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Nationalism and National Sentiment in Postsocialist Romania

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For western observers, a striking concomitant of the end of Communist Party rule was the sudden appearance of national movements and national sentiments. We were not alone in our surprise: even more taken aback were Party leaders, somehow persuaded by their own propaganda that Party rule had resolved the so-called national question. That this was far from true was evident all across the region, from separatism in Slovenia, Croatia, Slovakia, and the Baltic and other Soviet republics, to bloodshed between Romania's Hungarians and Romanians and between Bulgaria's Turks and Bulgarians, to Gypsy-bashing in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria, and widespread anti-Semitism – even in countries like Poland, where there are virtually no Jews. From no country was evidence of national conflict absent. Why?

The most common explanation by U.S. journalists and politicians has been that the end of “Communism” took the lid off ancient hatreds that Party rule had suppressed. Indeed, so insistent is the ancient-hatred theory that alternative accounts are shut out. It combines with an apparent view of the socialist period as in every respect an aberration whose end restores business as usual, a more normal order of “irrational tribal” passions in a part of the world long regarded as backward. Because asserting temporal distance, such as by calling something “ancient,” is a classic means of establishing the thing so called as inferior, this and the imagery of “tribalism” and “irrationality” make the explanation immediately suspect as ideology, not analysis.

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In this chapter I offer several alternatives to ancient hatred as an explanation of nationalism and national sentiment in postsocialist Eastern Europe. I suggest that to see socialism as having “suppressed” national conflict is a mistake, as is an understanding of present conflicts that ignores the effects of the dismantling of socialism. Although causes rooted in history have indeed been exceedingly important,

I prefer to emphasize how the organization of socialism enhanced national consciousness and how aspects of the supposed exit to democratic politics and market economies aggravate it further. My discussion does not present a unified explanation but includes several, for nationalism in the region has many causes, ranging from the macrosocial to matters of personal identity. It is, in other words, overdetermined, and the relevant causes vary from one country to another. I give only cursory treatment to some of them, particularly those already covered in other literatures, so as to focus more fully on those illuminated by anthropology. Although I draw most of my examples from Romania, I will bring in other countries of the region as I proceed.

I might begin by recapitulating what I mean by “nation” and “nationalism,” as discussed in chapter 3. “Nation” is a name for the relationship that links a state (actual or potential) with its subjects. Historically, the idea of “nation” has meant a relationship of at least two kinds: first, a citizenship relation, in which the nation is the collective sovereign emanating from common political participation; and second, a relation known as ethnicity, in which the nation comprises all those of supposedly common language, history, or broader “cultural” identity. The “citizenship” meaning of nation seems to have originated in the centers of liberal democracy, where it only sometimes coexists (as, for example, in France) with the “ethnic” meaning of nation. The latter is the meaning most common in Eastern Europe and is the one usually associated with “nationalism” – by which I mean the invocation of putative cultural or linguistic sameness toward political ends and the sentiment that responds to such invocation.

Because *no* state is ethnically uniform, the two meanings are potentially at odds: within given state borders, the number of potential citizen participants usually exceeds the membership of any ethnic nation (although this does not mean that all potential citizens are always recognized as such). Therefore, how a given polity defines the relationship between “ethnic nation” and “citizenship” deeply affects its form of democracy. Nationalism is of such consequence for democratic prospects in Eastern Europe because some groups make tactical use of a nationalism that would exclude large numbers of others from citizenship rights and political protection. This *exclusive* tactical nationalism can also be inclusive, if it seeks to include members of the ethnic nation living in other states; in this case, it can threaten international peace. These potentials for exclusion and for war give nationalism a bad name among Western (especially North American) liberals, who have trouble studying it with sympathy.

Nationalism, History, and Socialist Policies

Let me briefly take up three of the reasons for nationalism specifically relating to socialist and presocialist times in Romania and more broadly elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The first is the obvious historical reason: the national idea is playing so vital a role in postsocialist politics because it had played a vital role in politics for well over

a century. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century national movements consolidated the meaning of nation as ethnic, for in many cases it was as ethnics that people had felt excluded from the prerogatives of citizenly status, monopolized by other nations. The Romanian movement in Transylvania is a good example. Later, during the 1920s and 1930s, in all East European countries ideas about “nation” became deeply embedded not only in political discourse but also in many institutions – economic, scientific, political, and literary. Although the early years of socialist internationalism suppressed this form of discourse, it gradually crept back in, to greater or lesser degrees and more or less covertly, in every country. This occurred in part because of the legitimating value of “nation” and in part because talk of national interests gave ready expression to the anti-imperial feelings of many East Europeans (including many of their Party elites), against Soviet or Russian domination.

In a word, nineteenth-century national movements and the twentieth-century history of East European states were so effective in inculcating the national idea that the years of Communist Party rule could not completely expunge it. Indeed, it would have been impossible for party-states in an international system of *nation-states* to eradicate overnight so basic an element of modern political subjectivity. “Nation” in its ethnic meaning had entered firmly into people’s political and social identities and their senses of self. This history is in some ways the precondition for all my other arguments in this chapter, yet it is neither “ancient” (these national identities being fairly modern) nor sufficient to explain present conflicts. No set of issues simply hangs around for forty years awaiting resurrection. Much has happened in the meantime.

