

Nationalism and the mind*

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It goes without saying – and precisely for this reason I’d like to stress – that I regard giving this tenth annual Gellner Lecture before what is undoubtedly the most distinguished forum in the studies of nationalism as a great honor, which gives me an opportunity to pay personal homage to the memory of a great intellectual.

Like my father, Ernest Gellner was born in 1925 in Paris. Like my father, he was born into a Jewish family from an Eastern European, Slavic, country in turmoil (Russia in my father’s case, Bohemia in Gellner’s), and like my father, Gellner returned to grow up in that ancestral country. Both in terms of age and in terms of intellectual background I could be his daughter. Gellner’s 1983 book *Nations and Nationalism* was a departure point for my own work in the field, but, as often happens between generations of parents and children, mine was a radical, rather than a conservative, departure: it was provoked by a profound disagreement, rather than persuasion. This was a disagreement on the most fundamental level, pertaining to the ontology of our shared subject matter. While Gellner, like all the sociological structuralists and philosophical materialists, regarded society and history essentially as a continuation of the biological evolution (though one must stress, Lamarckian rather than Darwinian), I have based my thinking on the empirical generalisation that humanity constitutes a reality *sui generis*, distinguished from the rest of the animal species by the symbolic, therefore not material, instead of genetic, therefore material, transmission of its ways of life across generations. This specificity, which alone makes humanity worthy of a discipline of its own, necessarily translates into the specificity of human society, because human society, in distinction to animal societies, is organised symbolically, rather than materially, and into the specificity of human history, because human history, in distinction to the development of other animal species, is subject to the regularities of cultural, rather than biological evolution. And this, in turn, necessitates that the study of human historical and social processes focus on culture, considering cultural, or symbolic, factors as both *explanans* and *explananda*.

Yet, despite this fundamental disagreement, in some important way, I believe, I follow in Ernest Gellner’s footsteps. I accept his division of the academe into the tribes of ‘relativists’, ‘fundamentalists’ and rationalists of

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skeptical temperament, whom he called ‘Enlightenment Puritans’, and, like he, include myself in the latter group. I fully share his irreverence in regard to institutionalised departmental boundaries ‘of anthropology, area studies, economic history, politics, and social science’, all of which he crossed. This lecture indeed plans to add to this list and break the irrational isolation of several other traditions of study. I also like to think that my work continues the most inspiring trend in his: the attack on empirically unwarranted intellectual orthodoxies. Would he agree – even though the road I have taken leads me farther and farther away from his conclusions? Perhaps. After all, for Ernest Gellner, as one of his obituaries noted, ‘being right . . . often mattered less than throwing out good ideas to be proved wrong’.

It is a pity that I never had the chance to ask Ernest Gellner to draw a pictogram of nationalism. It is remarkable how much a 30-second drawing can reveal of one’s understanding. I do now ask my students to draw such a pictogram in the beginning of the discussion. They invariably draw flags and/or people with guns. When I ask them for a pictogram of nationalism at the end of the discussion, the emblem changes completely: they draw a globe and little unarmed people, who sometimes say things like: ‘Oh, my identity!’ For flags and guns do not even begin to express what is central and most significant about nationalism.

Nationalism, in short, is the modern culture. It is the symbolic blueprint of modern reality, the way we see, and thereby construct, the world around us, the specifically modern consciousness. The core of this consciousness is the image of the meaningful reality which the pictogram of the globe with people attempts to express. Being a pictogram, it can only express its immediately visible features, or outlines; even so, it captures its essential characteristics. This image of meaningful reality is secular – it is limited to this, experiential, world, thereby making this world, the mundane, the source of its own meaning, or ultimately meaningful; while within this world the most significant element is the people who populate it; this image is not only secular, it is fundamentally humanistic.¹

Why is this world-view called ‘nationalism’? For purely accidental, historically contingent reasons, specifically the use of the word ‘nation’ – at the time meaning a small group embodying an authority in a conciliar, ecclesiastical setting, or an elite – in regard to the entire population, the people, of England.² This momentous linguistic event, which occurred in the early sixteenth century, helped the members of the new Henrician aristocracy to rationalise their experience of upward mobility which made no sense in the terms of, and in fact contradicted, the traditional, feudal and religious, image of reality. By the same token, it symbolically elevated the mass of the population to the dignity of an elite and redefined the community of the people as both sovereign – the embodiment of supreme authority – and as a community of interchangeable individuals, each with a generalised capacity to occupy any social position, or, in other words, as fundamentally a community of equals. The word ‘nation’, therefore, acquired its modern meaning of a

sovereign people consisting of fundamentally equal individuals, while the community defined as a nation inevitably began to be restructured as such a people. It was the definition of an earthly community as sovereign which focused attention on this world and on humanity, exiling God beyond its confines and creating an essentially secular consciousness. In its turn, the secularisation of the world-view reinforced the effects of the principles of popular sovereignty and egalitarianism which between them define the modern concept of 'nation'.

