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The Importance of Being Modular

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WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY REALLY?

The simplest, immediate and intuitively obvious definition, which also has a certain amount of merit, is: civil society is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions, which is strong enough to counterbalance the state, and, whilst not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent the state from dominating and atomizing the rest of society.

Such a definition conveys the idea contained in the phrase, and also highlights the reason for the newly emerged attractiveness of the slogan in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, from the viewpoint of a sustained and serious, historically comparative investigation, this definition has a grave deficiency. It is good as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. The trouble is simple: such a definition would include under the notion of 'civil society' many forms of social order which in fact would not satisfy us, or those who have in recent years felt inspired by this slogan.

The point is this: historically, mankind has not *always* suffered under centralized despotisms. Quite frequently, it has not. The imposition of a despotism is not always an easy matter. Pre-modern polities lack the equipment for first pulverizing and then running the societies they control. They are interested in extracting as much surplus as possible, but frequently, the best way of doing this is to allow local communities to administer themselves, and merely oblige them to supply produce – or labour – on pain of punishment. In favourable circumstances, such as those conducive to mobile pastoralism, or in difficult mountainous terrain, local communities can even become fully independent and resist demands for taxation.

The centralizing logic of successive elimination of power centres, till one only is left, only operates in conditions which favour it, such as river valleys. What all this amounts to is that the traditional agrarian world, though its polities are most often monarchical, is nevertheless very well endowed in highly structured and partly or wholly autonomous communities.

These, however, maintain their cohesion, internal discipline and solidarity by a heavy ritual underscoring of social roles and obligations. The roles are generally conceived and defined in kin terms, and may in fact frequently be filled in terms of the kin positions of their occupants. Political, economic, ritual, kin and any other kinds of obligations are superimposed on each other, and their visibility and authority strengthened by a plethora of ritual reminders: as in a military organization, discipline is enforced by a proliferation of minor punishable transgressions, the avoidance of which puts a burden on each individual and keeps him in awe of the social order as a whole.

So, traditional man can sometimes escape the tyranny of kings, but only at the cost of falling under the tyranny of cousins. The kin-defined, ritually orchestrated, demanding and life-pervading systems of the 'ancient city', in Fustel de Coulanges's sense, do indeed succeed in avoiding tyrannical centralization, but only at the cost of a demanding culture which modern man would find intolerably stifling. The general sociological law of agrarian society runs, roughly, man must be subject to either kings or cousins, though quite often he is subject to both at once. Kings generally dominate societies through the intermediary of local institutions and communities.

So, if we are to define *our* notion of 'civil society' effectively, we must first of all exclude from it something which may be in itself attractive or repulsive, or perhaps both, but which is radically distinct from it. Fustel de Coulanges in *The Ancient City* perhaps did more than anyone else to establish this distinction. His aim was to disabuse his fellow French citizens, who had for some time been eager to invoke the alleged liberties of the ancients as precedents for the liberties they were eager to acquire or to fortify in their own society. But this was a total misunderstanding, Fustel claimed:

> The ideas which the moderns have had of Greece and Rome have often been in their way. Having imperfectly observed the institutions of the ancient city, men have dreamed of reviving them among us.

They have deceived themselves about the liberty of the ancients, and on this very account the liberty of the moderns has been put in peril.[1]

Fustel was eager to cure his compatriots of their illusions and thereby guard against the dangers inherent in them.

This particular danger may not be serious in our time: the rhetoric of the recent converts to the idea of civil society does not contain much, if indeed it contains any, invocations of the ancient liberties of the Greeks and Romans. Nevertheless, a proper understanding of what the ideal really means now must refrain from an uncritical invocation of any and every plural society, in which well-established institutions counterbalance the state. Such an equation is not merely in error sociologically, it also has practical misleading consequences which, even if they are not the same as those of the French contemporaries and predecessors of Fustel, are nonetheless important, and must be guarded against.

Fustel is exceedingly eloquent on the matter of how much real individual liberty, in the modern sense, there was in the ancient city:

> The city had been founded upon a religion and constituted like a church. Hence its strength; hence, also, its omnipotence and the absolute empire which it exercised over its members. In a society established on such principles, individual liberty could not exist. The citizen was subordinate in everything, and without any reserve to the city ... Private life did not escape the omnipotence of the state ... It exercised its tyranny in the smallest things ...[2]

Fustel was concerned to show how this kind of plural, non-centralized, but socially oppressive society, which for all its political pluralism would not satisfy a modern craving for civil society, was replaced by a new order in which the Christian separation of religion and polity made individual liberty thinkable. In this way, Fustel was not merely the ancestor of those who, like Louis Dumont, seek the religious origins of Western individualism, but also of those who seek to analyse the societies based on principles he had laid bare, and which in due course were to be called 'segmentary'.[3]

Fustel was interested in the disappearance and replacement of such societies, but in fact they had not disappeared from the earth, or even from the Mediterranean. Fustel and his ideas have also become the inspiration of those many investigators, who have since come to be called social anthropologists, who are eager to under-

stand societies which still function in the way which Fustel credited to Mediterranean antiquity. In his own time, Emile Masqueray rediscovered the ancient city, under Muslim camouflage, in the Berber hills of Algeria.[4] More recently, an American scholar has used Fustel, directly rather than mediated by Durkheim as is customary, in studying a long-urbanized Asian population. After summarizing Fustel's segmentary account of society and the way in which each level of segments was sustained by its deities and rites, Levy goes on to comment:

> Fustel's portrait contained a deeply felt myth, that of an earthly paradise of orderly, family-based unities prior to a transformation into a larger, impersonal and conflict-ridden state organisation.[5]

Unquestionably, Fustel's materials were used to help foster such a myth, though Fustel himself was rather concerned, as we have seen, to counter an earlier myth, that of the ancient city as a kind of precursor of the French Revolution.

