

Identity, Symbolism and Politics

The political life of mankind is not altogether amenable to reason. Political commitment is concerned with identity and loyalty and engenders obligations, sometimes of a very extreme, demanding and ultimate kind. People's choices in this matter cannot often be based on the conclusion of a rigorous argument or a precise calculation. Blessed are those for whom this is possible: a member of a stable and accepted polity may perhaps cast his vote on the basis of estimated interest, or even of the logical persuasiveness of a party manifesto. But when fundamental political choices are made, there are usually so many deep considerations, imponderable and incommensurate, to be taken into account, that rational analysis can only take one part of the way.

Yet there are choices to be made. The Durkheimian model of a man who, under the impact of ritual and excitement, internalises a unique set of authoritative collective representations, is quite inapplicable to the modern human condition. We live under multiple pressures and constraints:

Oh wearisome condition of humanity!
Borne under one Law, to another bound.
(Fulke Greville, Mustapha)

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In his Inaugural Lecture to the College de France, Raymond Aron described his conversion from the Durkheimian orthodoxy to the sociology of Max Weber. What attracted him to Weber was his recognition of the fundamental conflict of Gods, well outside the reach of rational resolution. At the time, Aron found himself a graduate student in Weimar Germany. The situation simply was not amenable to some kind of analysis in terms of social cohesion. The crucial criticism to which the Weimar republic was subject, as Thomas Mann eloquently described in one of his political essays, was that the outer institutions did not

correspond to anything inward. Its symbols were hollow. So it could not command loyalty. Real symbols are signs whose inner resonance is such that they confer legitimacy, and have the capacity to inspire loyalty.

The basic fact is that our identities and the associated obligations are neither given nor rationally demonstrable. Various philosophers have purported to tell us of human identity: Descartes found it in the thinking substance, Leibniz considered man a monad linked only by pre-established harmony, but not real contact, to a system of other monads. Hume saw man as a given bundle of perceptions, Kant in his pietist puritan way saw the fulfilment of our true identity in refraining from making any exceptions in the implementation of rules. Man is truly himself when he never sinks to allowing an exception: one might call this the dream of the bureaucrat.

Marx, an even more extreme expression of the bourgeois spirit than Kant, thought our true Gattungs-Wesen was fulfilled when we are allowed to indulge in creative work, without any system of social roles and constraints, which he generically castigated as 'alienation'. Marx's philosophical anthropology is, not surprisingly, a continuation of Kant's: the true self emerges when the distinction between inclination and obligation vanishes. For Kant this was only given to angels, for Marx it was the destiny of man when classes had disappeared. Most academics can, I suspect, sense what Marx meant: they experience fulfilment when on vacation, and when they can really get down to the work, and when no telephone call can bring them back to alienating pressures. Whether this apotheosis of free creative work can be generalised for all mankind, may well be doubted. The contemporary neo-Marxist Jon Elster still finds merit in such

a view and sees it as the central and most valuable element in
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 Marxism.

Even an irrationalist such as Schopenhauer, who saw a blind Will as the controlling force of each man and indeed each living being, seemed to think that this Will was reasonably unambiguous in its commands. Freud carefully avoided endorsing either a Schopenhauerian Id or a Kantian super-ego, and advised us to identify with the middle class of the ego. The ambiguity and wobbliness of this advice was mitigated, because the recipe commended a new re-negotiation of the psyche's identity, to be done a-new in each separate implementation of the Freudian ritual. By the moderation of his recipe and the flexible market-adjustability of its specific content, Freud supplied much of the Western intelligentsia with the idiom for conducting their life. If Marx represents the bourgeoisie at its most optimistic - a life of unrestrained creative work is possible, unimpeded by inter-personal conflict and social imposition - then Freud represents it in a more sombre and realistic mood: the commendation of a Middle Way between indulgence and restraint, with a recognition that a heavy price has to be paid for everything, notably for social cohabitation.

