

## NATION AND LIBERTY: THE BYZANTINE EXAMPLE

Nation and liberty: two ideas that in spite of the innumerable works that have been devoted to them are still open to new approaches, indeed, to new definitions. They pose a problem whose essence is to remain without a definitive answer, to be always actual, because it concerns man of all times, all countries and all conditions. This apparently-simple remark raises a question: is it possible to put nation and liberty on the same level? It is permissible to consider liberty and nation as a pair forming a new concept, or do we simply have a relationship located in a precise time at a given place?

The nature of the reflection we are going to formulate on the coexistence, interaction, interdependence and reciprocal influence of the two ideas depends on the answer to this question. The examples we will use as guides are those of a historical experience taken from the European—mainly Mediterranean—world during a time when unifying tendencies were appearing, to say nothing of uniting forces such as empire, official religion and others.

Before any analysis, a statement must be made: liberty taken in the singular, that is, as a faculty, is one part of the existential patrimony of man: *Homo sapiens* or *Homo faber*. It is an intrinsic part of the human condition, whereas “Nation” is a structure fashioned and created by man in his concern to provide frame-

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works that will assure him the best conditions for his development at each of its stages.

In other words, the nation appears as a creation of political man in the Aristotelian sense of the word; it marks a stage in the evolution of man in society; it is even a product, an acquisition due to man's liberty. Let us say more simply that the existence of liberty is anterior to that of the nation; it has a historical precedence that marks all the realizations of man, nation included. Obviously, we are not speaking here of liberties in the plural (political, religious and so on) that are concrete realizations and have the same rapport with liberty that works of art have with Art.

This cautionary statement allows us to specify immediately that we consider nation as an institution founded on the desire for and consciousness of the unity of its members. This unity is the result of a series of relationships, identities (language, beliefs, customs, "blood," as Herodotus said) that make up a basis of common interest, which means that the national community, in the name of a past—of a common patrimony—also forges a common future for its members. A nation is an evolution; it is the place where an impersonal destiny unfolds; it combines with the law that establishes the rules of its functioning. Law and destiny are the two poles of the history of a nation, and both are limiting for liberty. We approach indirectly the fundamental contradiction in the Nation-Liberty relationship to the degree in which the action, a product of liberty, cannot assure its own survival except by limiting the impulsiveness of its source.

In any case, the nation is first of all a unifying fact faced with the Other: by the discernment of what is proper to them, peoples are faced with the Other; the nation represents the majority, rejecting those who do not recognize themselves in its identity, independently of the bonds they might have (blood or culture, for example) with the other members of the national community. The cry, "I am a stranger in my own land" is a cry of the minority, but it is above all a cry of liberty affirmed in the face of the nation.

Thus the nation is directly faced with the Other (the stranger) but also with the minority of its members who remain rebels against its imperatives. We see that a nation's life is, as Renan said, "a great solidarity, the existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite. It is made up of the sentiment of sacrifices we have made and those

we are still disposed to make.” In this case, liberty consists in accepting these sacrifices in the name of the general good: solidarity cements the national community and channels and orients the action of the liberty that underlies social tissue.

Liberty crosses and irrigates the national domain by ceaselessly forming and transforming it. Liberty itself undergoes modifications that, depending on their importance, may eventually alter its original character.

It is clear that individual liberty and collective liberty are called upon to coexist peacefully within the nation, each exercising its own auto-limitation. Aristeppos said, “In order to be free, I refuse to close myself up in a *politeia* and I remain a stranger everywhere.”

Merleau-Ponty stressed that, within the same person, it is the widening split between the aspirations of the individual and the duties of the citizen that threatens and agitates national communities. There we have the illustration of the tensions that may exist between Nation and State on the one hand and between Authority (general) and personality (individual) on the other.

This situation of conflict is due to the emergence in the nation of a governing institution that is invested with authority and administers the public entity. National state and power (political or spiritual), having their own rules, cover and control the national domain. Quickly becoming autonomous institutions, they can be perceived by the members of the national community as a heteronomy; for the individual they are a source of restraint, even if they are based on a freely-accepted contract and a law that is necessary to national cohesion, an indispensable condition for the common welfare.

