TRADITIONAL AND MODERN NATIONS ARE PRIMITIVE AND ABSTRACT FAMILIES

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RÉSUMÉ — Le primitivisme est cette préférence à chercher la compagnie de ceux aux opinions semblables dans l'espoir de se passer de défi intellectuel. Cela rend le tribalisme attrayant, car le tribalisme est l'idée (fictive) de nous tous comme des proches par le sang. C'est la désintégration, style Herbert Spencer. L'Israël actuel en est un exemple. Incapable de se reconnaître comme une nation moderne, il met un frein à la tolérance religieuse. Il devient de plus en plus une nation dans le sens ancien du terme, ayant intégré une discrimination contre ses membres les plus faibles. Les femmes et les enfants sont les premières victimes de la régression vers la famille primitive. Les membres des minorités nationales sont les premières victimes de la régression vers la tribu primitive.

ABSTRACT — Primitivism is the preference of like-minded company, the hope to dispense with intellectual challenge. It renders tribalism attractive, as tribalism is the (fictitious) view of us all as blood relatives. It is disintegration Herbert Spencer style. Current Israel is an example. Unable to recognize itself as a modern nation, it curbs religious tolerance; it becomes increasingly a nation in the ancient sense, having inbuilt discrimination against its weaker members. Women and children are the first victims of regression to the primitive family; members of national minorities are the first victims of regression to the primitive tribe.

Traditional and Modern Nations are Primitive and Abstract Families

Joseph Agassi[1]

Resume — Le primitivisme est cette préférence à chercher la compagnie de ceux aux opinions semblables dans l'espoir de se passer de défi intellectuel. Cela rend le tribalisme attrayant, car le tribalisme est l'idée (fictive) de nous tous comme des proches par le sang. C'est la désintégration, style Herbert Spencer. L'Israël actuel en est un exemple. Incapable de se reconnaître comme une nation moderne, il met un frein à la tolérance religieuse. Il devient de plus en plus une nation dans le sens ancien du terme, ayant intégré une discrimination contre ses membres les plus faibles. Les femmes et les enfants sont les premières victimes de la régression vers la famille primitive. Les membres des minorités nationales sont les premières victimes de la régression vers la tribu primitive.

Abstract — Primitivism is the preference of like-minded company, the hope to dispense with intellectual challenge. It renders tribalism attractive, as tribalism is the (fictitious) view of us all as blood relatives. It is disintegration Herbert Spencer style. Current Israel is an example. Unable to recognize itself as a modern nation, it curbs religious tolerance; it becomes increasingly a nation in the ancient sense, having inbuilt discrimination against its weaker members. Women and children are the first victims of regression to the primitive family; members of national minorities are the first victims of regression to the primitive tribe.

The expression "Blood and Soil" was one of the most successful slogans of the Nazi propaganda machine. The source of this success is easy to fathom. All primitive regimes rest on shared faith (namely, myths and rites), blood, and territory. (Nomads make territorial claims too — for the whole of the tremendous territories along which they graze their herds.) Twentieth-century social anthropology was almost exclusively concerned with kinship terms and with faith. Authors did not explain, obviously considering the matter obvious. Why then is primitivism attractive?

Primitivism struggles with the comforts of technologically affluent society. Even writers who disliked this comfort admit its allure, as they declare it dangerous and demand great efforts to resist it. Theodor Herzl (the father of Zionism) expressed this sentiment in his forgotten short stories. Aldous Huxley did this in a forgotten essay "Comfort" and in a famous novel, *Brave New World*. Incidentally, he later succumbed to the allure: in *The Doors of Perception* and in his last novel *Island* he advocated the regular use of hallucinogens, psychedelic mind-expanding drugs. This seems to oppose primitivism. It does

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not. As the advocate of neo-primitivism, Hans Peter Duerr has noted, drugs abound everywhere, with the possible exception of twentieth-century urban centers. All this is tangential: one need not be aware of the conflict between primitivism and appeal of advanced technology, and one may be aware of it and try to overcome it without giving up either. Martin Heidegger, the most famous Nazi philosopher, has described this conflict and sided with primitivism, even though he found irresistible the tremendous military value of advanced technology, as his ideal Nazi individual is the well-armed thug. So he recommended restricting advanced technology to violent uses. Unbelievably, his writings are still taught in modern universities—as profundities, no less—even in Israel. He is the paradigm of the primitivist hope to master some advanced technology without succumbing to the openness of the societies that have produced it. Yet the bottom line is different: as primitivism is but a crude dream, its conflict with modern technology need not demand a resolution. Hence the success of Heidegger's sermons on technology is assured.

