The Spirit of the Nation-State: Nation, Nationalism and Inner-worldly Eschatology in the Work of Eric Voegelin

Arpad Szakolczai

Abstract

This paper argues that the ideas of Eric Voegelin, one of the earliest, most faithful and still most important followers of Max Weber, on the links between religion and the nation-state in modernity, represent a still untapped resource for the study of nations and nationalism; potentially the “missing classic” of the field. In its first part, by taking up the example of the French Revolution and its three “cardinal values”, liberty, equality and fraternity, and by analyzing the classic works of Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner on nationalism, and their shortcomings, it poses the problem of the reasons why nationalism has become, in contrast to liberalism and socialism, the “black sheep” of the family of modern political ideologies. It then presents Voegelin’s contribution, focusing on the concept of “intranandum” or “inner-worldly eschatology”. The paper closes by connecting “inner-worldly eschatology” to the rise of the nation state, in the broader context of “activist enthusiasm”, “world suspicion” and the “politics of suffering”.

Keywords: nationalism, experience of home, Voegelin, Weber, inner-worldly eschatology

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
William Butler Yeats, The Second Coming

Round God, the old tower, my gyres I perform,
and I’ve gyred there centuries long;
and I don’t know whether I’m falcon or a storm
or, perhaps, a mighty song.
Rainer Maria Rilke, I Live in Expanding Rings

Problems with nationalism studies, 1989 and beyond

With the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, nationalism has become – suddenly and together with globalization – one of the catchwords and core interests of the new times. This link between globalization and nationalism was by no means purely fortuitous, and merits separate treatment. However, as the central theme of this article is nationalism, our attention will shift to the other word in the inserted clause, specifying the modality of the starting sentence: the term “suddenly”.

More then anything else, the events of 1989 were marked by suddenness, or the effect of surprise. Beyond the sheer fact that hardly anybody anticipated the collapse of the Soviet “empire” and the speed by which it dissolved, the developments that took place in its wake were every bit as surprising. The rise of nationalism across the globe was particularly unexpected. Together with the failure to foresee the sudden collapse of the Soviet Empire there had been a neglect of attention to nationalist mobilization and nationalism developing within the region and attracting enormous interest. The consternation was even stronger in
social theory than within the former field of Communist Studies, as the theme of nationalism had been neglected all across the social sciences.

Furthermore, work in the field was somewhat perplexing, as most of it was accomplished by anthropologists, followed by political scientists and historians, and not by sociologists. This is particularly striking in light of the fact that nationalism is generally considered as an outcome of the French Revolution, thus a particularly modern phenomenon, that should have been at the centre of attention of sociologists, practitioners of a discipline that supposedly came into being to study modern societies, and not by anthropologists who originally focused their attention on non-modern societies. The almost complete lack of interest in the phenomenon of nations and nationalism by sociologists up to the 1990s certainly requires an explanation.¹

Even further, while making general claims about an entire field of study is certainly risky and in a way unjust, there are deep problems with the character and quality of the literature on nations and nationalism. This claim will be supported in some detail, through some attention paid to the two works considered as recent classics on nationalism, Imagined Communities by Benedict Anderson and Nations and Nationalism by Ernest Gellner, both anthropologists (at least, to a large extent), and both published in 1983. The scarcity of relevant works on nationalism and their problematic quality reveal further, and deeper problems. The first of these concern the absence of genuine classic works on the theme. The “national problem” and the “social problem” were the two central issues on the social and political agenda during the lives and times of Emile Durkheim, Vilfredo Pareto, Max Weber and Georg Simmel; yet, their works do not contain a clear, classic statement on the national problem, and even what they actually wrote was ignored by most of the secondary literature.²

In order to make up for this deficiency, scholars of nationalism tried to resurrect Ernest Renan, proclaiming his 1882 lecture “What Is The Nation” as a classic work by a classic scholar – forgetting the fact that the work of Renan, an early representative of positivism, had been considered just a few decades back so much of a liability, rather than an asset, that the classic biographic treatment of Durkheim’s work did everything possible to hide the otherwise evident inspiration Durkheim actually took there.³ Still others, with more reason and finesse, tried to proclaim Marcel Mauss’ unfinished and unpublished reflections on the nation a classic.⁴ Yet, the problems are clearly there: nationalism has been an “orphan” of the social sciences, with scarce attention devoted to it, without established “founding fathers”, and plagued with problems of quality.

This striking omission by the social sciences must be tackled directly, as it contrasts so clearly with the enormous importance nationalism assumed in real political and social life over the past centuries. Let’s evoke three instances: the already mentioned decades before WWI when the social and national problems dominated public attention; WWI itself when, as it is well known, national allegiances suddenly and decisively overrode social (or socialist) allegiances, thus evidently requiring the problem to be posed on the intellectual agenda – but which was overridden by the events of 1917 in Russia; and most importantly, its origin, the French Revolution.

This latter event can be taken as a guiding thread for the general thrust of this paper. In order to understand the combination of the enormous strength of the national idea with its stunning neglect in political philosophy and social theory, we need to pay closer attention to the central values associated with the French Revolution, trying to understand the exact nature of their mobilizing force and yet problematic character. The French Revolution generated an enormous echo as its flagship values liberty (freedom), equality and fraternity
(brotherhood) touched the heart of the human condition. Yet, as it has become evident almost immediately, the pursuit of these values would create insurmountable problems. On the one hand, they soon proved to be incompatible; the joint realization of freedom, equality and fraternity presupposes liminal conditions. On the other hand, the absolute and unconditional way of formulating them revealed their abstract, even lifeless character. Wanting to live free from external constraints is a universal human aspiration; but trying to be simply free “as such” is an absurdity, identical to a paranoid flight from any human bond or commitment. Being treated as an equal is similarly rooted in a deeply human search for fairness and equity, but the dream of a complete equality, for instance in the form of an unlimited search for equal “rights”, is motivated more by an abstract search for purity, if not outright by resentment and envy.

From this perspective, and in contrast to freedom and equality, fraternity has two main characteristics. On the one hand, the absurdity of making it into an abstract aim is even more evident, not to say self-contradictory: freedom can be sought for by a single individual; the equality of rights can potentially involve every human being; but a fraternal community with others must involve some substantive, concrete, existential connection. This irreducible concreteness of fraternity creates two problems: one at the level of thought, and another one at the level of political reality, which taken together make for a particularly explosive combination. At the level of thought, in spite of being a particularly modern, (French) revolutionary value, it also goes deeply against one of the most important characteristics of modern thought and the scientific spirit: their abstract, unconditional, non-concrete, even “outsider” character. Fraternity always and unavoidably implies an insider position; it cannot be cold and distant. In itself, this might even provide a counterbalance to scientific and legalistic “objectivity”. However, the problem is that in the modern world even fraternity can become “contaminated” by the logic of abstraction and its search for absolutist and Puritan solutions. Thus, the pursuit of fraternity as an abstract goal may lead to the exclusion of everyone who is not a “real” brother from the all-inclusive political community of the nation-state, and may develop into a search for ethnic exclusiveness and racial purity. Nationalism as a political goal thus becomes deeply compromised.

