Why Nationalism? Relative Backwardness and Intellectual Mobilization*

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Warum Nationalismus? Relative Zurückgebliebenheit und intellektuelle Mobilisierung*

I h a l t: Die Arbeit versucht, so gerafft wie nur möglich zu zeigen, daß seit dem Zeitalter der Renaissance, dann der Reformation, Ideen und Ideensysteme die Geschichte aufgrund der geänderten technischen und materiellen Bedingungen, die das Geistesleben nunmehr betrafen, zunehmend beeinflußten. Entsprechend der Mobilisierung der Intelligenz, wie sie etwa die Erfindung der Druckkunst „auslöste“, fanden Entwicklungen aller Art, die hier oder dort, in diesem oder jenem Land, einsetzten, Aufnahme und Antwort bald auch in anderen Ländern. Anstöße zum Wandel, zur Veränderung, wurden damit auch dort registriert, wo sie ursprünglich gar nicht gegeben waren. Nationalismus oder das Unternehmen, die Identität des Landes, dem man zugehört, festzustellen und zu befördern, ist in diesem Zusammenhang einer der wichtigsten, alle Aufmerksamkeit verdienenden Beispielsfälle.

A b s t r a c t: This essay attempts to state in “desperate brevity” that since the Renaissance and the Reformation ideas have had an important impact on the course of history because of technical and material changes in intellectual life. Because of an intellectual mobilization “beginning” with the invention of printing, developments in one country have received a ready intellectual response in others with the result that impulses for change have been felt where they did not originate. Nationalism or the attempt to define and advance the identity of one’s country has been a noteworthy consequence of these developments.

Nationalism is the great faith of the modern world, surpassing by far the international appeals of science or of Marxism, two other secular faiths which in practice are often divided along national lines. The nationalist faith has become world-wide since the sixteenth century, gradually fusing nearly everywhere with the idea of government in the name of the people, whatever form government has actually taken. Indeed, today only a very few military or monarchical regimes not only rule autocratically but actually discard populist justifications of that rule. Most governments prefer to make their peace with the idea of popular sovereignty, whatever their governmental practices may be.

I want to show that nationalism has been made possible by intellectual mobilization - the growth of a reading public and of an educated secular elite dependent on learned occupations. Recognition of this mobilization as a cause of social change need not detract from the familiar processes associated with economic development, such as urbanization and the commercialization of land, labor, and capital. But there are movements since 1500, such as the Reformation, agitation for ethnic and religious autonomy, for freedom and equality, which do not have a simple basis in the division of labor or class interest. Nationalism in particular is noteworthy for its protean reaction to the international position of one’s country, whether it is a superpower or a “new state” searching for identity. Ideas travel fast. In states that become aware of their backwardness in comparison with a more advanced country, the search for ways to overcome backwardness and acquire a respected place among nations often precedes every other kind of change. In this discussion of nationalism I will emphasize intellectual mobilization as a precondition of nationalism, the importance for nationalism of “demonstration effects” from advanced to follower societies, and the consequent division among nationalists between modernizers and nativists in one country after another.

I. Intellectual mobilization

Since the sixteenth century, the world has been in permanent revolution, if by that phrase we understand the thoroughgoing, if often unwitting, transformation of social conditions due to technical and economic change, wars, political intervention, and last but not least outright rev-

* This essay is a synoptic statement of a main theme in the second part of REINHARD BENDIX, Kings or People, Power and the Mandate to Rule (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978). References in the article are only illustrative; fuller documentation will be found in the book.
olution. In his Novum Organum (1620), Francis Bacon noted that printing, gunpowder, and the magnet had “changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world” (1939: 85). Guns mounted on ships were the technical means by which explorers and conquerors initiated the age of European expansion overseas (Cipolla, 1965: passim). The life-times of the great explorers (Columbus, 1445–1506; Da Gama, 1469? – 1524; Magellan, 1480–1521) overlapped with those of Luther (1483–1546) and Copernicus (1473–1543) so that there is a broad concurrence between exploration, overseas expansion, and the transformation of the prevailing religious and scientific worldviews. All of this had been preceded by the invention of printing, the first Gutenberg Bible appearing sometime before 1456. The number of educated people increased, as did the number of those whose livelihood depended upon teaching, writing, or some other intellectual vocation. The new facility of printing explains why overseas exploration, the Reformation, and the early development of science resulted in a burgeoning literature of travelogues, religious pamphlets, and scientific and political tracts. I call this whole process of a more rapid reproduction and diffusion of ideas and the related increase in the number of writers and readers “intellectual mobilization”.

