
The Past, Present, and the Future of the Nation-State

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This article examines contemporary debates about the nation-state as a political model in the contemporary world. After discussing what we mean by the terms, "nation" and "national identity," I discuss the relationship between the nation and the state, and whether effective governance requires a national basis. Lastly, I explore whether federal multinational systems are viable alternatives to the unitary nation-states, and the implications of the European Union for the future of the nation-state dynamic in Europe.

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Global Dimensions of Nations and Nationalism.

Many theorists of globalization predict the decline of the nation-state, classically conceived as a sovereign political community, territorially bounded, culturally homogeneous, and economically integrated. In their different versions they argue that the *autonomy* of the nation-state is mitigated by the growth of transnational institutions that have resulted in a pooling or loss of sovereignty. The *identity of nations* has also been recast. The unlikelihood of large-scale war between great powers means the loss of the traditional mechanism of collective differentiation: an appeal to us versus them. Global migration patterns and the international recognition of the rights of minorities mean that homogeneous national cultures are being pluralized

and hybridized. The future entails either new forms of community or weakened nation-states having to come to terms with multiculturalism.¹

These discussions tend to be Western Europe-centered (and I would argue are of limited validity even for the prosperous “West”). The problem in Eastern Europe and the Balkans is to contain the resurgence of nationalism in post-communist states; in Africa to sustain collapsing state-nation structures; and in many parts of Asia, including Afghanistan, to establish a common national identity as well as a stable political order. In fact, globalization, defined as an intensification of interconnectedness of the world’s populations, is not necessarily inimical to the nation-state. The diffusion of the national model from its European origins is itself another form of globalization.

What do we mean by the national model? I define a nation as a modern political community founded on the ideas of self-determination, a consolidated homeland, and a distinctive vernacular high culture, but nationhood also rests on the myths and memories of (generally) older ethnic communities. This definition combines elements of what have been long regarded as rival conceptions of the nation, “civic” and “ethnic.” The civic model views the nation as a territorial community united by the common political will of its members, the nexus of which is citizenship. Meanwhile, the ethnic model casts the nation as a quasi-kinship group, whose members unite as a community of descent, the core of which is a unique history and culture. In an influential typology, Hans Kohn designated the former as “Western,” democratic and rational, and the latter as an irrational “East-

ern” reaction to the West, which culminated in the totalitarian nationalisms of the twentieth century.²

In practice, most nations are a combination of civic and ethnic identities. Even France, the classic civic nation, rests on a substratum of medieval myths and memories, and Germany, an archetypical ethnic nation, offers citizenship to categories of non-ethnic “territorial” Germans. The potency of the nation in the modern world derives from its success both as the engine of collective power and progress, and as the source of unique identity and rootedness in a continuously changing world. But, like Kohn, many have claimed that ethnicity is a transitional loyalty. For them, “modernity” will require a shift to a civic community, based on artificially created and freely willed mutual ties, that in turn offers the possibility of transcending nationality altogether.

Nation-Building as the Basis of Effective Governance.

Scholars from very different perspectives have argued that, in the modern world, centralized states and national communities are inextricably linked. Several thinkers—Charles Tilly, Michael Mann, and W.H. McNeill—have argued that nations are an unintended consequence of the rise of the modern centralized territorial state, which itself was formed in large part through war.³ Warfare from the thirteenth century onwards has encouraged a growing centralization of administration in order to enforce order and extract taxation; cultural unification as a way of ensuring loyalty; and compact and bounded territories that become “homelands.” The French revolution gave birth to a union of state and nation by tying state legitimacy to rule by the people.