A second reason why national ideas are now important applies chiefly to the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the two long-term “federations” in the region. In these two states, the main national groups each had their own republics: the principle of national difference was constitutionally enshrined. Leaders of nationalities held power as such, in their republics. More important, this was so in a social environment that the party-state had worked assiduously to cleanse of *other* organizational forms that might compete with its own initiatives. When a system of that sort begins to decentralize and to encourage more initiative from lower-level units, the only units having the organizational history and experience to respond are nationalities. Weakening at the center thus empowers national elites first of all. Some of them (those in Croatia and Slovenia, for example) at once began refusing to drain their budgets for subsidies to backward regions; others (such as those in Lithuania and Estonia) began complaining about their earlier forcible incorporation into the Soviet empire. Precisely because the Soviet regime had destroyed all other bases for political organization while constitutionally enshrining the national basis, national sentiment emerged to overwhelm federal politics. This form of federal organization – installed by the Bolsheviks and by Tito – can properly be said to have been *part of socialism*; it reinforced rather than undermined ethnic difference, and as Soviet anthropologist Valery Tishkov and others argue, it was the proximate cause of the dissolution of the

Soviet and Yugoslav federations. It was significant in the breakup of Czechoslovakia as well, where a comparable reification of nationality had existed since 1968. One can even see echoes of it in the Party-membership ethnic quotas of other, nonfederated socialist states, like Romania and Bulgaria.

Third, there were additional features of socialism that made national ideas salient for average citizens, especially in those countries, regions, or republics having significant numbers of ethnic groups that were intermingled rather than territorially separated. In chapter 1 I have described socialism as a system of organized shortage. Basic to these societies was competition for access to scarce resources, with social actors constantly striving to put their hands on resources in very short supply. The more highly centralized such a system was – the more it resembled Romania or the Soviet Union rather than Hungary or Yugoslavia, for example – the more severe the shortage was, and the more active the competition was likely to be. Under these circumstances, any device that increased one’s chance of obtaining what one needed had a functional role to play. Shortage-alleviating devices included the ever-present use of personal ties and “bribery.” I believe that another such mechanism was ethnic preference: the tightening of ethnic boundaries, or the use of ethnicity as a basis for personalistic connections. In its most exclusive form, this expels competitors from the networks that supply a shortage economy, giving members of one group an edge over claimants from “other” groups.

Let me give a concrete if trivial example to show how ethnicity might work in regulating shortage. In Transylvania, where the mix of Romania’s ethnic groups is greatest, one sometimes finds ethnic occupational specializations – quite common in multiethnic settings. In the city of Cluj, for instance, where hairdressing is almost wholly in the hands of Hungarians, I noticed during my 1984-85 visit that several of my middle-aged Romanian women friends appeared rather often with their hair visibly grizzled at the roots, a lapse in self-presentation wholly out of keeping with their usual style. Finally one of them begged me to get her some hair coloring on my next trip West, for with the many restrictions on hot water and on imports of virtually everything, including hair dye, her beautician could no longer service all the regular customers but only special friends. I doubt that in such circumstances every Hungarian beautician consciously served only her Hungarian friends. Rather, ethnicity excludes “naturally,” as one restricts one’s services to one’s closest associates; and it is a commonplace that in situations of ethnic antagonism, such as that between Transylvania’s Romanians and Hungarians, it is very likely that special friends will be of one’s own ethnic group.

In other words, ethnonational identifications were one of several particularizing forces spawned by the system of centralized command. This makes them an analogue of the second economy and, like it, a form of resistance integrally tied to the organization of socialism. Given the premium this organization placed on all forms of particularism, to see Party rule as having “kept the lid” on a nationalism now free to “reassert itself” is, I believe, quite mistaken.

National Sentiment and Transition Politics

So far I have suggested three of several forces that were at work, in both presocialist and socialist times, to keep the national idea alive despite the Party's formal disapproval of it. The forces I have named had varying impact. Constitutionally enshrined national republics existed only in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and post-1968 Czechoslovakia; and ethnicity was useful in reducing shortage mainly where ethnic groups were intermingled, such as in Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and some Soviet republics. I will now discuss the several ways in which the processes of exiting from socialism create or reinforce nationalism and national consciousness: how "privatization" and other aspects of "constitutionalism" provoke national conflicts; how multiparty politics enables certain groups (often, those privileged under socialism) to make use of the national idea; and how Party rule created political subjectivities in ways that are now susceptible to the symbols inherent in national appeals.

There are many features of the proposed dismantling of socialism that aggravate relations between social groups. All have in common the fact that political and economic processes that the party-state had taken out of local hands are now being restored – not to the same hands as had relinquished them, of course, and here is part of the problem. A prime example is privatization. Although the principle holds for privatization in any form, I will illustrate it with privatization of land. Except in Poland and Yugoslavia, the expropriation of land and the formation of collectives virtually eliminated competition for land among local groups, whether these were defined as clans, as ethnic groups, or as families. After collectivization, the most they could compete for (and this they did) was bureaucratic access to regulate the benefits that might be derived from now-common property. But privatization restores the possibility of competition over land, and it does so after decades of population shifts, resettlings, expulsions, and changes in ownership that preclude a simple restoration of the *status quo ante* and precipitate conflict.

For example, in Aurel Vlaicu (Binținți), the village of my 1974 fieldwork, prior to 1940 the wealthiest farmers were Germans. When they were deported to Siberia in 1945 for war-reparations labor, their considerable lands were expropriated and given to poor villagers of Romanian ethnicity. These people, in turn, were the ones compelled to donate the land to the collective farm. Beginning in 1991, the collective farm (although not the state farm nearby) was to be disbanded. Germans, expecting to receive the maximum allowable under the law – ten hectares per family – were astonished and enraged to learn, in July of that year, that they had been given not rights to land but shares in the state farm, whereas the recipients of the amounts once owned by Germans would be the Romanians to whom the land had been given in 1945. Germans as a group took the decision to court, alleging ethnic discrimination. They won, but that was not the end of the matter: Romanian villagers contested the judgment, and ethnic antagonism has escalated between two groups that had mostly gotten along quite peaceably since the collective was formed thirty years ago. It is in

this context that one now hears what I never heard before: Romanians in the village saying – after a full century of cohabitation with Germans – “Why don't you Germans leave? What more do you want here? The land is ours.”

