

History as national identity

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When we say “national identity” we are also saying “history,” thereby bestowing and imposing a “social responsibility” on those who produce, conserve and teach history. Not just any history. National history. Such a social responsibility may clash with the professionalization of historians’ work, a recent process which has had two variants: the “scientific” one — history as social or human science — which aims at objectivity, seeking the truth; and the instrumental variant, which puts history at the service of a state, an ideology, a church, etc. Sociology, psychology and philosophy find themselves in the same situation. For simple reasons of common sense I will not use Mexican examples. Those who understand will need little explanation, but the transposition will be simple since the problem is a universal one. Today, nationalism is an essential principle of political legitimacy. It is therefore necessary to begin by reviewing the nature of nationalism.

I. National Identity

Nation, nationalism, nationality, feeling, national identity.... The multiplicity of words does not mean that the concept is

clear. It is not sufficient to separate, as does Marcel Mauss, the good nation from the bad nationalism — Mauss distinguished the idea of the nation from nationalism, “which generates sickness in national consciousness”; it doesn’t work to oppose positive patriotism to catastrophic nationalism, Rousseau to Herder, Renan to Strauss, the left to the right, the elective community to the ethnic community, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen to the Germanic forest. What Stefan Zweig, in his *Memoirs of a European*, called the “nationalist plague” is nothing but the dark side of a two-faced Janus.¹

Those who simply condemn and reject nationalism run the risk of understanding nothing about what is occurring in the world. The national fact, in addition to being a fact, is at the same time an idea, a project. It seems to be something evident when it is really an enigma. It is also feeling, and it can be passion. Strong emotion, weak definition. Rather than finding the reasons for this non-reason, we often counterpose Reason and its faithful, “us,” to the Nation and “them,” its fanatics. While more comfortable, this is quite useless. The historical cost for not recognizing the national fact will be no lower tomorrow than it was yesterday.

We liberals face the nation as those before Freud faced sex. Enlightenment men, universalists by conviction and profession, we are, as Régis Debray aptly puts it, “the Victorians of the nation, stifled by prudery.”

A poet may help us clear up the mystery: “The essential fact,” writes Paul Valéry, “which constitutes nations, their principle of existence, the internal bond which links the individual members of a people to each other and one generation to another, is not of the same nature in the various nations. Sometimes race, sometimes language, sometimes territory, sometimes memories and sometimes interests institute the national unity of an organized human agglomeration in different ways. The deep-going cause of one such grouping may be completely different than it is in another.”²

Nationalism works on something invisible: each person receives an education, that of the family, the school, the group; each person needs to be recognized, to belong, to share a common destiny. *Natio*: those who were born together, etymology tells us. Belonging to a nation is a double bond, the right to have an identity, to receive protection, and the duty of conforming to customs, to laws, even to die for the fatherland (“it is a fate

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¹ I will cite just a few authors from an interminable but recently much expanded bibliography.

² Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, Vol. II, p. 934.

worth envying," says a French republican anthem).

At the same time we all have a "small fatherland," a motherland in Luis González's words, and we belong to humanity. Still, for most of us, the nation weighs more heavily in the balance. Why? I do not know. Why not the region, the continent, a cultural area? Why is Central America made up of several nations, while Mexico is not? Why is it that today we have Catalonia and Slovakia and Croatia, while yesterday we did not? I do not know. National identity has affirmed itself and identified itself with its own nation-state over the past two centuries. A series of waves has swept the world: after the first republican wave (the United States and France) came the Romantic wave; from the two of them together there was born the wave of political independence movements of the 19th century and of 1919, prolonged by the decolonization wave after 1945 and the disintegration of the Communist system in Eurasia.³

It is as if, in our era, politics can create nothing which is not a nation. On the basis of this fundamental fact, nationalism serves as an ideological label and, as such, is protean. A national ideology presupposes a policy of mass mobilization. It has been a universal political challenge since the French Revolution. Schools and history are therefore mobilized. At least we know what a state is, what a culture is, but we still do not know what a nation is: a state and a culture, various states and one culture (European, Latin American), one state with various cultures (the United States of tomorrow)? Nationalism can be a very

³ Gil Delanoui, "Réflexions sur la nation," *Esprit*, January 1994.

