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# Postnationalism and Postmodernity

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Gary Madison's thinking about postmodernity has implications not only for how we rethink hermeneutic questions of interpretation, but also for new ways of envisioning political identity. Madison's commitment to a Gadamerian hermeneutics of tradition and historical belonging seems, on the face of it, incompatible with his commitment to radical postmodernism. But the opposition is only apparent. In fact, postmodern politics, as Madison argues, is directionless without some basic hermeneutic discernments between competing claims for our sense of socio-political allegiance. More specifically, Madison maintains that the whole hermeneutical-theoretical enterprise, committed to values of communicative rationality, seeks not only to understand but to transform social praxis itself. So doing, Madison invokes, on the one hand, Gadamer's equation of reason with freedom, and on the other, the claim by the American Founders that "free communication [is] the only effectual guardian of every other right." The values of postmodern hermeneutics—defined by Madison as tolerance, reasonableness, and the attempt to work out mutual agreements by means of discourse rather than by force—are, he holds, identical with those of genuine democratic politics. His position here is unambiguous: "To the degree that democracy is that form of social and political order that our postmodern times call for, to that degree hermeneutical theory provides the philosophical underpinning for a genuine 'politics of postmodernity.'" Theory and practice are inextricable for Madison. Changing the world in the right way means *interpreting* it in an appropriate way, and thereby assessing what may count as ethically-politically acceptable ways of engaging with our society. Hence the importance of hermeneutic determinations of "appropriateness" in matters of interpretation. It is for this reason that Madison argues that the value of hermeneutical *theory* can properly be assessed only in terms of its *practical* results.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I shall suggest that the whole question of nationalism, and the related issue of national identity, so central to current European politics, is being challenged by certain postmodern paradigms of thought. I will begin with some arguments about the need to distinguish between different kinds of nationalism as we proceed toward a "postnationalist" scenario. I will then attempt to show how this move corresponds to certain recent debates in postmodern theory (Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Heller); and I will conclude by proposing that what is needed is a postmodern politics of civic participation which goes beyond traditional forms of nation-state allegiance while respecting the need for a shared polity.

My special emphasis on the European and British-Irish contexts arises from my sociopolitical belonging to my own historical lifeworld. That this

particular horizon extends to a more universal overlapping with other lifeworld horizons goes without saying for those of us who, like Madison, are committed to a hermeneutic "universality of understanding." My attempt in this essay to trace a postmodern move beyond nationalism, though not directly concerned with the content of Madison's political philosophy, takes its cue from his basic hermeneutic plea to test philosophy in *practice*.<sup>3</sup> So doing, I hope to honor the dictum of another of Madison's hermeneutic mentors, Paul Ricoeur, that philosophical interpretation ultimately requires a return journey "from text to action."

### Beyond Nationalism

To offer a critique of nationalism does not mean, let me state at the outset, a repudiation of all forms of nationalism as inherently atavistic and malign. It is important to recall how certain forms of nationalism served, historically, as legitimate ideologies of resistance and emancipation. One could cite numerous examples from the last two centuries of progressive nationalist opposition by local populations to the colonial and imperial policies of successive Western Empires—European, American, and Soviet. What we witness is actually resistant nationalism struggling against forms of *hegemonic* nationalism. This fact alone should make clear the need to discriminate between different kinds of nationalism—colonial and anti-colonial, subversive and repressive, civic and ethnocentric, those that emancipate and affirm a community's genuine right to self-identification versus those that incarcerate and degenerate into ideological closure, xenophobia, and bigotry.<sup>4</sup>

I begin with the distinction between *civic* and *ethnocentric* nationalism. The former conceives of the nation as including all of its citizens, regardless of blood, creed, and color. The ethnocentric model, by contrast, holds that what binds a community together is not common rights of citizenship (or humanity) but common ethnicity (or race). The former derives largely from the modern legacy of the French and American revolutions, while the latter finds its roots in the German romantic conviction (Fichte, Herder, Schlegel) that it is the native *Volk* that founds the state, an ideology that underlay the drive to unify Germany as a nation-state in 1871. Fascism is one of the most extreme forms of ethnic nationalism, predicated as it is on the supremacy of one "people" over all others. Nationalism of this kind is not pride in one's national identity or character (a perfectly legitimate sentiment). It is, as Isaiah Berlin remarks,

... the belief in the unique mission of a nation, as being intrinsically superior to the goals or attributes of whatever is outside it; so that

if there is a conflict between my nation and other men, I am obliged to fight for my nation no matter what the cost to other men.... My gods are in conflict with those of others, my values with those of strangers, and there exists no higher authority—certainly no universal tribunal—by which the claims of the rival divinities can be adjudicated. That is why war must be the only solution.<sup>5</sup>

What ethnic nationalism repudiates is the existence of universal laws above the nation or subnational identities (e.g., minorities) within it. It is convinced that the nation is a "natural" given, with a pre-existing, fixed essence and a divine right to realize itself, organically and ineluctably, as a nation-state. What this ignores is the fact that "national identities" are also historical constructs or "imagined communities" in Benedict Anderson's apt formula. To acknowledge this last fact, as civic nationalism tends to do, is to realize that nationality may actually be strengthened by its decoupling from ethnicity and permitted to find more appropriate forms of expression than a centralist nation-state.<sup>6</sup>

In endeavoring to go beyond nationalism, in its negative guises, one must be wary, therefore, not to succumb to the opposite extreme of antinationalism. Those who identify all forms of nationalism with irredentist fanaticism habitually do so in the name of some neutral standpoint that masks their own ideological bias. To condemn roundly Irish nationalism, for instance, refusing to distinguish between its constitutional and nonconstitutional expressions, and omitting reference to the historical injustices of British colonialism and unionism, amounts to a tacit *apologia* of the latter. It also fails to appreciate the fundamental role of nationalist ideology in the formation of the *British* nation-state at the end of the eighteenth century. (Nationalism is not the prerogative of the Irish.) Indeed, the critical strains in Britain's vexed relationship to the European Union in the 1990s revealed how the very economic processes that helped form the nation-state were now undermining it. The growing discrepancy between economic growth and national sovereignty was exposing, as well as testing, the very basis of British nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

Republican nationalism played a legitimate part in the shaping of modern Ireland, just as monarchical nationalism did in the shaping of the United Kingdom. But it is now time to move beyond the competing nationalisms of these islands. What the British-Irish Agreement of 1998 endorsed was a transition from traditional nationalism to a postnationalism which preserves what is valuable in the respective cultural memories of nationalism (Irish and British) while superseding both.