Here we need to take a step back and recognize that our analysis so far, by taking the expression of the national feeling and its existing literature for granted, has situated itself inside what could be called, following Michel Foucault, the modern episteme. In order to come to a meaningful understanding of the phenomenon and the problems around it, however, we need to leave this horizon. This again involves two acts of recognition: concerning “home” and “meaning”, and the problem of modernity.

The first is the recognition that the central, and anthropologically based, political value-legacy of the French Revolution, as manifested through fraternity, is to have a home, or share an “experience of home” – a concern thematized by anthropologists under the rubric of participation – an experience which is the solid and necessary basis for any human life to have a meaning. From this perspective it becomes evident that a central problem with the dominant modern political theories is their ignorance of the question of home, based on their excessive valorisation of freedom (culminating in abstract, lifeless, generalised individualism) and/or equality (culminating in the similarly abstract collectivism), which assumes that the world in which we live is an alien place.

Second, this leads to the recognition that the problem of nationalism is intractable without posing it together with the problem of modernity. From the dominant perspective of the “modern” social sciences nationalism appears as an ugly bastard child of the modern world, the reverse aspect of the glorious processes that brought about progress,
industrialisation, individualism, social rights and the like. Yet, such a crude, Manichean, dualistic view of the phenomena is clearly unacceptable.

We now have a perspective from which the recent literature on nationalism can be approached: does it manage to take seriously the question of nationalism as social and political thought take liberalism and socialism seriously, or not? This paper will try to answer this question through an analysis of the 1983 books by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner.

The strange ferocity of anti-nationalism

The following analysis will focus on Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, widely considered as foundational figures for the contemporary mainstream literature of nationalism. The choice does not need much justification: these books are widely considered as the main works in the field; certainly representatives of the series of works that from the 1980s started to return some analytical attention in the wider social, political and human sciences to the phenomenon of nationalism.8

The coincidence that both books were published in 1983 is worth a few comments; even beyond the not unimportant symbolical power that this happened just before the year 1984. They thus belong to the early 1980s, marked by the rise of neoliberalism, sparked by the “greed is good” ideology of supply-side economics, keen on reviving explicitly the spirit of Bernard Mandeville, and the first vague sparks of the singularly decadent and typically fin-de-siècle movement of postmodernism; a period rendered “lively” only by the dogged attacks of leftist intellectuals against Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, recalling the situation of Italy in the last ten years, concerning Silvio Berlusconi – typical examples of schismogenic processes.9

Anderson

Benedict Anderson proclaims to have been inspired by Erich Auerbach, Walter Benjamin, and even Victor Turner, but – as it was only revealed in the Preface to its second edition (Anderson, 1991: xi) – the book clearly had a different kind of direct inspiration: the sincere but naïve concern of Western Marxists that around 1978-79 in the Far East a series of “nationalistic” wars took place among “socialist” countries;10 an approach characteristic of the classic Marxist fashion of attributing all the problems internal to Bolshevik-inspired “socialist” regimes to external factors. This reveals a more political than intellectual agenda behind the book of Anderson, immediately raising suspicions concerning its status as a classic.11

This, however, is only the start of the problems. The “spirit” of the book is best revealed by the citation from Walter Benjamin with which the first edition ended.12 It evokes the “Angel of history”, referred to by Benjamin – after Paul Klee – as Angelus Novus, or the “new Angel”, an expression strangely omitted by Anderson, but central for the image and even the “spirit” of Benjamin’s work, which is much condensed in the powerful metaphor. It also contrasts strikingly with the two mottos at the start of this article.13 A winged creature, an angel is quite similar to a bird;14 and the images also share a preoccupation with storms,15 though in quite different ways. Benjamin’s angel, in contrast to the falcons of Yeats and Rilke, is not moving in (spiralling) circles, but along a straight line, evoking – though equivocally – the metaphor of the “chain” of events; even further, and quite strikingly for
the “new angel”, it is looking backwards towards the past. The content of the vision is striking: beyond the Marxist metaphor of a chain, the entire human history is nothing but a “single catastrophe” that is “piling wreckage upon wreckage” (ibid: 162). The angel tries to resist this and awaken the dead, evoking the famous passage from Ezekiel (37: 1-10), but at this moment something strange happens: a storm comes, of all places “from Paradise”, and hurls this poor hapless angel literally back into the future. This storm is then identified as “progress”.

Here we need to evoke, beyond Anderson’s at once bombastic and cryptic evocation, the context of Benjamin’s text. It is taken from the 1940 Theses on the Philosophy of History, often considered as a key to Benjamin. The essay starts by evoking a striking story about the famous mechanical chess player (Benjamin, 1969: 253), or the image of illusion, deception, mirrors, puppets and a bookah, defining as the philosophical counterpoint of this game of trickery the “puppet called ‘historical materialism’” that is going “to win all the time”. This strikes the tone of the piece, where “historical materialism” will be both identified as Benjamin’s own position, and also a position with respect to which he manifests deep scepticism – a contradiction he never resumes, and thus becoming something of a mystery, except for the fact that “historical materialism” by definition cannot be a mystical position.

More concretely, and gradually narrowing down our focus, the passage cited, from section IX, fits into a triple context. The broader of these is provided by sections VII and VIII, and section X. Section VII has a motto from Brecht, which strangely rhymes with the motto of Section IV from Hegel – the only two mottos used before the motto given for section IX. The quote from Brecht evokes the “Valley of misery”, an image frequently used by classical Hebrew prophets and medieval theologians, but surprising for Brecht who is more famous about his evocations of the basic needs of mankind, especially the full stomach. Exactly this point that is evoked in the quote from Hegel, from the Phenomenology, which claims that the search for the Kingdom of God can only take place once food and clothing is secured – a position not usually identified with the philosopher of consciousness. This is further elaborated in sections VII and VIII, identifying Benjamin’s perspective as “the tradition of the oppressed”, and justifying his strange philosophy of history, where “the ‘state of emergency’ … is not the exception but the rule” (ibid: 257); a position which is further, normatively justified by the fight against fascism.

