

BEYOND REASON? ETHNOS OR UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT

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Held just over a year after the decease of Czechoslovakia, this conference couldn't help being like a Coroner's Court. What has the Court concluded so far?

Precise cause of death still uncertain. The Czechoslovak (or as they prefer to spell it in Slovakia) Czecho-Slovak State might have survived, had different individuals been round the table, had negotiations been longer pursued, had referenda been held - and so on. But what such ingenious counter-factual arguments avoid is the larger question which has also hung over the proceedings. Had Czechoslovakia been saved in 1992, would it have made any difference in the longer run?

In the same hypothetical mode, I'm bound to say: I doubt it. However, my reasons for this derive from theoretical considerations as well as from the rather little I know about the events of 1989-92. The Czech-Slovak split is a very interesting example from a theoretical angle, because two general modes of explanation can be used to analyse it. The question is: which works best and explains most?

PRIMORDIAL SLOVAKIA

The deeper debate about nationalism has always been between the Primordials and the Moderns. The former think that there just *are* nations in homo sapiens, which assert and (since 1989) reassert themselves through,

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across or against other trends like empire, and cosmopolitan or multinational culture. The Modernist faction (to which I adhere) thinks on the other hand that the study of nationalism is primarily about the 'ism'. It is this 'ism' of nationhood, its systemic political edge, which has caused both the onward movement (modernity) and the trouble. But that arose only recently, and is inseparable from other closely related modern phenomena like industrialization and democracy.

As regards the Czechoslovak breakdown it is quite easy to present both cases rather strongly. Slovakia is a *locus classicus* for ethnic primordialists. At different times during the conference I could not help thinking repeatedly of one famous illustration of this, sometimes quoted during the break-up rows. In 1969 a Bratislava weekly paper called **Nove Slovo** published a document which had been kept hidden in Communist Party archives for twenty-five years. It was a report from the Slovak Communist Central Committee about conditions in the then independent Slovakia set up (with German support) after the Third Reich had taken over the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia in 1938. Originally sent to Moscow, where Clement Gottwald led the Czechoslovak Communists in exile, the document must have found its way almost instantly to archival oblivion.

One can see why. In 1944 Allied and Soviet official opinion needed to believe that Nazi 'puppet states' like Slovakia were unrelieved hell-holes awaiting liberation. Yet here were Slovak Communists reporting that -

Generally speaking after the experience of six years, Slovakia is capable of an independent economic and financial existence. It is in a position to stand on its own feet and has sufficient resources (even technical ones) and production potential to face international competition...

(A summary of the 1944 report can be found in Eugen Steiner's **The Slovak Dilemma** (1973), chapter 6, 'The Struggle in Exile' (from which the quotes here are taken).)

The political implications were also disconcerting. Far from being 'swept away' (the one prospect permitted in Allied speeches) most Slovaks wished much of their recently-established independence to remain. The report pointed out how differently the war had affected Czechs and Slovaks:

After the war only those prepared to adopt a firm position (on the national question) can hope to receive support from the population...In

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this respect there is a difference between us and the Czech lands. The Czechs have lost not only political freedom but their national freedom as well. The Slovaks are politically worse off than during the Czechoslovak Republic, but from the national point of view Slovakia has gained...

Anti-Nazism obliged them to forget about such ill-gotten gains. But nationalism would not really let them do so. The fact is that some serious and long-held national aims were realized during the 1938-44 era. And all the native Communists were saying is that it might be a mistake to throw these out along with Fascism's filthy bath-water:

If this state had a different political structure...there would be no objections to independence from a Slovak point of view. Not surprisingly, many honest people are seriously considering and participating in movements whose aim is to change the regime, to give the state a different substance, but to keep its independence...

In 1969 the biggest surprise was the authorship of the long-buried document. One of its three authors was none other than Gustav Husak, Dubcek's successor as Premier of Czechoslovakia. It was known that he had been imprisoned in the 1950s for 'bourgeois nationalism', but few realized how grave these sins had actually been.

FEDERAL CORRECTNESS

But at least Husak's rehabilitation and post-1968 elevation were also accompanied by the fulfilment of some Slovakian national goals. 'Normalization' comprised a few satisfactions for its honest people. An elaborately federal system was set up and proclaimed (at Husak's insistence) from the old Pressburg Castle in Bratislava on October 28th, 1968 - the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of Masaryk's First Republic in 1918. It came into operation on January 1st 1969 - twenty-four years before the final political separation of the two federated entities.

