it was supposed to be constituted as a nation) and of the nature of a legitimate government (which had to respect popular sovereignty) dramatically increased, with the new terms replacing the traditional vocabulary of political discourse that stressed the royal prerogative and the distinction of ranks. The motto of the Revolution, “*Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite,*” symbolized this shift and captured the essence of the new consciousness: the inclusive nature of the community, the fundamental equality of all its members, and the right of every member to participate in its government. Precisely the same republican and secular thinking was reflected in the decision to name the assembly of the Third Estate (i.e., the commoners) “National Assembly.” It is interesting that the representatives of the Third Estate (who were all notables, if not nobles, thus members of the privileged strata) chose to identify themselves with an entirely new entity – the nation. In England, from which the idea was imported, since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when the word “nation” first came into general usage, it was the synonym of the word “people” (and it was this equation which made the nation an inclusive community of identity). But in France, in 1789, “people” still had the connotation of the lower classes, the rabble, and the revolutionaries in the assembly were reluctant to openly declare themselves representatives of the uneducated, uncouth masses, to which the word referred.<sup>1</sup>

In the National Assembly, groups with similar views, or parties, seated themselves apart from the groups with which they differed, and eventually ideological positions became identified with positions in the building of what had been the royal riding academy, in which the assembly met. The radicals, those who believed that all the vestiges of the old, pre-national, order had to be swept aside, became known as **the left**, the moderates, who thought that some elements of the old order, such as religion or, however redefined, monarchy, were integral to the French nation, and therefore should be kept, as **the right**. Those in the middle, or the center, who did not make up their mind one way or the other, incidentally, were called “the swamp.” In other words, originally, both those of the left and those of the right were nationalists; they all represented the new force of nationalism, while the terms “left” and “right,” in revolutionary politics, stood for radical and moderate forms of nationalism. Radical nationalists, specifically, were more eager to equate the nation and the people; the left nationalism, therefore, could be called **populism**.<sup>ii</sup>

The radicals had a clear agenda, were more activist, and acted, while the moderates mostly reacted to their actions. This identified the left with the revolution, and the right with reaction. The radicals wished to destroy the old order, the moderates wanted to preserve parts of it. As a result, the left came to represent orientation towards the future, change for the better, progress, and the right -- holding on to the past, conservatism. The revolution was inspired by nationalism, it represented the triumph of, the conversion of the French to national consciousness. Because it was a result of a conversion, like in the parallel religious experience, this consciousness appeared to the converts as the only true, natural consciousness. The newness of nationalism thus disappeared from the sight of the participants and they were no longer aware that it shaped the political positions of both the radicals (the left) and the moderates (the right). The British observers of the revolution, converted to the new consciousness since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and British colonists in America, who brought it with them to the New World, were also oblivious of that. And thus, the left and the right became separated from nationalism, different forms of which (radical and moderate) they represented.

Nationalism redefined the good and the just. It now appeared patently unjust, unnatural, and evil, if a social order did not correspond to the way a nation was supposed to be organized – as a sovereign community of fundamentally equal members, an inclusive community of identity. Every relic of such injustice demanded immediate correction, it could not be tolerated. The demand for such immediate correction and every action undertaken to promote it was natural and good, while every effort to slow it down unnatural and evil. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century such correction was identified with the direction of History: it was, in the words of Marx, nothing but “recognized necessity”: History itself demanded reconstruction of politics and society in accordance with national – i.e., egalitarian and respectful of popular sovereignty, i.e., **democratic** – consciousness. All other views were false consciousness, while freedom was defined as willing following of History’s direction.

This transformation of consciousness was reflected in several tropes which frame our thinking until today: all change is progress, desire for change is progressive, progressive is good, clinging to the past is bad, conservative is clinging to the past, reaction to change is bad, conservative is reactionary is bad; the left is progressive, the right is reactionary and conservative; the left follows the direction of history, the right opposes it; **the left is good, the right is bad**. One can still see these tropes in the fact that parties of the left have no problem in identifying themselves as of the left, while those of the right are very reluctant to class themselves with the right. In politics, “left” is a term of approbation and “right” of opprobrium. At the same time, the specific meanings of “progressive” and “conservative,” of “the direction of history” and “reaction” constantly change and the connection of all modern political agenda with nationalism is hidden from view.

