

## **REVIEW: NATIONS, IDENTITY, POWER**

*Ann Kennard*

George Schöpflin, 2000, **Nations Identity Power: The New Politics of Europe**, Hurst and Co., London, 2000. ISBN 1-85065-410-7, pb, £16.50, 320pp.

Fans of George Schöpflin will not be surprised that he has published this excellent book on nations and nationalism at this point in Europe's history. He analyses the contradictions inherent in the general understanding of nationalism in order to produce a new intellectual synthesis. In particular he questions why states in the West are able to live with the nation as the legitimate space for democratic institutions, whereas in the post-communist world, especially in central and eastern Europe, ethnicity plays a much more important role.

The book is divided into five sections, and several of the chapters therein have been published previously, sometimes in a different form or language. These original publications are listed and acknowledged. In his introduction on 'the nature of the beast', Schöpflin states that the defeat of Fascism/Nazism was seen as a defeat of nationalism, and subsequent European integration (in the West) meant that national identities were to be reformulated in the name of a higher European identity, so that the interests of the nation state were for a while regarded as 'vaguely illicit'. The whole idea of ethnicity as one of the building blocks of the nation state was not accepted in the West; indeed in the UK 'ethnic' is interpreted as non-white 'as if Scots or Irish living in England do not have an ethnic identity'. The acceptance of devolved parliaments/assemblies in the UK more recently has perhaps changed this perception. At any rate, Schöpflin's thesis, broadly, is

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that both ethnic origins and state construction have played a role in the modern nation state.

In the first section, 'What is the Nation?', the author propounds the idea that since in western Europe identities have come to resemble one another, the rise of ethno-nationalism in central and eastern Europe after 1989 was 'all the more unexpected and profoundly unwelcome, since the West did not have the cognitive tools to deal with it'. Indeed the Anglo-Saxon world, with which Schöpflin takes issue in a variety of ways, mainly due to its claim to universalism, is seen to have successfully marginalised the problem of identity so that there was 'a collective sigh of relief when the referendum on a Scottish parliament was lost in the 1970's – after the rules had been rewritten to help that objective'. Thus the revival of identity politics in the 1990's has been unwelcome in such polities where there is a single conception of citizenship.

In central and eastern Europe, on the other hand, ethnicity was able to re-emerge after the state collapsed because, all rationality having been vested in the Communist state, ethnicity had perversely never died. However, if one accepts Schöpflin's argument that ethnicity, civil society and the state are independent, dynamic elements which combine to make up democratic nationhood, then there is surely some way to go in central and eastern Europe. How far Russia may be from this ideal is demonstrated in a rather extreme form in a Soviet Army IQ test administered between 1970 and 1990 and published as late as 1997, the results of which are presented here. The results purport to show Russians as 'the master race' (with Jews also labelled as 'smart'), but criticising in particular the Ukrainian language as inferior, contributing to 'preadolescent underdevelopment of (the) frontal lobes syndrome' and using photographs to show 'significant correlation of forehead slope to (the) mean IQ score' and thus 'congenital cognitive disability' in Ukrainians!

In the section on the State, Communism and Post-Communism Schöpflin describes communism as, inter alia, 'the apotheosis of the étatist tradition' and post-communism as full of contradictions, due to the mutual (and self-) deception between communism and nationalism, the absence of civil society and the rise of anti-democratic movements. It will be difficult, therefore, without self-correcting mechanisms, such as constitutional courts, to develop a real civil society in central and eastern Europe. Without such self-limitation and good governance, the very real problem of finding a place in society for

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ethnic minorities which is acceptable to both sides will be difficult to solve. The author makes reference to a variety of instruments for regulating ethnic relations, but he refers to the necessity of accepting 'symbolic separateness' – difficult for majorities to accept, because it appears to threaten their own pre-eminence. This will strike a chord in many a Scottish heart also.

The final section is devoted to a series of case studies, where Schöpflin applies his understanding of nationalism to each, in particular to the former Yugoslavia, Hungary, the Czechs and Slovaks, and Romania. He also compares the role of ethnicity in other states, including Britain, in a chapter entitled: Englishness: Citizenship, Ethnicity and Class. The distinction between the civic and ethnic dimensions of nationhood is an extremely valuable one, due to the variable responses to different experiences. The *locus classicus* of civic nationhood is the French Revolution, but the civic model *tout court*, says Schöpflin, was always deficient, underestimating the impact of the state, particularly of the interventionist modern state, upon the emergence of shared patterns of identity. It also undervalued ethnicity in states supposedly legitimated by civic ideology. Associating this model with democracy has tended to lead to assumptions, particularly Anglo-Saxon ones, about democracy being the preserve of West European polities, plus the immigrant states of North America and the southern hemisphere. However, the author argues that the real political community that constitutes the state inevitably has ethnic as well as civic quality. It is difficult to argue with his contention that 'despite the claims to universalism derived from Enlightenment rationality, some sense of a shared culture – the bases of ethnicity – were present in the origins of nationalism even in the most civic of polities in Europe (France, England, the Netherlands)'.

The author's excursion into various aspects of Englishness is intriguing, since here he sees ethnicity as represented by class, or class as the locus for cultural reproduction. He uses aspects of speech, accent and language to demonstrate this, but he also describes the nominal projection of English norms onto the rest of Britain as very significant in allowing the maintenance of a system with enough leeway in it to satisfy Scottish and Welsh cultural reproduction. Hence Wales could be transformed into an officially bilingual region, and separate legal and educational systems could exist in Scotland, together with a range of other Scottish institutions, 'because English ethnic norms did not arise and the class hierarchy was not affected'. Schöpflin also argues that the subordination of ethnicity to class in England has a stabilising effect on

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society, so that the country is relatively open to migrants, exiles and other foreigners, as these do not threaten the class system, even if they do not (initially) fit into it – this may be beginning to change, one feels. Conversely, Eurosceptics have instinctively understood that further integration into Europe will inevitably mean the end of Englishness as we understand it, and hence their stance. This may well be music in Scottish ears, and make the European project even more desirable in this age of devolution.

This is a fascinating, academic and entertaining analysis of one of the most fundamental problem areas facing the societies of Europe today, and it is difficult to do justice to it in a short piece such as this. It usefully brings together some of George Schöpflin's previous excursions into Nation and Identity and creates a new and elaborate intellectual synthesis which helps us to understand recent developments in different parts of Europe. I cannot but warmly recommend it to all those interested in the operation of identity politics and the nation state in the modern world.

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