The longer the perspective, the stronger the ethnic argument seems. Dorothea El Mallakh's admirable monograph **The Slovak Autonomy Movement, 1935-1939** (1979) traces the fortunes of autonomism through the closing years of the First Czechoslovak Republic. She points out how Slovak separatism 'has been viewed overwhelmingly...as a factor in Nazi Germany's expansion of power', issuing in the 1939-45 Protectorate status of Slovakia:

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But also without doubt, although less clearly presented in the historical literature, is that Hitler did not manufacture the Slovak autonomy movement, rather that its existence was of long standing and could be exploited at a critical juncture. The multi-party, democratic experiment of interwar Czechoslovakia failed to control, direct, or effectively respond to the Slovak autonomy movement...

Scots often compliment themselves on how well Scottish autonomy has survived nearly three centuries of political integration. The 'long standing' mentioned here extended back over nearly one thousand years, and ended in a half century of aggressive assimilationism by the post-1867 Hungarian state. But as Jan Carnogursky relates in his article, the result was merely to drive this archetypally 'historyless people' into an alliance with the Czechs. Czecho-Slovakia was the temporary result.

Ms El Mallakh's subtitle is 'A Study in Unrelenting Nationalism'. The constancy of Slovak demands is indeed remarkable: from the 'Petitions of the Slovak Nation' of 1848 up to Vladimir Meciar's post-1989 ascendancy, they demanded much the same things over and over again, and in much the same style. It was not the call for statehood which was unrelenting. Independence figured only now and then in the list: but 'autonomy', linguistic and cultural rights, recognition and equality of status were never absent. These ethno-religious pressures were unremitting, and simply re-presented themselves in successive generations.

When Dubcek's 'Czechoslovakian Spring' arrived in 1968 it too had to sort out the issue. As El Mallakh writes - 'By mentally eliminating certain catch phrases...[the Dubcek Action Programme] could stand as the product of the Slovak autonomy party of some thirty to forty years earlier.'

It cannot be denied that even in Socialist Czechoslovakia, in spite of outstanding progress in solving the problem of nationalities, *there are serious faults and fundamental deformations* in the relations between Czechs and Slovaks...

The famous programme then went on to demand a 'final federative arrangement' in a new constitution 'which in a new way, on the basis of full equality, will solve the status of Slovak national bodies'...once and for all. With the advantage of hindsight we know that this is what Husak's post-1968 regime did (formally speaking). A farther dose of hindsight reveals what was to become of the once-and-for-all definitive constitutional formula: the 1992

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once-and-for-all break-up. What actually proved definitive was the introduction of democracy. Far from validating these laborious and complex federal recipes, this sent them very quickly to the scrapheap.

Petr Pithart underlines one reason for their futility in his article. Czechoslovakia was a federal polity with but two units, joined in an awkward 2 : 1 ratio, where no vote was possible on matters of joint concern (for fear that one or the other might be seen as 'dominating'), and no breathing-space was left uncircumscribed by stipulations of angelic symmetry. This proved beyond merely human powers to operate. Long before that phrase arose in the West, in fact, the Czech-Slovak Federation was a monster of well-intentioned Political Correctness, which substituted phraseology for unavoidably asymmetrical fact and hoped that the former would somehow mould (or spirit away) the latter. One of the byproducts was an odd kind of cold storage for the Slovak inferiority complex - the rankling idea (not unknown in Scotland) of a somehow inescapable marginalization and impotence. Anton Hrenko of the Slovak National Party conveyed a sense of this to our conference in a way everyone immediately understood.

Under Communism (the old joke ran) the state pretended to pay people a living wage, and in return they pretended to work. In much the same spirit, it was pretended that Federalism worked. In her comprehensive study of the system Carol Skalnik Leff has described in detail how the pretence was maintained. Her conclusion, written well before 1989, was that 'Czechs and Slovaks expecting the birth of a joint society have at least another generation to wait' (Leff 1988, part V). The regime still faced 'the same two choices with which earlier leaders have wrestled' -

The acceptance of political arrangements that honor the assumptions of bipolar politics will only serve to institutionalize and reinforce the national distinctiveness of each region still further, perhaps irreversibly. Integrationist policies, on the other hand, given the current social structure and national sensitivities, are out of step with the character of the binational society and will thus breed conflict...It is not an enviable choice for a regime to make.

