

A Global Village or the Rights of the Peoples?

by Tomislav Sunic

The great conflicts of the future will no longer pit left against right, or East against West, but the forces of nationalism and regionalism against the credo of universal democracy. The lofty ideal of the global village seems to be stumbling over the renewed rise of East European separatism, whose aftershocks may soon spill over into the Western hemisphere. Already the dogma of human rights is coming under fire by the proponents of peoples' rights, and the yearning for historical community is making headway into atomized societies deserted by ideologies.

With the collapse of communist internationalism the clock of history has been turned back, and inevitably the words of the 19th-century conservative Joseph de Maistre come to mind: "I have seen Poles, Russians, Italians, but as to man, I declare never to have seen him." Indeed, this paradigmatic universal man, relieved from economic plight and from the burden of history, this man on whom we pattern the ideology of human rights, is nowhere to be seen. He appears all the more nebulous as in day-to-day life we encounter real peoples with specific cultures. If he resides in Brooklyn, his idea of human rights is likely to be different from somebody who lives in the Balkans; if he is a fundamentalist Moslem his sense of civic duty will be different from somebody who is a Catholic. The rise in nationalist sentiments in Eastern Europe should not be seen as only a backlash against communist economic chaos; rather, it is the will of different peoples to retrieve their national memories long suppressed by communism's shallow universalism.

All of Europe seems to be undergoing a paradoxical and almost ludicrous twist of history. On the one hand Western Europe is becoming more and more an "americano-centric" anational meta-society, while post-communist Eastern Europe threatens to explode into a myriad of mini-states. Conversely, whereas Western Europe is experiencing an unparalleled wave of foreign immigration and the inevitable surge of racism that must follow, the racial homogeneity of East Europeans has made them today more "European" than West Europeans-the East's own multiethnic turmoil notwithstanding.

In view of the disintegrating state system in Eastern Europe, Woodrow Wilson's crusades for the right of national self-determination and global democracy must seem contradictory. Home rule as envisioned by the architects of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 may have suited the demands of Poles, Czechs, and those European peoples who benefited from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, but it had little appeal for those who were forced to exchange one foreign ruler for another. For the Germans stranded in, a newly emerged and bloated Poland or Romania in 1919, or for the Slovaks in a hybrid Czechoslovak state, the right to home rule meant nothing less than the creation of their own separate nation-states.

Yugoslavia, too, has owed its relative longevity more to Western liberal well-wishers than to the true consensus of its disparate peoples. For the last seventy years the Yugoslav experience has been an exercise in civil wars and constant ethnic strife among four of its major ethnic groups. Naturally, in light of the present salvos being exchanged between the Croats and the Serbs, the question that comes to mind is why does the artificial blending of different peoples always lead

to instability and ethnic chaos? The answer seems to be rather obvious: that the rights of peoples are incompatible with universalism. Ethnic particularities cannot coexist in a state that places abstract principles of human rights over the real principles of peoples' rights.

It would be impossible to chronicle with precision who is right or wrong in the present ethnic turmoil that besets Yugoslavia. A litany of grievances can be heard today among Croats, Serbs, Slovenes, and ethnic Albanians, of which each group is tirelessly trying to outdo the others with its own impressive victimology. As Yugoslavia demonstrates, in multiethnic countries the notion of justice depends solely on the constantly shifting inter-ethnic balance of power, as well as the perception that each ethnic group may have of its neighbor. Both Serbs and Croats, the two largest ethnic groups in Yugoslavia, are today utterly disappointed with their country; the former, on the grounds that Yugoslavia is not centralized enough to allow the consolidation of the Yugoslav state; the latter, on the grounds that Yugoslavia is already too centralized. The lesson to draw today from the Yugoslav experience is that in multiethnic states democracy can only function when the national question has been resolved.

Moreover, democracy can take root only within the ethnographic frontiers of various peoples, who will define that word in accordance with their genius loci and their own history. Just as it was foolish some time ago to talk about Yugoslav anticommunist dissidence, so it is foolish now to anticipate the emergence of the all-out "Yugoslav" democracy. What seems good for a Croatian democrat today may be seen as a direct threat by somebody who styles himself a Serbian democrat tomorrow. Even America, because of its erratic immigration policy and the declining birthrate among whites, may soon find itself in a similar situation of having to redefine the concept of democracy. The legacy of the Founding Fathers, in the years to come, may be interpreted differently given the changing racial fabric of America. Voting preferences are likely to hinge on skin color, which could lead to a Balkanization worse than the one presently threatening Yugoslavia.

