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NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION

BY HENRI LAMBERT

AN old aspiration which in relatively recent times has found its rational expression in the "self-determination of nationalities," or "government by consent of the governed," is destined to play a leading rôle in the political reconstruction of Europe and the world. The fate of mankind will largely depend on the right appreciation and application of this "*mundi principium ordinis*." Such a principle cannot be too seriously tested. Compliance with errors or illusions, pursuit of will-o'-the-wisps, when the gravest issues are at stake, may again lead men to fields prepared for immeasurable ruin and innumerable graves. Welfare and progress can come only from a recognition of truth. Is self-determination, as an aspiration and a political principle, born of unquestionable truth? If so, what should be the method of its application?

This query transcends the domestic issues of the life and development of the smaller nationalities concerned; it raises the whole problem of the organization of a better international life; no satisfactory answer can be given to it if considered by itself, isolated from the general question of the conditions making for greater international justice, harmony, security, thus preparing the advent of a permanent universal peace and the birth of a truer and higher civilization.

As long as nations feel insecurity in regard to one another the peoples will be confirmed in the entirely sound idea that national might, Great Powers, Empires, are necessary. They will, perforce, form compact national blocks and, impelled by vital interests, will refuse to listen to the pleas of sacrificed and wretched subject nationalities. Insecurity will inevitably lead to the formation of the greatest possible national units, the integration of smaller nationalities into empires. It follows that the problem of international security must first

be solved before the gradual disintegration of these great national units and the reconstruction of the world into independent or autonomous nationalities can be attained; only in this way can a natural and lasting readjustment be worked out.

In an industrial and commercial age, when the progress and the very existence of peoples depend fundamentally on their achievements in these domains, it is clear that the satisfaction of economic interests through a just equality of economic rights must form a prerequisite of international security. Economic justice and security are fundamental justice and security. It has been far too commonly overlooked by students, lawyers and statesmen that the policy of nations and the evolution of human progress have been influenced constantly and increasingly by the economic conditions of the period. For nearly half a century justice or injustice in international relations has been fundamentally a question of equality or inequality of economic rights and opportunities. This is not only natural, but in conformity with morality and righteousness, in their truest and highest meaning.

In one of the most eloquent pages of all literature, your original and stimulating philosopher, Emerson—who was, be it remembered, a true poet—wrote as follows:

Trade was always in the world, and, indeed, to judge hastily, we might well deem trade to have been the purpose for which the world was created. It is the cause, the support and the object of all government. Without it, men would roam the wilderness alone, and never meet in the kind conventions of social life. Who is he that causes this busy stir, this mighty and laborious accommodation of the world to men's wants? Who is he that plants care like a canker at men's hearts, and furrows their brows with thrifty calculations? that makes money for his instrument, and therewith sets men's passions in ferment and their faculties in action, unites them together in the clamorous streets and arrays them against each other in war? It is Trade—Trade, which is the mover of the nations and the pillar whereon the fortunes of life hang. All else is subordinate. Tear down, if you will, the temples of Religion, the museums of Art, the laboratories of Science, the libraries of Learning—and the regret excited among mankind would be cold, alas! and faint;—a few would be found, a few enthusiasts in secret places to mourn over their ruins;—but destroy the temples of Trade, your stores, your wharves and your floating castles on the deep; restore to the earth the silver and gold which was dug out thence to serve *his* purposes;—and you shall hear an outcry from the ends of the earth. Society would stand still, and men return howling to forests and caves, which would now be the grave, as they were once the cradle, of the human race.

This partial and inordinate success by which this institution of men wears the crown over all others is necessary; for the prosperity of trade is built upon desires and necessities which nourish no distinction among men; which all,—the high and humble, the weak and strong, can feel, and which must first be answered, before the imprisonment of the mind can be broken and the noble and delicate thoughts can issue out, from which Art and Literature spring. The most enthusiastic philosopher requires to be fed and clothed before he begins his analysis of nature, and scandal has called poetry, taste, imagination the overflowing phantasms of a high-fed animal.

No economist has ever so inspiringly pointed out the basic importance of the economic factors and issues in the problems of human life, and so implicitly their necessarily crucial bearings on national and international political welfare and destiny.

