



LE REGIONI MULTILINGUI COME FAGLIA E MOTORE DELLA STORIA  
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**Fragments of Europe:**

**Linguistic plurality, its contexts, and discontents**

I

In his much celebrated book *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: “Language is perhaps the strongest and most enduring link which unites men. All the immigrants spoke the same language and were children of the same people.” This interesting observation, however, can be read in two different, and even contrasting, ways. On the one hand, it indicates that the adoption of English by all the immigrants in the United States creates a strong bond between them in spite of the great diversity of their countries of origin, their different mother language and particular customs (an idea which would lead later on to the “English-only” movement.) On the other hand, it may also indicate that the immigrants’ original language—their mother tongue—was a strong bond among them also in their homeland, in their *patria*, as well as in their newly adopted host country, a fact confirmed by findings of sociological research, which indicates that in most immigrant families only the third generation grows up with the local language (English in this case) as its mother tongue. In many cases, the grandparents--the first generation of immigrants—are compelled to study better English much later, often in order to be able to speak with their grandchildren who don’t know anymore the language of origin. This problem doesn’t exist for the second generation which is usually bilingual.

This demographic evolution explains in part why we could find many years after the immigration process began, newspapers in the Italian language in Argentina, Brazil and New York. Such was, for instance, to mention only a few from the many titles, *La Patria* (1876-1898, renamed *La Patria degli Italiani* in 1893) and *L'Operaio Italiano* (1872-1898), both founded in Buenos Aires by Basilio Cittadini, *L'Avvenire* (1895-1903) by Felice Vezzani, *La Questione Sociale* (1885-1890) by Errico Malatesta. In Brazil, *Il Messaggero* (1892) in Rio de Janeiro and *Fanfulla* (1893-1964) in São Paulo, were published by Vitaliano Rotellini; *Avanti* (1900-1914) by Alceste de Ambry, and *La Battaglia* (1904-1912) by Oreste Ristori. Jewish immigrants' publications thrived too. In the United States, for instance, the well-known Yiddish daily *Forverts* (*Forward*), was founded in New York by Abraham Cahan on 22 April 1897 and had among its contributors future Nobel laureates such as Isaak Bashevis Singer and Elie Wiesel (it was only in 1999 that the daily became a weekly in English). Likewise, even in the highly Hebrew-minded Israeli society the *Neueste Nachrichten* was founded in Tel Aviv in 1935 by Siegfried Blumenthal for the German-speaking immigrants and was renamed *Israel Nachrichten* in 1948. (The truth is, though, that the immigrants from Germany were particularly resilient to abandon the German language and adopt a new one.)

I have dwelled on these examples (taken out of many) in order to illustrate the strength of the language as a bond between a national, an ethnic, or a confessional group, and to hint at the many problems and difficulties that may engender a situation of plurality of languages. Indeed, as we will see below, in most cases this plurality is never isolated from other factors and features which complicate each and every situation, and in particular many of the proposed solutions to existing tensions, conflicts, or discontents. What are these other factors and features?

## II

Linguistic plurality almost never exists in isolation from other variables. In most cases it is accompanied with, or embedded in, a context of national, ethnic or religious differences, and the concomitant issues of minority status, cultural autonomy, self-determination, language as a component and a vehicle of culture, and very often--issues of observation or infringement of human rights. It is this almost perennial and permanent configuration that often makes these issues intractable, and leads to conflicts and confrontations. These issues have exercised the hearts and minds of scholars and politicians during the long

twentieth century, and there is no sign that at the beginning of the twenty-first century there is a change in this respect, quite the contrary.

It seems, indeed, that the process of globalization has two apparently contrasting effects: on the one hand, it removes economic and financial boundaries, but on the other hand, it generates and enhances an awakening or a revival of various particularisms, including linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and national ones. In view of the great historic failure of the minority rights' charters in our era, it has become painfully clear that minorities cannot be protected efficiently, and that they live vulnerable lives due to circumstances not of their making. At the same time, majorities, whether nationalistic-minded or not, fear the specter of demands for various kinds of autonomy, minority rights and others' language tolerance that may be voiced by the minorities which live in their midst. These demands raise questions such as: Should there be universal standards for the treatment of minorities? If so, should they be expressed in political as well as cultural institutions? To what extent should local cultures be autonomous? What if a minority demands protection but oppresses its own members?

Against this background, *“la tragica storia dello “scioglimento” del plurilinguismo europeo”* seems to conform very much to the rule in this respect, and it is not an exception or a “deviation” from some unspecified ideal norm. To use a current (and faulty) metaphor which for some pundits and politicians seems to belong only to a remote corner of Southeast Europe, “balkanization” is in fact everywhere. Nevertheless, I will muster all my reserves of optimism and faith in the future so that these opening remarks of mine serve as an *entrée en matière* to our discussion and not as a funeral oration.

### III

One of the basic concepts of this Conference is “the long twentieth century” which begins with the Revolutions of 1848—also known as the “Spring (or the “Birth”) of Nations”—and ends in 1999, but which in fact lasts till our own days. This concept stands in contrast to Eric Hobsbawm’s “short twentieth century” which runs from 1914 to 1991. I believe that for the purpose of the topic *“regioni multilingui come faglia a motore della storia europea”* the “long century” approach is better suited and apposite, provided that we understand the “multilingual situations” in all their links and multiple contexts which were mentioned above. For there is maybe only one country where

multilingualism has been applied without dramatic events and as a non-conflictual fact of life: Switzerland. In all the other cases this was not so and, to the best of my knowledge, for the time being the Swiss model has not been repeated anywhere else.