Such approaches view the nation not just as the construct of states, but as the *necessary* construct of states. In the modern period, states have used centralized control of the population, mass education, and conscription to create culturally

state. The nation is a surrogate religion, which arises with secularization and often builds on older religious identities. State centralization can help crystallize a sense of nationhood, but it is only one factor.⁵ Although modern states can exert

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homogeneous nations, which in turn legitimize their existence. In his recent book, *Containing Nationalism*, Michael Hechter argues that indirect forms of rule, which allowed for considerable ethnic heterogeneity, were the norm (as in Empire) before the modern period. Modern communications technology allowed states to bypass local leaders and impose direct rule on their populations, and the age of empire was replaced by the era of nation-states.⁴ But the implication is that if the centralized state should become outmoded, as some globalization theorists believe, ethnically homogeneous nations will cease to be necessary or (perhaps) viable. As a result, ethnic heterogeneity or forms of multiculturalism will become possible.

In contrast, Anthony Smith and I maintain that nations are not explicable only by state necessities. The nation is a moral community that binds individuals into a “timeless” society evoked by “unique” myths, memories and culture, so that they overcome contingency and death. Religious institutions can be of great importance in clarifying the definition of national identity because of their deep social reach, often endowing a community with the sense of being chosen that informs the modern nation-

immense power by mobilizing their populations through efficient administrations, educational systems, and economic alliances, they are tested to their limits by unpredictable political, military, economic, and ideological challenges. Throughout the modern period, states and populations have fallen back on prior ethno-communal moral and political resources in the face of unforeseen contingencies such as war, economic dislocations, large-scale international migrations, ideological challenges, and natural disasters. In short, nations are not the outcome of states; rather they are built on older ethnic identities, which often drive political development.⁶

Either way, whether the weight is put on the political or the ethno-cultural dimension of nations, the claim is that the centralized state legitimates itself by appealing to national loyalties in a disenchanted world. The question then is: if the ethnic materials are lacking, can the modern state build the nation? The answer is: not easily. Where there are few distinctive common memories and traditions on which to build (e.g. Belarus), the process is likely to be long drawn. The more likely setting is a state that contains two or more ethnic communities within its borders. As Walker Connor pointed

out many years ago, very few states in the modern world are ethnically homogeneous, and the dark side of nation-building, when it entails the assimilation of ethnic minorities to the dominant culture of the state, is nation-destroying.⁷ The failure of even the long established states, France, Britain, and Spain for example, to “eliminate” their national minorities demonstrates the power of ethnicity in the modern world, and the necessity for nation-states to come to terms with ethnic diversity. This is especially important now that the normative advance of democracy and human rights has reinforced the rights of minorities. Most states, however, continue to resist the territorial losses that accompany ethnic secession, and in the final chapters of *Containing Nationalism*, Hechter asks if new forms of indirect rule can resolve the destructive conflict between the nationalisms of dominant and minority groups within the same state. Can nation-states be replaced by federal systems?

Alternatives to the Unitary Nation-state. There are successful federations. Amongst these are the “New World” polities—the future-oriented multicultural federations of the United States, Australia, and Canada. Some would deny them the status of nations because in principle these countries reject unity based on ethnic descent in favor of a commitment to political institutions. Unfortunately, these tolerant multicultural models cannot be exported easily because they were founded by immigrants who had at some level rejected their homeland societies and were willing to take on a new identity in a new “empty” land.

This “immigrant nation” identity makes them more open to including

outsiders than European nation-states, but it also means that their relevance is limited for states whose minorities are not diasporic but peoples settled on historic homelands (Catalonia, Wales). In Canada, the issue of Quebec is more analogous to these problems of typical multinational states. Here, the struggle to reconcile the Quebecois with what they see as an ever-increasing Anglophone hegemony looks as unpromising as attempts to harmonize Fleming and Walloon within an increasingly decentralized Belgian state.

In general, the track record of federations between peoples residing on their historic homelands is very mixed. Disintegration remains a possibility as we have recently observed with the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. In Africa, where states were founded on colonial boundaries and govern ethnically heterogeneous populations, minorities too often regard federations as forms of concealed rule by a dominant group.

It could be said that breakdowns of federalism result from the legacy of despotism (in Eastern and Southern Europe) or of colonialism. But, there are successful liberal democratic federations, such as Switzerland, which has often been cited as a general model rather than being a special case: After Versailles, nationalists who sought federation with other small peoples as a way of defending themselves against neighboring great powers cited the Swiss example as justification for the creation of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia.