What these thinkers have in common is the conviction that their insights tell us who or what we truly are, and where our real identity lies. A marked exception to all this were the Existentialists, once so fashionable, whose central message was precisely that no man can pass the buck to his own identity to anything at all. No wonder they were most in vogue in countries suffering from defeat, national humiliation, and the dismantling of the supportive symbolic machinery. These had previously endowed men with not merely an identity, but above all a proud and confident one, but many of those supports were smashed during

the various cataclysms of our century. The consolation which Existentialism offered to people in such a condition was to tell them - the situation you find yourselves in, of being obliged to choose an identity without support and reassurance, let alone proof and guarantee, is the human condition. You are not in any way singled out and worse than others. The only thing which singles you out that you know your condition, and that you do not furtively obscure it. In a sense, you are better off, or superior to those who do not properly comprehend their situation, because they are sheltered from it by illusion, whereas you are not. You know, and they do not, and to convey the fact that it is all a bit their fault - they collude in their agreeable self-deception - we call it bad faith.

What was wrong with this Existentialist account of our condition is that it privatised it all to a totally unrealistic degree. Their picture may fit the predicament of an individualist intellectual, whose work or leisure permit him to nurse his identity, or lack of it, with loving care. Most of mankind has a living to make, and/or need to protect themselves from aggression; they do it all as members of collectivities, and an identity comes with the package deal. There is something dreadfully ethnocentric about pretending that something which characterises most of mankind - the acceptance of a socially imposed identity - is morally pathological, and that we alone in our special isolation are among the saved. This is to make a general virtue of a specific misfortune.

So we have a number of false guides to our condition. The rationalistically inclined philosophers talk as if our identity could be supplied logically, as the terminus of a cogent and possibly prolonged piece of reasoning. The cosy sociologists of

the Durkheimian type talk as if collectivity would do the job for us, in this age, without ambiguity and strain. The voluntaristic individualists pretend that we go into this market alone, choosing a self as we might a style of interior decoration.

The truth of the matter is that this is not how we live now. Identity, the package of commitments and obligations and loyalties which make up a man, is not chosen in the abstract: men are constrained by their economic opportunities, personalities, passports, visas, and so forth. Men seldom design their own identity: they take them from stock, and the stocks are supplied in bulk by large collectivities. But at the same time, many of us are not uniquely constrained in our choice of identity. We simply do not resemble a Durkheimian savage who, having but one ritual available at the local totem pole, is therefore supplied with a unique set of collective representations, within which he then lives, whether he likes it or not, and without really being able to ask whether he likes it. The collectivities which actually supply our ready-to-wear identities - off the peg, and seldom with a perfect fit - are multiple, overlapping, unstable, and sometimes given to inner fission. Choice is often possible, or it is actually imposed, a predicament rather than a privilege.

For a number of obvious reasons, available options are in the main conveyed by symbolism. There may be some who reach their decisions with pencil and paper, working out a cost-benefit budget for each option. But they must be rare. This is so not because men are above the calculation of interest, but because in these complex, many-stranded choices, calculation is almost impossible. The options are communicated, and I suspect evaluated, in terms of symbols, rather than balance-sheets.

Symbols are markers endowed with emotional potency. The properties they are required to have are almost the inverse of those supposedly required of a good scientific notation. The latter is required to be precise: the exact limits of what does and does not fall under a term are to be specified as finely as possible, so that the truth or falsity of statements employing the term can be determined. The terms ought not have multiple roles and complex involvements with reality, obstructing their univocal use. They should have as little emotive charge as possible, or if endowed with it, it should be so to speak detachable. With symbols, on the other hand, the plurality of meanings and levels and the emotive charge are all of the essence.

How they acquire the charge is a complex and varied matter. The theory of totemism is perhaps the most persistent discussion of one aspect of this problem. Modern societies and institutions are richly endowed with quasi-totemic insignia, though they do not involve the prohibition of consumption. No Welshman feels guilty when eating leeks. In linguistics, it is a principle that generally speaking, there is no inherent, as opposed to 'conventional', link between sign and object. Onomatopoeic words are an exception, and a relatively small one. In the world of symbols, though complete conventionality is not unknown or even rare, the contrary assumption constitutes a kind of baseline expectation. The symbol is on the whole expected to have some kind of non-conventional link to the thing symbolised. When the link is tenuous (for instance, the garter and its connection an Order of nobility), it adds a kind of piquancy to the symbolism - as if to say, look how much is meant by how little. The weight of that which is symbolised is in such cases

underscored by the very triviality of the symbol.

