The history of modern nation building suggests that the authority of the state must be grounded in the common cultural and ethnic values of its citizens. In the present day, however, state power is eroded by the decline of party politics and effects of globalization. In this context, argues the Hungarian MEP, cultural diversity, articulated as ethnic identity, will find ever stronger expression. Small states are more exposed to external influences and need stronger barriers to protect their cultural norms. It would help, he says, if the larger states practised a measure of self-restraint and tried to understand the needs of smaller communities.

The modern nation is the central and most effective guarantor of democracy. For many, this proposition is challenging, provocative, and perhaps even offensive. The world is full of idealists who believe in the superiority of universal norms that all should accept. My position is that this is utopian, possibly the road to dystopia, because all ideas, all ideals, utopias, ways of seeing or improving the world are culturally coded and, therefore, represent a particular and particularist perspective. And to impose one particularist perspective onto another is the high road to despotism.

One of my underlying assumptions is that all cultures are communities of moral value - they create moral values and demand recognition as communities of value creation and worth. [1] And if we accept this proposition, then it follows that we place a value on diversity, however much we may dislike certain practices that other communities of moral worth pursue. This position, however, is directly challenged by globalization and human rights normativity, for instance, and the world that we live in can be interpreted along this polarity.

Centrally, there is constant tension between universalistic and particularistic discourses. It would be sad indeed if either were to triumph over the other. Both are needed. Universalism threatens to become oppressive unless challenged by ideas external to it and the same applies to particularism. But since the Enlightenment, we in the West have
tended to privilege universalism and universalistic discourses and have tended unconsciously to assume that what we think is what all right-minded people think. Not so. The world is infinitely diverse and various.

Our views of the world, however much they may assume the guise of representing the most enlightened approach, are nevertheless bounded. None of us is culturally innocent. If this is so, then the role of culture and cultural diversity must be accepted as having a positive role in sustaining values that are meaningful. Indeed, if there is one thing that is universal, it is diversity itself.

In the argument that follows, I want to take a very close look at the relationship between political power and cultural community. The pivot of my argument is that this relationship is real, that political power rests on bounded cultures, and that the very real attainments of democracy are determined to a significant extent by the cultural foundations of political power.

My starting point is the arrival of modernity. Modernity is a much contested concept; it has dimensions in politics, economics, society, and culture in the widest sense, not to mention in psychology and other areas. In the context of nationhood, however, the central determinant is the transformation of the nature of power. From the seventeenth century, the early modern state underwent a significant shift in its contours and capacities. It radically increased its power over the inhabitants of the territories it controlled and began a process of territorial consolidation to secure this new-found power. [2] This shift took place for a number of interlocking reasons, mostly to do with the introduction of new technologies of information storage, military potential, and methods of organization. The information revolution of the sixteenth century was based, of course, on the invention of printing in the previous century; it consisted in the application of this technology to the recording capacity of the state, creating the possibility of large-scale bureaucracies and the corresponding emergence of increased rate of literacy. The outcome was what we have come to know as the absolutist state.

These practices were paralleled by the rapid growth of the scientific sphere – scientific in the widest sense of knowledge – that was to find full form in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, Europe was the home to a growing number of people with the literacy, the knowledge, and the aspirations to constitute what today we would call an intellectual elite. [3] This was the Republic of Letters. Simultaneously, new trading and production patterns, equally reliant on literacy, were resulting in a growing accumulation of wealth in private hands. This posed a problem for the state. Taxing the newly moneyed entrepreneurial classes would appear to offer new opportunities for extending the power of the state, but it was already understood that taxation without a quid pro quo was ineffective: people did not like to be taxed without their consent. In England, this issue had already come to the fore during the 1640s and was a key aspect of the civil war. Similarly, the state discovered that people did not care to be coerced without their consent.

The question then arose of how, and to what extent, the state would redistribute power in order to attain the consent of the governed. It is in this moment that we can see the origins of citizenship and democracy. Without consent, there can be no democracy, of course. In the Thirteen Colonies, this proposition generated the slogan: "no taxation
without representation”. Note that this was an extraordinarily radical idea, one that ran
directly counter to the accepted order of access to political power as the exclusive
privilege of birth, in other words, the aristocracy.

