Patriotism, cosmopolitanism and democracy

Ghia Nodia

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We are discussing the issue of patriotism and cosmopolitanism in a specific context: when the very foundations and vitality of western civilization are under question. There is a sense of a crisis, but there are differences of opinion what the roots of the crisis are. Quite a few people point at the rise of nationalism as the primary expression of the crisis, even if its ultimate source may lie elsewhere.

But maybe, it is holding nationalism in contempt, and trying to get rid of it once and for all, which is part of the problem.

There is one simple about democracy that appears obvious to me but is not readily admitted by most liberals: You cannot have democracy without some element of nationalism. Here, under nationalism I understand the so called civic or political nationalism that can be considered as synonymous with Patriotism. This implies that sense of belonging to a country, and country means both territory and its people, which is *nation*. However, while we may want our civic nationalism to be as inclusive as possible, in practice it is hardly possible to make it fully devoid of at least some cultural element.

This is not something classical liberal theory was focused on: when you read John Locke, for instance, he takes the existence of a polity, a political community, for granted. Still he mentions it somehow. When he talks about transition from the state of nature to the civic state, to the state of stateness, he basically talks about two steps: First, some number or people should constitute themselves as a polity, that is commit themselves to pursuing a common political project; second, they negotiate the social contract, that is make a determination to delegate certain natural rights they have to a common authority that is then called "state". However, the first stage he only mentions in passing, he does not dwell on it: maybe because he really took it for granted, maybe, discussing this would complicate things too much. As a result, the theory focuses on the substance of the social contract, it discusses how to design and implement it in such a way that we have government that is effective but also does not descend into tyranny.

But still we have to ask: how that first step is made, how we define the scope of the polity, how we decide who belongs and who is excluded? The guiding wisdom in the social science is that it is not really the people who make that decision, it is historical contingency that makes that determination for them. This has to become clear when people actually try to enter into a social contract, which may be interpreted as an equivalent of establishing a democracy – something that scholars later called a "transition to democracy". There is some hour *x*, when a polity – for whatever reasons – makes a determination to create democratic institutions. The main difference from Locke's classical model is that the starting point if not the state of nature, that is the state of statelessness, but it is a pre-existent political order which is autocratic. It is not people roaming in the woods who decide to establish some kind of political order, but it occurs when people living under an autocratic regime decide that it's time to have a democratic regime. This was actually the situation in which John Locke as a supporter of the Whig party, found himself at a time of the Glorious Revolution.

So, it is assumed that at this hour *x*, forces of history have already had made a determination for who belongs to the people who are now going to create a liberal polity (maybe, for that it was handy to live on an island: Geography also helps to carve up stable nations). That example is usually extrapolated: Stage one of the democratic projects had been performed for the people by the "forces of history", or, in effect, interrelations of autocratic regimes: they had predefine, what is England (or Britain), what is France, what is Spain, what it Portugal, etc. People accept (or should accept) that predetermination and proceed directly to the Stage Two which is negotiating new democratic social contract. That is probably the real reason why Locke only mentioned the Stage One in passing. And this is why many democracy theorists after him presume that people should not have any say in defining whom they want to have a democracy with. "We the people" may decide many thing, but not the boundaries of whom this "we" includes.

However, while there are many examples when this works like this, in many other cases it does not. Sometimes people did not take that autocratic predetermination of the Stage One of the democratic project for granted. The most conspicuous example was the fall of Soviet Union, or of Yugoslavia. Most western political scientists presumed that people who happened to be part of the Soviet Union had to (and would) democratize within those borders, that this would be the most natural course of events. But it did not happen so. It turned out that for Estonians, or Ukrainians, or Georgians, the idea of creating democratic polities only made sense if they included people with whom they had some sense of community. We may argue whether this was good or bad but it was so. We should accept

the facts: even an attempt to undermine autocratic regimes (whether or not it leads to establishing democracies) territorially destabilizes many countries. Iraq and Syria are more recent examples. These are not examples we like, but we should face the facts and draw the lessons. It is unreasonable to believe that people only care for having democratic institutions (Stage 2), but do not care who they will have these democratic institutions with (Stage 1). From them, it matters, who is included in the "we the people". This cannot be taken for granted.

This brings us one more reason why the importance of the Stage One of the democratic project is often overlooked. Stage Two is rational, or at least it appears fully rational: one can calculate how to found our political system in such a way that it provides as many public goods as possible for the least costs, that it properly separates the issues that should be government responsibility from those who should be to left to the citizens to decide, and prevents ambitious politicians from getting too much power and abusing it. It is difficult to design such a system, but it is also an exciting intellectual task (apart from, of course, having an enormous practical value). We passionately disagree on those issues, but we can use rational arguments to defend our positions. It may be an illusion that we can solve those disagreements based on our rational judgment alone, but at least we can keep the illusion alive that at some point we will.

Not so with Stage One: there is no rational ground for deciding, what is the right way for carving up a democratic nation. We can only say what we already have: that historical contingency plays an important role in that, but also that sometimes people refuse to accept more or less arbitrary borders imposed on them by others. Why do they accept them in one case and not in others? No general theory is possible about that. But exactly because no universally accepted rational ground may be found for resolving those issues, they cause hideous conflicts, which we don't know how to resolve.

There may be a hope that this is only a matter of some transitional stage: The times when new social contracts are negotiated are murky and dangerous, we accept that, but we can at least hope that once we somehow put that stage behind us, we can heave a sigh of relief. We call this post-sigh-of-relief stage that of democratic consolidation: within consolidated democracies, issues of nationalism, among other things, should be rendered irrelevant; if somebody still raises them, this person should be proclaimed either a crackpot, or an unscrupulous self-interested provocateur, and be marginalized. This appeared to be the case in established democracies of the West. But no longer. The sense of crisis and decline that is now shared in the West is that we started to doubt what we thought should not be

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doubted: maybe, consolidated democracies are *not* like diamonds, maybe, they are *not* forever. Maybe, their very foundations may be endangered.