This case is simple by comparison with those in areas such as the Caucasus, where ethnic intermixtures and successions of ownership are infinitely more complex. Throughout the region, it was often nationalities who had been expelled or deported (as with the Germans above) or who had temporarily fled (as many Romanians did from northern Transylvania after 1940). Thus it is as nationalities that they contest the redistribution of lands being proposed. If property had remained collective, this source of ethnic conflict would not arise; hence, we are looking at conflicts whose cause is clearly postsocialist. That they are heated owes much to the uncertain future of local economies, in which the prospects for unemployment make access to land the last guarantee of survival.

Other aspects of the transition have similar consequences for somewhat different reasons. Arutiunov has described, for example, the struggle between groups in Abkhazia, where Abkhazians (who form a minority) were struggling to achieve a legislative and particularly a judicial majority. There, as in all formerly socialist societies constructing new constitutions and new supposedly independent judiciaries, it became a matter of great moment *which* nationality would control the judicial apparatus. This was not simply to enable corruption of the judiciary (though that may be part of it); it was to guarantee that judges would acknowledge the importance of the customary law that still regulates behavior – far more than does constitutional law – throughout the area. Arutiunov gives the example of a man who killed his brother-in-law for an insult to his honor; the local chief of police acknowledged the justice of the killing, and even though he knew it “should” be punished according to formal law, he delayed doing so. Without such a flexible judiciary, Abkhazians would find themselves at the mercy of other groups' notions of justice, a fate they dearly hope to avoid. Analogous situations may well obtain in other parts of the former Soviet bloc, wherever the formation of new political entities has produced a new judicial apparatus, which groups with conflicting stakes in judicial outcomes can struggle to control.

Even more significant are the new constitutions and citizenship laws that have been developed, both for existing states and for the states newly created from the former federations (Croatia, Slovenia, Estonia, Slovakia, etc.). In nearly every case, the premise of these constitutions is that state sovereignty resides in a majority ethnation, not in individual citizens. Robert Hayden has pointed to the problems attendant upon these practices in his article on constitutional nationalism. A good example is the temporary citizenship rulings in Estonia that barred more than a third of the population from participating in the 1992 elections. Even in the preexisting states constitution writing has been inflammatory, as ethnonational groups strove to create conditions favorable to them in the new constitutional order. The drafting of the Romanian constitution, for example, provided just such a conflict-ridden moment

between Romanians and the Hungarian minority. As for why “citizenly” rights are defined in ethnic terms, I would invoke both the preformed ethnic identities of earlier nation building and the constitutional reification of nationality in the socialist period, under circumstances that obstructed the formation of “civic” or other countervailing identifications.

Further sources of intergroup conflict emerge from the electoral process and the groups that come into competition in it. In Romania, these include some extreme nationalist organizations, such as the “Romanian Hearth” (*Vatra Românească*), its associated political Party of Romanian National Unity (PUNR), and the “Greater Romania” Party (PRM). These groups have not hesitated to use xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Gypsy, and anti-Hungarian rhetoric, inflaming public opinion against other nationalities. They have also adopted the time-honored language of opposition to Europe, used since the mid-nineteenth century all over the region to resist both penetration by Western capital and the dislocating introduction of Western political forms. In its 1990s form, this discourse inveighs against the “return to Europe” proposed by those favoring market reform, privatization, and democracy. Together the parties named here won just under 12 percent of the seats in the Romanian parliament in the September 1992 elections, but this under-states their influence, since they formed the most important bloc of swing votes and their natural political allies have been the parties of former Communist apparatchiks.

Who are these nationalists, socially speaking? Many in Romania’s political opposition are convinced that they are the former old guard – above all, ex-Communist Party politicians and members of the Secret Police (sometimes collectively known in Romania as the “Red Right” plus “Green Left,” or more concisely as the “National-Communists”). Extreme nationalism joins with the moderate nationalism of some in Romania’s governing party, the FDSN (later PDSR), the chief party of former Communist bureaucrats. Romanian president Ion Iliescu, for instance, celebrated Romania’s national holiday in 1991 by sharing a toast with extreme nationalist stalwarts, all of them apparatchiks of yore.

The equation “nationalism equals Securitate plus Communists” appears often in various newspapers of the Romanian opposition. These argue that the former Securitate and its successor organization are sowing discord among Romania’s national groups, blaming Gypsies, Jews, and Hungarians for all the country’s woes instead of acknowledging that Party rule itself, in which they so signally collaborated, is responsible for present problems. They see the Securitate and former Party elite as seeking to undercut democratic processes by convincing the public that opposition means anarchy. The opposition also charges these old-regime groups with fanning popular anxiety by spreading rumors of a possible revision of the borders, which would return part of Transylvania to Hungary. Anti-European and nationalist rhetoric has been associated with the old elite elsewhere as well, such as in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

That the opposition interprets things in this way is partly, of course, in the nature of its political struggle. Because the Romanian public generally reviles the name of Communism (though not necessarily everything one might associate with its platform), opposition leaders can capitalize on this by labeling their opponents “Communists” and “Securitate.” Any group who charges that the governing party or its nationalist allies are disguised Securitate and crypto-Communists thereby undermines those others’ legitimate claim to power, while presenting itself as the true defender of an anti-Communist national interest. In other words, these charges and countercharges are part of the larger process of reconstituting political legitimacies, of seeking to construct moral authority for one’s own party and undermine that of others.