What concerns us now is that the situation is, at the very least, triangular: there are the segmentary communities, cousin-ridden and ritual-ridden, free perhaps of central tyranny, but not free in a sense that would satisfy us; there is centralization which grinds into the dust all subsidiary social institutions or sub-communities, whether ritually stifling or not; and there is the third alternative which is the one we seek. A proper definition must take all this into account: it has at least two contrasts, its essence cannot be seized with the help of a merely bi-polar opposition between pluralism and monocentrism.

DAVID HUME ON RELIGION, OR, CIVIL SOCIETY A FAILED *UMMA*?

There is a fascinating contradiction in the thought of David Hume on this topic, a contradiction which is probably more revealing and illuminating than the consistencies of lesser men. In *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume works out a sociology of religion which is, at the same time, a sociology of the emergence of liberty. His views resemble those of Gibbon and those of the great latter-day follower of both Hume and Gibbon, namely Frazer. They are well in the style and spirit of the Enlightenment, manifesting admiration for the virtues of classical antiquity, and distaste for the monotheist scripturalist and egotistical ethos which has replaced it. Hume does

not yet have the sophistication of Fustel de Coulanges or Benjamin Constant, and he fails to appreciate that the liberties of the ancient would not be altogether to modern taste. The contrast in terms of which he argues is basically one which opposes classical religion – social, civic, this-worldly, communal, traditional, tolerant – to the world religion which replaced it, which by contrast is egotistic, other-worldly, doctrinal and intolerant. His code word for the former is *superstition*, and for the latter, *enthusiasm*. His conclusions are clear:

> The tolerating spirit of idolaters, both in ancient and modern times, is very obvious to any one ...
>
> The intolerance of almost all religions, which have maintained the unity of God, is as remarkable as the contrary principle of polytheists.[6]

The contrast drawn is obvious, and the reasoning persuasive. The priests administering the rites of civic religion inculcate civic virtues, and are not concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy, barely possessing any doctrine or the means for fixing and codifying it. By contrast, the zealots of individual salvation through adherence to doctrine, on the one hand encourage their followers to place the salvation of their own private souls above all else, and, on the other, define members of the community of the saved in terms of commitment to formally defined *conviction*, deviation from which defines heresy, which in turn calls for exemplary punishment.

It follows that mankind was much better off under the regime of the ancients, and that the adoption of revealed, doctrinal, scriptural, universalistic religion was a disaster. The argument is persuasive, and evidence supports it. Yet something is not quite right. Even in *The Natural History of Religion*, which in the main is devoted to expounding the Augustan theme of the excellence of the ancients and the corruption of the moderns, he comments on the counter-example:

> And if, among CHRISTIANS, the ENGLISH and DUTCH have embraced the principles of toleration, this singularity has proceeded from the steady resolution of the civil magistrate, in opposition to the continued efforts of priests and bigots.[7]

The greater liberty of the English and the Dutch clearly contradicts the Augustan thesis, and Hume invokes the not really very ad-

equate *Hilfshypothese* of the civil magistrate and his steady resolution to overcome the difficulty. This won't really do, and elsewhere Hume does rather better. His remarkable essay 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' deserves to be counted as one of the earliest, and most perceptive, contributions to the debate concerning the role of protestantism in the emergence of the modern world. In it, he puts forward three propositions:

> that superstition is favourable to priestly power, and enthusiasm not less or rather more contrary to it, than sound reason and philosophy.
>
> that religions, which partake of enthusiasm are, on their first rise, more furious and violent than those which partake of superstition; but in a little time become more gentle and moderate.
>
> that superstition is an enemy to civil liberty, and enthusiasm a friend to it.[8]

Here we are no longer in the pre-Fustel world of Gibbon, committed to the equation of the good social condition with the best to be found in antiquity, but rather, in the world of Max Weber, pervaded by the awareness that something very distinctive indeed had happened in the modern world, and that it is connected with the Reformation.

The last of the three propositions sums it all up: the other two offers attempts at explanation of this strange phenomenon, so contrary to the plausible reasoning of *The Natural History of Religion*. The explanation offered resembles what Max Weber was later due to call 'routinization': the religions addicted to 'enthusiasm', that is to firm commitment to abstract doctrine and its serious implementation, though uncompromising initially and thereby inimical to liberty, eventually soften and become tolerant. They make a double (at least) contribution to freedom: first, they destroy the priests, in part by universalizing priesthood and thus terminating the existence of a distinct priestly caste, and, secondly, by being directly inclined to liberty during the period of diminution of zeal. This diminution is further aided by the absence amongst these erstwhile enthusiasts of a special category of people charged with maintaining the flame of faith. That very equalization of the religious condition, which had made the puritans such formidable enemies of liberty at the time of maximum fervour, also made them more tolerant during the time of diminution of enthusiasm.

All this is excellent, and immeasurably superior to Hume's attempt at explaining the liberal potential of enthusiasm in *The*

Natural History of Religion. The balance of power in society, as between the enthusiasts and the addicts of superstition, must surely also be taken into consideration. Perhaps the full story could run something like this: the enthusiasts made great inroads on the society, and in fact were, for a time, victorious. Nonetheless, in the end, they were defeated but not crushed. The society as a whole favoured a compromise, a retention of superstition, priestly power and ritual and all, but with limited power and a toleration of the extremists/enthusiasts, who, obliged to renounce their ambition of imposing the rule of righteousness on earth, if necessary by political force, turn instead to pacifism and tolerance. The priests concentrate on combating the enthusiasm of the zealots, and quietly tolerate disbelief provided it is discreet and ambiguous; the zealots turn inwards, to the worldly asceticism of *disinterested* accumulation.

