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THE CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY PROBLEM OF BALTIC YOUTH IN AUSTRALIA

ALDONA JUŠKAITĖ

When asked why one has lost one's national identity, I have often heard it said: "First we must be human and then Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian" and so forth. Although I do not deny that everyone's primary aim is to develop as human beings, I cannot accept the much expounded idea, which is voiced by a loud minority in the Lithuanian community, that belonging to a country does not play an important part in the development of the human spirit. I cannot accept assimilation justified and defended in the name of humanity or Christianity.

I found that it was the negative attitudes and comments within my own ethnic community which actualised the question of whether I (or others) should be Lithuanian or not, and I have no doubt that this question of identity faces other Baltic youth as well. The attitudes vocalised by the statement "first be a human and only then belong to a nation of people" gives rise to such issues: Shall I be a narrow minded nationalist or a Christian cosmopolitan internationalist? Are not we all brothers? Distinctions of country and nation cause war and are anti-Christian.

However, such statements warrant closer inspection before one jumps onto the bandwagon of quick assimilation.

Firstly, to be human. The concept implies the ideal of developing as human beings (humanisation) instead of encouraging the brute animal instincts. Thus, it is important to ask how will assimilation help us to humanise, and what in actual fact is humanisation.

Humanisation

Human development is primarily expressed by the acquisition of a world-view. The aim of acquiring a world-view is that it forms a basis for human development, helping us to come closer to an understanding of the essence and meaning of human existence.

Assimilation can occur in a number of ways, but in all cases it results in the intake of a new culture as completely as possible with a negation or denial of the old culture. It is more than social adaptation or integration. Assimilation means incorporation into the new dominant culture with a loss of the original culture.

Psychologist Erich Fromm, explaining humanisation, writes: Man's evolution is based on the fact that he has lost his original home, nature — and that he can never return to it, he can never become an animal again. There is only one way he can take: to emerge fully from his natural home, to find a new home — one which he creates, by making the world a human one and by becoming truly human himself. Man's aim is to be fully born, to be fully awake, to acquire a world-view; i.e., a philosophy of existence, a spiritual awareness or awakening, or as sociologists Berger and Reich put it — a consciousness.

Consciousness, as they explain, is not a set of opinions, information or values, but a total configuration in any given individual which makes up his whole perception of reality, his whole world-view. Culture is the product of consciousness, but it also helps to form consciousness or a world-view.

What is culture?

Professor Richard Niebuhr (theologist) regards culture as the sum of all that has spontaneously arisen for the advancement of material life and as an expression of spiritual and moral life. Thus, culture is all social intercourse, technologies, arts, literature and science; while the spearhead of culture is speech.

Culture is the social heritage we receive and transmit. Most importantly, if one of the marks of culture, is that it is the result of past human achievement; another is that no-one can possess it without effort and achievement on his own part. Culture cannot be possessed without striving on the part of the recipient; e.g., speech must be laboriously acquired.

These human achievements are all designed for an end. The world of culture is a world of values. The values with which these human achievements are concerned are dominantly those for the good of man. Thus, cultural progress and creativity are of utmost importance in our quest for human development.

However, culture cannot be maintained unless men devote a large part of their efforts in the work of conservation. Culture is a social tradition which must be conserved by painful struggle. Let education and training lapse for one generation, and the whole grand structure of past achievement falls into ruin. Thus, each culture needs to be preserved; otherwise, the past work of generations results in naught. Conservation is thus just as important as is creativity and progress.

Man cannot help reacting to his environment. If there is a lack of idealism, culture, he will react badly. If his environment is favourable, then he will react well. Everyone is born with about the same human potentialities, but they need to be developed. Some family, social and cultural conditions are better than others. We need to search for the best that past and present cultures offer. In humanising, we need to choose the best not the easiest way. But to be capable of choosing one needs to know enough to compare.

There is much literature to be found dealing with the problems of "modern" man and his current state of alienation and dehumanisation in highly technological societies. Reich, Berger and Kellner all state that a new revolution is needed to bring man's thinking, his society and his life to terms with the revolution of technology and science that has already taken place.

Berger describes "modern" man in USA (and to a lesser extent in Australia) as the "homeless mind". Technology, far from liberating man, has increased his feelings of helplessness, frustration and alienation.

Reich says about America: we think of ourselves as an incredibly rich country, but we are beginning to realize that we are also a desperately poor country — poor in most of the things that throughout the history of mankind have been cherished as riches. Reich describes the present impoverishment of highly technical, democratic societies. He concludes that our life activities have become artificial and false to our genuine needs; the individual is stripped of his imagination, his creativity, his heritage, his dreams and his personal uniqueness in order to style him into a productive unit for a mass technological society.

