Roger Scruton

The Dangers of Internationalism

We Europeans, and Westerners more generally, hear a great deal about the dangers of *nationalism.* Hardly a day goes by without distressing reports from Bosnia or Kosovo of the cruelties perpetrated by the Serbs; from Africa about the bloody tribal rivalries which threaten to de-stabilize the continent; from France and Germany about a new and insidious racism disguised as national loyalty. And there is no doubt that nationalism is often to be feared. For it is the force which enables people to stand together and claim their territory. On the other hand, there are circumstances when it is right for people to claim their territory, right to group together as a "we," right to assert themselves against those who threaten them. In such circumstances nationalism does not seem so bad. Indeed, if you look at the matter impartially, you must surely come to the conclusion that nationalism, in and of itself, is neither good nor bad, but a natural feature of the modern world. We hate the nationalism of our enemies; but we welcome the nationalism of our friends.

Of course, there is much more to be said. Being an Englishman I find it difficult to be a nationalist. For there is no such thing as the English nation. England is the metropolitan center of an Empire that has vanished. My country, defined geographically, is Great Britain; defined politically it is The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; defined culturally it is nowhere and everywhere, the point of departure for the greatest experiment in international government that the world has ever known. Nevertheless, I am a patriot, a believer in local loyalties, and a fierce defender of the territorial and historical rights of my countrymen. It's just that I am not too sure who my countrymen are. For some purposes they include the Scots and the Welsh; for other purposes they include the Australians and the New Zealanders—or some of them at least; nor should we forget the Falkland Islanders and the inhabitants of St. Helena. At the same time there are many people who live in England who would never dream of identifying themselves as English, preferring to retain an identity formed in Pakistan or Bangladesh or Jamaica. Are they my countrymen or not? The only possible answer is: it depends.

The same is true of many other countries in the modern world. An Indian is likely to identify himself as such only for some purposes and in certain company; for other purposes he is a Sikh, for instance, or a

Roger Scruton, England's leading conservative philosopher, is the author of many books, including *The West and the Rest* (ISI Books, 2002), and *Gentle Regrets: Thoughts from a Life* (2005). This essay is adapted from a lecture delivered recently in Prague.

Kashmiri. Local loyalties nest one inside the other just as localities do. I love my neighborhood in Wiltshire, and will defend it against the next valley with a passion. But I will defend all of Wiltshire against Gloucestershire and Berkshire, all of the South of England against the North, all of England against the Scots, the Welsh, and the Irish, and all the peoples of the British Isles against whatever threat might come from Europe. The real question is how far we can extend our loyalties to embrace people who might otherwise be strangers, aliens, enemies. The hope of the Enlightenment was to extend loyalties so far that enemies would no longer be found. That, for Kant, was the recipe for "perpetual peace." But subsequent history has done nothing to confirm the philosopher's optimism.

This brings me to my point. We have heard much about the dangers of nationalism. But what about the dangers of internationalism? Surely we ought at least to examine them. After all, it was an international doctrine that brought about the most recent enslavement of the nations of Eastern Europe. Indeed, the communists inherited from Marxism the most comprehensive form of internationalism that has ever been devised. They did not, like Kant, hope to extend people's loyalties so as to cross one national boundary after another, and at last embrace the civilized world; rather, they hoped to build a political system around *another kind of loyalty altogether.* Not attachment to a place or a people, but attachment to a class. The proletariat, for the Marxist, is an international class, and class-loyalty, for the workers at least, will automatically cross national frontiers and eventually destroy them. Revolution in one country will, the Marxists believed, lead to revolution in all, and national boundaries will disappear, having lost their function.

The damage done by this fiction is apparent to all of us. For seventy years the Soviet Communist Party proceeded as though world revolution were its goal, as though the proletariat everywhere would welcome its embraces, and as though the imperial expansion of Russia were identical with the liberation of everyone else. This was the single most important cause of war and catastrophe in the twentieth century.

Rather than dwell on facts that are well known, I want to point to one or two neglected features of the communist experiment, since they bear on the other form of internationalism that is gradually enveloping the European continent. The first and most important consequence of the theory of class war and class loyalty is the loss of respect for law. The law, in Marxist-Leninist theory, is merely an instrument of class oppression, a means to secure the property rights of the bourgeoisie. It is there to adjudicate conflicts which can occur only under "antagonistic relations of production." Take away the conflicts and there is no purpose to the law. And of course the first result of the communist takeover in any state was what Lenin called the "withering away" of law: in other words, the replacement of law by arbitrary force. Law in the communist state is an elaborate fiction, part of the system of deception beneath which violence can proceed without cost. Note how different, therefore, is the communist international system from that advocated by Kant, in which the expansion of loyalties is achieved through the gradual adoption of an over-arching system of law.

