

The Idea of Empire

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Europe was the place where two great models of polity, of political unity, were elaborated, developed and clashed: the nation, preceded by the monarchy, and the empire. The last emperor of the Latin West, Romulus Augustus, was deposed in 475. Only the Eastern empire remained. But after the Western empire was dismantled, a new unitary consciousness seems to have arisen. In 795, Pope Leon III started to date his encyclicals based on the reign of Charles, king of the Franks and patrician of the Romans, rather than on the reign of the emperor of Constantinople. Five years later in Rome, on Christmas Day in the year 800, Leon III placed the imperial crown on Charlemagne's head.

This is the first renovation of the empire. It obeys the theory of transfer (*transratio imperii*) according to which the empire Charlemagne revived is a continuation of the Roman empire, thus putting an end to theological speculations inspired by the prophet David who foresaw the end of the world after the end of the fourth empire, i.e., after the end of the Roman empire which succeeded the Babylonian, the Persian and the Alexandrian empires.

At the same time, the renovation of the empire also breaks with the Augustinian idea of a radical opposition between *civitas terrena* and *civitas Dei*, which could have been understood to mean that a Christian empire was only a chimera. In fact, Leon III had a new strategy — a Christian empire, where the emperor would be the defender of the City of God. The emperor derived his powers from the pope, whose spiritual powers he reproduced in the temporal realm. Of course, all quarrels surrounding investitures will stem from this equivocal formulation which makes the emperor a subject in the spiritual order but at the same time makes him the head of a temporal hierarchy whose sacred character will soon be asserted.

After the Verdun Treaty (843) sealed the division of the empire between Charlemagne's three grandsons (Lothario I, Ludwig the German, and Charles the Bald), the king of Saxony, Henry I, was crowned emperor in 919. The empire then became Germanic. After Carolingian power was dislocated, it was restored again in the center of Europe with the Othonians and the Franks in 962 to the benefit of King Otto I of Germania. It remained the major political force in Europe until the middle of the 13th century, when it was officially transformed into the **Sacrum Romanum Imperium**. After 1442, the appellation "of the German nation" was added.

It is not possible to retrace the history of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation here beyond pointing out that throughout its history it was a composite bringing together three components: antiquity, Christianity, and German identity.

Historically the imperial idea began to disintegrate in the Renaissance, with the appearance of the first national states. Of course, the 1525 victory of Pavia, won by imperial forces against Francis II's troops, seemed to reverse the trend. At the time, this event was considered very important and caused a

renaissance of Ghibellinism in Italy. After Charles V, however, the imperial title did not go to his son Philip, and the empire was again reduced to a local affair. After the Peace of Westphalia (1648), it was seen less and less as something dignified and more and more as a simple confederation of territorial states. The decline went on for another two and a half centuries. On April 6, 1806, Napoleon brought the revolution to fruition by destroying what remained of the empire. Francis II resigned his title and the Holy Roman Empire was no more.

At first sight, the concept of empire is not easy to understand, given the often contradictory uses that have been made of it. In his dictionary, Littré is satisfied with a tautological definition: an empire is “a state ruled by an emperor.” This is a bit too brief. Like the polis or the nation, the empire is a kind of political unity; unlike the monarchy or the republic, it is not a form of government. This means that the empire is compatible a priori with different forms of government. The first article in the Weimar Constitution stated that “the German Reich is a republic.” Even in 1978, the constitutional court at Karlsruhe did not hesitate to claim that “the German Reich remains a subject of international law.” The best way to understand the substantive reality of the empire is by comparing it with that of the nation or the nation-state — the latter represents the end of a process of nationality-formation for which France more or less provides the best example.

In its current meaning, the nation appears as a modern phenomenon. In this respect, both Colette Beaune¹ and Bernard Guene are wrong in locating the birth of the nation very early in history. This idea rests on anachronisms; it confuses “royal” and “national,” the formation of nationality and the formation of nation. The formation of nationality corresponds with the birth of a sense of belonging which begins to go beyond the simple natal horizon during the war against the Plantagenets — a sense reinforced during the Hundred Years War. But it should not be forgotten that in the Middle Ages the word “nation” (from *natio*, “birth”) had an exclusively ethnic meaning — the nations of the Sorbonne are simply groups of students who speak a different language. In the same way, the word “country,” which only appeared in France with the 16th century humanists (Dolet, Ronsard, Du Bellay), originally referred to the medieval notion of “homeland.” When more than a mere attachment to the land of one’s birth, “patriotism” is fidelity to the lord or allegiance to the person of the king. Even the word “France” appeared relatively late. Starting with Charles III (called the Simple) the title borne by the king of France was *Rex Francorum*. The expression *Rex Franciae* only appeared at the beginning of the 13th century, under Philippe-Auguste, after the defeat of the Count of Toulouse at Muret, which ended with the annexation of the countries speaking the *langue d’oc* and with the persecution of the Cathars.