Democracy in any multiethnic state, at least as the global democrats would like to see it, is semantic nonsense; the liberal principle of "one man, one vote" is inapplicable in a country of diverse ethnic groups. Consequently, the genuine democratization of Yugoslavia, or for that matter the multiethnic Soviet Union, would require the disintegration of the country and the establishment of new nation-states. The German Holy Empire was an example of a rather stable confederal system that lasted for almost one thousand years, although at one point it was divided into three hundred sovereign principalities.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the ideology of global democracy seems to parallel closely the failed communist Utopia, with one exception: it is presently more successful in the pursuit of its goals. What we are witnessing in the West is a liberal transposition of the Christian ideal of one world into a post-industrial society—a *civitas dei* in an age of cable TV and Michael Jackson. Everything presages, however, that this brand of universalism can be as dangerous for the peoples of Eastern Europe as the now moribund communism. From the point of view of a globe-trotting merchant a centralized and unified Yugoslavia, or Soviet Union, organized into giant free markets, would be the best solution insofar as that would facilitate the free movement of capital, and thus better ease the strain of ethnic animosity. Indeed, the prospects of having to deal with an additional twenty states on the Euro-Asian continent is a nightmare to a businessman more interested in the free flow of capital than in the self-determination of ethnic groups. The political liberal will surely endorse a global village that includes different ethnic parades—so long as they do not turn

into military marches. Such a line of thinking, that “economics determines politics,” clearly points to the Marxian morphology inherent in liberalism, confirming, once again, that communism is nothing else but its pesky brainchild.

But will the free bazaar in the global village dissolve ethnic passions? Although the masses in franchised Eastern Europe are today mimicking every move of the West, nothing indicates that their honeymoon with the global village will last long. Ethnic intolerance will only worsen once the peoples of Eastern Europe realize that the global village promises a lot but delivers little.

What makes a people? A people has a common heritage and a will to a common destiny. A people exists despite superficial cleavages such as parties, interest groups, and passing trends in ideologies. As Georges Dumézil, Mircea Eliade, and Carl G. Jung have demonstrated, a people shares a “mythe fondateur”—a communal myth that gives birth to original cultural endeavors. The culture of a people, recalls Alain de Benoist, is its identity card and its mental respiration, and “it is the passport for a future that takes the shape of destiny.”

When a people becomes oblivious of its founding myth it is doomed to perish. Worse, it may turn into an aggregate of happy robots whose new dictum of universal human rights could be just another cloak for mindless hedonism. Western Europe is already experiencing this kind of ethnic and cultural oblivion. Paris in August resembles Oran or Marrakesh, and wide stretches of Berlin, at noon, have the distinct flavor of Anatolia. To many foreigners France is becoming more a synonym for its famous goat cheese and less a symbol of Corneillian heroism, and if one decides to go to Florence it is for a good bottle of Chianti rather than the mystic transcendence experienced through Botticelli’s paintings. Yugoslavia, founded on similar principles of multiculturalism, is a product of the Russian 19th-century pan-Slavism combined with the Wilsonian dream. This experiment has not resulted in perpetual peace. In times of great crises host nations no longer look at aliens as purveyors of exotic folklore, but rather as predators snatching bread from their host’s mouth. Peoples are not the same; they never have been and never will be. Ethnic groups can be compared to the inmates of large American prisons, who usually begin to respect each only when their turf is staked out and when their cells are separated by massive stone walls. Thrown into one cell they are likely to devour each other in a perpetual conflict over “territorial imperative.”

The best way, therefore, to resolve the Yugoslavian multiethnic crisis is not by appealing to the spirit of “brotherhood and unity” but rather by dismantling the country into a loose confederal state. Blood and soil will forever determine the life of nations. “Scratch the skin of any globalist, goes the proverb in Croatia, and you will find beneath a passionate Croat, Serb, German, or Jew.”

With the end of communism, the end of history will not follow, as some would wish us to believe. Had the Europeans in the 13th century conjured up the “end of history,” the Mongol khananat would have been transferred to the Iberian peninsula. Had the Germans and the Poles preached the liturgy of affirmative action in 1683, Vienna would shine today as the capital of the Turkish sultans. The endless power game among nations and ethnic groups, the constant shifts in demographic trends, teach us that life goes on in all its “creative” hatred—Hitler, Stalin, or Saddam notwithstanding.

