

NATIONAL CONSCIENCE AS HUMAN SOLIDARITY FORM

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Eastern Europe has been lately an arena for a spectacular revival of various nationalisms, often in conflict one with another, but similar in structure and forms of expression. Challenging all theories and scenarios which postulated the gradual and rather smooth establishment of supranational organization schemes, either at world level or at European level (be it in the elitist and limited pattern of the European Economic Community, or in the enlarged version of the European Common House suggested by Mikhail Gorbachev), this phenomenon needs the full attention of social scientists.

¹ A first draft of this essay has been written in 1987; the text has been revised in autumn 1990 and published in the journal "Societate & Cultură. Noua alternativă", 1/1990, p.44-46. Its genesis was due mostly to intensive discussions between the two authors, because at that time we had not yet read the extensive literature on nationalism written in the 1980s (the studies of Benedict Anderson, John A. Armstrong, John Breuilly, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Anthony D. Smith); nevertheless, we had the satisfaction to see that our ideas were leading in a similar direction with those of major scholars in the field of nationalism. Under these circumstances, the original text had no footnotes, and we have decided to republish it in the same way also now. We will just indicate that the long quotation from George Ionescu-Gion is to be found in his conference at the Romanian Athenaeum, *Studiul istoriei naționale în școlile noastre*, București, 1889, p.16-17. Some concrete aspects mentioned in this essay have been developed by us later in: Bogdan Murgescu, "Phanariots" and "Pamânteni". *Religion and Ethnicity in Shaping Identities in the Romanian Principalities and the Ottoman Empire*, in Maria Crăciun, Ovidiu Ghitta (eds.), *Ethnicity and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*, Cluj, 1995, p.196-204; Mirela-Luminița Murgescu, *Între "bunul creștin" și "bravul român". Rolul școlii primare în construirea identității naționale românești (1831-1878)*, Iași, 1999, 262 p.

In the following we do not intend to enter into the details of the polemics about the essence of the nation and the way to define it. We will just outline that, apart from its objective constituents, a nation cannot exist without its members sharing the idea that they belong together. National conscience is thus basically a form of human solidarity.

The human society experienced throughout its existence a great variety of solidarity forms. The multitude of solidarity forms is not only diachronic, but also synchronic. Thus, in the mind of each individual, as well as in that of each human community, there coexist several *elementary (primary) solidarities*: the domestic and/or kin solidarity, the solidarity of the rural community, the solidarity of the people sharing the same profession, the ethno-linguistic solidarity, the confessional solidarity etc., going on up to the limit of the solidarity of all human beings on earth. Obviously, this listing, which does not aim to be exhaustive, groups solidarities based on a stable and elementary criterion of delineating the people accepted as part of the community and enjoying solidarity. The stability and obvious character of these membership criteria grant to these solidarities which we have called *elementary (or primary)* the property of lasting over great periods of time and of being spread worldwide.

We must notice that each individual, as well as each human community, can share synchronically only a limited sum of solidarities; under these circumstances, the rise of any of the elementary solidarities is at the cost of another elementary solidarities, either by outright denial, or more often by quietly pushing them into subordination or even into oblivion.

An important issue, but which transcends the theme of this short essay, is the investigation of the (positive or negative) correlations between different elementary (primary) solidarities. In the following we will just postulate that these correlations are, if not permanent structures, then certainly patterns of the *longue durée*, as defined by Braudel.

During the Middle Ages the term *nation* (Latin *natio*) designated a specific social-political community. The emphasis was put on the special social status of the group which defined itself as *natio* in contrast with other groups, either inside the same political realm, or outside that political dominion. Differently to the elementary solidarities, the social-political solidarity (*natio* solidarity) is not linked to a fixed criterion. Quite on the contrary, one can notice a great variability of the membership criteria, both among various groups and communities and across time.

Usually the social-political solidarity overlaps with one or another of the elementary (primary) solidarities. This overlapping is determined especially by the specific interests of the individual or social group which thus legitimates itself. The variation in time of these interests determines the shift from legitimating oneself by means of one elementary solidarity to legitimating oneself with the help of another elementary solidarity (ies). The logic of this transition is determined first of all by the concrete interest of the individuals to share a group solidarity, i.e. to place themselves on the platform of common interests and requests, and to benefit from being part of that particular group. The ability to collect these benefits inexorably diminishes in time, either because the group is joined by people who initially were not part of it, a fact which leads to the inflation of the specific advantage granted by membership to the group, or because of social-economic processes which lead to the overall deterioration of the group's position. In both situations, the attempt to preserve the 'rights' (the relative advantages) implies the redefinition of the membership criteria to that particular group, in the first case by limiting the access of outsiders, in the second case by enlarging the solidarity in order to face the unfavorable circumstances.

The shifts from one form of social-political solidarity to another are not mechanical, but are mediated by the values shared by the implied individual or social group. Therefore, the quality which will become the prevailing membership criterion has to be already positively valued at the beginning of the transition from the old solidarity to the new one. This outlines the importance of the opinion leaders (Gramsci's "organic intellectuals") in the preparation and the effective unfolding of the transition to new forms of human solidarity. We must also be aware that such a transition does not occur overnight. Its duration depends heavily on the size of the group, lasting in the case of large groups for several decades (1-2 generations). Under these circumstances, between the variation of the concrete interests of the individuals and the adjustment of the solidarity forms there always is a certain time lag. Therefore, no social-political solidarity form matches fully the concrete interests of the members of a social group. Accordingly, each solidarity leaves place for the gradual erosion of the relative advantage of every social group.