To sum up: nationalism is a fundamentally secular and humanistic consciousness based on the principles of popular sovereignty and egalitarianism. These three characteristics are present in every specific case of nationalism. Modern culture, more generally, is essentially nationalistic in the sense that it has at its core the nationalist world-view and that it projects this world-view on every sphere of cultural/social activity.

To claim that nationalism is the modern culture is tantamount to saying that it represents the cultural foundation of modern social structure, economics, politics, international relations, education, art, science, family relations, and so on and so forth. I shall mention just the most salient of its implications for the character of modernity in the ascending order of importance, starting with modern economy.

Modern economy, contrary to a widespread belief, to put it bluntly, is a product of nationalism, for it is this vision of social reality which provided economic activity with the motivation that reoriented it from subsistence to sustained growth.³ The economic effects of nationalism are mainly the result of the egalitarian principle at its core. To begin with, the definition of the entire population, the people, as a nation, that is, as an elite (given the previous meaning of the word 'nation' in its ecclesiastical context) symbolically elevates the lower classes and ennobles their activities. Economic activities in general, engaging the overwhelming majority of the people and traditionally denigrated in pre-national societies precisely for this reason, gain status and, with it, a hold on the talented people who, under different circumstances, having achieved a certain level of financial independence, would choose to leave the economic sphere.

Arguably of even greater moment is the fact that the symbolic ennoblement of the populace in nationalism makes membership in the nation, i.e. nationality itself, an honorable elevated status, thereby tying one's sense of dignity and self-respect to one's national identity. This ensures one's commitment to the national community and, in particular, one's investment in the nation's collective dignity, or prestige. Prestige is a relative good: one nation's having more of it implies that another has less. Therefore, investment in national prestige necessarily gives rise to an endless international competition, for no matter how much prestige one may have gained at a certain moment, one can be outdone in the next. Unlike other types of societies, then, nations are inherently competitive. This competition goes on in all the spheres of collective endeavor: moral (the nation's record on human rights, for instance),

pertaining to cultural creativity (scientific, literary, musical, etc.), military, political. Any particular nation chooses those spheres of competition where it has a chance to end on, or near, the top, and disregards those in which it is likely to be shamefully out-competed. For instance, Russia has always chosen to compete in the cultural and military arenas, and has never been interested in economic competition. Where economic competition is included among the areas of national engagement, however, the inherent competitiveness of nationalism gives rise to the economies of sustained, endless, growth – i.e. to what is recognised as modern economies.

Since not all nations include the economy among the spheres of international competition in which they are willing to engage, not all nations develop the specifically ‘economic nationalism’, i.e. an economic interpretation of nationalism, and therefore a reconstruction of the economic activity on the basis of the nationalist image of reality. Thus, while economies of sustained growth (modern economies) cannot exist without nationalism, nationalism can exist without spawning economies of sustained growth or economic modernisation. In distinction, nationalism cannot fail to affect politics, as it does not simply encourage, but logically implies the reconstruction of political structures and processes in accordance with its fundamental principles. The essential secularism and the two principles of nationalism’s image of the social world define this form of consciousness as such, and though its specific expressions, or particular nationalisms, are distinguished by numerous other qualities, it is these three general characteristics which explain the central political features of every modern society.

The first of these central features to be listed is the democratisation or universality of political action: the striking fact that in modern societies it may be found on any rung of the social ladder and in any corner of the national territory. It is this, dramatic by comparison to other types of societies, level of political participation, which the term ‘civil society’ as a rule describes. Indeed, it would be absurd to talk of ‘civil society’ or ‘political action’ in the framework of the European feudal society or Indian caste society, to mention the two perhaps best-known non-modern types. The forms of consciousness prevailing in them did not allow for the existence of such political phenomena, which still appear unimaginable to us, being logically incongruent with the two cultural frameworks. The focus of nationalism on this world as ultimately meaningful and the principle of popular sovereignty combine to render social reality changeable and place the responsibility for its shape in the hands of the earthly living community – the nation. The focus on the life in this world dramatically increases the value of this life to the individual and inevitably leads to the insistence on a good life, however defined. One is no longer expected to submit to suffering or deprivation, unless one has special reasons to do so, for the general reasons for such submission – the expectation of rewards in the beyond, transmutation and migration of the souls, the duty to serve witness to the glory of God wherever one is called, or the sheer impossibility to change one’s condition – no longer apply.

Moreover, in a self-sufficient world, changeable and shaped by people, suffering is generally believed to be man-made. Even natural disasters are likely to be so interpreted: a famine, an earthquake, or an epidemic are as often as not attributed to some human agent's withholding of the needed but available resources or negligence; personal misfortunes, such as debilitating, life-threatening, and incurable illnesses are blamed on artificially created environmental conditions (second-hand smoke, lead paint, etc.) or on doctors' incompetence. None of these natural disasters, it is said, 'have to happen': they are no longer believed to be in the nature of things. Of course, the right to a life free of suffering is most clearly asserted when suffering is caused – as it is mostly, in modern societies – by social evils: war, economic or political conditions, competition for precedence, and so forth. Humiliation, rejection, thwarted ambition are felt as unjust – as contrary to expectations and thus resulting from illegitimate intervention of malicious others. As one's precious time on earth is limited, the change in the conditions preventing the realisation of one's right to a life of contentment, free of suffering, is experienced as urgent, and since those responsible for their creation are only human, any naturally active and temperamental individual, who is not particularly timid, easily gets engaged in whatever form the political process around him or her takes.