This said, however, it is likely that the equation of nationalists with members of Romania’s old regime has some truth. It is supported first of all by the reaction of both nationalists and the ruling party to the Soviet putsch in August 1991: they spoke up in favor of it, as one would expect of persons whose fates were tied to the centralized, repression-based system the Soviet putsch leaders represented and were trying to reinstall. And who else but the old elite would argue, as the Romanian Hearth has, for returning the confiscated funds and patrimony of the former Communist Party and for renationalizing industries now being spun off from state control?

Public opinion largely prevented these groups from arguing their case by defending the Communist Party itself. Moreover, although the language of marketization and reform is used by all, the political opposition has monopolized it, leaving old apparatchiks few rhetorical alternatives but the time-honored “defense of the nation.” The electoral process has given this rhetorical form certain advantages, too, particularly in zones with large percentages of Hungarians. In such areas, the degree of fragmentation among Romania’s political parties (144 competed in the September 1992 elections) means that ethnically Romanian politicians risk losing elections to Hungarian candidates, for nearly all Hungarians vote with a single Hungarian party. Gerald Creed has made a similar argument for Turkish areas in Bulgaria. Following the changes of 1989, in both Romania and Bulgaria the largest national minorities (Hungarians and Turks, respectively) each formed a political party and voted for it in a compact bloc; a Romanian or Bulgarian politician living in those regions would stand a chance of winning only if he could persuade all voters of his own nationality that their group is under terrible threat from the other group. The extreme nationalist Romanian Hearth organization originated in just such a region, and the pattern of election of nationalist-party Romanian mayors has conformed closely to this picture.

If such elites find cause for worry in democratization, some – especially those in the less developed countries and regions – also find it in market reforms. There may be a connection between nationalism and the former Party apparatus wherever relative economic backwardness obstructs the possibilities for enrichment through

the market. Former members of the apparatus in such regions – that is, in Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and the less developed parts of the former Soviet Union – have rather poor prospects for transforming themselves into the new propertied class of “entrepratchiks,” as is happening in the more developed Baltic states, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. Even in those latter regions, however, some former apparatchiks who are losing ground to others more “enterprising” than themselves may defend their turf nationalistically. In all these cases, the opposition to market reforms appears as a defense of national values.

It is easy to see why the former elite might be nationalists, genuinely resenting “Europe” and Europeanizing reforms. Although members of the Secret Police and other Communist apparatchiks remained particularly strong in Romania, where the structures and personnel of the Ceaușescu regime were minimally displaced, they also exist, weakened to varying degrees, in all postsocialist countries. Many of them do not see a ready place for themselves in a democratic, market-based society. Among the allies of these old political elites are some intellectuals whom change also injures – writers, poets, artists, and historians accustomed to the socialist regime’s support of culture. Unlike the technical intelligentsia, many of these intellectuals find themselves sinking in a market economy. They have every reason to oppose market reforms and to be genuinely concerned for the market’s deleterious effects on the quality of the nation’s cultural values. Such intellectuals and members of the former ruling apparatus, in often-fortuitous alliance, have been especially powerful opponents of “democracy” and the market – and especially effective proponents of nationalism – because they have long experience with disseminating their ideas and disrupting the ideas of others. When they oppose reform in the name of national values, they have an immense potential audience: all those ordinary people whom markets and privatization injure, such as the many workers in Romania (and the other countries of the region) who have lost their jobs in a transforming economy.

The association between nationalism and those variously privileged under socialism does not hold for every country, or even for all of anyone country. Macedonian leader Gligorov is both a nationalist and a former Communist; in Hungary the nationalist leaders were not Communists; and while old Communists were the most active advocates of Slovak independence, in the Czech regions the association is weaker. Which groups use national rhetoric for political advantage depends partly on what alternatives other groups have already appropriated. Not all nationalists are former Communists, nor all ex-Communists nationalists. My remarks are intended to point to one group that in some places makes use of the electoral process to retain power by tactical use of a national rhetoric, offering to others who find contemporary changes bewildering and painful a way of thinking about their plight. To see nationalism here as resulting from ancient hatreds is clearly inadequate.

National Identity and Socialism’s Divided Self

All my arguments so far are inadequate, however, to explain why the ideas such groups use – to considerable effect – are national ideas rather than any others. I will explore two possible answers: similarities between national ideology and certain policies of the Communist Party, and ways in which “anti-Communism” became an identity that feeds national identities. Throughout the region, Communist Parties pursued policies designed to narrow both the gaps between and the sources of antagonism among social groups and to create social homogeneity. These policies included things like measures to decrease income inequalities and gender-based discrimination, and efforts to assimilate groups such as the Gypsies. They aimed to minimize the differentiation of social interests and to make everyone equally dependent on state handouts. The regimes presented this as a moral imperative, making morality (rather than political interest) the basis of political community. By homogenizing the social field, the Party could justifiably claim to represent and serve the interests of society as a whole, a collective subject from which it had ostensibly effaced meaningful differences. (Note the contrast with classic liberal democracy, in which parties generally claim to represent the interests of specific groups.) Such homogenizations were in the service of neither an ethnic nor a citizen “nation” but of a socialist nation that, as I argued in chapter 3, was a kind of extended family. The party-state reinforced its claim to speak for society-as-a-whole by purging the landscape of other organizations that might independently articulate specific interests or grievances.

Claude Lefort calls the result “the representation of the People-as-One,” built on a denial that society consists of divisions. In consequence of such policies, he says, “In the so-called socialist world, there can be no other division than that between the people and its enemies.” Communist Parties constructed their identity by defining and setting themselves off from an enemy: class enemies, the enemy in the bourgeois West, enemies at the border (such as Nazism), and the enemies within, the dissidents. They created a dichotomized universe, dividing the world into the Good and the Bad, Communism and Capitalism, proletarians and kulaks, Party members and those who resisted the Party’s dictates. Their emphasis on the People-as-One, combined with the insistence on the moral basis of political community, facilitated establishing the community’s boundaries by expelling its enemies. In consequence, dissidents and kulaks were exiled, sent to labor camps, or interned in mental hospitals, so as to maintain a clean, uncontaminated, morally pure community.