As the idea of the nation was imported from the place of its birth, three types of nationalism appeared, depending, on the one hand, on whether the national community was defined as an association of individuals or as a collective individual, and, on the other hand, on whether membership in the community was believed to be voluntary or biologically determined. Individualistic conception of the nation and voluntary membership produced the original, English (later British, American, and Australian) **individualistic and civic** type of nationalism. Collectivistic conception of the nation and voluntary membership resulted in the **collectivistic and civic** type, adopted by France. Most of the nations which were formed after the French Revolution combined the collectivistic definition of the nation with the belief that membership was determined by blood and developed the **collectivistic and ethnic** type of nationalism. The interpretation of the core values of nationalism – liberty, equality, and fraternity – differed along both axes. Individualistic nationalisms, in general, put the stress on liberty, specifically, the freedom of choice, and interpreted equality as equality of opportunity; collectivistic nationalisms emphasized equality, interpreting it mostly as equality of result. Civic nationalisms, in principle implied that the nation was an open society, while nationalisms of ethnic type limited fraternity to the born members of the presumably biological, naturally self-enclosed grouping. <sup>iii</sup>

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, political categories of “left” and “right” were generally inapplicable to individualistic nations. England, the original nation, broke with the past more decisively and much earlier than any other society, and was inherently geared for change and forward-looking, without the need to articulate these national attitudes in elaborate ideologies. It was definitely on the side of progress, but defined progress mostly in economic terms and in terms of science and technology. Modern economy – the economy oriented to growth, later called “capitalism,” which constantly increased the wealth of the nation -- was a product of this understanding of progress. In collectivistic nations, by contrast, progress was defined in terms of social justice, the equal share of all the members in the collective pie, however stationary. The orientation to this goal went by the names of “socialism” and “communism,” which were,

in effect, radical – i.e., left – forms of collectivistic nationalism. Though fundamentally political, this orientation implied opposition to private property, to those who had a lot of it, and to the pursuit of profit in the abstract. Thus, socialism became identified with anti-capitalism, making capitalism as an economy and its political correlate, liberalism as the doctrine of individual freedom and equality of opportunity, anti-socialism, and therefore, of the right. This, second, phase in the relationship between left, right, and nationalism was, to a large extent, a product of Marx's reinterpretation of the struggle between nations for national prestige as the fundamentally economic class struggle between the proletariat, working class, for Marx embodied by Germany, and the moneyed capitalist class, or Capital, represented in his view by France and England.<sup>iv</sup>

This Marxist reinterpretation had a particular effect in Russia. The Russian Revolution of 1917, which occupied in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western imagination a place similar to that which the French Revolution held in the imagination of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was called the (Great October) **Socialist** Revolution, and its declared antagonist was Capitalism. The categories of “left” and “right” in this conflict continued to resonate with the intelligentsia in Western Europe, this time traveling to the United States as well, for American educated elites disliked capitalism for their own reasons. But the inspiration behind the Russian Revolution was, again, nationalism, which the sympathizers from abroad failed to notice. Lenin, in particular, was quite clear that its task was to redeem the honor of the Russian nation, proving that, rather than stuck in deep feudalism, it was the most progressive nation of all.<sup>v</sup> The immediate ancestor of Lenin's party was the movement of worshippers of the people – *Narodniks* – rendered “Populists” in English, and the people (*narod*) in question was the Russian people, which was defined by blood. However, Russia ruled over a huge empire, and it was not in the interest of Russian nationalists (Socialists as they were) to give it up. Therefore, to advance Russia's national agenda, they had to coopt the left in the numerous non-Russian nations within its imperial dominions. In the country of victorious socialism, nationality (i.e., Russian, Georgian, etc.) defined by blood, as a race, was the most important social category: only nationality, not class or religion, was inscribed in the internal passport of every Soviet citizen. But, ostensibly, the Soviet Union stood for internationalism.