The second consequence of communist internationalism was to regard all *natural* loyalties as a threat to the system of control—which was said to be the system of liberation. The proletariat was supposed to welcome the Communist Party as its liberator, and all workers as brothers. Yet fraternal feelings have never been a strong point among the working classes. If any-

thing, their loyalties are even more local and fraught with suspicion than those of the bourgeoisie. Hence the first concern of communist politics was to atomize the proletariat in order to ensure that, if it could not be loyal to the Party and its international cause, it would at least be loyal to nothing and no one else. The communists succeeded in this and have left behind them, as their most poisonous legacy, societies in which no one will take the risk of doing anything for anyone except himself and his immediate family. In these circumstances national feeling is one of the few salves for the seventy-year old wound, one of the few still living sources of that loyalty towards strangers on which all modern societies depend.

One other consequence of communist internationalism is worth our attention. The communists were unable to abolish, except here and there, the nation-states of Europe. Language, geography, and history—as well as international pressure—made it impossible to absorb Poland or Hungary into the Soviet Union. Instead, the communists regarded the nation states under their control as possessing what Brezhnev called, at the time of the invasion of Czechoslovakia, "limited sovereignty." The communist states of Eastern and Central Europe could make their own decisions in all matters that did not affect the rule of the Communist Party. But in anything that affected their real identity and independence, they were not free. And the question whether this or that matter did or did not affect their independence was decided in Moscow. Reflect on these facts and you will rapidly perceive that limited sovereignty is no sovereignty at all.

All those consequences are pernicious and recognized to be so by anyone who has lived through the communist experience. The great question, therefore, is whether they are consequences of internationalism as such, or just consequences of the communist version. Here we must ask ourselves a few searching questions. First, what makes law possible? What are the conditions under which disputes can be settled, business transacted, and people disciplined by law rather than by force? Secondly, what is the true foundation of loyalty and public spirit? What are the conditions under which people do things for strangers, and sacrifice themselves for the common good? Thirdly, how, if at all, can internationalism avoid limiting the sovereignty of peoples who wish to take their own decisions in the matters that are of greatest consequence to them?

I do not think these questions are addressed by modern politicians. Certainly they are not addressed by those who are most vehemently advocating the new international order of the European Union. But perhaps we ought to address them, if only to be true to the history of the eastern half of the European continent, so that the lost and mutilated lives of those oppressed by communism will not have been entirely in vain.

First, the question of law. It is obvious that law does not exist merely because some code of law has been written down by a bureaucrat or pinned up in an office. Law exists only if it is enforced—and only if it is enforced *as law*. This means that those charged with making, disputing, applying, or enforcing the law cannot themselves be exempt from it. An intricate and interlocking system of institutions is required if law is to be enforced as law, and not as arbitrary violence. Let us just imagine one of the possibilities. There is a law forbidding bribery. John is arrested for bribing the mayor in order to obtain a building permit. But the policeman who arrests John is also bribed by him. Being beyond the law, the policeman is immune to prosecution, and John's case proceeds no further. Now this

was the normal situation under communism; it is the normal situation in Southern Italy today. And when Southern Italy transports itself to New York, it becomes the normal situation in New York. But it is a travesty of law.

To cut a long story short, there can be law only where those charged with administering and enforcing the law have a deep respect for procedure, and a sense of the law's authority. How is this feeling—which the Germans call *Rechtsgefühl*—engendered? Law-abiding people, it seems to me, come into being because obedience to the law is *expected* of them. They are living up to a standard. But expected by whom? And a standard laid down by whom? Kant believed that it is Reason that lays down and upholds the standard. But even if that were so, the evidence of history is that Reason is not enough to produce obedience. There has to be a public expectation of law-abidingness, and a desire to live up to what others expect. And this returns us again to the question: which others?

The obvious answer is this: I desire to live up to the expectations of *those with whom I belong.* I make a distinction between people who are mine, and people who are not mine. And part of what is involved in this distinction is that the opinions of those who are mine *matter* to me. Now intellectuals, businessmen, and aristocrats have no difficulty in belonging to a multinational group. They compare and compete across national boundaries, since that is precisely what their metier requires. The same is not true of ordinary people. Their sense of belonging is tied down to a locality, a language, a set of customs, and family affections. Ordinary people are the majority, and their law-abidingness is therefore of the greatest importance. Hence, some element of national loyalty is a necessary precondition of law—and also of the international law which is built precariously on domestic foundations.

