Self-Determination as Cause of War
(Self-Determination as Source of Peace)

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(Incomplete Draft)

“When the President talks of ‘self-determination’ what unit has he in mind? Does he mean a race, a territorial area, or a community? Without a definite unit which is practical, application of this principle is dangerous to peace and stability....The phrase is simply loaded with dynamite. It will raise hopes which can never be realized. It will, I fear, cost thousands of lives. In the end it is bound to be discredited, to be called the dream of an idealist who failed to realize the danger until too late to check those who attempt to put the principle in force. What a calamity that the phrase was ever uttered! What misery it will cause!”

- Secretary of State Robert Lansing on Woodrow Wilson’s use of the phrase “self-determination”

I

Robert Lansing’s words, written in 1918, are proving themselves yet again today prescient. The current hostilities in Macedonia provide only the very latest confirmation of their wisdom. Since the spiral of dissolution of the former Yugoslavia began in the early 1990s, virtually every close observer of Balkan affairs expected the outbreak of hostilities in Macedonia sooner or later. NATO’s military intervention in support of the de facto secession of Kosovo made them all but inevitable and in relatively short order. The spectacle of NATO authorities coordinating with the Macedonian government as it seeks to defend Macedonian territory from the encroachments of

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Albanian guerillas, newly baptized the “National Liberation Army”, is downright surreal in light of the events in Kosovo of a mere two summers ago. It is even odder to hear through the Western media that the NLA’s struggle is for “equal rights”. Apart from the usual guarantees of civil and political rights which all citizens of Macedonia - whether of Albanian, Slavic or any other ancestry - enjoy equally, the Macedonian constitution goes to unusual lengths in making provision for communal rights for Albanians and other “national minorities”. An ethnic Albanian party is, of course, a partner in Macedonia’s ruling coalition government. But this strangely misplaced emphasis on rights which Macedonia’s Albanians in fact already enjoy is presumably symptomatic of a certain unease in American and at least some European foreign policy circles about uttering or hearing uttered the expression which no doubt more exactly captures the aspirations of the NLA and its supporters: viz. “national self-determination”.

Lansing was not quite right when he said that the phrase “self-determination” would “raise hopes that can never be realized”. Just a year or so after calling “self-determination” an “imperative of action”, Wilson himself would confess in a similar and revealing vein: “When I gave utterance to those words I said them without knowledge that nationalities existed, which are coming to us day after day....You do not know and cannot appreciate the anxieties that I have experienced as a result of many millions of people having their hopes raised by what I have said.”

If these hopes were not fulfilled at the time, this was not only due to their impracticality or, as the opponents of the “Versailles System” often said or insinuated, the political calculations of the victorious Powers, but also, it should not be forgotten, because other hopes and aspirations

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conflicted with them: for instance, the aspirations to southern Slavic union which came to fruition in the founding of the first Yugoslavia. But in fact the hopes raised by the prospect of “self-determination”, in the sense in which Wilson seems, albeit vaguely, to have understood the expression, could be realized. The question is: at what cost? The principle of “self-determination”, though still, as Lansing put it, “dangerous to peace and stability” today, could eventually form the basis of a stable peaceful international order. But the question is: what sort of order and what sort of peace?

Leaving aside for the moment such relatively rare cases as continue to approximate the model of anti-colonial struggles, the cost of realizing as yet unfulfilled aspirations to “national self-determination” would be exactly the cost which the people (the people - I mean individuals - not the “peoples”) of the Balkans have paid in the last decade: civil war, territorial partitions, at best “population transfers”, at worst “spontaneous” or coordinated pogroms. Typically, there will be some of both of the latter, “population transfers” and pogroms, a certain amount of direct physical violence preceding and accompanying the eventual expulsion or “voluntary” departure of unwanted population groups. At the extreme, where the populations in question have no safe haven to which to flee or are not permitted to do so, their actual physical extermination could ensue: which is, of course, the meaning of genocide in its etymologically strict sense. But, despite the hyperbolic tendencies of certain politicians and jurists, echoed by many academics and media commentators, this extreme has certainly not been approached, much less reached, during the Balkan Wars of the last decade. In short, what has come to be known as “ethnic cleansing”, whatever its forms, is a perfectly normal component of struggles for “self-determination”: so long, that is, as the inhabitants of the would-be national territory continue to include persons who, according to whichever of the customary criteria happens to get invoked (“descent”, language, “culture”) or by their own profession, do not belong to the appropriate “national community”.