The first beneficiaries of the new concept of governance found that the combination of
these forces – rule by a degree of consent, economic power in the private sphere,
intellectual exchange – allowed them access to disproportionate power. This was Britain
and the Netherlands, to some extent France before the revolution, and Switzerland. But
the picture also had its dark side. Rule by consent immediately raised the problem of
dissent. What would happen if a significant group of people chose not to consent, to
demand access to power of their own? Should they be able to establish a new state? In
pre-modernity, when state power was looser, this was not a serious issue. States could
arise and disappear – this was the fate of Burgundy, for example. But once power, people,
and territory came together as the central resource, no holder of power would willingly
countenance its disruption.

To cement these newly modernizing states, therefore, something else was needed. Ideal-
typically, to answer the problem of dissent, a shared culture had to be constructed which
was sufficiently cohesive to pre-empt dissent and disruption. With modernity, no state
would willingly countenance the loss of power and prestige that secession represented.
The early modern state attained this by a combination of ethnic cleansing, oppression and
assimilation of culturally deviant groups. France eliminated the Protestant Huguenots
with the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. England marginalized English and Irish
Catholics; in the Netherlands, again, Catholics were held down. And the United States
began its international career by eliminating about a third of its population, the Loyalists
who remained committed to the British Crown. This also points towards something else –
the growing role of secularization by the eighteenth century.

The modern state, in order to attain the degree of cultural homogeneity that would
permit political heterogeneity, had to condense sufficient cultural power to make this act
of coercion relatively risk-free. Sections of the population regarded as posing a potential
risk had to be made to conform to a state-driven and elite-driven model of cultural and
moral normativity. The state, therefore, took over some of the normative goal-setting that
religion had performed until then and assumed the role primary agent of cohesion. [4] In
exchange, citizenship offered access to political power and the wider world of literacy,
education, and choice.

The question arises whether this newly devised state-driven set of norms could be purely
or overwhelmingly civic, requiring no solidarity of the type that we would define today as
ethnic? Initially, the situation was unclear and the early narratives were certainly civic.
The French revolution invented the citoyen, making all inhabitants of the territory of
France potential members of the French nation; however there was always a preference
for the language of the Ile de France. Could one be a citizen of France while speaking
Breton? No. Similarly in Britain, the idea that one could speak Welsh in the public sphere
and assume full rights using that language would have been dismissed as laughable until
the 1960s. From the outset, therefore, non-civic elements were brought into nationhood
and citizenship was conjoined with language, thereby necessarily importing the non-
philological qualities of language into citizenship. [5] It is dangerously naive to suppose
that a language can be neutral in this respect. However, this did not and does not mean
that a state must be monolingual, just that life is much easier if this is the case.

From this perspective, the idea of the civic contract as the determinant of the nature of the modern state was always a myth, a self-serving narrative. Citizenship is a cold concept. Legal regulation, administrative procedures, rights and entitlements do not build solidarity and trust. Citizenship needs a cultural foundation and cultures have qualities of their own that cut across the ostensible goals of full and equal citizenship for all the residents of a state territory. [6]

The problem with basing civic rights exclusively on residence, taxation and obeying the law, as universalists like to do, is that it ignores the tacit norms, the implicit bases of consent. As children of the Enlightenment, we like to believe that we are in possession of a seamless universal rationality. This is a fallacy. It assumes either that cultures are so alike that all differences can be ironed out without any damage or difficulty, or that those who disagree with us are motivated by ill-will, ignorance or stupidity. The possibility that such disagreement may derive from the collision of different cultural norms is regarded with suspicion, given that no culture is easy with the relativization of its own moral norms.

In reality, everything that we do is culturally coded and our own universalist assumptions are never culturally innocent. There are, of course, structural similarities and parallels, and it is the task of the social sciences to identify them; but beyond a given threshold, difference prevails. [7] If we ignore these differences, we end up imposing our norms on others; the name for this is imperialism. Hence, in our understanding of modernity and democracy, we must recognize the pre-eminent role of cultural norms. This brings us to the problematic of culture itself.