This is not to deny that there can be successful international jurisdictions. But it is worth considering what success, in the past, has involved. There are four salient examples: Roman Law, English Law, Canon Law, and the *Shari'a.* In Roman Law and English law a system of law was spread far and wide across the globe by a people who were attached to it as a symbol of their superior civilization, and as a justification for their imperial power. Neither system could have succeeded in bringing peace to the world were it not for two vital facts: first, that the metropolitan citizens were put in charge of it, and secondly, that each system left room for local laws adapted to local loyalties (the *ius gentium* of the Romans). Romans and Englishmen upheld the over-arching law precisely because they identified themselves as Romans and Englishmen—i.e. as apart from, and in a measure superior to, those over whom they ruled. Their international jurisdiction was made possible by a version of national loyalty, and when their empires collapsed the law collapsed along with them.

The Canon Law and the *Shari'a* are more truly universal. The first borrowed extensively from Roman law and was very quickly pushed into a subordinate position by the secular law of European states. The second has been sovereign in many Islamic countries, and is the nearest thing we have to a truly international jurisdiction, depending on no equivalent of national loyalty. However, it owes its authority to loyalty of another kind: to God, and to the word of God as spoken through the prophet. It gives us no grounds for thinking that there could be such a thing as an international and secular rule of law which did not depend, at a deeper level, on national loyalties. On the contrary: old Turkish law, which tried to respect the *Shari'a*, was compelled to distinguish the religious part of the law from the separate jurisdictions

of the various communities, or *milletler* (from the Arabic *millah,* a creed-community), which refused to submit to Muslim commandments.

If we examine the history of legal internationalism we do not find many grounds for thinking that there can really be such a thing without some strong imperial power determined to enforce it. It is true that, in the aftermath of such a power, the nations may break away from each other while adopting structurally similar systems of law. The last time this occurred was after the collapse of the Napoleonic dictatorship in France. Napoleon had successfully imposed the *Code Napoléon* on many European peoples, and they retained the *Code* after their liberation. But this does not mean that they acknowledged a common legality, or that they were able to retain the spirit of the law without attaching it to their own sense of nationhood.

In Europe today, however, we see an attempt to make law and impose it without reference to any focus of loyalty that could be recognised by the people. There is no imperial power, and therefore no law-enforcers with a sense of their civilizing mission, who would remain bound to each other as the Romans were bound to the Romans and the English to the English. There are only bureaucrats, based in a country (Belgium) notorious for its failure to produce any sentiment of national unity and now, following the arbitrary criminalization of the Flemish nationalist party (the *Vlaams Blok*) on the verge of disintegration. The edicts of these bureaucrats are propagated without respect for national differences or existing sentiments of legitimacy, and with no real expectation that anyone will be motivated to obey them. The result is a gradual erosion of respect for law, and the growth of a new kind of corruption—a bureaucratized mafia which shields its actions by passing laws which no one is expected to obey, least of all the bureaucrats. In such circumstances we should be surprised that it is only 30% and not much more of the EU budget that is now unaccounted for.

Can there be a public spirit whose foundation is the internationalist idea? It seems at first that there can be. Some of the most public-spirited movements of our century have been expressly internationalist in their aims: the Olympic movement, the Red Cross, the United Nations, and the aptly named *Médecins sans Frontières.* Again, however, I do not think that any of these movements could have succeeded without the fund of national sentiment on which they drew—unless, that is, they take their inspiration, as does the Red Cross, from a religious idea. The Olympic movement seeks to bring about international cooperation through enhancing, rather than diminishing, national pride: for that is what competitive international sport requires. And as the Berlin Olympics of 1936 conclusively demonstrated, the result may enhance nationalist belligerence too.

Furthermore, public spirit is an attribute of nations. Not all people possess it in equal degrees. Indeed, there is a notorious difference between those people for whom family is the source and object of all social loyalty and those people who recognize the web of obligations to strangers. The Sicilians, being of the first kind, have often wrought havoc in America, where they have found themselves among people of the second kind, who are without effective defenses against them. And in the new international jurisdiction in Europe we find an interesting dividing line, which separates the *Langue d'oc* from the *Langue d'oeil* and the German-speaking from the Latin and Greek-speaking peoples. Above this line corruption is minimal; below it corruption is the normal state of affairs.