The process here described has taken some ten years to play itself out in the Balkans and thus far claimed some tens of thousands of lives. Supposing the relevant external Powers are agreed to draw the line at Macedonia’s borders and maintain an armed peace in the region, these figures could with some slight adjustments be definitive. If not, there is no reason not to expect the conflagration of ethnic violence to continue to spread, perhaps even beyond the territory of the former Yugoslavia: for instance, into northern Greece. In the event of an extension of the principle throughout the African continent, the comparable figures for sub-Saharan Africa could reasonably be expected to bear an exponential relation to the figures just cited. In sub-Saharan Africa, after all, the number of ethnic and tribal communities, both absolutely and relative to population, far outstrips the relatively limited number of alleged “nationalities” present in the Balkans; the territorial imbrication of these communities is even more intricate; their members more often have non-trivial grounds, above all linguistic, for considering themselves meaningfully distinct from members of other communities; and the existing national borders take still less account of their geographical distribution. Consequently, a century of conflicts does not seem like an unreasonable estimate. I will not venture to speculate on numbers of dead.

But once this process has run its course - after, say, a century of inter-communal violence, involving at least the Balkans, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and large parts of Asia - it could well lead to the establishment of a new, stable and peaceful international order. The character of this outcome for the regions in question is again foreshadowed by the outcome in which the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia has issued: a myriad of formally independent, for the most part impoverished, putatively “homogenous” micro-states. By way of an extraordinary ideological inversion, nouveau philosophes and other partisans of the Bosnian cause managed to depict the war(s) of Bosnian secession as a struggle in defense of “multi-culturalism”. But in fact the principle of “self-determination”, as it has come to be violently applied in Bosnia and throughout the Balkans, is rather a recipe for, as I have put it elsewhere, “juxtaposed
Officially, the territory of the former Yugoslavia now comprises six micro-states: not including Kosovo, still treating Montenegro as part of the Yugoslav Federation, and indulging the fiction according to which the Republika Srpska and the two components of the supposed “Bosnian-Croat Federation” all belong to a single Bosnian “state”. *De facto*, if not yet quite *de jure*, it comprises ten. In Africa, for instance, the consistent application of the same principle would result not in there being finally ten or so states, but at least some hundreds if not thousands. Further sub-partitions of the Indian sub-continent would, of course, also be necessary, along with subsequent re-settlement of populations. But barring those regions of the world - the Americas and Australia, for instance - where the “mixing” of “peoples” is widely acknowledged as irreparable, the vision of global political order articulated by the 19th century jurist J.C. Bluntschi could thus be realized: “As humanity is divided into a number of nations,” Bluntschi wrote, “so should the world be arrayed into just as many states. For every nation, a state; for every state, a nation.”

As the Balkan precedent suggests, each of the resultant micro-states would be too small, in terms both of its population and its territory, to be self-sufficient except at a persistently miserable level of economic development. Organic regional ties of economic interdependence having been either weakened or outright severed by the establishment of independent statehood, each would fall prey to dependence upon a larger external economic hegemon or combination of hegemons. Thus the sovereignty in economic matters - monetary policy, fiscal policy, trade policy, etc. - which the erstwhile “multi-ethnic” or “multi-national” states might have been powerful enough to preserve, will in all likelihood be lost to their putatively mono-ethnic micro-successors. For many of these micro-states, the content of statehood might be reduced to little more than a flag and a national anthem, and perhaps the right of citizens periodically to elect governments bereft of powers. Bosnia-Herzegovina could serve as the paradigm for this sort of, so to say, virtual

7 Cited in Klein, *Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht*, p. 15.
statehood. The introduction of the Deutschmark as the official currency in several of the other emergent or emerging micro-states of the Balkans demonstrates just how little such statehood has in fact to do with any of the practical aspects of sovereignty as the latter has been traditionally understood.

There will be one further cost which the establishment of such an order will demand and which I have been tacitly assuming throughout my discussion: the citizens of each of these micro-states or, more exactly, some critical mass of them will have to believe or at least practically to accept as a supposition that they really form part of meaningfully distinct “ethnic nations”. For it is only on this supposition that the wars which founded their separate statehood, as well as their separate political existence thereafter, with all the encumbrances to prosperity and well-being it entails, could be perceived as justified and tolerable. In times when the celebration of cultural “difference” is the rage and the protection of “peoples” is championed with the same zeal and in much the same style as the protection of endangered animal species, to treat this as a cost might seem odd to some. But why should the benefits of political and economic union which, for example, the 19th Century advocates of German national unity successfully urged upon even Bavarians and Prussians in order to induce them to accept their incorporation within a common state - why should these benefits be denied the members of alleged “ethnicities” whose cultural or linguistic differences are certainly no greater and probably far less?