A public that found itself ill-served by Party rule took up this same dichotomizing, but in reverse: opposition and resistance were good, and the regime was bad. The grounds for community remained, however, moral (in this case, opposing the regime), and the universe remained black and white, but with opposite values from those of the Party. The political opposition, too, saw itself as representing the collective subject “society as a whole,” whose unified interest the Party had betrayed.

Organizations like Solidarity and the Czech Civic Forum brought this attitude across into the post-socialist era.

I have tried to make clear how kindred are the central elements of socialist rule, particularly the emphasis on the interests of the whole, with nationalism. They share both a fundamental essentialism (identities are fixed, unchanging) and a totalizing impulse. As Jan Urban puts it, “Nationalism is a totalitarian ideology.” In its most extreme forms, it too rests on a moral community defined by sameness rather than by difference: others who are “like us.” Many East Europeans are used to thinking in terms of secure moral dichotomies between black and white, good and evil. For those who also understand democracy not as institutionalized disagreement and compromise but as consensus – and they are many – a powerful longing for a morally pure unity can easily solidify around the idea of the nation and the expulsion of polluting aliens: those who are not of the “People-as-One.” This is the easier because socialist homogenization left a relatively undifferentiated social field that nationalists can claim to represent on behalf of the nation as a whole. But the *meaning* of “nation” has shifted: it has become ethnic.

Let me sharpen this point further by recalling that the result of people’s gradual alienation from and moral repudiation of Party rule was the opening up, in each country, of a yawning chasm between “us” and “them.” “They” were always doing something nasty to “us”; “we” suffered hardship while “they” wallowed in privileges and luxury goods and built fancy houses. Even though the categories “we” and “they” might be elastic, their occupants changing from one situation to another, this elasticity does not weaken the basic split – us and them. In socialist countries the split was pervasive: between public and private, official and unofficial, “first” and “second.”

The pervasive us/them split precluded legitimation, but it also did far more: it formed people’s very identities. Anthropologists who study the concepts of “person,” “self,” and “identity” generally note some sort of fit between these and the social environment. All regimes enter in some way into persons, constituting identities; in socialism these were split. Countless East Europeans have described the “social schizophrenia” or “duplicity” that became their way of life: you developed a public self that could sit at interminable meetings and read aloud the most arrant inanities (even while covertly signaling distance from these inanities as you read), and then at home or among close friends you revealed your “real” self – a self that was, of course, relentlessly critical of what “they” were doing. Like the second economy, which worked only in parasitic relation to the first, this “real” self was meaningful and coherent only in relation to the public or official self. In other words, people’s sense of identity and personhood was not independent but required the “enemy” Party, the “them,” to complete it. Bipolarity, in short, became constitutive of the social person.

The end of Party rule, however, produced a crisis in this self-conception: the “them” against which so many had delineated their “selves” had vanished. Senses of self had been built up and perpetuated for decades with the certainty that the enemy

was the Communists; now they were gone. As a group of East European social scientists visiting Washington in the fall of 1991 told their host, “We had to find a *new* enemy.” That enemy, I suggest, became “the *other* others” – other nationalities, who existed in greater or smaller numbers in every one of these states. As anthropologists have known since the path-breaking work of Fredrik Barth, the essence of ethnic identities is a dichotomization into “us” and “them,” through a process analogous to moral dichotomization in socialism: both produce identities based in an attribution of difference that yields opposed status groups. Easing the shift from the oppositional identities of Communism to those of ethnicity was the fact that many East Europeans were already seeing the Communists not just as “them” but as aliens, opposed to the whole (ethno)nation. Their alienness was posited both by linking them with Russians and Jews (Jews having been overrepresented in the early Communist movements) and in other ways. For example, well before Romanian dictator Ceaușescu’s overthrow but even more so after it, rumors circulated that Ceaușescu was “not really Romanian” but Tatar, Turkish, Armenian, or even Gypsy, and during the 1980s I heard many Romanians claim that the Securitate were a *different race of people*, physically recognizable as such. This image of an alien Party, parasitic upon the nation and now deservedly expelled from it, feeds readily into a search for other enemies of the nation to expel.

What ends does this hypothesis serve, when so many other things, including the pre-Communist history of national conflicts, already account for nationalism? First, historical enmities must be reproduced into the present: their continuity cannot be simply presupposed. Second, part of what makes nationality so powerful is that it exists not just at the level of political rhetoric, interest groups, and constitutionalism but as a basic element of people’s self-conception. Scholars should therefore not stop at macrolevel explorations but also explore the sources of national sentiment in individual identities (as I sought to do in chapter 3). My experience in Romania convinces me that among that regime’s most notable consequences for personal identity was the dichotomizing of self against other. And third, something beyond concrete intergroup antagonisms is required if one is to account for how there can be hatred of groups like Jews and Gypsies in countries where they are almost nonexistent. Other causes must be at work. I suggest that one of these causes is that people’s identities are still being defined, as before, in strict relation to unacceptable others whom one excludes from one’s moral community.