However, the Swiss success has depended on distinctive factors, including a history of confederation dating from medieval times, given mystique by its heroic defense against the Habsburg Empire. Switzerland has a strong Ger-

man core, and tendencies to internal differentiation are muted by a cantonal system not based on ethnicity and by crosscutting religious allegiances. Brendan O'Leary argues that a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for a viable federation is the control of the state by a demographically dominant nationality.⁸ I would suggest that all

However, others argue that the rise of the European Union can be explained instead as a new strategy by national elites to maximize their sovereignty amid globalization. Moreover, some see the European Union as a hybridization between national and regional loyalties, the start of a process of replacement of the national by the European.¹⁰

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effective states rely on a dominant ethnic core. This is true even for the United States, Australia, and Canada, who have rested on a founding ethnic culture of English (or English and French in Canada's case), which provided the initial basis of cohesion and continues to dominate their public life.

The European Union and the Nation-State. That said, there does appear to be a trend toward regional devolution even in the most centralized states of Western Europe: Great Britain, Spain, and France. Is it possible that, as Charles Tilly suggests, globalization may be undermining the organizational power of the centralized nation-state, and that this in turn means that ethno-cultural homogeneity is no longer required? Weakening central governments and cession of autonomy to discontented nationalities is the pattern in Canada and Belgium, and might mark the future everywhere.⁹

Following Tilly, the European Union can be cited as a fundamental revulsion against the national principle in the name of wider (European) civilization loyalties.

The European Union (EU) can be seen as the latest in a series of attempts to politically unite Europe as an instrument of national ambitions. In the modern period, France and Germany each attempted to establish a European power bloc as a global actor against imperial competitors. What is distinctive about the current project is the alliance of the former enemies, France and Germany, and the voluntary agreement of other European nation-states to pool their sovereignty in a supranational institution as an expression of a general revulsion against the national rivalries that nearly destroyed Europe.

Still, EU politics can be explained by national motives. In most cases, support for the EU arose from a particular conception of national interest. For all member states, participation in the EU gives them status as joint decision-makers on the world stage, which is particularly compelling for small countries to which the Presidency periodically rotates. EU politics are also driven by the national interests of the larger states, notably France and Germany. Strengthening the European Union arose from the French desire

to constrain a re-united Germany within a “European” set of economic institutions and German willingness to offer up its economic autonomy in return for admission of the former communist states, which helped stabilize its eastern borders and extend its influence. Nonetheless, the EU has a supranational as well as intergovernmental character, and its range of regulatory functions is steadily increasing. This suggests a Europe-wide federation may arise as an *indirect effect* of the competitive goals and fears of European nation-states, just as the nations of Europe themselves arose in part as an unintended consequence of competition between royal dynasties.

identity the EU wishes to create is vague and contested. The European project is articulated by reference to an indefinite future-oriented *telos* that represents a rejection of the past of national rivalries. In this it resembles the United States, but the EU was founded by the elites of defeated nation-states and has at best a pragmatic rationale, administered by bureaucrats.

Its defenders argue that the EU is a pioneer of a new form of democratic political community, which acknowledges the reality of multiple and overlapping locations of power and authority. The European Union liberates both dominant and minority

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Can a European identity be found that will eventually transcend national loyalties and underpin a European state? On the other hand, is the future likely to be based on an order that acknowledges the primacy of nation-states while regulating the respective powers of supranational and national institutions?¹¹ Or is the emerging EU *sui generis* a novel entity recognizing the multiple sovereignties of postmodernity?

The introduction of symbols such as an EU flag and anthem and the preoccupation with a European demos suggests the desire to create a European *national* community. But symbols in themselves have no efficacy unless they evoke a sense of a concrete collectivity. Whereas nations evoke heroic images of collective will, a concrete cultural community, and a sacred homeland, the “European”

nations from their fetish of the nation-state. Moreover, a citizenship conceived in European terms would be less exclusive of immigrant minorities and compatible with the multi-cultural realities of contemporary industrial societies.