The Agreement states that henceforth, and for the first time in the history of the two islands, it is possible for citizens of Northern Ireland to

be British or Irish or both. Postnationalism is not Pol-Potism. It does not solicit a liquidation of the past, but its reinterpretation or *Aufhebung*. As such, it recommends a series of hermeneutic discriminations: between various forms of nationalism (civic, ethnic, and so on, as mentioned above); between nationalism and nationality (i.e., national identity as cultural memory, tradition, belonging); between nation and state; and between nation-state and other models of community (federal, international, regional, local). It is this latter kind of discrimination that Agnes Heller has in mind, I suspect, when she advocates a "postmodern" version of cosmopolitan identity in opposition to modern versions of narrow nationalism. Speaking of Europe, she writes:

[O]ne feels that this tiny Continent now has both the need and the opportunity for becoming more cosmopolitan.... The nationalism of race harbours the single greatest danger for our world, and also for Europe. One can only hope that Europe will fall victim no more to such a temptation. The external limits of Europe as a cosmo-polis can once again be transformed into internal limits. This time, the internal *limes* can assume the form of practical humanism as the spontaneous and active toleration of otherness.... After the great century of nations, of national literature, national music, national painting and national philosophy, the postmodern art and taste gives the finishing touch to the accomplishment of high modernism: it leaps over national borders.<sup>8</sup>

But the federal-cosmopolitan Europe, envisaged by people like Heller, Arendt, and Berlin, is not to be confused with a move to a "European national-state," analogous to the United States, for that would be merely to replace one model of nation-state with a super-nation-state still dominated by one-nation ideology. "Europeanism" and "Americanism" are nationalisms amplified to the upper case of geopolitical power; they still operate according to the old absolutist principles of inclusion and exclusion. By contrast, the cosmopolitan Europe promoted by Heller is one based on a common right to "fellow-citizenship" and a corresponding right to one or more identities of nationality and regionality. In this scenario, one may be Irish and British (in Ulster), Spanish and British (in Gibraltar), Spanish and Catalan (in Catalonia), Basque and French (in Le Pays Basque), Arab and French (in Marseilles), Flemish and Belgian (in Northern Belgium), Swiss and Italian (in Tyrol)—while being *European* in all.

Beyond the "modern" alternatives of national independence and multinational dependence lies another possibility: a postnational model of interdependence which is now beginning to emerge. This third model might,

I suggest, take the form of a new federalism counterbalanced by a new regionalism. "The question of identity," writes Erhard Eppler, a leader of Germany's SDP, "no longer necessarily connects to nation-states.... And it may even be that the European nation-states are being overcome from both sides at once: by the European Community, and from below, by regional cultures."<sup>9</sup> Several EU countries have already made significant moves toward greater regional democracy (notably Italy, Denmark, Spain, Germany, and the UK with its policy in the late 1990s of regional assemblies for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland). It is not insignificant that the most visionary EU President to date, Jacques Delors, explicitly endorsed a European triad of region-nation-federation as the preferred model for an integrated Europe of Regions.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the formative EC Reports on Regional Policy by Martin (1986) and Hume (1987), together with Art. 23 of the SEA (1988) and the proposed Committee of Regions in the Maastricht Treaty (1993), confirm the need to provide for a Europe of equal regions. The proposals are still largely unrealized—due to resistance by respective nation-states—but are no less urgent for that. The European project is still a wager, not a *fait accompli*.

Let us take Germany, one of the EU's most influential member states, as a test case here. Germany has, to date, been enthusiastic about the ideal of a federal Europe, in large part, one supposes, because of its successful experience of federal government within its frontiers since the war. Germany has led the push away from central administration toward increased regional and local government (since unification the Federal Republic includes 16 *Länder*). The case of Germany is also telling in that it has suffered, and made others suffer, more than any other country from excesses of national sovereignty. Two world wars last century and over fifty million dead speak for themselves. This point is made forcefully by the poet Hans-Magnus Enzensberger in his book *Europe, Europe*. Nation-state sovereignty, he reminds us, is an invention of recent centuries. In the case of Germany, it lasted less than a hundred years—"and what did it do for the Germans between Bismarck and Hitler? One crash landing after another." Enzensberger observes that the history of almost every European nation is a "millennium of patchwork." Diversity, not homogeneity, is the best recipe for a new Europe. "Particularism is the true home of all Germans," he concludes, "and that's not just true of Germany, it's really a European phenomenon...."<sup>11</sup> Another influential German intellectual to endorse the decentralizing of power in a federal Europe is Peter Glotz. He promotes the thesis that "at the end of the twentieth century the nation-state is economically, ecologically, militarily and culturally out of date." He argues, accordingly, for a two-pronged movement "down to regional autonomy and up to trans-national structures." For democracy to succeed in the new

postmodern scenario, what is required is "a pan-European federation—with maximal guarantees for ethnic groups and minority rights."<sup>12</sup>

Such a pan-European Federation of regions is becoming less and less utopian. Scottish political theorist, Neal Ascherson, foresees the emergence of a larger Community, including the EFTA countries plus much of the former Eastern Europe. The marginal nation-states would still be represented, but most of their existing powers would be exercised either from Brussels or through a diversity of smaller units, coordinated through a Council of Regions. As far as the British archipelago is concerned, suggests Ascherson, these units might be England (or possibly several English regions), Scotland, Wales, Ulster, and either the Republic of Ireland as a whole or its provinces acting as autonomous regions. "The cultural and economic links between Ulster, Southern Ireland, and England would remain strong, but they would no longer carry connotations of sovereignty."<sup>13</sup> But for this to work, we must be prepared to go beyond the traditional limits of sovereignty.

