

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Post-communist societies: between ethnicity and globalization

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GEORGE SCHÖPFLIN, *Nations, Identity, Power. The New Politics of Europe* (Hurst, London, 2000), 442 pp., ISBN 1-85065-410-7 (pb), £16.50

How can we understand national identity today? Ten years after the collapse of communism, Professor George Schöpflin from SSEES has written a forceful and inspiring book. It is based on 27 essays, some of which were previously published. Most of them focus on the central role of nationhood and ethnicity in post-communist societies, and their relationship to democracy. This is a thought-provoking collection on a diverse range of issues that have preoccupied scholars of nationalism and political transitions since even before the collapse of communism.

Two captivating features of the book stand out. The first is Schöpflin's careful attempt to delineate ethnic/national identity as an object of analytical attention, and not, as is sometimes the case, to hastily relegate it as epiphenomenal. Yet, Schöpflin refuses to reify it as a primordial phenomenon beyond the purview of critical analysis. The second is his use of illustrative material from places such as England and Central Europe, particularly Hungary, which helps to bridge the gap between theoretical abstractions and empirical reality.

The volume does not offer a retrospective overview of the state of the subject over the past few years, and bibliographical references are scarce. Yet it conveys new ideas and is the remarkable result of years of reflection on the topic.

In the Introduction, the author makes his case for the study of nationalism from new perspectives, rejecting the legacy of what he terms 'Hans Khonism', namely, 'the proposition that there is a Good Western nationalism (civic, democratic, peace-loving etc.) and a Bad Eastern nationalism (nasty, brutish and anything but short)', a distinction that is 'truly lazy' (pp. 4–5). The straitjacket that such dichotomies tend to impose on the field can gloss over paradigm-defying realities. However, Schöpflin does not deny that there is a difference between East and West.

Indeed, this difference is crucial and inescapable, especially in ways of thought, rather than lifestyles. In Chapter 8's 'Ideological thinking and post-Communism' the author goes as far as arguing that even after the fall of communism, the erstwhile ideological system has become 'self-reproducing' (p. 99). Borrowing from Hannah Arendt, he identifies this tragic inheritance in

the persistence of a form of deep-seated 'ideological thinking'. The latter is 'a flawed way of world-making, a faulty cognitive process, which takes a narrow slice of reality as its premise, or converts a normative proposition into analysis, and then imposes it on all who are a part of the collectivity in which it operates' (p. 102). This is manifest in the way ethnic exclusiveness has replaced Communist eschatology as a purely restrictive practice. I would add that this is also the way globalization is experienced East of Berlin. It is a homogenizing, intolerant, morally vacuous and baneful phenomenon, at least in the fields of culture and values. Perhaps the greatest limitation of this book is that it does not dare to venture into this yet unexplored terrain: an analysis of the peculiar effects of globalization, or Americanization, as a totalizing, nearly totalitarian, phenomenon in former communist societies. But whether other topics such as globalization should have been covered is a moot point, since one simply has to make choices.

Reliance on both ethnicity and totalizing principles is predicated on the 'absence of rules recognised as binding by all contestants'. In this context 'individuals are forced to establish some forms of regularity in their lives', while attempting to 'extract rules from ideology' (p. 103).

As stated above, ethnic nationalism has become *the* dominant ideology—although its direct connection with economic and cultural globalization is barely explored. The experience of 'discretionary power' leads to apathy and depolitization, a situation where 'might is right'. What terrain could be more suitable for the emergence of mafias and the colonial exploitation of multinational corporations? This is best exemplified in the still prevalent blind faith in 'free market fundamentalism', where the rules of the game are dictated by a few US and, to a less extent, European companies.

It is the deficit of 'rule of law' with its concomitant moral disorder and mass disorientation that characterizes post-communism. The attendant general insecurity paves the way to the rise of populism, which is in turn inescapably legitimized by appeals to the exclusionary practice of ethnicity. Communism lingers on in people's mind, partly because there is a general, but superficial, rush to emulate the West, notably the US, in order to 'catch up' and enjoy its benefits and advantages, even at the price of destroying national cultures.

One methodological, as well as conceptual, problem that is common to all studies of nationalism is that the distinction between ethnicity and culture becomes often burred. The illusion that the two are somehow coterminous, favoured by nationalists and populists, have led observers to dismiss the evident fact that ethnic politics has often not ushered in a revival of national culture. Indeed in Eastern Europe the joint attack of ethnicization and globalization on the local fabric has led to grim and sinister consequences: national cultures have nearly vanished as viable markets, except in the form of language and banal nationalism.

