1 A blobologist in Vodkobuzia

Make no mistake about it, Vodkobuzia is a breathtakingly beautiful country. In the autumn, the wooded slopes which sweep down from the Carbunclian Range to the lowlands of the Manich Depression are ablaze with a colour which not even Hampshire or Liguria can match. (There actually *is* a geographical location called the Manich Depression, believe it or not, which you can find on the map if you look hard enough. But do not suppose you can identify the country I am talking about from the location of that Depression. This is a composite portrait, based on various lands drawn from a *number* of ideological culture circles, as you might say.) It is also from this area that the most plaintive, most moving folk songs come, commemorating as they do the devastation wrought by the invasions of the Rockingchair Mongols.

It is this beauty which makes it so hard to cut oneself off from that land. Hence the brutal coup, and subsequently the ideological straitjacket, imposed on that country over a quarter of a century ago by Colonel Shishkebab was not merely a tragedy for the natives of the country, but also a sadness for those outside it who love it and its culture. Colonel Shishkebab did not hide his firm conviction that a New Man was to be forged in the light of the principles of Revolutionary Populism, to which his country now adhered under his leadership, and that an ideal which was, all at once, so elevated and yet so arduous – going as it does against various well-known, deeply rooted, quite endearing but not altogether edifying traits of the national character – did not allow for half measures if it was to have any prospects of effective implementation. A Trauma, as the Colonel referred to it, was required, in order to shake the people out of their engrained habits, and a Trauma was duly administered.

This was most unfortunate for those who were, as the phrase went, Trauma-Resistant (the execrable TRs, as they were known at the time), and rather extreme measures were required to make them socially and morally more sensitive. Mind you, quite a few of those

who were executed during the Trauma have now been posthumously rehabilitated, and their widows on occasion receive a small pension. Even their children, who at the time were forbidden access to education, have now been issued with certificates confirming that their illiteracy is not wholly their fault but a consequence of the temporary Deformation of the principles of Revolutionary Populism. Historians now refer to that time as the Period of the Trauma. It has of course been disavowed by Shishkebab's successors, though with different degrees of emphasis and nuance, and correspondingly the term Shishkebabist – an adherent of an *à outrance* application of the principles of Revolutionary Populism, as practised in the days of Shishek, as he was affectionately known among his intimates if they survived – has become pejorative, while to be a TR has become all at once more glamorous and less dangerous.

At that time, in fact, I faced no moral problem. I was far too insignificant to be invited to the country and to be used to legitimise whatever it was up to. The few articles on aspects of Vodkobuzian folk music (rather a hobby of mine), which have since earned me some invitations were at that time not written, let alone published. So no moral problem arose, and problem No. 1 which I wish to offer for your consideration is quite hypothetical. If you had been invited, at the time of the Trauma, would you have gone?

Consider the circumstances. Shishkebab had imprisoned most of the best men in my main field (blobology), had had some of them tortured, and had imposed on the Institute of Blobology, as its Director, a party hack whose knowledge of the subject would soil the back of any postage stamp on which it could easily be inscribed. (In fairness, it must be said that during the Shishkebab regime, postage stamps were very large, portraying glorious events in the national past in great detail.) To have gone would have meant, among other things, shaking the hand of this Director, an ignoramus who had benefited from the incarceration, and worse, of his predecessors. Moral problem No. 1 is simple: in these circumstances, would you accept an invitation to go? The question answers itself. No decent man would go, and I wish no decent man had gone.

But now it is more than a quarter of a century later. The regime has softened. Above all, all kinds of internal cross-currents and strains can be discerned, and some of those internal currents earn one's respect both by what they stand for and by the courage of those who represent them. Take once again the situation in my field. The old hack appointed by Shishkebab has long since retired, and the Institute is in the hands of his successors, who are not hacks, or at any rate not

all of them and not altogether. Even the man who runs the place and
who is consequently too busy politicking to do any real work in the
subject (a fate not unknown even in the most liberal societies), and
whose public pronouncements are the very height of innocuousness
(that can happen here too) has an admirable record in securing jobs
and facilities for good scholars even when endowed with dubious TR
pasts, and with a regrettable tendency to shoot their mouths off in a
TR manner.