### **Toward a Political Theory of the Postmodern**

Postmodern theory can have radical implications for politics.<sup>14</sup> One frequently encounters the claim, for instance, that postmodern critiques of the center—as logos, arché, origin, presence, identity, unity, or sovereignty—challenge the categories of established power. The most often cited examples here relate to the critiques of totalitarianism, colonialism, and nationalism. The postmodern theory of power puts the "modern" concept of the nation-state into question. It points toward a decentralizing and disseminating of sovereignty which, in the European context at least, signals the possibility of new configurations of federal-regional government.

A formative contribution to the postmodern critique of centralized power has come from Derrida's reading of Western "logocentrism." After deconstruction, we are told, the center cannot hold. The accredited notion of a single origin or end is replaced, or displaced, by a play of multiple meaning.

It was necessary [says Derrida] to begin to think that there was no centre, that the centre could not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the centre had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This moment was that in which ... the original or transcendental signified is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.<sup>15</sup>



The translation of this deconstructive moment into political terms has subversive consequences for inherited ideologies. Totalizing notions of identity (imperial, colonial, national) are submitted to scrutiny, the theory goes, in the name of an irreducible play of differences.

Several of these consequences are explored by Michel Foucault in *Governmentality* and by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. Foucault argues that the modern "problematic of government" first emerges in the sixteenth century with the phenomenon of "state centralization," or what he calls the establishment of the "great territorial, administrative and colonial states." Machiavelli's *The Prince* was to play a pivotal role in these deliberations, nowhere more so than in nineteenth-century Europe where the Napoleonic heritage of the French Revolution, and the German and Italian claims for territorial unity, were confronting the question of how, and under what conditions, a ruler's sovereignty over the state could be maintained. Gradually we find the transcendent singularity of Machiavelli's Prince being replaced by an immanent "economy" of state power. With this introduction of economy into political practice, sovereignty is no longer merely defined in terms of power exercised on a territory and its subjects, but of power exercised on all relations between "men and things." A new and more pervasive paternalism replaces the old paternity of the feudal kingdom. The task of government now becomes a question of how to introduce the father's economic management of the family into the management of the state.

To govern a state will therefore mean to apply economy, to set up an economy at the level of the entire state, which means exercising towards its inhabitants, and the wealth and behaviour of each and all, a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of the head of a family over his household and his goods.<sup>16</sup>

Over time, this economic model of family management is replaced, in turn, by the political-economic model of population management.

One of the consequences of this paradigm shift is that the old goal of sovereignty—which was the exercise of sovereignty itself—now takes the modern form of a "state rationality" governed by four sciences: statistics (the science of the state directed upon the administration of the "population"); the Cameralist science of police (which ensured law served the state rather than the contrary); mercantilism (the first rationalization of the exercise of power as a practice of government—wealth accumulation); and political economy (the intervention of government in the relations between population, territory, and wealth). With the birth of the so-called "governmental state," sovereignty becomes inseparable from practices of

centralization and discipline. In reality, concludes Foucault, "one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security."<sup>17</sup> Against this triangular state, Foucault suggests we experiment with "local struggles" aimed at degovernmentalizing the practice of politics.

For his part, Lyotard defines the postmodern turn as a dismantling of grand narratives, which seek to totalize meaning around a single foundation, in favor of "little narratives" (*petits récits*). The ultimate reference of postmodern narrative is not some totalizing center of meaning—party, king, nation-state—but other narratives. In other words, postmodern narratives are multiple, diverse, and non-subsumable into some final solution. As Lyotard says: "Let us wage war on totality. Let us activate the differences...."<sup>18</sup>

On this reading, the postmodern critique of power implies the replacement of absolute sovereignty—theocracy, monarchy, bureaucracy—with "republican principles" of freedom. "As the common inheritance is more and more measured in terms of the law of freedom, the uncertainty about previously held beliefs increases, and the social network becomes more fragile, insubstantial," writes Lyotard. "In the political field, a sign of [this] can be found in the extension in people's mind of Republican principles." To the extent that we can speak here of a political or ethical community, it is one that "always remains *in statu nascendi* or *moriendi*, always keeping open the issue of whether or not it actually exists." It is, in short, a community where identity is a part of a permanent process of narrative retelling, where each citizen is in a "state of dependency on others."<sup>19</sup> In such a postmodern republic, the principle of interdependency is seen as a virtue rather than a vice; it serves, in fact, as a reminder that every citizen's story is related to every other's.

Postmodern politics favors the dissenting stories of the detainee in opposition to the Official Story of the Commissar—the latter masquerading as a metanarrative which merely conceals its narrative status. The postmodern turn seeks to deconstruct the Official Story (which presents itself as Official History) into the plurality of stories that make it up. Modern imperialism and modern nationalism are two sides of the Official Story. Genuine internationalism (working at a global level) and critical regionalism (working at a local level) represent the two sides of a postmodern alternative.