The second, narrower set of boundary markers, Sections VII and X, concerns two striking references to monasticism. A central concept of section VII is aedonia, or melancholic sadness, an emotional disturbance plaguing monasticism since its early history; while section X immediately starts by evoking monastic discipline as an attempt to turn away from the world, with Benjamin’s explicit identification with such a turning away. Such combination of Brecht, Hegel and monasticism, however, is untenable, as monasticism is based on the recognition that when the ways of the spirit are followed, food and shelter indeed do not present problems.

Now we reach the third circle of the context, section IX itself. It starts with a motto from Gershom Scholem, the famous scholar of Jewish mysticism, and a close friend of Benjamin, giving the key to Benjamin’s perspective of Klee’s “angel”: it contains a “salute” from the angel, but of a very strange kind. This angel is pressed for time, as it cannot be satisfied with eternity; and thus is ready to fly backwards. There is only one more element to add to the “context”, the identification of Klee’s image as the source of the vision and its short description.

What significance does all this have for our subject matter? What meaning can we find behind Anderson’s evident identification of his position with Benjamin? Quite a lot, I
would argue. Beyond the “spirit” moving Anderson’s influential work, or the similar “spirit” moving Benjamin’s work – itself the “moving force” behind Anderson’s – something much broader and more substantial appears: an important aspect of contemporary culture and politics – especially of the avant-garde, the “left”, or of “critical theory” – thus, a significant, if not central part of the “spirit” of modernity itself. This can be characterised by a dialectics between two extremist positions, just as if an electric tension was sparked between two poles. On one side there are some extremely negative views of the world, this our only world, as a hopeless place of unending and meaningless suffering; on the other a dogged, unquestioned and unquestionable, indeed fanatical belief that, in spite of all this, eventually a Messiah will come, out of the blue, and will put everything in order. This captures the destructive and nihilist, but also apocalyptic world-view of a certain “revolutionary left”.

In Between Anderson and Gellner

While the work of Ernest Gellner certainly does not belong to the “left”, it shares the epistemological position and even the animating “spirit” of Anderson’s approach. This concerns most of all a thoroughly negative attitude with respect to the phenomenon studied; a failure to understand that attachment to a nation could be intrinsically human, ignoring the meaning of a home; thus evoking, beyond class struggle and industrialism, the deeper conflict between the settled and the foraging nomad. This is best visible through a direct reference by Anderson to Gellner’s writings, which reveals in an important and illuminating way the tight connections between the two books.

It is in a section entitled “Concepts and definitions”, in the very first pages of the book, just following Anderson’s own “definition of the nation”, in a supposedly “anthropological spirit” – though one could argue that a genuine “anthropological spirit” would imply suspicion with respect to “definitions”; which belong more to a neo-Kantian “imperative” than to anthropological “method”. Anderson defined the nation as an “imagined political community” – and in the paragraph immediately following the definition, just after a reference to Renan (which would be all but taken back in the second edition, where an entire chapter is added to correct the “mistake” in his interpretation) follows a citation of a “compatible point” from Ernest Gellner, according to which “ ‘Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist’ ” (ibid: 6).

Starting with matters of context in the phrase leading up to the quote, Anderson identifies the modality of Gellner’s attitude to nationalism: the emphatic point about the “invented” character of the nation is made “[w]ith a certain ferocity” (ibid). The metaphor of verbal violence should not be taken lightly, as it actually captures the spirit guiding Gellner’s work on nations and nationalism: beyond being satisfied with a cool rationalism, Gellner is sincerely convinced that anybody who feels the slightest degree of belonging to a nation is not simply a fool, but a dangerous one at that.

The sentences following the citation clarify the way Anderson takes this position further. It has two steps. First, Anderson suggests modifying the term “invented” to “imagined”. This identifies Gellner as the direct source of Anderson’s own work, and also indicates the direction where Anderson tries to pursue the approach. Far from compensating for the “drawbacks” of Gellner’s emotional involvement, actually Anderson is even more “ferocious”, by implicitly questioning any authentic reality behind human communities. According to him, Gellner still accepts a distinction between “true” and “false”
communities; but this makes no sense, as all communities (possibly even small, face-to-face groups) are invented. It is based on this assertion of the uniform non-existence of real communities, the bedrock of his approach to nationalism, that he starts to make distinctions: “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (ibid). Thus, using Gellner as a springboard, a great trick amounting to a revaluation of values is performed within a few sentences: like in a game of street crooks, “here is the red, where is the red”, and your money disappears before you think about it – there is no community, no meaning, no home, no reality – we are free to invent ourselves, as if paraphrasing Milton Friedman’s “Free to chose”.

Gellner

Ernest Gellner’s Nations and Nationalism is one of those rare books that is proclaimed in advance to become a living classic, and then promptly performs the feat. It was commissioned as the first volume of the new Blackwell series New Perspectives on the Past, in order to explain the phenomenon of nationalism. The manner in which R.I. Moore, the series editor, explains the reasons for commissioning and evaluates the outcome is particularly illuminating. While such texts are inevitably ceremonial and rhetorical, social scientists trained by the academic study and especially the life experience of communist regimes can recognize the manner and extent to which such statements can be meaningfully analysed. This “Editor’s Preface” contains two precious gems. First, it encapsulates with particular clarity the mystery surrounding nationalism in the modern world: both strikingly close and hopelessly distant, as its “force in shaping and reshaping the modern world is so obvious, and ... yet remains obdurately alien and incomprehensible to those who are not possessed by it” (in Gellner, 1983: 8). Second, Moore claims that Gellner, drawing on his various skills, produced an explanation that “makes [nationalism], for the first time, historically and humanly intelligible” (ibid). This is a momentous claim; and while Gellner’s manifold competence is beyond doubt, one might wonder, given his “ferocity”, what makes him “destined” to accomplish the feat.

It is widely asserted that Gellner laid the foundations of a Weberian approach to the study of nationalism. However, as we shall see, his work follows neither the method nor the substantial ideas of Weber – not to mention his spirit. Concerning method, Gellner rather follows the most conventional, not to say pedantic neo-Kantian rationalism, by starting with straightforward definitions, by giving clear but also cold and arid definitions of his central concepts, and ending with a classificatory typology. While this method is certainly not Weberian,21 it has clear affinities with the manner in which Gellner approaches his subject matter, using neo-Kantian constructivism to analyse the nation and nationalism which for him are anyway simple inventions, or constructs. You always find what you are looking for, if you are persistent enough; which for neo-Kantians means that the material obtained from the real world can always be cut up into the categories you prepared; and once you declared from the outset that the subject matter under study does not have any intrinsic meaning, the violence such a procedure does to real human experiences, emotions and concerns will not be realised, as it is assumed from that outset that everything is a construct anyway.