The idea of nation was fully constituted only in the 18th century, especially during the revolution. At the beginning it referred to a concept of sovereignty opposed to that of absolute monarchy. It brought together those who thought the same politically and philosophically — it was no longer the king but the “nation” which embodied the country’s political unity. Finally, it was the abstract location where people could conceive of and exercise their rights, where individuals were transformed into citizens.

First of all, the nation is the sovereign people which, in the best of all cases, delegates to the king only the power to apply the law emanating from the general will; then it is those peoples who recognize the authority of a state, inhabit the same territory and recognize each other as members of the same

political unity; finally, it is the political unity itself. This is why the counter-revolutionary tradition, which exalts the aristocratic principle, initially refrains from valuing the nation. Conversely, Article 3 of the 1789 Declaration of Rights proclaims “The principle of all sovereignty essentially resides in the nation.” Bertrand de Jouvenel even wrote that: “In hindsight, the revolutionary movement seems to have had as its goal the foundation of the cult of the nation.”²

What distinguishes the empire from the nation? First of all, the fact that the empire is not primarily a territory but essentially an idea or a principle. The political order is determined by it — not by material factors or by possession of a geographical area. It is determined by a spiritual or juridical idea. In this respect, it would be a serious mistake to think that the empire differs from the nation primarily in terms of size in that it is somehow “a bigger nation than others”. Of course, an empire covers a wide area. What is important, however, is that the emperor holds power by virtue of embodying something which goes beyond simple possession. As *dominus mundi*, he is the suzerain of princes and kings, i.e., he rules over sovereigns, not over territories, and represents a power transcending the community he governs.

Julius Evola writes: “The empire should not be confused with the kingdoms and nations which constitute it because it is something qualitatively different, prior to and above each of them in terms of its principle.”³ Before it expressed a system of supra-national territorial hegemony, “the old Roman notion of imperium referred to the pure power of command, the quasi-mystical force of auctoritas.” During the Middle Ages, the prevailing distinction was precisely one between auctoritas (moral and spiritual superiority) and potestas (simple political public power exercised by legal means). In both the medieval empire and the Holy Roman Empire, this distinction underlies the separation between imperial authority and the emperor’s sovereign authority over a particular people. For example, Charlemagne was part emperor and part king of the Lombards and the Franks. From then on, allegiance to the emperor was not submission to a people or to a particular country. In the same way, in the Austro-Hungarian empire, loyalty to the Hapsburg dynasty constituted “the fascism link between peoples and replaced patriotism” (Jean Branger); it prevailed over relations of a national or confessional character.

This spiritual character of the imperial principle directly provoked the famous quarrel concerning investitures which pitted the partisans of the pope and those of the emperor against each other for many centuries. Lacking any military content, the notion of empire originally acquired a strong theological cast in the medieval Germanic world, where one could see a Christian reinterpretation of the Roman idea of imperium. Considering themselves the executors of universal sacred history, the emperors deduced from this the idea that the empire, as a “sacred” institution (*Sacrum imperium*), must constitute an autonomous power with respect to the pope. This is the reason for the quarrel between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines.

The emperor’s followers who denied the pope’s pretensions — the Ghibellines — found support in the old distinction between imperium and sacerdotium, seen as two equally important spheres both instituted by God. This interpretation was an extension of the Roman concept of relations between the emperor and the pontifex maximus, each being superior to the other in their respective orders. The Ghibelline viewpoint was not to subject spiritual authority to temporal power but to claim for imperial power an equal spiritual authority in the face of the Church’s exclusive pretensions. So for Frederick II of

Hohenstaufen, the emperor is the half-divine intermediary whereby God's justice is spread on earth. This *renovatio*, which makes the emperor the essential source of law and confers on him the character of "living law on earth" (*lex animata in terris*), encapsulates the Ghibelline claim: like the pope, the empire must be recognized as an institution sacred in nature and character. Evola emphasizes that the opposition between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines "was not only political . . . it expressed the antagonism of two great dignitates, both claiming a spiritual dimension On its deepest level, Ghibellinism held that during his life on earth (seen as discipline, combat and service) the individual could transcend himself . . . by means of action and under the sign of the empire, in accordance with the character of the 'supernatural' institution which was granted to it."⁴