In any case, the institution-State, in charge of administering the nation, watches over the good functioning of the elements that assure national cohesion. Thus institutions-cadres proper to each unitary element are put into place and have authority in their respective domains, such as the school, the Church, administration, parliaments and courts of justice.

It is through control of these institutions that the State attempts, in the name of the nation, to direct or coordinate cultural, political and spiritual life, and even traditions (we are thinking of the organization of national festivals): these are the very factors that

forge the unity of the nation, that form the living patrimony, nourish the collective memory and give to the members of the national community the certainty of having a common past and future.

Now, if the past can, if necessary, be invented (it may be mythical or legendary), the future depends on the realities that are prepared and organized by institutions-cadres according to choices dictated by their own interests and produced by their particular mechanisms.

We clearly perceive the existence of divergences in the choice of direction: we understand that individual liberty finds its limits when faced with the imperatives of the institutions-cadres; but we also explain that these cleavages are found within the national community, according to the adhesion or the degree of adhesion of each to such or such an institution-cadre. From a sentiment of unity, the nation progressively becomes in accord with the essential, whereas the State wants to be identified with the nation. Let us note that the more the State is identified with the nation, the more liberties suffer, their defense becoming an imperative for all, even for the citizens who refuse to adhere fully and unconditionally to the aims fixed by such or such an institution-cadre. We observe the development, within the national domain, of zones of influence or pressure groups with contradictory interests, nuclei of endo-national conflicts and centrifugal forces whose action hastens disintegration. Zones of regional dialects, that of parochial school or public school or that of regional traditions (for example, Alsatian, Provençal or Meridional) make division inside the nation, creating and marking particular solidarities but also zones of "otherness," thus minorities. There is no need to say that in a general way the constituting phenomena of national unity (beliefs, culture, language and so on) resist any precise geographic demarcation. They develop within a space whose contours often ignore political frontiers (except perhaps when they are marked by a geographical accident), an additional reason for rivalries and hostility between neighboring nations. The Balkans, especially after the establishment of national states (mainly in the 19th century) offer many examples of these disputes.

As a living phenomenon, a nation is intractable to a precise geographic definition (we are thinking that there are even nations

living “outside of space,” Armenians and Jews, for example). The idea of a national “home” is better suited to a nation. Thus the Nation and the State differ from each other; the latter is an institution defined in space. It is, above all, established on an organized territory inhabited by a human community that may not be uni-national but multi-national. Empires are striking illustrations of this formulation; Switzerland is another, no less interesting, to say nothing of the United States, the perfect example of a nation formed by a multi-aculturating action.

Let us emphasize that the State, a political institution, has linear frontiers, whereas the Nation, a phenomenon grouping identities (linguistic, cultural and spiritual) or human communities founded on a solidarity nourished by common interests, has zonal frontiers that may not correspond to political ones.

Nation and State obey a centripetal movement. On their margins are formed or take refuge minorities that, depending on the historical situation of the world around them, assimilate or integrate into the national body or, on the contrary, detach themselves and animate separatist or irredentist movements. We conclude that liberation movements aim at activating liberty in a sense that is contrary to the one dictated by the hard core of the nation. The liberty that feeds these liberation and independence movements undermines the preceding, national and political unity. It is considered as anti-liberty, an eroding and disintegrating force that threatens the very existence of the nation. There is no doubt that the national forces of liberty will try to suppress any liberation movement so as to preserve the country’s unity. We see that the liberty of nations is like that of individuals: it ends where the liberty of the other begins. This explains not only the conflicts between the nations that people history but also, and particularly, the fact that every nation has a destiny. Nations are fragile and mobile; they live and they die and cede their place to others; they withdraw within their frontiers or they burst into pieces, but they also disappear without leaving a trace. Who, in our day, would claim the heritage of Phoenicia; who would claim to be descended from the Avars and the Huns; who speaks about the Chazars, the Petchenegues, the Coumans and other people-nations whose existence and actions almost reversed the course of history!