Gellner’s reliance on Weber’s substantive ideas does not fare much better. Weber had discussed ethnic groups and political communities (see Weber, 1978: 385-98), the issue of the legitimate everyday order underlying structures of power and action (see Weber, 1978:
29-46), or even explicitly addressed the problems of the nation-state, as in his 1895 Freiburg inaugural address. However, Gellner’s “Weberianism” does not go further than textbook references to Weber’s definition of the state or the concern with bureaucracy and rationality (or objectivity), following Parsons’ questionable reading, inspired by Alfred Weber. Even worse, occasionally the presentation is fully distorted. This applies in particular to Gellner’s appropriation of Weber as a classic for the study of “industrialization”, his own favorite subject matter, arguing that the real value of the Protestant Ethic lies not in Weber’s identification of the “spirit” of capitalism, but rather in preparing the way to study the new industrial order, thus helping to shift attention away from capitalism to industrialism (Gellner, 1983: 19). Unfortunately, this claim has such deep and manifold problems that one is at a loss where to start objecting. The study of industrial society completely antedates Weber, going back to Claude Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte; Weber actually failed to show an interest in the theme as he considered it a mere outcome of more significant processes. Furthermore, the Protestant Ethic hardly showed any concerns with bureaucracy or bureaucratization (pace Gellner, ibid: 19-20); and one cannot even approach the meaning and significance of Weber’s work if one dismisses as irrelevant the question of the capitalist spirit.

The question now is the following: beyond the problems identified so far – the (clearly Popper-inspired) neo-Kantian positivist constructivism, the “ferocious” hostility to nationalism in all its forms, and the violence done to the letter and spirit of Max Weber – does Gellner’s analysis fulfil the promise of providing a foundation for the study of nationalism? While the book has many evident merits, and while these short remarks do not constitute a comprehensive analysis, such claims seem exaggerated. Furthermore, while Gellner’s ideas are by no means identical to Anderson’s, the two complement each other well by spanning a space within the modern episteme. This includes constructivism and the reduction of the nation idea to exclusive ethnic boundaries. The main difference concerns progress, which for Anderson, following Benjamin, is sheer ideology, while for Gellner it is the most evident fact of history. Indeed, Gellner’s frequently quoted master narrative about the identity of modernity, industrialisation and progress is so stunningly simple that one would almost like to believe it. But only almost; and it is the extremeness of the two views that identifies them as types within the same class.

Overall, these “classic” analyses of nationalism offer a wide range of options, but also a surprisingly coherent position: belief in progress through industrialism or an even more resolute rejection of history and fatalistic waiting for the Messiah; with liberalism or socialism, or a combination of both, but always against nationhood, community and nationalism; proclaiming modernity as the gate to earthly Paradise directly or indirectly (through finally provoking the Messiah into action through the sufferings provoked). Most importantly, they fail to recognise any underlying meaning behind “nation”, and refuse to consider the “effective history” of modernity.

This is why this paper now suggests a turn to the work of Eric Voegelin.

**Eric Voegelin on inner-worldly eschatology**

There are several reasons why the work of Voegelin is particularly well suited to replace Anderson and Gellner as foundational for a serious study of nation and nationalism, and in particular for this journal. First, Voegelin started his work as a true follower of the spirit of Max Weber’s research. Second, in its later stages Voegelin’s research went exactly in the
direction of political anthropology as defined by this journal, meaning to situate the study of
the modern world in the horizon of classical political philosophy and the basic moving
forces of human nature, as championed by Plato, Augustine, Jean Bodin and Giambattista
Vico. Third, for Voegelin the study of the nation in its various manifestations is inseparable
from a general diagnosis of the modern condition. Finally, the central issue is certainly the
strength and still surprising novelty of Voegelin’s related ideas.

In the steps of Max Weber

At the end of his famous lecture Science at a Vocation, proclaimed – as another matter of
symbolically striking coincidence – on 7 November 1917, or when the Bolshevik attack on
the Winter Palace was going on, Max Weber ventured into prophesizing that his true
audience will be the soldiers who would soon return from the front. Though not taking part
in the War, turning 18 just after it ended, Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) certainly belonged to
this generation. Together with his lifelong friend and university colleague Alfred Schutz
(1899-1959), who was at the front, they literally devoured the books of Weber as soon as they
came off the press in 1920-22, or their university years, and took his ideas as the point of
departure of their own life projects; though in different ways. While Schutz set up as his task
the elaboration of the philosophical foundations of Weber’s sociology using the philosophy
of Husserl, Voegelin eventually came to perceive as his project to do for the field of politics
what Weber had accomplished for economics: to identify the underlying spirit of the nation
state.

The parallels between Weber’s and Voegelin’s projects are striking, extending to small but revealing details. Weber started work on Economy and Society in an attempt to update
Gustav F. von Schönberg’s Handbook of Political Economy, the most used textbook of
economics in its time and place; while Voegelin did so on Order and History through updating
George Sabine’s similarly standard History of Political Ideas for Macmillan. Both projects soon
turned from a general though existentially vital professional work into a deeply personal, life-
long commitment. Both authors ended up piling up page after page, coming up with
thousands-pages-long manuscripts that were impossible to finish and that were published
posthumously, with serious editorial shortcomings. In an effort to regain focus and
summarize their findings, both Weber and Voegelin wrote shorter, increasingly more
conceptual and less historical works. Weber followed up the second part of Economy and
Society with the first part, helped by a series of increasingly more reflexive, even meditative
essays, the Einleitung, the Zwischenbetrachtung, and the Vorbemerkung. Voegelin’s History of
Political Ideas was turned into the first three volumes of Order and History, followed by his best
known book, the New Science of Politics and by a series of essays on Gnosticism. Finally he
published the fourth and the posthumous fifth volume of Order and History, as well as a series
of further meditative essays.

Beyond such parallels, the connections extend into direct legacies. A crucial term in
Weber’s historical project was “inner-worldly asceticism”, the Protestant “heir” to medieval
monasticism, according to Weber, and a main source of the “spirit” of capitalism. Voegelin,
in his History of Political Ideas, identified the underlying spirit of modern politics in
“inframundane eschatology”. If by his term Weber identified the core of modern capitalism
in instrumental rationality, or at the level of “means”, Voegelin complemented this by
identifying the specificity of the modern nation state at the level of “ends”, or goals.
Furthermore, he followed Weber’s methodology in perceiving at the heart of modernity
secularized Christian concerns. Even further, while in the Zwischenbetrachtung, his most
theoretical essay and a culmination of his thought, Weber came to identify his central concern in the “religious rejections of the world”, following Nietzsche’s preoccupation with the sources of modern nihilism, Voegelin eventually came to identify the source of this nihilistic world-rejection with the modern revival of ancient Gnosis.