As a result, involvement in political action (or participation in civil society) under nationalism is a function not of the social position – as it was, let's say, in feudal and absolutist Europe or in Tokugawa Japan – but of character and personality. Since temperament changes with age, and young people, for instance, are more likely to be impetuous and unthinkingly brave, it is also a function of age: it is noteworthy that all revolutionary movements of the last 300 years, from the French Revolution to the student one of the 1960s, were movements of adolescents and people in their twenties and to a lesser extent thirties. It is even more significant that in the last 300 years – but never before – there were revolutionary movements, that is, explicit attempts at social change, movements oriented towards reshaping the world by human design. All forms of consciousness allow for revolts and rebellions, spontaneous eruptions of frustration and rage, essentially expressive collective actions, aimless – perhaps vaguely oriented to the righting of some tremendous, but ill-defined, wrongs – with goals and demands thought through, if at all, only after the fact. But revolutions are a modern form of political action: at their root always lies nationalism.

The central political institution of our age – the state – is also a product of nationalism. Specifically, it is an implication of the principle of popular sovereignty. The state is not to be confused with government in general; it is only a form of government, and this form is characteristically modern and necessarily bureaucratic. The concept of 'state' as a form of government appeared in the English of the sixteenth century – about fifty years after the entrenchment of the idea of the 'nation' and well into the development of the nationalist discourse. It obviously reflected a new reality, as it did later in

other countries when the term migrated there in translation. This new reality was the new form of government, called forth by the new form of consciousness, which presented a new image of what a government should be. As nationalism first developed in Western Europe, this image contrasted most sharply with the then existing Western European ideal of government – the medieval ideal of kingship. The distinguishing characteristic of kingship was its personality: the government was inseparable from a particular person, a person born at a certain time to a certain family, who needed no other qualifications in addition to this accident of birth (of course, never regarded as an accident and at a later stage explicitly reaffirmed as divine appointment) to assume power. In contrast, the distinguishing characteristic of the state became its impersonality. Since supreme authority, in the framework of nationalism, resides in the body of the nation in accordance with the principle of popular sovereignty, the authority of the state is necessarily delegated, representative (in the sense that it only represents the authority of the people), and, insofar as it is subject to recall, limited. Sovereignty is delegated to the office, not to any particular person, and any person exercises authority only as a holder of the office. The state is a government by officers, that is, a bureaucracy. In this sense, Adolf Hitler, the Führer who ardently believed that he represented the will of the German people, was but a bureaucrat, as was Joseph Stalin, the appositely referred to General Secretary, who did not believe in any such thing but made sure that everyone else did.

Finally, the principle of the equality of national membership lies at the root of the open recruitment to state offices, which obviously also exerts a most profound influence on the nature of politics in modern society. It is through the principle of equality of membership – its core social principle – that nationalism affects the social structure most directly, because in modern society the system of social stratification – the nodal social structure, in which all social systems meet and connect – is based on this principle. In this case, too, the modern, or national, system of social stratification represents the very opposite of the stratification system characteristic of the European feudal society, which it replaced. In place of a rigid structure, sharply distinguishing between strata of which it was composed and, except by special dispensation, allowing no movement between them, we now have an open system with loosely and only theoretically defined compartments, in practice virtually indistinguishable and seamlessly flowing one into another via the numerous channels of social mobility. One no longer has a social position and function, clearly defined by birth, which is supposed to serve one (or, rather, which one is supposed to serve) all of one's lifetime; instead, one is supposed to choose a function and to achieve a social position (which presupposes specifically upward mobility), moving from one social position to higher and higher ones as one grows older, 'bettering oneself' or 'getting ahead.' In modern societies one does not talk of 'usurpers', 'parvenus' or, however great the temptation, 'nouveaux riches': one is expected, even encouraged, to strive, to have ambitions, to be a proficient social climber. And so there is nothing strange

in a poor seminarist from Georgia becoming the all-powerful ruler of the great Soviet Union; a son of elderly underpaid Leningrad parents rising through the ranks of foreign espionage to the presidency of only slightly less great Russia; a daughter of a modest greengrocer gaining recognition as the premier of United Kingdom; and a child of a single mother, unhappily remarried to a garage mechanic from Arkansas, twice being elected to head the United States of America. Our form of consciousness, nationalism, makes this kind of mountaineering normal, respectable, in fact, necessary. The combination of the principles of popular sovereignty and fundamental equality of membership implies democracy: government of the people by the people; therefore, political recruitment must be open to any member of the nation. The process of recruitment in the democratic, national, or modern, societies differs drastically from those based on forms of consciousness different from nationalism, for, whatever the differences between nationalisms (which, as I have argued elsewhere may be very significant), it is in all nations essentially, rather than accidentally, a process of *self-recruitment*, always dependent on (though not inevitably determined by) individual initiative, the nature of one's ambition, and talent, while in other societies it follows strictly charted paths from certain initial social positions to specified political functions, which only extraordinary circumstances allow to circumvent.

