

The Call of the Nation

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A DARK WAVE is submerging democracies all over the Western world.

It started in Britain, a land we always saw as the mother of democracy, the homeland of a particularly sensible people. It voted in a plebiscite to leave the European Union, that landmark of human progress which arose out of the terrible ruins of World War II.

Why? No particular reason. Just for the heck of it.

Then came the US elections. The incredible happened: A nobody came from nowhere and was elected. A person devoid of any political experience, a bully, a habitual liar, an entertainer. Now he is the most powerful statesman on the planet, the “Leader of the free World”.

And now it is happening all over Europe. The far-right is making gains almost everywhere and threatens to get voted into power. Moderate Presidents and Prime Ministers resign or get kicked out. With the notable exception of Germany and Austria, which seem to have learned their lesson, fascism and populism are gaining ground all around.

Why, for God's sake?

COUNTRIES ARE different from each other. Every local political scene is unique. So it is easy to find local reasons for the results of every local election and plebiscite.

But when the same thing is happening all over the place, in many countries and almost simultaneously, one is compelled to look for a common denominator, a reason that applies to all these diverse phenomena.

It is nationalism.

What we are witnessing now is a rebellion of nationalism against the trend towards a post-nationalist, regionalist and globalist world.

This trend has practical reasons. In most fields of human endeavor, larger and larger units are required.

Industries and financial institutions demand large units. The larger the unit, the more rational the economy. A country with a market of ten million cannot compete with a market of a billion people. Centuries ago, this trend compelled little regions like Bavaria or Catalonia to join national states like Germany and Spain.

Nowadays, the economic lives of billions is determined by anonymous, trans-national corporations, which reside

nowhere and everywhere, far beyond the comprehension of ordinary people.

At the same time, the information revolution has created ever-larger communities of knowledge. Five hundred years ago, it was rare for a peasant in Europe to move beyond the next village. Travel was expensive, only aristocrats had horses, a carriage ride to the large town was out of reach for most people. For the same reason, it was impossible to move goods over long distances. People ate what could be grown locally. News traveled slowly, if at all.

Nowadays, wherever you live you hear about Austrian election results or a coup in Sudan within minutes. The world has become a village.

Almost everyone has an internet connection, he or she can converse with almost everyone else on the globe, while scientists in many places probe deep into the universe.

In this new world, the nation-state has become an empty shell, a flag, a rousing anthem, a football team, a stamp which is used less and less.

HOWEVER, THE end of the era of the nation-state has not put an end to nationalism. Far from it.

The human mind changes much slower than material circumstances. It limps at least three or four generations behind, clinging to outdated ideas and ideals, while political, economic and military realities race ahead.

Modern nationalism arose only some two or three centuries ago. It is a comparatively recent invention. Some believe that it was created by the French revolution. A notable historian argued that it was created by the Spanish settlers in South America, who wanted to get rid of Spanish imperialism and constitute themselves as independent nations.

Be that as it may, nationalism quickly became the dominant force in the world. By the end of World War I, it had broken up the old empires and created a dozen new nation-states. World War II finished the job.

The nation state stands on two legs: the material and the spiritual. The material need to create larger markets and defend them against other large markets was obvious. The spiritual need of belonging to a human group was less so.

Actually, this need is as old as the human race itself.

People had to stick together to defend themselves against other people, they had to cooperate in hunting and planting. They lived in large families, then in tribes, then in kingdoms and republics. Social forms evolved and changed throughout the ages, until the modern nation superseded all other forms.

For most people, the need to belong to a nation is a profound psychological need. People create a national culture, often speak a national language. People are ready to die for their nation.

Great modern movements tried to overcome nationalism in favor of other ideologies. Communism was a prominent example. The proletariat has no fatherland. Yet in its hour of greatest danger, under the onslaught of super-nationalist fascism, the Soviet Union forsook the “Internationale” and adopted a national anthem, and Stalin proclaimed the Great Patriotic War. Later, the internationalist Soviet Union broke up and Russia reverted to pure nationalism, personified by Vladimir Putin.

I believe that what we are witnessing now is a worldwide reaction against supra-nationalism and globalism. People don't want to be citizens of the world, nor, it seems, even Europeans or North Americans. A few idealists may march ahead, but ordinary people stick to their nation. They want to be Frenchmen, Poles or Hungarians.

This is a need that comes from below. The “elites”, the well educated and the rich may look further and embrace the new realities, but the “lower classes” everywhere cling to their national values. It's the only thing they have to cling to. The proletariat has a fatherland. More than anyone else.

This is even more true in countries that have a sizable national minority. The “lowest” class of the dominant nation is the fiercest nationalist and even fascist political force. The polite term for this is “populism”.

IS ISRAEL following the same trend? You bet.

Indeed, Israelis can take pride in the fact that it happened here even before Brexit and Trump.

Israel is now firmly in the grip of a far-right, xenophobic, anti-peace, annexationist government, which includes thinly disguised fascists. Binyamin Netanyahu sometimes seems almost moderate compared to some of his allies and adherents.

Israel was created by Zionism, a revolutionary move-

ment that survived many other 20th century revolutions. Zionism was a nationalist movement without a nation. Its founders had to invent a nation that did not exist before. It had to turn a dispersed, ethnic-religious community, that had survived for thousands of years in a changing world, into a modern nation. The founders of Zionism saw this as the only answer to anti-Semitism, which was the bastard daughter of modern European nationalism.

Even the name of this nation is debatable. Is it a Jewish nation? A Hebrew nation, as some of us preferred to call it? An Israeli nation? And where does that leave the millions of Jews, who would not dream of immigrating to Israel, or the 20% of Israeli citizens, who claim to belong to the Palestinian nation, which has (as of now) no state?

This shaky ideological ground has created a Jewish-Hebrew-Israeli nationalism that is stronger and fiercer than most.

NEITHER IN Israel nor anywhere else does a progressive, peace-loving movement have any chance of success, if it is conceived as antagonistic to nationalism.

I have believed so all my life. I have always defined myself as a nationalist. I believe that there is no basic contradiction between nationalism and internationalism. Indeed, inter-nationalism means, literally, cooperation between nations.

As an Israeli nationalist I believe in the rights of other peoples to cling to their own national values. This means first of all respect for the Palestinian people and their right to a national state of their own, side by side with Israel.

The Israeli peace movement must first of all assert their national credentials. Indeed, we are the true nationalists. We want Israel to flourish in peace and security, while the pseudo-nationalists who are in power now are leading us to disaster. Let's not allow the fascists to steal nationalism from us.

Some prefer to call themselves “patriots”, rather than nationalists. But patria means fatherland. It means the same.

As Israeli nationalists, we must strive for the solidarity of all nations in our region, and join the march towards a world order where all nations can flourish.

I would advise all our sister movements throughout the world to do the same, and thus break the dark wave that threatens to submerge us all.