It was able to go on pretending to make it for so long, because Czechoslovakia was in effect governed from 'outside': by a one-party order which managed the constitution, and was in turn propped up the Soviet imperium. When that ceased to be the case, the pretence quickly foundered. So (any 'Primordialist' would declare) ethnic verity at once reasserted itself,

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and two natural nations shook themselves free of the previous multinational wreckage. Factors 'beyond reason' (in Walker Connor's phrase) resurfaced to put merely civic and constitutional nationalism in its place. In an LSE lecture two years ago Connor argued that the 'nature of the ethnonational bond' has been the key to the whole post-'89 disorder:

The fault lines that separate nations are deeper and broader than those separating non-kindred groups, and the tremors that follow those fault lines more potentially cataclysmic. What underlies...'man's inhumanity to man' is all too often 'nation's inhumanity unto nation'. (Connor 1992).

Hence the past explains the present - in this case, the 1992 split. A general crisis allowed ethnonational bonds to reaffirm their force, since they represent a communitarian inheritance upon which people can fall back - the resort of ethnic nature, which seemed an abiding reality after the failure of complex multinational formulae.

CZECH UNEVENNESS

The only flaw in this theory is that it fails to explain the break-up of Czechoslovakia. The explanation may appear to work if one considers Slovakia alone, or primarily, and leaps rapidly over the actual politics and negotiations of 1991-92. But any more cautious approach discovers a quite different story. Slovak ethno-religious bonds were of course a necessary condition of what happened. But the sufficient condition emerged from a different direction altogether - it came from the Czech side, and took the form of a new intolerance of unevenness.

One recent economic account of the Czech 'nineties puts it this way:

The Slovaks pushing for separation were motivated more by questions of identity and pride than by worries about the economy. Czech politicians (such as Klaus) who pressed for a clean break were largely motivated by economic considerations...Klaus's pragmatism is rooted in a commonsensical view that markets work better than central planning, that a stable currency is better than hyperinflation, and that the Czechs' future lies in rapid integration with Western Europe. (Rutland 1993).

Such attitudes are often attributed to the influence of Friedmannites and Western advisers. But Peter Rutland points out how well these accorded with

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quite traditional Czech attitudes. They are 'views...which have more to do with Czech history and traditions than with off-the-shelf reform programs'. Hence the desire for ultra-rapid Europeanization was no mere rhetoric: it became identified with an impatient national will to get out of past entanglements (including the weird cobwebs of post-1968 Federalism) and forward into a more viable modernity.

But that will was clearly going to be slowed down by the inherited joint arrangements with Slovakia. Carnogursky's categories of 'Central European' and 'East-European' assumed their full meaning here. The Prague city-state desired the shortest possible route to capitalist integration, while Slovaks argued for a more phased approach allowing time for a cushioned re-adjustment of what Carnogursky calls their 'artificial' heavy economy. On paper it looked like an argument over timing. And for a nation-state, it might indeed have been an argument over timing. But for the strange bicephalous entity, Czecho-Slovakia, it inevitably assumed two contrasting forms and implied differing choices.

The Slovaks alone did not make that choice, even after Meciar became Prime Minister. Carnogursky (for example) relates in his article how he strove to hold some sort of federal deal together until both countries could be in Europe. Such a policy of 'Independence...but *not yet*' was the clearest Slovak national interest in 1990-92. But it was Klaus's new Czech government that drew the line: 'Independence... *now*'. That line was (equally plainly) in the interests of Czech *simn fein* - the expression of what Rutland describes as 'a nationalism...alive and well, in spite of a self-effacing nature which testifies to its inner self-confidence'. Petr Pithart has sometimes called this 'regional egotism': the more outward-looking Czech identity which (as it were) can eschew or minimize ethno-national drag because it feels *essentially* 'developed'. An effective sense of that approach was brought to the Edinburgh conference by Daniel Kroupa of the ODA (Obcanska Demokraticka Aliance) - all the more so for coming from within the ruling alliance but not from Klaus's own party.

Confronted with such logic, Meciar's brand of ethno-nationalism had of course to react in its own terms. It had to make the most of it. We now know what a colourful and disastrous result this was to be during the first year of Slovak separate existence. Western comment over the whole period overlooked the low-profile nature of Czech nationalism and unduly emphasized the high-profile sins and antics of Bratislava. But in reality the latter derived partly from the former - that is, from a coherent developmental will rooted in the longer history of the Czech lands as (by far) the most

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industrialized area of the former Hapsburg Empire. Bohemia-Moravia was the repository of a unique inheritance which is only partly accountable in ethnic terms: Protestantism, early industrial development and the preponderance of a single great urban culture also contributed to its ascendancy.

To this was added an unusual ethnic homogeneity, obtained after the post World-War II mass expulsion of the German population: one of the largest examples in European history of what is now routinely referred to as 'ethnic cleansing'. However, the equally unusual circumstances of that change - a practically unopposed act of revenge, supported by the international opinion of the time - meant that it deposited astonishingly little 'ethno-national' content in Walker Connor's sense. Mono-ethnic and mono-lingual, the Czech Republic was to inherit the social reality of an almost 100% successful nationality-struggle - with comparatively little of the standard ideological tension and culturalist flourishes that normally derive from such a struggle.