The egalitarian presupposition of nationalism's image of society, which necessitates an open and fluid system of social stratification, i.e. the class system, characterised by social mobility, makes the individual the historical agent and bases the social position, or status, on transferable goods of wealth and education. When the culture of nationalism is imported into a traditional society, it necessarily undermines the characteristic rigid stratification (such as that of the society of orders, a legal estate – or a religious caste – system), with its status based on birth; the family, rather than the individual, as the historical agent; and – as a consequence – the illegitimacy of social mobility. Since the system of stratification is the nodal social structure, in which all the others crisscross and influence each other; it does not exist separately but only through the others. It is, therefore, clear that a dramatic reconstruction of the social stratification, such as is presupposed by the emergence or importation of nationalism, will change the very nature of the existential experience, of one's desires and aspirations, frustrations and fears, the very nature of one's passions, and with them, both of happiness and of suffering. In the modern world, defined by nationalism, one can, nay, is supposed to, make oneself; the open system of stratification allows and encourages ambition; one is free to move and is invited to shape one's destiny. Only in nations are children asked what they want to be when they grow up. This question is inconceivable, more than that, subversive in a traditional society where one's future is determined by birth. The countless children who declare they want to become an American president, or a British Prime Minister, or whatever is regarded as the pre-eminent leadership position in Russia at the moment, are not checked as precocious arrivistes, they are praised for the healthy vigor of their

aspirations. And this freedom is not limited to the political or even generally occupational sphere. One can dream of becoming a great scholar or a multimillionaire or a heroic firefighter, or one can think not in terms of greatness at all, rather seeking self-realisation as a gardener or fulfillment in love. All these are modern desires, made possible by the egalitarianism of nationalism and the system of stratification it creates. Who thought of marital happiness, when marriage was a contract concluded between two families, rather than a free union between two individuals, and when being a wife or a husband was a job and an office?

But the advantages of modernity come with a heavy price-tag. The greater the choice one is given in forming one's destiny, the heavier is the burden of responsibility for making the right choice. The more opportunities one is offered to 'find oneself', the harder it is to decide where to look. Life has never been so exciting *and* so frustrating; we have never been so empowered *and* so helpless. Modern societies, produced by nationalism, because of their very secularism, openness and the elevation of the individual, are necessarily *anomic*. As was recognised already by Durkheim, *anomie* is the fundamental structural problem of modernity.⁴ *Anomie*, commonly translated as 'normlessness', refers to a condition of cultural insufficiency, a systemic problem which reflects inconsistency, or the lack of co-ordination, between various institutional structures, as a result of which they are likely to send contradictory messages to individuals within them. On the psychological level *anomie* produces a sense of disorientation, of uncertainty as to one's place in society, and therefore as to one's identity: of what one is expected to do under circumstances of one sort or another, of the limits to one's possible achievement (i.e. aspirations that would be frustrated) on the social, political, economic and personal planes. In acute cases such a sense of disorientation and uncertainty leads to depression, deviant behavior, even to suicide. On the social level, pervasive *anomie* necessarily increases the rates of depression, deviance and suicide. Indeed, Durkheim's classic discussion of the phenomenon occurs in his study of the rates of suicide. *Anomie* may occur in all types of societies, but in modern society it is a built-in feature. One cannot have modernity – one cannot have nationalism – without *anomie*.

Anomie, is, in fact, the ultimate cause of cultural change. It both breaks the old cultural routine and encourages the formation of a new one. The general pattern of human history can be imagined as an alteration between relatively brief and rare periods of widespread (though culturally localised) *anomie* and cultural routine. Widespread *anomie*, most commonly implying gross inconsistencies between elements of culture impinging on individual identities, specifically inconsistencies within the system of social stratification which defines a person's position in the social world in general and vis-à-vis particular others, affects large groups of individuals and expresses itself in social turmoil. A readjustment of the stratification system in the course of such turmoil eliminates these inconsistencies, that is, resolves *anomie*, again making possible unhindered development of identity and routine functioning

of both the individual and the surrounding culture. But modern culture (and, as a result, modern history) does not fit this pattern. Nationalism, the novel vision of reality, which was the formula sixteenth century Englishmen used – quite successfully, so far as they were concerned – to resolve their particular anomic situation, turned out to be anomic, and *anomie-generic*, vision. Thus it has produced a culture (meaning a society, a polity, an economy – the entire organisation of human life, in short), in which *anomie* is built-in. In modern culture, in other words, the cultural routine itself is *anomic*. We live in a constant condition of *anomie*.

As much as the open class structure, the state and civil society, and the modern economy characterised by sustained growth (in nations which choose to compete in the economic arena), *anomie* is an implication of the nationalist image of reality. Representing a condition of cultural insufficiency, it inhibits the formation and normal functioning of the human mind. I am, therefore, proposing that *nationalism inhibits the formation and normal functioning of the human mind*.