But what it is that is source of this danger to the liberal democracy in the West? Is it rather about what I called Stage Two, that is the substance of the social contract: specific constitutional rules, legislation, policies? Or is it mostly about the Stage One, the composition of democratic polities, and the level of bonding and trust within them? It appears, that the latter is the case, those it is not always popular to accept that.

The reality we have to accept is that democracy can only be effective when there is the sense of commonality, common belonging, trust, the sense of "we" among the people whose democracy it is. The fact of having a good Constitution, a good set of rules, is not sufficient for this: Jürgen Habermas' idea of *Verfassungspartiotismus*, patriotism springing solely from the fact of participation within the same civic project, is a great idea, but it has proven a Utopian one. This does not necessarily imply that all people who belong to the same democratic "we" look the same, have the same religion, or even speak common language. There are quite a few examples where this is not the case. Diversity is a normal for a democratic polity, this is not just a normative statement but it is proven by experience. But in any case, a democratic community requires some sort of common civic culture, and belief that other members of the community share it. It is a wholly different topic *how* this civic culture, and the belief that it is indeed shared within a given polity, develops; but we can say with confidence that develop it must, and that this process takes time. We are lucky if some part of this process takes part under an autocratic regime, but sometimes we are not that lucky. On the other hand, we cannot rule out, that this sense of commonality and trust may also be *undermined* over time, and if it does, that the democratic project is in trouble.

When we talk about ongoing problem of break-down of trust in western political communities, there are two dimensions that appear different, though may also be interrelated. One is the issue of ethnic divisions within democratic communities, especially those caused by migration, of popular concerns and backlash against changing ethno-cultural composition of western political communities. We can approach the issue in a normative sense and express concern about growing expressions of bigotry, exclusion of minorities, etc. This concern is genuine and justified. But we may try to look at the same issue form a more analytical perspective as well: why is it that sometimes, bigotry becomes a greater issue? As I said, there is no necessity at all that the people should live in ethnically homogenous communities: democratic communities may and often are open for diversity. However, this

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commendable openness can only work if there is the process of integration, when diverse groups – while contributing something of their own to the community – also accept and share principal norms, values, habits upon which the integrity of the polity is based. There appears to be a certain threshold, after which "absorption capacity" of democratic polities become too stretched. We have natural dislike of demagogues who manipulate people's xenophobic emotions: but this should not stop us from trying to understand, why such xenophobic eruptions become more likely at certain times. How to maintain a balance between openness and solidarity on the one hand, and legitimate requirements of integrity on the other? This is not an easy question to answer, but at least we should accept that this is a legitimate question to ask. Just trying to raise it should not become ground for automatic accusations of bigotry and racism.

The second widely discussed cleavage is that between liberal elites and not so liberal masses that express itself in the phenomenon of populism. Populists are often demagogues who manipulate this popular mistrust of the elites for their particular benefits. But just calling them demagogues should not prevent us from asking legitimate questions about the roots of this genuine and deepening cleavage. One school of thought focuses on deepening economic inequality that is, of course, the result of capitalist economy and, more specifically, of the post-1980s neo-liberal wave. That is probably part of the problem. But it appears that the deepening cultural cleavage, most convincingly (though very differently) presented by authors like Charles Murray and David Goodhart, is more salient and more powerful. There had always been a gap between norms an values espoused by different social groups, but now this gap is getting even deeper. And this is not a cultural gap between people of different ethnic groups, but rather a gap between an elite that claims to be cosmopolitan, to be above ethnicity as such, and the allegedly backward people who are stuck in the world of ethnicity. The cultural elite is elite not because it has more money (though it may also have it), but because it claims power to define what is "advanced" or "progressive" and what is "underdeveloped" and "backward". Arguably, it has always been like that: there have always been elites and non-elites, and it were elites who defined what the right kind of behavior is. But it appears that if earlier non-elites were ready to follow the lead of the elites, considered them their role-models, this is not the case anymore.

This is a complicated issue to discuss, but the elite imposition of the cosmopolitan culture that is intolerant towards the idea that defense of traditional norms and values is automatically considered not only backward, but also "racist" has causes a backlash, that sometimes includes genuine expressions and racism and bigotry, but cannot be reduced to them. The elite insistence of presenting itself as

champions of the minority groups (the cause that is undoubtedly honorable and commendable in itself) has somehow developed into arrogance and intolerance towards natural expressions of loyalty to traditional norms, if they come from groups that are deemed dominant and cannot claim the status of victims. But if victimhood is considered a necessary virtue, it become only natural that majorities also start raising claim to it.

We know that democracy is about balance, and this is another balance to achieve. Liberal democracy is about universal values, and these values include those of tolerance and openness towards people of any cultural background, as much as they share those values of tolerance and openness. But modern liberal theory is also based on human nature, and success of the modern liberal project was largely predicated on the readiness of liberals to accept human nature as it is, though also to cultivate its best features in such a way that allows for having better society and better political life. Trying to drastically change human nature, to deny its basic features may only lead to disastrous results – as we also know from the Communist experience. It appears that it is part of human nature that humans – or most humans – prefer to live in more or less familiar cultural (but sometimes also geographical) landscapes, sharing lives and institutions with people with whom they share some values, norms, ideas, and common stories. Liberal democracy is a universal idea, but the experience shows that it can only thrive within communities that have some shared sense of belonging. They can also be open to "others" and accommodate them – but within certain limits. Liberals have to accept those limits as well, at the same time defending universality of their creed and openness of their minds. This is not easy to achieve, but the liberal project had never been easy to start with.