But before examining some of the practical implications of these positions, there are two further contributors to the debate who merit specific acknowledgement: Kenneth Frampton and Charles Jencks, both, as it happens, theorists of architecture, the discipline which first launched the term postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s. In a seminal essay in

*Postmodern Culture*, Frampton advances a model of "critical regionalism" as the most appropriate response to our contemporary predicament. He defines this as "an attempt to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived from the peculiarities of a particular place." Whereas modernism, in architecture at least, tended to represent the "victory of universal culture over locally inflected culture," the postmodern paradigm of critical regionalism opposes "the cultural domination of hegemonic power"—a domination that sacrifices local concerns to abstract ones.<sup>20</sup>

Advocating a postmodern resistance to the modernist avant-garde, Frampton argues that

... architecture can only be sustained today as a critical practice if it assumes an *arrière-garde* position, that is to say, one which distances itself equally from the Enlightenment myth of progress and from a reactionary, unrealistic impulse to return to the architectonic forms of the preindustrial past. A critical *arrière-garde* has to remove itself from both the optimization of advanced technology and the ever-present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism or the glibly decorative. It is my contention that only an *arrière-garde* has the capacity to cultivate a resistant ... culture while at the same time having discreet recourse to universal technique.<sup>21</sup>

Such a program, Frampton believes, offers the best prospect of a post-modern regionalism of emancipation.

Charles Jencks adds a further inflection to this position when he advances a poetics of "radical eclecticism" in *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*.<sup>22</sup> All tendencies toward cultural uniformity are to be resisted. As applied to architecture, this entails the liberty to mix together stylistic "quotations" drawn from a variety of periods and styles (Egyptian, Graeco-Roman, Celtic, medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, late modernist, high tech, functionalist). As applied to literature, it might be said to correspond to Roland Barthes's notion of "multiple writing" where the cultural text is recognized as a pluridimensional space of open reinvention. One of the goals of "radical eclecticism," Jencks reminds us, is to rid us of the illusion of englobing ideologies which erode cultural differences. But it is important to distinguish this radical eclecticism from the "weak" or "conservative" kind that tolerates multiplicity by default, by simply discarding commitment or purpose, by succumbing uncritically to the dispersive trends of consumer society. The challenge is to turn "weak eclecticism" into "radical eclecticism," to transform the existing jumble of cultural fragments into carnivalesque collage.

Taking the example of *Finnegan's Wake*, a prototypical postmodern text, we witness a blending of indigenous myth with a "polyguttural" assortment of foreign narratives (Judaic, Greek, Babylonian, Chinese). Joyce portrays a culture as a "circumbendibus" of multiple aspects, a transmigration of perspectives which, like the Vico Road, goes round and round to end where terms begin. To be true to ourselves, as Joyce put it, is to be "othered": to exit from our own time frame in order to return to it, enlarged and enriched by the detour. This signals a new attitude not only to culture, but to history. The very notion of evolving historical periods (tradition, modernity, etc.) following each other in causal order is put into question. Rather than construing history as a continuity leading inexorably back to a lost paradise or forward to a guaranteed future, postmodernism views it as collage. It resists the belief in history as inevitable progress or regress, recommending instead that we draw from old and new in "recreative," nondogmatic ways. The "post" in postmodern refers, then, not just to what comes *after* modernity. It signals, rather, another way of seeing things, which transmutes linear history into a multiplicity of time-spans. Thus the modern idea of a millenarian state in which cultural and political differences might be subsumed into consensus is challenged by the postmodern preference for *dissensus*—diversity without synthesis.

When Lyotard, finally, opposes "dissensus" to totalizing models of identity, he is careful to distinguish it from mere relativism (or lazy pluralism). There is, he concludes, a significant distinction between a relativist refusal to judge, on the one hand, and a postmodern hermeneutic of indeterminate judgment, on the other. The latter crucially involves the recognition that there exist certain *differends* (conflicts of compatible but equally valid interests) which cannot be resolved. This does not mean that *any* judgment is as good as any other. It means, rather, that history will never end because we will never be done with doing justice.

The just judgment leaves the question of what justice might be open to discussion. It does not allow justice to become a determinate concept. The multiplicity of justices evoked by the heterogeneity of language games is thus not a mere relativism, since it is regulated by a justice of multiplicity. This judgment is not an undifferentiated pluralism, rather it is based in the most rigorous respect for difference.<sup>23</sup>

In short, a postmodern hermeneutic would be one guided not by skeptical solipsism, but an idea of justice always to be determined. Not "any kind" of justice, therefore, but the right kind of justice—one which necessitates that we keep open the discussion about the nature of justice.

## Democracy: Representative and Participatory

How does all this relate to the critique of nationalism? Apart from the obvious challenge to exclusivist notions of race, centralized notions of power, and absolute notions of sovereignty, postmodern theory also provides us with useful insights into the contemporary crisis of "representative" government. Representative democracies are those where the people supposedly empower certain elected individuals to represent them in parliament, to act in their name and on their behalf. When we hear talk of the loss of confidence in a governing power, as we do more and more, this signifies that the people are withdrawing their consent from their representatives. (Less than half of American citizens vote in presidential elections; less than forty percent of the British electorate vote in most local elections). The nation-state is falling into crisis. Realizing this, and fearful that the people will also realize it, those in power often begin to react as sovereign rulers or monarchs. They substitute communications propaganda for the assent of the people. They try to fill the "credibility gap" no longer by police or military force, as in former times, but by media seduction or simulation.