From here on, the decline of the empire throughout the centuries is consistent with the decline of the central role played by its principle and, correspondingly, with its movement toward a purely territorial definition. The Germanic Roman empire had already changed when the attempt was made in both Italy and Germany to link it to a privileged territory. This idea is still absent in Dante, for whom the emperor is neither German nor Italian but "Roman" in the spiritual sense, i.e., a successor of Caesar and Augustus. In other words, the empire cannot transform itself into a "great nation" without collapsing because, in terms of the principle which animates it, no nation can assume and exercise a superior ruling function if it does not rise above its allegiances and its particular interests. "The empire in the true sense," Evola concludes, "can only exist if animated by a spiritual fervor If this is lacking, one will only have a creation forged by violence — imperialism — a simple mechanical superstructure without a soul."⁵

For its part, the nation finds its origin in the pretension that the kingdom has to give itself imperial prerogatives by relating them not to a principle but a territory. Its beginnings can be located in the division of the Carolingian empire following the Verdun Treaty. At that point France and Germany, it one can call them that, began to have separate destinies. The latter remained in the imperial tradition, whereas the kingdom of the Franks (*Regnum Francorum*), seceding from the Germanic community, slowly evolved toward the modern nation by the intermediary of the monarchical state. The end of the Carolingian dynasty dates from the 10th century: 911 in Germany, 987 in France. Elected in 987, Hughes Capet was the first king who did not understand *francique*. He was also the first sovereign who situated himself clearly outside the imperial tradition, which explains why, in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante has him say: "I was the malignant roof whose shade darkened all Christian land!"

In the 13th and 14th centuries, the kingdom of France was constructed against the empire with Philippe-Auguste (Bouvines, 1214) and Philippe le Bel (Agnani, 1303). As early as 1204, Pope Innocent III declared that "it is publicly known that the king of France does not recognize any authority above him in the temporal realm." Just as the Trojan legend was instrumentalized, an entire work of "ideological" legitimation allowed the empire to be opposed to the principle of sovereignty of national kingdoms and their right to recognize no law other than their own interest. The role of jurists, emphasized so well by Carl Schmitt, is fundamental here. In the mid-13th century they were the ones who formulated the doctrine according to which "the king of France, who does not see anyone above him in the temporal realm, is exempt from the empire and may be considered as a *princeps in regno suo*."⁶ This doctrine was further developed in the 14th and 15th centuries with Pierre Dubois and Guillaume de Nogaret. By

proclaiming himself “emperor in his own realm” (*rex imperator in regno suo*), the king opposed his territorial sovereignty to the spiritual sovereignty of the empire – his purely temporal power was opposed to imperial spiritual power. At the same time, jurists took the side of centralization against local elite, and against the feudal aristocracies, thanks especially to the institution of the “cas royal.” They founded a juridical order, bourgeois in character, in which the law — conceived as a general norm with rational attributes — became the basis of a purely statist power. Law was transformed into simple legality codified by the state. In the 16th century, the formula of the king as “emperor in his own realm” was directly associated with the idea of sovereignty, about which Jean Bodin theorized. Schmitt remarks that France was the first country in the world to create a public order completely emancipated from the medieval model.

What happened next is well known. In France the nation came into being under the double sign of centralizing absolutism and the rise of the bourgeoisie. Here the main role fell on the state. When Louis XIV said “L’Etat c’est moi,” he meant there was nothing above the state. The state creates the nation, which in turn “produces” the French people; whereas in the modern age and in countries with an imperial tradition, the people create the nation, which then creates a state. The two processes of historical construction are thus entirely opposed and this opposition is based on the difference between the nation and the empire. As has often been pointed out, the history of France has been a constant struggle against the empire. The secular politics of the French monarchy was primarily aimed at breaking up Germanic and Italian spaces. After 1792, the republic took up the same objectives: the struggle against the house of Austria and the conquest of the Rhine.

The opposition between the spiritual principle and the territorial power is not the only one. Another essential difference concerns the way in which the empire and the nation regard political unity. The unity of the empire was not mechanical but organic, which goes beyond the state. To the degree to which it embodies a principle, the empire only envisages a unity on the level of that principle. Whereas the nation engenders its own culture or finds support in culture in the process of its formation, the empire embraces various cultures. Whereas the nation tries to make the people and the state correspond, the empire associates different peoples.

The principle of empire tries to reconcile the one and the many, the particular and the universal. Its general law is that of autonomy and of the respect for diversity. The empire tries to unify on a higher level, without suppressing the diversity of cultures, ethnic characters and peoples. It is a whole whose parts are autonomous in proportion to the solidity of what unites them. These parts are differentiated and organic. In contrast to the unitary and centralized *societas* of the national kingdom, the empire embodies the classical image of *universitas*. Moeller van den Bruck rightly saw the empire as a unity of opposites, while Evola defined it as “a supranational organisation such that its unity does not tend to destroy or to level the ethnic and cultural multiplicity it embraces,”⁷ adding that the imperial principle makes it possible “to retreat from the multiplicity of diverse elements to a principle which is at once higher and prior to their differentiation – a differentiation which proceeds only from sensible reality.” So it is not a question of abolishing but of integrating difference.