Facilitated by the invention of printing, old learned occupations turned secular, new professions based on learning developed, governments became bureaucratic, and secular education rose to social esteem and functional importance. (Carr-Saunders/Wilson, 1964: passim). Furthermore, the Reformation gave impetus to literacy among the middle and lower strata of the population and, later, writing became an independent, secular profession (Williams, 1961: passim). In the course of these transformations, many people became consumers of secular culture, whereas formerly they had been confined to religious observances and popular amusements. This emergence of a culture-consuming public is the background for the intellectual leadership of an active minority composed of lawyers, teachers, ministers, writers, and many others.

There is a correlation between economic backwardness and intellectual mobilization, which was described by the German folklorist Wilhelm Riehl in the late 1840’s. In a chapter entitled “Die Proletarier der Geistesarbeit” Riehl (1930: 312 f.) wrote that this group represents the great vanguard of that social stratum which has broken with the traditional social structure, openly and self-consciously . . .

I think of this group of the fourth estate in the broadest terms. It consists of a proletariat of civil servants, a proletariat of schoolmasters, perennial students of theology, starving academic instructors, literati, journalists, artists of all kinds ranging downwards from the travelling virtuosi to the itinerant comedians, organ-grinders and vaudeville singers . . . In Germany, the turnover of the nation’s material capital is disproportionately small compared with this wholesale and retail trade, this hawkering and profiteering in spiritual goods. Germany produces more mental product than she can use or pay for . . .

We are confronted with a vicious circle. Intellectual work shoots up like weeds, because economic enterprise does not provide it with sufficiently extensive opportunities for growth, and this growth in turn cannot come to fruition, because every surplus of energy is dissipated in an endless foliage of books.

Riehl had genuine insight into the uneven pace of the intellectual, economic, and social development of a country, and that insight applies quite generally to follower societies of the nineteenth and twentieth century. But Riehl’s conservatism put him out of sympathy with the intellectuals he described, and he failed to see that their mobilization was a general attribute of European countries developing a national identity.

In late sixteenth-century England, three groups developed which eventually coalesced in opposition to the rule of Charles I. The first group consisted of Puritan divines, led by men who had been persecuted under the reign of Mary Tudor. After Elizabeth came to the throne (in 1558), these men wanted to purify the Anglican church of its Catholic legacies in doctrine and ritual, but they wanted to do so from within the church through reform of church service, the presbyterian principle of organization, and widespread lecturing (see Walzer, 1970: passim). The second group consisted of common lawyers, members of a conservative profession, many of whom had a guild-like interest in the common-law

1 See a forthcoming publication by Elizabeth Eisenstein. In the meantime cf. (1968).
courts as against the prerogative courts of the king (see PREST, 1972: passim). The third
group consisted of prominent landed gentry
in parliament, men of great standing in the
realm who sponsored the Puritan clergy through
their control of church benefices and employed
common lawyers in their many lawsuits. These
aristocratic representatives of "the country" were
often legally trained and many were themselves
Puritans (cf. ZAGORIN, 1971). The ties of inter-
est which linked these three groups have been the
subject of much controversy. But there is less
dispute that these men of faith, vested interest,
and high social standing were originally prompt-
ated by the English Reformation to define the
position and aspirations of their country in con-
scious opposition to the Spanish world-empire
and its alliance with the Papal attack on the
English heresy (WIENER, 1971).