Another more predictable strategy for resolving the crisis of consent is scapegoating: one fabricates an inner sense of national solidarity by focusing on a common external enemy. Hence the use of the Falklands in Thatcherite Britain; the reds-under-the-bed syndrome in McCarthyite America; the witch-hunt of "foreign-backed" counter-revolutionaries in communist China. But scapegoating does not work in the long run, for the scapegoaters know, though they seek to hide it from themselves, that those scapegoated are not really what they are denounced as being. As Sartre points out in *Portrait of an Anti-Semite*, liars can fool others, but not themselves. A sense of national unity predicated upon the projection of inner hostilities onto some outer adversary is ultimately condemned to fail. The ploy of demonizing others returns to plague the inventor.

Rather than face the consequences of inner disunity and diversity, nation-states will sometimes push the scapegoating stratagem to the point of war. The irresolvable conflict now becomes one *between* nation-states rather than *within* them. As Hannah Arendt observes in *Crisis of the Republic*:

So long as *national independence*, namely freedom from foreign rule, and the *sovereignty of the state*, namely the claim to unchecked and unlimited power in foreign affairs are *equated* ... not even a theoretical solution of the problem of war is conceivable, and a guaranteed peace on earth is as utopian as the squaring of the circle.<sup>24</sup>

Since Arendt believes that war is no longer acceptable as a last resort for the resolution of conflicts between sovereign states, she opts for a federal alternative where power would operate horizontally rather than vertically, the federated units—regional governments, councils, or cantons—mutually checking and controlling each other's power. But a genuinely transnational federation of this kind must be distinguished from a supernational administration which lends itself to monopolization by the strongest nation or by a single global security state. An equitable and just internationalism is one that draws its authority from below (not above), from the participatory democracy of local councils. This principle of civic participation has been recognized in principle, if not yet sufficiently in practice, by the European Union's commitment to subsidiarity: no political decision should be taken at a higher level that can be taken at a lower level.

The most practicable alternative to the state or superstate system of centralized authority is, by this argument, a federated council of councils. (See, for example, my joint proposal in 1995 on a British-Irish Council to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation in Dublin Castle.<sup>25</sup>) Every time it has emerged in history, the council model has been destroyed by party or state bureaucracy. This is true of the French Revolution, the American Revolution (as pioneered by Jefferson's original vision of a federation of "elementary republics"), the Paris Commune, the original Russian soviets of 1905 and 1917, the German and Austrian revolutions at the end of the First World War, and the Hungarian councils of 1956. In each of these, the council system emerged spontaneously as a direct response to the requirements of democratic political action. It grew from the actual experience of local participatory democracy. A council network of this kind, to which the principles of absolute sovereignty and nationalist hegemony would be alien, is arguably best suited to the possibility of an international federation.<sup>26</sup>

William Dewey recognized as much, and in response to the traumas of the Second World War, which he experienced at first hand, he spoke of a "Great Community" consisting of a confederation of local communities. "Unless local communal life can be restored," he argued, "the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself." In parallel fashion, such local forms of self-identification and participation need to avoid isolationism by establishing networks of mutual association and coordination with other local councils in the wider community. This would ensure the direct participation of each citizen in the public affairs of society. The council model thus represents, for Arendt as for Dewey, nothing less than "a direct regeneration of democracy," valorizing "the average citizen's capacity to act and to form his own opinion." In contrast to the regime of unitary national sovereignty, the council system acknowledges multiple

layers of political membership, from the local to the confederal. It fosters a pluralism of identities and cultural specificities, in defiance of the them-and-us polarity of ideological nationalism. Finally, it demonstrates that "centralized nation-states are not hospitable agencies of ... democratic political empowerment, and that any challenge to the principle of nation-state sovereignty must envision a new world order."<sup>27</sup>

Such a confederation of councils represents a robust challenge to the modern equation of political authority with the sovereignty of unitary states, proposing as it does to bi-locate authority in both a universalism of rights (at odds with the national exclusivism of territorially based sovereignty) and a particularism of responsibilities. This renunciation of sovereignty in favor of federated political communities requires the renunciation "not of one's own tradition and national past, but of the binding authority which tradition and past have always claimed."<sup>28</sup> In short, it calls not for the surrender of our particular attachments, but for a preparedness to incorporate into them the standpoints of the particular attachments of others. Such a process of reciprocal incorporation entails the idea of a universality-in-diversity operating within a framework of "mutual agreements."<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

The fact that such a process has not yet been realized does not mean that it will never be. Indeed, our own joint proposals for a federal Europe of regions to the International Opsahl Commission (1993) and for a British-Irish Council to the Dublin Forum for Peace and Reconciliation (1995) were largely motivated by a conviction that the time was ripe to explore such a council-of-councils in response to the British-Irish sovereignty crisis. The British-Irish Agreement of 1998 was certainly a concrete step in this direction. Without such a dissemination of sovereignty beyond the frontiers of the nation-state and within it, Ireland would continue to find itself at odds with neighboring Britain and at sea in an EU market where existing economies of scale benefit the larger complexes over peripheral regions. More than any other region in Europe, Northern Ireland needs to escape from the stranglehold of nation-state conflict. To do so means confronting a double crisis of *representation*. First, the crisis of representative democracy outlined above, and second, the correlative crisis of imaginative representation. This last requires us to invent, or reinvent, new images of communal identity, replacing for example the Four-Green-Fields of old Nationalist Ireland with the more generous metaphor of a Fifth Province where differences can be accorded. Or, on the British side, replacing the triumphalist emblems of Empire (Britannia, Sceptre and Crown, King and

Country) with alternative images of accommodation: Britain as "archipelago," as "North-West Islands" and so on.