So the coming of civil society, a society liberal in the modern and not in the ancient, non-liberal, cousinly and ritualized though plural sense, presupposed two things: a political stalemate between the rival contestants, such as in fact occurred in seventeenth-century England, leading to a compromise consisting of a watered-down ritualism and mediation at the centre, and a so-to-speak privatized *Umma* at home among the minoritarian enthusiasts; and, prior to all this, the kind of balance between mediation-cum-ritualism (the left-over from communal religion) and universalistic-doctrinal elements, which in fact is found in Christianity.

When doctrinal, soteriological, omnibus world religions partially replaced communal religions in the 'Axial Age', they seldom if ever replaced them completely. The doctrinal, individualist, universalist element was introduced, and the doctrine or illumination offered to any questing and anguished individual was added to the community-defining ritual and its guardian priesthood; but the second element did remain. Henceforth, the religious life of mankind in the more complex societies was due to be the interaction of these two major elements, sometimes fusing harmoniously, something in overt confrontation. The manner in which these two elements met in Christianity and in Islam is interesting: the two cases are almost mirror images of each other.

In Islam, the scripturalist, puritan, universalist, individualist variant prevailed at the centre. Not always endowed with political power, it was generally credited with a kind of normative authority. The ritualistic, mediation-addicted, ecstasy-seeking, hierarchical variants were fragmented, peripheral, popular, and often a little

shame-faced. So we have *Umma* at the centre, community at the periphery and in the lower levels of the social hierarchy. Periodically, conflict erupts between the two: the enthusiasts at the centre for a time prevail over the superstition at the margins, but social factors eventually restore the balance, and the circle repeats itself; in the traditional world, this goes on for ever, it would seem.

Or should one say rather, *because* the circle repeats itself for ever, Islam never breaks out of the traditional world. This is the cyclical, non-progressive dynamic of Islam, analysed by Ibn Khaldun and rather contemptuously noted by Friedrich Engels, in fact echoing Ibn Khaldun without actually citing his name.[9] Come the modern world, however – imposed by extraneous forces rather than produced indigenously – and the new balance of power, favouring the urban centre against rural communities, causes the central faith to prevail, and we face a successful *Umma* at long last. This is the explanation of the secularization-resistant nature of Islam.

In Christianity, the mix of the two religious elements was quite different. Hierarchy, organized mediation, bureaucratized ritual and magic, prevailed in the very central and single Organization, claiming a monopolistic link to the Founder of the religion and the coming of the unique Revelation. The scripturalist, puritan, individualistic, symmetrical, ecstasy-spurning and mediation-repudiating enthusiasts were at the margin. *They* were disunited, the Organization was unique and united (at least most of the time).

It was this mix which in fact engendered, by some internal chemistry, the modern world. Whether only it could have done so, as a very great sociologist claimed, we shall probably never know: we cannot rerun the experiment in order to find out. This mix, plus the fact that the great confrontation between superstitious centre and enthusiastic periphery ended in a draw and in a deadlock, meant that the modern world was produced, and when produced, the compromise led to no general *Umma*, nor even to a series of ghetto-*Ummas*, but to a widespread secularization. And also, and this is what concerns us in the present argument, to a pluralism free of the imposition of the *Umma*, but not resembling the cousinly ritualism of communities either.

We have at least three situations to consider: the Muslim *Umma* which succeeded, the Christian one which failed but engendered civil society and the would-be secular *Umma* of the immanentist, formally materialist socio-historical religion, which signally failed as an *Umma* but has not yet demonstrated its capacity to produce a civil society either. All that the latter has achieved is to generate,

at least amongst a significant proportion of its citizens, an evidently sincere and ardent *desire* for civil society.

MODULAR MAN

There are firms which produce, sell and advertise modular furniture. The point about such furniture is that it comes in bits which are so to speak agglutinative: you can buy one bit, which will function on its own, but when your needs or your income or the space available to you augment, you can buy another bit and it will fit in with the first bit, and the whole thing will still have a coherence, aesthetically and technically. You can combine and recombine the bits at will. This makes modular furniture quite different from the ordinary kind: with that, if you want coherence, you have to buy it all at once, in one go, which means that you have to make a kind of irrevocable commitment, or at any rate, a commitment which it will be rather costly to revoke. If you add a new bit of non-modular furniture to an old bit, you end with an eclectic, incoherent mess. You must then either resign yourself to such messiness, or scrap the old and start altogether anew, which is costly.

We are investigating the notion of civil society partly by means of contrasting it with its alternatives, and our point is that not one, but more than one important contrast is involved. We are concerned not merely by the opposition between liberal civil society and an ideological *Umma* (whether the dismally failed secular *Umma* of Marxism, or the strangely successful *Umma* of Islam), but also with the contrast between it and the as-it-were Durkheimian society of ritual-based and communal, rather than doctrine-based and soteriological society. What really marks this distinction is that genuine civil society requires, not modular furniture, but modular *man*.

The main point of Durkheimian sociology, and perhaps of the organicist or communalist tradition in social thought generally, is that man is markedly un-modular. He cannot be bonded into a social organism easily or at will. The Social Contract theorists had thought the opposite, and supposed that a society could be set up as easily as modern man can buy a washing machine on hire purchase. The trouble with them was not merely that their position was logically circular – if it is contracts which bind men, then a meta-contract is required to make the first one binding, and so on forever

– but above all, they were illegitimately generalizing from one kind of man, who takes his own promises and commitments seriously, to man in general.