At the height of the Roman Empire, Rome was an idea, a principle, which made it possible to unite different peoples without converting or suppressing them. The principle of imperium, which was already at work in republican Rome, reflected the will to realize an always threatened cosmic order. The Roman Empire did not require jealous gods. It admitted other divinities, known or unknown, and the same is the case in the political order. The empire accepted foreign cults and the diversity of juridical codes. Each people was free to organize its federation in terms of its traditional concept of law. The Roman jus prevailed only in relations between individuals of different peoples or in relations between federations. One could be a Roman citizen (*civis romanus sum*) without abandoning one's nationality.

This distinction (foreign to the spirit of the nation) between what today is called nationality and citizenship can be found in the Germanic Roman Empire. The medieval Reich, a supra-national institution (because animated by a principle beyond the political order), was fundamentally pluralist. It allowed people to live their own lives according to their own law. In modern language, it was characterized by a marked "federalism" particularly able to respect minorities. After all, the Austro-Hungarian Empire functioned efficiently for centuries while minorities began to constitute most of its population (60% of the total). It brought together Italians and Romanians, as well as Jews, Serbs, Russians, Germans, Poles, Czechs, Croats and Hungarians. Jean Branger writes that "the Hapsburgs were always indifferent to the concept of nation-state," even to the point where this empire, founded by the house of Austria, for many centuries refused to create an "Austrian nation," which really only took shape in the 20th century.⁸

Conversely, what characterizes the national realm is its irresistible tendency to centralization and homogenization. The nation-state's investment of space is first revealed in a territory on which an homogeneous political sovereignty is exercised. This homogeneity may at first be apprehended in law: territorial unity results from the uniformity of juridical norms. The monarchy's secular struggle against the feudal nobility, especially under Louis XI, the annihilation of the civilizations of countries where the langue d'oc was spoken, the affirmation of the principle of centralization under Richelieu, all tended in the same direction. In this respect, the 14th and 15th centuries marked a fundamental shift. During this period the state emerged as the victor against feudal aristocracies and ensured its alliance with the bourgeoisie at the same time as a centralized juridical order was put in place. Simultaneously, the "national" economic market appeared. Thanks to a monetarization of all forms of exchange (non-commercial, intra-community exchanges being untaxable before then), it responded to the will of the state to maximize its fiscal revenues. As Pierre Rosanvallon explains: "the nation-state is a way of composing and articulating global space. In the same way, the market is primarily a way of representing and structuring social space; only secondarily is it a decentralized mechanism for regulating economic activity through the price system. From this perspective, the nation-state and the market refer to the same form of socialization of individuals within space. They are conceivable only in an atomized society in which the individual is considered autonomous. In both the sociological and economic senses of these terms, a nation-state and a market cannot exist in spaces where society unfolds as a global and social entity."⁹

There is no doubt that monarchical absolutism paved the way for bourgeois national revolutions. After Louis XIV had broken the nobility's last resistances, the revolution was inevitable when the bourgeoisie

could in turn win its autonomy. But there is also no doubt that in many respects the revolution only carried out and accelerated the tendencies of the Ancien Regime. Thus Tocqueville wrote: “The French Revolution caused many subordinate and secondary things, but it really only developed the core of the most important things; these existed before it . . . With the French, the central power had already taken over local administration more than any other country in the world. The revolution only made this power more skilful, powerful, enterprising.”¹⁰

Under the monarchy, as under the republic, the “national” logic tried to eliminate anything that might interfere between the state and the individual. It tried to integrate individuals to the same laws in a unified fashion; it did not attempt to bring together collectivities free to preserve their language, cultures and laws. State power was exercised over individual subjects, which was why it constantly destroyed or limited the power of all forms of intermediate socialization: familial clans, village communities, confraternities, trades, etc. The 1791 law against corporations (*loi Le Chapelier*) thus found its precedent in Francis I’s suppression of “all confraternities of trades and artisans in the whole kingdom” in 1539 — a decision which at that time targeted those artisans [*Compagnons*] belonging to societies said to be of duty. With the revolution, of course, this trend accelerated. The restructuring of the territory into departments of more or less equal size, the fight against “the provincial spirit,” the suppression of particularities, the offensive against regional languages and “patois,” the standardization of weights and measures, represent a real obsession with bringing everything into alignment. In terms of Ferdinand Tönnies’ old distinction, the modern nation emerges when society rises on the ruins of old communities.