But there is more to it than that. Inside the subject there is a com-
plex and confused struggle between those who would liberalise it and
heed scholarly criteria (whatever they may be) and those who drag
their feet, or even wish to march in the opposite direction. But do not
be misled into supposing that the moral line-up is simple, or that the
alignment of individuals is self-evident. Here, as elsewhere, life is full
of moral ambiguities – perhaps rather more so, or perhaps they matter
more because more is at stake. No one is ever quite what he seems,
and when the veils come off, you never know whether you have seen
the removal of the last one.

Let me give you some examples. Take the guilt-ridden liberal. X
has impeccable values and has *never* soiled his hands with Shishkeba-
bism. He paid his price in the days of the Trauma; more ironically, he
also paid a certain price in the heady days of de-Traumatisation, for
de-Traumatisation was carried out above all from within the Move-
ment. Those who were not in it were deprived, at least until very late,
of any base from which to take part in the process. Ironically, the ex-
Shishkebabists who turn against the unpalatable aspects of their faith,
are often terribly fastidious about cooperating with those who had
never committed the same errors: or who abandoned them too soon
or too late. Though Errors they be, it seems that one must have com-
mitted them to be eligible for political participation, and the Timing of
Repentance is of great importance. By a further irony, X, deprived of
full participation for his consistent TR-ism, did not suffer too much
when the pendulum swung back again towards orthodoxy, and scores
were settled among and between ex- and neo-Shishkebabists. Conse-
quently he is left more or less alone, his professional life is relatively
satisfactory (though not deeply fulfilling), and he is abandoned to his
Inner Emigration, within which he is haunted by guilt, knowing full
well the contempt in which he is held by those who are suffering more,
and who despise him as the regime's Parade-Liberal.

For contrast, take Y. Y is a toughie, physically and otherwise. He
has what is known as a good profile, excellent prefect or officer
material in erstwhile British terms, combined with evident devotion to

the principles of Revolutionary Populism. He is trusted and can travel abroad. But eventually – is it because he trusts me, or was he trying it on? – he let himself go, as we are walking through those lovely forests which sweep down from the Carbunclian Mountains to the Manich Depression, where bugging is hardly feasible. Y is not going to waste himself on some five minutes of pointless and expensive protest: he will make it *when it counts*. Was he apologising to me for having failed to make it yet (though heaven knows I do not presume to sit in judgement on him, and I shudder to think what I would have done, or failed to do, in X's or Y's shoes)?

Now consider moral problem No. 2. The moment *when it counts* has come at last. The TRs are struggling, more or less openly, with the half-cowed neo-Shishkebabists. The current Director of the Institute of Blobology (admittedly once a Shishkebabite, and owing access to his present position to docility or even enthusiasm in the days of Trauma) now struggles for liberalisation. He invited me over to lecture on some recent developments in Blobology, and to help develop contacts between his Institute and blobologists the world over.

Would I go? Of course I would go. I like going. I fancy myself as rather suitable for this kind of mission. In the capital, I am in fact seldom taken for a foreign visitor. My accent in the language is appalling, but I think they usually attribute this to my belonging to some kind of ethnic minority within the country. In fact, my kind of squashed-dago looks are quite common in the country (especially in the south, where the Carbunclian hills sweep down, etc.). But above all, it must be the poor quality of my clothing. Tourists are usually approached by touts offering them local works of art or fakes thereof (which it is illegal to export) in exchange for their suits, but no self-respecting member of the Vodkobuzian elite, let alone their swinging youth, would be seen dead in the kind of suit I wear, and so I am never accosted on that account.

But I need not really explain or defend myself. In situation No. 2, when decency and oppression have joined in battle under reasonably well-defined banners, most men would go and help. Few would be put off by the Shishkebabite record, in the Trauma days, of some of those who are now sponsoring the invitation and soliciting moral aid. The Trauma was a quarter of a century ago: what regime, what individual, can bear having its or his record examined very far back? Here once again the question more or less answers itself, though not perhaps for everyone. At the distance of twenty-five years, a situation has arisen which calls for a different, and, now, a positive answer.