In aiming for human development, the exclusive training of people for some specific activity in life is not enough. Gaining knowledge in the meaning of all facets of life is human development. The material results of cultural activity are useless unless they are accompanied by a learning process which enables us to employ them as they are intended to be employed. Thus, we need to develop consciousness and seek out cultures which do not place accent so heavily on material progress. Through culture man is capable of experiencing individuality: "I am". But to find and experience "I" we need a sense of identity — such as belonging to a nation, a religion, a class, an occupation. All furnish a sense of identity. This identity is more efficient if blended with older feudal remnants as in European countries.

In places like the United States, or Australia, where so little is left of feudal relics, and in which there is so much social mobility, these status identifications are less efficient and the sense of identity is shifted more and more to the experience of conformity; e.g., inasmuch as I am not different, inasmuch as I am like the others and am recognized by them as "a regular fellow" I can sense myself as "I". A new herd identity develops, in which the sense of identity rests on the sense of an unquestionable belonging to the crowd.

While we need a frame of orientation, an identity, we do not need such described intense conformity where an individual has an illusory identity, but cannot develop; where progress and creativity are stifled from fear of being different. Man needs an atmosphere which is conducive to creativity, where choices must be made and knowledge acquired, where effort is needed. In a society conducive to herd conformity, the conditions for creativity and progress will be hard to find. Human development is stifled.

There are in each culture basic symbols which provide an understanding of the world, and all the manifestations of the culture are determined by the working out of these symbols. Each culture has its own peculiar symbolic form, but all of the elements by their symbols bring order to what is given in experience and appropriate it to the spiritual life of man. These symbolic forms cannot be reduced to a simple unity. On the contrary, each one has its specific character and structure. There are tensions and frictions among them, yet they all have a functional unity in human culture, where they complete

and complement one another. Culture demands diversification, but this does not mean discord. It is a co-existence of contraries, a harmony of oppositions.

Thus, human culture, taken as a whole, may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. None of the symbolic forms presents a picture of reality, but each one is justified to the extent that it contributes to man's cultural life and to the world which his mind constructs. Whilst looking for the best of past and present cultures, we must not lose sight of the importance of cultural variety. Differences and a controlled level of tension is conducive to creativity.

Radginskis is critical of historians and sociologists who claim that the social, economic and cultural surroundings alone are conducive to creativity. Radginski claims that cultural progress is the work of a minority in society; that it is the minority who suffer discrimination who are the most creative. By aiming to prove that they are equal to larger groups, if not better, they become creative. Discrimination, of course, must not be oppressive discrimination, such as one would find in the Soviet Union, but discrimination as to cause some tension, a disturbance. In potentially creative persons, something useful may come out of this disturbance because one thinks and feels and new ideas are born. Thoughts and feelings must build up pressure to become fruitful.

Radginskis also examines creativity from the view of assimilation. He bases the assimilation process on the following formula: ethnic mingling — cultural decline — ethnic fusion — cultural efflorescence. I stress, that before there is ethnic fusion, cultural decline (including the negation of one's own culture) occurs. The duration of the decline depends, among other things, upon the qualitative differences among cultural groups involved and the degree of ethnic mingling.

But how does assimilation affect the cultural and achievement patterns in the US, in Australia? One can state almost with axiomatic certainty that ethnic mingling of such vast proportions must be followed by a cultural decline before any secondary rise can occur. Comparison of USA with the nations of western Europe with which is shared the same cultural heritage reveals some unhappy differences, pointing to the relative weakness of the American social structure. Comparisons also reveal the relative weakness of Australian social structure. Radginski states: we boast of the number of schools, universities, churches, hospitals. But our leadership is mainly in the number of physical plants rather than the spiritual, intellectual and creative values that should go with them.

Radginski describes the excessive extent of confusion, antagonism, tension and lawlessness caused by rapid assimilation of a great assortment of ethnic stock in the USA. He concludes that politicians, who for reasons of expediency and false humanitarianism press for the relaxation of immigration laws, are in effect asking for the perpetuation of confusion and lawlessness.

To humanise means to be responsible towards the people nearest to you, to family and country, and includes a moral integrity to humanity in general. To forsake family and friends, to forget the plight and suffering of one's own country shows that the concept of humanizing is not understood and that the concept is simply used to justify an action of retreat: Who will respect a person who does not respect himself, his heritage or his past? To respect one's past, one cannot hide or run away from one's cultural identity. Thus, to humanise, one cannot separate oneself from one's cultural heritage, but must seek to know it fully and to understand it to one's capacity.

