Notes on nation and nationalism

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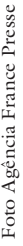

In an article in the present issue of Estudos Avançados ("The religion of politics in Israel"), David Bidussa recalls Zeev Sternhell's distinction between two "cultural templates" for the idea of nation: the "romantico-political" notion inspired by Herder and based on the concept of "Volk", and the "Illuminist-Jacobin" view founded upon the principle of citizenship. The distinction can be likened to two problems that authors of political development literature, which flourished some decades ago, used to highlight as demanding solution in the implantation and expansion of the modern nation-state: the problem of identity, in which nationality emerges as a decisive condition of the personal identity of people and as an object of loyalty, and that of equality, which refers to citizenship and its enrichment and expansion – in the terms of T.H. Marshall (1965), the passage from civil rights (the legal warranties at the base of the "Rechtstaat") and political rights (especially the right to vote and be voted for) to social rights (access to health, education, social security, etc.). However, to the existing problematic, this literature added the problem of authority, which involves appropriately building up the bureaucratic and symbolic apparatus of the state (see Rustow, 1967, for example).

These "problems" or dimensions are tightly interwoven. It is quite clear, as suggested by the very fusion indicated by the expression "nation-state", that the socio-psychological elements of national identity make an important contribution to the symbolism of the state and its bureaucratic or instrumental ramifications, that is, its capacity to operate efficiently upon the collectivity as such. Yet the problem of equality immediately stands out given the exhortation to solidarity contained in the reference to the common sharing of the national condition. Solidarity emerges as a virtue defining duties (at the limit, the sacrifice of one's life itself) that society intends to be able to demand of the citizen, and a classical and "republican" view – the one contained in Benjamin Constant's "freedom of the Ancients", or in the notion of citizenship as civism – turns these duties into the touchstone of the very definition of citizenship. However, even back in the city-states of classical Antiquity, as in Athens or republican Rome, there were already experiments in which the demand for civism and patriotic solidarity came together with an egalitarian and democratic drive. As pointed out by Ellen Meiksins Wood (2003), the crucial

trait of those experiments, especially in Athens, lies in the peasant-citizen, or in the fact that peasants may be citizens, in contrast with what normally occurs in traditional societies, where the appropriating state subjugates the peasantry. This is linked to the more general idea that producers (peasants, shoemakers, ironmongers, or manual laborers in general) can become rulers – being citizens, they can participate in the government of the community.

But the republican and democratic experiment in the ancient city (which, in the case of Athens, met with resistance from some of the major names in Greek philosophy) ended up proving problematic and fleeting. And it is no doubt possible to identify the issue of equality, as do the "political development" writers, as the most specifically "modern" part of the trinomial "modern nation-state". This unfolds into something of special significance: aside from justifiable disputes as to the existence or otherwise of an ancient ("acquisitive", "wild") capitalism, it was with the post-Renaissance affirmation of capitalism that the problem of equality and the "social question" gained decisive importance, lending the modern sociopolitical process a genuinely revolutionary edge.

On one hand, from the perspective of citizenship, the conditions of an expanding capitalism and the emergence of the issue of equality as an effective problem tie in with the affirmation of the liberal ideology, in which the incipient egalitarian impulse of the classical republican experiments becomes intense and vocal. Hence the fact that the "civic" emphasis of the classical citizenship of Antiquity is replaced by the emphasis on a "civil" concept of citizenship in which the citizen par excellence, rather than being just encumbered with duties and responsibilities before the collectivity and the state, is first and foremost the bearer of "rights", whose enjoyment is secured by resources available to him in the private sphere and which he affirms not just before his peers, but also before the state as a potential source of tyranny and oppression.

On the other hand, this liberal affirmation of rights and equality was bound to universalize and gain explicit social expression, as a consequence of which capitalism itself seemed to be put in check. That is the reason the relationship between capitalism and democracy came to appear inevitably tense and unstable. With the masses now armed with suffrage, it seemed inevitable to many that matters would progress toward either the expropriation of the capitalists and the onset of socialism or a conservative restoration and the suppression of democracy (Offe, 1984). Thus, the revolutionary feature of the modern sociopolitical process resulted in the challenge of engineering the "constitutional" accommodation of conflicts, or of building the institutional/legal apparatus in which conflicts could be framed and processed in a routine manner capable of avoiding violent clashes. Through varied vicissitudes, in which the social question often assumed such a violent guise (to say nothing of the long experiments with authoritarian socialism and fascism), in advanced

capitalist countries, where it could run more deeply, the process ended up in a combination of the "civil" and "civic" dimensions of citizenship.