On the most general level, *culture* is the process of transmission of historical ways of life and forms of human association across generations and distances. As I mentioned in the introduction to this lecture, in distinction to other animal species, such transmission of ways of life and social organisation, in the case of humanity, is not genetic, but *symbolic*. Humans are the only biological species, the continuation of whose existence is dependent on symbolic transmission.

The products of this cultural process are stored in the environment within which our biological life takes place, but the process itself goes on inside us. In other words, culture exists dynamically, develops, regenerates, transforms only by means of our minds – which makes culture a mental process. Let me reiterate: *culture is a symbolic and a mental process*. The fact that it is a mental process means that it occurs by means of the mechanisms of the brain. The fact that it is a symbolic process means that its logic cannot be reduced to the logic of the brain mechanisms, that it is an *emergent phenomenon and a reality sui generis*. In other words: the neural processes by means of which the cultural process occurs serve only as boundary conditions outside of which it cannot occur, but are powerless to shape the nature and direction of the cultural process. In contrast, culture itself consistently directs the brain, by means of which it occurs, forcing brain mechanisms into patterns of organisation and operation which (though, obviously, not impossible) are most improbable given all that we may know of the biological functioning of the brain.

Most importantly, *culture creates the human mind*. The mind is also a symbolic and a mental process: it is supported by biological brain mechanisms, but is generated by culture outside of the human brain. The mind is, one may say, an individualised culture process, or *culture in the brain*. The products of this individualised process are stored primarily in the brain *memory*. Memory is a faculty humans share with the rest of the animal world;

human memory is, therefore, made precisely of the physico-chemical ‘stuff’ that any animal memory is made of. Another mental capacity humans share with other animals is the capacity for *learning* – namely, for committing to memory experiences of encounters with the environment and adapting to the environment as a result of such experiences. However, in addition to the mental processes, such as learning and memory, which are characteristic of the entire animal world and can be fully accounted for by neurobiology without recourse to anything exogenous to the nervous system, there are clearly mental processes in which the human brain is involved because it participates in the symbolic processes of culture. These uniquely human mental processes include *identity*, *will* and *symbolic imagination*. The ‘mind’ is a collective name for the complex interaction among these symbolic mental processes. For heuristic purposes, the mind may be seen as a symbolic system, and it is highly likely that to this symbolic system there corresponds a neurological system in the brain, the system of specific brain mechanisms and spaces that support the constituent processes of the mind.

The term *identity* in its semiotic (culturological/pertaining to symbolic systems) sense, refers to symbolic self-definition. It is the image of one’s position in the socio-cultural ‘space’ and the image of the relevant socio-cultural terrain itself. It contains and provides information regarding one’s social status, one’s relevant others and the types of relations one is supposed to have with them, one’s immediate and more remote social world, expectations one may have of one’s environment and vice versa, conduct proper to one under various, likely to arise circumstances (i.e. foods one should like or dislike, clothes one is supposed to wear, questions one is supposed to ask and issues one is supposed to be interested in, emotions one may legitimately experience and ones of which one should be ashamed, people one may befriend, marry, respect, despise and hate, and so on). In short, one’s identity represents an individualised microcosm of the culture in which one is immersed, with the image of one’s significant sector in it (which may include God and His angels, paradise and hell, or one’s immediate neighbors, colleagues and fellow fans of the local football team) magnified and highlighted.

Unlike other animals, who carry their social order and the individual organism’s position in it in their genes, humans have to figure out their social order and their position in it for themselves, which involves representing both in one’s mind. Identity, therefore, is a *symbolic* self-representation, an image a human individual has of oneself as a cultural being and a participant in a cultural universe. At the same time, it is clearly an essential element of human mental functioning and health – that is, of one’s ability to function cognitively and emotionally, and to adjust socially. Problems in identity-formation and maintenance (i.e. crises of identity, doubts about one’s identity, multiple identities) are immediately evident in and directly affect one’s ability to learn and commit information to memory, the adequacy (in other words, cultural propriety) of one’s emotional reactions and the degree of one’s social

adjustment. Identity is literally the central human mental process, for it mediates between one's natural or biological capacities to learn, memorise, adapt to the environment – the capacities of one's brain – and one's functioning as, in fact being, a person. Obviously, two individuals endowed with different brain powers would learn, memorise and adapt differently, but so most certainly would two individuals with equal brain powers but different identities. Similarly, damage to one's brain capacities (as a result of physical trauma or impaired growth) will undoubtedly be reflected in one's mental performance, but damage to one's cultural identity (as a result of a traumatic experience, such as immigration or 'loss of face', or in consequence of impaired formation) will alter mental performance as dramatically.

