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Book review

Sangre y pertenencia. Viajes al nuevo nacionalismo. (BLOOD AND BELONGING. JOURNEYS INTO THE NEW NATIONALISM). Michael Ignatieff. Barcelona: El Hombre del tres. 2012, 311 pages.

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Good books endure in time, because they face questions and paradigms that are repeated over the years and replicated with the passing of generations, stages or great events and milestones that mark History.

And, undoubtedly, the work in question is one of these, since it constitutes a narrative that transcends the moment in which it was written. It was published for the first time in 1993, in a historical context in which the recent fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Soviet Union gave rise, as expressed in Francis Fukuyama's 1992 work *The End of History and the Last Man*, to the idea of embarking on a new era for Humanity, to the fact of entering a new stage in which armed conflicts would take second place, once the great ideological disputes had ended.

In that framework of hopes and expectations, of dreams of a Kantian lasting peace and of a world with a greater degree of global governance –one has only to recall the exponential growth of United Nations peace missions as a reflection of this attempt to increase international action– there are episodes that, although initially appearing as the mere death throes of the past, soon provide a dose of realism and a harsh spotlight on the concept of the end of history... for it seems, in the end, that history always returns.

A multi-faceted person like Michael Ignatieff (Toronto, 1947) –his extensive curriculum and career includes working as a writer, an academic at various universities in different countries, a radio and television presenter, as well as a politician– with his broad professional and vital experience, observes the events taking place in the former Yugoslavia of today and in other parts of the world, and seeks to produce a black-on-white vision of events based on issues that appeared to be from the past and not in line with the global and globalist expectations generated at the beginning of the decade. And this vision is centred on and articulated around nationalism.

Thus was born the work *Blood and Belonging. Journeys to the new nationalism*. Skillfully penned, with a combination of general and intimate brushstrokes, the reader is moved by its immediacy, by the power of its story, and also, of course, by the reflections it generates. In fact, for the reader less experienced in geopolitics and international relations, apart from certain issues almost contemporary to its publication relating to the war in the Balkans (in the former Yugoslavia) and the reunification of Germany, the remainder of the text, with the exception of passages in which a date or an event of particular significance is cited, could have been written «yesterday», mentioning the same places and almost the same characters and types as those presented here.

The book starts with an introduction and is then grouped into «six journeys» – Croatia and Serbia, Germany, Ukraine, Quebec, Kurdistan and Northern Ireland– and ends with a final reflection, as well as an epilogue to the Spanish edition. And throughout, the text revolves around the notions of nationalism and belonging, using as practical examples the environments and circumstances present *in situ* during those six journeys.

Ignatieff begins with a presentation of his work and what he hopes to achieve with it from a quasi-personal perspective; acknowledging that the world was heading towards

a new globalism, irrevocably leaving nationalism behind and definitively abandoning tribalism, he points out how deeply mistaken this way of thinking was.

He masterfully distinguishes between two types of nationalism, civic and ethnic nationalism, marking the profound differences between the two. Thus, he indicates that civic nationalism occurs when the nation is focused on individuals who espouse the political creed of the nation, regardless of their race, sex, religion, ethnicity or language; and it is civic because it grants an equal citizenship with rights, and, in addition, it is necessarily democratic, because what holds a society together, according to civic nationalism, are not the common roots –since today most societies are not mono-ethnic– but the law.

However, when dealing with the issue of ethnic nationalism, he notes that it advocates that an individual's deepest bonds are inherited, not elected. And while this psychology of belonging, he says, may be deeper than that of civic nationalism, the sociology that accompanies it is much less realistic, so that nationalist regimes necessarily end up maintaining unity by force, not by consent, which implies that they are ultimately more authoritarian than democratic regimes.

He goes on to point out on page 12 that *the fundamental appeal of ethnic nationalism is that it is a rationale for ethnic majority rule, for keeping one's enemies in their place, or for overturning some legacy of cultural subordination*. In the face of the dominant and prevailing cosmopolitanism of that time, he indicates that there has been no transition to a post-national age, and that, moreover, such cosmopolitanism is the privilege of those who can take a secure nation state for granted, because in the face of a situation of political and economic chaos, the question that arises is: who can I trust and whom can I consider «my own»? And the answer offered by ethnic nationalism is clear and obvious: those of your own blood.

Following these deliberations, he describes the case studies of his work; his first stop, Yugoslavia, where he had lived as a child under the rule of Tito (he died in 1980), where he was astonished to learn that the term «ethnic cleansing» had been coined in the ruins of the country he once admired, and was endeavouring to answer the question of what had turned former neighbours into enemies.

Germany, in the midst of the process of reunification –we need to remember that the original work was published in 1993– and beset with difficulties in this context, despite the fact that German laws define citizenship from the point of view of ethnicity, one of the few places in the developed world where this is the case.

