

AN EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT FORMS OF FEDERALISM AND REGIONAL AUTONOMY IS REQUIRED

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RJ *Do you agree with the thesis that ethnic hostility and xenophobia against, for example, migrants or representatives of other ethnic groups, is a substitute for authentic social protest?*

I suppose that it is a standard position of the left that ethnic attachment and ethnic hostility are, both of them, the product of false consciousness, and that they will disap-

pear when social justice is finally achieved. **Well, we should certainly work to achieve social justice for our own very good reasons, and this might bring a reduction in the virulence of xenophobia as a side effect.**

Communal attachment will always be with us; it is a feature of normal human life. And sometimes it will indeed make for what you call the dissolution or, more accurately, the partition, of multi-ethnic states – of the sort we are now seeing in the Sudan. But this is a radical solution, and one that is likely to be necessary only after long periods of oppression – again, as is the case in the Sudan. In general, it is better if all of us, political elites especially, look for and experiment with different forms of federalism and regional autonomy.

RJ *Is it possible to preserve ethnic diversity within a multinational state? Is it even something that we should try to preserve?*

There are two questions here. The first is what to do when there are rival claims to the same territory, and here there is no easy answer. One possible solution could be to consider corporate rather than regional autonomy. The second question is whether co-existence is possible for groups with radically different ways of life. Consider here US policy with regard to the Mormons. We banned polygamy, but permitted the growth and development of the Mormon community. It is sometimes necessary to draw hard lines, but only to ban practices that are really far-out in the common understanding. The hard lines should leave a lot of room for diversity and self-rule. The idea that ethnic and religious diversity can be overcome seems crazy to me – and besides, **who would want a world or a state where everyone lived and thought in the same way?**

Americanization and Russification can succeed only as political projects, as efforts to expand citizenship

and participation, not as cultural or religious projects.

RJ *Contrary to Marx, Ernst Gellner claimed that a more complex and developed economy leads to more pronounced ethno-national differences. Do you agree with this viewpoint?*

Gellner was probably right, though we won't know for sure for a long time to come. What it means if he is right is that these questions are not going to go away. Communism didn't make them go away, and capitalist development won't do it either. It is necessary to deal with these questions, and it is always better to do so sooner rather than later.

RJ *John Stuart Mill argued that cultural uniformity in a population is the basis of liberal democracy. Do you agree with this claim? Is democracy possible only within an ethnically homogeneous society?*

What Mill provides is a defense of the legitimacy of the nation-state, when one exists, and also an argument for the creation of new nation-states, when that is possible, as in the separation of Norway from Sweden, for example, or of Slovakia from the Czech Republic – and of the Baltic states and many others from the Soviet Union. It may be true that democracy, and especially social democracy, is easiest in homogeneous societies, where solidarity is more readily evoked. Certainly welfare systems are weaker and more shoddy in heterogeneous societies like the US. But 'only possible' is too strong a phrase. Politics is full of surprises – the survival of American democracy, imperfect as it is, would have been a surprise to 18th century theorists of republican government. **A strong democracy, even a strong social democracy, in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state is a possible surprise. At least, that has to be our working assumption. ■**

Michael Walzer was speaking with Yulia Netesova