But man in general is not modular, his individual isolated acts and affirmations are not to be taken seriously or to be relied on, his only real commitment is to a kind of interdependent and ritually orchestrated totality. Before you can trust his promise, it has to be made with trumpets and drama, with witnesses and presentations, dancing and music. By laying on the solemnity, preferably with a sacrifice, by linking the act to all kinds of other social relationships and symbolically fusing it with a whole network of solemn occasions, you can get it to be taken seriously. A traditional wedding involves two entire clans, great expense, much sound and fury; it is modern man who can get married in a quick sober procedure with a couple of witnesses and yet incur legally and socially serious consequences.

Non-modularity is as it were the normal human condition, which can be assumed to obtain unless some very special circumstances make for modularity. But the political and economic consequences of non-modularity are tremendous. The political ones are, above all: the only effective social groups, which alone can engender a social balance of power and counteract arbitrary centralized tyranny, are heavily ritualized, socially pervasive, deeply demanding, stifling social segments. The only alternative to the tyranny of kings is the tyranny of cousins (though of course, you *can* have *both*). The economic consequences of non-modularity are simple and obvious: rigidity, conservatism, stagnation. The bonding of practices and procedures to ritual and to kin group means the freezing of technique. Technical innovation means social disruption and the de-stabilization of that essential social segment, which alone offers protection, and 'life meaning', to man. It obviates the possibility of choosing techniques simply in terms of clearly defined criteria of efficiency, and of nothing else. It imposes instead the need to judge practices, if indeed they are to be subject to critical scrutiny at all, in terms of the multiple, imponderable, complex considerations of their participation in an indivisible, 'organic', cultural totality.

It is the political consequences of modularity which are really important. Modular man can combine into effective associations and institutions, without these being total, many-stranded, underwritten by ritual, and made stable through being linked to a whole set of relationships, all of these then being tied in with each other

and so immobilized. He can combine into specific-purpose, *ad hoc*, limited associations, without binding himself by some blood ritual. He can leave an association when he comes to disagree with its policy without being open to the charge of treason. A properly terminated contract is not an act of treachery, and is not seen as such. A tenant who gives due notice and pays the recognized rent, acquires no stigma if he move to a new tenancy. Yet these highly specific, unsanctified, instrumental, revocable links or bonds are effective! *This* is civil society: the forging of links which are effective even though they are flexible, specific, instrumental. Society is a structure, it is not atomized, helpless and supine, and yet the structure is readily adjustable and responds to rational criteria of improvement.

MODULAR MAN IS A NATIONALIST

The modularity of modern man was probably a precondition of the industrial miracle, and is certainly – by definition – a precondition of civil society: civil society is a cluster of institutions and associations strong enough to prevent tyranny, but which are, nevertheless, entered freely rather than imposed either by birth or by awesome ritual.

But the modularity has a price, or at any rate, a precondition, which in turn is liable to raise problems. So far, we have focused on certain moral and intellectual qualities which are presupposed by modularity: what is required is that a man should be capable of undertaking and honouring, deeply internalizing, commitments and obligations by a single and sober act. He will honour his debts and obligations without prolonged and fearful rituals, without involving the honour of all his kin and so forth. It is not so much that his word is his bond, but that his word is his word even when spoken softly, without emphasis, in ordinary circumstances, without artificial heightening of the atmosphere, so to speak. And he must also be capable of lucid, Cartesian thought, which separates issues rather than conflates them and takes them one at a time: the non-conflation of issues, the separation out of the social strands, which makes society non-rigid, presupposes not merely a moral willingness, but also an intellectual capacity. Clear thought is not a birthright but an accomplishment, and somehow it had to be taught and its principles internalized: it is an acquired taste, and the acquisition had to be fostered.

But the modularity, the flexibility of institutions, requires the substitutability of men for each other: one man must be able to fill the slot previously occupied by another. To do this, they need not be identical in all respects: were that so, nothing would be accomplished by the substitution. The substitution or replacement of one man by another only has point if, precisely, they do differ, and the substitution effects an improvement in the totality within which it occurs. But, nevertheless, if it is to be possible and workable as well as constituting an improvement, the connections between the occupant of the slot and his neighbours must be standard, so that communication, interaction, can continue at least at the previous level. The communication symbols employed by the new occupant of the slot must be culture-compatible with those of his new neighbours.

This is indeed one of the most important general traits of a modern society: cultural homogeneity. The old segmentary societies of various kinds highlighted and fortified the boundaries between the segments by cultural differentiation: people spoke, ate, dressed, etc., differently, according to their precise location in a complex, intricate social structure. They had to speak and generally comport themselves as their station required, and to speak in any different manner would have been offensive presumption, if not violation of legal or ritual prescription. There was, in these conditions, not merely no incentive for, but plenty of reasons against, defining political units in terms of identity of culture. This idea, which is the very essence of nationalism, goes against the grain of traditional society. If ever it does exemplify any degree of correlation between political and cultural boundaries, it does so by accident, and not from any kind of inner compulsion.

But not so in the new realm of modular man. It requires men to be modular, for it requires them to be mobile as between social positions in an inherently unstable social structure. It cannot tolerate idiosyncrasies of communication, which would only inhibit the shifting of one social pawn from a given position to another. It cannot tolerate locally idiosyncratic idioms of communication, which, when taken from one position to another where the neighbours are no longer familiar with them, would immediately lead to unintelligibility and the inhibition of the easy flow and comprehension of messages.