To use the terms of George A. Kelly (1979), one could speak both of a "civic II", in which the psychological vigor of modern patriotism, identification with the nation and national solidarity represent a return to the "civic I" of classical citizenship, and of a "civil II", in which access to the "clientelistic" benefits of the welfare state represent an expansion of the initial modern affirmation of liberal rights (or "civil I"). On the "civil" side, this is the logic of the expansion of citizenship presented by Marshall (1965), culminating in some form of social-democracy. On the "civic" side, the crucial idea is that effective institutional construction (and thus "constitutional" accommodation) cannot be achieved without the factor of convergence represented by some degree of identification with the wider collectivity, or without the sense of community that comes from participating in a larger whole – a requirement for the existence of the appropriate "political culture", with the "consensus on fundamentals" it demands.

Now, if community in this sense must be created, the territorially-based collectivity, made up of those bound by relations of vicinage or common occupation of a certain territory (if not of kinship), furnishes a natural focus, which concerns the "primordial sentiments" dealt with by Clifford Geertz (1973). The feat of the modern national state was to stretch the range of operation of the relevant mechanisms from the scale of the city-state to a much larger one, through a process of integration and centralization only seen hitherto in conquest-based imperial experiments typically lacking in precisely such community feelings.

This integration or unification involved, to begin with, a process of psychological mobilization, in which more effective channels of communication (often, in the classic cases of Europe, favored by the catalyzing role played by the hegemony of a "nuclear area"[Deutsch, 1967]) enabled disperse or "parochial" populations to be "assimilated" and see as natural the reference to what would come to be the nation as such. From this point of view, the process required incorporating and neutralizing the relevance of ethnico-cultural and linguistic differences – despite the resistance it met with in many cases and the ensuing "ethnic irredentisms", giving rise to nationalisms of narrower bases.

However, while this side of communication and assimilation may make it appear "natural" to think in terms of the national state (and render more difficult for one to escape even analytically, nowadays, the perspective thus defined), it combines rather troublesomely with the social question and the problem of equality. Some revealing shades in the articulation between the two aspects can be observed in the work of two important Brazilian authors.

Let us begin with Helio Jaguaribe, an important name of the former Instituto Superior de Estudo Brasileiros (ISEB). Jaguaribe's is an explicit and

elaborate defense of a nationalist position, and its articulation with the social question is expressed in terms of a supposed confluence between what the author calls the "representativeness" and the "authenticity" of class ideologies. Class ideologies are representative according to the degree to which they suit the "situational" interests that engender them, that is, the class interests from which they presumably derive. Their authenticity, on the other hand, concerns the measure in which, regardless of the class interests they express, ideologies formulate "for the community as a whole criteria and directives that [...] allow better advantage to be taken of the natural conditions of the community, in connection with the predominant values of the civilization to which it belongs". Assuming that the relationship of class ideologies to economic development is the main criterion of their authenticity, Jaguaribe sustains that we would have, in post-1930s Brazil, a fortunate convergence between the two attributes of the ideologies, so that struggling for development would be the best way for each class to pursue its own interests (Jaguaribe, 1958, pp. 48-50).

It is easy to identify the illusory component in Jaguaribe's approach, which leads him to underestimate the autonomous weight and dramatic nature of the problem of equality in Brazil. However, this is the approach one should expect from a nationalist intellectual. More revealing is to see nationalism creep in the back door, as it were, in the Marxist-leaning analyses of the so-called "dependence theory", to which Fernando Henrique Cardoso made an important contribution. Despite the leftist criticism of nationalism that issues from Marxist internationalism, the denunciation of "dependence" that the theory involves inevitably results in assuming a nationalist position, and it was always read as nationalism, despite Cardoso's protestations to the contrary. For the denunciation points, of course, to national autonomy as the desideratum to be contrasted with the condition of dependence, and supposes that nations, as the "natural" and prominent foci of reference for the collective identity of their members, ought to be autonomous subjects. Without postulating the value of the autonomous affirmation of specifically national collective identities, the theory would not be able to escape a dilemma in which the denunciation becomes senseless: either extend the prescription of autonomy to each and every collectivity of whatever scale (which, as a collectivity, will also have its identity: shouldn't we seek to liberate the Brazilian Northeast from its "dependence" with regard to the Southeast?), or else simply give up the denunciation (without identity there is no reason for autonomy, and no way of having autonomy) in favor of the factual recognition that collectivities, like individuals, always tend to relate to each other in terms involving hierarchies and asymmetries of power and resources.