In making this suggestion, I hope to serve the broader goal of understanding how ethnic sentiment becomes entangled with other kinds of subjectivity. Anthropological common wisdom would suggest that Romanians should not have precisely the same personality configurations or “stable individual identities” as North Americans. In other words, Romanians and others formed within socialist political economies were constituted as subjects in ways rather different from people in other kinds of social worlds. To my knowledge, however, no one has offered a convincing analysis of what we might see as a distinctive “socialist identity structure.” The result may well *not* be

“an identity,” and it may not be normatively assumed to be stable, as *our* “identities” are supposed to be. Self-actualization in socialist Romania seems to me, rather, to have been much more situationally determined than North Americans find acceptable, such that people could say one thing in one context and another in another context and not be judged deceitful or forgetful or mad. Within this kind of contextually determined “self,” I believe, there is a fundamental reflex toward microexperiences of solidarity and opposition: of “myself as part of a larger entity, “us,” collectively defined against “them.” The ubiquitous (and now sadly absent) jokes of the socialist period are a superb example of this: little oppositional moments, enacted repeatedly in daily rituals of sociality, whose humor lay precisely in the sociality and the expressed opposition to “them.” And I have been arguing that the categorical distinction among different *kinds* of “them” is very labile, moving readily from “Communist” aliens to “ethnic” ones.

A slightly different angle on this same problem – of the subjectivities in which ethnic dichotomization may be embedded – is manifest in a particular feature of the way national historiography constructed national selves, in Romania and other East European countries. All across the region, local historiographies represented the nation as an innocent victim, victimized nearly always by other nations rather than by its own members (never mind that co-nationals often did do the victimizing – to wit, the Ceaușescus). Poland appears time and again in Polish historical works as the “Christ of nations,” whom the nations around it unjustly crucified, carving it up for over a century; generations of Czechs have been raised with the image of their nation as martyr. Hungary’s and Romania’s historians have presented their nations as suffering for the salvation of Western civilization, sacrificed on an Ottoman altar so the glory of Western Christendom might endure. Hungarians also view themselves as having been constantly thwarted by others – Habsburgs, Russians, and so on – from achieving their God-given mission to become a great civilizing power. Bulgarian and Romanian historians see their people’s “darkest” period in the time of direct Turkish rule, claiming that the Turks did everything possible to ruin the nation’s economy and culture. Famous Romanian émigré Mircea Eliade wrote in 1953, “Few peoples can claim that they had so much ill fortune in history as the Romanian people.” (An impious Romanian writer calls this “the lacrimogenesis of the Romanian people.”) In every East European country, most people saw the Communist regime as the imposition of a foreign power, the Soviet Union. For those who suffered under Party rule, this was merely the latest in a long series of victimizations by other nations.

Given many people’s frustrated and discouraging lives over the past forty years, how natural it is to explain their victimization in national terms. How automatic a reflex it is to accuse the Gypsies of getting rich “without working,” when one seems unable to make ends meet despite all one’s efforts, or the Jews for having “brought Communism in the first place” and for the ongoing financial machinations that (many Romanians believe) thwart economic recovery. The contrast between the anarchy of Romania’s political scene and the apparent discipline and militancy of the

political party of the Hungarians makes it easy for Romanians to believe in a Hungarian plot to recover Transylvania with another mutilation of Romania, as happened in 1940. The postrevolutionary vogue for prison memoirs, exposing in excruciating detail people’s suffering under the (as they see it) Russian-Jewish Communist Party, contributes further to this sense of a history of national victims.

I believe this experience of a self as both national and victim – of a self that has been victimized by history just as one’s nation has been – disposes many Romanians to accept nationalist demagoguery: “Oh, wretched Romanians, your troubles have always come from the scheming of aliens in your midst. Expel them and all will be well.” No matter which social groups make use of this rhetoric, it takes root because of the way the national and self identity of many Romanians emphasizes unjust suffering, in a present in which suffering remains deeply real – and still unjust. The historiographical construction of national selves dovetailed nicely, then, with the practices and experiences of socialism, which tended to “other” (as class enemies, as saboteurs, as traitors) those seen as responsible for social problems.

Here, I believe, are the seeds of people’s receptivity to an anti-Western, antimodernist, antinationalist political discourse that blames other national groups for whatever is going wrong. Thus I see “scapegoating” explanations of ethnic conflict as too simplistic. More precisely, socialism produced a characteristic organization of the self – one characterized by an internalized opposition to external “aliens,” seen as “them”; it also produced specific conditions from which scapegoating emerged as an effective political tactic, one that uses stereotypes of other nationalities as means to explain social problems.

Ethnic Symbolism

I will now explore a related issue: what the symbolism behind ethnic stereotypes reveals about those who employ them. My examples are Romanians’ use of stereotypes of Gypsies and Jews and of the “Hungarian problem” in Romania’s current political context. I will suggest that images of these groups have become important symbols for discussing particular kinds of social dislocation attendant on the exit from socialism.

The principal group singled out as a symbol of dislocation all across the region is the Gypsies; actual or “merely” verbal Gypsy-bashing is prevalent even in Poland, where Gypsies are few in number. No matter: public sentiment is whipped up against them nonetheless, along with other groups merged with them in people’s minds (in Poland, Romanians; in Hungary, Arabs; and so on). The forms of the stereotypes suggest that the problem is not Gypsies per se but markets and the dislocations of economic reform, which Gypsies are made to symbolize.

Gypsy-bashing begins in their somewhat greater visibility in the flourishing petty commerce that has accompanied market reforms (paralleling the trade practiced by nomadic Gypsies, under socialism), although they are far from the only ones engaged in it. In Romania, this traffic is called *bîșniță* (from “business”); it involves goods that

are produced by the seller, and also goods acquired illicitly from warehouses that usually supply state stores. In either case the prices charged can be quite high. Numerous Romanians, from the most refined intellectual on through unskilled laborers, account for the problems they face as caused by *bizniță* and the Gypsies who supposedly monopolize it. Almost any conversation in Romania, in cities as well as in villages, can turn into an impassioned attack on Gypsies: it is said that they steal goods from warehouses, or bribe the person in charge, walk off with whole months' production, and either sell things on the street at a frightful markup (eating into salaries already weakened by rampant inflation) or cart them off to Hungary and Yugoslavia, so that when the innocent buyer goes to the store for something there is nothing to be found.

