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Essentialism and Violence

Ethnic nationalism and racism are, beyond the unquestionable differences, similar in the way that both imagine identity as being essence, non-discursive, homogenous and immutable. The meaning of this is quite transparent if we take into account the therapeutic effects that the promise of certainty can have as a response to a modern age in perpetual change and fragmentation.

But essentialism, in my view, supposes a latent violence. The insecurity of modern identity, as Baumann rightly emphasizes, also means compensating traditions. The confusing abundance of discourses, as a „clear” sign of the weakness of the democratic system, imposed in the eyes of the modern man the necessity of violent radicalism as the final solution to get beyond the illusory reality of the words, to the reality itself.

In this context violence can be understood in two ways: firstly, essentialism believes in a sort of violent act of reaching consciousness. In this point lies the origin of the almost mystical metaphors that run through this kind of discourse. The examples are quite visible: the Romanian hymn talks about „awakening” from a long sleep, from something that is similar to a blindness regarding ethnic roots. Of course those who are to blame are the foreigners. And here we get to the second way in which violence manifests itself: as a force exercised not towards the inner state of blindness but towards the Others. As we adopt the essentialist logic we think binary, between you and the Other is an ontological limit. Paradoxically, though, the Other is both strange and intimate. That is why there is always the threat for breaking the limits ideologies postulate: the other slips in the nation’s or race’s body in order to destroy its immune system. It is the case of the Romanian gypsies which are viewed by the nationalist as pervert aggressors to the cultural and biological purity of the Romanian people.

As a conclusion, we know that modern time is the scene where theory and practice are split up. To fill this gap ideologies have developed a sort of violent reflex through which they could legitimize their own option and gain certainty. We can even say that radicalism becomes more and more the criteria for differentiating those who hold the truth and those who don’t because the words by themselves are powerless in touching the core of an identity that is not discursive.