Nationalism and the Crisis of Political Modernism: Diversity and Democracy

According to Tony Smith in his study of ethnic politics and US foreign policy, Foreign Attachments, one of the great subjects of global history over the last two hundred years is the rise of mass participation in the political process. The American and French Revolutions were the first expressions of this and their success gave rise to a host of imitators promoting an ethnic consciousness that calls for the existence of a state on a designated territory to give sovereign political form to the collective life of an ethnically described people. This consciousness is what we call nationalism and its passions brought about Latin American independence from Spain and Portugal, the “springtime of nations” associated with a crisis of German and Austro-Hungarian imperial orders in 1848, the unification movements in Italy, Japan, Turkey, Russia, and China in reaction to the onslaught of the Western world, and the birth of Zionism. In the twentieth century---the “people’s century”---nationalism spurred on both world wars, the Arab Awakening, the decolonization of European empires in Africa and Asia, the Mexican, Chinese, Cuban, and Iranian revolutions, and the collapse of the Soviet empire and the Soviet Union itself.

These nationalist demands of the past 225 years engendered what can be called with no exaggeration “a crisis of modernism,” for they spelled nothing less than the eventual end of the old authoritarian and imperial state. With its appeal for popular sovereignty reflecting an upsurge of mass political participation, nationalism spawned debates over new forms of citizenship---including the place of ethnic minorities---new ways of organizing the state, and new kinds of political legitimacy.

But if nationalism over these years has been a solvent of authoritarianism and imperial political orders, it has been far less good at specifying how the modern state should be constructed and how it should relate to the international community. With this in mind, the task of the twentieth century has been to substitute a new form of relationship between state and society---government and people---that involves governments basing their control of the population on political parties, complete with new symbols and ideologies based on wholly new ideas of civil society and basic human rights for the individual.

Unavoidably then, the twentieth century was destined to be highly charged ideologically. Many variants of modern government capable of responding to nationalist demands were proposed, but only three universal blueprints emerged: liberal democracy, communism, and fascism. In time, these three ideologies came into conflict, each bidding to be the blueprint that would organize the politics of nationalism. Each proposed new institutions of government, new forms of state legitimacy, and new bases for citizenship. All of these processes involved nation building in multiethnic environments, which came to mean very different ways of constructing ideologies of national unity.
Because adherents of these three ideologies could be found in every industrial state, and because these adherents came to dominate the governments of rival major powers, the crisis of modernism----related as it was to issues of ethnicity and nationalism---contributed directly to both world wars, to decolonization and the Cold War.

Yet whatever the important differences among them, neither fascism, communism, nor liberal democracy had a compelling answer as to how to deal with history’s legacy of ethnic privilege or victimization and the deeply felt personal and group antagonisms that the past bequeathed to the present. Fascism’s solution ---the politically enforced superiority of some ethnic groups defined in racial terms, the subordination of others, and the physical elimination of still more---ended in 1945, even if disturbing variants emerge from time to time in different parts of the world. Liberal democracies learned in the struggle against fascism about the evil of ethnic stereotyping and of the need for a just and free political order to recognize the essential dignity of all peoples. Communism triumphant in Russia after 1917 founded itself upon a multiethnic empire whose differences had to be recognized. Lenin’s solution was to promote a degree of local autonomy under the authority of a highly centralized communist party. In the end, the Soviet Union proved unable to maintain its multiethnic empire against powerful nationalist forces within it and this led to the breakup of the country in 1991. The irony is apparent: in discounting ethnicity and nationalism as political forces in favor of class interests as the principal dynamic of history, Soviet rule was undone by its own ideological blindness.

As the only survivor, liberal democracy remains bedeviled by the ethnic question. After a long history of marginalizing some ethnic minorities or viewing ethnicity as a private matter that should not be explicitly politicized, democracies have tried to deal with ethnic differences by allowing these groups to share power through federalist practices (India, Canada) or through consociational arrangements (Switzerland), or through proportional representation (Israel). Where these methods have failed, democracies have even offered to partition themselves, allowing the creation of new states (division of Czechoslovakia). In the US, the civil rights movement eventually resulted in other democratic innovations such as affirmative action and educational reforms designed to enhance ethnic awareness.

All these measures focus on the empowerment of ethnic groups politically in ways that respect their rights yet try to maintain national unity as well. It is an attempt to arrive at a balance between ethnic rights and obligations----between a sense of common citizenship and the right to live out one’s ethnic values.

(After Tony Smith, FOREIGN ATTACHMENTS, Harvard University Press, 2000)