Central and Eastern Europe is endowed with at least three major identity-conferring, life-orienting principles: 1) the ideal of a secular, revolutionary establishment of justice on earth; 2) nationality; 3) religion, in the literal sense. It is worth making some general and some specific remarks about them.

In the zone stretching between the Baltic, the Adriatic and Black Seas, the implementation of every single one of these principles is precarious. This precariousness is much greater than it is, for instance, in Western Europe. In the West, boundaries of the operation of various principles, in geographic and social space, are relatively secure and well-established. The definition, and in smaller measure, the geographic limits, of the major nations has been agreed for some time. They were set up, either by strong dynastic states on the Atlantic coast of Europe, or by the codification of vernacular languages and the creation of a national High Culture, at the time of the Renaissance (in Italy) or the Reformation (in Germany).

As for religion, the settlement of 1648 has on the whole persisted, even though Switzerland managed to have a religious civil war in the 19th century, and Ulster continues to provide a counter-example. The last major political civil war occurred in the then backward Spain, or perhaps in the turbulent but not over-bloody post-war change of regime in Portugal. The inter-war histories of Germany and Italy were certainly not peaceful, but interestingly, changes of regime were induced either by defeat in war, or were carried out in an at least formally quasi-constitutional manner. There were no unambiguous endogenous revolutions.

The nearest thing to a revolutionary theatre occurred in

France in 1968, and it was more theatrical than revolutionary. By and large, the national and religious identities benefit by now both from a certain stability and a certain routinisation. Few if any sophisticated intellectuals, or others for that matter, can display deep emotion - as opposed to merely decent decorum - in the presence of their associated symbols. A person who sobbed quietly whilst seeing the Queen inspecting the Trooping of the Colours would go into a Bateman cartoon, in the series on solecisms, together with the Guardsman-who-dropped-his rifle and the-man-who-asked-for-a-whisky-in-the-Pump-Room-in-Bath. As for revolutionary ardour, it has become routinised without ever having been successful.

By contrast, the mid-East of Europe can be characterised as the zone of precariousness. At the beginning of the settlement which followed the Napoleonic wars, the area was divided between four empires, and not a single one of the minor nations was endowed with its own political roof. Some of them, the 'non-historic' nations, can barely be said to have existed at the time, except as a kind of ethnographically identifiable raw ethnic material. By the time all four of the great empires collapsed in 1918, most of these nations acquired independence, but the precariousness and ambiguity of that independence, where it lasted, is something that hardly needs stressing.

A revolutionary, highly discontinuous inversion of the social order has indeed taken place but, in most places, it has not yet been fully blessed with the softening which comes with routinisation. Religious ardour inspired by religious doctrine or symbolism on their own may have diminished as much as elsewhere, but the religious definition of ethnicity is conspicuous in a number of cases; religion is also endowed with

symbolic potency as an alternative, and hence a denial of secular political messianism. In brief, all the great identity-conferring principles are more demanding, more contested and more precarious. One may venture a generalisation: symbols are more potent when what they stand for is at risk.

Some specific observations about each of the principles.

Secular revolutionary messianism: it is in no way devoid of powerfully stirring symbolism. The red flag, the tune and words of the Internationale, when sung in a country in which Communists were not in power, and their followers belonged to the underprivileged, could be deeply moving. At any rate, I found it so on the Square of the Republic in Prague on May 1st, 1938, when a crowd, filling the entire available space, sang it in unison. It was the closest I ever came to a Durkheimian religious experience. But even at the age of twelve, I clearly noticed that members of the crown who thought that this unity erased ethnic/religious differences, were gravely deceiving themselves.