It must be said that this destiny, that characterizes the life of any

nation and truly constitutes its history, can never concern liberty, that can neither be exhausted nor disappear. It is as universal as humanity and as eternal as ideas. These two qualities that characterize liberty but are missing in the nation, that is, universality and eternity, have always haunted peoples as nations searching for formulas that would guarantee their perpetuity and security. All the eschatological beliefs of the Middle Ages, popular prophecies or philosophic and political theories, are based on the identification of the Christian Empire—in this case, Byzantium and Christian Rome—with history in its entirety. It is this search for the absolute, that is, spatio-temporal infinity, that leads peoples to mythify their destiny, to consider themselves as the universal bearers of transcendental values and, imbued with their superiority, to create panethnicisms (pan-Germanism, pan-Slavism, pan-Touranism, etc.) that openly preach the domination, if not the annihilation, of the Other. It is in these national mystiques that man's liberty is ruined.

Every nation has known these temptations, but they have not all succumbed. The Nation identified with virtue and even with God forged the mystique that permitted it to combat all those who were exterior to it (the foreigners) but also those among its members who refused to share this mythification. Liberty in this context was the possibility to resist, disobey and even betray. Modern times have offered many examples of these fissures: they have brought to light the conflict between nation and the idea of liberty, or, more simply, between the world of yesterday whose certitudes must be denied and the world of tomorrow whose cause must be served. This leads us to say, not without some exaggeration, that the consciousness of belonging to the same world creates the nation, whereas the consciousness of having the same conception of the world (*weltanschauung*) acts against the nation, that is, it unites men in the name of an idea, a cause, that like any militant idea rises against those who do not accept it.

It is perhaps in this way that we can explain the fall of the ancient world that was displaced by the Christian world. Clearly we have here two different conceptions of the world, whose collision brought about the ruin of the Hellenic world. Pan-Hellenism grouped all the Greeks through a culture that opposed them to the Barbarians. It was the realization of a people bound by blood,

language, religion and customs (to quote Herodotus). It was displaced by Christianity that potentially grouped all humanity, united in the same faith. One country, Byzantium, identified itself with this new concept of the community. Those who remained outside Christianity were strangers to it (they remained outside of Rome: ἔξω Ῥώμης); the term ἔθνικός (gentiles) in fact, meant both foreigner and pagan in Byzantium, whereas the term Christian was identified with Roman, that is, Byzantine (Byzantine=Roman).

Within this framework, liberty was the possibility of each and everyone to become Christian and thus adhere to the Byzantine community, a guaranty not only of security but also of the salvation of its members. It is due to the Christian faith, to orthodoxy, that Byzantium found its unity and became a nation after having been a state. It is from this point of view that Byzantium is a *sui generis* example of ethnogenesis.

In fact, it was for reasons of state (administrative and military needs) that the Roman Empire was transformed into the Byzantine Empire before the end of the 4th century. Byzantium was the heir and legatee of Rome; it was still an empire, thus multi-ethnic and multi-national. Its cohesion was not based on race (an almost unknown term in Byzantium) but on the identity of interests, dictated by values that were recognized by all. Progressively, the Byzantine nation was created on the ruins of the ancient world. It was founded on a spiritual base that was elaborated on the Roman, political base. In short, Byzantium was the active center that definitively broke with the values, beliefs and solidarities by which men of antiquity lived. They were recapitulated in an opposition between Hellenes and Barbarians, between Romans and *Gentes*. For Byzantium, mistress of the universal church, the Barbarians, designated by the generic term *Gentes* or *Nations* (in Greek, *Ethnè*) were retrievable; they now entered into history, due to conversion. The practice (or adoption) of Christianity became the condition *sine qua non* of the new solid community, the new Byzantine nation. The term ἔθνος Χριστιανῶν, "nation of Christians," made its appearance to designate the Byzantines, who were still designated as Romans, the qualificative "new chosen people" being used to designate their community. As we see, the Byzantines retrieved the Judaic heritage and the Roman heritage, one through the Old Testament (the basis for monotheism), the other through