Here comes the rub: there are many lands whose moral situation,

or the response they evoke, is not at either end of the spectrum sche-
matised in my argument as situations 1 and 2, and separated, in my
hypothetical example, by a neat quarter of a century. If you allow, for
the sake of argument, the passage of time to correspond neatly to the
moral situation (the real world is always more complex), then moral
clarity prevails at either end: a year or two or three after the Trauma,
of course you still would not go; a year or two or three before the
Moment of Truth, of course you *would*, and be eager and proud to
help that moment along, to recognise it before it becomes obvious.

But in the real world you never know how far off that moment is, or
which way the pendulum is swinging. The country looks, not close to
either end of the spectrum, but somewhere in the middle. A dozen
years or so away from Trauma, perhaps, and as far again from
Rebirth. The ambiguity surrounds not merely the overall situation but
also the role of individuals within it.

Some of the bravest, most admired TRs have a Shishkebabite past.
Some present seeming Shishkebabites are biding their time (or were
they having me on?). Some apparent TRs may be *agents provocateurs*.
In brief, the present situation, unlike the two which I have construc-
ted, does not evoke a clear moral reaction. If you go, you shake the
hands of practitioners and beneficiaries of Shishkebabism and it is
said that you strengthen them, as the price of possibly also aiding
TRs, including some latent TRs within the breasts of outward con-
formists.

There is no simple or reliable answer, perhaps no answer at all. I
cannot feel at home either with the holier-than-thou puritans (who
never compromise at all) or the blasé practitioners of *realpolitik*
(always willing to go). Yet one must also try not to be complacent, even
at the second level, about one's lack of complacency (shared in dif-
ferent forms by the puritans and by realists). There is a certain seduc-
tive regress, seeming to offer one moral clearance by virtue of one's
anxiety. I am not complacent, or even complacent about my non-
complacency, and so on. Yet in the end one still risks patting oneself
on the back. The fact that I am recursively anxious about using my
own anxiety as a justification still does not give me clearance. The
danger lies in supposing that being a Hamlet excuses everything,
which is one further twist of complacency – and so is saying this in
turn, if it were meant to excuse anything. There really is no clear
answer, and I leave the question with you.

2 Nationalism and the two forms of cohesion in complex societies

The role of amnesia in the formation of nations is perhaps most vigor-
ously affirmed by Ernest Renan: 'L'oubli et, je dirais même, l'erreur
historique sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation...'[1]
Renan, like other theorists of nationalism, does also invoke common
memories, a shared past, as one of the elements which bind men and
help form a nation. But a deeper and more original perception is to be
found in his view that a shared amnesia, a collective forgetfulness, is at
least as essential for the emergence of what we now consider to be a
nation. Antiquity, he had noted, knew no nations in our sense. Its city
states knew patriotism, and there were of course imperial and other
large agglomerations: but not nations.

Renan believed nations to be a peculiarity of Europe as it developed
since Charlemagne. He correctly singled out one, perhaps *the*, crucial
trait of a nation: the anonymity of membership. A nation is a large col-
lection of men such that its members identify with the collectivity
without being acquainted with its other members, and without ident-
ifying in any important way with sub-groups of that collectivity. Mem-
bership is generally unmediated by any really significant corporate
segments of the total society. Sub-groups are fluid and ephemeral and
do not compare in importance with the 'national' community. Links
with groups predating the emergence of the nation are rare, tenuous,
suspect, irrelevant. After listing various *national* states – France, Ger-
many, England, Italy, Spain – he contrasts them with a conspicuously
un-national political unit of his time, Ottoman Turkey. There, he
observes, the Turk, the Slav, the Greek, the Armenian, the Arab, the
Syrian, the Kurd, are as distinct today as they had been on the first day
of the conquest. More so, he should have added, for in the early days
of conquest, it is highly probable that Turkish-speaking tribes
absorbed earlier Anatolian populations; but when the Ottoman
empire was well established, a centrally regulated system of national
and religious communities excluded any possibility of a trend towards
an ethnic melting-pot.

[1] Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, Paris 1882.