All cultures are collective; they include and exclude; they give us a particular set of identities; they allow us to make sense of the world; they offer us collective regulation and collective forms of knowledge; and they are bounded. These boundaries may shift but they will not vanish. They protect the culture in question and act as a filter through which new ideas are received and integrated. All cultures rely on broadly similar mechanisms to keep themselves in being. [8] They engage in cultural reproduction and construct memory, a myth-symbol complex, forms of mutual recognition and the quest for acceptance of their moral worth as communities of value. [9] If threatened, they will redouble their efforts to protect cultural reproduction. Hence, in our analysis of cultures, it is vital to recognize that cultural reproduction has a rationality of its own, one that certainly defies material rationality and utilitarian satisfaction. Indeed, whenever you hear a particular pattern of collective behaviour by another group being described as “irrational”, you can be certain that the speaker is making a statement about their own boundedness.

The problematic does not end there, however. If we can recognize the relationship between citizenship and culture, and the central significance of cultural reproduction, it follows that the rise of the modern state, with part of its base in the realm of culture, simultaneously means disproportion in power relations. Some states are evidently more powerful than others. This can be argued as a form of uneven development, though hardly in the Marxian sense. Put simply, the rise of a number of politically, economically, and militarily powerful states in Europe in the latter part of the eighteenth century
threatened the cultural reproduction of other, less powerful communities. Once the early starters had been successful in condensing power around the political-cultural base, they threatened the cultural norms of other, less developed collectivities. The Napoleonic Wars were at least in part about this phenomenon. The weaker cultural communities had no option but respond or vanish, and few of them were prepared to face disappearance with equanimity. The patterns established then are still clearly recognisable.

The outcome was a frenzied race to construct modern – more accurately “modern” – cultures, cultural communities that could compete with the condensing power of the emergent modern states – France, Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden. The difficulty for the latecomers was that they lacked the political, economic and cultural resources of the early entrants to modernity and were, therefore, obliged to construct a modernity from their own, inadequate resources. Without modernity and without autonomous access to political power, which did not necessarily have to mean state independence, they were doomed and they knew it. The literature of the latecomers in central and south eastern Europe, for instance, is full references to the fear of extinction. [10] This pattern then determines the history of Europe, as well as of nationhood, culture and democracy, until our time.

We are now in a position to see the quality of modern nationhood from a perspective that is different from the conventional view that privileges citizenship and universalism over culture and particularism, preferring to screen out the latter. Next, a few words on the relationship between culture and ethnicity. All cultures create identity, but not all identities are ethnic. Some identities are completely transient, others are restricted or contingent, yet others are partial. The particular qualities of ethnicity, however, demand further scrutiny. Ethnicity, and I am using the word in its European sense, not in its North American meaning of hyphenated identity, is to be understood as a culturally dense set of shared meanings that make the world coherent. A world of meanings is one of collective narratives that tell us what the world is about, what is positive and what is negative, why things happen and how we should behave. Without such meanings, the world is incoherent and terrifying. Individuals are left isolated and unable to cope. It follows that we all have both individual and collective identities. It is, again, naive to suppose otherwise.

Thus ethnicity is the web of meanings through which we understand and recognize one another and the world in which we live. It exists both in the explicit and the implicit dimension, in that ethnicity is part of the code through which we can take certain ideas, certain forms of knowledge for granted. When we say that something is “sensible” or that it is “common sense”, we are tacitly referring to the ethnic forms of knowledge that we all have. There is nothing inherently reprehensible in this. The problems arise in the relationship between ethnicity and political power and that, as I have been arguing, is an inevitable and ineluctable aspect of modernity and thus of mass access to power through democracy. Nationhood, then, is constructed at the intersection of cultural reproduction and democratic political power.

The instruments of identity construction are complex, but may be unravelled by using some of the insights of sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. My approach is post-Durkheimian. As far as I am concerned, collective identities are constructed and real for those living in them. A brief summary of these processes of identity construction yields
something like this: collective and individual identities impact on one another reciprocally. There is a continuous construction of both the individual and the collective self, and some of this is implicit or occluded. Reflexive processes relativize our sense of identity, but do not eliminate them. [11]