One can put the development of eighteenth-cen-
tury France in analogous terms. LOUIS XIV
died in 1715, leaving a country that was culturally
and politically preeminent in the world, but
exhausted from the decades of war leading to
that position (see GOUBERT, 1970). In the
wake of LOUIS XIV's reign, opposition to the
ancien régime and ultimately to the monarchy
also showed a strong convergence of theoretical
principles, vested interests, and high social stand-
ing. The philosophes formulated their doctrine
of natural rights in opposition to church and
nobility under the inspiration of NEWTON and
LOCKE. The famous Encyclopédie, beginning
its publication in 1751, linked a burgeoning
natural science which found universal acclaim
with the principles of reason and natural law
applied to man and society. Soon, these beliefs
were taken up by others whose social position
gave great weight to their opinions. One group
consisted of the parlementaires, the noblesse de
robe serving on the sovereign courts of France
primarily in a judicial capacity. But these par-
lementaires, especially those of Paris, had the
right and duty to register governmental edicts
without which no royal decree was legally valid;
and when they refused to do so, as they often
did in the eighteenth century, they used the
language of the philosophes to justify their ac-
tions. Another group consisted of the high
French nobility, congregating not only at the
Versailles court, but in the salons and masonic
lodges of Paris where they mingled freely with
the luminaries of French culture. Note that
the language of the philosophes, the parlement-
aires and the nobility was suffused with ideas
derived from English parliamentary institutions
and from the struggle for independence of the
American colonies. Thus, opinions of the educat-
ed elite (which led up to the French Revolution)
were mobilized by invidious comparisons be-
tween the freedoms achieved or fought for in
England and America and the vested interests
and abrogation of rights characteristic of the
French ancien régime.

The French revolution and the populist revolu-
tions which followed must be distinguished from
the English revolutions of 1640 and 1688. The
mainstream of English revolutionary thought was
limited by the religious and legal contexts in
which the old justifications of authority had
been questioned. English theory and practice
remained compatible with the restoration of
oligarchic rule, though on the new basis of the
"king-in-parliament". By contrast, French
revolutionary thought went beyond such limi-
tations because it made the people and the
country the basis of all authority. Note also that
in both cases the movement towards revolution
was spearheaded by men of education and
standing in the established society of their day.

As one observes old societies that have lain on
the periphery of Europe's outward thrust over
the centuries, or as one moves east in Europe
itself during the nineteenth century, one finds
countries in which neither an educated elite, nor
representative institutions, nor an economically
and politically active bourgeoisie and aristocracy
are indigenous developments, or at any rate not
generous one. Such countries are arenas of intel-
lectual mobilization in which officials, teachers,
literary people, and other members of RIEHL'S
"intellectual proletariat" tend to coalesce into
a class of their own. That class consists of ide-
ological groups which are sensitive to develop-
ments beyond their country's frontiers and anxi-
ous to find a more viable mode of social organ-
ization for their native land.

II. Demonstration effects

A revolution occurs when a social order is dras-
tically transformed and reconstituted. Though

2 See REINHARD BENDIX, Kings or People, op.
revolutions are conventionally identified with lower-class movements, a "revolution from above" can be equally far-reaching. Indeed, restorations can prove as revolutionary as revolutions. The Meiji restoration of 1868 is a good example, for the Meiji government restructured the whole political and social order to Tokugawa Japan. Should this restructuring be called a revolution even though it was undertaken in the interest of national survival against Western incursions and quickly entailed the imposition of new restraints? I think it should, because both nationalism and the restoration of authority are found in many (possibly all) modern revolutions.

Modern history has been characterized by consecutive revolutions or restorations, with each of these transformations influencing the next. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries England began these great upheavals with the Henrician Reformation, the civil war and revolution of 1640–1660, and the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. These were followed by the industrial and the French revolutions of the eighteenth century, the Prussian reforms (1807–1814) and the unification of Germany under BISMARCK (1870–1871), the Meiji restoration of Japan in 1868, and the transformation of Russia from the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the Stalinist revolution of 1928. Each of these revolutions or restorations was a collective response to both internal conditions and external stimuli. Each had repercussions beyond the frontiers of the country in which it occurred. After each transformation, the world changed in HERACLITUS' sense that you cannot step into the same river twice. Once the English king had been overthrown and parliament declared supreme, other monarchies became insecure and the idea of parliamentary government was launched. Once industrialization was initiated, other economies became backward. Once the idea of equality had been proclaimed before a world-wide audience, inequality became a burden too heavy to bear².