Many Romanians criticize Gypsies not only for their putative monopoly of trade but also for theft and laziness, long-standing stereotypes now mobilized more insistently than ever. Under socialism, of course, no one worked hard, and everyone stole. Now, however, inflation increasingly drives people to hold two or even three jobs and thus to be enraged at "lazy" Gypsies, who must be living by "theft" since many appear to have no other work; and many Romanians also see as a form of theft the profits gained from trade. Theft, I believe, is a potent notion in Romania and across the whole region, in part because inflation and the dizzying rate of change have left people acutely conscious of a hole in their pockets. The "real" reasons have to do with government pricing and taxation policies, the uneven and disorienting effects of the market, IMF-imposed austerities, joblessness from closing inefficient firms, privatization, reduced subsidies, and a host of other things. To see all this as a problem of "theft" is a helpful simplification. It is solidly rooted in the ideas of the socialist period: the productionist view that trade is bad and work is good (i.e., exchange is inferior to production), that it generates inequality, that it is illegal because it is "like" the black market, that Gypsies aggravate shortage, and that for all these reasons they are criminals deserving punishment. As market reforms exaggerate all these problems of socialism, anger focuses on Gypsies, who have become their symbol.

The same symbolization of Gypsies appears in every East European country. But more is at stake than "representation." How seriously should we take the attitudes people express toward Gypsies? In a taxi ride in Bucharest during the summer of 1991 my driver mentioned a Gypsy neighborhood that had been recently attacked and burned; to my expression of alarm at this, he replied calmly, "There's only one solution to the Gypsy problem: mass extermination." Another friend said on another occasion, "Hitler had the right idea about Gypsies." Yet other friends to whom I reported these exchanges told me I was taking them too literally – told me, in effect, that I was inappropriately assuming a one-to-one relation between language and its behavioral referent, between signifier and signified. Are the comments I have quoted just "verbal inflation," then, a sign of the desperation and lack of control people are experiencing but not a cause for alarm? Gypsy areas in several villages and towns in

Romania, Poland, and other East European countries have been attacked, the houses burned and the inhabitants beaten or killed. After the residents of a certain Romanian village drove out its Gypsy members, a man offered the justification that they had "expelled not Gypsies but thieves." Is this a passing moment of intolerance, or the beginning of pogroms? We do not really know. We know only that these attitudes indicate significant resistance toward the effects of market reforms, for which Gypsies are getting the blame.

Similar questions can be asked and similar points made about anti-Semitism, except that the stereotypes are different. In Hungary, Poland, Russia, the Czech and Slovak Republics, and Romania, anti-Semitic talk has raised much concern – even in countries like Poland where there are almost no members of that group. How can there be anti-Semitism without Jews? They seem everywhere to symbolize two things: socialism and cosmopolitan Westernism. The association with socialism stems from the fact that in many East European countries, the Communist Party initially had disproportionate numbers of Jews among its members and its leaders. Thus people who are angry at socialism for their wrecked lives see Jews as responsible for the whole disastrous experiment (never mind that Poles, Czechs, or Romanians were also in charge). But long before Party rule, Jews in this region were also seen as cosmopolitan, urban, and Westernized. Whenever Western influence has brought trouble, Jews have become its symbol. Whereas intolerance of Gypsies suggests problems related specifically to the market, anti-Semitism suggests a broader hostility to things of "the West," including democracy and private property, as well as markets; and it embraces themes of concern to a broad array of groups, distressed either at past injustices under socialism or at present dislocations. To say that one dislikes Jews is easier and less revealing than to say one dislikes democracy or international lending institutions. One can make this statement employing Jews as a symbol even if there are few actual Jews around.

My last example of how the dislocations of the moment may be symbolized by means of other nationalities concerns the way Romania's nationalists foment anti-Hungarian sentiment, employing the language of "purification," of expelling "enemies," and of the "People-as-One." Here is an example:

Romanians, Hungarian fascism is attacking us openly. . . . *In twenty-four hours we must ban by law all anti-Romanian groupings: the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania and Soros Foundation, as well as their stooges, the Civic Alliance Party, Group for Social Dialogue, Literary Romania, Democratic Convention! Romanians, don't be afraid of the wild beast of Hungarian revisionism; we have put its nose out of joint a few times already, and now we'll crush it decisively and without pity! They want autonomy? Expel them!*

In many of their writings they invoke the problem of Transylvania, playing upon the collective trauma Romanians experienced when the northern part of that region was briefly returned to Hungary, between 1940 and 1944. Although the majority of the population is Romanian, many Romanians fear that Hungary wants to repossess the

territory; nationalists exploit this fear. Their language continually emphasizes not just these aliens' defilement of sacred Romanian soil but the image of Romania's territorial dismemberment. A book written to warn Romanians of the impending danger, for example, shows on its cover a map of Romania being menaced from the north-west by a giant set of teeth, about to take a huge bite out of the country's pleasingly rounded shape.

