

THE NATION IN THE CURRENT EUROPEAN CONTEXT

by Ulisses Moulines*

In contemporary Europe we find that it is very difficult to broach the topic of national identity in a dispassionate, unprejudiced manner. This is equally true of the Spanish state, which like many others in Europe is a de facto multi-national entity, without wishing to legally admit it.

There are various factors that can explain this situation. One of them is undoubtedly the fact that wide sections of public opinion, the intelligentsia and naturally the political class of these countries all share a fear of nationalism. This is to say they are frightened of any political programme that defends the national identity of any nation, whether represented by a state or not. Many intellectuals and politicians, whether conservatives or on the left, view the nationalism of minority nations as a conflictive, destructive ideology, which must be vigorously countered. It is symptomatic that the members of the public who have such a negative opinion of nationalism in European countries are precisely those that belong to a nation which has possessed its own

state for a long time. This is in contrast to those that have recently obtained a sovereign state, as is the case of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, or those citizens of Western Europe who identify themselves with a minority nation within a multi-national state, as is the case with the Catalans, Basques, Corsicans, Bretons, South-Tyroleans, the Scots and so on. In my opinion, there is a pressing need for the national question to be openly debated within the European framework. This urgency is particularly apparent in the case of the Spanish state, where the debate surrounding the topic is so dangerously heated.

Throughout the twentieth century, many 'well-meaning' intellectu-



als, more or less politically liberal or on the left, were convinced that the nationalist ideal belonged to a phase in humanity's history that had been definitively overcome, that the time for the 'citizen of the world' had arrived and that those that insisted on declaring themselves nationalists were reactionaries of the worst kind. The Cold War period, characterised by the confrontation between two blocs that apparently were not at odds for nationalist reasons, but rather as a result of incompatible social and economic programmes, exacerbated this perception. These same well-meaning intellectuals and politicians were shocked and surprised to observe how, a few years or even months following the collapse of the Soviet Union, strong nationalist

movements broke out all over Central and Eastern Europe in groups reclaiming their national identity, ahead even of social and economic reforms. Who would have imagined that Latvians simply wished to be Latvians before anything else? How frustrating it was to discover that the small Slovakian nation was prepared to resist, with the use of arms if necessary, the powerful Yugoslav army (in other words the Serbian army) in order to preserve its national identity!

However, if the Western intellectuals in question had paid a bit more attention to the role of true collective, lasting sentiments, not only of small, more or less exotic nations, but also of their own fellow citizens, they could not only have

foreseen but also explained the foundations of this phenomenon. A prophetic few had foreseen this for some time. Here is a quote from 1941, the author of which I shall reveal below:

It is not possible to see the modern world as it is without recognising the burning force of patriotism, of national loyalty. Under certain circumstances it can be demolished, in certain levels of civilisation it does not exist, but as a positive force nothing can compare to it [...] What is more, we should accept that the divisions between one nation and another are based on real differences in attitude. Until very recently it was sufficient to pretend that all

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BUT RATHER A PROFOUND, UNIVERSAL CULTURAL
PHENOMENON**

humans are very similar, but in fact anyone capable of using their own eyes can see that human behaviour differs enormously from one country to another'.

Guess who wrote these lines: a German Nazi, an Italian fascist, a Serbian Chetnik? No, they were written by George Orwell, a militant socialist who mercilessly criticised British imperialism in India, a member of the International Brigades that fought fascism in Spain, where he was gravely injured on the Aragon front for defending the cause of the international proletariat. In spite of his credentials, Orwell, who had lived for a long time in a number of countries on two continents, was 'capable of using his own eyes' in order to see the obvious. This was in contrast to many 'internationalists' both before and especially after him.