The allure of primitivism is that of a very special dream: it is the conviction that accompanies the dream that it is a reality. The proof of the reality of primitivism is simple: it rests on blood relations, and these are strong, its strength being primordial, quite primitive. Let me mention in passing that all this deeply troubled Franz Kafka. He loved his sisters but he insisted that this had nothing to do with their being his siblings (*Letters to Felice*). He was in error, of course. It is no accident that etymologically, all terms for political units, from those denoting the extended family to those denoting nations, are all related to words designating blood relations. This may be the explanation of the force of primitivism: any political association looks quite superficial and arbitrary and thus unstable, with the exception of those that rest on blood relations, since these are given. Politics deeply involves loyalty on many levels and in many ways, and as we take blood relations as given, so we take as given also loyalty to members of the nuclear family, the extended family, and the tribe: blood is thicker than water, they say, thereby declaring its strength resting on the inescapable truths by nature, not to the shaky truths by convention.

The supposition that social cohesion and the trust that it requires rests on blood conflicts with the equally popular supposition that the fear of punishment is the source of social cohesion. This is the heart of the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes that he developed in response to the terrible civil war that he had experienced, the Great Rebellion of the mid-seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, Hume and Rousseau disproved him: society must rest on trust: rulers cannot possibly rely on brute force alone. Now, initially, trust rests on loyalty. This is the mark of the primitive: were it so all the way then the modern, abstract society would be impossible, as constantly most of us interact daily with individuals who are not members of our extended families: they are strangers and the extended family is dissolved in the more modern

societies. Communist China used military conscription to destroy it. In the modern, abstract society, it is loyalty to strangers that custom considers superficial and arbitrary; in abstract society trust rests on abstract principles. This does not appeal to primitivists: many competing principles are available, and so the choice between them is arbitrary. Of course, the principle that my tribe has endorsed may be proven, and then adhering to it is not arbitrary. Except that proof belongs to science, science rests on the theory of the siblinghood of humanity, and so, it seems, it cannot explain the strength and importance of blood ties. Jean-Paul Sartre replaced the idea of proof with that of engagement, of commitment. This renders loyalty something that is above reason. It does not work, as we can never be sure that people are committed to the causes they work for. Arthur Koestler tells a funny story on this. He reports that long after he gave up his faith in communism, he climbed a London bus and found himself sitting next to a police detective who had been in charge of monitoring his movements when he still was a communist. He felt that as the cause for the distance between them had vanished, he could now befriend the detective. He met with a cold shoulder: the detective found objectionable his disloyalty to the cause, even though he was hostile to it all the way. Loyalty is above reason: you side with your gang, no matter what. True, the communist party served Koestler as a surrogate family; thugs too treat their gangs as families: emulating primitive thinking, they employ terms of kinship. So did also trade unions, of course, and their roots were modern industrial society, and thus in the open society; yet they were educated in the family, and so their techniques were often primitive. The literature on trade-union violence is immense. Much of it is defensive, referring to its twin, the police violence. But two wrongs do not make a right. What signifies here is the appeal to something primitive, to the blood that flows in our veins. Native Americans took the Europeans to be a tribe and deemed as their totem, the eagle that they found on their coins. And at least in this they were right: the primitive Native Americans met with the racism that was the primitivist attitude of most of the Europeans whom they encountered.