Voegelin as political anthropologist

The substantiation of the claim that Voegelin is a classic of political anthropology as understood by this journal would require a full article. Here only the basic outlines can be indicated.

First of all, Voegelin’s work was never restricted either to a narrow specialized field, operational in the neo-Kantian academic setting with the joint purpose of advancing “knowledge” and making a career, or to the interests of a particular, always ideological mass social movement, but – just as Weber’s – was rather concerned with basic questions about the rise and dynamics of the modern world, aiming at the heart of the times in which we live. Second, Voegelin always recognized that the study of the modern world cannot be separated from posing the broadest and widest possible range of questions about the human condition, extending not only to the conditions of emergence of the modern world, but to ancient history, even prehistory, just as in the case of evidence from anthropology, mythology, archaeology and literature. Even further, beyond Weber, Voegelin felt the need to return to the works of the classics, refuting the modern pretence of their obsolescence. In particular, and as an explicit critique of Kant and Hegel, and the entire Enlightenment legacy, he returned to the thought and spirituality of Plato and St. Augustine. Finally, Voegelin was also convinced that the central existential problems posed by modern politics are inseparable from basic spiritual questions.

Voegelin’s quest: from intramundane eschatology through modern Gnosticism

Voegelin started his genealogy of modern politics in the footsteps of the “Nietzschean Weber”, analyzing the roots of modern “nihilism”, and searching for the equivalent of Weber’s “religious rejections of the world” at the political level.

The parallels between asceticism and eschatology are tight. Asceticism aims at the methodical shaping of individual conduct and in this sense established the condition of possibility of modern individualism; while inner-worldly eschatology intimates the possibility of creating a perfect community in this world, thus providing the collectivist counterpart of asceticism. Even further, the two terms correspond to the two comings of Christ on Earth, capturing their essence: the use of ascetic techniques in regulating the conduct of life is considered, since the earliest times of monasticism, to imitate the life of Christ, or his “first coming”; while eschatological expectations, again since the earliest times of the first Christian communities and the texts of the New Testament are strictly connected to the “Second Coming”.

“Intramundane eschatology”, according to Voegelin, is the dogmatically heretic and intellectually absurd intention to bring about the pure and perfect realm of God by solely human means. This tendency which appeared in the urban heretical movements of the late Middle Ages. In this period critics of such tendencies placed the emphasis on heresy and not absurdity: these movements claimed divine authority, their leaders often presenting themselves as reincarnations of Christ; but such pretensions clearly failed. In the modern
period, after the Reformation, the emphasis gradually shifted from heresy to absurdity: the carriers of the perfect realm became ever more secular, ever more violent, and ever more successful – if not in realizing the perfect realm of God on Earth, then in bringing about a radical and lasting devastation of human lives and values. In a series of remarks that were intended to be both provocative and revealing Voegelin repeatedly established a direct line of descent between Cromwell, Robespierre, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin and their comrades; between the nihilism of “activist enthusiasm” and the moral justification of violence and terror.31

Intramundane (or “inner-worldly”) eschatology was the central concept of Voegelin’s History of Political Ideas during the decade lasting from the late 1930s to the late 1940s, dominated by WWII. From here the work literally exploded in several directions. First, Voegelin recognized the unique significance of Gnosticism in bringing together asceticism and eschatology, thus giving a better content to the old Weberian concern with religious world-rejection, and came to identify modernity as a Gnostic revolt. Second, he continued to push the time horizon of his work backwards, towards Antiquity. Following again Weber and anticipating Foucault he looked for the remote sources of and the reasons behind asceticism and eschatology. This concern dominated the first three volumes of Order and History. In this context he found the thesis of Karl Jaspers about the “axis time” or “axial age” of especially great use (Eisenstadt, 1986), though he would eventually counter this claim with his own thesis about the “ecumenic age” in the fourth volume of Order and History.

At this point the question cannot be avoided: if Voegelin indeed was a most important direct heir to Weber’s work, then why is his work not better known among the wider academic public, in particular in the field of nations and nationalism? The response to this question lies in manifold problems surrounding the publication and reception of Voegelin’s ideas.

Problems of publication and reception

The first set of problems concerned the sheer accessibility of Voegelin’s ideas. By 1938, the year of his escape from the Gestapo to the United States, he had published five books, exposing important ideas concerning the links between nation, race, state and religion. These, however, all appeared in German and at the times were physically difficult to get hold of. Even further, there were problems with the publication of Voegelin’s English writings. While Voegelin would soon gain a reputation for his erudition and the quality of his ideas, the most important things he wrote did not get published. In 1942 he set aside an article-length piece about the “People of God” argument, central for his ongoing study of the modern nation state, and sent it to Social Research, then edited by Leo Strauss, but it did not see print. Even further, the entire History of Political Ideas manuscript, by the late 1940s running to about 4500 type-script pages, failed to become published. At first publishers failed to have the courage to launch such a major work, then Voegelin did not manage to rework the entire manuscript for publication.

But there were problems even with whatever Voegelin managed to publish. An important aspect regards Voegelin’s links to Max Weber. While Voegelin’s debts to a Weberian inspiration are evident, by late 1940s the watered down, dehistoricized and evolutionalized version of Weber’s ideas, as propagated by Talcott Parsons, became dominant in the US. Voegelin evidently felt the need to mark his distance, and the publication of Leo Strauss’s tricky account on Weber misled Voegelin into a one-sided account on Weber in the New Science of Politics, the work that first presented publicly an
overview of Voegelin’s decade-long research (for details, see Szakoleczai, 2000: 58-60). Since then, Voegelin is read by friend and foe alike as an opponent of Weber.

The problems of reception, however, go far beyond the links to Weber. The New Science of Politics became a much read and discussed work, even a best-seller, with coverage in Time magazine, but it was also considered “controversial”, an adjective often applied to Voegelin’s work in general. Here caution is needed, as in the contemporary intellectual setting this term is used in two different senses. On the one hand, there are figures who thrive on polemics by attacking leading persons and ideas, and in particular take pleasure in destroying belief in beauty and virtue in the world, by propagating a dire, cynical look at the human condition. On the other hand, the adjective is often used to denote those figures who generate controversy in exactly the opposite manner: in going against the stream of cynical modernist nihilism, trying to reassert the virtues without which intellectual activities would lose their sense, and do not shy away from affirming meaning even in the sense of transcendence and spirituality. Through the complicity of the media, both inside and outside academia, members of the first group enjoy wide popularity, while the latter are often marginalized through adherents of rigorous academic “science” who reject any interest in “meaning”.