Furthermore, as again the Balkan example teaches, many of the individuals comprising the now separate and allegedly distinct “nations” will previously have lived in close proximity - for instance in border regions or urban centers - with members of other “nations”. They will have intermingled not only geographically, but also socially and indeed sexually. Consequently, their segregation into distinct “communities” apportioned among distinct states will require not only the

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8 Based on his analysis of the Dayton constitution, Robert Hayden writes: “...Bosnia and Herzegovina seems to be essentially a customs union with a foreign ministry, thus indeed a government with no authority within its territory, ‘mimic sovereignty’ in Alexander Hamilton’s words in Federalist no. 15.” Hayden, Blueprints. p. 126.
severing of economic ties, but also ties of friendship and even, if it were to be strictly enforced, of marriage and companionship. Indeed, for the children of so-called “mixed” couples, this segregation will not even be a real possibility. Such “hybrids” or “Mischlinge”- to use the awful expression once favored by German “racial theorists” and which regrettably still has some currency today - will, in the most literal sense, be monsters as far as the new international order is concerned: un-persons, belonging “wholly” and unequivocally to none of the “nations” whose alleged distinctness is meant to be the rationale for their separate political existence. No one familiar with the histories of the regions likely to be most affected by the processes of political fragmentation I am here describing, can doubt that the number of these monsters will in fact be considerable, however much it will have by the nature of the case to be dissimulated. According to the 1981 Yugoslav census, for example, 35% of the children of the Eastern Slavonija region of Croatia were the product of “mixed” Croat-Serb marriages.9

Perhaps it will be argued that while such “mixing” was common under the Yugoslav regime and as concerns those of its constituent “peoples” which were in any case all Slavic, it was not characteristic of the history of those “multi-national” or “multi-ethnic” states and empires which forcibly combined without integrating “peoples” of more substantially distinct cultural traditions. Thus, it has been famously observed, even by so committed an opponent of the nationality principle as Ernest Renan, that Czechs and Germans were combined in the Austro-Hungarian Empire like “oil and water in a glass”10. But, as against the empirical reliability of this supposition, one can be reminded of the story of the old Austrian government “in which there were three German and three Czech ministers, and the three Czech ministers all had German names and the three German ministers all had Czech names”11. Cultural tradition, moreover, as

9 Hayden, Blueprints, p. 74.


the very word “tradition” implies, is transferrable. Without wishing to minimize the important differences in their modes of administration, if the history of multi-ethnic Empires (the Muslim Empire of Spain, the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire itself) teaches us anything, it is precisely this transferability and adoptability of cultural tradition. This is indeed the very basis for the existence of the allegedly distinct but still Slavic “peoples” of the former Yugoslavia.

In any case, unless there be any clones among my readers, we are all in fact “Mischlinge”. Genetic “mixing” is the hitherto absolutely universal condition of human reproduction. Even should humans one day in the not too distant future be cloned, still each genetic prototype will have to have been the result of “mixing”. From a biological viewpoint, what get called distinct “ethnicities” or “peoples” are nothing more than human gene pools which by virtue of physical (geographical) or cultural (linguistic or religious) or political barriers have been kept relatively isolated from one another. So-called “peoples” are the products of human history, not its presupposition. When they are not simply a function of real spatial isolation, whether as a result of natural geographical boundaries or artificial political ones, they are only ever functions of cultural difference, not “bearers” of the same. They come-into-being and pass-out-of-being as a result of changing political and economic circumstances. As Renan has written,

...les origines zoologiques de la humanité sont enormément antérieures aux origines de la culture, de la civilisation, du langage. Les groupes aryen primitif, sémitique primitif, touranien primitif n’avaient aucune unité physiologique. Ces groupements sont des faits historiques qui ont eu lieu à une certaine époque, mettons il y a quinze ou vingt mille ans, tandis que l’origine zoologique de la humanité se perd dans des ténèbres incalculables.12