The standardization of idiom is in any case imposed on this kind of society by the nature of work, which has ceased to be physical and has become predominantly semantic: work is now the passing

and reception of messages, largely between anonymous individuals in a mass society, who cannot normally be familiar with their interlocutors. Located as is the partner in the exchange of messages at the other end of a telephone or a fax, his identity normally is not even known, let alone familiar. But this being so, it is no longer acceptable that the partner's facial expression, body posture, past history and habits should enter into the determination of the meaning of the message, as a kind of additional but essential phoneme. In the old intimate, closed peasant communities, in which all speakers and listeners were intimately familiar with each other, these as it were personal, privatized phonemes were not merely tolerable, they were, very nearly, the only ones tolerated. Explicitness of speech, which detaches the meaning from these elements and makes it a function exclusively of standardized phonetic elements, independent of context and identity of speaker and listener, is something reserved for, at most, a few scholastics and lawyers. Its practice by others is unthinkable.

All that changes in the society of universal and anonymous communication. Modularity, with its moral and intellectual preconditions, makes civil society, and the existence of non-suffocating yet effective segments, possible; but it makes not only for civil, but also for nationalist society. Modular man is not *universally* substitutable: he is substitutable within the cultural boundaries of the idiom in which he has been trained to communicate, to emit and to receive messages. He has had to be *trained* for this, for the capacity to observe a standardized code cannot be acquired through the informal procedures of daily living, which is the way in which old, folk, popular traditions were, by definition, transmitted. It can only be done by means of formal education, transmitting to its wards the standardized, codified rules of a culture which, precisely in virtue of this codification and its inherent links to a specialized educational institutions, is a *High* Culture. In these circumstances, for the first time in world history, a High Culture, in this sense, becomes the pervasive and operational culture of an entire society, rather than being the privilege and badge of a restricted social stratum.

But it also means, of course, that the territorial or social limits of the use of any one such High Culture at the same time also sets the limits of the substitutability, the possible deployment and social insertion, of the given modular individual who had received his training in that particular culture. For the average person, the limits of his culture are the limits of his employability, social accept-

ability, effective participation and citizenship. His educationally acquired culture is by far his most important possession and investment, for it alone gives him access to all else; and the existence of a secure, preferably extensive political unit identified with that culture, and therefore automatically conferring full status on him as a bearer of it, is his most pressing and powerful political concern. He is not a nationalist out of atavism (quite the reverse), but rather, from a perfectly sound, though seldom lucid and conscious, appreciation of his own true interests.

As indicated, the previous agrarian world was enormously rich in cultural nuance, having used it to indicate and highlight and confirm and sacralize an enormous multiplicity of social distinctions. For the same reasons, it could not use cultural boundaries to indicate and highlight political ones. Now, the reverse is the case. *Inside* political units, cultural differentiation and nuance are to a large extent wiped out, in the interests of furthering that invaluable modularity. But at the same time, as the limits of substitutability are the limits of commitment, political boundaries will tend to converge with boundaries of High Cultures, and indeed, High Cultures will generally displace Low ones.

At the beginning of the social transformation which brought about the new state of affairs, the world was full of political units of all sizes, and of cultural nuances, and hence of men whose own culture did not converge with the one used by the political unit they inhabited. Under the new social regime, this became increasingly uncomfortable. They then had two options, if they were to diminish the discomfort: they could change their culture, or they could change the nature of the political unit, either by changing its boundaries, or by changing its cultural identification. Men generally adopted one or the other of these strategies, sometimes both, whether in succession or simultaneously. The surface result of all this was the nationalist turbulence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

FRIEND OR FOE?

The same, or largely overlapping, forces have produced both human modularity and nationalism. Modularity is the precondition of civil society and, according to the most famous and most influential sociological theory, it is itself the fruit of protestantism. It was protestantism which, on this theory, had taught men to stand

alone, to be bound by their word without the benefit of reinforcing ritual and communal context. Protestantism, by making the absence of ritual into its own most potent ritual, and the absence of graven images into its most suggestive fetish, liberated mankind, or rather, a segment of mankind, from that addiction to audio-visual and socio-contextual reinforcement which is so characteristic of most of humanity, and which had prevented the emergence of that modern world to which we are now committed, and whose most valued political features are associated with the notion of civil society.

If civil society and nationalism are both the offspring of the same forces, does this kinship turn them into political allies or enemies?

At the start, they tended to be allies. For one thing, early nationalism was modest and timid, the Herderian defence of the charms of folk cultures against the imperialism of the French court or of British commercialism or the bloodless universalism of abstract man of the Enlightenment. (Later, the philosophical anthropology of nationalism was to become more aggressive, not to say ferocious, but that was yet to come.) But above all, initially liberalism and nationalism had the same enemy, the baroque absolutist state which was indifferent to the folk culture of its subjects, and in any case disinclined to allow them too many liberties or too much participation. So, the claim for greater liberties for the individual, the ratification of that which was to become the normal comportment of modular man, and the claim for greater equality of cultures, could be presented together, and even endowed with an elective affinity with each other, as jointly seeking greater human fulfilment.

But in due course, their paths diverged. The individualism inherent in the condition of modular man, if pushed to its logical conclusion, was hostile to the cult of community. The position was indeed pushed to its extreme logical conclusion by those whose own social situation impelled them in that direction. Nationalism, on the other hand, went in a different direction. Notwithstanding the fact that its real social roots lay in the emergence of a mass anonymous society destined to use a shared and standardized culture, it adopted the pretence (held in all sincerity by its protagonists and propagandists) that it was defending and perpetuating a village, folk culture. Rooted in an emerging *Gesellschaft*, it preached *Gemeinschaft*. In Central and Eastern Europe, it was forced into this stance partly by the fact that new High Cultures had to be forged on the basis of peasant cultures. But the nationalists were hostile not merely to rival cultures, but also, and perhaps with

special venom, hostile to bloodless cosmopolitanism, perhaps because they sensed in it an ally of political centralism, a support for the attempt to maintain the old transnational empires against neo-ethnic irredentism. (They were right: in the end, the liberals, committed to an open market in goods, men and ideas, were the last supporters of centralism, remaining faithful to it, even when the old baroque absolutism and the partisans of the *ancien régime* had given up the struggle.)