political institutions. Byzantium still referred to itself as *politeia rômaiôn*, the base of the universality and unity of the Empire, but it kept its distance as far as ancient Greece and the Greco-Roman spirit were concerned. Constantinople, soon called the new Rome and the new Jerusalem/Zion, was never called the new Athens. The Byzantines called themselves Romans or Christians (the terms were interchangeable), but the term Hellene was stamped with discredit. It designated pagans motivated by the values of the past: the Hellenes were those that the new man must fight in order to acquire his complete personality. The Byzantine nation was born when the Hellenic spirit and the spirit of Hellenic paganism was banished from souls, consciences and mentalities. A series of Imperial measures and dispositions intervened to accomplish this; their extent reveals to us the elements that previously made up the foundations of the solidarity and the community of men nourished by the ancient spirit of pan-Hellenism. These elements had to disappear to give place to their corollaries, dictated by the new world marked by the new solidarity, the new testament, the *new alliance*—the term is important—that is, by Christianity.

Thus to assure Byzantine cohesion and unity several steps were taken:

- 1) the pagan cult was forbidden in all its manifestations. The destruction of temples was decreed (“the priests must remain quiet or perish,” said Licanus to the Emperor Theodosius in defense of the ancient cult);
- 2) schools were closed, the ancient “*paideia*” was forbidden but for its harmless and soothing part (for example, Isocrates);
- 3) there was an effort to eradicate the customs that were part of ancient “anthropology,” and if that proved to be impossible, they were recuperated by according them traits that connected them with the new religion. In order to create a new tradition, the elements of the ancient tradition that were intended to be abolished were exploited and changed.

The ancient world composed of the idolatrous Hellenes was the Other, the heteronomy and enemy to combat. Its religion-cults, its culture and its tradition, that is, its memory, were ruined by the new power. Christianity took their place or, rather, the Christian State, Byzantium, which installed its cult, its culture and its tradition, not without having previously used recuperated ancient ma-



terials (such as language, political institutions and even ancient temples transformed into churches). When the new elements, that is, orthodoxy, the Christian State “protected by God,” the new “*paideia*,” (that which obeyed the new religion), mythical Constantinopolitan history, and the new “*patria*,” the new patrimony were in place, the Byzantine nation was created: its existence was the coming of the Empire of Christ, the materialization of the new alliance with God. This alliance was the mystical source of power, the Byzantine State and nation. It was transcribed as a belief that was profoundly rooted in consciences; it fed the popular imagination and irrigated traditions, legendary or not, by founding a future dictated by the will of God. In short, it was the basis of the new solidarity, pan-Christian, thus Byzantine (it was reconsidered at the time of the “divorce” of Christianity, especially after the fourth crusade and the fall of Constantinople, when the idea of sin-punishment explained the reverses in the history of Byzantium). We see that the mystic dimension became the basis for imperial ideology and consequently the constituting element of Byzantium: it was in its name that Byzantium was a one-cult and one-cultural empire, characteristic that made it an intolerant nation swerving from the practice of liberty. Cult and culture submitted to cult, these fundamental dimensions activated and guided by the true faith (Christian orthodoxy) were the living expression of the alliance between Byzantium and God. It is this almost carnal alliance that was to assure Byzantine perpetuity, its eternity; this certitude was unshakeable and general. In the 6th century Cosmas Indikopleustes declared, “The Roman (Byzantine) Empire is invincible, it will live till the end of time because it was the first to believe in Christ.” It is clear that it is God who is at the origin of the Byzantine nation, and not liberty; it is not surprising if we see that the term “liberty” in Byzantium is without any philosophical dimension; it refers to the freeing of slaves (absence of liberty) and fiscal exemption (absence of obligation). This element, the mystical foundation (alliance with God), no doubt made Byzantium the world that knowingly founded its historical process on divine right considered as the regulator of the destinies of the Empire. We understand why any idea of liberty remained foreign to the elaboration of the Byzantine nation, which saw itself as ecumenical and eternal because it was Christian.

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Modern nations, on the contrary, elaborated the idea of the nation-association as issuing from a contract of liberty; from Rousseau to Renan, this idea runs through all political philosophy, with one important step, however, the identification of nation with sovereignty, as results from the 1791 constitution of the French Revolution.