weak glue, or reinforced concrete. Ernest Gellner⁴ obliges us to be modest in our convictions. According to him, contrary to popular and even academic belief, nationalism does not have such deep roots in human psychology. Nor is there a scientific basis for the idea that nations are the Sleeping Beauties of history, needing only the appearance of an enchanted prince in order to become states. We must reject this myth: nations are not a political version of the theory of natural classes; and national states have not been the evident final destiny of ethnic or cultural groups. Gellner notes that the great majority of potential national groups (around eight thousand languages are spoken on the planet) have failed to fight for their homogeneous cultures to have the perimeters and infrastructure necessary for achieving political independence. While it presents itself as an ancient, hidden and lethargic force, nationalism

⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Naciones y nacionalismo*, Alianza Universal, 1988, p. 1588.

economic growth, technological innovation, occupational mobility, generalized literacy and an overall educational system protected by a state. Nobody has yet provided a better explanation for why nationalism is now such a prominent principle of political legitimacy.

Thus, our nations, with their corresponding states, persist in the fundamental enterprise pursued by the society of men: it is a grouping of men who depend on the same *res publica*, acquire a collective identity, inscribe their respective positions within the same natural space, build their institutions in the same cultural space, and determine themselves as a community vis à vis foreign peoples, seeking the means for their security and development. This enterprise repeats itself, it is eternal, but it operates in variable conditions; for each society, in each era, there is a singular environment, an inherited

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is but the consequence of a new form of social organization, derived from industrialization and a complex division of labor —although it does take advantage of cultural wealth and

situation, a legacy delimiting possibilities and impossibilities. That is the reality and that is the history.

II. History

If history is that which is real, historiography is more than the narration, the retelling, the analysis of

that reality. If national identity is a moment of history, historiography has no reason to identify itself with that moment and thereby become instrumental.

Over the course of two centuries historiography has transformed itself in a remarkable way. Its professionalization established norms of objectivity and, theoretically, freed historians from the need to work for the powerful or adapt themselves to the tastes and values of the public. Until recently the academy and the university functioned like Benedictine convents, or like Rabelais' abbey of Thélème, like islands where science could escape from external pressures—those of the Palace, the Temple and the Town Square. Professionalization meant autonomy. Nevertheless, historians, albeit later than their "social scientist" colleagues in sociology, psychology and economics, as well as jurists, found themselves unable to escape the demands of Power, which never forgot the close relationship between power and knowledge.

Every day there is a greater demand for a "public" history; every day the market for historians grows, to the point that now they are able to choose between the Palace and the Town Square in order to go with the highest bidder. The government, the ministries, state industries, the schools, companies, private individuals, social, religious, cultural and ethnic groups, genders, unions—all are buyers. So what happens to our objectivity? In this century historians have known the imperative demands posed by the totalitarian state and suffered the pressures and seductions of the authoritarian state; now they experience the temptations of the market. How can they maintain their professional integrity when they are subjected to the pressure to produce the

expected results? History as national identity is but one aspect of a larger problem: the issue of public history, history on demand, with or without conviction, cynicism, prostitution.

Every social state demands fictions and myths. History can be a myth, given that it is considered essential for the creation and maintenance of national identity. Valéry stated: "Give me a pen and paper and I will write you a history book or a sacred text. I will invent a king of France, a cosmogony, a moral or a gnosis. What will warn an ignorant person or a child of the fact that I am deceiving them?"⁵

In "De l'Histoire," Valéry affirms:

"History is the most dangerous product made by the chemistry of intellect. Its properties are well known. It produces dreams, makes peoples drunk, gives them false memories, exaggerates their reflexes, keeps old wounds open, torments them in their sleep, leads them to delusions of grandeur or persecution, and makes nations bitter, arrogant, insufferable and vain."⁶

Nietzsche believed that Europe "suffered a malignant fever of history," caused by "man's prodigious memory, his inability to forget anything."⁷

When one sees what is happening today in the Balkans, or Rwanda, or the Caucasus; when one hears certain historians invoke the past—it matters little whether or not this past is mythical—to justify everything; when one hears the university academic Milorad Ekmetić say "we do not hide

our desire for vengeance,"⁸ one feels like agreeing with Nietzsche and Valéry: "Happy peoples have no history." This would lead to the inference that suppressing history would make peoples happier. A glance at this world's events leads to the same conclusion. "Forgetfulness is a blessing which seeks to corrupt history."⁹

III. History as national identity

Why not shield ourselves behind Renan? He wrote: "Forgetfulness and, I dare say, even historical error are an essential factor in the formation of a nation and, therefore, the progress of historical studies is often a danger to nationality."¹⁰ Renan spoke of history as a science, not of history as a servant.