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It was not so much that the ethnic or religious groups of the Otto-
man empire had failed to forget. They were positively instructed to
remember:

> The Ottoman Empire was tolerant of other religions... But they were
> strictly segregated from the Muslims, in their own separate communities.
> Never were they able to mix freely in Muslim society, as they had once done
> in Baghdad and Cairo... If the convert was readily accepted, the unconver-
> ted were excluded so thoroughly that even today, 500 years after the conquest
> of Constantinople, neither the Greeks nor the Jews in the city have yet
> mastered the Turkish language... One may speak of Christian Arabs – but
> a Christian Turk is an absurdity and a contradiction in terms. Even today,
> after thirty-five years of the secular Turkish republic, a non-Muslim in
> Turkey may be called a Turkish citizen, but never a Turk.
>
> (Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*,
> 2nd edn, Oxford, 1968, pp. 14 and 15)

Yet overall, Renan's perception of what it is that distinguishes the
modern nation from earlier collectivities and polities seems to me
valid. His account of how nations came to be important seems to me
inadequate and incomplete. It is basically historical, and seeks to
explain why the national principle prevailed in Western Europe, and
not yet (at the time he wrote) in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. He
invokes the circumstances of the Teutonic conquests: Franks, Bur-
gundians, Lombards, Normans often arrived without a sufficient
number of women, and eventually intermarried with the locals; more-
over, they adopted the religion of the conquered. Next, powerful
dynasties imposed the unity of large societies; the King of France, he
notes, did so by tyranny and by justice. Switzerland, Holland,
America, Belgium were formed by the voluntary union of provinces,
even if in two cases the union was subsequently confirmed by a mon-
archy. Finally, the eighteenth century changed everything. Though he
had ironised the idea that a large modern nation could be run along
the principles of an ancient republic, he nevertheless retains a good
deal of the return-to-antiquity theory of the French Revolution:
'L'homme était revenu, après des siècles d'abaissement, à l'esprit
antique, au respect de lui-même, à l'idée de ses droits. Les mots de
patrie et de citoyen avaient repris leur sens.'

To sum up: that crucial required amnesia had been induced by
wifeless conquerors, willing to adopt the faith and often the speech of
the vanquished; by effective dynasties; sometimes by voluntary associ-
ation; and the principle of amnesia and anonymity within the body
politic was finally confirmed by the eighteenth-century revival of the

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ideas of rights and of citizenship. And it is the glory of France, he observes, to have taught mankind the principle of nationality, the idea that a nation exists through itself and not by grace of a dynasty. It is also the case that he exaggerated somewhat the extent to which France had become culturally unified in his time. Eugen Weber tells us convincingly[2] that the process was far from complete. But the fact that it was in the process of completion is significant. Whether it supports Renan's explanation, or a modified one, is another matter.

Renan's theory of nationality and nationalism in effect has two levels. His main purpose is to deny any naturalistic determinism of the boundaries of nations: these are *not* dictated by language, geography, race, religion, or anything else. He clearly dislikes the spectacle of nineteenth-century ethnographers as advance guards of national claims and expansion. Nations are made by human will: une nation est donc une grande solidarité, ... elle se résume ... par ... le consentement, le désir, clairement exprimé de continuer la vie commune. L'existence d'une nation est un plébiscite de tous les jours ... This is one level of his argument: a voluntaristic theory of nationality and the nation state. Paraphrasing T. H. Green, he might have said: will, not fact, is the basis of a nation. Green, when he said that will, not force, was the basis of the state, then had to go on to say that Tsarist Russia was a state only by a kind of courtesy. Renan was obliged to concede that the ethnic groups of antiquity and pre-modern times generally, often barely conscious of themselves, and too unsophisticated to *will* a cultural unity or to crave state protection for it, were not really 'nations' in the modern sense – which is indeed the case.

The second level is the answer to the question, how did the nations which he did have in mind, roughly European nations west of the Trieste–Königsberg line, come into being? He notes the anonymity which prevails in these large collectivities and their shared amnesia, and credits them to the wifelessness of Teuton conquerors, the brutality of centralising monarchs, direct affirmation of will amongst the Swiss and Dutch, and a belated affirmation by the Italians ...

Be it noted that the theory is profoundly unsatisfactory at both levels, and yet at each level it contains an important and valid insight. Will, consent, is not an exclusive characteristic of modern nations. Many utterly un-national groups or collectivities have persisted by consent. Amongst the wide variety of kinds of community or collectivity which has existed throughout history, consent, coercion, and

[2] *Peasants into Frenchmen*, London 1979.

inertia have co-existed in varying proportions. Modern national states
have no monopoly of consent, and they are no strangers to inertia and
coercion either.