The situation was practically the reverse of the post-war Slovak one. It was the Slovaks, not the Czechs, who had launched a desperate national uprising against Nazism in 1944. This was (in Steiner's words) 'a real people's movement. Slovak partisans, soldiers, workers, peasants and intellectuals, wherever they had the chance, went into action virtually without their new national leaders. The latter joined the people only after they...realized they could not stop the course of events.' At a critical stage of the war, it took two German divisions two months to put down the insurrection and restore their puppets to office. Yet this classical national-liberation battle was curiously side-tracked by the restoration at the war's end. The events which consummated Czech identity were to eclipse that of the Slovaks.

The very dourness of Klaus fits into the Czech perspective which Rutland observes as follows -

Paradoxically, Klaus's relative obscurity might have worked in his favour. More well-known dissidents, such as Petr Pithart and Jiri Dienstbier, were associated with the tribulations of the past, while Klaus was a new face who talked only of the future.

Slovak-style ethnonationalism calls on its past in order to face the future; in contrast - having fully achieved its nationalist aims - Czech-style 'regional egotism' could afford to feel the past consisted mainly of 'tribulations', and turn in a far more determined and aggressive way towards the European future. If it has become the 'success-story' of post-'89 Central and Eastern

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Europe, this may be because it was really the sole area where, for deeper historical reasons, most of the population could be counted on to go on supporting such brusque development policies.

MODELS OF DISORDER

So there were two 'fault-lines' at work in the split. One was Connor's ethnonational bond. The other was a profound developmental gap between the two parts of Czechoslovakia. Some analyses have underlined how by 1992 this socio-economic gap was far less than it had once been, and argued that (therefore) the federation might have been saved with some good will on both sides. But good will involved consciousness and joint assent to some common vision - the very things congenitally lacking, on Pithart's account. Statistical closeness can accompany, and even aggravate, socio-cultural divergence (Musil 1993).

In that sense it seems doubly futile to blame leadership for the failure (if it was one). To give such emphasis to the 'primacy of politics' only works if politics are removed into an abstract sphere. The conflict can of course then be retrospectively renegotiated to make it come out differently. However, what one is actually renegotiating may, when examined more concretely, turn out to be virtually the whole past history of both nations.

It also avoids looking at two fundamental and related things: the profundity and ancient character of the 'developmental gap', and the developmental storm of post-'89. The 'fault-line' reactivated here was actually that between East and West, which happened to lie across a post-1918 Czechoslovak state which had been in many respects an example of political primacy - a purely political construction that seemed to suit the elites and big-power interests of a given moment. From 1918 until 1992 a wholly disproportionate amount of that state's effort and resources had gone into maintaining the construction.

No-one need deny there were good reasons for doing so, or that some of its side-effects were beneficial. However, too many of these reasons were external, or a function of the same ambient interests and great-power pressures. With the abrupt climatic shift of 1989-90 these ceased to work. Then a storm burst over the whole area which in any case compelled a more native remobilization. Although its effects had been anticipated to some degree here and there in Eastern Europe, the full force of the development-dilemma (capitalist transformation and conversion) could not take effect until

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the final dissolution of the old order. When it did so, this effect was like a hastened recapitulation of the century preceding the advent of Communism.

During that time the primal nationalism of the region had been formed by resentful mobilization both for and against Western and Great Power example: the will to emulate or catch up, and the determination that this be accomplished 'on our own terms' - the terms furnished in most places by pre-existing ethno-linguistic or ethno-religious identity. In theoretical perspective, 'primordialism' tends to perceive and emphasize these terms; 'modernism' tends to perceive and accentuate the socio-economic causes - the developmental differentials underlying and prompting the politico-cultural responses of nationalism.

Returning to my original question: which works best and explains most in the Post-Czechoslovak case? Well, neither theory is straightforwardly validated, it seems to me - nor should anyone expect such a simple proof. But what the Czech-Slovak circumstances may do is to 'locate' these differing elements of explanation for us far more clearly than any other single example of nationalist rebirth or secession. Located astride the historic East-West fault-line and reproducing in microcosm all of its most important tropes, the break-up of the Czechoslovak polity (rather than Bosnia-Herzegovina) is the most significant 'laboratory example' of nationalism which post-1989 has yet thrown up for theory. Perhaps our two days of debate in Edinburgh established that much, even if they didn't get to the bottom of it.

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June 1994