1. False social responsibility.

Public history presents an (apparent) disorder of images, symbols and exemplary personages. Everything is a thesis. They color in some scenes for us, which are always repeated: Clodoveus, Charlemagne and the students, Philip Augustus in Bouvines, Saint Louis beneath the oak, Joan of Arc, etc., up to De Gaulle's entrance to Paris in 1944. That is for little, and not so little, Frenchmen. This catechism, this rosary with its mysteries, this *via crucis* makes our past and our common future into a single destiny. These history books are false, yet they present an irresistible "truth." I have not forgotten, nor will I forget, "le petit Lavoisier," our primary-school primer, written by a great professional historian and admired by Justo Sierra. Every nation has its lying and admirable Lavoisier.¹¹

That more or less fantastic past, that set of founding myths acts on the future because it is a present action. The real

⁵ Valéry, p. 903.

⁶ Valéry, p. 935.

⁷ Nietzsche, *Au delà du bien et du mal*, chapters 7 and 8, "The Genealogy of Morals" (second essay), *De l'utilité et de l'inconvénient des études historiques pour la vie*.

⁸ *Esprit*, July 7, 1993.

⁹ Valéry, p. 903.

¹⁰ Ernest Renan, *Qu'est ce qu'une nation?* (1882), new edition, Paris, 1992.

¹¹ Marc Ferro, *op. cit.*

nature of that history is to take part in history. The future, by definition, cannot be imagined. That type of history almost performs the miracle, for us, of giving the future a face. That history is therefore iconographic, inseparable from the anthem and flag, all of it consisting of religious references. It offers us a repertoire of situations and catastrophes, a gallery of forebears, a recipe book of behaviors, expressions and attitudes to help us be and become. "Let's not deceive ourselves: the image we have of other peoples, and even of ourselves, is associated with the History we were told when we were children."¹²

Independent of its scientific vocation, history fulfills a militant function. I will leave aside the party-politics and purely ideological function,¹³ and refer to its role as missionary of the nation. Yesterday in France, today in Catalonia. History is rewritten, for schools as well as universities, for encyclopedias and television, in Barcelona, Bratislava,

1969 in the USSR, the new kindergarten Preschool Program stated: "Particular attention will be given to engendering, from the tenderest age, such important moral feelings as love for the fatherland and the Soviet people." Who can throw the first stone at those mentors? What differentiates the republican cult of Joan of Arc from the Soviet cult of Vladimir Ilyich?¹⁵

Elise Marienstras, a French historian of the United States, stresses the fact that American historiography, from textbooks to scientific works, is a compendium of the national ideology and myths. But she warns: "A critical history of nationalism will relativize its myths. Far from questioning the mystery of national identity, as do the writers of megahistory, the historian will discover the imperative necessity of national myth in its functional aspect: building a nation where one did not exist."¹⁶

Negation is no less important than affirmation. In the face of the

revolutionary terror and the martyrdom of the Vendée.¹⁷

Collaboration with the Nazi invaders, anti-Semitism and the Algerian war are other examples of conscious or unconscious amnesia in France. Every nation is in the same boat. A Japanese minister just resigned after an international scandal which he provoked when he denied the massacres that the imperial army carried out when it seized Nanking in 1937. For many Japanese this is a Chinese "invention," a "lie" aimed at sullyng Japan's image. These reactions show the fear of knowing, the rejection of any attempt to "disenchant" national history.

All this is normal. What is hard to accept is the relation it has with our profession. Our discipline is subject to a constant revision, a broadening of fields and methods; yet, in all the countries I know, school programs and textbooks persist in being what they are: cruelly nationalistic and deceitful. The history which is taught to the masses outside of primary-school classrooms is no less dishonest and brutish. Why does it escape the process of correction, revision and extension which characterizes historiography?

The same man who is wise while sitting in his study forgets his professionalism when he writes for the public at large or for television; he accentuates development, national pride, the glories of the revolution and the empire, the grandeur of the heroes of the past. He lacks the excuse enjoyed by the men of the 19th century, who were convinced that they were doing pious works when they wrote their "history of bronze." He is consciously committing fraud, intentionally fooling people, accepting a split personality.

“The idea of civilization demands a society which is at once open and closed, in a constantly reconstructed equilibrium, on three levels which are never found in an absolute, pure or separate form: humanity, the group, the individual”

Tashkent, Bishkek, Baku and Erivan. In the United States, history is ceasing to be that of the "melting pot" and becoming that of the "salad bowl," of the ethnic, culture and gender mosaic. It does not cease to mold collective consciousness, to offer a model.¹⁴ In

"revelation" of "forgotten" facts, reactions may be violent and may reveal the panic that an attempt to objectivize a mythologized national history may provoke. It took France two centuries to face the reality of

¹² Ferro, p. 9.