Which brings us to the third phase in the relationship between left, right, and nationalism – the phase in which left and right congregated **in** socialism and for a while applied only to varieties within it. The reason for this was the socialist revolution in Germany. For, while the triumph of National Socialism was not referred to as a revolution, it certainly was one by definition, presupposing and achieving a radical transformation of the entire social and political order in accordance with an explicit ideological blueprint. The choice of the Jewish people as the enemy of German socialism and the systemic violence of its antisemitism apart, there was very little difference between German and Russian nationalisms (both belonged to the collectivistic and ethnic, i.e., racist, type) and, consequently, between their varieties of socialism. Goebbels, in fact, originally considered the sobriquet “National Bolshevism” for the German movement, but it sounded too obviously borrowed. Instead, National Socialists depicted both Bolshevism in the

East and Capitalism in the West as Jewish inventions, deployed by the Jews in the interest of achieving world domination, and professed to both undying hatred.<sup>vi</sup>

As, in the eyes of the world (or, at least, Western intelligentsia), the Soviet Union was *the* country of the left, the geo-political embodiment of the left vision, the confrontation of the two socialist (i.e., collectivistic nationalist) regimes logically placed both German socialism and nationalism, which in its case was explicitly acknowledged and emphasized (while in the Russian case, it was only implicit and rhetorically concealed) on the right. Still, the very concept of socialism of the right was awkward: it undermined too many political tropes. Thus, it was systematically occluded: its opponents took care never to spell out the acronym “Nazism” and to group the phenomena to which it referred not with socialism but as a variety of Fascism – a contemporary political movement, whose appellation, derived from Latin *fasces* (Italian *fasci*) – a word used in Ancient Rome for a ceremonial bundle of rods -- in no way disclosed its nature.

Remarkably, in Italy, *fasci* was originally used for syndicates, political organizations equivalent to guilds or trade unions. Moreover, the founder and acclaimed leader of the Revolutionary Fascist Party (which later became the National Fascist Party of Italy and stood at the helm of Italian **Social** Republic), Benito Mussolini, before becoming a fascist leader was a prominent Socialist – the editor of the Italian Socialist Party’s newspaper *Avanti!* In fact, he was a hereditary Socialist: named after a Socialist by a Socialist father, who was, naturally, also a nationalist. Mussolini broke with the Socialist Party because of its opposition to Italy’s participation in WWI, but he certainly admired Lenin much more than he would ever admire Hitler.<sup>vii</sup>

A gulf separated Fascism from Nazism, which reflected the profound difference between Italian and German nationalisms: both were collectivistic (thus tendency to Socialism), but Italian nationalism was civic, and German – ethnic (or racist). One of the greatest heroes of WWII, who in occupied Budapest managed to save the lives of some six thousand Jewish children, women, and men, most audaciously spiriting them from Eichmann’s very clutches, was an Italian fascist, Giorgio Perlasca. He accomplished this with the help of the representative of Fascist Spain, Angel Sanz Briz (“the Angel of Budapest”). When asked long after the war how come, a fascist, he risked his life to save Jews, he said: “I was neither a fascist nor an anti-fascist, I was an anti-Nazi.”<sup>viii</sup>

The word “fascism,” however, conveniently for socialists of the left, concealed all this. The tropes that organize our reality were preserved: Socialism is good, therefore it is of the left; National Socialism is bad and, as such, of the right, therefore it is Fascism and not Socialism.

II In the fourth, contemporary, phase, the relationship between left, right, and nationalism came full circle, with nationalism identified with resistance to change, conservatism, reaction, hankering for the imaginary good old days, in short, with the right and, therefore, as evil. This time, the United States participated in the transformation, perhaps even led it, rather than

observing it from the side, as happened in the earlier phases, and the American political spectrum also came to be characterized in terms of left and right positions. The phase began, after a certain hiatus, during the Cold War.

After the Allied victory in WWII, faced by the reality of the Holocaust and embarrassed by the de facto acquiescence of the West to it, Western intelligentsia desperately desired to be on the side of the good. The intelligentsia blamed the acquiescence to the Holocaust on classical liberalism, with its stress on individual freedom, which implied the right to be indifferent to the suffering of others and the right to use one's strengths to outcompete the weaker, which now appeared woefully inadequate – in fact not that different from fascism itself. Specifically, in the United States, this dramatically increased the appeal of Marxism, socialism, communism, anti-capitalism, prompting leading sections of the intelligentsia to self-identify as the left. At the same time, nationalism as such (not a particular type of nationalism) was associated with gore and brutal primeval instincts and defined as the very opposite of what was progressive and followed the direction of history. For some 40 years, it was banished from discourse (among others, academic) and considered completely irrelevant to the life of nations. History equaled progress and was perceived by the majority of intellectuals as leftward oriented – just as Marx originally predicted -- towards inter- and, in effect, trans-nationalism. Paradoxically, inside the United States, this coincided with growing concern with the rights of ethnic and racial minorities -- and soon other groups under-represented in the elites, women above all -- constituted as groups by physical, presumably genetic, characteristics. These groups were presumed to be separate (in this sense, exclusive) inclusive (i.e., cutting through lines of status and class) communities of natural identity, in exact parallel to the way in which exclusive, ethnic nations were imagined in the framework of collectivistic-ethnic nationalisms, such as German and Russian. They all were presumed to be opposed to and suffering under the heel of the privileged or majority group, also naturally (biologically) constituted and also representing an inclusive community of identity – that of white heterosexual males. (Interestingly, the Jewish people, whose genocidal persecution, with the shocking fact that the United States turned to it a resolutely deaf ear, lay at the root of this concern with the suffering of the oppressed, was not included among the suffering minorities, but, by dint of the whiteness of its European contingent, was associated with the privileged majority.)