The primitive attitude to blood does not always work: wars within families happen ever since Kane and Abel. Moreover, all too often families are surrogates, beginning with the restoration of Athenian democracy by the tyrant Cleisthenes who redivided Attica to new tribes while assimilating into them all sorts of aliens that were there and persisting with our teaching our children to call our friends uncles and aunts. This is akin to the famous ancient institution of blood brotherhood that still exists all over the primitive world and is the fiction of sharing blood. Trusting blood brothers and any other fake kin renders true kinship politically less important. Modern abstract society does not have blood brotherhood: it has many surrogate families instead and it demands trust even among strangers—so that internet programs prolifer-

ate that arrange dating strangers, be it mean for brief encounters or for marriages. This attitude facilitates adoption and the recognition of it. In Antiquity this institution was important too, to the extent that it became problematic. In ancient Rome, adoption was common and family relations were very complicated; this was possible because the power of the head of any family over his family was supreme and so he could modify them ad hoc. This insured the immunity of the family from reform, rendered the transmission of political powers unstable and hastened the fall of the Roman Republic. In the nineteenth century, Sir Henry Maine, the leading student of Roman law, declared the whole system of Roman blood relations fake. Obviously, Romans deemed it unavoidable. Not so today: the modern world spurns many surrogate families, and with ease.

This is a result of a process that began with the rise of modern nationalism, as modern nations are frankly fake or surrogate tribes. This is why nationalism does not mix with faith even though tribalism is unthinkable without it. Muslim fundamentalism, Shiite or Sunni, as well as its current Israeli Jewish imitation of it, is not religious but tribalist; religion is but an unavoidable accessory to it: faith helps determine the distinctness of the social unit, be it an extended family, a tribe, or a nation in the old, primitive sense of the word. In primitive societies, the legal and the religious systems are one system of customs. Members of any unit considered customs of other units abominable (Genesis, 43:32). The abominable was not so much any idea, any theory, or any myth system: people are extremely adept at translating myth systems when they pay attention to other people's systems. It is not the different myth systems but the different rites that make the difference. Rites cement the extended family, tribe, or nation in the old sense, and they stabilize its boundaries. And stable boundaries are allegedly determined by blood. This idea is just one item in the myth system. Those who complain about it as it is primitive and who criticize it as primitive are mistaken. It is powerful because it is a myth, and the myth is powerful just because it is primitive. Primitive myths have the greatest appeal even when they are obviously false. They belong to our distant past.

Attitudes to faith offer the most significant distinction between nationalism primitive-style and modern. In old-style nations, faith is cement, as Émile Durkheim has repeatedly emphasized. He ignored the modern separation of state and church. To be precise, only some modern states, like France and the USA, separate them; in northern Europe, state religions still prevail. Both these legal ploys isolate religious considerations from political ones, so as to avoid religious discrimination. Indeed, countries like today's Syria that practices religious discrimination and legally separate church and state, are simply lawless. Primitivism imposes religious discrimination because it acts as cement, as Durkheim has noted. This is what makes Israel incapable of avoiding religious discrimination: despite its being modern in so many ways,

Israelis feel that Israel must discriminate against its non-Jews in favor of its Jews, and this discrimination requires a legal criterion, and the criterion that Israel's rabbis determine is of blood (faith comes in as secondary, the officiating rabbis make it obligatory for its Jews-by-blood who do not belong to the Jewish faith to convert to Judaism); this prevents the nation from being a modern one, a surrogate family, a genuine imitation, to use the popular American oxymoron expression.

As a surrogate family, the modern nation has to destroy the extended family and this has a tremendous effect on the nuclear family, with many people hardly knowing their first cousins and most of them having no contact with their second cousins. The extended family is practically extinct in today's relatively open societies, and grandparents and uncles still have strong ties with the young generation only if they live close by. Nuclear families that live separately, each having its own household on a place that is often empty during the workday and so husband and wife learn to share housekeeping and women fight for equality. Those who advocate a return to tribal societies whom we call fundamentalists adhere to the traditional inequality of women because they appeal to tradition as a tool for the return to the tribe. This they call family values. The expression indicates that its users do not value tradition as such. They value tribalism, the hostility to other tribes. This hostility, I suggest, is the root of their appalling attitude to women. It does not look this way since the appalling attitude is backed up by demands to protect our women from their men; but it is actually the attitude to them that makes us want to prevent their men access to our women. Some writers use psychological arguments to explain the wish to keep our women away from their men; this goes with the observation that we view them as inferior and we do not want our women to marry down. But today many fundamentalists view them as superior to us as is clear from their claim that by the right traditional criteria they are not superior to us. Yet the hatred of them remains and even thrives. Arguing that hatred is negative does not work just because it is an expression of loyalty to the tribe and loyalty is positive. It also bespeaks the traditional humiliation of women. If you want your women treated properly, stop hating others. (Thus, feminism grew out of American abolitionism which deemed slaves as human, and so as kin.)