Voegelin clearly belongs to the latter group – but a more detailed account belongs to the scope of another article.

Taking up Voegelin:
world suspicion, activist enthusiasm, and the politics of suffering

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom
W. H. Auden, In Memory of W. B. Yeats

World suspicion: Beyond “rejecting” the “world”

Voegelin’s interest in “inner-worldly eschatology”, which he identified as the driving spirit of the modern nation state, followed the footsteps of the “Nietzschean Weber”. Friedrich Nietzsche defined nihilism as questioning the value of the “world” as such, and came to blame religion, especially Christianity, as the source of modern nihilism. Weber took up the challenge of Nietzsche but came to a different result, arguing that Christianity was world-neutral and not world-rejecting, while Judaism and Islam were outright world-affirming. Yet, he did not live to connect back this analysis to modernity. Voegelin’s interest in Gnosticism directly follows from here, but it remained similarly inconclusive. Clearly, we need to achieve a better grasp of the meaning of the “rejection” of this “world”, and its relevance for modernity.

Our own present, by living through “liminal” processes of “globalization” or mondialisation, helps to better understand the exact nature of a “world-rejecting” attitude. What is at stake is not the abnegation of the existence or the order of the world, but rather the problematization and diagnosis of these specific kinds of liminal processes – even if the exact differentiation of the concept and the identification of such processes are extremely difficult. Time and again individual theorists and social movements repeatedly have fallen
into the trap of trying to reject the orderly beauty and even the reality of the world, reducing the cosmos to chaos, thus failing to distinguish, differentiate and discriminate. The term “rejection” is therefore misleading, failing to discriminate between careful, religious or philosophical analysis of these processes, and summary, nihilistic condemnations of the entire order of reality. In the spirit of Weber and Voegelin I suggest the term “suspicion” with respect to the “world”.

What brings together Plato and the classical Hebrew prophets, the Buddha and Christ was not that they wanted to “reject” the world, in the Gnostic-utopian-sophist-cynic sense, rather that they were suspicious concerning the dynamics of certain civilizational processes, secular or religious, given the imitative nature of human conduct. The reality is indeed what we see and experience; but appearances both mislead and trick us on the one hand, and imprison on the other. They create the striking complacency between the experience of the liberating power of dreams and fantasy, and of the world as a prison, the recto and verso sides of the modern Panoptic system that so much baffle readers of Foucault. According to Voegelin, we can escape the misleading self-evidence of the “world” and penetrate the heart of the structure of reality if the possibility of transcendence as an experience is opened up – an idea central to the philosophical project of William James, through his VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, a book so important for Weber’s project.

The “axial” religions and philosophies do not want to “reject” the world; they are rather deeply suspicious towards certain processes of the “world”, understood as the dynamics of interaction between individuals outside primary communities, and that are particularly prone to being carried away by imitation through images. This suspicion is therefore particularly strong with respect to those aspects of human conduct which are most prone to imitation and the power of images, and thus can easily escalate into violence, like laughter, drinking, sexuality and certain type of arts; or activities that in the anthropological literature are associated with the figure of the “Trickster”. This leads axial systems of thought, including not just the main Weberian “world religions”, but classical philosophy as well, to not only relentlessly condemn violence, but also to problematize all imitative processes that are prone to escalate into violence, requiring them to make delicate compromises with the “real world”. Even further, recognizing that violent mimetic potentials are inherent in “liminal” situations like revolutions, civil wars, or dissolutions of political and social order, where symmetrical relations are posited among a large mass of individuals, they have an in-built tendency for “conservatism” understood as a preference for benevolently asymmetric circles of social order.

Asceticism and eschatology, just as Platonic philosophy, belong to the axial modalities of “world-suspicion”.

“Activist enthusiasm”

As asceticism and eschatology are closely connected to the first and second coming of Christ, they were fundamental for the success of Christianity, in the sense that – of all the various axial religions and philosophies – it was Christianity that gave an effective response to the crisis of the first global age. This crisis culminated in the collapse of the last and most important global or ecumenic empire, the Roman Empire, generating a meaningful order out of liminal chaos, violence and despair. It managed to do so by a singular combination of restraining and stimulating human impulses: it imposed a certain regime of life, which limited the immediate search for the satisfaction of human impulses. This move curbed the pervasive logic of violence and warfare dominating life after the collapse of Rome. Which
had at the same time managed to give hope and enthusiasm, not simply through otherworldly beliefs, but also by transforming everyday worldly existence in a direction of spiritualization and ennobling, through very real concrete examples and daily experiences.34

Still, while not being without motivating value, the attitude of medieval Christianity with respect to the liminal character of globalising forces was clear and one-directional: it was only about limitation. Thus, in this respect as well, it was radically different from the attitudes characteristic of Islam, which was much more permissive and even encouraging with respect to the most pervasive kind of liminal conducts, violence, warfare, and sexuality, both in terms of daily life and even more at the level of “eschatological ideals”.

A radical break took place at a moment when, in a very specific context and for a very specific reason, this limitation of violence was turned into its opposite, an explicit promulgation of a “holy war”. The context was the rise of the Seljuk Turkish Empire and their closing of the road of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. The result was the preaching of the First Crusade in 1095, an event unfortunately underplayed by Voegelin, in spite of his general attention to political “sentiments” – a term he later changed to “experiences”.

The consequence was a radical inflexion, even inversion at the very heart of what could be called, paraphrasing Norbert Elias beyond his intentions, the Christian European “civilizing process”, whose importance cannot be exaggerated, as it would eventually render inner-worldly eschatology – in the sense of using violent means for creating the “perfect community” – possible. This fundamental novelty was immediately understood by the Frankish and Norman lords and warriors whose joy could hardly be contained at the perspective of finally finding a way to devote themselves to their favourite pastime, warfare, while fully remaining within the sphere of rightful Christian conduct.

The “politics of suffering”

The question now concerns the exact nature of this “activist enthusiasm”, not only related to its concrete limits, but including the possibility of its (secular) extension. The central issue, in my view, is the justification of otherwise unacceptable acts in the name of suffering victims.

Such a justification, of course, is meaningless from a strictly Christian perspective, as the redeeming of suffering belongs exclusively to Christ, and has already been accomplished by his death on the cross; and the Gospels at any rate reject the use of violent means. However, once a precedent for “pious violence” is created, this becomes a political force on its own. The energies liberated by the First Crusade turned out to be enormous, soon moving far beyond the original aims. The spirit was out of the bottle. By the mid-13th century a movement would emerge, the Spiritual Franciscans who, drawing inspiration from the apocalyptic writings of Joachim of Fiore, would take the justice of God in their hands for purely secular reasons, fighting against the rich and powerful.