If secular political messianism is endowed with potent symbols, why is it that they seem to have lost much of their charm? One can only hazard a number of guesses. The trouble with secular messianism may be not so much that it is secular, but that the Messiah has made the mistake of appearing on earth. The Revolution has actually taken place, and the reality it has brought about can be confronted with its promises. Religions in which the Second Coming is postponed sine die, or where the saviour is in decent Occultation, are spared such embarrassment. Believers in a secular revolutionary transformation of mankind may be excused a certain bitterness at this point: why are they criticised, so soon, for the non-fulfilment of their principles? Christianity has preached meekness and submission, non-violence

and poverty for centuries, whilst the institution incarnating it was devoid of such attributes, without attracting quite so much eager and impatient criticism. There is another factor, which hardly needs to be dwelt upon: the revolutionary zeal is undermined further when non-fulfilment of expectation is joined to foreign domination, when it conflicts with the dictates of national identification.

Even if these obvious factors are taken into consideration, a puzzle remains. They do not fully explain the relatively low blood-stirring effectiveness of Communist ritual, once Communists are in power. There is something a little shoddy and dreary about them. For better or for worse, judged by what might be called Max Reinhardt criteria, Left wing rituals - at any rate when the Left is in power - do not compare with those of the extreme Right. If Oscars were awarded for political theatre, without regard to the merit of the political ideology that was being dramatised, I fear they would go to the Right. Why should it be that not merely does the devil have the best tunes, but the Right has the best impresarios?

If I am right in my assessment, one may well demand for an explanation. I shall tentatively hazard some. The theatrical failure of Left authoritarian regimes may, ironically, be in part a consequence of certain virtues. Outright socialist regimes are not authoritarian because their ideology positively requires it, but because of the operation of a not quite intended social mechanism, which is brought into play by near-total economic centralisation. Where there is but one politico-economic hierarchy, its occupants cannot tolerate rivals. But the authoritarianism is unacknowledged, at least under that name, and so it is slightly embarrassed. It cannot joyfully and proudly

proclaim, and ritually endorse, ranked sub-groupings, or a hierarchical structure of society. It avoids any overt ritual of brisk and devoted obedience. Ranking and power-concentration do of course exist, but they are not eagerly recognised and symbolically sacralised. The touch of shame which attaches to the effective organisational principle of society, inhibits its proud symbolic externalisation. There is a dampening disparity between that which is real, and that which may be theatrically celebrated. Right wing dictatorships have no such inhibitions. They can glory in their hierarchies and endow them with colourful symbols. It is a bit like the difference between feudalism proper and a patronage system. Real feudalism overtly acknowledges and glories in relations of inequality and dependence, the exchange of loyalty for protection, of reciprocal but unequal service. Patronage systems do much the same, but in the context of a society which repudiates such relationships. Hence patronage relations are tinged with ambivalence and shame, and lack joyful ritual expression.

Socialist societies are marked by the pulverisation of civil society and a sordid struggle for power in the single bureaucratic hierarchy, a struggle acute because the bureaucracy is the single locus of power, and mean and sordid because, in the main, it can only employ the usual devices of bureaucratic conflict, namely intrigue, sycophancy, persistent pressurising, cliquishness, tacit or illicit horse-dealing. In the civil society itself, survival is only possible by wheeling and dealing and membership of unofficial networks.² Which of the elements of this kind of society wish to see themselves mirrored in ritual or symbolism? Knightly thugs may joust, so as to proclaim the basis of their privilege in force and valour, but who wants a symbolic ritual re-enactment of Office Intrigue? Perhaps it

should be tried. But as things are, the officially sponsored rituals can then only dwell on themes which have little connection with reality, and so lose their capacity to stir. The irony of Solidarity and its suppression is of course that it embodied in part the very ideals or values which nominally constituted the legitimating principles of the regime which also suppressed Solidarity. Only when endowed with genuine autonomy, did the appropriate symbols recover their potency. Those who believe, for better or for worse, that set of symbols is still alive and should not be discounted, and would regain its magic if not sullied by official support, may find good supporting evidence in this historic event.³

Right wing authoritarian regimes seem rather better placed from this viewpoint. Their overt commitment to hierarchy and corporatism allows them both to recognise sub-groupings openly, and to grant them some autonomy and reality. It is a bit like the difference between the Conservative and Labour Parties in Britain. Both of them may be effectively centralised in their decision-making, but Conservatives do not repudiate hierarchy and deference, but on the contrary believe in them, whereas Labourites officially reject them. In consequence, Tories can muzzle their own extremists, by appealing to values endorsed by party members, and prevent over-zealous activists from being too much of an electoral liability. The ethos of Labour makes it virtually impossible to do the same. Attempts to discipline extremists (i.e. people who take nominal socialist doctrines with undue seriousness and literalness) are thwarted, because the matey pseudo-egalitarian atmosphere of the Party makes any kind of discipline difficult.

