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Misreading the World Situation

Book Reviews by Mark Wegierski

BLOOD AND BELONGING: JOURNEYS INTO THE NEW NATIONALISM

By Michael Ignatieff
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
201 pages, \$21.00

THE WRATH OF NATIONS: CIVILIZATION AND THE FURIES OF NATIONALISM

By William Pfaff
New York: Simon & Schuster
257 pages, \$22.00

Michael Ignatieff, a Canadian of distant Russian origin, is an accomplished academic and author. His family memoir, *The Russian Album*, won him the Governor-General's Award, Canada's highest literary honor. The son of a prominent Canadian diplomat, growing up in many lands, he acknowledges his status as a "cosmopolitan", which one supposes is quite appropriate for a Canada that has today largely renounced its own national and cultural identity.

The book consists of an introduction, "The Last Refuge," followed by "Six Journeys": "Croatia & Serbia"; "Germany"; "Ukraine"; "Quebec"; "Kurdistan"; and "Northern Ireland". This is followed by extremely brief "Further Reading" suggestions, "Picture Credits" (there are a number of photographs in the book), "Acknowledgements", and an "Index" (pp. 195-201).

The central distinction Ignatieff makes in the book is between civic and ethnic nationalism:

...civic nationalism, maintains that the nation should be composed of all those — regardless of race, color, creed, gender, language, or ethnicity — who subscribe to the nation's political creed ... it envisages the nation as a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values. ...Ethnic nationalism claims ... that an individual's deepest attachments are inherited, not chosen. It is the national community which defines the individual, not the individuals who define the national community (pp. 3-5).

The primary historical examples he cites of the civic nation are Britain (with its attachment to Crown, Parliament, and the rule of law — which, as an historically homogenous population-pattern, and the

single phrase "ancient rights of Englishmen" indicate, was hardly as un-ethnic as Ignatieff implies), Revolutionary France, and the United States. Ignatieff's definition of "the civic nation" not only repudiates the necessity of a shared homogeneity and long common history for defining a nation, it also imposes on it the necessity for adhering to liberal values as the very definition of its nationhood. In a time of European demographic collapse (birth-rates far below replacement rate, and a rapidly aging population), a Third World population explosion, and of cross-planetary mass migrations (a clearly different situation from earlier historical periods), the embrace of Ignatieff's "civic nation" is a possible formula for Western suicide.

It could also be noted that all but one of the areas Ignatieff visits are European. He is thus selectively condemning European nationalisms, where he might have visited South Africa, for example, where radical black nationalism threatens genocide against the white "settlers" and the Asians, as well as the Zulus — seen as "collaborators." He might also have described some of the black radicalism in the United States, flourishing in those "cosmopolitan world-cities" praised by him, with its strange theories and intense hatred of Europeans and European civilization. He might have written about any of several murderous ethnic conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa. He also does not visit one of the most inflamed parts of the world as far as intercommunal conflict is concerned: the State of Israel, with its hostile Palestinian population.

Nevertheless, Ignatieff writes with much sympathy and sensitivity to what he clearly sees as the more positive aspects of the spirit of nationalism, and some of his passages are quite striking and even moving. Unfortunately, in his journeys to those parts of the world still animated by nationalism — to a greater or lesser degree — he misses the central reality of the contemporary world: the onrushing assimilation to one mode of North American-style, consumption-based existence, which is probably a cause of the increasing intensity and radicalization of such nationalisms (and religious fundamentalisms) which have not entirely succumbed to it.

William Pfaff is a highly placed writer and polemicist, writing for *The New Yorker* since 1971, for *The International Herald Tribune* (syndicated by the *Los Angeles Times*), and being a former editor of *Commonweal*. His earlier book, *Barbarian Sentiments*, was a National Book Award finalist, and in

French translation won the City of Geneva's Prix Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the best political work of 1989-90.

Pfaff acknowledges his work to be of the type of "the conjectures of dilettantes," hence there is no footnoting apparatus, just some unnumbered discursive footnotes, and a list of works cited. There is, however, an index. Each of the nine chapters covers a huge topic on which there is a vast literature, so the whole book is really of the genre of the grand essay. One needs at least a good general knowledge of history to make sense of the book.