The grounds of a “politics of identity”, or morally justifying violence always and strictly in the name of the suffering victims was thus prepared. This is not restricted to our times, or to left-wing politics, as Hitler – among others – could only gain access to power by appealing to the sufferings of the German people. It is therefore on this horizon that we can locate the truly problematic aspects of modern nationalism, which can also help to understand why the combination of the “nationalist” and “socialist” agendas turned out to be so particularly explosive.

Still, we need to show the connection between the modern nation-state, inner-worldly eschatology, and the politics of suffering, at least in its main lines.
Voegelin, modernity and the nation

The carriers of inner-worldly eschatology

Eschatology in the proper sense means the Second Coming of Christ himself, thus it cannot have any secular carriers. The project of realizing the kingdom of God on this Earth, however, by more or less purely human initiative, requires the presence of exactly such special carriers.

These carriers can be analyzed in two manners. At the level of their idealistic self-descriptions, they must possess some special characteristics rendering them suited for this task; they have to be the perfect or – even better – the pure. Purity is the unparalleled key word for this undertaking, as in this sense it implies a presumed lack of contamination by the forces of the world that renders them uniquely suited for the task – equal to the squaring of the circle – of realizing the kingdom of God in this world. It is by no means accidental that this purity, exactly in the sense of freedom from existential involvement in, and thus contamination by, the world has been selected as the banner by the most important sectarian carriers of the spirit of inner-worldly eschatology: the Cathars of the Middle Ages (meaning “the pure” in Greek); the Puritans of England; the “pure reason”, uncontaminated by experiences and reality, in the mind of Kant, rendering possible a line of development through Fichte and Hegel (and also through Jean-Paul, a crucial and often ignored figure of image power) to Marx and Freud; and finally the various pure-hearted professional revolutionaries from the Jacobins through the Bolsheviks up to the contemporary not-so-new social movements (see also Eisenstadt, 1999).

Max Weber introduced the concept of “carriers” or “carrier strata” (Trägerschicht) into the social sciences, in particular in order to identify the different groups which played a role in propagating a certain religion. Applying it to medieval sectarian movements, Voegelin has argued that such movements have been mostly urban (see Voegelin, 1997/9, Vol. 4, 148-51). At one level, this is by no means surprising, as the survival of a dissenting sect requires the maintenance of a secret society type organization that is much easier in an urban than in a rural context. At another level, however, the implications of such specifically urban sectarianism were ignored both at the origins and broad impact of such movements.

The nation state as the main carrier of modern inner-worldly eschatology

The question of how the murky underground movements of medieval urban heresy came to the forefront with the rise of the modern world was a central dilemma preoccupying Voegelin during the writing of History of Political Ideas. Eventually, he came to think that the answer is to be found in a peculiar elective affinity between secular intellectuals as a class and the modern nation state, through the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. As a result, applying the Weberian concept of “carrier” to an entire institution, the nation-state as a whole can be considered as becoming the carrier of a certain spirit of inner-worldly eschatology.

The existence of nations was a central and specific component of the medieval world order; its significance, however, was exclusively restricted to the temporal sphere. They had no religious relevance beyond the territorial organisation of the Church. This is still valid today for the Catholic Church, due to its universalism, which is a consequence of the
universal relevance of the analysis and containment of the potentially globalizing forces, shared with Platonic philosophy.

Nations became carriers of religious meaning through the Reformation, where a schism was produced at the level of culture through taking up the cause of individual reformers, and the very idea of Reform, by regional and national powers, thus contributing to the formation of the modern identity of a nation. The consequence was the period of religious and civil wars that undermined not simply the unity of the Church, but of the entire European civilization held together by a shared community substance with a Christian (thus religious) basis. This, in turn, led to the realization by Hobbes that religious conflict cannot be healed and therefore lasting peace can only be searched for outside the field of religion, thus justifying the rise of the modern secular nation state.

The absolutist state, Hobbes’s solution, however, did not bring about lasting peace. It rather inaugurated a new, spiralling process of warfare, leading to the gradual resurrection of the sacrificial mechanism (Girard, 1972), a consequence of the confessionalization of religion that eventually entailed a secular re-tribalization, with national eschatological movements pretending to be the selected “people of God”. Such movements usurped state power in many countries inaugurating dynamics that culminated in the twentieth century in two world wars and a series of right and left wing revolutions. It is less known, however, and certainly more controversial, that the internal dynamics and the competition between these states was not simply driven by purely secular considerations of economics and politics, of welfare and power, but rather by religious factors that had become secularized. It is in this way that the religious reformers as central agents in politics, like Calvin in Geneva or the Puritans of Cromwell, were in a series of steps replaced by secular intellectuals, like the Enlightenment followed by the Jacobins of Robespierre, just as in the field of economic life the charismatic figures with Protestant vocation were replaced eventually by secular entrepreneurs.

In the sense of curbing violence and spiritualizing or ennobling the moving forces of the human soul, the rise of national churches has been a grave regression compared to the unity of the Church. The value of Christianity, just as that of Platonic philosophy and the other axial systems of thought lay, and still lies, in their suspicion of the forces of the “world” and their ability to diagnose “globalizing” processes, where imitative processes spin out of control; and in this sense they carry universal value. The restriction of the validity of this message to a particular carrier, whether a class or an ethnic group as the basis of an organized state, carried the potential of re-starting or fuelling, with a never-before-seen vigor, these exact processes of globalization; something that soon became a reality, and which by our time has been fully unleashed, with unprecedented destructive potential against nature, human nature, and the nature of sociability. The fight between nation states, sanctified by so many national churches, has thus been a major source for a new politics of identity.

**Conclusion**

In order to understand the particular character of the dominant contemporary intellectual attitude with respect to nations and nationalism, this paper contrasted the discussion of nationalism with that of liberalism and socialism, tracing each to the respective central value of the French Revolution. It found that, behind a definite lack of attention devoted to the theme and arguable problems of quality with the literature, including the lack of a proper
“classic”, the reasons could be traced to a quite general blindness to the question of “home” in the social sciences. The “experience of home” as a taken for granted reference point of human life is replaced by the idea of progress, actual or potential, often combined with apocalyptic beliefs or expectations.