Although in electoral terms nationalist groups polled "only" 12 percent of the vote in the September 1992 elections, my conversations over three summers suggest that many Romanians, especially those in Transylvania, found their rhetoric compelling. This is partly from real, recollected experiences of 1940-44 but also, I believe, from what as a result of those events "Hungary" has come to symbolize. In the post-1989 context – one in which many feel utterly confused, in which a bewildering party politics collides with a thirst for consensus, in which intolerance of opposing views strains long-standing friendships and even marriages, and in which inflation causes new rounds of panic every week – Hungarians and Hungary have come to represent the loss of a feeling of wholeness. The "Hungarian problem" symbolizes the fragmentation, the feeling of flying apart, of chaos and loss of control, that accompanies the collapse of the only thing that held Romanians together: Party rule and their opposition to it. An abstract feeling of social fragmentation gains a concrete object when the Hungarian party demands group autonomy, when Hungary's Prime Minister Antall pronounces himself leader of "all the world's Hungarians," and when conferences in Hungary raise the question of repossessing northern Transylvania: in other words, when Romanian national sentiments collide with the nationalism of Hungarians. If attitudes toward Gypsies express anxiety at the ravages of the market and economic reform, then, anti-Hungarianism consolidates self and wholeness against the newly deepened fragmentation of social life, which is both a legacy of socialism and a product of the transition itself.

Conclusion

I have proposed a number of factors contributing to the salience of national sentiment in Romania. They include tactical resort to national ideas and symbols, often by people formerly privileged under socialism and eager to retain that privilege; competition over newly privatized land or over the newly decentralized institutions of new political entities; and a broad societal receptivity to "national" explanations, owing to affinities between the "self" of socialism and a psychic economy in which other national groups become symbols, used for explanation and blame. By emphasizing so many sources of nationalism and national sentiment in Romania and in the rest of the region as well, I have meant to argue that these phenomena are heavily overdetermined. There are no parsimonious explanations for them: Occam's Razor here sacrifices understanding instead of yielding it. Their determinants lie equally in the historical and structural situations of groups in the polity, in calculations of advantage and the rhetorics that promote them, in social constructions

of "self" and "person," and in people's representations of their life circumstances in which images of other social groups serve as primary symbols.

Such multiple determination should not be a surprise, for "nation" as a construct stands at the root of the central political subjectivity of modern times: that which inserts people into "nation-states." Building nation-states has entailed processes of internal homogenization and differentiation – homogenizing the population that is subject to a single sovereignty and differentiating it from those of other sovereignties. It has also entailed creating loyalties and identifications suited to the early-modern state's penchant for war; this was achieved by entering directly into social persons and forming identities that linked them unambiguously with "their" encompassing polity. The cultural construct that has accomplished these tasks in modern times has been "nation." It is an idea with a venerable lineage, owing to its root meaning of "birth" – a notion crucial to making the arbitrary constructs of the social order appear natural.

In its march across the globe, however, "nation" has been wrongly thought to mean a single thing, whereas its meanings have in fact been several. Upgraded from its medieval meaning of "feudal estate," it took on the meaning of "citizen"; with this, it became the foundational concept of modern state sovereignties in the Western world. This concept did not make equal sense everywhere, however: in some places, great masses of people lacked citizenship and its concomitant sovereignty, and in others (such as "Germany") political fragmentation produced sovereign entities that were laughably small. The ideas through which such situations would be reversed were those of Herder, who argued that it was not a unified political will that made true nations but "shared" history, language, culture, and sentiment. This, said Herder, should constitute a "nation": a community of birth, a "natural" entity, rather than the artificial constructs (states) made by conquest and political calculus. Herder's ethnic concept of nation migrated from "Germany" into the national movements of peoples throughout Eastern Europe (as well as elsewhere in the world), becoming the principal idiom of politics there.

Given this history, then, my argument cannot be that socialism *caused* present sentiments and conflicts, only that it perpetuated and intensified national feeling, whereas a different outcome was also possible. Just as the meaning of nation has shifted historically, it might also have shifted under the impress of socialism. I have proposed here that this is precisely what did not happen. The Communist Party's manner of entry into Eastern Europe and its mode of operation had much to do with this outcome; they fed the anti-imperial sentiments of satellite nations, politically reified national identities in the mistaken belief that these were mere epiphenomena of class difference, bred widespread resistance to Party rule, eliminated organizational forms (besides the Party) that might have shaped other identities, and institutionalized competition for which ethnic difference was a handy resource. Thus Party rule enhanced the salience of the national idea. In Romania in particular, I have suggested elsewhere, the encounters between the national idea and a monolithic socialism resulted, through a complementary schismogenesis, in a more monolithic

nationalism. Instead of nudging national sentiments in a new direction, then, socialism strengthened them in ways that were not readily apparent until the changed political circumstances of the “transition” gave them new space.

One might object that by excluding similar national phenomena in the nonsocialist world, such as Sri Lanka (or even an increasingly xenophobic Western Europe), my account is weakened. This objection assumes that just because something we call “nationalism” occurs in many places, it is the same phenomenon in all of them – that similarity of form implies similarity of both content and cause. I disagree. Social scientists too often lump together “nationalisms” that are quite different, seeking a single explanation where very diverse forces are at work. That the world community is organized so as to produce nation-states and therefore nations (though this may now be changing) does not mean those nations have everywhere the same lineage. To the contrary: it is their particularities that deserve exploration, lest we misconstrue their origins and significance. Nation is first of all a political symbol. As such, its meanings are as varied as its multiple histories and as numerous as the social-structural positions from which it can be both utilized and read.

There is no better illustration of this truth than the fateful consequences of Woodrow Wilson’s failure to recognize it. By seeing “nation” as having a single, universal sense and by promoting “national self-determination” as the route to a peaceful world order, Wilson (in the words of Eugene Hammel) “legitimized the ethnic nation-state and confused its creation with democracy.” The persistence of such simplistic views perpetuates the confusion. It will not do to overlook the presence of nationalism in Eastern Europe’s new polities on the assumption that any political movement opposed to Communism is thereby “democratic,” or to abdicate thoughtful policy in the belief that national conflicts erupt from some atavistic, primordial urge no one can influence. As I have argued here, socialism and its aftermath have influenced them mightily, in ways we should continue to explore.

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