Inequality had been an accepted condition of life. In the household, masters ruled over their servants as the king ruled over his subjects. In TOCQUEVILLE's view, the "whole course of society" since the eleventh century had been marked by an increasing equality of condition. Wars dispersed noble estates. The clergy acquired power and opened its ranks to all classes. Commoners obtained high positions at court, enriched themselves through commerce, and acquired title by purchase. Every improvement in trade and manufacture, every acquisition of property, and every discovery in the arts created "new elements of equality", as did the great historical events of this long period.

The Crusades and the English wars decimated the nobles and divided their possessions; the municipal corporations introduced democratic liberty into the bosom of feudal monarchy; the invention of firearms equalized the vassal and the noble on the field of battle; the art of printing opened the same resources to the minds of all classes; the post brought knowledge alike to the door of the cottage and to the gate of the palace; and Protestantism proclaimed that all men are equally able to find the road to heaven. The discovery of America opened a thousand new paths to fortune and led obscure adventurers to wealth and power (TOCQUEVILLE, 1948, 1: 5 f.).

TOCQUEVILLE was right in emphasizing the spread of egalitarian ideas, but he failed to examine the process by which such ideas spread from country to country. Since the fifteenth century, the transformation of societies has been accelerated by the revolution in communications and by intellectual mobilization.

Advances in one part of the world have provided impulses for change in others. For example, sixteenth-century England was still comparatively slow in the commercialization of labor and capital, but the country witnessed a flourishing trade, a rapid commercialization of land, and a high degree of intellectual mobilization. The awakening of both national awareness and of self-confidence mixed with apprehension was due in good part to English perceptions of French, Spanish, and Catholic intentions. It was due also to English self-perceptions as a small island on the margins of a Continent. Spain dominated the western Mediterranean and encircled the globe, France dominated Europe, and the Pope controlled an international church with hierarchical connections in nearly all countries. The Spanish empire, France, and the Catholic church were the "reference societies" to which the intellectual leaders and the educated public of England responded emotionally and political-

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ly. The results of those responses may be termed "demonstration effects".

Two centuries later, observers of the industrial revolution were impressed — and rightly so — by the role the division of labor played in the economic development of all Western European societies. Since the modern industrial revolution had begun in England, other countries followed the English model when they began to develop their own industry. But they wished to follow the latest English development to which they could gain access, not the English practices of the 1760's with which English industrialization began. Countries were, therefore, less and less able or willing to repeat each other's development (see GERSCHENKRON, 1965: passim).

Nor were they likely to become the same kind of societies as a result of successful industrialization. Continued political and cultural differentiation is the more likely outcome. The "demonstration effect" itself prevents societies from repeating each other's development, thus hindering industrial societies from converging culturally and institutionally.

HENRI PIRENNE (in Medieval Cities) has illustrated how the demonstration effect worked prior to the modern revolution in communications. In the eleventh century, the merchants and craft guilds of a few cities used force to win recognition of their independent jurisdiction from feudal overlords. A good many other rulers took the hint and negotiated a settlement with their own towns before armed conflict occurred (PIRENNE, 1956: 121 ff.). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the English and French revolutions provided demonstration effects of far greater impact due to the intellectual mobilization after 1500. These two societies, themselves having responded to reference societies, became the reference-point to which follower-societies responded by taking them either as models or as an indication of what to avoid in charting their own development. As a reaction to English and French antecedents, German rulers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in an effort to maintain their inherited authority, proposed to do for "their" people — by a revolution from above — what the French people had done at high cost and for themselves (see EPSTEIN, 1966: 391 f.). In the twentieth century, the Russian revolution became — at least for awhile — the reference society for China after 1949. Russia's overthrow of an old regime in an economically backward society and its forced collectivization and industrialization were achieved at enormous cost. The Chinese under the leadership of MAO TSE-TUNG reacted to this model by accepting a slower rate of economic growth and with a positive emphasis on the peasantry, on re-education campaigns, and on the importance of subjective commitment as a major cause of change. By linking these policies with the Chinese tradition, they have created a new revolutionary model. Today, Communist China has demonstration effects on other countries, which have been added to the demonstration effects of earlier revolutions and restorations.