Today, more than ever before in the history of mankind, it is the specificity of peoples that is

threatened by the universalist credo. Whether one travels to Warsaw or Sarajevo, or lands in Bucharest or Berlin, the blaring of rock music and the iconography of junk culture have become the new lingua franca, of the global village. One could spend days in the Budapest Hilton without ever knowing one had left the suspended bridges of the hotel complex of downtown Atlanta. The new universalism, in order to enforce its creed, no longer needs to resort to genocide and depopulations, to the frigid climate of Kolyma or Katyn, to which Stalin, in the name of a paradigmatic global proletarian, carted off Volga Germans, Kalmuks, and Chechens. The new universalism need only turn to a tepid universe of Kentucky Fried Chicken, a society in which everybody equals everybody, and where ethnic identities, therefore, mean nothing.

This “cool Stalinism” strips peoples of their souls by creating a Homo economicus-dollaricus. The end results of both brands of universalism are pretty much the same, except that the veiled violence of liberal universalism can now be more dangerous than the blunt violence of communism. It is an irony of history that naked violence often preserves regionalism and ethnic roots; each persecution has its cathartic virtue, and each sacrifice invariably strengthens a peoples’ historical memory. Communist violence has triggered a hitherto unseen ethnic pride from the Balkans to the Baltic lands. In an air-conditioned hell of cool universalism, by contrast, regionalism and the love of one’s country do not need to be openly crushed; instead, they can be turned into a commodity, and thereby rendered superfluous, if not outright funny. If ever the ethnic pride disappears from Eastern Europe it will not be as a result of communist repression, but rather as the outcome of a new infatuation with capitalist gadgetry. The global village knows how to enslave Ulysses’ lotus eaters without even making them realize the peril that they face.

In a system in which everything has become a commodity, ethnic identity is viewed as an expendable triviality too—a triviality that may at best arouse some culinary interest or a tourist’s curiosity. If necessary, universalism will even do good business from the hammer, sickle, and swastika—as long as they sell well. For a globe-trotting merchant, home is where he hangs his hat, and where he makes a big buck. Montesquieu was, after all, not wrong when he wrote that commerce is the vocation of equal people.

Until recently, the concepts of egalitarianism and global democracy were strictly limited to Western peoples. Today, in a spasm of masochism, and because of the so-called “white guilt,” the West has extended these principles to the antipodes of Earth. The bon sauvage has been transformed in our postmodern age into the therapeutic role of white man’s superego. Not long ago it was the white man who had to teach the nonwhites the manners of the West. Today the roles are reversed; now it is the non-European, with his pristine innocence, who grafts himself onto the ailing consciousness of the Westerner, pointing out to him the right path to the radiant future.

The very concept of “the West” has been stripped of its original geopolitical and geographical significance, becoming instead a metaphor for a meta-system that encompasses Alaska, the Philippines, South Korea, and any nook or cranny where the idea of the mercantile global village thrives.

With the end of its competing ideology the philosophy of the global village has taken hold in many countries, eulogizing those who support it, vilifying those who don’t. What the future holds is not difficult to guess. It may well happen that inter-ethnic troubles will eventually subside in Eastern Europe, but this is not likely to happen in the West, where racial turmoil

looms large. We may soon see replicas of the Berlin Wall erected in New York and Philadelphia in order to contain the multiethnic violence of the global village. The lesson of artificial Yugoslavia should not be forgotten. Our “promiscuous altruism,” as Garrett Hardin writes, may lead us against our will into a war of all against all.

The cult of the global village appears today as a political response to theological and ideological battles that have rocked the West for more than a century. But it remains to be seen how the singular principle of human rights can be implanted in a world that remains eminently plural. “We invoke human rights,” continues Hardin, “to justify interfering in another nation’s internal affairs. Thereby we risk making enemies of that nation . . . The intentions behind the fiction of ‘human rights’ may be noble, but insisting on such rights poses grave dangers.” Global democracy is the last twilight dream of those who are spiritually homeless and physically uprooted. It is a doctrine that eloquently masks the ethnic and racial reality behind the theology of universalism.

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