Ukraine, the «frontier» –for this is the meaning of the term– presents a narrative with a strong personal element, since the author's grandparents and great-grandparents were Russian landowners settled in Ukraine, and where he tries to value what it means for Ukrainians to be a new and young nation; there is a section dedicated to Crimea, the peninsula that was Russian, then annexed to Ukraine in a territorial reorganisation by the USSR and annexed again by Russia in 2014... and where the Crimean Tartars want, as the author indicates, the return of an autonomous Tartar Republic, although, as he also points out on page 165: *«I fear the Ukrainian nationalists may be as deaf to*

Crimean Tartar demands as Russian dissidents were when asked to identify with Ukrainian autonomist demands in the 1970s».

Quebec –the destination of his exiled Russian grandparents– is the fourth stop on his journey, and is also the author's native country, a country that, as he points out, has been torn apart for thirty years by Quebec nationalism on the basis of cultural and linguistic claims. And, similar to what happens with the Crimea in Ukraine, he explores, among other issues, how Quebec nationalism addresses the demands for national self-determination of the Cree, an indigenous people in northern Quebec on whose lands lies a significant part of the economic potential of a potential independent Quebec, those Cree people, who repeat the argument: how can you ask for self-determination and deny it to us?

His fifth stop takes us to Kurdistan, the territory of a stateless people, divided among several states, where the author refers to part of their struggle to achieve it, as well as the attempts of Kurdish nationalism to achieve a single nation facing, in addition to the very states where that region is located, a still powerful tribal and local element.

Finally, Britain, where the author spent several years of his life; having depicted the general background, here the narrative focuses on Belfast, where the split between Catholics and Protestants is such that, as he points out, walls had to be erected so that neighbours did not kill each other from one side of the street to the other. Ignatieff continues with the importance of that background, and points out how the British are among the most fiercely nationalistic of all peoples, but also refers to Britain's «(...) awareness that their nation-building met its greatest failure in Ireland» (page 270). And finally, before moving on to his conclusions (pages 293-294), he states that: «*What saves the province (Ulster) from becoming Bosnia is nothing more than the British Army, policemen who do their jobs and courts which convict upon evidence. There is a larger moral to be drawn from this. The only reliable antidote to ethnic nationalism turns out to be civic nationalism, because the only guarantee that ethnic groups will live side by side in peace is shared loyalty to a state, strong enough, fair enough, equitable enough, to command through obedience*». In his final analysis, full of questions resulting from the investigation and assessment of what he witnessed in his travels, he focuses on a single, but highly significant aspect: «*Everywhere I've been, nationalism is most violent where the group you are defining yourself against most closely resembles you*» (page 295), for it is that very similarity which leads to it being defined precisely by the differences, however subtle they may be. It is what Sigmund Freud defined as «The narcissism of minor differences», and it is what motivates that hatred between siblings which, when it exists, is greater than hatred between strangers.

Similarly, he includes another very significant sentence: «*Nationalism is a form of speech which shouts, not merely so that it will be heard, but so that it will believe itself. It was almost as if the quotient of crude historical fiction, violent moral exaggeration, ludicrous caricature of the enemy was in direct proportion to the degree to which the speaker was himself aware that it was all really a pack of lies*» (pages 296-297), implying that, consequently, nationalism remains a language of fantasy and evasion of the harsh reality of life.

And, in view of the potential attraction that such fantasies may exert, the author points out that the political systems of any society may be vulnerable to them, as he states on page 297: «*Societies with adequate democratic tradition have proven themselves vulnerable to the politics of fantasy. But a democratic system does provide at least for the punishment of fantasists whose lies catch up with them. At the same time, however, one cannot think of democracy as a reliable antidote to nationalism*».

A note on violence: Ignatieff indicates that it is a mistake to assume that the whole world hates and fears violence –in his travels he has been able to verify this faithfully– as it can also be affirmed that there exists a deep connection between violence and belonging: the more strongly you feel the bonds of belonging to your own group, the more hostile, the more violent your feelings towards outsiders.

He therefore concludes by indicating that there is a battle between the civic and the ethnic nation and that the outcome of that battle is, for the time being, uncertain.

With Europe currently immersed in such a profound challenge as represented by Brexit, involving the reversal of a supranational integrative process, as well as the powerful internal tensions to which many of the nations of Europe –and of the world– are subject, the question arises as to whether or not the work is indeed highly topical. In any case, the reader who is fortunate enough to approach these three hundred pages, which are read in a heartbeat, will be able to assess whether this is one of those works that will endure over time. Fortunately, or perhaps because of the subject matter, in this case, unfortunately. Whatever the case, it is undoubtedly well worth exploring.