This individualist component of the nation-state is essential here. The empire requires the preservation of the diversity of groups; by its very logic, the nation recognizes only individuals. One is a member of the empire in a mediated fashion through intermediary structures. Conversely, one belongs to the nation in an immediate way, i.e., without the mediation of local ties, bodies or states. Monarchical centralization was essentially juridical and political; it thereby pointed to the work of constructing the state. Revolutionary centralization, which accompanied the emergence of the modern nation, went further still. It aimed at “producing the nation” directly, i.e., at engendering new social modes of behavior. The state then became productive of the social, a monopolistic producer: it attempted to establish a society of individuals recognized as equal on a secular level, on the ruins of the intermediate bodies it had suppressed.¹¹

As Jean Baechler points out, “in the nation the intermediate groups are seen as irrelevant with respect to the citizenry and so tend to become secondary and subordinated.”¹² Louis Dumont argues along similar lines, that nationalism results from transferring the subjectivity characteristic of individualism to the level of an abstract collectivity. “In the most precise, modern, sense of the term, ‘nation’ and ‘nationalism’ (distinguished from simple patriotism) have historically been part and parcel of individualism as a value. The nation is just a type of global society which corresponds to the reign of individualism as a value. not only does the nation accompany individualism historically, the interdependence between them is so indispensable that one could say the nation is a global society composed of people who consider themselves individuals.”¹³

This individualism, woven within the logic of the nation, is obviously opposed to the holism of imperial construction, where the individual is not dissociated from his natural connections. In the empire the same citizenry is composed of different nationalities. In the nation the two terms are synonyms: belonging to a nation is the foundation for citizenship. Pierre Fougereyrollas summarizes the situation in these terms: "Breaking with medieval societies which had a bipolar identity – that of ethnic roots and of the community of believers — modern nations are constituted as closed societies where the only official identity is that which the state confers on citizens. Thus in terms of its birth and foundations, the nation has been an anti-empire. The Netherlands originated in a break with the Hapsburg Empire; England originated in a break with Rome and the establishment of a national religion. Spain only became Castillian by escaping from the grasp of the Hapsburg system, and France, which was slowly constituted as a nation against the Germanic Roman Empire, only became a nation by combating traditional forces in all of Europe."¹⁴

The empire is never a closed totality, as opposed to the nation, which has been increasingly defined by intangible boundaries. The empire's frontiers are naturally fluid and provisional, which reinforces its organic character. Originally the word "frontier" had an exclusively military meaning: the front line. At the beginning of the 14th century, under the reign of Louis X the Hutin in France, the word "frontiere" replaced "marche," which had commonly been used up to then. But it would still take four centuries before it acquired its current meaning of delimitation between two states. Contrary to legend, the idea of a "natural frontier," which jurists sometimes used in the 15th century, never inspired the external politics of the monarchy. Its origin is sometimes wrongly attributed to Richelieu, or even to Vauban. In fact, only during the revolution was this idea, according to which the French nation would have "natural frontiers," used systematically. Under the Convention especially, the Girondins used it to legitimate the establishment of the eastern frontier on the left bank of the Rhine and, more generally, to justify their annexation policies. It is also during the revolution that the Jacobin idea that the frontiers of a state have to correspond both to those of a language, a political authority and a nation begins to spread everywhere in Europe. Finally, it is the Convention which invented the notion of the "foreigner within" (of which Charles Maurras was paradoxically to make great use) by applying it to aristocrats who supported a despised political system: by defining them as "strangers in our midst," Barrere asserts that "aristocrats have no country."

Even with its universal principle and vocation, the empire is not universalist in the current sense of the term. Its universality never meant expansion across the whole earth. Instead, it was connected to the idea of an equitable order seeking to federate peoples on the basis of a concrete political organization. From this viewpoint, the empire, which rejects any aim of conversion or standardization, differs from a hypothetical world-state or from the idea that there are juridico-political principles universally valid at all times and in all places.

Since universalism is directly linked to individualism, modern political universalism must be conceived in terms of the individualist roots of the nation-state. Historical experience shows that nationalism often takes the form of an ethnocentrism blown up to universal dimensions. On many occasions the French nation wanted to be "the most universal of nations," and it is from the universality of its national model that it claimed to derive its right to disseminate its principles throughout the world. At the time when

France wanted to be “the elder sister of the Church,” the monk Guibert de Nogent, in his *Dei per Francos*, made the Franks the instrument of God. From 1792 on, revolutionary imperialism also tried to convert all of Europe to the idea of the nation-state. Since then, there has been no lack of voices authorized to ensure that the French idea of nation is ordered to that of humanity, and that this is what would make it particularly “tolerant.” One can question this pretension since the proposition can be inverted: if the nation is ordered to humanity, it is because humanity is ordered to the nation. With this corollary, those opposed to it are excluded not only from a particular nation but from the human species in its entirety.