It is not enough to be "represented" by elected members of parliament. The crisis of representation, which afflicts the history of British-Irish sovereignty, is one with roots deep in the sociopolitical imaginary of these communities. Citizens identify with their community by internalizing the "imaginary significations" which in each society organize the human and nonhuman worlds and give them meaning. Political institutions and constitutions are creations of the social imagination and cannot function, or retain legitimacy, without the latter (as manifest in languages, images, myths, memories, ideas). A community of whatever kind—nation, state, or otherwise—can only exist as *instituted*. "Its institutions are always its own creation, but usually, once created, they appear to the collectivity as given (by ancestors, gods, God, nature, reason, the laws of history, the workings of competition, etc.); they become fixed, rigid and worshiped."<sup>30</sup> The answer to this reification of institutions is to remind ourselves that nations and states are of our own making and can be *remade* according to other images.

In this respect, a liberated postmodern community would be one that not only acknowledges that it created its own laws, but is prepared to reconstitute itself "so as to free its radical imaginary and enable itself to alter its institutions through a collective, self-reflexive and deliberate activity."<sup>31</sup> This crucial task of liberating the "radical imaginary" of our society requires the kind of critical postmodern hermeneutic that a philosopher like Gary Madison has worked toward.

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## Notes

1. Cited in Gary B. Madison, "The Practice of Theory, The Theory of Practice," *Critical Review* Spring 1992, 195, 195–6.
2. *Ibid.*, 197. In addition to "The Practice of Theory," see Madison's development of a postmodern liberal politics based on his hermeneutic model of philosophy in such works as *The Logic of Liberty*, "Philosophy Without Foundations," *Reason Papers* vol. 16, and the Prologue to *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity: Figures and Themes*.
3. Earlier versions of the discussions included here have appeared in my article "Postmodernity, Nationalism, and Ireland" in *History of European Ideas*, vol. 16, nos. 1–3, 1993, and in Study Four of my book *Postnationalist Ireland* (New York: Routledge, 1997).



4. A number of political theorists and philosophers have made impressive attempts to provide criteria for such discriminations. Julia Kristeva, for example, distinguishes between nationalism as a genuine "choice" of self-identification and nationalism as pathological regression to a lost origin. Desmond Fennell distinguishes between "revised nationalism," in tune with the complexities of contemporary reality, and "die-hard nationalism" which imposes its preconceived ideology on people (see *The Revision of Irish Nationalism*). Charles Taylor distinguishes between authentic nationalism, as a legitimate need for recognition, and regressive nationalism as a refusal to accept, and to mourn, the passing of the nation-state (real or imagined). He writes: "National identity is a very fascinating thing. In some ways, it's an inward-turning thing but in fact, deep down, it's an outward-turning thing. People want to be recognized by others. And when they feel not recognized, that creates the strains and tensions." (See "Nations and Federations: Living among Others" in my *States of Mind*, 25.) Taylor envisages a solution to the historic problem of nationalist conflict, especially in the European context, with the emergence of multiple layers of compatible identification—regional, national, and federal. Hence Taylor's relatively optimistic prognosis for an emerging Europe of regions: "As Europe is formed, paradoxically, the national state becomes less important and the region can become more important. And the national hatreds between European states, because of the bloodbath that ended in 1945, are so discredited that Europe can enter a phase where it's willing to put some of that behind it. So, because of this constellation of circumstances—the memory of Hitler and the hope of more space for regional societies—I think Europe has a real chance..." (ibid., 26). The biggest danger here would be for Europe to replace the old nationalism with a new Eurocentrism where it refused to see itself as one society among others, and assumed a hostile and exclusivist attitude to non-European cultures both within its borders (emigrants) and beyond (international politics). For perhaps the finest historical account of the variations of nationalism, particularly anticolonial and separatist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (e.g., Indian, African, Arab, and east-central European), see John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). For the purposes of our present enquiry, see especially Part III on varieties of nationalism in a world of nation-states. Breuilly's central thesis, as both historian and theorist, is that nationalism is a form of politics that arises in opposition to modern states.

5. Isaiah Berlin, "European Unity and its Vicissitudes" in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Ideas in the History of Ideas* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 176–7. Berlin contrasts the modern ideology of nationalism, based on the romantic ideas of heroism, martyrdom, and self-affirmation (refusing the

notion of a common humanity) with the old universalist philosophy of wisdom, reason, harmony, and a belief in international law. See Hannah Arendt's critique of nationalism in *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 76–7, 161–8, 248–9. Arendt identifies the birth of nation-state nationalism with Rousseau's reduction of the political principle of consent to that of the "general will," later invoked by Robespierre when he demanded: "*Il faut une volonté UNE...*" Thus Rousseau and Robespierre contrived to equate the many (of democracy) with the one (the nation-state as a single body driven by one will). Hence the myth of nation-state sovereignty—*la nation une et indivisible*—comes to replace, rather than subvert, the centralizing role of monarchy. The subsequent need to represent the changing, and conflicting, wills of the multitude in a *single unified body* soon led to the rise of revolutionary dictators. Arendt makes much here of Robespierre's comparison of the nation to an ocean: "[I]t was indeed the ocean-like sentiments it aroused that drowned the foundations of freedom" (96). "What saved the nation-state from immediate collapse," claims Arendt, "was the extraordinary ease with which the national will could be manipulated and imposed upon whenever someone was willing to take the burden or the glory of dictatorship upon himself. Napoleon Bonaparte was only the first in a long series of national statesmen who, to the applause of an entire nation, could declare: "I am the *pouvoir constituant*." However, while the dictate of one will achieved for short periods the nation-state's fictive ideal of unanimity, it was not will but interest, the solid structure of a class society, that bestowed upon the nation-state for the longer periods of its history its measure of stability" (163).