I believe an archetypical experience underlies the obvious diversity of these examples. In comparison with some advanced country (or countries), the educated minority or intelligentsia sees its own country as backward. This is a troubled perception, for it identifies strength if not goodness with alien forces and sees weakness if not evil in the land of one's birth. In this setting, ideas are used to locate and mobilize forces which will be capable of effecting change and thus redressing this psychologically unfavorable accounting. A typical strategy of perception and argument ensues. As viewed by the outsider, the strength of the advanced country is formidable, but it is also sapped by false values, corruption, and spiritual decay and therefore should not or cannot endure. At the same time, the weakness of one's native land is pervasive, but the hidden spiritual values of the people are an untapped source of strength which will prevail in the end. Thus, the dominance of the advanced country carries with it the seeds of its own destruction, while the backward people and the underdeveloped country possess capacities that are signs of a bright future. Behind this strategy lies the simple belief that ultimately the advanced country must be weak because its people are evil, while the backward country must be strong because its people are good.

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4 The phrase "reference society" is modelled after MAX WEBER's definition of social action and ROBERT MERTON's concept of "reference group". See ROBERT MERTON (1957: 225–386). "Demonstration effect" is a concept familiar from economic theory.
Such secular prophecy has been an important factor in nationalist efforts to achieve the social and economic development of backward countries by routes other than those followed in the pioneering country. This archetype of “intellectual mobilization” under conditions of relative backwardness provides only a model. When sensitive and articulate men and women suffer from the weakness and deprivation that is all around them, they will leave no avenue untried to better the fortunes of their country and its people. When practical measures to do so are unavailing, free play is given to ideas. The result is a kaleidoscope of national aspirations linked to a world-history of uneven development and world-wide inequalities.

ALEXANDER HERZEN once wrote that “human development is a form of chronological unfairness, since late-comers are able to profit by the labours of their predecessors without paying the same price”\(^5\). He neglected to mention the unprecedented problems which new states face and the price they must pay for “human development”. Indeed, the problems facing each modernizing country are largely unique. Even the countries which had been building their political institutions for centuries still have to cope with the repercussions of their process of modernization. Today new states looking for analogies or precedents in other countries have more models to choose from than ever before, but their histories and the earlier development of other countries have not prepared them for the tasks of nation-building.

III. Modernizers and nativists

These tasks have been formidable throughout but perhaps they are even more so in the setting of the twentieth century. “Demonstration effects” make it impossible to repeat earlier developments, the effort of learning from the developments of other countries is beset by difficulty and — pace HERZEN — the price may be high. Every idea taken from elsewhere can be both an asset to the development of a country and a reminder of its comparative backwardness — that is, both a challenge to be emulated and, whatever its utility, a threat to national identity. What appears desirable from the standpoint of progress often appears dangerous to national independence. The revolution in communications since the fifteenth century has been accompanied by ever new confrontations with this cruel dilemma, and the rise of nationalism has been the response nearly everywhere.

The contemporary world has made us familiar with the tension between progress and national identity. Each country must cope socially and politically with the disruptive impact of ideas and industrial practices taken from abroad. Its ability or inability to do so is conditioned to a considerable extent by its own history. The old societies which have recently become new states look back upon centuries of historical experience involving a mixture of languages, economic systems, and religious beliefs\(^6\). This is the base from which they must master the impact of the “advanced world”. Only by understanding the peculiarities of each affected civilization can we begin to assess how different countries will cope (or fail to cope) with the ideas and institutions of the industrially and politically influential countries.

The advanced countries of today have had their own periods of underdevelopment and of responding to the “advanced world” of their day. They have grappled for centuries with internal divisions and the problems of political integration and still struggle (as all countries must) with the unresolved legacies of their several histories. For example, “England” does not include Scotland and Wales and is a misleading name for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Scottish nationalism, Welsh language and culture, and the continuing struggles in Northern Ireland certainly reinforce that point (cf. HECHTER, 1977: passim). Ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions pose ever-changing problems of political accommodation, and societies are unified only in the sense that they have learned to handle such diversities. Terms like “state” or “nation” play down or ignore these persistent divisions, but political

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\(^5\) Quoted by ISAIAH BERLIN in his introduction to FRANCO VENTURI (1966: XX).