One could sustain that what we have with the theory of dependence, as a distorted consequence of the Marxist perspective that inspires it, is a curious inversion of what one would expect with regard to the relations between the

analytical and normative aspects of the reflection on nationalism. On the analytical level, it would be necessary, of course, to devote due attention to the problems surrounding the nation as the focus for the definition of personal and collective identity and the multiple relevant sociopolitical ramifications that stem from that. On the doctrinarian or normative level, in turn, it has always been necessary to underscore the at least potential irrationalism behind all forms of nationalism and the fact that it was an important factor in some of the darkest events in modern history and in various forms of political authoritarianism: Nazi-fascism, obviously, and even the "Big Brazil" ideology of our own recent dictatorship, in which the appeal toward convergence which Jaguaribe's analysis sees as a spontaneous occurrence was exacerbated in a sinister and violent way. The difficulties are aggravated, furthermore, under globalization and the current world conditions. If the nationalism of the ISEB, in its affirmation of national identity, sought to replace the naiveties of traditional patriotism (our forests are greener…) with an emphasis on the material and economic tasks of the promotion of national development, the conditions engendered by globalization, in which some of the very tendencies highlighted by dependence theory unfold, raise a difficult although not entirely new question: the necessity to disassociate the problems of personal and collective identity, which are, in principle, resolved on the cultural plane, from those concerning the more or less successful insertion of nations in the global economic dynamics, with the consequences for material life opportunities for their populations – in our case, for Brazilian society as a whole, especially the less privileged masses.

Dependence theory, however, does the opposite of what emerges from these recommendations. On one hand, embarrassed by the notion's low stock in the Marxist tradition, it falls silent on the theme of the nation and on the analytical complications produced by its articulation with different aspects of the general problem. In so doing, just like the Brazilian nationalism of the 1950s, it ties the authentic affirmation of nationality (and, at the extreme, the very sense of national dignity) to a certain equivocal ideal of economic autonomy of nations.[1] At the same time, it exposes itself to a difficult question, which is in fact just a sharper rephrasing of that raised in the previous paragraph, and which could be put to it either from the perspective of the old "conservative" criticism of nationalism as hammered out by a Roberto Campos, for example, or even, perhaps, from a radical leftist perspective: seen from the angle of the vital opportunities that open (or close…) to the Brazilian poor, what difference does it really make if the surname of the capitalist willing to hire them is Silva, Jones or Schmidt?

However that may be, it is appropriate to explore the analytical roots and certain doctrinarian ramifications of the authoritarian dangers of nationalism. They certainly have a lot to do with the peculiar power of those "primordial sentiments" invoked above in reference to Clifford Geertz, which,

in turn, articulate with the "ascriptive" character – to use the old sociological jargon - of the condition of being a "national" of this or that country: we are dealing here with the immersion, from birth, in a territorially-based collectivity of "multifunctional" characteristics that envelope the individual in a complex manner, forcibly molding and conditioning him or her in a deep way. Such characteristics help to produce the "suffocating" feature which Ernest Gellner (1996) does not shy from pointing out even in the "virtuous" republican civism of the ancient city, which, with its unconditional demand for loyalty, was not accompanied by the idea of civil rights; rather, as Gellner emphasizes, it shared certain characteristics with the clearly negative model of the Islamic umma, with its pressure for conformism and submission to a common faith.

If we assume the goal of collective autonomy tacitly affirmed by dependence theory, then the decisive question becomes how that collective autonomy is to relate with individual autonomy – and the obvious answer is that, if autonomy is a value, its affirmation on the collective level cannot result in its negation on the level of the individual. The nationalist disposition all too often forgets (or is willing to sacrifice) the latter in favor of the former. The most dramatic and telling illustration of the contradiction inherent to this is perhaps the 1836 "gag rule" passed by the United States Congress, which prohibited the discussion or acceptance of any petitions or proposals concerning the issue of slavery, leaving all decisions on the matter to the discretion of each state on the ground that in the view of the southern states it was something crucial to their identity and way of life (Holmes, 1993). From the point of view of autonomy as a value, the rule was patently absurd, as the autonomy of the southern states was upheld at the cost of continued slavery and so of the radical negation of the individual autonomy of many.

