



Ethno-nationalism from a psychiatric perspective

The Mass Psychology of Ethnonationalism by Dusan Kecmanovic Plenum Press, New York 1996.

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The literature written on the subject of ethno-nationalism as a historical phenomenon grew tremendously during the last fifteen years for obvious reasons. After reading some of it one has the feeling that it rehashes the same old historical justifications of what is unavoidable due to historical developments in general. The academic experience of the topic unexpectedly changed the moment I got hold of "*The mass psychology of Ethnonationalism*" (Plenum Press, New York 1996, a book written ten years ago by a Sydney-based practising psychiatrist Dusan Kecmanovic). Kecmanovic, like many others of us, fled the country after figuring out that there was nothing we could do to stop the madness we refused to take part in. The strength of this volume is based partly on psychiatric observation, partly on academic research and mainly on direct observation of the phenomenon while being in the midst of it all. This is not to say how those who only read about it could never have the knowledge about it, however, the closeness to Plato's idea in this case speaks for itself, reading about the terror can never replace the personal experience of it.

The questions he asks in his book are in my opinion essential to any discussion on this particular topic: What forces make people so committed to their ethno-national groups to a degree where they ignore everyone else's concerns, the rights and interests of people of other ethnicities? What is the psychological and anthropological basis for ethno-nationalism? Why and how do people attain and follow blindly nationalist attitudes and beliefs?

For Kecmanovic nationalism or ethno-nationalism is the integral, totalitarian, ethnic nationalism. The appeal of nationalism lies in its capacity to provide people with satisfaction of some of their needs even though these needs in themselves have almost



nothing to do with either nation or the protection of national interests. Nationalism is followed blindly, argued for academically, and ‘exercised’ because it defines the most suitable reaction to social pressure. It provides an opportunity for coping with feeling of personal insufficiency, as well as social insufficiency – an inability of getting along with the ones who are different from oneself. Maybe its most appealing characteristic lies in its capability of providing an arena on a grass roots level for a socially approved exercise for aggression of various kinds. It is the perfect instrument of escape from ones own individuality and the possibility of redefining self-worth by ones dissolution into the masses.

This multipurpose function that nationalism has, the polyvalent functionality, is in practice the depth of its strength and vitality. The more purpose it finds within the scope of needs on the individual level, the more fascinating it becomes and the more individuals find it appealing.

What makes this volume different from all the historical explanations of what happens when it happens is that its explanation is in a way free of history. The basic model places the explanation in the nature of how individuals are capable of acting rather than placing the explanation at a certain location within a certain group, at the certain point in time. Kecmanovic sees the nationalist ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling as a universal human potential, which then may be realised under certain socio-political, economic, and historical circumstances. In Kecmanovic’s view, exactly because nationalism has to do with the basic features of humans as group animals, it can be easily identified throughout recorded human history. This is where, according to Kecmanovic, the role of national feeling and the social psychological and anthropological foundations that are the basis for the sense of belonging that is essential to nationalism come from.

For Kecmanovic, to be able to understand the reasoning behind nationalism one has to understand that to nationalists the nation is the ultimate point of reference for social, political, and all other loyalties and actions. In this way, on the individual level, nationalism competes with all kinds of crosscutting factors such as multiple and overlapping economic, religious, and cultural networks and loyalties. This competition is a competition for responding and promoting conformity, direct aggression toward deviants



and collective intolerance, for the purpose of boundary-drawing and further over exaggerated contrasting.

The final point Kecmanovic draws in this landscape of eternal madness is that an idea nationalism is generally an elite phenomenon while in practice it is a mainly mass phenomenon.

Because of this characteristic and because it appeals to and relies on people's emotions, nationalism is also a non-rational phenomenon, since national sentiment is non-rational. This is, of course, not to say that it is irrational, since obviously so many of us fall into the trap by pure human basic need. This is also why in Kecmanovic's view if the nation could lose this kind of essence for the individual redefinition of self-worth through nationalist way of being, this still in a way would not be the end of it. This kind of apparent individual fulfilment would keep on existing, just under another name, another term for something very much the same. If nationalism that always is a result of some very basic human inclinations did not rely on human inclinations, it would not be able to gain such intense control over people who let themselves be controlled by it. Of course in this type of perverted psychedelic experience of just another aspect of what we are about as kind at different times throughout human history, the colours remain pretty pale since

Nationalism never surpasses its destiny of not ever being an end in itself, but always remains as nothing more and nothing less than the good old standard of human means to an end...