6. See Vincent Geoghegan's useful discussion of this separation of national identity from nationalism in the context of a "post-nationalist citizenship" in "Socialism, National Identities, and Postnationalist Citizenship," *Irish Political Studies* 9, 1994, 76–7. See, in particular, his conclusion: "Amongst the rights of citizenship there must be recognition of a right to one or more identities of nationality, or to none at all. No one, therefore, can have a biological, cultural or historical veto on self-descriptions of nationality.... There are, of course, a whole range of sub- and supra-national identities that are of immense importance, and that must be addressed in a deeper and broader citizenship. In this way one can conceive of a possible plurality of national identities at the individual level, and certainly at the community level, coexisting with a multitude of other identities, guaranteed by a citizenship, located in a state, multi-state or conceivably non-state, political system" (78). On the complex relationship between national identity, nation-state, and nationalism in the more specifically Irish context, see also Desmond Fennell, *The Revision of Irish Nationalism*, 9–18; George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Croom Helm, 1982); Joseph Lee, "State

and Nation in Independent Ireland," and David Harkness, "Nation, State, and National Identity in Ireland" in *Irishness in a Changing Society* (Princess Grace Irish Library 2, Barnes and Noble, 1988).

7. See Tom Nairn's critique of British nationalism in *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (London: Radius, 1988). See similar analyses by Bernard Crick, "The Sense of Identity of the Indigenous British" in *New Community* vol. 21, no. 21, April 1995. By contrast, see former Prime Minister John Major's rabble-rousing call to the party faithful during the Conservative Party Conference of October 13, 1995: "Others may join a federalist Europe, but not Conservative Britain!"

8. Agnes Heller, "Europe: Modern, Pre-Modern, Postmodern" in *The Irish Review* 10, 1990.

9. For a development of this argument in the Irish and European contexts, see my Open Letter to Jacques Delors, "The Implications of a Federal Europe on a Divided Belfast" in *The Irish Times*, May 18, 1990. See also Kevin Boyle, "The European Opportunity" in *National Identities*, Bernard Crick, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 78. Citing a number of recent developments in the Irish-British relationship within the European Community in the 1990s, Boyle concludes that "a new concept of the integration of the peoples and states on these offshore European islands on conditions of equality ... augers well for a less destructive future for Northern Ireland and therefore for these islands as a whole. Separatism, as expressed in the Unionism and the Nationalism which partitioned Ireland and created a gulf between the state of Ireland and Britain, is obsolete. Dominance and the subordination of the cultures of these islands by England is equally obsolete. What can replace them is the concept of a European citizenship with allegiance distributed between region, country and Europe. Such developments, for example, could allow for the development of a more inclusive sense of Irishness to embrace the Northern Unionist. *The emancipation of the four nations and cultures of these islands from the straitjacket of national sovereignty and exclusive national identities*, expressed in exclusive and hostile territorial arrangements, should be the goal for the decade of the 1990s."

10. See, for example, Jacques Delors, *Antenne* 2, June 24, 1990.

11. Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, *Europe, Europe* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 301, 307.

12. Quoted by Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (London: Chatto, 1990), 123–5.
13. Neal Ascherson, "Beyond the Endgame of Sovereignty," *Independent on Sunday*, London, May 19, 1991; see also his more advanced version of this position in "Europe of the Regions," *We Are All Europeans Now*, M. Crozier, ed. (Belfast: Institute for Irish Studies, 1991). Other useful contributions to this debate include David Martin, "A European Charter of Regions" in *Scotland and the New Europe* (Strathclyde: John Wheatley Centre Publications, 1989); Yann Fouere, *Towards a Federal Europe: Nations or States* (Swansea: Davies, 1980); essays by Mick Featherstone, J.-F Lyotard, Michael Ryan, and Gianni Vattimo in *Postmodernism: Theory, Culture and Society*, 5 (2–3), 1988; essays by John Hume, Edgar Faure, Ivor Browne, Frank Barry, and T. J. Barrington in *Across the Frontiers*, R. Kearney, ed. (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988); and Edgar Morin's *Penser l'Europe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). Morin's advocacy of European multiplicity and creative democratic conflict stems from a savage indictment of the centralizing nation-states: "The notion of Europe which emerged in the eighteenth century corresponded to a common age of national sovereignties, wars, the Right of Peoples and the balance of powers. Europe harboured within her both conflict and the means of regulating conflict. Her wars prevented any attempt at hegemonic unification and upheld polycentrism. But when the national states transformed themselves into Nation-States, when the wars became massively and totally national and when advances in armament made carnage possible on a huge scale, then Europe had reached its peak and began to sink into the abyss" (53).
14. To cite some of the most significant discussions of postmodern models of politics, see J.-F Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Gary Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity*, Michel Foucault, "Governmentality" in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); Bernard Flynn, *Political Philosophy at the Closure of Metaphysics* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992); J. Arac, ed. *Postmodernism and Politics*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986); H. Foster, ed. *Postmodern Culture*, (London: Pluto Press, 1985); Thomas Doherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism—Postmarxism* (London: Routledge, 1990). Most of these theorists critique the modern concept of the nation-state which claims legitimacy in the appeal to some foundationalist essence or ethnocentrist origin.

15. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play" in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Derrida explores the "deconstructive" consequences of certain political, institutional, and ideological discourses in a number of publications, notably *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); *Du Droit à la Philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1990); his essays on Mandela and apartheid in *Psyche* (Paris: Galilée, 1987); his critical re-reading of European identity in *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and *Spectres of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1995).
16. M. Foucault, "Governmentality," 88, 83–4.
17. *Ibid.*, 100–1.
18. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
19. Lyotard, *Peregrinations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 39.
20. Kenneth Frampton, "Critical Regionalism" in *The Postmodern Condition*, 21.
21. *Ibid.*, 17.
22. See Charles Jencks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1977); and *Current Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1982).
23. Lyotard and J.-L. Thebaud, *Just Gaming* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 26, 47; see also Lyotard, *Political Writings* (London: UCL Press, 1993), 3–33; and "What is Just?" in R. Kearney, ed. *States of Mind* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); and Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard* (London: Routledge, 1991), 125–8.
24. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: HBJ Books, 1972), 229.
25. See R. Kearney and R. Wilson, "Towards a Council of Islands of Ireland," proposal to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, Dublin Castle, January, 1995 in R. Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1997, 92–5).