The return to primitive systems is a case of disintegration Herbert Spencer style. His study of disintegration was a part of his effort to combine biology and politics. We may ignore this, as nowadays we speak of systems in the abstract. The point is common sense anyway, or, rather, the part of it that is commonsense deserves notice. Wherever there is a hierarchy of centers and a high center loses control, lower centers must act autonomously in efforts to survive. Thus, when the brain is damaged some reflexes (such as Babinsky's) that it normally suppresses come to fore. Thus, when a capital city collapses, regional capitals take over some of its functions. To enable the system to work

even if the capital will be unable to function, the US military developed the Internet. With no internet, when a system collapses, tribes come to life, as happens bigtime when the Soviet Union collapsed. The extended family or tribe in this kind of system, usually known as a mafia, initially function as old-style extended family or tribe, but soon the blood aspect becomes increasingly fictitious. This does not improve the system's functioning; the more it moves away from its customary quasi-blood-determined system, the more it becomes corrupt, unless a modern nation takes over. This is not precise: corruption is not lawlessness but deviation from existing norms. But such a system is unstable, so that usually either law gets soon established or it soon dissipates into anarchy.

Consider Afghanistan. The deviation from tradition began with the Soviet installment of a puppet regime there. The blood system was powerful and prevented modernization. This triggered the Soviet invasion. The rebels moved to Pakistan and fought back with help from the USA. The USA demanded the dismantling of the blood system too. After disposal of the puppet government, the Afghan rebels returned to the blood system, including the traditional family system, especially the violent subjugation of women. Traditional clothing became a symbol of that subjugation as it is so visible and even easy to photograph. Iran experienced a similar process, and for similar reason: behind the façade of its current quasi-democratic political system and its more obvious religious system, stands blood relations, and the surrogate family of the clergy that rests on it. Iraq suffers from a civil war between Shiites and Sunnis, the first of this kind. It is due to the disintegration of society that boosts tribal strife; the importance of religious disparity is that it marks the boundaries of extended families fighting for dominance. Kurdistan is such a serious problem there and in Turkey because Kurdish tribes seek national independence, but not in the modern sense of the national.

The first victims of regression are the weakest part of the system, and when the regression is to primitive family, it is the women. In Israel, primitivism prevents the enacting of Israel's basic law of gender equality because there the family law is above the civil law, in the hands of the practitioners of the ancient Talmud and Shari'a. Israel thus cannot recognize itself as a modern nation: it cannot abide religious tolerance; resting on blood and so on faith, it is increasingly a nation in the ancient sense, with an inbuilt religious discrimination. Women and members of religious minorities are then only the first victims of this allegedly traditional system that is retrograde and disintegrating. All Israelis then suffer from this anomaly. In Israel accent is constantly put in the prevalence of start-up companies and their international success. The meaning of this is the denial of all that is said here, particularly about Israel as primitivist, since the approval of technology is progressive, not regressive. There is much truth in this: Israeli ultra-orthodox females are not allowed to appear in the company of males outside the family, and so they are

very restricted in their effort to acquire education and trade. The profession of programming technology has offered them a new chance: ultra-orthodox women occupy some office spaces that are exclusively female. Yet this is hardly an innovation: the plight of ultra-orthodox women is not new, and as so often they are the sole providers for their nuclear families, they found different solutions to their problems ever since the ultra-orthodox reform was instituted in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Their solutions that are apparent in Israel are mere stop-gaps. They do not stop the strive for gender equality that is a highly destabilizing factor in all ultra-orthodox sub-societies. Thus, although they have the highest birthrate in the nation, and although the nation is becoming increasingly tribalist, the size of the ultra-orthodox minority in Israel does not change. The tension between the ultra-orthodox and the religious Jews in Israel is relentless. The only way out of it is to change the concept of the modern nation as a family in a broader and more abstract sense than the traditional nation that is a system of extended families and tribes. Israel and the Islamic world need this change badly and urgently.

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