Inspired by reading this text by Orwell, by the incomprehensible incomprehension shown by many of my colleagues and friends in various countries when faced with the nationalist phenomenon, and last but not least by my condition as a member of the Catalan diaspora, a couple of years ago I decided to embark on a philosophical and methodological analysis (the only kind of which I feel myself capable) of the concept of the nation and the sense of nationalism as a political programme. The result of my reflections was published under the title *Nationalist Manifesto*. This was followed by replies to critics and subsequent revisions. The reaction of people in Europe who read my 'Manifesto' has been typical: some considered it an intolerable provocation and have not spoken to me since; others, including one publication in particular, have suggested I am an ETA sympathiser; others have taken it as a joke in bad taste; another asked me why I spent so much energy on something that at the end of the day is already stated in the United Nations Charter (an observation that is basically correct, but which has not prevented the states that make up the UN from systematically ignoring it). A Jewish anti-nationalist friend even used the following ad personam argument, 'how is it possible that you, Ulisses Moulines, with a French grandfather and Catalan parents, born in Venezuela, having lived for many years in Mexico and having been a German teacher for the last 25 years, how come you of all people don't call yourself a citizen of the world?'. With a smile I replied: in effect I do consider myself a citizen of the world and a nationalist at the same time; there is no contradiction (for the reasons outlined in my *Nationalist Manifesto*).

I mention these personal experiences in order to note that, while it is apparent that it is necessary to inspect the

topic of nations and nationalisms with a keen conceptual approach and not in a superficial manner, in Europe it is practically impossible to take on this task at the academic level. In as much as European intellectuals deign to say anything about nationalism, they usually do so in two ways: either to virulently denigrate it, or in order to undertake a historical analysis, highly erudite, but often also rather tedious, in order to work out whether, for example, one can detect the appearance of a nationalist movement in the north of Italy in the eighteenth century or in the nineteenth century Austro-Hungarian Empire. The how and why of the problems they are currently facing in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Flanders, Bretagne, Euskadi, the Catalan Countries, Corsica, South Tyrol (not to mention what has happened and what continues to happen in the immensity of the ex-Soviet bloc), is often all left to journalists. Undoubtedly there are honourable exceptions among university researchers, but I am referring to the general tendency. The message transmitted to public opinion by the immense majority of European intellectuals, with considerable success, is that the history of these nations and nationalisms is radically ridiculous or perverse, or at best only of interest from a theoretical point of view.

On the contrary, in my opinion the debate surrounding the national question should not be solely left to the journalists and politicians that are concerned with day to day events (although, naturally it is also a good thing for them to take the question seriously), neither should it be left to psychiatrists (as some Spanish intellectuals appear to suggest) or museographers. In my opinion, the topic presents a sufficient level of complexity and significance for the study of human affairs for a philosopher to also poke their nose out of their ivory tower and cast an analytical

eye over the matter. Such was the objective of my 'Manifesto', even if it was to be in a fragmentary and provisional manner.

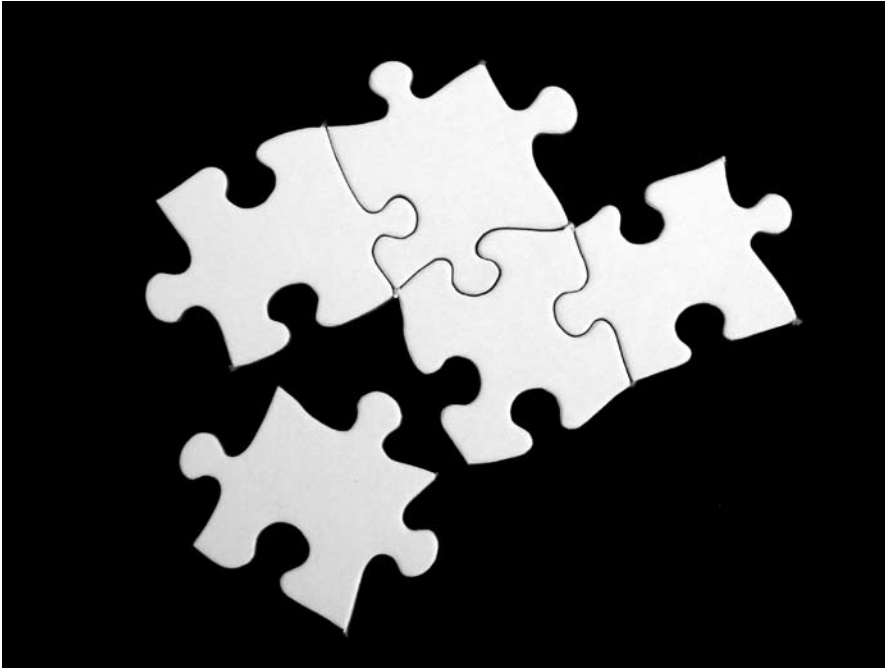
**NATIONALISM SHOULD BE VALUED POSITIVELY:
IN THE SAME WAY AS WE SHOULD BE IN FAVOUR OF
DIVERSITY IN ANIMAL AND VEGETABLE SPECIES**