Like all mental processes, identity must be supported by brain mechanisms. Because it is a uniquely human mental process, however, we cannot establish what brain mechanisms these are and explore them in experimenting with animal brain. Since animals perform their social functions based on genetic instructions, they do not need to have a representation of their social position in their brain; they do not have an identity. Still, the representation of an identity within the brain may be analogous to the cognitive map of the spatial environment in animals, such as was found encoded in the firing pattern of the hippocampal pyramidal cells in mice, for instance.⁵ Perhaps the pyramidal cells can function as identity cells, in addition to serving as place cells. Wherever within the human brain it takes place, the uniquely human mental process of identity, which must take place within the brain and use brain mechanisms, could be accessed by means of experiments structurally similar to those of the neuroscientists who study representations of encounters with the physical environment in animals.

I mentioned that certain complex patterned processes, such as identity, mind and culture, for heuristic purposes can be seen as static systems or structures. For instance, it may be useful to represent these three as a hierarchy of structures of increasing complexity, in which identity is the central 'organ' of the mind, while the mind is the smallest active unit of a culture. Symbolic imagination cannot be so envisioned. It is analogous, rather, to a tendency or ability of a living entity, such as breathing, or to a physical force, such as gravity, which can be perceived only in operation or in their effects. Symbolic imagination is the central faculty of the human mind, on which each of the mind's functions and its very formation (and thus the cultural process in general) depend. Symbolic imagination is an ability to create new information within the brain and, therefore, the creative mental ability *par excellence*.

Our reality, the world we inhabit as human beings, represents a multi-dimensional fabric of symbolic systems, interwoven, crisscrossing and diverging in most intricate ways. The most intricate symbolic system which lies at the very core of cultural reality is language. But because we are symbolic creatures, everything around us becomes a symbol. A bow, a glance, a smile, a handshake are symbols. It is on symbols of this silent kind, to which we sometimes refer as body language, that the nodal cultural structure of social

stratification, for instance, rests to a far greater extent, than on language proper, whether written or spoken. In context, a casual bow may signify a relationship of equality, a passing glance, superiority and, perhaps, contempt, a forced smile, subservience. All these gestures may also signify something entirely different. A dog is instructed when to wag his tail, and what precisely this means, genetically. Nobody ever gives us detailed instructions, applicable to all our circumstances, when to smile forcibly and when to refrain from smiling, when to look and when to avert one's eyes, when to answer a greeting eagerly and when to wait for five seconds before acknowledging it. And yet, we all participate in such symbolic exchanges constantly and most of us usually do this on cue (correctly). The logic which guides these exchanges, making certain reactions adequate to and others inconsistent with an action which elicits them, changes not only with time, but also depending on the sphere of social life of which the exchange in question forms a part. A casual bow to a salesclerk in a store would be adequate enough, but highly inappropriate to one's academic advisor in a corridor. We are given very little information, i.e. we can learn very little from the environment, regarding the correct path of action in most situations we find ourselves in. But on the basis of the few pieces of data our imagination provides us with the clue to the puzzle – the logic operative in any particular case – and so supplies the missing information. Our – correct and incorrect – behaviour then becomes a lesson, an additional piece of information to others and to ourselves, and so it goes, a symbolic system is maintained, the cultural process continues.

With language this is not much different. Somehow between the ages of 3 and 5, as any parent among us would know, the child acquires the language and starts using it, by and large correctly by the standards of its environment, that is according to numerous rules of grammar and syntax, of which he or she could not have heard, and often creatively, guessing at words outside of the actually learned vocabulary, understanding these words without ever having heard them before. Most of this new proficiency does not come from learning – it comes from imagination. It is only by this means – i.e. owing to our imaginative capacity to complement, and greatly augment, in accordance with the proper principles of consistency which we figure out the little that we know – that a language goes on living, and the same applies to other symbolic systems, from the etiquette of drugstore shopping to high diplomacy, and from cuisine to philosophy.

The operative logics – namely, principles of consistency – in different symbolic systems are different. Moreover, in all of these logics, with the exception of the Aristotelian, deductive logic based on the principle of no contradiction, these principles of consistency are context-dependent, that is historical and constantly changing. Symbolic imagination in essence consists precisely in the ability to figure them out in different situations and, on the basis of such figuring out, construct one's behavior.

How can we systematically move between logics, often combining blatantly contradictory principles? We can do this, apparently, because, under the

influence of our cultural experience, our brain has evolved mechanisms – collectively, they support the agency we call *will* – which, for every event, select the logic (or logics) appropriate to the context, while suppressing other logics. What does the *will* do? It arbitrates in cases of contradictory stimuli. Most often, such arbitrage is unconscious and involves no effort (of will) on our part: we simply receive, and obey, an instruction of the sort: ‘In the case of the Christian doctrine (or the Jewish law, or Ancient Greek Mythology, or a grammatical structure, such as the affirmation that “nobody understands me”) you will forget rules of deductive logic’. It is this ability to block one logic to attend to another which explains how people can live quite ordered and contented lives in a contradictory environment. (In the Soviet Union and Soviet dominated Eastern Europe such ability, evident from the fact that everybody knew that the social system was based on a pack of lies and yet staked one’s entire life on the validity of its presuppositions, was attributed to the development of a ‘double consciousness’. In actuality, if a consciousness can be equated with a particular symbolic logic, we all necessarily develop multiple consciousnesses and, depending on the occasion, skillfully select among them the appropriate one.)