Justice in international relations is above all a policy that favors the economic development of all nations, without excluding any. Doubtless the production of wealth is not the supreme aim and object assigned to humanity, and economic prosperity can never provide the consummation of the edifice of human progress; but it does provide its foundation and its material structure, and the right of every nation constantly to enlarge this edifice is clear and inalienable. And since the growth of the material prosperity of nations is the necessary condition of their intellectual and moral advance—for we cannot conceive of a lofty civilization as a product of poverty—their right to the fullest economic development compatible with the wealth of their soil and their own capacity for useful effort is a right that is natural and indefeasible—a divine right in the holy sense of the term.

Now, the economic development of every nation is inseparable from the ever-widening operations of its exchanges. None can live and prosper economically isolated from the others. Coöperation through economic exchange is thus seen to be not only the main and fundamental fact, but the essential natural right of man in his international relations. Freedom of exchange will be the tangible manifestation and the infallible test of a condition of true justice, of morality, of righteousness, in international life.

If only freedom of exchange can give the required equity in rights and stability of opportunity to the industrial activities of all nations, and thus insure the necessary security to their fundamental life, it must be recognized that, in the absence of such freedom, powerful nations will not, nay,

cannot consent to abandon the conception of prosperity guaranteed and protected by a military power which must itself be attained by expanding territory and increasing population. In a system of international life made of privilege, monopoly, exclusion, the stronger progressive peoples will rightly, by force and subjection, constitute the greatest possible territorial, political and economic units, not only for reason of military power, but also because such a policy offers the sole means of achieving economic liberty, stability and expansion. For the desire to conquer, to annex, to form economic empires at the expense of subject nationalities, there exists, in the very nature and force of things, only one alternative.

Had all nations lived, if only for ten years, under a régime of freedom of exchange and intercommunication, they would see clearly that greater advantages than formerly accrued to them from territorial expansion and imperial centralization of power were obtainable through unrestricted intercourse, and without the evils engendered by the old system of domination. The idea of coöperation and association would replace the idea of power. Peoples would free themselves from the madness of "empires." And gradually, even the great acquisitive nations would cease to find it detrimental to their interests and their progress to accord autonomy or independence to the various nationalities of which they are composed; indeed, free intercourse and the "open door" would prove an immense boon *for all, great and small*.

On the other hand, it appears extremely doubtful whether, under a régime of reciprocal exclusions and inequality of rights and opportunities, with the resulting international rapacity, strife and instability, the smaller nations would have a true interest in separation from the great empires; for their economic and political isolation would mean poverty and decadence or stagnation, with added insecurity.

The coöperative federation of the nations, under a régime of economic freedom, insuring equality and general progress, minimizing jealousies and rivalries, tending to unify interests and identify political conceptions and aims, is the only solution of the question of nationalities that can conceivably be satisfactory and permanent.

From other and most important points of view, the coöperative economic federation of the world is needed much more than a political "league of nations" as the *condition precedent* of a safe and progressive settlement of the problem of

nationalities. Let us not deceive ourselves; the principle of self-determination and self-government, *if applied in unfavorable conditions*, bears germs of national dissolution, anarchy and international wars.

Democratic suffrage and parliamentary institutions, as practiced by the older nations, have not been so successful in achieving national welfare or international safety as to permit great expectations from their adoption by young, uneducated and turbulent peoples. It might well prove better that autonomy, as a step toward independence, should remain to be settled by the great national units concerned *within a limited period* after true fundamental international liberty and security have been established. Meanwhile, the old democracies ought better to exemplify the benefits of their institutions. Democratic self-government is not a national panacea, but only the machinery which is susceptible of smooth running if seriously improved and properly used.

The peril of international disputes might increase in proportion to the number of nationalities if the new nations began their life of independence by adopting the prejudices and committing the errors born of ignorance of economic truth; an ignorance which has led most of the old nations, democracies included, to seek prosperity not in the prosperity of all through coöperation, but in mutual exclusion, monopoly of opportunities, spoliation through the absurd and immoral system miscalled "protection," which leads fatally to war between nations whose "places in the sun" are altogether unequal and insecure. Self-governing nations must be enlightened lest they become international nuisances.

Moreover, are all regional portions of great countries, all ethnical sections of great national commonwealths, to enjoy the right of self-determination? If so, this right would soon turn into general dismemberment and universal anarchy. But if free economic intercourse, with its consequent gradual unification of interests, ideas, morals, institutions (and even language in the form of a universal commercial and familiar idiom) were established as a general principle and actual rule between all national groups, it would no longer matter so much to a man on what side of the border line he lived. National and international tranquility would be much less endangered by ethnical aspirations and local vicissitudes.

