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Analysis 🔍

Nationalism As Authentic Multiculturalism

by Marcia Christoff-Kurapovna ⌚ May 25, 2019 💬 0 👁 865

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In one of those extraordinary works of history few have heard of, *The Mantle of Caesar*, by the 20th century German classicist Friedrich Gundolf, the advancement of Western civilization is described as a restless spiritual ambition driven madly forth by generations of great leaders seeking to embody the standard of Julius Caesar. It is the continuation of “Rome” in a mystical sense,

powered by the human imagination, and with such staggeringly romantic influence that the progress of occidental culture since antiquity may be likened to the sleepwalk of a waking-dream. The Byzantine Empire, known officially as the 'East Roman Empire', saw itself as the living expression of Rome, now suffused with Christianity. The Holy Roman Empire—the name itself enamored of this historical calling—rivaled Constantinople in that narrative.

The inhabitants of either civilization regarded themselves as 'Roman' and even with the distinctive emergence of the Germanic sense of "Germaness" in the 13th century, that population, too, remained Roman in self-concept. Charlemagne saw Caesar as one of the great eternal images, while Napoleon regarded himself as the modern embodiment of the *dictator perpetuus*, likewise Bismarck. In America, too, the idea of the 'Fourth Rome' compelled the ambition of the Founders; Thomas Jefferson and James Madison studied ancient city-states and read Polybius to better understand the Roman republic's constitution, while George Washington, for his part, had been compared to Cincinnatus. The great thinkers and humanists also could not resist the spell: Ovid credited him with putting chaos into order, while Saint Augustine saw him as history's destiny. Machiavelli admired him; John Milton, while lamenting his violence, said that no other human so deserved the rewards of kingship. As far as the Romans themselves were concerned, Aeneas, hero of Troy and progenitor of the Romans, was their

'racial' ancestor, just as that hero was for Decimus Janius Brutus Callacius, the conqueror of Spain who turned ancient Albion into Britain. Alexander the Great was Romans' human ideal and for Alexander, it was Olympian ancestry that compelled him to mission. In this action-oriented idea of "Western man", all that is seen was first made from the unseen and there is nothing in reality that was not first imagined. From the universal comes the intensely personal and from this a very refined and alluring sense of cultural identity.

Thus, here at work across the centuries is an individual relationship to the universal, the regional to the imperial, the actual to the historical, the temporal to the divine. What was to be eventually strained out of all of this became what recognize as "the nation" or that which is "national" or possesses "national culture—still so elusive of definition that only the erudition of an Oswald Spengler came close to penetrating the mystery. Yet, to define national identity against the backdrop of this larger context, one must first answer the question of what it is that built up this magnificent sense of 'Rome' in the first place and that has held the world so spellbound? Certainly, one might correctly answer that it was the combination of military might, valor, order, vision, influence, wealth, nobility, customs, wisdom, not to mention a millennia-and-half long existence. However, this still would not be complete.

Historical anecdote gives perhaps more insight. For

example, as mentioned above, it was by absorbing the Roman that Germany first felt its sense of the Germanic. The legendary Hohenstaufen dynasty was responsible for the introduction of Roman law into secular Germany and slowly, surely, in cities such as Bamberg and Naumberg, German architecture began to portray German figures; Roman poets such as Virgil were translated into German and an interest in classic literature took root among the clergy and educated classes. Nietzsche once remarked that this “southern light’ allowed Germany to experience within her borders ‘a blossoming of song and vision, painting and sculpture’. He wrote: “There is a touch of something almost Hellenic which awakens in contrast with the south”. He then added: “Every race leans towards the universal.” Frederick II Hohenstaufen, during whose reign many of the German mythological epics were written, sought out whatever struck him as most ‘Roman’ while the Church was fostering whatever was most nearly ‘national’. As it was said of this greatest of Hohenstaufen: “He was perfectly clear in his own mind what he wanted—hesitation never haunted him—and we can accept as correct his own later statement that from his earliest youth he had one lofty aim: to devote himself unreservedly body and soul, to the exaltation of the Roman Empire.”

In a word, from ‘eternal’ origins, natural culture grew concrete and self-aware. True nationalism, one may argue, is at its origins, universal, and therefore *authentically* multicultural. It is the local

within the regional, the regional in relation to the universal. It never was, and never could be, an indiscriminate levelling, dissolution and 'equalizing' hodge-podge of ethnic arrogances somehow manipulated to destroy distinction by first raising social and political hell by specifically emphasizing those distinctions. The multiculturalism of today is but the multiplicity of mass man. There is nothing hierarchically cultural about it at all as it cannot exist without a robust sense of nation and this in turn derived from a "time immemorial" ideal of such identity.

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Ernst Renan, in his classic study of what makes a nation, considered many attributes of national identity to determine what was “the “ main ingredient of that self-definition: race, language, commercial interests, religious belief, geography, military necessity, etc. But none of these categories provided a satisfying explanation or consistent basis. Firstly, nations are (relatively) new to history, as Egypt and China did not know them and Athens and Sparta were patriotic yet small territories. Ethnography became too narrow a definition—after all, was a Frenchman a Frank, a Gaul or a Burgund? Was an Englishman a composition of Angles, Celts and Normans?. The Roman Empire, Spain, the Habsburg Empire were assemblages, as was Italy. Austria-Hungary, a state but not a nation, broke into many nation-states as did the British Empire with severe after-shocks drawn along ethnic lines. Then one must explain Switzerland, which has four languages, three ethnic groups and two

religions. Furthermore, as “nations” evolved through history, they did so through various forms: in France, it was unity between north and south dynastically through a king; in Holland, Belgium, Switzerland this took place “as an expression of direct will”, in the words of Renan and “by a general spirit” in Italy and Germany. Assimilation held its own mysteries: even at the end of one or two generations, Norman invaders did not distinguish themselves through the rest of those inhabiting Britain, all the while Sicilians to this day see themselves as distinct from Italians. Nor could religion provide the basis: while it is true that one was not a proper Athenian if one did not swear by the cult of the Acropolis or a good Venetian there was no vow to St. Mark, when Rome tried to impose worship of the Jupiter Olympian in Antioch it proved a disaster. “National feeling” was still something that eluded all of this.