In addition, the left-leaning intelligentsia's predilection for transcending the retrograde national loyalties coexisted with the sympathy for national liberation movements and revolutions – i.e., nationalism, struggle for national sovereignty -- in what emerged after the war as the Third World. Also viewed as anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, Third World nationalism, whose standard-bearers were regularly educated in Moscow's Institute of the Peoples' Friendship, named after Patrice Lumumba, was generally Marxist in its inspiration and politically and militarily backed by the Soviet Union. Neither the left-leaning Western intellectuals, nor the card-carrying Soviet Marxists were bothered by the contradiction between Marx's insistence on the solidarity of the working masses across national borders and efforts to create inclusive

blood-based communities in total disregard of such exclusive proletarian class loyalty. Class warfare was, in effect, forgotten.

The Cold War opened a rift in Western elites between the intelligentsia seeking moral redemption and the political establishment actually engaged in the confrontation with the nuclearly armed Soviet Blok. In the United States, the intelligentsia concentrated on the Coasts, which tended to vote Democratic, and represented an extremely important, vocal, part of the electorate, in control of the educational institutions and the media; the Democratic half of the political establishment thus increasingly adopted the intelligentsia's moral stance, while the Republicans, by default, were identified with the opposed to it, thus immoral, "military-industrial complex." Still, so long as the Cold War lasted and the Soviet Union was seen as a threat, even though American policies in some crucial cases contradicted this, the American public at large, including the political establishment and a considerable portion of the intelligentsia, upheld the values of the so-called "free world" -- those of classical liberalism, in which individual freedom was paramount and equality seen as equality of opportunity -- and approved of "free market" capitalism in the economy. Socialism remained identified with the oppressive authoritarian (commonly referred to as totalitarian) regime in the Soviet Union, in which the individual was deprived of freedom, especially the freedom to think independently and to excel, and equality was equality of result, or "levelling," and with controlled economy which kept the population poor. During the first two decades of the Cold War, only "counter-cultural" or radical groups, self-identified as of the left, openly disagreed with this. But by the mid-1960s such groups dominated the student opinion on university campuses around the country and were constantly gaining on mainstream public opinion.

By the late 1980s, the American intelligentsia and the Democratic party, identified with it, embraced the "left" sobriquet. By opposition, this placed the half of the nation identified with the Republican party on the right. One half of the nation was, therefore, by definition, progressive, the other conservative; one was, by definition, good, the other -- bad. In the course of this importation of the European political/moral cartography, the intelligentsia had already implicitly rejected classical liberalism in which American nationalism expressed itself and began referring to it as "conservatism," while "liberalism" acquired the meaning of "multiculturalism" in the sense of the insistence on the equality of group rights, specifically the rights of physically constituted groups. Liberalism so redefined became the Democratic party line, it was articulated by the intelligentsia in the universities and the media, establishing formulas of political correctness, and broadcast to the public. In the meantime, the other half of the nation had no benefit of such articulation, as a result of which Republican and "conservative" became associated with benighted. The trope "left," therefore, stood for the good and the enlightened, while the trope "right" aligned with evil and stupid.