I shall not repeat here the detail of the arguments presented in this essay. Some readers may already be familiar with it, others can consult the book in a library or even (I almost daren't say it) buy a copy. Here I shall limit myself to briefly outlining the three main arguments that I defend:

- 1) Nationalism is not a passing fashion, but rather a profound, universal cultural phenomenon (historical-cultural argument).
- 2) The concept of the nation (as opposed to the concept of the state) is not empty: nations are real entities, even though they are not identifiable from the point of view of direct perception in the sense that mountains and houses are (ontological argument). In all disciplines we find endless concepts that refer to real entities, even if they are not directly detectable by the senses (some examples are: 'electromagnetic fields' in physics, 'genes' in biology, 'grammar' in linguistics and so on).
- 3) Nationalism should be valued positively: in the same way as we are in favour of diversity in animal and vegetable species, we should also be in favour of national diversity. For this reason it is necessary to be a nationalist in any part of the world; nationalism is the cultural equivalent of ecology (ethical-political argument).

What are the prospects for nationalism in the countries without a state in the European context? In the heart of the European Union I believe they are rather poor, at least in the mid-term. The reason is simple. The European Union is no more or less than what its member states want it to be. It would therefore be naïve to expect that any of its states would show the slightest interest in preserving the European nations that do not have a state. In effect, the states that make up the European Union are essentially of two types (leaving aside Belgium, which is a special case): either they are homogenous uni-national states, such as Germany, Holland and the majority of states in Central Europe and the Nordic countries, or else they are multi-national states that are clearly hegemonistic (which is to say they are states where, for demographic reasons, one nation exercises hegemony over the others). This is the situation in Spain, the United Kingdom, France and Italy. It is clear that no state of the latter kind will lift a hand to help minority nations in another state in the club. It would be like expecting landowners from one region contributing in all good faith to agrarian reform affecting landowners in a neighbouring region. As for states of the former kind, the uni-nationals, some time ago they resolved their own national question and they have no reason to raise the issue in other nations; at best we can expect total indifference from them, at worst active opposition. This is the case of Germany, where for concrete historical reasons (the term 'nationalism' sounds to German ears a lot like 'National Socialism'), the official and unofficial opinion makers are rabidly intransigent with respect to any form of nationalist loyalty on behalf of the nations without a state.

Do the minority European nations therefore have to desperately



wait alone in slow agony? I think not. Each and every one of them should be conscious of the fact that they are not alone with their problem. The national question is a worldwide phenomenon. 'There is safety in numbers', as the saying goes. According to experts on the subject, a minimum of 600 hundred nations can be identified worldwide. There are 193 sovereign states, however, only a minority of which are un-national states that are more or less homogenous. Applying basic arithmetic, this means that the vast majority of existing nations lack a state that defends their identity. An enormous potential exists, therefore, for a shared interest. Due to its very nature, the UN is completely inept at representing this

community, for the same reasons that the European Union is. Having said this, allow me, as a philosopher who moves in the realm of speculation, to propose the following utopia: a global organisation, which could be called 'OSN' (the Organisation of Stateless Nations), that is responsible, as far as possible, for the interests of its members and raising awareness as to the problems facing nations without a state among international public opinion, including those journalists, intellectuals and politicians from the hegemonic nations who are sympathetic to the problem (who do exist, in spite of everything). It may be that in the future this proposal is not as utopian as it seems...

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