In its permanent shift from one elementary solidarity to another, the social-political solidarity overlapped throughout history also with the ethno-linguistic solidarity, but without this connection being a constant pattern of historical evolution. In time there occurred several situations

when - under the pressure of special circumstances, e.g. of acute external threats - the ethno-linguistic solidarity prevailed, determining the life and actions of huge numbers of people. Yet, before the 19th century the ethno-linguistic solidarity did not subdue for a long time entire societies, the periods of impressive breakthroughs being followed by others of decline. Thus, even in the case of France, where the moment of Jeanne d'Arc is considered to be a benchmark in the emergence of the French national conscience, the attachment to the king being combined with a strong affective commitment to what was already called "la douce France", more recent investigations have shown that provincial solidarities still prevailed, being dismantled only after the French revolution, during the 19th century. With respect to the late fulfillment of ethno-linguistic solidarity in the Romanian popular mind, we will quote only a testimony of George Ionescu-Gion from 1889: "Who does not remember that even in recent years, if you asked a peasant: What are you?, he answered, scratching his head and smiling with obedience: Well, Sir, what should I be? A Christian like all other Christians, just to God! I asked him talking in his own manner: Good, my cousin, but how that, only Christian? Christian! Christian is also the Bulgarian... Christian is also the Muscovite... Christian is also the Greek... You're Christian! But you are also something else, are you not? Don't you feel that you are from all your ancestors Romanian, Romanian green as the oak and with a brave arm which smashes the chest of the enemy? - Well, Sir, answered the countryman, I do not know such things; you speak *as from the book*".

Accordingly, we think we can claim that the ethno-linguistic solidarity was not always perceived as prevailing. Certainly, one can discuss whether and to which extent there existed throughout history a 'preference' for defining ethno-linguistically social-political solidarities, but we think that more important it is to outline the fact that the rise and the decline of this particular type of solidarity was always the outcome of determined historical circumstances, reflecting precise individual and group interests.

Some examples will better support our case: it is well-known that under the Ottoman dominion the subject population was classified according to confessional criteria; there existed thus a *millet* of the Orthodox, one of the Armenians and one of the Jews. During the 17th century, when Catholic Bulgarian humanists struggled to overthrow the Ottoman yoke, they insisted on the historical tradition and on the Bulgarian ethnicity in order to overshadow the confessional criterion, which separated

the Catholic enclaves from the Orthodox majority. Their final failure is connected to the fact that the Orthodox mass continued to think in confessional terms and rejected cooperation.

Sometimes, the shift is determined by the class interests of privileged groups. Thus, the boyars from the Romanian Principalities, challenged during the 17th century by the penetration and competition of Levantine elements, valued the quality of *pământeau* (countryman) in order to legitimate its opposition to the intruders and its monopoly over the privileges. Similar situations can be noticed in the Seldjuk emirates during the 13th century, where the Turkish aristocracy reacted to the intrusion of cosmopolitan elements at the courts of the emirs by trying to impose the Turkish language instead of Arab and Persian, or in the Ottoman Empire, where the Turkish aristocracy of the 15th-16th centuries discredited energetically the *devshirme* system, because the children from Christian background who became Muslims and entered the sultan's service challenged it in the competition for official positions.

In pre-modern societies, the overlappings between ethno-linguistic solidarity and social-political solidarity were inevitably ephemeral, the respective groups shifting to other forms of legitimation. We will give only one example. During the migrations, the ethno-linguistic criterion played a major role in defining the social-political status. With territorialization and the adoption of an universalist religion like Christianity, the ethno-linguistic criterion became secondary, letting other forms of elementary solidarity prevail.

Beginning with the second half of the 18th century and continuing during the 19th century, we can notice at an European level the overlapping of social-political solidarities with the ethno-linguistic ones, the result being usually called *national conscience*. Its emergence occurred in a historical context shaped by the decline of elementary solidarities previously important, such as the confessional and the territorial, either regional or local. Furthermore, imposing the *national conscience* to the masses implied a sustained educative effort of the intellectual elites. Through school, newspapers, communication systems and compulsory military service, the society dismantled previous solidarities, which were forced to give way to the national solidarity. In the collective mind there were enforced ideas which granted a specific identity to the national entity, outlining the noble origin, the age and virtues of the respective people, its role in the world and the prominence of the loyalty towards the fatherland.

Moreover, becoming mass phenomena, modern nationalisms acquired the force to be one of the motors of historical evolution.

Its extension to the lower strata of the society and the contemporary progress of the media, leading to the establishment of an increasing number of cultural elements common to all social strata, explains also the lasting character of the national conscience, which is also nowadays the main way most of the people identify themselves.

At this point one could ask: *What are the prospects of this solidarity, taking into consideration that the dynamic development of the media tends to change Earth into an "electronic village"?* We cannot give here and now a short and conclusive answer, such an answer needing detailed studies in order to analyze the issue in various parts of the world, with different development levels and social/cultural environments. Therefore, we will just postulate that the shift from ethno-linguistic solidarity to more inclusive solidarities will most probably occur only in several stages, both horizontally (in various geographical areas) and vertically (with respect to the different social strata).

In those states where these discrepancies will merge with acute interest conflicts between the various social groups, there is a high risk that, instead of switching to supranational solidarities, most of the society will temporarily experience either the prevalence of less inclusive solidarities, e.g. social/professional solidarities, or the strengthening of the existing national solidarities by excluding the 'cosmopolites'.

Taking into account the danger of such accidents, it is necessary that especially in societies facing serious crises, such as those in Eastern Europe, the attachment to larger entities should be thoroughly prepared and dealt with.