The word empire should be reserved only for the historical constructions deserving this name, such as the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Germanic Roman Empire or the Ottoman Empire. The Napoleonic empire, Hitler’s Third Reich, the French and British colonial empires, and modern imperialisms of the American and Soviet types are certainly not empires. Such a designation is only abusively given to enterprises or powers merely engaged in expanding their national territory. These modern “great powers” are not empires but rather nations which simply want to expand, by military, political, economic or other conquest beyond their current frontiers.

In the Napoleonic era the “empire” (a term already used to designate the monarchy before 1789, but simply in the sense of “state”) was a national-statist entity attempting to assert itself in Europe as a great hegemonic power. Bismarck’s empire, which gave priority to the state, also attempted to create the German nation. Alexandre Kojeve observed that “Hitler’s slogan: Ein Reich, ein Volk, ein Fuhrer is only a (bad) German translation of the nationalistic watchword of the French Revolution: la République une et indivisible. The Third Reich’s hostility to the idea of empire is also visible in its critique of the ideology of intermediate bodies and “estates.”¹⁵ A centralist and reductive vision always prevailed in the Soviet “empire,” implying a unified politico-economic space thanks to a restrictive concept of local cultural fights. As for the American “model,” which tries to convert the whole world into a homogeneous system of material consumption and techno-economic practices, it is difficult to see what idea, what spiritual principle, it could claim!

“Great powers” are not really empires. In fact, modern imperialisms should be challenged in the name of what an empire truly is. Evola thought no differently when he wrote: “Without a *Meurs et deviens*, no nation can aspire to an effective and legitimate imperial mission. It is not possible to retain one’s national characteristics and then to desire, on this basis, to dominate the world or simply another place,”¹⁶ And again: “If the ‘imperialist’ tendencies of the modern age have been abortive because they often accelerate the downfall of the peoples who give in to them, or if they have been the source of all kinds of calamities, this is precisely because they lack any really spiritual — supra-political and supra-national — element; the latter is replaced by the violence of a power which is greater than the one it wants to subjugate but which is not of a different nature. As an empire is not a holy empire, it is not an empire but a kind of cancer attacking all the distinctive functions of a living organism.”¹⁷

Why think at all about the concept of empire today? Is it not purely chimerical to call for the rebirth of a true empire? Perhaps. But is it an accident if, even today, the model of the Roman Empire has continued to inspire all attempts to go beyond the nation-state? Is it an accident if the idea of empire (the

Reichsgedanke) still mobilizes reflection at a time when thought is in disarray?¹⁸ And is it not this idea of empire which underlies all the debates currently surrounding the construction of Europe? Is the nation-state irreplaceable? Many on the Left and on the Right have said so. This is, notably, Charles Maurras' viewpoint. According to him, the nation is "the biggest of the temporally solid and complete communitarian circles."¹⁹ He taught that "there is no political framework larger than the nation."²⁰ Thierry Maulnier replied: "The cult of the nation is not in itself a response but a refuge, a mystifying effusion, or worse still, a redoubtable diversion from internal problems."²¹

What basically moves the world today is beyond the nation-state. The latter finds its framework for action, its sphere of decision-making, torn apart by many ruptures. The nation is challenged both from above and below. It is challenged from below by new social movements: by the persistence of regionalisms and new communitarian claims. It is as if the intermediate forms of socialization which it once did away with were born again today in new forms. The divorce between civil society and the political class is reflected in the proliferation of networks and the multiplication of "tribes." But the nation is also challenged from above by often weighty social phenomena which mock national frontiers. The nation-state is stripped of its powers by the world market and international competition, by the formation of supranational or communitarian institutions, by intergovernmental bureaucracies, techno-scientific apparati, global media messages or international pressure groups. At the same time, there is the increasingly distinct external expansion of national economies at the expense of internal markets. The economy is becoming globalized because of interacting forces, multinationals, the stock-exchange, global macro-organizations.

The imagery of nations also seems to be in crisis and those who talk of "national identity" are generally hard-pressed to define it. The national model of integration seems to be exhausted. The evolution of politics toward a system of techno-managerial authorities, which brings to fruition the implosion of political reality, confirms that the logic of nations is no longer able to integrate anyone or to assure the regulation of relations between a state criticized on all fronts and a civil society which is breaking apart. So the nation is confronted with the growth of certain collective or communitarian identities at the very moment when global centers of decision-making paint a gloomy picture above it. Daniel Bell expressed this when he said that nation-states have become too big for little problems and too little for the big ones. Deprived of any real historical foundation, in the Third World the nation-state seems to be a Western import. The long-term viability of, e.g., black African or near Eastern "nations," seems increasingly uncertain. In fact these nations are the result of a series of arbitrary decisions by colonial powers profoundly ignorant of local historical, religious and cultural realities. The dismantling of the Ottoman and of the Austro-Hungarian empires as a result of the Sevres and Versailles treaties was a catastrophe whose effects are still felt today — as the Gulf War and renewed conflicts in Central Europe show.