Thus modern European man recognizes as nation a freely chosen community. The nation, if only for a moment, is for everyone identical to liberty (we are thinking of the strength of the idea of national independence): it is the place where liberties are exercised, but it may, for internal and external reasons, also become the cause of restrictions and even the stifling of liberty. In this crisis that leads to the breaking up of the nation, violence finds a privileged place; in the name of the liberties to come, it strangles existing liberties. In this vicious circle almost all the institutions that man has fashioned to assure his security are swallowed up: the nation does not escape from it.

*Vous et nous, tous, jadis fûmes ensemble  
Un corps uni sous un divin gouverne;  
Mais venue est cette heure, ce nous semble,  
Qui vous de nous distraît et désassemble  
Par vieil venin et par envie moderne.*

The above is a quotation from the 15th-century poet Georges Chastellain, (in *Dit de vérité*, couplet 14, Vol. VI, pp. 219-248), to express the quarrel between Burgundy and France.

Revolts, revolutions and other disorders (whose characteristic is internal barbarism, such as the wars of religion) are the lot of all nations. Supported by a power rooted in its space and become progressively an alienating and autonomous institution, the nation dictates the law that must serve the common good. Seen by the members of the community as founded on justice and respect for liberty, the law consolidates and cements national unity. But if the law is seen, even by a part of the community, as arbitrarily restrictive, it becomes the target of protest, it crystallizes resistance, it is violated, it falls into discredit, taking with it the authority from which it came. That is to say that liberty in the daily life of the national community becomes a quest for justice. To violate the feeling of justice is to give justification to the liberty that endeavors

to redress the situation, that is, to justify and legitimize first the protest of the “prince” and then the institution itself of the nation.

Thus liberty, to form, transform, or even to destroy, goes through all the manifestations of the national community. The life of nations develops under the sign of liberty. It is thanks to it that they are born, it is through it that they prosper and develop, it is also in its name that they disappear. Liberty can, in effect, change its camp, which is impossible for a nation.

We are thus led to establish another difference between liberty and nation. Liberty remains the dynamic force that changes things, while the nation can become devitalized and, especially, it has an almost natural tendency to become a conservative institution, thus a source of alienation and not of liberty.

From this point of view, the history of the concept of the nation in French reality is particularly significant. Created in 1789 in order to denote the source of sovereignty, that is, the totality of the French community become juridically sovereign, the concept of nation was later monopolized by the conservative right to symbolize the privileged bond of former values and virtues in the name of which was woven the glory of the country. The belief in the nation as a supreme value led, as we know, to the avatars of nationalism-socialism that turn their backs on liberty and its imperatives.

Let us say, however, in conclusion, that each time the course of the nation deviates from that liberty, it is the nation that suffers in the end. The cry “Liberty or death!” of the Greeks in 1821 is a strong affirmation that identifies liberty with life itself, as well for man as for the living organisms he invents, including the nation. But must we remind ourselves that the sentiment of liberty is not identical in all men? Etymologically, liberty means in Greek, “to go where everyone would like to go,” as the ancient Greeks said. However, we go where we can and, even worse, we want to go where we know we can go: there is always a reality of dreams, liberty designates the dream of realities.

In the endless march of man towards his betterment liberty signals the way, it is the vector and the transcendental force: it remains the universal reference. The nation is only a stage, a formula among many others that man invented to give himself the best possible framework in a given historical moment at a given

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point as a manifestation of his attempts at betterment.

Before the nation, there were other formulas, such as the family, the *gens*, provinces and empires. There will be others after it: international or multinational solidarities; the outline of supranational institutions is already a hopeful reality. The courses of liberty progressively abandon national space in order to proceed more and more toward the wide world. The emergence of the planetary-mundial community as framework and institution will be the work of liberty, or it will never exist. Dynamic force or motivation, only liberty can found an international order to which men aspire today through their uncertain groping. On the eve of the third millenary, on the threshold of the nuclear age, once more man has an imperious need of liberty in order to forge Humanity.

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