So, in the later stages, the push towards an individualist civil society, and the nationalist striving, tended to come in collision with each other. The ambiguity of this relationship was very visible in the Habsburg empire, and the pattern was due in the end to be replayed in the terminal stage of the tsarist-bolshevik empire.

THE TIME ZONES OF EUROPE

The manner in which the nationalist aspect of modular humanity manifested itself in Europe varied from region to region, and the differences are both inherently interesting, and important for the understanding of subsequent developments. Roughly speaking, and allowing for certain complications which will be specified later, Europe falls into four time zones, resembling a little those global maps one sometimes sees at airports, which indicate the different times in the various vertically defined stretches of the globe.

It is perhaps useful, if contrary to nature, to proceed from West to East, as in this matter the West is less problematical than the East. The westernmost time zone is that of the Atlantic coast of Europe. The point about this area is that from the late Middle Ages onwards if not earlier, it was occupied by strong dynastic states, which roughly, even if only roughly, correlated with cultural areas. This meant that when, with the coming of nationalism, political units had to adjust themselves to cultural boundaries, no very great changes were required here. History had made a present to nationalism of a broad region, where the nationalist imperative was already, at least in some measure, satisfied before the event. Some turbulence there was, of course, even within this zone: to this day, there is violence in Bilbao and Belfast. One major adjustment of the political map did take place, namely the establishment of the Republic of Ireland. But all in all, the map of this part of Europe in the age of nationalism does not look so very different from what it had been in the age when dynasty, religion and local community had been the determinants of boundaries. The dynastic states,

finding themselves in charge of an area correlating with a culture, tended to identify with that culture, even before nationalism had turned culture into the most potent political symbol. There was no need for very widespread ethnic irredentism when the new order arrived. New cultures did not need to be created, and the attempt to revive one in Ireland failed. The cultures which exist did not need to acquire new political roofs: the roof was ready, waiting for them.

The next zone to the east was different. Far from possessing ready-made dynastic states, it was an area of quite exceptional political fragmentation, endowed with effective political units much smaller than the geographical extension of the two locally dominant High Cultures. The major political meta-unit of the area, the Holy Roman empire, had lost effective reality and, by the time of the coming of the age of nationalism, had ceased to exist even in name. But if the region lacked pre-existing political units ready for the nationalist requirements, it was well equipped with pre-existing, codified, normative High Cultures. Both Italian and German were well codified, ever since the Renaissance and the Reformation respectively, at the very latest.

So here there was a need for polity-building, but not for culture-building. There was no need for schoolteachers, ethnographers, folklorists, and national 'Awakeners' generally, to go out to the villages and construct a national culture from the chaos of regional dialectal variety. It had all been done, before nationalism. Whereas in the westernmost zone, all that needed to be done was to transform peasants sunk in local cultural particularism into properly educated members of the national culture, here (though perhaps this had to be done too), the main thing required was a political change. An existing High Culture had to be endowed with a political roof worthy of it. It took a certain amount of military and diplomatic activity, but not a great deal else. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the task had largely been accomplished.

It was the next time zone to the east which presented the greatest problems, from the viewpoint of the implementation of the nationalist principle of *one culture, one state*. Here there was an appallingly complex patchwork of diverse cultures, intermixed both geographically and in the social structure, with political, cultural and religious boundaries devoid of any coherence or overlap. Many of the cultures were not clearly endowed with a normative High Culture and educational institutions capable of protecting, perpetuating and disseminating it in a world in which a High Cul-

ture had to become co-extensive with an entire society, rather than defining a narrow minority. Here both cultures and polities had to be created, an arduous task indeed. If the eventual units were to be compact and reasonably homogeneous, more had to be done: many, many people had to be either assimilated, or expelled, or killed. All these methods were eventually employed in the implementation of the nationalist political principle.

Finally, there is Europe's fourth time zone, corresponding more or less to the territories of the erstwhile tsarist empire. The pattern here corresponded fairly closely to that of the third zone – until the end of the First World War. Till then poly-ethnic empires, with a dynastic-religious foundation, managed to survive the pressure generated by nationalist irredentism. But in each case the empire was defeated in the war and disintegrated. But thereafter, the two paths diverge. The tsarist empire was re-established rather quickly, under entirely new management and in the name of a uniquely new, formally secular ideology, though one endowed with all the zeal and messianism of a salvation religion, which in fact it was.

The new faith was imposed with conviction and ruthlessness, and in fact generated a secular *Umma*, a charismatic community which saw its task on earth as the implementation of absolute righteousness, and saw itself as being in possession of the recipe for that righteousness. The faith which was being implemented had undergone, under the leadership and inspiration of Lenin, a kind of inverse Reformation: initially, the faith possessed no clauses which would entail an internal stratification of the faithful. All mankind eventually, and in the meantime at any rate all the oppressed and dispossessed, were granted an equal and symmetrical access and relationship to the truth which was to save humanity. Lenin, however, had come to the conclusion that ordinary humanity was incapable of rising to the perception of the truth (i.e. the unaided working class would merely be reformist rather than revolutionary, would concentrate on improving its position within the existing social order, rather than grasp that its role was to usher in a wholly different new order). This being so, a special dedicated and highly disciplined Order was required, capable of understanding and appreciating the great Message. When, rather surprisingly, the revolution succeeded and, even more surprisingly, survived despite the absence of external aid from fraternal revolutions elsewhere, this Order naturally inherited the governance of all the Russias, and performed the task which had thus fallen to it in a

manner befitting the possessor of an absolute and supremely important revelation. As Lenin observed, the teaching of Marx was
all-powerful because it was *true*. A red banner with this quotation
continued to hang in the entrance hall of the Institute of Philosophy
of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR well into the late 1980s, by
which time however it was impossible to draw the attention of any
passing Soviet citizen or scholar to it without provoking a wry
smile.