The appeal of nationalist sentiment in Eastern Europe has

declined less, if indeed it has declined at all, than it has in Western Europe. In Western Europe, recent decades have witnessed the emergence and decline of some new mini-nationalisms, and occasional racist extreme right movements, directed at alien labour migrants. Violent nationalism has been not too prominent, with the exception of Ulster and Basque-land and, marginally, Corsica. In the Eastern half of Europe, the political order has in the main been capable of containing violence - with marked exceptions such as the recent Azeri pogrom of Armenians - but one's impression is that irredentist and liberationist sentiments are powerful, even if politically suppressed.

Two quite distinct principles have governed the 1945 ethnic settlement in Eastern Europe. As far as German minorities were concerned, leaving aside isolated pockets fairly far to the East (in the USSR and Rumania), a final solution of firm expulsion has resolved an old and festering problem. Bohemia and Moravia, ethnically plural since the Middle Ages, are now virtually Deutschrein as well as Judenrein: Hitler and Stalin between them have achieved an ethnic homogeneity which would have been unthinkable some decades earlier. Poland, endowed with enormous ethnic minorities before the war, now only has tiny ones, and is similarly homogeneous. On the other hand, as between states destined to enter the Soviet orbit, neither frontier rectification (with the exception of annexation by the USSR), nor expulsions or transfers of population were permitted. I remember how in 1945, the Czechs and Slovaks were surprised that the expulsion of the Germans was not allowed to be followed up by a similar expulsion of the Magyars from southern Slovakia, as seemed logical. But evidently Stalin had no desire to create running sores between fellow-satellites.

As far as frontier rectification is concerned, presumably the same principle was tacitly adopted as that which governs inter-state relations in post-Independence black Africa: if the principle of ethnographically determined boundaries were admitted at all, trouble would be simply endless. Any contrary policy would also have allowed states, or one state in particular, to benefit from having taken part in the war on Hitler's side. A slightly odd consequence is that the Ukraine now has a strip of Magyar villages: when Ruthenia was transferred from Czechoslovakia to the USSR, the Ruthenians retained the Hungarian zone which the Czechs grabbed (with neither ethnographic nor historical warrant) in 1919.

The consequence of the simultaneous operation of two quite different principles is that one can now divide the states into two different kinds, from an ethnic viewpoint - the newly homogenous ones, namely Poland and the Czech lands proper, and those which perpetuate the old Habsburg "prison-house of nations" pattern (with or without federal form), namely Yugoslavia, Rumania, and Czechoslovakia as a whole. Hungary and Bulgaria are homogeneous for a somewhat different reason: both of them, in consequence of their geo-political location, were victims of successful coalitions of their neighbours directed at them, and were reduced in size, or prevented from expanding, to a point where they contain little by way of minorities, though Turkey has complained of the treatment of Turks in Bulgaria. Despite the importance of these differences in political type, one's impression is that national feeling is intense throughout the region. It is hard to guess to what extent this is due to the political regime being linked to foreign domination and the enforced, option-less inclusion in one particular international

block.

I do not wish to repeat here at any length the arguments I have expounded elsewhere, purporting to show why ethnic identification is so much more powerful in the modern world than it had been in the past: in an occupationally mobile, technically sophisticated and heavily bureaucratised society, a man's employability, dignity, moral incorporation, depend largely on his mastery of and acceptance within a literate, educationally standardised and transmitted High Culture, and the idiom of state bureaucracy, economy and social life need to be identical (particularly so under socialism). A man endowed with the "wrong" culture, i.e. one other than that which provides the idiom for the state-and-economy in which he finds himself, is at a permanent disadvantage, and finds himself exposed to perpetual humiliation. It is not surprising that, in such a world, nationalist sentiment is strong. Nevertheless, there has been a diminution of it in the West, but not, as far as one can tell, in the East.