Freedom spells justice and morality and proves to be the only safe refuge of man. Sound economics, that is to say,

truth, freedom and justice in economic relations, are, by the very nature and necessity of things, at once the moral basis and the palladium of individual, national and international life.

If *all* the regional and ethnical interests of the great national units are not to be granted the right of self-determination and self-government, what will be the criterion? Neither race, language, religion, customs, history, geographical proximity nor common government constitutes the main factor in the formation of nationality. It is common economic interests, combined with one or with several of those factors, that makes nationality a vital force. Our economic life and relations are our fundamental life and relations. The true and profound origin of nationalities is economic in its nature; consequently, the question of national welfare must remain an economic issue. Under a régime of free economic intercourse the complexity of the problem would be reduced to a minimum; on the other hand, any settlement that disregarded this freedom would prove artificial and ephemeral.

It therefore seems useful to suggest that the present questions can hardly be answered satisfactorily by the process of plebiscites or referendums.

Why should the vital interests and the political fate of the inhabitants of a given portion of a contested country be definitely and finally determined by the will of the inhabitants of other parts of the country? Why should the political wishes as well as the fundamental interests of an enlightened minority, *and of the whole group*, be sacrificed to the wishes, and often to the blind passions or prejudices, of a majority? Why should countries thus forcibly, by numbers, be affiliated with a greater national unit? In many cases, minorities and majorities may be nearly balanced and subject to changes. Would not the result of a plebiscite then be an error, an illusion, a will-o'-the-wisp? Only autonomy leading to complete independence—the natural and gradual result of the international security engendered by the coöperative federation of the nations—can finally satisfy the various interests of *all* the members of a nationality.

There, moreover, stand against the settlement of these questions by way of referendums and plebiscites divers complications and difficulties which may prove insuperable. It seems as if Nature itself had thus provided for the necessity of a deeper, or of a higher solution: as if, for the happiness

of the smaller nations, and for the safety of the greater, a superior purpose—by no means inaccessible to human understanding, since God does not put us insoluble riddles—required the advent of a state of righteousness, morality, spirituality in international life.

Such a view of the question as is here presented may be considered pure idealism by those “practical men” who profess to deal only with “realities and facts.” It may be scorned by the “practical politicians” of the allied countries as well as by those inspired by Germanic ideas, culture and aims. In conclusion, therefore, let us complete our statement by challenging them with this pragmatic argument: It may well be that absolute security and certain peace can exist only when no peoples any longer have reason to desire conquest, and, consequently, none of them has any reason to fear it. Now, liberty of trade relations between two peoples (assuring, as it does, liberty of general intercourse) is *equivalent to mutual annexation* by these two peoples; and the same liberty extended to all peoples would be equivalent to reciprocal annexation by all peoples. No nation would any longer have an important, or even a serious interest in vanquishing other nations and conquering their territories. Given universal freedom of commerce, and it appears that international morality, as manifested by the absence of conquest and war, would become a positive, practical reality.

If it has been shown successfully that the permanent freedom of smaller nationalities is dependent on this final abolition of war and conquest, we are justified in concluding that enduring satisfaction of the legitimate desire for self-determination and self-government can be produced only by such practical international morality as will result from worldwide enjoyment of “places in the sun” and equal opportunities afforded to all nations. Such, even according to pragmatic interpretation, appears to be the will of Nature—against which the will of man can never prevail.

Whatever may be the differing views of men—idealistic or realistic—it is manifest, we think, that only by a rational and scientific (because natural) method of self-determination can the reconstruction of the world, according to national aspirations, provide the future of mankind with a useful and durable framework for a worthier and a higher civilization.

Wrongly put, the problem of self-determination would be insoluble or susceptible only of an artificial and ephemeral

settlement; illogically dealt with, the issues involved are fraught with eminently and imminently grave perils. National self-government is not an unquestionable principle, is not a truth that stands by itself as natural and immanent; it is a political contingency depending on such a progress of morality and civilization as will be marked by international security. Freedom of nationalities cannot be the origin and *cause* of this security and of peace; it can only be the natural, gradual, logical *consequence* of these.

International security and peace must fundamentally manifest themselves in the economic life and relations of the nations. In proposing, as the third of his fourteen articles, "the removal, as far as possible, of all economic barriers and an equality of trade conditions for all nations," the President of the United States has enunciated the moral condition and, we may hope, has laid the moral foundation of a new and better world order, in which national collectivities will gradually find the necessary opportunities for the material and spiritual welfare and happiness of their members. Such will be the result, the blessed fruit, of a *Pax Economica*.

HENRI LAMBERT.