Anyway, the new secular *Umma*, under this dedicated and determined leadership, had even less difficulty in containing nationalist
irredentism, than had the empires of the erstwhile Holy Alliance
during the century which stretched from 1815 to 1918. The new
ideocracy, and the institutions it spawned, controlled the entire
territory with ease, and obliged its inhabitants to proclaim that their
nationalist aspirations were satisfied. A complication of importance, which must be noted, is that as a result of its military victory
in 1945, the socialist *Umma* pushed the boundary of the fourth
zone westwards, and incorporated large areas which had, between
1918 and the second war, belonged to the third zone. Moscow time,
ideologically and politically speaking, now extended to the Adriatic
and the Elbe.

For reasons which are of the greatest importance, which have not
been adequately elucidated, the world's first secular ideocracy collapsed in the late 1980s, making plain that the faith in this particular
salvation creed at any rate had disappeared almost completely in
those lands in which its implementation had been attempted. It is of
course this very collapse which engendered that craving for civil
society, and the revival of the phrase and its elevation to a potent
political symbol. The interaction between this aspiration, and
the sudden release of nationalist irredentism following the end of
dictatorship, calls for further discussion. But this must be preceded
by a kind of typology or timetable of the successive forms of
nationalism.

THE VARIETIES OF NATIONALIST EXPERIENCE

There is a sense in which the *third* time zone is most typical of
the human condition: the transition from the situation in which
culture underwrites status but not political boundaries, to the condition in which it does the very reverse, is most manifest in it, and
least disturbed by contingent intrusions – by the contingent pres-

ence of dynastic states which just happen to correspond, roughly,
to future national ones, or by the contingent presence of a well-
codified High Culture, or by the Second Coming of Soteriology or
Ideocracy in a secular guise. It is the third zone which proceeded
from a blatantly ethnicity-defying, dynastic-religious order to a
rabid nationalism, and did so relatively undisturbed by other
factors. In this sense, the stages through which it passed can be
considered 'normal': they are what one would expect, if no unusual
additional factors are operative.

There is the first stage in which the old dynastic-religious system
is still operative, as it was at the Congresses of Vienna in 1815.
There is the second stage of sustained but, all in all, ineffective
nationalist irredentism: the new principle of culture-based states is
operative, but cannot prevail against the established order, unless
the established order is particularly weak. This was the state of
affairs between 1815 and 1918, except for the Balkans, where the
unusual weakness of the Ottoman empire permitted the creation of
five or six national buffer states. Stage three is interesting: it could
be called the Age of Nationalism Triumphant and Self-defeating. It
lasted from 1918 till the domination of Europe by Hitler and Stalin
in the course of the Second World War. It was characterized by a
political system consisting of fairly small states, overtly and
proudly self-defined as national states, which had succeeded the old
poly-ethnic, religiously validated empires. These new states had all
the weaknesses of the old empires: they were just as haunted by
minorities as they had been, if not more so. In addition, they had a
whole series of additional weaknesses of their own. They were
small; they were, in the main, new, and were not hallowed by age;
they often had inexperienced, greedy and uncautious ruling classes,
more eager to make hay while the sun shone, without expectation
of or much concern with stability; and they had, amongst their
minorities, members of the erstwhile dominant ethno-linguistic
groups, unhabituated to submission and minority status, resentful
of it and endowed with external support, in their 'home' national
state, which helped and encouraged them to struggle against their
newly attributed subordinate status. The consequences of these
manifold weaknesses soon became manifest: the system offered
virtually no resistance, and in any case no effective resistance (except for Finland), when the two great dictators of the century
agreed to carve it up between themselves. The system of supposedly
national states, set up in the name of national self-determination in
1918 and 1919, collapsed like a house of cards.

The time when it collapsed was also the period of an unprecedentedly large-scale and total war, in the course of which both the flow of information and the strength of moral susceptibilities were markedly diminished. A century of ineffective national striving, followed by a quarter of a century during which the role of oppressor and oppressed was in part inverted, left the region as a seething mass of ethnic resentments. On top of all that, the dominant power, Hitler's Germany, was committed to a mixture of a communalist and biological ideology, which singled out certain ethnic minorities without a territorial or peasant base as specially noxious and deserving of extermination. The interstitial position with which the most important of such minorities was endowed had in any case made it an object of hatred amongst the 'host' populations.

The hatred and resentments were there, and so was the ideological rationale, and as it happens, so was the political will and the organizational machinery. Wartime secrecy made it all easier. The consequence is known. The Jews, but not only they, were objects of a massive, well-organized and efficient campaign of extermination. But other populations suffered as well, and during the immediate postwar period, though information now flowed more easily, indignation and the desire for retaliation permitted the employment of methods — above all, forcible transplantation of population in disregard of normal principles of justice — as a result of which, in some but not all regions, the previously complex ethnic map was brought into closer relationship with the newly imposed political boundaries, thus satisfying the requirements of nationalism more closely than had been feasible in days of moral restraint.