But *will*’s arbitrage may involve a conscious effort, and it is for the cases when it does that the language – at least, in the West – reserves the concept of the ‘will’. For instance, one may be tired and wish to lie down, but have unfinished work (such as formulating the present thesis), in which case the *will* will instruct the organism: ‘You will pay no attention to your fatigue, but will be guided by the logic demanding you to finish the work you have started’. Late in the evening, however, it will issue a different instruction: ‘You will now lay down your work, though unfinished, and take care of your fatigue. Otherwise, you won’t be able to continue your work tomorrow’. Or, in the case of a soldier fearing for his life, the *will* may declare: ‘The logic you will obey at present is that of a collective military enterprise. Therefore, you will expose your life to danger and disregard the survival instinct which instructs you to run away and hide’. Or, in the case of a scholar building a career, the *will* may prompt the person to prefer the logic of scientific inquiry (‘Go and raise questions about the dominant theory, on the acceptance of which your promotion depends, because you know this theory to be erroneous’) to the logic of collegial harmony and career building: ‘Keep your mouth shut and pretend to accept the dominant theory, though you know it to be erroneous, because your promotion depends on such acceptance’. We refer to that *will* as a ‘strong’ one, which systematically imposes on the person the logic considered to be more difficult to follow. Of course, what is so considered changes with the context, and so do the logics of symbolic systems themselves; these logics are context-dependent: they evolve with the system, and with the system in which the particular system evolves, and thus do not have first, fundamental, principles.

We are able to deploy our imaginative capacities correctly, namely, in accordance with the appropriate symbolic logic thanks to the agency of the

will, while the *will's* arbitrage, much as our capacity to learn and memorise, is mediated by *identity*. Clearly, it would be much easier for a person unambiguously self-defined as a soldier to risk his life in the face of mortal danger, rather than try to save himself; his identity will, in effect, screen the logic of self-preservation from him, making him, so to speak, 'single-minded' in his sharp awareness of the dictates of proper soldierly conduct. A person unsure of whether being a soldier is really 'him', in contrast, will be much more likely to hesitate and run for cover. Similarly, a person lacking intellectual confidence (i.e. suffering from self-doubt and uncertain of the validity of one's ideas) would be more sensitive to fatigue and ready to procrastinate and be distracted from unfinished work, than one who has a clear identity as a thinker and so does not question their ability to produce scholarship of fundamental value. Problems with identity impair the will, making the person indecisive and unmotivated (examples are too numerous and familiar to everyone to need recounting), while an impaired will interferes with routine functioning of symbolic imagination. Since it is symbolic imagination which ensures social adjustment and proper emotional and cognitive behavior, the common effect of such interference is mental confusion, slowing down of simple mental operations and in general mental dulling.

Paradoxically, an equally direct, though far less common, effect is the dramatic increase in creativity, that is, in internal generation of strikingly new and improbable information by a small, but significant minority of minds. While the reasons for the distribution of individuals between the majority (experiencing the common effect) and the minority (which reacts by increased creativity) have to do with the biology of the brains of their respective members, the surge in collective creativity is explained by the change in the symbolic, rather than neural, circuits – by what is happening to the mind, in other words, rather than to the brain. As the will is no longer capable of selecting the logic appropriate to each context and the routine channels of symbolic imagination are, therefore, closed, hyper-active symbolic imaginations find new channels, 'discover' common logical principles behind several previously unconnected logics, and 'jump to conclusions' in new, unexpected directions. History of culture attests to the close connection between periods of *anomie*, which imply problematisation of individual identities as a result of which identity-formation becomes psychologically taxing, and surges in cultural creativity. But this is an aside, since, as I said, such creative reaction to identity problems is a reaction of a small minority. Genius is connected to mental disturbance, but the overwhelming majority of mentally disturbed people are not geniuses.

This brings us back to nationalism. The modern culture at the core of which lies the vision of nationalism, with its presuppositions of fundamental equality of national membership, and popular sovereignty, and its secular focus – the inherently and pervasively *anomic* culture – cannot provide one with a clear social map and a sense of a defined, stable, position on it. The picture one receives changes from moment to moment, constantly reorienting

and confusing one with changing, often contradictory directions. Though the mapped or pictured reality in question is cultural, it is mapped or pictured mentally, that is, using available brain mechanisms and in a manner, as I suggested, analogous to the way a physical terrain is mapped in the brain of a mouse. The effect on the mind of nationalism, therefore, is comparable to the effect on the brain of a mouse of an incessantly and irregularly changing physical environment, produced, for example, by holding the mouse by its tail and twirling it in the air. No neuroscientific experiments are required to understand that such inconsiderate action would destroy the animal's mental equilibrium and make it sick.