Two brief sets of reflections to finish these notes. Firstly, in accordance with the view of the relations between collective and individual autonomy outlined above, one should stress the culture of individualism and democratic pluralism into which autonomy as a value must necessarily translate. Rather than the psychological fusion and effusion that the nationalist or patriotic spirit expects and encourages and the authoritarian ethos that usually accompanies it, what is to be hoped for is that citizens become capable of "decentering" with regard to their collectivity, so that the latter can be an object of allegiance through a posture of sober and reflective civism distinguished by tolerance as the virtue par excellence and by the identification with varied groups and categories voluntarily adhered to, rather than "ascribed" or imposed (in contrast to a certain "multiculturalism" which tends to value the multiplying of identities based on "primordial" and absorbing ties, re-issuing on a "micro" scale all the difficulties of a "macro" nationalism). This posture will also involve the recognition that the autonomy in question, should it wish to serve as the platform for democracy and pluralism, cannot exclude the pragmatic component that sees as legitimate the individual pursuit

of interests, understood here as corresponding generically to personal goals of any nature and to the "self-affirmation" which writers like Habermas (1975) and Pizzorno (1966) take as the very definition of the idea of interest – with the proviso, of course, that their pursuit be ruled and mitigated by that sober and tolerant civism. This is the sense Gellner (1996), for instance, defends for the expression "civil society", looking to recover a long line of pluralist thought against the inconsistent and normatively equivocal idealizations that have become so common in the recent abundance of literature on the theme.

Secondly, an important set of interconnected qualifications. We have already mentioned the globalized world and the difficulties it aggravated for a nationalist perspective "instrumentally" oriented by the promotion of economic development. It so happens that globalization and its correlate processes have a significant impact on the articulation of the problems of identity, authority and equality, creating a peculiar disjunction among them. So, if nationality continues to provide the key point of reference for personal identity (there is nothing on the transnational level capable of competing with the sense of participation in a community that nationhood brings about), the problems related to "authority" and "equality" emerge with deeply changed features. Not only does the state's role as the administrator of problems concerning the "systemic" and social integration of capitalism come to be questioned and hindered (not to mention the worldwide defeat of socialism and its disappearance as a relevant aspiration or goal), but so does the enriched form of citizenship that Marshall's analysis saw as crowning a long process of development see itself threatened in favor of the roughness of the market.

However, we still have the resilience of the welfare state, even in countries where it was more severely attacked, and the complex political and partisan game that is played out around it. Furthermore, with each economic/financial crisis it becomes increasingly apparent that there is urgent need for a functional equivalent of the state capable of effective action on the global scale at which market mechanisms have come to operate. Of course, there is little cause for optimism on this score: all signs point to a turbulent future fraught with tribulations and hard lessons. And the hardships seem particularly severe on the social plane, where the economic dynamics have combined with yawning inequality and ample restrictions – in a world in which capital moves swiftly – to the circulation of workers across the frontiers that separate the economically advanced countries from the rest.

One way or another, not only will any attempt at institutional construction on the transnational level have to count on the national states as important agents, but also, given the impossibility of some form of transnational Keynesianism or social democracy in the foreseeable future, we cannot relinquish the action of the state in economic and social administration on the national level – nor the solidarity that state action requires. This is even truer of a country like Brazil, affected by stark inequality. Let us disabuse

ourselves of the illusions and mystifications surrounding the idea of identity: the Brazilian national question is, with better reasons than in other cases, the social question, and we must recognize that a genuinely democratic and pluralist society will not be built without first creating the material conditions for overcoming the country's inequality (even if that comes at the cost of the colorful identity associated with a folkloric image of Brazil that tends to be exploited in various ways). But, underpinning the action of the state, even if oriented by the critical spirit of a reflective civism, some form of nationalism will probably continue to be necessary.

Note

1 In fact, the accusation of "nationalism" was leveled against dependence theory by Francisco Weffort (1971), in an old debate with Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1971). But Weffort, who would later become Minister of Culture under Cardoso's Presidency, did not intend to demand more attention to the idea of nation and its cultural correlates. His aim was rather to demand orthodoxy, calling attention to the contamination of the analytical perspective by the introduction of the "spurious" concept of nation.

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ABSTRACT - The article examines some psychosociological assumptions of nationalism in terms of collective identity and their relationship with the general problem of equality. Last century's "official" Brazilian nationalism and the "theory of dependence" are object of a brief critical analysis in the light of the new global economic dynamics. The nationalist disposition is also confronted with the longings related to a pluralist ideal.

KEYWORDS - Nation, Nationalism, Identity, Equality, Dependence, Pluralism.

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