¹³ Meyer, *Perestroika...*, 1994.

¹⁴ Novick, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Gerd Krumeich, *Jeanne d'Arc à travers l'histoire*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1994.

¹⁶ E. Marienstras, *Nous le peuple. Les origines du nationalisme américain*, Paris, Gallimard, 1988, p. 7.

¹⁷ *La Vendée dans l'histoire*, Paris, Perrin, 1994.

It is true that the pedagogical institution is immense and few people have the desire to change things, but there is also the sincere conviction that history should teach a certain number of "essential facts," which are considered the framework of history. These essential facts are political, since the traditional, institutional definition of history has to do with events whose explanation is always of a political nature, even though it sometimes disguises itself as military, economic or intellectual. Among the best there is the cynical idea that it doesn't matter, that anything defective will correct itself, will be complemented at the university and that in the meantime it is indispensable that the children be enthusiastic about these fairy tales. It is clear that for them, history has a framework, and that this framework is of a political nature. This is because it is linked to national identity (or to any political or religious "general line"). This cuts off all other types of history, specifically those which have been developed by the new history, which made just one mistake: disdaining and abandoning political history ("histoire événementielle," "histoire-batailles").

For these reasons, the education of the masses and the molding of their opinion fall outside the influence of university debate and intellectual criticism, even in the most democratic societies. For this reason history for the masses recognizes nothing beyond a small set of stereotypes, of personalities, and God help the brave person who dares to suppress a single stereotype, a single hero! They want the masses to identify with wonderful characters from the past, men, women and children heroes who are dead (one must flee from history which is too contemporary) but ever alive. Lenin lives, Lenin will live forever!

This is done in order to tranquilize, in order to ensure the legitimacy and strength of national society. A big dose

of "daily life" can be added to this political history in order to make it more vivid, more "truthful" for students, readers and television viewers. It continues to be political, nationalist, conceited, anti-historical.

Not without surprise, I realize that the free university researcher, working in free countries' free institutions, writes books which are quite similar to those by historians in totalitarian countries, when it is a matter of patriotism and national pride, even, at times, of racial and religious superiority.¹⁸

Thus, we historians show the Jansenist Pierre Nicole to be right when he says: "It is our conviction that every historian is a liar, involuntarily if he is sincere, as a con man if he is not. But since neither the former nor the latter warn me of their perversity, it is impossible for me to avoid being fooled."

2. *Genuine social responsibility.*

The professional historian can undertake a sincere fight to improve textbooks. French and German scholars have done this regarding a very concrete point: suppressing all chauvinism, all xenophobia, giving them no ground in the teaching of history. After the First World War Jules Isaac, director of the famous Malet-Isaac manual collection, worked in a binational commission. This group was revived after the Second World War, and every summer for more than twenty years German and French historians worked at scrupulously cleaning up textbooks.¹⁹

It is much more difficult to read national history with the same clinical eye. It is no accident that a young American historian, Robert A. Faxton, was the first to pose the problem of the Vichy regime and French collaboration in the 1940-44 period. He opened a

breach which many French historians subsequently climbed through. But in 1973 the first reaction of the university community was indignation against the stranger who dared to stick his nose into the nation's closet since, supposedly, as a foreigner he was unable to understand anything about France. In those days I was surprised by some of academia's glories.

It is a difficult but not impossible task, as Edmundo O'Gorman and Luis González showed us long ago and Enrique Krauze has shown us recently.²⁰ "But I ask myself now: Should such a mistaken way of envisaging and expressing love for the fatherland really be maintained? Because, in addition to everything which has been said, beyond the vain hopes it all feeds and the fallacious idea it sustains regarding the extent of one's own forces, this stale attitude implies a shameful shame towards what is, neither more nor less; and it winds up turning our past into always-fertile ground for harvesting bad Mexican citizens. Not to know the weaknesses of heroes, thereby turning them into cardboard figures who can no longer communicate anything to the heart; to concede, on the other hand, not a jot of good intentions, abnegation or patriotism to the men and women who embraced historically erroneous or lost causes; to preach, in sum, a kind of national evangel about a historical development which was fatefully predestined to see the triumph of a succession of good men over a succession of very bad men —all this is nothing but a clear echo of an outworn and harmful nationalism whose survival reveals an unfortunate

¹⁸ Ferro, *op. cit.* and Peter Laslett, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Claparède, 1931.

