Connections

On Nations and Nationalities

Lord Acton, the nineteenth-century historian and philosopher, wrote of nationalism and socialism as forces which can impede despotism. In his essay on nationalism, however, he warns that these forces present their own dangers. "Whenever a single definite object is made the Supreme end of the State, be it the advantage of class, the safety or power of a country, the greatest happiness of the greatest number or the support of any speculative idea, the State becomes for the time inevitably absolute. Theories of this kind are just inasmuch as they are provoked by the definite ascertained evils and undertake their removal. They cannot as a basis for the reconstruction of civil society as medicine cannot serve as food; but they may influence it with advantage because they point out the direction, though not the measure, in which reform is needed." He goes on to criticize the liberals of his time for advocating national unity as an ideal form. "Harmony and not unity" must be the mode of organization of the State to preserve liberty and avoid despotism. "The coexistence of several nations under the same State is a test as well as the best security of its freedom. It is also one of the chief instruments of civilization; and as such, it is the natural and providential order."

In the period of more than a century since these words were written socialism and nationalism have been important political forces. Lord Acton's warnings seem well-founded.

Five years after Czechoslovakia another experiment in giving socialism a humanistic face has ended in repression and terror. This time there were no foreign tanks crashing across borders. The late President Allende's efforts to redistribute wealth while preserving personal and political liberties came to an end when the military removed itself from the political processes it was supposed to defend. In the wake of Watergate the paranoia of the Left and the wishful thinking of the Right concerning American intervention are not implausible. What does seem clear is that the support the U.S. Government has been wont to give to right-wing regimes that were not popularly elected would have gone far toward stabilizing the economy of Allende's Chile. In not showing greater friendliness, the American government has allowed an interesting model of development of a Third World nation to fall. Inaction too has moral violence.

Back at home, a full-blown debate has taken place in Congress over favorable trade agreements with one of Chile's predecessors on the road to socialism, a country which long ago forgot Lord Acton's warnings about the dangers of "single definite objects." Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, by placing their bodies on the line have reminded us who our trading partners will be. Mr. Brezhnev, in supporting trade with no strings attached, says that the bases of peace are the "principles of sovereignty and non-interference." This corresponds with recent editorial positions of the Wall Street Journal in dissociating trade from efforts to influence domestic policies of the Soviet Union. Sakharov's statements about what the Soviet Union may do, once relieved of its current economic crisis, ascribes responsibilities to the United States if it interferes economically without interfering politically—extracting some commitment to liberalization. Trade is a form of interference, the consequences of which must be examined. And as Martin and Dina Spechler remind us in their article on Soviet-American trade in this issue, the domestic economic benefit of expanded trade with the Soviets is far from a settled issue.

We are no longer surprised to hear of disgruntled national groups in the Soviet Union, in spite of the provisions of the Soviet Constitution which legislate the pluralism Lord Acton advocated. And it's not class conflict. Neither can the continuation of sixteenth-century wars taking place in the streets of Belfast be readily reduced to class conflict, as Richard Neuhau's points out. Language, history, religion, culture—the sentimental ties that join people together and separate them from others—cannot be seen merely as epiphenomenal.

The situation to the south of the British Isles seems a bit more hopeful for the cause of international cooperation with the development of new economic conditions. But even here the Basques have already made their cause known, the Southern Tyrol remains unredeemed, and who knows what a bunch of Lichtensteinian hotheads might some day do.

It is against this background of the assertiveness of nationalities that any prospects for settlement of the Palestinian problem must be viewed. The Israelis should know from their own history that raising the standard of living of the Palestinians in Israel and Israeli-controlled territory will not serve the problems posed by Palestinian nationalism. Deprivation of political rights and cultural autonomy will only provide the seeds of new conflict. Similarly, programs proposed for Arab-Jewish reconciliation in a binational state that would eventually limit cultural and political expressions of Jewish nationalism cannot succeed. Here the warnings of Lord Acton about the dangers of nationalities which are coterminous with the States are applicable to the limited sense of toleration for minority groups. Culture is an ambiguous code; vital nationalities do not lack internal diversity. The nation-state can be sufficiently diverse along other lines of human division to preserve individual freedom. The diverse life experiences of Mr. Dalah and Mr. Turki as examples of modal Palestinian experiences could stimulate a vibrant culture in a sovereign Palestinian state. The links between politics and culture cannot be overlooked. Where they are, the outcome is a Soviet-style multinationalism where Russification is the order of the day and where only the most debilitated national groups have their cultures paraded about for their quaintness.

At a time when international cooperation based on the most pragmatic considerations is fashionable, inner seams of certain nation-states are weakening. The optimal units of organization for economic and technological developments may not be optimal in fulfilling other human needs. The upsurge in national and ethnic expressions in some unexpected places may be part of the effort to adjust social units to manageable sizes. The nation-state must adjust to the redistribution of power necessitated by economics as well as nationality.

News of the new outbreak of war between Arabs and Jews came just as this issue of Worldview went to press.