A person who has no comprehension or understanding of his cultural heritage lacks insight and understanding of himself. History joins previous generations with the present generation. A person is not only born into a family, but also into a country (fatherland). He has a responsibility to love family and country because they are his. However, one cannot love what one has only limited knowledge of, or no knowledge. It is important to strive to understand a culture as deeply as possible, for only then can love develop.

How does one lose one's nationality?

1) When materialism becomes the value to strive for, culture is considered an unimportant aim. The person slowly forgets the language and cultural heritage, or the person may suffer a spiritual loss; that is, he still has knowledge of the language, etc., but he is no longer interested in his ethnic community problems, aspirations or orientation.

2) The person likes another culture more than the one implanted in him. He negates his own culture because he sees the new culture as better. It often means that the Australian society is seen as being better because it is bigger, while the ethnic community is inferior because it is small and thus inadequate. The person is afraid to be different. It is easier to identify oneself as an Australian because there is such a large mass of them. Quantity, not quality is measured.

3) Cosmopolitanism. A cosmopolitan thinks there should be no countries because they cause war and not brotherhood. A cosmopolitan claims that he loves all of the world and thus he cannot patriotically love his own country because he does not believe in national limitations. But what value has a love that is uncommitted and requires no responsibility or effort; which is a statement but not a deed?

One of the excuses for assimilation is that it is impossible to harmonize or reconcile two separate cultures within the one person, that one or the other culture must be chosen. If a choice has to be made, why defend it as being cosmopolitanism or humanism?

Other excuses are that one is too narrow and limited as a person if one is restrained by nationality. "And anyway, there is so much fighting and bickering, making the ethnic community intolerable and unendurable." The negator accuses and degrades his ethnic community so that he himself will feel justified and righteous. He runs away from the problems found in the ethnic community, as though these same problems are not to be found in any society.

A cosmopolitan sees all countries and cultures as equal. What then would be the logic of negating one's cultural heritage when, by so doing, cultures become classified as better or worse. How can the assimilator class himself as cosmopolitan? And just how possible is it to be a cosmopolitan? The writings of people such as Radginski, Reich, Kellner, indicate that for the vast majority of people, it is not possible, and that such a vast level of intellect and maturity must be reached before one is capable of choosing or being able to incorporate into oneself even partially the best the world has to offer without feeling overwhelmed and lost and incapable of functioning as a creative being. Man is, sadly, unequipped to cope with rapid social change and the vast amount of knowledge, ideas and habits resulting in social mobility. In the search for brotherhood, one often forgets that this value should begin with the people with whom one has the closest contact. It is harder to work and interact with people intimate to oneself because so many added conflicts arise that would not exist through interaction with people one had no real identification or feeling for.

If one looks closely at the many statements and reasons given for assimilation, we soon notice the hypocrisy and insincerity of the statements. How can one love humanity, but not love one's family background and cultural heritage? Since when did the Baltic people stop being part of humanity? Since when did Australia come to represent all of humanity? Since when does one ignore human rights, or the suffering of people, in the name of humanity? In our development as humans we have to mature and reach such a stage of human understanding where familiarity no longer breeds contempt but, instead, compassion. This means that one does not run from arguments or fights in a community but learns to overcome them. It means learning to cope with the feelings of inadequacy. It means striving, instead of taking the easy way. it means not losing those aspects that distinguish us from other cultural groups or from the mass. Every country is part of humanity. In searching for a way to serve humanity, we cannot ignore the closest contact we have with humanity: family and country. It is only through a deep understanding of a particular culture that we become productive and thus make an offering to humanity.

In summing up I would like again to emphasize that to be human requires that we understand what it is to be human. Our constant attempt to understand is the process of humanisation. To humanise requires the acquisition of consciousness which is the pre-requisite for creativity. Overall, the conditions associated with assimilation have little to do with the process of humanisation. Whatever our choice, at least let us try to come by it through intellectual freedom; i.e., let us have the knowledge to be able to make objective choices and statements instead of prejudiced justifications and manipulations.

In concluding, it should be hardly necessary to say that to love one's country does not mean putting one's nation above humanity, above the principles of truth and justice. To love one's country is to have a loving interest in one's own nation and people, which is concerned as much with the nation's spiritual as its material welfare. Love for one's homeland should be a part of one's love for humanity. Thus, one's love of a country must be seen in perspective to humanity, with the realization that an offering to humanity is possible only through a culture; a creative offering (for most) through one's nation or cultural heritage.

Love for humanity begins with love for the concrete individual; with struggle for human rights in day to day living. Otherwise, humanity is just an abstract term, with no repercussions on living.

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