The chapters deal with, in rapid succession, "Nationalism"; "Nations and Nationalism"; "Internationalism"; "Hapsburg and Ottoman Internationalism"; "The Ottoman Aftermath"; "Asian and African Nationalism"; "American Nationalism"; "Liberal Internationalism"; and "Progress" — a truly world-historical scope. Pfaff recognizes that nationalism can be the source of the most sublime sentiments, as well as the most brutal behaviors. However, the thrust of his analysis seems to be to try to rob nationalism of its power, particularly in the European context, by delimiting it to a certain comparatively narrow time-period and intellectual origin (i.e. German Romanticism). He is at pains to prove that nationalism almost never has any ethnic basis, and that most Europeans are generally "mongrels", i.e. an almost infinite variety of admixtures. This ignores the painfully obvious fact that the intermixture of largely similar Anglo-Saxons and Celts (for example) over centuries is of an entirely different kind than that of hugely dissimilar white Europeans and sub-Saharan Africans, occurring in a very short period of time.

For example, he does say that

...[s]ince 1945 Britain has acquired Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and West Indian minorities (African and Indo-Pakistani in origin), a recolonization of the colonizer by the colonized - a phenomenon experienced by some of the other former colonial powers as well(p. 19).

But this comes right after the passage speaking about "Norman French (which is to say Scandinavian) rule and colonization in 1066", the two phenomena being considered as more-or-less equivalent in relation to English national identity.

The credit which Pfaff gives to nationalism is in its overcoming of what he considers to be the internationalist ideologies of Nazism (so described because of its universalistic and transnational focus on Nordic racialism) and Communism. On the other hand, he strongly insists on considering the Vietnam conflict as one of Vietnamese nationalism against a westernizing America, in which he probably overestimates the role of nationalism, considering the extreme brutality of the Vietnamese Communists

against their own people.

Pfaff makes some remarkably astute observations about America, for example, that it has existed as at least three successive, almost entirely different societies, very tenuously connected to each other. He writes sympathetically of the Southern "nation", clearly identifying the Civil War and the resultant destruction of the Old South as the birth of a new America. Tracing America's evolution as a whole, he writes:

What originally was an Enlightenment, North European, white Protestant Christian society with a formal commitment to an historically identifiable set of intellectual as well as political values has become something quite different...increasingly as the consequence of choices made: ...secularism and materialism, a market test for values, a non-directive education, non-European immigration, and most recently...the effort to adopt a multiculturalist and multiracialist social system (pp. 165-166).

A European nationalist would see this as a precipitous decline, possibly resulting from the inelectable progressive logic of the ideological underpinnings of the American Founding, which the newest America, "the Left's last utopia" (in John Gray's phrase), has attempted to extend across the entire planet.

If anything, Pfaff is too optimistic.

The modern western nation...provides defense, civil order, a system of justice...it demands solidarity among citizens, which means their willingness to accept the moral and legal norms of the collectivity, to pay taxes...and to come to the common defense (p. 23).

Looking at much of the United States today, one would be hard-pressed to say that it meets even these strictly formal criteria of a state. It increasingly seems that, to have a real state — as opposed to a congeries of therapeutic and managerial bureaucracies — one requires a real, more-or-less homogenous nation. Pfaff then, misses the point that the central struggle for most Europeans today is to restore or preserve their increasingly diluted and weakened collective identities, as opposed to trying to establish further liberal checks on such collectivities and their actions, as he argues for in his second-last chapter. The maximal danger today is the complete *déracinement* of Europeans (and, to a lesser extent, of other once-rooted peoples) as a result of the incredible pressures of what has been called "McWorld" — the loss of their essential *identity*, as opposed to the depredations of Serb warlords or of a Zhirinovskiy in the backwaters, though the latter phenomena could also certainly be opposed with a martial vigor now sadly lacking in the apparently "post-historical" West. ■