To found international political order upon the postulate of ethnicity is thus to found it upon a fiction: a myth no less preposterous than the founding myths of primitive tribal communities and which, unlike the latter, under contemporary conditions of global economic interdependence lacks even the merit of serving some positive function of social integration. This

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12 Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*, p. 47.
myth can be summarized in two simple propositions: firstly, that there even are or have been “peoples”, in the sense of groups of individuals descended from common ancestors, each of whose genealogies has, presumably from the very beginnings of human life, been kept perfectly separate from the genealogies of other such “peoples”; and secondly, that these “peoples” are the “bearers” of distinct cultural traditions and perhaps even mental dispositions, such that the collective “lives” of each are governed by, to use Fichte’s expression, a “unique principle of spiritual development”. If the first proposition is false, then the second obviously cannot be true. Now, as concerns any given alleged “people”, the first proposition is, of course, empirically unverifiable, as is entirely normal for myth. But this proposition is not only unverifiable, but indeed, on any plausibly ample interpretation of the groups in question, logically, i.e. necessarily, false. Either the “common” ancestors of any set of individuals identified as belonging to a single “people” means nothing more than whoever the ancestors happen to have been - in which case, we all have “common” ancestors, and the claim to there being biologically distinct “peoples” falls - or the “peoples” in question must in fact be siblings born of siblings born of siblings and so on to the origins of human life. Otherwise, i.e. if the alleged “peoples” in question are supposed to comprise anyone more than just such pathologically in-bred sets of siblings, their individual members must by the very nature of the case necessarily not all have common ancestors and hence the first proposition must likewise be false.

There is a well-known name for the modern myth-system or ideology which I have just adumbrated: *racism*. An international political order could be founded upon racist assumptions, however untenable these assumptions are. But there are no rationally-defensible grounds why one should be. To cite Renan again:

*L’histoire humaine diffère essentiellement de la zoologie. La race n’y est par tout, comme chez les rongeurs ou les félins, et on n’a pas le droit d’aller par le monde tâter les crânes des*
Before continuing with my argument, I want to take the opportunity here briefly to comment upon the increasingly commonplace practice of describing the disappearance of alleged “peoples” through assimilation as “genocide”. As the foregoing discussion will have made clear, such usage implies a capitulation to racist thinking. The biological history of humankind is nothing other than a history of continual, multivalent genetic assimilation. There are no “peoples” to be preserved into which the biological substance of manifold other “peoples” has not already in fact “disappeared”. Even as concerns primitive tribal communities, as the work of the anthropologist Claude Meillassoux has shown, so-called “consanguinity” is a “myth of anthropology”, not a real organising social principle of these communities themselves. I might add that to treat assimilation as “genocide” also results in a hypertrophic deformation of the very concept of genocide, which, frankly, debases the memory of the victims of genocidal policies in the etymologically strict sense of the expression. The latter did not lose their racial distinctiveness. They lost their lives - namely, at the hands of those who precisely insisted on their racial distinctiveness.  

II

In drawing the above grim balance of the results of implementing the principle of “self-determination”, I have, of course, been assuming just one possible interpretation of this principle, based on one possible answer to the pivotal question posed by Lansing: What is the intended “unit” of “self-determination”? Or, in other words: Who or what is the “self” to which

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13 Renan, Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?, pp. 48-9.

14 Cf. Victor Klemperer’s journal entry for 20 April 1933: “...what is most deplorable is that I have constantly to be occupied with this madness about the racial difference between Aryans and Semites, that I have to consider the whole obscuration and enslavement of Germany always from the point of view of what is Jewish. This seems to me a triumph of the Hitler people over me personally. I do not want to concede it to them.” Self-cited in Victor Klemperer, LTI (Leipzig: Reclam, 1975), pp. 36-7; author’s translation.
the principle refers? Supposing the principle is upgraded to a right, then the question becomes: Who is the subject or claimant of this right? The answer I have been supposing is the answer which has been given in practice by the so-called “international community” in granting recognition to the break-away Republics of the former Yugoslavia and lending its support to the KLA in Kosovo: namely, that the subject of “self-determination” is an *ethnic* nation or, in other words, a “people”, in the incoherent ideological sense of the term analyzed above.

