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Nostalgia for Origins

Miguel Amorós

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*“Undaunted youths, go, seek that mother earth
From which your ancestors derive their birth.
The soil that sent you forth, her ancient race
In her old bosom shall again embrace.”*

Virgil, *The Aeneid*

The dissolution of all social bonds that are not reducible to transactions that bear within themselves the total reign of the commodity over human life arouses two kinds of reactions: one rational, and the other foreign to Reason. The first reaction was concretized in a radical democratism that broke with bourgeois liberalism to converge with a socialist anti-capitalism, with its first most incisive variant, in our view, being the anarchist naturist school. But the annihilation of memory that goes hand in hand with commodity colonization favors irrationality to the detriment of reflection and historical critique, and therefore it is also prejudicial to legitimate resistance to capital, especially when this irrationality is expressed among rural social groups, and is often manifested in sentimentalism, conservatism and religious traditionalism [*de manera ... ultramontana*]. Although the first tentative

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expressions of anti-capitalism often speak the language of religion, it is a struggle that only requires the consciousness of what it is actually doing in order to become revolutionary. The local impulse to rally around “the old laws”, tradition or the absolute monarchy, which responded to the same causes as the millenarian peasant revolts or the Luddite riots of the weavers and miners, occurred in various locations on the Iberian peninsula during the 19th century. The deepest roots of regional nationalism were embedded during this era, and in the case of the Basque Country they are quite evident, but nationalism properly speaking is manifested in very diverse ways in accordance with the class interests that use it as an ideological or political umbrella, depending on the specific weight of the proletariat and the degree of capitalist development that has been attained. At the present time, now that the process of industrialization has culminated in the transformation of society itself into one vast global industry, when the standardizing steamroller of mass culture has abolished differences, and when deracination is leading to nostalgia for lost identity, many are those who share the search for their “mother earth”, and nationalism, often mixed with other ideologies, is coming to the fore. The question concerning what relation the nationalist polemic can maintain with projects for social emancipation has different answers depending on the type of nationalism involved and the specific historical moment. To begin with we can say that at the present time almost all identity-based nationalisms and patriotisms are in practice alternative political approaches for carrying out capitalist development, approaches that oppose central State regulation of capitalist development, which is why their relation with freedom and the end of oppression is nil. Precisely the most interesting part of nationalism, and the most progressive in the human sense, that of its romantic origins, that is, the defense of old customs and traditions, communitarian institutions, egalitarianism, the rejection of

the industrialization process and, in general, everything that really sets it apart, is the ballast which is being jettisoned in favor of an extreme economic modernization that is supposed to set the standard for and provide the new pattern for development in less developed nations. Most contemporary nationalists do not want to defend their identity by preserving their territory from global financial flows, but instead seek to create a profitable local franchise that will attract those flows. The development of regional metropolitan systems as nodes of the networks of globalized capitalism provide them with the best secessionist arguments: the conurbation-State is the most adequate political form for economic globalization, the form that provides the highest profits. This nationalism therefore defends the interests of the local oligarchies that are intimately linked with world finance; the differences that distinguish various nationalist trends, to the degree that these differences have any meaning, respond to the variable impact of the emerging middle classes in their schemas, which are more or less oriented towards independence depending on the greater or lesser need for or fear of the central State power.

Nationalism is based on the assumption of the existence of a separate, homogeneous, ethnic population with its own interests, which speaks its own language, has its own culture and therefore constitutes a nation. By “historical right” it is supposed to be entitled to the development of its own sovereign institutions, the products of the popular will, in the framework of an independent State, with its parliament, its officials, its police, its army, its judges and its borders. We shall attempt to show that all of this is false. Everything that could define a people has long since ceased to exist and for that reason there is no popular will, either. The need for a national market created the central State, ruined the local non-capitalist economies and abrogated their laws. The rural areas were impoverished, their “historical” institutions were abolished, their popular folklore and traditions were lost together with all so-

cial relations extraneous to the economy (relations based on reciprocity, mutual aid, the gift, redistribution, barter...), communal lands were confiscated, guilds were dissolved, classes arose, migratory movements were set in motion and, finally, the individual was uprooted from his community and thrown onto the market. In the transition from a pre-capitalist society to a capitalist society, populations were gradually standardized and homogenized, that is, transformed into a proletarianized social class. Any community or harmony of interests that might have been able to exist among the Estates of the Ancien Régime disappeared, erased by the capitalist intrusion into society. Economic interest dominated every other kind of interest, popular culture passed away and the popular language ceased to be used among the elites. Despite the meritorious cultural renaissances linked to the local intelligentsia or to bourgeois sectors in conflict with the State (due to the unequal development of the ruling classes), the process nonetheless continued, and with the appearance of mass culture, that is, of the spectacle, of generalized entertainment, of the mass media, etc., language lost its validity as a vehicle of culture and means of communication—any language—putting an end to its role as the last sign of surviving identity. The current institutionalization of culture and teaching of regional languages has the same effect as the erstwhile institutionalization of Castilian culture and the promotion of the national language: no language can be used to communicate. The modern conditions of existence prevent any serious communication; language and communication do not go hand in hand.