A collective identity constructs a thought-world and a corresponding thought-style; these organize modes of thinking and the style of articulating them. Identities are anchored around a set of moral ideas, signifying that identity raises issues of “right” and “wrong”, and that this is collective. The absence of moral regulation produces anomie, loss of identity and self. [12] The collective self is a collective identity. It creates collective forms of knowledge, it provides answers to a whole range of problems which exceed the capacity of the individual, like that of individual responsibility and remoteness of cause and effect. Collectivities are engaged in cultural reproduction and protection of the collective boundary. This is undertaken by reliance on a myth-symbol complex, boundary markers, and filters. Crucially, the collective identity creates and sustains a discursive field which holds meanings steady by establishing a plausibility structure. [13] Benedict Anderson’s theory of imagining a collective existence functions implicitly by relying on the theory of discursive fields. [14] These discursive fields offer the individual stability and security and are the foundation for communication, as well as for providing a sense of identity over time. Crucially, the continuous definition and redefinition of identity requires an ongoing normative debate. [15] In the absence of such debate, norms are simply imposed on the weaker party.

And given the significance of discursive fields in sustaining collective existence, it is hardly surprising that all identity groups seeks to minimize ambiguity and to establish as far as possible a single, unchallengeable sense to utterances. Collectivities rely heavily on the production of monology – the elimination of ambiguity – whether of the thought-style or at the moment of receiving external ideas. It is equally clear that such monology is under perpetual challenge both from within and from outside. Monology cannot be sustained, but is a continuous endeavour of collective existence. [16]

Ultimately, collective identities give the individual’s life a meaning beyond the individual lifetime, they are a way of constructing the past and the future. However, identities may be fractured by, for example, the impact of change (political, economic, technological) that bring the existing meanings into doubt. The outcome can be a devastating crisis for the collective in question.

From this brief sketch, it should be clear that identities and identity construction are a complex and often sensitive area, one that is frequently misunderstood, and the insensitivity of external actors with greater power than the community in question can have far-reaching negative consequences. The coming of modernity was a crisis of this kind for latecomers; and this process is continuous, given the dynamic, rapidly changing nature of the world today. National communities which think that they have adapted successfully to the demands of modernity discover that the goalposts have been shifted without their participation.

This now brings us to the next set of problems. We have become accustomed to journalists’ sensationalist accounts of ethnicity, seen at this popular level as an unmitigated evil, and reinforced by our own inclination towards seeing our norms as
universal, which leads us to undervalue or devalue the norms of others. We marginalize the role of solidarity in the construction of democracy overwhelmingly, because we in the West have been fortunate enough to live in solidly established democratic societies.

If we turn now to central and south eastern Europe, where new democracies are being constructed, it is far too easy to believe that these are unsuccessful or are solely operated for the benefit of ethnic majorities or sustain their thin democratic practices only because of the pressures of the West. A deeper analysis of nationhood produces a different conclusion. The central problem for the political communities emerging from communism a decade ago was the scarcity of materials from which to build democracy and, second, the problem – still a problem – of trying to build a democratic order that goes with the grain of cultural expectations.

The grain of cultural expectations is a metaphor, of course, and the central problem for the post-communist region was to establish a social base for a democratic order, one that goes beyond surface compliance. In central Europe, this has been broadly successful. There is both elite and popular acceptance of and support for democracy and there has been some movement towards the acceptance of the diversity and complexity that modernity produces, and towards giving some of this diversity a political representation. Of course, there are flaws and failures, and these are picked up and exaggerated by the Western press, but the overall trend is set to fair.

What the West – to be precise, the dominant states of the West – finds very difficult to understand and, therefore, to integrate into its perception of the region is the phenomenon of cultural insecurity. The mainstream history of Europe and the West has been written from the perspective of the successful actors and these have been the larger states. But there is another history, one written from the standpoint of the small state. This putative alternative viewpoint would give us a quite different picture. It would show, for example, that the dominant powers in Europe have consistently ignored the narratives of the smaller cultural communities and stigmatized them as provincial or irrational. If one looks at the past through eyes of the central or south eastern Europeans, the past is often malign and under the control of other, external forces. [17]

This phenomenon, this sense of seeing oneself as marginal, on the periphery, has been an enduring aspect of the region. [18] But the smaller states of western Europe are not significantly different. Their central concern has been to match the capacity of the large states in condensing cultural and political power in order to develop their own domestic models of modernity. Scandinavia has been successful on the whole, as have the Low Countries and Portugal. But the experience of central and south eastern Europe points in the other direction.