26. See Arendt, *On Revolution*, 240–54; also Jeffrey Isaac, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 149–50, 182–8, 217–26. Internationalism, as Arendt understands it, is not a supra-nationalism, which would be merely to replace the centralized nation-state with a centralized global state. Nor should it be confused with multinationalism, in the purely commercial sense of global capitalism. If the solution to the crises of modern nationalism does not lie in the revivalist dream of a unified “nation-once-again,” nor a blanket dismissal of all that nationalism has achieved, neither does it lie in the gold rush of multinational consumerism. Selling oneself to the highest financial bidder or compromising one’s singular freedoms and opinions in some geopolitical power block offers no answer. For a more detailed treatment of this argument, as it relates to the specifically Irish context, see my “Postmodern Ireland” in *The Clash of Ideas*, Miriam Hederman, ed. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987).
27. J. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus and Rebellion*, 146–50.
28. Ibid. See in particular Isaac’s critique of nation-states in favor of a post-modern global government, 219, 224–5 forward. See also here our own critique of “revivalist nationalism” in “Myth and the Critique of Tradition” in *Navigations* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2004).
29. For a development of this universality-in-diversity argument see my “Across the Frontiers: Ireland and Europe” in *Ireland and Europe*, ed. D. Keogh (Cork: University College Cork Press, 1989); my “Pour une Intelligentsia Europeene” in *L’Europe sans Rivages.: De L’Identité Culturelle Européene* (Paris: Proceedings of International Symposium, January 1988, Albin Michel); and E. Morin, *Penser l’Europe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987). Morin argues here that European culture remains properly elusive for the reason that it is not reducible to some common “essence” but is a “cauldron of diversities”—the very absence of homogeneity being, in his view, its greatest strength. “Europe is a community of multiple faces which cannot be superimposed on each other without creating a blur,” Morin writes. “Europe’s only unity lies in its multiplicity. Its unity is itself plural and contradictory, stitched together from the interactions between peoples, cultures, states and classes. The difficulty of ‘thinking Europe’ is first of all the difficulty of thinking about this unity in multiplicity—this *unitas mutiplex*” (27). Morin goes on to argue, accordingly, that European history can no more be defined by geographical frontiers than geographical Europe can be defined by historical ones. In fact, Europe cannot really be understood in terms of frontiers at all (which are always shifting), but only

in terms of the particular originality which produces and organizes it—namely, its very *absence* of unity (36). This appreciation of Europe as essentially polycentric and polylinguistic is the best safeguard against the opposing view of Europe as a hegemonic empire in its own right, a view not only evident in the chauvinistic Eurocentrism of colonial policies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but also in the barbaric dreams of a “New Europe” championed by Hitler and Mussolini. For Morin, European identity resists cultural and political hegemony by promoting its own truly pluralist character, made up of (a) transnational cultures (Slav, Germanic, Latin, Celtic, etc.), (b) national cultures and (c) regional “micro-cultures” irreducible to the boundaries of nation-states and expressing themselves as “little cultural departments at local, regional and provincial” level (67). Whence the curious fact that California and New England have more in common (despite the huge distance between them) than such proximate European regions as Brittany and the Basque country, Portugal and Denmark, Germany and Italy, etc. Morin concludes accordingly: “The organizing principle of Europe can only be found in that historical principle which links its identity with perpetual becoming and metamorphosis. It is the vital urgency to save its identity which today calls Europe towards a new metamorphosis” (67). Vaclav Havel sees the future of Europe’s political identity as dependent upon a choice between this process of metamorphosis and tribal stagnation and regression: “On one side is the modern concept of an open civil society, in which people of different nationalities, ethnic roots, religions, traditions, and convictions can live together and creatively cooperate. On the other side is the archaic concept of a tribal state as a community of people of the same blood. That is, on the one side stands a concept that has been one of the cornerstones of the current European integration process, one that represents the only hope for today’s global interconnected civilization to survive. On the other side is a concept that for millennia has stained human history with blood and brought forth lethal fruits, the most horrifying of them to date being World War II. On the one side, a concept with its emphasis on equality for all human beings, on the other a conviction about the exclusive status of some group who through only a chance of birth were made to belong to a certain tribe. On the one side an emphasis on what brings all people together, and their respect for the otherness of others and their solidarity; on the other, a cult of collectivism under which an affiliation to the pack is more important than a person’s own qualities” (“A Conflict Between Blood and Civilisation,” *Irish Times*, January 3, 1996).

30. Cornelius Castoriadis, “Psychoanalysis and Politics” in *Speculations after Freud: Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and Culture*, eds. S. Shamdasani and M. Munchow, (London: Routledge, 1994), 6–7. See also on this question of a

society's "social imaginary" Paul Ricoeur, "Myth as the Bearer of Possible Worlds" in *Debates in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004): "Beyond or beneath the self-understanding of a society there is an opaque kernel which cannot be reduced to empirical norms or laws. This kernel cannot be explained in terms of some transparent model because it is constitutive of a culture *before* it can be expressed and reflected in specific representations or ideas. It is only if we try to grasp this kernel that we may discover the *foundational mythopoetic* nucleus of a society. By analysing itself in terms of such a foundational nucleus (or social imaginary) a society comes to a truer understanding of itself; it begins to critically acknowledge its own symbolising identity."

31. *Ibid.*, 7–8.