Similarly, at the second level, the processes invoked – wifeless and
conversion-prone conquerors, strong ruthless centralising rulers –
are in no way a speciality of Western European history. They have
occurred elsewhere, and plentifully. No doubt they had often had the
effects with which Renan credits them in Europe, destroying kin-
links, eroding continuities of social groups, disrupting communities,
obliterating memories. But, after the cataclysm and trauma, when the
deluge subsided, when social order was re-established, internal cleav-
ages and discontinuities reappeared, justified by new, probably fic-
titious memories ... New ones are invented when the old ones are
destroyed. Most societies seem allergic to internal anonymity, homo-
geneity, and amnesia. If, as Renan insists, Frenchmen have obliter-
ated the recollection of Gaulish, Frankish, Burgundian, Norman, etc.
origins, this does not distinguish him from those whom he singles out
for contrast: the Anatolian peasant also does not know whether his
ancestor had crossed the Syr-Darya, or whether he had been a Celt,
Greek, Hittite or any other of the local proto-inhabitants. His amnesia
on these points is at least as total as that of his French peasant coun-
terpart. An Islamic folk culture stands between him and any fond
memories of the steppes of Turkestan. And his ancestors too had
known invaders and centralising monarchs – on occasion more effec-
tive ones than those who had ruled and unified France. The Orien-
talist Renan should have known better than that.

What distinguished Western Europe are not those invasions and
centralising efforts which happen to have preceded the modern
national state – though they may have contributed to a situation which,
accidentally, resembled in some small measure that fluid anonymity
which characterises membership of a modern 'nation', and have
helped prepare the ground for it. What distinguishes the areas within
which nationalism has become the crucial political principle is that
some deep and permanent, profound change has taken place in the
way in which society is organised – a change which makes anonymous,
internally fluid and fairly undifferentiated, large-scale, and culturally
homogeneous communities appear as the only legitimate repositories
of political authority. The powerful and novel principle of 'one state,
one culture' has profound roots.

If Renan was misguided about the origin of the phenomenon which
he correctly identified, his hand was also a little unsure in tracing its
central feature, in his famous 'daily plebiscite' doctrine. Religiously

defined political units in the past were also recipients of the ritually reaffirmed loyalty of their members; they were the fruit, if not of a plebiscite of every day, then at least of the plebiscite of every feast-day – and the ritual festivities were often very frequent. Conversely, even the modern national state does not put its trust entirely, or even overwhelmingly, in the daily plebiscite and the voluntary reaffirmation of loyalty; they are reinforced by a machinery of coercion.

And yet here, too, Renan discerned something distinctive and important. The modern nationalist consciously wills his identification with a culture. His overt consciousness of his own culture is already, in historical perspective, an interesting oddity. Traditional man revered his city or clan through its deity or shrine, using the one, as Durkheim insisted so much, as a token for the other. He lacked any concept of 'culture' just as he had no idea of 'prose'. He knew the gods of his culture, but not the culture itself. In the age of nationalism, all this is changed twice over; the shared culture is revered *directly* and not through the haze of some token, and the entity so revered is diffuse, internally undifferentiated, and insists that a veil of forgetfulness should discreetly cover obscure internal differences. You must not ignore or forget culture, but oblivion must cover the internal differentiations and nuances *within* any one politically sanctified culture.

Can we go further and complete his account, developing his insights and avoiding his misunderstandings?

The present lecture commemorates A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. My contention is that the problem highlighted and solved only in part by Renan does indeed have a definitive solution, and moreover one which can be reached only by a systematic use of a distinction which pervaded Radcliffe-Brown's thought, and dominated the anthropological tradition to which he had contributed so much. Renan had correctly singled out a problem: there is something quite distinctive about the principle of cohesion and of boundary-definition which animates the modern national state. He identified the distinctiveness (correctly) in terms of internal amnesia, and a little misleadingly in terms of voluntary assent: and he explained it, somewhat irrelevantly, by invoking its allegedly unique historical antecedents, rather than in terms of persisting social factors which perpetuate it. It seems to me that we can go further and do better, and that we can best do so with Radcliffe-Brown's tools, applying them to a problem which had not preoccupied him.

The tools I have in mind are simple, indeed elementary, and pervasively present in the discourse of anthropologists: they are, essen-