Ultimately, Renan described nationalism as “a soul, a spiritual principle”, one “consisting of the past and the present”. He writes of this beautifully: “One, is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received.” He added, echoing the sentiments of the great leaders who have longed for “Rome”: “The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices and devotions. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate: our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past with great

men and glory (I mean true glory) is the social capital upon which the national idea rests. These are essential conditions of being a people: having common glories in the past and a will to continue them in the present; having made great things together and wishing to make them again. One loves in proportion to the sacrifices that one has committed and the troubles one has suffered. One loves the house that one has built and one passes on.”

It is the true multiculturalist who appreciates this. For to such a personality, nothing quite matches that thrilling discovery of hidden treasure, unique atmosphere and exotic peculiarity that belongs to what the writer Lawrence Durrell called “the spirit of place”—and to it alone. It is that feeling of being in Italy when one is in Italy, of something ‘Russian’ when one sees Moscow for the first time; of the charm in becoming aware of something ‘Yankee’ that is specifically New England and nowhere else. To understand such places in their profound, human dimensions—the explorers, artists, industrialists, entrepreneurs, poets, popes, scientists, writers, nobles, radicals and pioneers—and that are produced from these ‘cultures’, is to know what makes life worth living. This essence, Renan writes, “is composed of a great solidarity, one constituted by the feeling of sacrifices made and those one is still disposed to make”. It all presupposes a past but is still recreated in the present by a concrete fact: the clearly expressed desire for the people of that heritage to continue a

common life. “We are what you were; we will be what you are”, goes the classic Spartan chant. That elegant line expresses an inheritance, mythological as well as chronical, of universal, diverse epic and education, one that resonates the world over and is understood the world over.

It is national feeling born from strong identification with the living past in the future-present that gives true meaning to “multiculturalism”, and not the brew and stew of watered-down kinships as insisted upon today. Such is the irony of the populist and the patriot, he who is accused of the most unsophisticated provincialism. For it is in fact he, who, ultimately, best relates to that which is outwardly the most foreign, knowing that the right to one’s heritage is and always will be the common code of a universal ideal.

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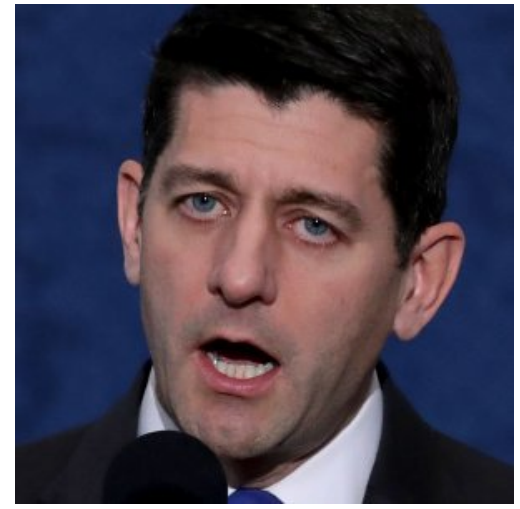
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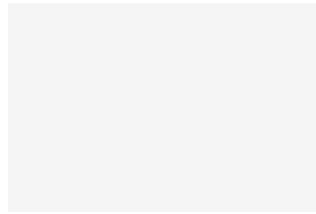
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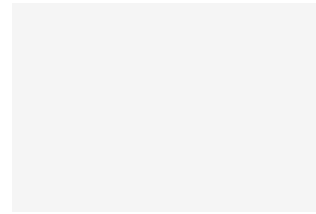
Marcia Christoff-Kurapovna

Marcia Christoff-Kurapovna contributed feature pieces and op-eds on Swiss and Liechtenstein banking issues for The Wall Street Journal Europe while based in Vienna, Austria; she also authored a column, 'Swiss Watch.' for the Ludwig von Mises Institute. Her geopolitical and cultural reporting has appeared in The New York Times, The International Herald Tribune, The Economist, The Imaginative Conservative and the journal of the Council on Foreign Relations, Foreign Affairs. She began as a reporter covering the wars of the former Yugoslavia for the WSJ, resulting in her first published non-fiction work. She was later United Nations Correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor. She has also been speechwriter and op-ed writer to several ambassadors and foreign dignitaries. In Vienna, she worked for one of the oldest banking families in Europe and owners of a prominent art collection, leading her to pen a first novel. She later founded an art and technology consultancy and was hired full time by Virgin Hyperloop One, a futuristic transportation company. She currently lives between Los Angeles and Washington DC.

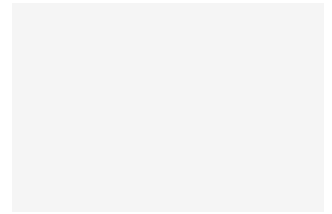
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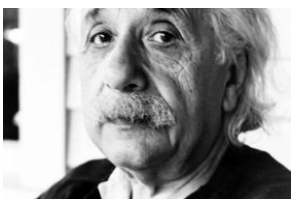
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