Religious identification and symbolism is the third principle. This, in some ways, seems the most complex sphere, no doubt in large part because of its intricate involvement with the political and ethnic spheres. In some measure, the salience of religion is a consequence of the fact that some of the nations of this zone possess a religious definition: it is part of the identification of the member of the ethnic group that he adheres to, or rather that he or his immediate forbears did adhere to, a certain faith. The extreme example of this is constituted by the Bosnian Muslims, who are linguistically indistinguishable from their Serb and Croat neighbours, but who succeeded in having an ethnic category of 'Muslim' officially recognised, although some of those who proudly define themselves in that manner may

also be atheists and/or Marxists. A gentleman does not need to know Latin and Greek but is required to have forgotten them, and in Bosnia, a Muslim does not need to believe that there is no God but God and that Mohamed is his Prophet, but he is required at least to have lost such a conviction.

The religious definition of ethnic identity, where it obtains, is of course further reinforced by two supremely important factors. A well organised Church, with a headquarters and central secretariat outside the territory controlled by the state, even if not openly defying the state, is outstandingly well placed to crystallise either tacit or dramatic dissidence. With the exception of Albania, the state in Eastern Europe has more or less respected the principle of toleration of religious freedom: where the faith in question is inherently an organised one, where the object of the reverence is a religious community with a sacramental hierarchy, the control and capture of the church by the state is difficult. The autonomous survival of the church violates the state's pretension to ideological monopoly. This is of course the second important fact: the enemies of my enemies are my friends, and the symbols which offend my enemy or my oppressor become my symbols.

Any theory of the social effectiveness of symbolism needs to distinguish between what one might call, generically, the "catholic" and the "protestant" religious styles. One might also call them the Externalising and Internalising religions, or those which stress the Durkheimian and the Weberian elements respectively. The former rely on the power of external and collective ritual, the latter on the proud repudiation of reliance on such outer support, preferring to stress inner commitment and tension. This distinction cuts across the issue

of whether or not the faith has control of the coercive political apparatus, and so can ensure that the theatrical externalisation is effective, so that participation is extensive and not sabotaged. There are obvious advantages in possessing such powers, and no doubt this is part of the explanation of why the re-ritualisation of politics by Fascist regimes was so effective.

But the advantage of physical contrast over public space should not be over-estimated, for there is something strongly operative on the other side: there is a long-standing admiration for the inner command which dares over-rule the external sanctions. In fact this is something which secular-revolutionary, nationalist and religious martyrology share: the reverence for the hero, who recognises the legitimate call at a time when all the outward apparatus is still in the hands of usurpers, and is aimed against the true inner voice. Such inward, unsustained commitment is held to be specially admirable. At present, where the Church is influential, it benefits from a double advantage: its ritual is externalist, but its authority, unsustained by the coercive polity, is internalist. Protestant faiths do not seem to have achieved anything similar, though some protestant sects are specially vigorous in the USSR.

These seem to be the contestants in the battle of the symbols: a routinised secular soteriology which has lost its ardour and conviction, a vigorous set of nationalisms, and a religion endowed with vigour mainly when it is linked, in alliance or defiance, to the other two. It is these claims and not the symbols as such which are in conflict, but by a kind of conceptual metonymy, the symbols come to constitute the entities they signal, and help bring them into existence.

This is the abstract and no doubt obvious schema. The importance of the essays assembled in this volume is that they

bring un-obvious, fascinating, carefully researched, and sensitively interpreted documentation concerning what really happens. Anthropology lives by the recognition that social reality which is to be found in the details. One's interest in this outstanding material is of course inspired only in some measure by mere intellectual curiosity, by sociological voyeurism, by the light they may throw on the theory of identity and symbolism. To a much greater extent, it is inspired by sympathy with those who are involved in these deep predicaments.

Ernest Gellner

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FOOTNOTES

1. On Taking Marx Seriously. Cambridge University Press, 1985.
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3. Cf Andrzej Walicki, "Liberalism in Poland", Critical Review, Vol. 2, No.1, Winter 1988, p.8; and Stanislaw Andreski, "The Prospects for Poland in the Event of a Cessation of Social Control", to be published.