The constitution of Croatia, for example, makes reference in its preamble to “the inalienable right of the Croatian nation [narod] to self-determination”; the Slovenian constitution, to the same “inalienable right” of the “Slovene nation [narod]”. The word “narod” in these formulae clearly implies a putatively *ethnic*, i.e. pre-political, nation or “people”. This is already obvious simply on logical grounds. For how could an alleged right to “self-determination” of a *politically*-constituted “nation”, i.e. the citizenry of an *already existing* state, form the basis for its claim to statehood? But even if it were not, it is made explicit by the reference in the same constitutions to members of “other nations” or “minorities”. The right to “self-determination” of the latter is evidently *not* fulfilled by the founding of the states in question. It is this important constitutional nuance which - as Robert Hayden has shown in his book *Blueprints for a House Divided* - made the wars of Yugoslav Succession inevitable.

I want to stress, furthermore, that the constitutional appeal to “self-determination” made these wars inevitable even if the Yugoslav state renounced its authority over the territories of the seceding Republics - as in fact in each case it more or less promptly did. For inasmuch as these territories contained precisely members of “other nations” than the titular nations (i.e. Croatians for Croatia, Slovenes for Slovenia, and so on) - i.e. persons who, as noted above, whether according to allegedly “objective” criterion or by their own profession, did not belong to the latter - such persons tended, unremarkably, to reject their inclusion within states which by definition were not “theirs”. Inasmuch, furthermore, as members of some such “other nation” in fact

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15 For details, see Hayden, *Blueprints*, pp. 70-1.
constituted the *majority* of the population in some part of the national territory - as Serbs once did, for instance, in the Krajina region of Croatia - they tended to give their support to local political leaderships which with perfect consistency claimed in turn the right to “self-determination” now on *their* behalf and attempted to secede in turn from the newly-seceded Republics.

What occurred in Yugoslavia was not in fact a simple secession of its constituent Republics, but rather a *nesting pattern of secessions*, just *some of which* the “international community” recognized as legitimate and others of which, though they were based upon exactly the same principle, it did not. It is just such a nesting pattern of secessions, though far more ornate in detail, that one should expect throughout Africa should the principle of “self-determination”, in the indicated ethnic-national sense, come to be applied there. As in the Balkans, these secessions would have to be followed by civil wars to determine just which parts of the erstwhile unified national territory will henceforth pertain to which “peoples”. Once the principle of “self-determination” has been accepted, the dynamic of political fragmentation and the violence accompanying it could only come to a halt when new micro-national territories have been demarcated whose inhabitants are sufficiently “homogenous” to deprive it of its force - or rather, as indicated above, whose inhabitants are prepared to regard themselves as such. This is why, as I have suggested, “ethnic cleansing” - whether in the form of the physical extermination of “alien” populations or their expulsion or their consensual “transfer” - is a perfectly normal aspect of the process in question.

According to a proposal which is much celebrated nowadays, the alleged right of ethnic nations to “self-determination” could be realized without its having to lead, in the manner I have suggested, to the logical extreme of a perfect, if albeit imaginary, identity of ethnic nation and citizenry: namely, inasmuch as the state grants “minority rights” to “other nations” besides its titular one. Given the failure of the “minority rights” regime put in place by the League of Nations after the First World War - a failure which acquired definitive form precisely in the *Second* World War - it is somewhat surprising that such a proposal should be resurrected today. In any case, the very history of the Balkans over the last decade provides a more contemporary demonstration of
the inherent instability of such an alleged solution. For typically the successor states of Yugoslavia have indeed recognized the existence of “national minorities” on their respective territories and undertaken to guarantee them rights corresponding to their ascribed “minority” status. While such legal provisions have formally remained in force, they have very soon been without application as their would-be beneficiaries have been slaughtered or fled. To formulate the matter in pointed fashion: it is an ill and foreboding fate that befalls an individual when the state recognizes the “minority rights” of some group of which s/he is supposed to form part, for it is implicit in this recognition that s/he is thereby excluded from the nation whose sovereignty the state in question is supposed to manifest. Either rights - including, n.B., cultural and linguistic rights - are ascribed universally to individuals simply in their capacity as citizens or, if they are not and the law distinguishes between groups to which distinct categories of right pertain, they are only ever the instrument of discrimination.

III

The interpretation of the principle of “self-determination” which I have here assumed is one possible interpretation. It is not the only one. Indeed, though it is this interpretation that has been endorsed in practice by the recent actions of the “international community”, inasmuch as the principle or even indeed an alleged right to “self-determination” have gained a foothold in international law, it is certainly not in this sense that they have hitherto been cited.

[to be continued...]
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