In such conditions, how can the idea of empire be ignored? Today it is the only model Europe has produced as an alternative to the nation-state. Nations are both threatened and exhausted. They must go beyond themselves if they do not want to end up as dominions of the American superpower. They can only do so by attempting to reconcile the one and the many, seeking a unity that does not lead to their impoverishment. There are unmistakable signs of this. The fascination with Austria-Hungary and

the rebirth of the idea of Mitteleuropa²² are among them. The call for empire will be born of necessity. The work Kojève wrote in 1945, only recently published, is remarkable. In it he makes a fervent appeal for the formation of a "Latin empire" and posits the necessity of empire as an alternative to the nation-state and to abstract universality. "Liberalism," he wrote, "is wrong to see no political entity beyond the nation. Internationalism sins because it can see nothing politically viable beyond humanity. It too was incapable of discovering the intermediate political reality of empires, i.e., of unions, even international fusions, of related nations, which is today's very political reality."²³

In order to create itself Europe requires a unity of political decision-making. But this European political unity cannot be built on the national Jacobin model if it does not want to see the richness and diversity of all European components disappear. It can also not result from the economic supra-nationality dreamt by Brussels technocrats. Europe can only create itself in terms of a federal model, but a federal model which is the vehicle for an idea, a project, a principle, i.e., in the final analysis, an imperial model. Such a model would make it possible to solve problems of regional cultures, ethnic minorities and local autonomies, which will not find a true solution within the framework of the nation-state. It would also make it possible to rethink the whole problem of relations between citizenship and nationality in light of certain problems arising from recent immigration. It would allow one to understand the resurgent dangers of ethno-linguistic irredentism and Jacobin racism. Finally, because of the important place it gives to the idea of autonomy, it would make room for grass-roots democratic procedures and direct democracy. Imperial principle above, direct democracy below: this is what would renew an old tradition!

Today there is a lot of talk about a new world order, and one is certainly necessary. But under what banner will it take shape? The banner of man-machine, of the "computer-man," or under the banner of a diversified organization of living peoples? Will the earth be reduced to something homogeneous because of deculturalizing and depersonalizing trends for which American imperialism is now the most cynical and arrogant vector? Or will people find the means for the necessary resistance in their beliefs, traditions, and ways of seeing the world? This is really the decisive question that has been raised at the beginning of the next millennium.

Whoever says federation, says federalist principle. Whoever says empire, says imperial principle. Today this idea does not seem to appear anywhere. Yet it is written in history. It is an idea which has yet to find its time. But it has a past and a future. It is also a matter of making an origin clear. At the time of the Hundred Years War, Louis d'Estouteville's motto was "Where honor is, where loyalty is, there lies my country." We have our nationality and we are proud of it. But it is also possible to be citizens of an idea in the imperial tradition. This is what Evola argues: "The idea alone should represent the country . . . It is not the fact of belonging to the same soil, speaking the same language, or having the same bloodline which should unite or divide us, but the fact of supporting or not supporting the same idea."²⁴ This does not mean that roots are unimportant. On the contrary, they are essential. It only means that everything must be put into perspective. This is the whole difference between origin as a principle and origin as pure subjectivity. Only origin conceived as a principle makes it possible to defend the cause of peoples, of all peoples, and to understand that, far from being a threat to one's own identity, the identity of others in fact plays a role in what allows one to defend one's respective identity against a global system

which tries to destroy them. It is necessary to affirm the superiority of the idea which preserves diversity for everyone's benefit. It is necessary to assert the value of the imperial principle.

Notes:

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- ¹ Naissance de la Nation France (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).
- ² Les Debuts de l'Etat Moderne: Une Histoire des Idees Politiques au XIXe Siecle (Paris: Fayard, 1976) p. 92.
- ³ Revolte Contre le Monde Moderne, (Montreal: L'Homme, 1972) p. 121.
- ⁴ Les Hommes au Milieu des Ruines (Paris: Sept Couleurs, 1972) p. 141.
- ⁵ Essais Politiques (Puisseaux: Pards, 1988) p. 86.
- ⁶ Robert Folz, Le Coronement Imperial de Charlemagne (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).
- ⁷ Essais Politiques, op. cit., p. 83.
- ⁸ Histoire de l'Empire des Habsbourg 1273-1918 (Paris: Fayard, 1990).
- ⁹ Le Liberalisme Economique: Histoire de l'Idée de Marche (Paris: Seuil, 1989) p. 124.
- ¹⁰ L'Ancien Regime et la Revolution, Vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) p. 65. (First edition 1856).
- ¹¹ Cf. Pierre Rosanvallon, L'Etat en France de 1789 a Nos Jours (Paris: Seuil, 1990).
- ¹² "Deperissement de la Nation?" in Commentaire (Spring, 1988) p. 104.
- ¹³ Essais sur l'Individualisme (Paris: Seuil, 1983) pp. 20-1.
- ¹⁴ La Nation: Essor et Declin des Societes modernes, (Paris: Fayard, 1987) p. 931.
- ¹⁵ cf. Justus Beyer, Die Ständeideologien der Systemzeit und ihre Überwindung (Darmstadt, 1942).
- ¹⁶ Essais Politiques, op. cit., p. 62.
- ¹⁷ Revolte Contre le Monde Moderne, op. cit., p. 124.
- ¹⁸ During the Weimar Republic, there was a real growth in publications concerning the idea of empire and of "thinking about the Reich" (Reichsgedanke). On this subject, see Fritz Buchner, ed., Was ist das Reich? Eine Aussprache unter Deutschen (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1932); Herbert Kruger, "Der Moderne Reichsgedanke," in Die lat (December 1933) pp. 703-15 and (January 1934) pp. 795-804; Edmund Schopen, Geschichte der Reichsidee, 8 Volumes, (Munich: Carl Rohrig, 1936); Peter Richard Rohden, Die Idee des Reiches in der Europäischen Geschichte (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1943); Paul Goedecke, Der Reichsgedanke im Schrifttum von 1919 bis 1935 (Marburg: Doctoral thesis, 1951). The authors dealing with this subject often disagree about the meaning of the idea of empire and about the relation between the medieval Germanic Reich and the Roman imperium. In Catholic circles, the apology for empire often expresses nostalgia for the medieval Christian unity before the religious wars. The concept of the Reich as a "Holy Alliance" or as a "sacramental reality" frequently points to romanticism (Novalis, Adam Muller) but also to Constantin Franz. In other respects, the idea of a "third empire" carries chiliastic representations from the end of the Middle Ages (Joachim of Fiore's announcement of the Reign of the Spirit). On the Protestant side, one finds the "Reich theologies," especially in Friedrich Gogarten's Politische Ethik (Berlin, 1931), Wilhelm Stapel's Der Christliche Staatsmann: Eine Theologie der Nationalismus (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932) or Friedrich Hielscher's Das Reich (Berlin: Reich, 1931), but from a different perspective. In Stapel, the main idea is that of a national Reich having its own "nomos" with a pronounced pluri-ethnic character but sanctifying German hegemony. See his reply to the supporters of the Catholic Reich, "Der Reichsgedanke zwischen den Konfessionen," in Deutsches Volkstum, (November 15, 1932) pp. 909-16. In Moeller van den Bruck, this secularized and strictly German concept of empire is stressed even more. Very critical of the Holy Roman Empire, Moeller accuses Staufens of having been taken in by the "Italian mirage," and of wanting to make the imperium romanum (the "periphery") live again rather than trying to unify the German people (the "center"). This is the reason for his strange sympathy with the Guelphs and for his preference for the Deutsches Reich deutscher Nation as opposed to the Heiliges romisches Reich.
- After 1933, the discussion concerning the idea of Reich [Reichsidee] was carried on outside official circles. For Carl Schmitt, the notion of empire is the central representation of a new right-wing political order of peoples associated with the notion of "great space" (Grossraum) -- an idea which was strongly criticized by the supporters of a purely German and volkisches notion of empire. These supporters saw in the Reich the organizing force for a "living space" grounded in the "biological" substance of the German peoples. This argument is made by Reinhard Hohn ("Grossraumordnung und volkisches Rechtsdenken: in Reich, Volksordnung, Lebensraum, 1943, pp. 216-352). See also Karl Richard Ganzer, Das Reich als europäische Ordnungsmacht, (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt,

1941-2); and Oswald Torsten, Riche: Eine Geschichtliche Studie bet die Entwicklung der Reichsidee (Munich and Berlin: R. Oldenburg, 1943).

¹⁹ Mes Idees Politiques, (Albatros, 1983) p. 281.

²⁰ Enquete sur la Monarchie 1900-1909, 1st ed. (Nile Libr. Nationale, 1909) p. XIII.

²¹ Au-dela du Nationalisme, (Paris: Gallirnard, 1938).

²² Cf. Karlheinz Weissmann, "Das Herz des Kontinents: Reichsgedanke und Mitteleuropa-Idee," in Mut (January, 1987) pp. 24-35.

²³ "L'Empire Latin," in La Regle du Jeu (May 1, 1990) p. 94.

²⁴ Les Hommes au Milieu des Ruines, op. cit., p. 41.

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