The uniformity achieved under capitalism means the end of peoples and nations. The real content of popular resistance to the implications of this standardization, that is, the resistance against the creation of a market for money, land and labor, was distorted by the local bourgeoisie and petty bourgeois by way of the contrivance of ethnic stereotypes and national myths, the manipulation of history and the invention of a spu-

to the root—we shall all have to find the signs of our future identity.

rious tradition amalgamated with folkloric residues. The nationalists need a Golden Age whence they can extract idyllic images and fabulous visions that serve as models for the patriotic imagination and their electorate. This is never enough, however, and the active presence of the militant proletariat, a new factor, forced the nationalist movements to define themselves with respect to the proletarian movement. There was no lack of individuals who discovered that the revolutionary working class was the only subject capable of resolving the problem of the national question. The proletariat, as “working people” and social majority, became the depository of the essence of the fatherland. In general, the diverse socialist tendencies reacted against this trend. The anarchists, for example, opposed national independence in the name of the unity of the proletariat, and opposed the formation of a new State in the name of their principles. In its time, the CNT rejected the Catalan statute, despite the fact that the majority of its members had voted for the nationalist party, the ERC (the Catalan Republican Left), because the proposed new State was conceived in accordance with capitalist interests. The social revolution was real independence. Proletarian federalism went even beyond the statist secessionist movement, which diverted the attention of the workers and left exploitation as it was. The CNT recognized the “Catalan people”, but not the Catalan bourgeoisie; Catalonia was a country, but not a nationality. Nation and State were only artificial creations. Catalonia would be free only as a sum of federated municipalities, without borders, rather than as a State. The defense of the oppressed Catalan culture and language was perfectly compatible with the class struggle, for even though the proletariat is internationalist and has no fatherland—its fatherland is the world—it does have a language. Indeed, Catalonia was never more free than during those two and a half months when it was ruled by the Committee of Anti-fascist Militias, but this was not the kind of freedom that was desired by the diverse interests camouflaged under the

flag of Catalanism, with the exception of those who were represented by the POUM. These interests were transformed during the civil war into the vanguard of the counterrevolution, excavating an abyss between the workers and Catalan nationalism that has yet to be bridged. The ephemeral resurgence of the workers movement in the sixties and seventies gave way once again to a socialistic nationalism, and even led to a certain type of anarcho-patriotism that hardly made any contribution to the identity debate and even less to libertarian theoretical renewal. The lure of lost roots caused the workers movement to fall into the trap of recovered “identity”, endorsing with greater or lesser enthusiasm the most suspect nationalist paraphernalia, neo-folklore, flags, anthems, [linguistic and cultural] “normalization” and subsidized culture, all of it presented by the local oligarchy as the recovery of national identity, while it is actually nothing but the obligatory supplementary curriculum for the subject who desires to prosper in the new political framework.

Today—in the Iberian peninsula and, more generally, in the countries where modern conditions of production and consumption prevail—there are no peoples, and to prove this we shall note the decline of the birth rate of the native population, the indisputable aging of the population and the flood of immigrants that maintains the level of exploitation that the functioning of the economy requires. Nor are there any specific places or landscapes; unrestricted urbanization has merged the countryside with the city by destroying both and scattering over the surface of the land a single predatory model of territorial occupation. Constant mobility has done the rest. There are no more real roots, or particular ethnicities, or national interests, or any greater identity than the one that is disseminated by the generalized uniform way of life. Under the absolute rule of capital, amidst the full-blown globalization of the economy, what causes people to resemble one another, regardless of their background, is much greater than what

sets them apart. The levels of consumption or the degree of repression may vary, but the standardizing tendencies are increasingly erasing any and all differences. In a manner of speaking, everyone will end up either singing along with the “Macarena” or hating it. Even racial mixing and mixed race children are the inadvertent result of the planetary rule of finance. There are more than fifty languages spoken in every conurbation. The national interest is nothing but the interest of international capital represented in the “national” territory by its political-economic oligarchy. Only the oppressed are a nation. Does this mean that nationalist demands are reactionary? Not necessarily; at least not in their anti-capitalist and anti-centralist tendency. Not as the historic reference to a life outside the market and separate from the bourgeois State. It is reactionary, however, as bourgeois mystification and an alibi for leaders. It is reactionary as spectacle. The struggle against the oppression of the tide of globalization is essentially a local struggle and a struggle for the reassertion of local rights, but everywhere it is the same; freedom must start from the bottom, concretizing in local forms, direct relations, communities speaking their own languages, and this, without deviating from the cosmopolitan exigencies, will lead us to the real discovery of the past. This does not involve a return to the past, or disinterring an extinguished society, or giving life to a mummified people, forgetting about the rest of the world. It is not a return of the kind recommended by the god Apollo to Aeneas in our quotation from Virgil. It is rather a matter of recovering memory, identifying the point where society first took its demented turn, discovering in the old wisdom and the old collective practices of the peoples, but not only in them, the forms of a lost freedom, with the intention of availing ourselves of them in our modern anti-capitalist battles. It is in this historical connection between past and present, between local experience and the polyglot reality, that, in order to orient ourselves by real radical struggles—struggles that go