\(^6\) See CLIFFORD GEERTZ, “The Integrative Revolution”, in GEERTZ (1963: 105–157), and the same author’s recent reformulation of his position (GEERTZ, 1977).
unity is never complete, and serious challenges to it recur to this day even in the old states.

In the new states, the predominance of civil ties over the affinities of language, religion, and ethnicity is a much more recent and precarious development. Fifty-one countries founded the United Nations in 1945; from 1946 to 1976 ninety-one additional countries have become sovereign. Most new states have had to establish their governments on a new basis and define "the people" as the ultimate source of authority. In the new states, nationalist appeals to legitimacy are heard frequently—even in the absence of war (the by-product of which was the formation of political community in the old states).

However, nationalism, while a nearly universal phenomenon in modern history, is not in fact a force that easily unifies countries. Indeed, the old states underwent long periods of intellectual polarization when they had to come to terms with challenges from abroad. The typical response—which is evident today in the new states—is a polarization of modernizers and nativists. One example of this phenomenon is the debate in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan between those who advocated national learning (kokugaku) and desired to derive all guidance from Japanese tradition, and those who advocated Dutch learning (rangaku) and desired to complement their native heritage with Western knowledge (see ERL, 1964: passim). Another example is found in Russia, the gradual transformation of whose "backwardness" is indistinguishable from its responses to the West. The conflict between modernizers and traditionalist is evident in the debates of the Nikonian reformers and the Old Believers over the introduction of "foreign" ideas into the Orthodox church in the seventeenth century and in the debates of the Westernizers and Slavophils in the nineteenth century.

Modernizers and nativists share the desire to preserve and enhance their native land—and even the hostility to the "advanced country". A Westernizer like HERZEN commented on his "elective affinity" with the Slavophils: "Like Janus, or the two-headed eagle, we looked in opposite directions, but one heart beats in our breasts."

All the same, such groups are deeply divided over the path their country should follow.

In the examples of Englishmen responding to the Spanish and Catholic danger in the sixteenth-century, or of the Chinese to "Mr. Science" and "Mr. Democracy" of the West in the early twentieth century, a pattern emerges. Perception of advances abroad are reminders of backwardness or dangers and weaknesses at home. Intellectuals attempt to cope with the ensuing dilemma: Whether to adopt the advanced model and invite its attending corruptions, or fall back upon native traditions and risk their inappropriateness to the world of power and progress. This dilemma engenders heated debates and ever-uneasy compromises which have their common denominator in a shared concern for the native country. Such intensive debates provoked by common concerns are the foundation of nationalism. The result need not be divisive: A traditionalist like GANDHI and a modernizer like NEHRU could work together in their opposition to British rule. But the debates between "nativists" and "modernizers" remain unresolved more often than not, both during the struggle against an old regime and after it has been overthrown and a new regime established.

Before as well as after the revolution the root causes of nationalism remain. Men want their country recognized and respected in the world, and to this end they cultivate or revive native traditions. The reconstruction of history is an act of resacralizing authority in the name of the people. It is an appeal to civic loyalty and national brotherhood in lieu of more divisive communal attachments, because birth in a common homeland makes all people members of one nation sharing equally in its past glories. But the desire to be recognized and respected in the world also calls for the development of a modern economy and government which focuses attention upon the advanced society (or societies) of one's choice. This reference to foreign models has become inescapable since the great intellectual mobilization of the sixteenth century.

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My account has attempted to show that nationalism has become a universal condition in our world because the sense of backwardness in one's own country has led to ever new encour-

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7 Quoted in ADAM YARMOLINSKY (1962: 73).
ters with the "advanced model" or development of another country. Within the context of modern communications and uneven development, this process of historical models and their demonstration effects continues to the present, and I cannot see an end to its further ramifications.

Several countries have been in the world-historical position of providing demonstration effects. In the twentieth century, old models have been replaced once more. After Spain and Portugal, after England and France, it is now the turn of the United States, the U.S.S.R., and China. Any heir of the Western tradition will watch new states with humility and respect for the personal courage of people who must try to blend restored traditions with the demands of modern development under the conditions of the twentieth century.

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