In the cultural framework of nationalism one's status is no longer defined by birth, and for this reason any social position can no longer be equated with identity. Identity ceases to be a cultural given, which is formed naturally as one grows into one's social environment. The particular environment into which one grows is not necessarily one's own. In modern societies, the individual is expected to be the maker of their own destiny – how dramatically different from all the other cultures humanity has known! – to make oneself, in effect, which implies the creation of a proper environment for oneself (it is this expectation which is the source of the ideal of a 'self-made man'), and to be able to do so, one has first to 'find oneself'. Self-definition becomes a matter of choice and responsibility. Instead of being a product of simple learning and commitment to memory of symbolic information from the outside, the construction of identity is turned into a task for creative symbolic imagination, the mental faculty dependent on identity for its routine operation. In this way, nationalism, it may be said, in fact creates a new breed of men: it modifies the way the mind is formed and functions, producing, on the one hand, a small number of exceptionally creative people, and, on the other, a much larger minority of permanently disoriented, confused and unhappy individuals.

The majority of modern individuals continue to function normally, namely, they continue to function the way most human beings have functioned throughout history. The effect of nationalism, clearly, depends on the neurophysiological constitution of the receiving individuals, and is likely to affect deeply only those with an acute innate sensitivity to symbolic inconsistencies. Such sensitivity, similarly to inborn predispositions of other kinds, is distributed unequally, most likely in the pattern of a bell curve, with those above the average only about as numerous as those below. One must both be receptive to numerous cultural messages at once and perceive, i.e. imagine, the inconsistencies among them to be confused by anomic culture. Many people have the capacity to focus on a particular message to the virtual exclusion of others; many are capable of compartmentalising various messages they receive in such a way as to preclude any relationship – whether of consistency or inconsistency – among them. Most Americans (not all, but an overwhelming majority) well into the twentieth century lived quite contentedly and were not disoriented by the glaring contradictions between the

supreme national commitment to equality and the multitude of inequalities of condition as well as opportunity which they witnessed every day. It usually takes a cataclysmic event or a widespread and dramatic change of experience to reveal an anomic situation to individuals who would not perceive systemic cultural inconsistencies on their own (for instance, it took World War II and the Holocaust to make the general public in the US aware that anti-Semitism was an un-American attitude; it took the participation of urban middle-class women in the labor force to change the view of the 'natural' place of women).

But, notwithstanding this dependence on the effect of nationalism (and anomic more generally) on innate predispositions of individuals, the more open the cultural system, the more perfect is the realisation of the core principles of nationalism in the institutions of a society, the more pervasively anomic it will be, and the greater will be the effects of anomie. The more insistent the society upon the verity that everyone is created equal, the more intolerable will become one's inequality to the very best or even the better-off: to the prettiest girl at school or just girls who are prettier, the most popular boy or just more popular boys; to the best or better students or athletes; to those on a faster career track, those with larger salaries or bank accounts; to owners of bigger houses and parents of smarter children – the more kinds of ambition a culture makes possible, the more varieties of self-doubt and envy it creates. Ambition drives creativity, and self-doubt and envy destroy one's sense of equilibrium and impair mental health. The negative effects of the anomic modern culture, created by nationalism, outnumber the positive ones. There are far more people who are made deeply unhappy by the openness and pluralism of modernity than those who are made happy. It is not a coincidence that socially paralysing mental disorders are a scourge of the most prosperous and freest nations, that their rates grow together with life-expectancy and as problems caused by the physical environment (starvation, malnutrition, the dangers of heat and cold) and ravages of physical diseases recede; that schizophrenia, bipolar and eating disorders are modern diseases *par excellence*, that there is an epidemic of depression among America's teenagers and young adults, ranging from mild (but almost universal) state of malaise to severe, physically destructive illness, which may drive these young people to suicide and, even if it does not, disables and often effectively destroys their lives.

To relate this to the poster announcing my talk, it is not the sleep of reason that leads to madness, but the fact that reason is allowed no rest. Nationalism demands from the individual mind to do the work which other cultures take on themselves; therefore it overworks the brain and fatigues it into stupor.

In my earlier work on nationalism, I have shown what profound effect it has on the political consciousness and behaviour of the modern man. In my recent book, *The Spirit of Capitalism*, which expanded on the investigation begun in *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, I attempted to draw attention to the formative influence of nationalism on the modern man's economic activity, specifically its central role in producing economic growth. The aim of

my talk here today was to indicate the direct link between nationalism and our, modern men's, mental formation and health. If I am right, deeper, more accurate understanding of nationalism may be the key to the treatment of ever-spreading mental disorders which have called modern psychiatry and clinical psychology into being and which modern psychiatry and clinical psychology have been trying in vain to cure – more than that, a deeper, more accurate understanding of nationalism may be the key to the very problem of happiness and unhappiness.

Those assembled here have been aware for many years, often in the face of opposition from politicians, the media and our own academic disciplines, of the tremendous importance of our subject. It may, in fact, be far more important than even those assembled here have believed.

Notes

- 1 See Liah Greenfeld (1996).
- 2 Liah Greenfeld (1992).
- 3 See Liah Greenfeld (2001).
- 4 See Emile Durkheim (1996 & 1984).
- 5 Squire and Kandel (1998: 124–6).

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