One of the consequences of the communist ideological legacy is a pervasive sense of conspiracy, which is immediately translated into ethnic terms: all responsibilities are automatically blamed on the outside, on 'the other', be they minorities or international actors. Milosevic's regime was, of course, the paradigmatic and prototypical example of this trend. It systematically pinned the blame on all sorts of all external enemies: Germany, the Vatican, Turkey, Islamic fundamentalism, the US, and so on, in order to justify the failure of its own domestic politics. This belief in international conspiracies was facilitated

by the communist legacy of secrecy and inaccountability, which became promptly transposed in collectivistic-ethnic terms.

Having said that, one of the most brilliant chapters of the book is the exploration of what amounts to a very effective 'conspiracy', those of status-holders against the less influential elements of society. In Chapter 21, entitled 'Englishness: Citizenship, ethnicity and class', a cornucopia of profound and insightful perceptions is presented. In contrast to most other countries ethnicity in England has been largely replaced by class. Yet despite a widespread anti-classist rhetoric (even conservatives have spoken about the desirability of a classless society), the class chasm has remained (pp. 311ff.). A key reason for this is that the system functions very well, as people feel broadly comfortable within the boundaries of their ascriptive class membership, which provides them with personal security, and provides society as a whole with a well-experimented stability. Another reason is the presence of a Marxist elite that has radically distorted the concept of class into a vacuous, ineffective and purely materialistic interpretation. By doing so, it has emptied the concept of its *élan vitale*. It should not be forgotten that many English Marxists are aristocrats or descended from aristocratic families (a memorable example being Tony Benn). Being based on ethnic-alike 'old boys' networks, the English landed oligarchy and its descendants have done and will do whatever is in their hands to preserve their status. This is a feature they share with ethnic groups, since 'communities will do all they can to ensure that their set of codes is not threatened with elimination, that, whatever happen, the community will persist' (p. 55).

Schöpflin is also fully aware of a nearly universal modern predicament: Either East or West, centrifugal separatism is historically the after-effect of centralism, rather than of an incomplete process of national integration (i.e. the failed building of nation-states). Hence, assimilation is unworkable. This has been the case in Eastern Europe throughout the past century, but it is now the common fate of territorial minorities throughout most of the modern world. Even if it is apparently effective, assimilation is counterproductive, as it is often achieved at enormous costs, leaving a legacy of bitterness and resentment. It was a realistic option only when people migrated from the countryside to the urban centres, so that they had to shed an entire lifestyle. Assimilation was then part of a wider package of adaptive tricks that, willingly or not, peoples were constrained to accept. But now 'classical assimilation is ... very largely a matter of the past' (p. 272).

On the other hand, precisely because of the East-West chasm, post-communist countries look at the West for illumination and guidance, if not perhaps as a model. Therefore, the West has enormous responsibilities, although it clearly failed to assume its historical task at the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis and is possibly failing again with a double-edged handling of the Macedonian crisis. Because of a self-deluding 'tacit assumption that the post-communist world can be assimilated to Western norms in a very short time', the West's greatest mistake has been 'short-termism' (p. 276). It is hence crucial that all politics adopted in post-communist societies are tailored towards long-term solutions and taken up consistently. They therefore require 'regular maintenance' (p. 276).

Chapter 19 ('Ethnic minorities in South-Eastern Europe') contains a list of

all possible political responses and 'solutions' to ethnic pluralism, explaining very clearly and convincingly why each of them has so far failed in the East. As such, this is an extremely useful chapter and should be included as core reading in any course on democratic transitions and geo-politics.

Other notable chapters deal with the break-up of Yugoslavia, the rise and decline of Hungarian irredentism, its possible implications for European enlargement, the relationship between democracy, civil society and nationalism, varieties of ethnic myths, language and nationalism, and the fall of empires.

The book is a wide-ranging theoretical treatise that draws upon sociological and political thinking in an attempt to provide a general analytical framework for understanding ethnic and national sentiment, particularly in Central and South-eastern Europe. It is to Schöpflin's credit that in many respects he has succeeded in this arduous task, producing a work which will be useful not only as a teaching tool but also as a marker for future scholarly theorizing.

This balanced and well-written book provides a very useful introduction to the field and an essential theoretical background to both the novice and academic reader alike interested in the roots and manifestation of ethnic conflict. While it will be of interest to all scholars of nationalism and ethnicity, the book's real strength lies in its novel synthesis of the dynamics of ethno-national conflict in democratizing societies.

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