Now this factor is relevant to the present day, because it helps to explain the role of ethnicity in the politics of the region. Given the pre-eminence of the larger states, the central and south eastern Europeans have repeatedly had to live with the experience of having externally developed models of modernity foisted upon them, often enough without a second thought as to their own norms and imperatives. Communism was the most extreme of these externally driven modernizations, but there have been many others in history, including modern history. Indeed, the reception of democracy and integration into the European Union has certain structural similarities with earlier transformations.
Not unexpectedly, the sense of being at the mercy of external forces impels these communities, or at any rate some members of these communities, to retreat into their cultural citadels, into a cultural isolation, for fear that otherwise their cultural reproduction will be at risk. It is this fear for the continued existence of the community that underlies resonance of ethnic and ethnicized discourses. It is not the whole story, of course; the acceptance of democratic norms has been genuine, but the lack of time to construct their own responses and the impatience of the West have had their consequences.

In any case, small states and small cultural communities suffer certain disadvantages that large states seem quite incapable of understanding, or so the history of the last two centuries would suggest. On the one hand, access to power is clearly more direct in a small state – anything below a population of 20 million is small – because the number of levels of representation is fewer. It is easier for individuals to make their mark. And the members of the elite come to know one another well. As against this, it is much more problematic to generate the kind of cultural density that large states can do, indeed do so without any conscious effort. As a result, small states are more exposed to external influences and need stronger barriers to protect their cultural norms. This necessarily leads them to adopt practices that are supportive of ethnicity and ethnic discourses, even when this flies in the face of the human rights normativity that large states have elaborated. It would help, if the larger states practised a measure of self-limitation, held back and tried understand the needs of smaller communities. But they do not do so. Nor do they engage them in normative debate, which is essential if the parties are to internalize values rather than merely react passively. Power implies responsibility, but political actors can find this responsibility difficult to discharge when it comes to other actors whom they do not recognize as fully equal.

An example from current events. It is clear to anyone who knows the dynamics of ethnic cultural reproduction that no amount of cajoling or bribery or threats will produce the kind of ethnic cooperation in Kosovo or Macedonia that the West is seeking to attain in the name of multi-culturalism. This is not because the Albanians, Serbs, and Macedonians are obstinate, recalcitrant or ill-intentioned, but because Western projects pay scant attention to their cultural fears. The best that can be attained at this time, in order to secure the minimum, is the institutionalization of parallel societies. But the West will not hear of this. The outcome is continued insecurity all round and no amount of Western money or pressure will change this. The local actors will pay lip-service to what they think the West wants to hear, but that is as far as they will go.

The proposition so far has been that the state acquired new power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that to exercise that power efficiently, it had to develop a reciprocal relationship between rulers and ruled and the redistribution of power was most effective within a relatively homogeneous culture. This indicates that from the outset, ethnicity – shared culture – was an integral part of democracy and that modern nationhood cannot be conceived of without the collective cultural norms condensed by the state. All this suggests that a high capacity state reliant on a web of shared cultural norms is a necessary condition for citizenship.

The problem at the start of the new millennium is that the established states of the West, which have constructed successful democracies, are coming under pressure from two
disparate but related directions. From within, the explosion of civil society and the proliferation of civil social actors – lobbies, pressure groups, charities, semi-state agencies, identity movements, entitlement claimants – are transforming the nature of the relationship between rulers and ruled. [19] Not only is party politics weaker, but the authority of the central state bodies is declining. The state is losing its capacity to condense cultural power in the way that it could even in the very recent past. If it continues to lose this capacity, it could endanger civil society itself, as civil society without state regulation and enforcement of the rule of law rapidly becomes uncivil, as has happened in Russia.

Simultaneously, the power of the state is being eroded by globalization. [20] The consequences are likely to be an unexpected transformation of politics. Parallel to the growth of civil society, there could well be an increase in ethnic identification. States, finding that their capacity to condense civic power is under challenge, could come to rely more heavily on ethnic or ethnicized discourses. Large states are becoming smaller in the context of globalization. This does not have to be a disaster for democracy, as some fear. There are well-tried instruments for regulating inter-ethnic relations. What is beyond doubt is that the universalism of the great cultural powers, the belief that the French, British, or American way of doing things is best for everyone, will be challenged, and the diversity of cultures, articulated as ethnic identity, will find ever stronger expression.

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Footnotes


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