²⁰ O'Gorman, *Del amor del historiador a su patria*, Mexico City, Condumex, 1975; Luis González, "La historia académica y los rezongos del público," *Diálogos*, January 1979; Enrique Krauze, *Siglo de caudillos*, Madrid-Mexico City, 1994.

lack of historical maturity. Must we then be underdeveloped in this aspect of intelligence as well?"²¹

Enrique Krauze followed Luis González's recommendations for putting an end to the "history of bronze" and those of Edmundo O'Gorman for a true and historical love of country. "Mexico has not succeeded in reconciling itself with its past; that is why it lives a lie, or rather a half-truth. This book is an attempt at taking a look, with balance and perspective, at the 19th century, without the pressure to judge, condemn or absolve its characters, but rather with the objective of understanding them...and taking them off their pedestals." Thus, it seeks to contribute "to Mexicans' tolerance towards ourselves and reconciliation with our conflicting ancestors."²²

History can also be a "teacher of life" and, as such, a positive factor in national identity, if it is able to retrieve the voice of the "vanquished" and the forgotten. So long as it does not fall into the temptation of giving such priority to the new history of women, blacks, Jews and Catholics to the point of mythologizing that history. As a conservationist of memory, the historian must always subject it to criticism, with all the rigor of positivism. Thus, the historian is aware of the distance separating commemoration from science, the conviction of experience from critical questioning, convenient amnesias from hard methodological reality, retrospective anachronisms from the obligation to maintain distance, memory as identity from the checking of that memory against truth. The historian cannot accept the highly popular theory which holds that "living memory is the only kind which is able to say what is just and unjust."

IV. Personal conclusions

The historian in search of national identity can seem like Oedipus; his quest may lead to catastrophe just as it led Oedipus to disaster, since he wanted to know too much about what he was. The Serbs and the Irish Catholics are our modern Oedipuses, while I consider the Palestinians and Israelis who met in Brussels in March 1988 to have been right when they stated that "simply, in order to begin talking, one must put history between parentheses."²³

Calmed and tolerant, national consciousness strikes a subtle balance between memory and forgetfulness, lucidity and amnesia, tradition and imagination. If the dosage is modified—and historians can and usually do have a great share of responsibility in such a chemical operation—the result is a ferocious humanity made up of fanatical individuals.

The problem is not to know identity in order the better to preserve it, but to guarantee the diversity which is manifested, among other things, by several identities, which are simultaneously sensitive and imprecise. The idea of civilization demands a society which is at once open and closed, in a constantly reconstructed equilibrium, on three levels which are never found in an absolute, pure or separate form: humanity, the group, the individual. None of these three levels should be presented as an absolute, since the person is situated in his or her triple context.

In his *Reflections*, Burke sees civil society as a very particular contract among three categories of persons, of whom two are not living; it is an association between the living, the dead and those to come. Thus Burke puts us on guard both against disdain for one's forebears and indifference towards

posterity. This allows us to reject paradigms and "necessities," to find our freedom in space and time. A little bit of internationalism distances us from the nation; a lot of internationalism returns the nation to us.

An historian can be loyal to his national community and at the same time cosmopolitan; for a Mexican, studying New Spain or the 15th century on the highlands means being cosmopolitan, as cosmopolitan as when we study 15th-century Castile or New France. If he works on national as well as contemporary subjects he will have more difficulty in conciliating scientific deontology with ideological and sociological pressures; nonetheless, he knows that the most difficult and noble task facing the historian is that of debate and reexamination. Genuine revision requires benevolent comprehension. It means open scientific interchange in order to confront divergent viewpoints and achieve an analytic and critical vision which is evolutionary without being relativist. There is no definitive truth, but honesty is necessary.

While it is true that history is an element of national identity, I do not see why it should be up to the historian, as a "social scientist," to vouch for the "truth," for the veracity of the so-called founding myths. I prefer to base myself on Renan.

Moreover, my hope, my wish as a citizen, is that in our conception of public life we will be making the transition from a society in which legitimacy comes from tradition to one governed by the model of a contract, adhered to—or not—by each individual. Memory, tradition and history will then give way not to forgetfulness but to some universal principles, to the "general will." Our public life does not need a "public" history as a source of legitimacy. ❧

²¹ O'Gorman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²² Enrique Krauze, *op. cit.*, Introduction.

²³ Tzvetan Todorov, "La mémoire et ses abus," *Esprit*, July 1993.