So much for stage four. Thanks to the crimes of Hitler and Stalin, some but not all areas of Eastern Europe now satisfied the nationalist imperative. At the same time, being subjected to the extended area of domination of the new secular ideocracy, it did not matter too much whether or not they did satisfy that imperative, in as far as the new empire had the will and the means to impose its authority in any case, both in areas in which murder and transplantation had produced ethnic homogeneity, and in areas in which the old complexity continued to prevail.

Eventually, during the second half of the 1980s, the secular soteriological ideocracy collapsed, in some measure because of internal opposition, but in the main because of a loss of conviction and nerve at its centre. The leaders, faced with sustained defeat in both the consumerist and the arms races, turned to liberalization in

the hope of a quick — or only — remedy, and found themselves incapable of arresting its course once it had gathered momentum, or at any rate, unwilling to adopt the extreme measures which would have been required to arrest it. Their predecessors, in the days of faith, would not have hesitated to use them, but ruthlessness on such a scale no longer seems to come easily (to their credit) to members of this political culture.

So the authoritarian system collapsed, sufficiently to reveal both the yearning for civil society *and* the powerful ethnic passions. It is the interaction and the relative strength of these two newly liberated forces which concern us here. At present, their interaction makes up much of the great political drama of Eastern Europe, and the outcome is far from clear, and will presumably remain unclear for quite some time yet. But it is already possible to make a certain number of observations.

Both the economic and the political aspects of civil society are rather difficult to erect, or to stimulate into emergence. Initial political parties tend to be ephemeral clubs of intellectuals, without effective grass roots. It is easy enough to stimulate certain kinds of enterprise, notably the kind of service industry which tends to exist in semi-legal form anyway, in all but the most repressive of dictatorships. A small restaurant required little space, not a great deal of entrepreneurial talent or imagination, little more than a certain amount of gastronomic and visual taste and fastidiousness. But a genuine open market, as opposed to mere networks, and an entrepreneurial class and institutions — it does not seem easy to set these up by fiat. Much the same goes for political institutions.

By contrast, ethnically based and defined associations appear to be capable of almost immediate formation and so to speak crystallization. Solid organization with local branches, shared symbols and sentiments, recognized and respected leadership — it seems to be possible to create these on a nationalist basis with amazing speed and effectiveness. This may be regrettable: one might wish that the other aspects of modular man, other than his eagerness to identify with the social category within which he is, in virtue of his cultural traits and training, substitutable, should make as ready an appearance. The fact is, they do not. We may or may not like this, but we have to recognize it. The sleeping beauty of ethnicity can be awakened with the gentlest and most tender of kisses. The sleeping beauty of civil society may be more desirable, at least to those sharing our taste, but to wake her up is the devil's own job.

Once again, are nationalism and liberalism allies? At first, certainly: both were oppressed by an authority which combined dogmatism with centralism, and those who long for free thought, and those who long for autonomy for their own cultural totem pole, will naturally be in alliance against the centre. Given the speed with which ethnicity can be mobilized, and the slowness with which anything else can be roused, it is probably a good thing to use ethnic bases as fortresses against centralist reaction. This had been, for instance, Boris Yeltsin's strategy in his confrontation with Gorbachov. Some of us doubted the wisdom of such indiscriminate encouragement of ethnic particularism, a weakening of the centre at any cost, but when, in August 1991, both Yeltsin and Gorbachov had to be saved from a would-be violent reaction by the centrists, it was Yeltsin's capacity to fall back on such a base which saved the day . . .

One can sum it all up as follows: the modularity of man, so intimately tied up with an industrial and growth-oriented society, has two aspects, two principal social corollaries: it makes *possible* civil society, the existence of plural political associations and economic institutions; and it makes *mandatory* the strength of ethnic identity, arising from the fact that man is no longer tied to a social niche, but to a culturally defined pool. The one potentiality is a mere possibility, essential in the long term if the society is to be capable of competing with its rivals, but dispensable in the short run; the other, however, is an immediately felt imperative. This is something one must recognize and take into account, whether or not one likes it.

NOTES

1 F. de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome* [1864], Anchor Books, New York, 1970, p. 11. It is sometimes claimed that Benjamin Constant had anticipated Fustel on this point in his famous address of 1819 on 'The Liberty of the Ancients compared with that of the Moderns' (Constant, *Political Writings*, ed. B. Fontana, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 309–28). But Constant only stressed that ancient liberty was not *individual* liberty, and in fact opposed such liberty; but he did not specify the role of social sub-groups and their heavy ritualization in the process *both* of depriving the individual of freedom *and* of maintaining social order in the absence of a strong coercive centre. It is *this* perception which makes Fustel the ancestor of modern 'segmentary' theory, of the understanding of a society which *is* plural but *not*, in our required sense, 'civil'.

2 Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, pp. 219–20.
3 L. Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, Ill., 1977. The theory of segmentary society begins, of course, with the first major book of one of Fustel de Coulanges's students, namely E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls, Free Press, New York, 1984. The theory was used by such scholars as Emile Masqueray, Robert Montagne, Edward Evans-Pritchard and Jacques Berque, all of whose work is discussed in and stands at the back of E. Gellner, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981.
4 E. Masqueray, *Formation des cités chez les populations sedentaires de l'Algerie* [1886], new edn, ed. F. Colonna, Edisud, Aix-en-Provence, 1983.
5 R. I. Levy, *Mesocosm*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Cal., 1990, p. 21.
6 D. Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* [1757], Stanford University Press, Stanford, Cal., 1956, pp. 49, 50.
7 Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, p. 50.
8 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm' [1741], in D. Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, Liberty Classics, Indianapolis, Ind., 1985, pp. 75, 76, 78.
9 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. F. Rosenthal, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1958; F. Engels, *Die Neue Zeit*, winter, 1894/5.