Linguistic pluralism was a feature of the Ancien Régime, which was defined by “one faith, one law, one king,” but not “one language.” The end of the wars of religion in Europe established the principle *cuius regio, eius religio* with no reference whatsoever to linguistic, ethnic or national criteria. Old Europe was indeed a Tower of Babel. The French Revolution tried to change that. The Jacobins sought to destroy all corporate bodies and to standardize *one* national language on the basis of the Parisian French, and wipe out Breton, Italian (in Southeast France), Corsican, Basque, and German (in Alsace). Their success was limited in spite of a relentless process of uniformity, and the drive of the modern state to promote centralization, similarity, and conformity. Even one hundred years later, as Eugene Weber writes in his well-known book *Peasants into Frenchmen*, local *patois* existed in almost every province beyond Ile-de-France. Similarly, when most Frenchmen said “*mon pays*,” they didn’t mean “France,” but their village, or town, and its province.

If this was so in France, considered as the *locus classicus* of the Nation-State, we should consider also whether the nation-state was not, at one and the same time, both a myth and a reality, and to the extent that it was a reality, whether it was not a very imperfect one. The French Revolution enunciated the immanently individual character of the process of assimilation of all the *citizens* in the new social and political order, and waged a campaign against separate community boundaries—guilds, estates, languages, and (paradoxically) nationalities. Thus, for instance, with regard to the Jews, it formulated: “Everything – to the Jew as individual, nothing – to the Jews as group.” This principle put the modern nation-state generated by the French Revolution on a collision course with national and linguistic minorities included in it, and eventually opened the way to majoritarianism and discrimination.

In the long twentieth century there were in Europe a great number of multilingual regions and three polyglot empires: the Habsburg monarchy, Tsarist Russia, “the prison of the peoples,” and Ottoman Turkey. This multilingualism was always synchronic and connected, like Siamese twins, with a multiplicity of nations, multi-ethnic fault lines, and religious diversity. When these three historic empires disintegrated, their main constituent elements fell

apart, first, along national lines, then, concomitantly, following linguistic diversities. It was obvious that Austrian German and Hungarian were different languages, as it was clear that Austrians and Hungarians belonged to different nations. But what was supposed to be the fate of the hundreds of thousands of Hungarians who found themselves in Romania and in other neighboring countries in post-Trianon “Median Europe”? This is only one example out of many, which produced the fragmentation of “Median Europe” after World War I following the (imperfect?) application in real life of Woodrow Wilson’s principles of “self-determination and national sovereignty.” Thus, the disappearance of the three empires did not signify the end of multilingualism; on the contrary, it created several new multilingual states, and a mosaic of regions in which lived side by side a plethora of linguistic, ethnic, national and religious groups. In Galicia, for instance, one could hear at the local market of each town Polish, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Russian, German, Romanian, Hungarian, Rusyn, and other tongues and dialects.

Artificial attempts to bridge by fiat linguistic gaps were doomed to failure either from the start or in the very short run. “Serbo-Croatian,” for instance, was not “one language” because of a cluster of deep disparities: the Serbs and the Croats were distinct nations; the Serbs were Orthodox Christians, the Croats—Catholics; the Serbian language used the Cyrillic alphabet, Croatian—the Latin one. The Serbs had very distinct historical memories, the Croats—different ones. This situation had a potential of conflict and confrontation, which had nothing to do with the geo-political location of these peoples and the so-called “cursed Balkans, where they are killing each other for one thousand years,” as the worn-out cliché goes.

On the other end of the spectrum, stands the highly intriguing question of how, in Italy’s extraordinary case of one country-one religion-one language (which does not exclude local and regional dialects, and the multilingual region Trentino-Alto Adige), which lasted at least till the 1980s, had influenced the direction of the historiography, and what is the relative weight accorded, on the one hand to research on the social tensions in the country, and on the other hand to problems raised by linguistic plurality and ethnic minorities.

These examples, in addition to those mentioned in the “*Ipotesi di lavoro*” of the Conference, illustrate indeed that the most interesting and intractable cases of multilingualism are those embedded in distinct national frameworks and different religious confessions. Similarly, it seems to me that,

whether an “invented community” or not, the defining reality of the nation and its strength and resilience seem to be the most important factor for the understanding of both late nineteenth- and twentieth-century European history and the events of the last twenty years. This “reality of the nation” is, in my view, a more powerful historical factor and a better tool of analysis than the concepts of “empire” and “imperial” in the examination of the questions discussed here. Paradoxically, as hinted above, globalization and the development of the European Union, while creating wider political configurations of states and cultural-political areas, have also imparted a boost to local peculiarities, particularisms, and national autonomies. If the sovereign state of Spain can be a part of the European Union, a supranational organization, why could not the Basques and the Catalans be autonomous parts of a Spanish Commonwealth? Actually, Catalonia has already achieved a great degree of autonomy, and one should not be a separatist to assume that in the future a similar evolution may occur, for instance, in the Basque country or in Corsica.

#### IV

The historical fate—dissolution or separation--of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and Cyprus, with all the differences between these cases, was predicated and should not have come as a surprise. Rather, the surprising feature is that so many “well informed” and knowledgeable pundits, politicians, and specialists considered them as stable viable formations, and they even advocate nowadays bi-national or multilingual solutions to present-day tensions and crises. Inversely, a community of language coupled with an attachment to one and the same nation would always act, with varying degrees of magnitude, as a uniting factor. Thus, similarly to the reunification of Germany, one could assume that sooner or later the unification of North and South Korea may occur too, and so will the creation of a Kurdish state. (Concurrently, the formation of a Palestinian state is a process in its own right, but does not belong to the category of cases discussed here.) The problems and difficulties in these developments are considerable, but not insuperable. Maybe the lessons supplied in this respect by the long twentieth century will help to avoid bitter conflicts and bloodshed, for the greatest benefit of all multilingual, multiethnic, multi-religious, and multinational communities.

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