However, this argument is open to two objections. First, this underestimates the degree to which national identities remain ingrained, and are capable of being re-ignited. The commitment of post-war Germans to a European democratic idealism did not interfere with the impetus to national reunification in 1990 despite statements of alarm by European Union leaders. Second, this does not explain how an indefinite ideology can mobilize European populations to collective action in crisis. Only a potent and def-

inite identity is capable of orienting and mobilizing collective action in order to overcome threats such as eruption of localized wars, Islamist terrorist threats, economic recessions, and the prospect of large-scale immigration. A negative anti-Americanism is not a sufficient binding force, and indeed could be dangerously destabilizing amid current world crises.

The expansion of powers by the European Union intensifies a need to find some form of legitimacy and mandate. To be successful, monetary union will require powers of fiscal coordination, and significant powers of taxation to distribute resources from richer to poorer regions of Europe as compensation for the loss of exchange rate adjustments. The stronger the EU leadership grows, the more it requires cultural power to mobilize consent. But it does not possess even a common language, let alone a bank of myths, memories, and symbols to convey a sense of belonging in a community of sentiment. Judged by a range of measures, including electoral turnouts, the EU currently lacks popular legitimacy compared with its nation-state components.

The danger that the EU may collapse from its own contradictions is all the more likely as an elite-driven integration process gathers momentum despite the absence of a substantiated European democracy that might legitimize the surrender of nation-state powers. Major gaps in popular opinion have already been exposed by ref-

erenda in France, Ireland, and Denmark. The incapacity of representative national institutions to regulate such central areas such as monetary policy and frontier controls makes it all too probable that grievances over unemployment, immigration, and race and ethnicity will be expressed in populist direct action.

Conclusion. Nations are moral communities whose potency comes from what they promise to their members: a sense of unique identity and meaning in the modern world. They are political units, galvanizing their members to great collective sacrifice, most visibly in warfare. Although they are not derivatives of the modern state, the nation-state is still normally the most effective vehicle of their objectives. It is difficult to find effective governmental units that do not rest on a strong national core population. The problem is that such national bases are not easily constructed. Like other European innovations, such as democracy and industrial capitalism, the nation is still putting down roots in the rest of the world. Where there are no prior ethnic traditions on which it can build, the nation may well be a long time in forming. The attempt of states to construct nations in populations with strong ethnic differences may well be divisive, generating secessionist nationalisms. Federal multi-national systems seem to be more viable where there is a long history of mutual trust between populations, and where identity-formation is not conceived as a zero sum game.

NOTES

1 See Montserrat Guibernau, "Globalization and the Nation-state", in Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson, eds., *Understanding Nationalism* (Oxford: Polity, 2001).

2 Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, (New York: Macmillan, 1945).

3 Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; W. H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984; Charles Tilly, "Introduction" in Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

4 Michael Hechter, *Containing Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

5 Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

6 John Hutchinson, "Nations and Culture" in M. Guibernau and J. Hutchinson eds., *Understanding Nationalism* (Oxford: Polity, 2001).

7 Walker Connor, "Nation-building or Nation - destroying?" *World Politics*, 24 (1972).

8 Brendon O'Leary, "An Iron law of Nationalism and Federation? A (neo-Diceyan) Theory of the Necessity of a Federal *Staatsvolk*, and of Consociational Rescue," *Nations and Nationalism*, Volume 7, Issue 3 (2001).

9 Charles Tilly, "States and Nationalism in Europe 1492-1992" in John Comaroff and Paul Stern eds., *Perspectives on Nationalism and War* (Amsterdam: Gordon Breach Publishers, 1995).

10 For an excellent discussion of these and related issues, see Paul Gowers and Paul Anderson eds. (*The Question of Europe*, London: Verso, 1997).

11 For further discussion, see John Hutchinson, "Enduring Nations and the Illusions of European Integration" in Willfried Spohn and Anna Triandafyllidou, eds., *Europeanisation, National Identities and Migration: Changes in Boundary Constructions between Western and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2002).