Ponder those facts, and the history of

public spirit in those countries—England, Switzerland, Scandinavia, the USA—which have most evidently displayed it, and you will surely conclude that internationalism is very unlikely to produce public spirit without help from a more local source of moral sentiment. Public spirit is, in origin, a domestic product, the manufacture of which is greatly stimulated by cold climates and Protestant habits of self-accusation. It can be exported to sunnier and happier places, but only if the grim and self-denying missionaries take charge.

Finally, the question of sovereignty. It is fairly obvious that empires diminish sovereignty. But they do so by enhancing the sovereignty of the central power. Can there be a *shared* diminution of sovereignty, one that will be agreed to by all those who join the system but which will not transfer sovereignty to some central body? The answer is that there can be, but only if such a central body does not exist: only if there is some focus of loyalty which is not political at all, not attached to any particular time or place or office, and lying above all human disputes. That is what Islam once achieved: a system of shared sovereignty, in which all authority rested in God. But we know that it did not last and can never again be revived. Certainly it is impossible to envisage a secular system of common sovereignty without a central executive and legislative power. As the experience of the United States abundantly confirms, sovereignty relinquished to a federal body is also transferred to it: the states of the Union lost powers, which the Federal Government gained. And once transferred they could not be recaptured. The result, at a certain point, was civil war, after which the states of the Union retained only nominal sovereignty.

The EU tries to pretend that this need not happen. It invokes a peculiar principle, called "subsidiarity," in order to explain the point. The term derives from a 1931 papal encyclical by Pius XI, in which the Pope argues that in all political arrangements decisions should be taken at the lowest possible level—i.e., by those whose decision in the matter can be regarded with indifference by everyone else.

The problem is that subsidiarity, so defined, has no clear legal meaning. Which matters affect *us* but not *them*? What exactly is the "lowest" level? Why speak of low and high levels, if we do not wish to imply the existence of a supreme and sovereign apex? Moreover, who is to decide whether "subsidiarity" applies? Only, it seems in the current EU case, the European Commission—the central body in which true sovereignty accumulates. If we are free to make decisions in a matter only if the European Commission decides that we are free, then we are not really free, since it is the European Commission that is deciding. As with Brezhnev's "limited sovereignty," subsidiarity is not sovereignty at all, but a kind of soothing lie with which we habituate ourselves to our subjugation.

I don't think this question of sovereignty has ever been properly addressed, or that it could be resolved in the way that internationalists desire—namely, so as to grant sovereignty to people who want it, while binding them to international rules. This is important, since it points to one of the greatest dangers in internationalism: that people will be drawn into a transnational web, believing that they thereby enhance their power and their choices, only to discover that both their power and their choices have been diminished. At a certain point they will discover that they are subject to a power to which they have, and can have, no instinctive loyalty—since loyalty is a local and historical phenomenon, and cannot be conscripted. The result will be war, as in the American Civil War.

All this ought to make us wary of the

internationalist idea. Even if we think that the new forms of internationalism have little in common with the insolent dealings of the communists, we must ask ourselves seriously what are the real interests that advance, in the post-modern world, behind internationalist projects and ideas. Here it is important to make a distinction: between cosmopolitanism and internationalism. The cosmopolitan is someone who is at home in any city, who appreciates human life in all its peaceful forms, and is emotionally in touch with the customs, languages, and cultures of many different peoples. European art and culture is, and has always been, cosmopolitan. Our classical music has ranged freely across cultures, not destroying or absorbing but enhancing them. The same is true of our art, architecture, and religion.

The cosmopolitan is a nationalist—a believer in his own nation. But he is also a believer in all the other nations that have captured a corner of the earth that they can legitimately claim as their own. He is a patriot of one country, but a nationalist of many.

The internationalist is someone who wishes to break down the distinctions between people and who does not feel at home in any city because he is an alien in all—including his own. He sees the world as one vast system in which everyone is equally a customer, a consumer, a creature of wants and needs. He is only too happy to transplant people from place to place, to abolish local attachments, to shift boundaries and customs in accordance with the inexorable demands of economic progress.

The two most important kinds of internationalist in our world are these: the multinational businessman and the pop-star. Both are the product and the producers of global forces. Both are busily engaged in destroying loyalties that impede the universal trade in their product. If we allow them to have their way the entire face of our planet will be changed. Nothing local will remain. One language, one music, one architecture, one supermarket will spread across the globe. People will be set in hectic motion, moving constantly from place to place, only to discover that all places are alike—and losing, in the process, the local attachments that made their lives worthwhile. They will live then as aliens, in the global farm for the production of aliens. Do we really want to go in this direction? Do we really want to lose everything that was distinctive of our histories and traditions? Do we really want to lose the loyalties which made the European ideal of legal order and secular government possible in the first place?