The paper then argued that the literature on nation-state and nationalism could find its missing “classic” in the works of Eric Voegelin, one of the most important direct followers of not just the words but the “spirit” of Max Weber’s research. Voegelin worked during the 1940s on a monumental, multivolume study about the “genealogy” of the modern state, in the footsteps of Weber’s genealogy of the moving force of modern capitalism. Unfortunately, for various reasons, History of Political Ideas remained unpublished until the late 1990s. Voegelin argues there that the driving force of the nation-state, and of modern nationalist movements, was inner-worldly eschatology, an attempt to establish a perfect community on earth by purely secular means. Originating in medieval urban heretic movements, this striving became a major force of modern politics through various revolutions, turning particularly menacing when combined with “activist enthusiasm” and the “politics of suffering”, concepts that are introduced in this paper on the basis of Voegelin’s work. This helps to explain the quasi-religious aspects of so many modern political movements, just as the similarities and differences between nationalism and socialist movements, the problem to which Voegelin turned in his later work.

Notes

1 The phenomenon can be compared to the identical lack of sociological interest in the similarly fundamental phenomenon of warfare (see Joas 1999, 2003).
2 For e.g. see Weber’s 1895 inaugural lecture, obviously an important piece of work for any thinker, but whose centrality has only been recognized by Wilhelm Hennis (1988).
3 For some details, see Szakolczai, 1996: 14-6.
4 These were collected and published posthumously by Henri Lévy-Bruhl (see in Mauss 1968, III: 569-639). See also Victor Karady’s 1994 lecture at the European University Institute.
5 A detailed study could show that these three values perfectly capture a liminal ritual, as described by Victor Turner (1967) with “freedom” corresponding to the suspension of all social norms and institutions, “equality” to the relations between all initiants, and “fraternity” the communitas created by the rituals. This would also render it evident that liminal conditions always require masters of ceremonies, possessing absolute power – thus explaining why revolutionary enthusiasm (purportedly doing away with all “masters”) is always and necessarily followed by sheer terror.
6 See the classic works by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1975) and Colin Turnbull (1968).
7 The first issue of IPA has devoted considerable attention to this issue; about home, see Szakolczai (2008); about meaning, see Wydra (2008).
8 For other contemporary examples, see Breuilly (1982), Hroch (1985), and Anthony Smith (1983). For a review of the literature, see Tambini (1998).
9 About schismogenesis, see Horvath and Thomassen (2008), in the first issue of this journal.
10 The reference to Victor Turner is particularly problematic. While the book contains several references to, and long quotes from, Auerbach and Benjamin, Turner is only mentioned once as somebody who wrote about the “journey” (53), without evoking any of the concepts he developed. Although directly after this evocation he goes into discussing the theme of pilgrimage, one area on which Turner worked substantively, this discussion is not informed either by the words or the spirit of Turner’s approach (53-6).
The situation was genuinely tragic, but unintelligible from inside a leftist paradigm, which is based on a misperception of a much more tragic situation typical of Western Marxism; this concerns the deep-seated lack of ability to perceive the nature of the East European regimes.

The expression is Weberian, meaning the central moving force of a book, including but going beyond a “main inspiration” or a “guiding hypothesis”. It also explains why here it seems necessary to present a detailed analysis of the Benjamin citation.

I am particularly grateful for Bjørn Thomassen for calling my attention to this connection.

On the iconography of angels, see Saxl (1990).

Being a “storm god” is one of the most important characteristics of the main Indo-European and Near-Eastern deities, from Hittite Tarhun and Etruscan Tarchon up to Gall Taranis and Greek Zeus.

Constructed in the late eighteenth century by the Hungarian Farkas Kempelen.

The hookah – a popular Middle-Eastern pipe, not a frequent subject matter of social theory – recurs in an essay by Poe and in the closing pages of Baudelaire’s famous introductory poem to Les Fleurs du mal, just before evoking the complicity of the reader, thus establishing an intimate connection between Baudelaire, Poe, Benjamin, Jauss, Foucault and Girard, concerning the “spirit” of modernity, that would be worthwhile pursuing further.

On the problematic idea that “antifascism” justifies everything, see Boland (2008).

Such an allusion on monasticism is particularly revealing for the paper, given Weber’s long-standing interest in monastic asceticism, a source of “inner-worldly asceticism” according to him, and given the characterisation of monasteries a “brotherhoods”.

Such lack of identification, of the names of Klee and Scholem, given the importance assigned by Anderson to this quote, is something of an omission; at any rate, the personal connection Benjamin had to this image and this poem is quite extraordinary, as he bought Klee’s 1920 picture in 1921, and considered it for the rest of his life as his most valued possession, while Scholem composed his poem in 1921 for Benjamin’s birthday, and also to celebrate the journal Angelus Novus Benjamin was about to launch (see the editorial comments in the Hungarian edition of Benjamin’s collected works; Benjamin 1980: 988, 1058). All this adds weight to the quote identifying the “spirit” of Benjamin’s work, and thus its broader relevance.

For Weberian method, see for e.g. the start of the sociology of religious groups in Economy and Society.

For details, see Szakolczai, 1996; 1998.

Note for e.g. the sharp and witty remarks, at the beginning and the end of the book (20-23, 130-133), that assign and limit the ideas of Hume and Kant to their times and places, emphasising – in the best Durkheimian spirit – the importance of the social context of the seemingly most abstract ideas.

In order to clarify his position in a 1992 conference on nationalism, organised by the European University Institute, Gellner made the following, unforgettable comment, trying to illustrate the progressive elements of industrialism: “peasants only grunt”.

Gellner’s unreserved glorification of industrialism and dismissal of national identities also has unsettling affinities with central elements of Stalin’s policies.

This refers to Foucault’s presentation of the “genealogical method”.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, this article does not try to proclaim Voegelin as the saviour of political anthropology, or of studies on nationalism. Voegelin’s work is part of an epistemic horizon in which vertically Nietzsche and Weber, and horizontally Elias, Borkenau, Foucault, Koselleck and many others take up an important place. But one could suggest to all students of political anthropology or of nationalism to study the works of Voegelin very seriously, as they will certainly find there many points of interest.

For further details concerning this, and in general on Voegelin, see Szakolczai 2000; 2001a; 2003.

For details, see Szakolczai 1998; 2001a; 2001b.
In German, these were published jointly in the first volume of Weber’s *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religions*. In English, the first two were published as *The Social Psychology of World Religions* and *The Religious Rejections of the World and Their Direction* by C.W. Mills in his 1947 Weber Reader (*From Max Weber*), while the third by Parsons as the “Author’s Introduction” to the *Protestant Ethic*, creating the false impression that this piece was written by Weber for the latter work only.

31 See for e.g. *History of Political Ideas*, Vol. 4, 175.

32 The wider significance of research on the comparative anthropology and mythology of the Trickster for social thought has been recognized by Agnes Horvath (1998; 2000); see also Horvath and Thomassen, 2008.

33 This recognition in modern thought leads from Shakespeare through Mauss to René Girard.

34 This has been emphasised, among others, by Dante, Nietzsche and Lewis Mumford.

**Bibliography**