But it was the end of the Cold War that made this transformation of consciousness explicit and cleft the American society into two warring sections. So long as the Soviet Union existed, there was a threat to the American way of life and concern for it: it was valued. The moment the



threat to it disappeared, the way of life itself lost its value for large sectors of American population and they lost the sense of allegiance to their nation and, it may be said, the very sense of their national identity. Though their consciousness is still national consciousness – they still see the world as divided into sovereign communities of fundamentally equal members – this consciousness no longer reflects the specifically American, individualistic and civic nationalism. **Loyalty** to the nation was replaced by the **voice** against it. Today, close to 50% of college students (who, one may safely assume, come from humanities and social sciences) prefer socialism – though no longer identified with the working class and its struggle -- to capitalism, an opinion shared by over 40% in the millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1997) in general.<sup>ix</sup> The loss of confidence and pride in the American way of life reinforces the sense of, and greatly contributes to America's decline as a superpower, which began almost immediately after its so-called victory over the Soviet Union. Both this decline and the outspoken contempt for American (individualistic, classical liberal) values offend those Americans who still identify as Americans above all -- the Republican, "conservative," less educated people in Middle America – and they reassert their national identity. The effect of the end of the Cold War in Western Europe, less stark than in the United States for obvious reasons, has been similar and was exacerbated by the anemic nature of the European Union -- its inability to make British, Dutch, French, and Italian people to feel better about themselves (i.e., add to their dignity) and to protect the ways of life to which they and other Europeans have been accustomed.

This is the cause of the rise of nationalism in the West and the reason why this rising nationalism is perceived on the opposing, left-wing, side as right-wing. It is right-wing by definition, because its critics, who regard themselves as on the side of the good, naturally see their opponents as evil. The left is the side of the intelligentsia, of people who articulate and publicly express their views; left=good and right=bad are the intelligentsia's tropes (because it is the intelligentsia that produces tropes). It is because these are tropes, that the terms "left" and "right" remain evocative and appear sufficient as explanations, however changeable and confusing their actual meanings are. In terms of these actual meanings, "left" and "right" today refer to the very opposite of what they referred to at different times in the past. "Left" – the good, the progressive – originally referred to radical nationalism, the veneration of the common **majority** of the nation, "populism"; "right," in contrast, stood for moderate nationalism, the defense of the freedom to differ, rights of minorities, including elites, and respect for outsiders; then "left" became specifically identified, as "socialism," with class struggle and the interests of the leading "proletarian nation" -- Russia, while the "right" stood for international, in fact, globalizing, "capitalism"; then "left" became the name for internationalism and defense of universal human rights, and "right" was connected to dividing humanity into groups defined by blood or their (ultimately biological) nature. Today "left" stands for the rights of such biologically defined, exclusive, groups, on the one hand, and for economic globalization – international capitalism, on the other; these are the agenda of the educated elites, who define the "right" as "populism" – the position of ignorant and inarticulate working masses, the

explicitly defined **majority**, whom the elites disdain and who appeal to national consciousness in an attempt to defend their dignity.

And yet, we still live in the Age of Nationalism. In fact, today we live in the age of the **globalization of nationalism**. In the decades after the end of the Cold War, nationalism was reasserted in Russia, spread in China and India, grew more explicit in Latin America, and is gaining new converts around the world. The reason for its globalization is that, by making common individuals shareholders in, and contributors to the dignity of their nations, it dignifies their personal identities. Wherever it spreads, nationalism makes societies competitive and strong. In these conditions, to look down on common – typical, undistinguished by anything special – people may not be a good idea. If Western educated elites have transcended nationalism – and they appear to have done so, in particular the American one, in two different directions, they have contributed to the weakening of the Western society, in the American case, raising the possibility of the disintegration of the United States. Even those on the left may consider the prospect of this kind of change too sinister. In the face of this specter, wouldn't it be right to equate the progressive with the conservative?

- i Detailed references to the above may be found in my Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity.
- ii In English, see particularly James H. Billington, Fire in the Minds of Men: Origins of the Revolutionary Faith, Book I. Also, on mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Book II, and on late 19<sup>th</sup> c. and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. (Russia and Germany), Book III.
- iii Nationalism, op.cit.; Advanced Introduction to Nationalism, 2016.
- iv Marx, "Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," 1843, and "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844."
- v Lenin, in particular "What is to be done?"
- vi See Nazi Ideology Before 1933: A Documentation, Eds and trans. B.M. Lane and L.J. Rupp, 1978.
- vii On Mussolini, the Socialist, see Jacob Talmon, The Myth of the Nation and the Idea of Revolution.
- viii Enrico Deaglio, La Banalita del bene, 2013.
- ix Boston Globe Magazine, "Millennial Issue."