The Nation-State: An Oxymoronic Relationship?

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International relations theorists often refer to the 'nation-state' in their analyses, tending to avoid academic precision. Some years ago, a seminar concluded that international relations as a discipline had come to view dialogue and synthesis as incompatible objectives (Hellman, 123–53), thus underling by default that there was no single all-encompassing theory. Seeking precision on the meaning of 'nation-state' is a Sisyphean task, essentially because the term 'nation' is laden with all manner of emotions, such as nostalgia, atavism and indeed 'nationalism', whereas the term 'state' is devoid of that, as it is essentially legal, specific and dry. Etymologically speaking, a nation is where one is born, but with emphasis on ethnicity (the Greek word for nation is 'ethnos'). Thus, a nation can transcend borders, one of the most obvious examples being that of international Jewry, or the Greek diaspora. As such, very few nations correspond precisely to state borders.

Mass movements of populations have rendered a precise definition of a nation difficult. For example, when an American president speaks of the American nation, one can wonder whether he means anyone born in the US, which includes original indigenous tribes and elements of various other nations, or whether he really means 'state', but prefers to hide reality with the more emotional sounding 'nation'. According to *Britannica*, a nation-state is a territorially bounded sovereign polity—i.e. a state—that is ruled in the name of a community of citizens who identify themselves as a nation. Yet this 'one size fits all' definition does not correspond to reality. It might almost apply to Japan and Iceland, but (for example) the US is full of different nationalities.

The concept of state is at least simpler: a group of peoples living within a defined and internationally recognised border, with its own government and sovereignty. As such, territory is the essential factor. We know enough about the ancient Greek city states and Renaissance Italy to see that states based on territory have existed for a long time. But when we come to the term nation-state matters become complicated. First, many IR analysts, often of the realist school, use nation and state interchangeably. A way of avoiding this ambiguity is to use the word 'country', but even that is vague. To confuse the issue, politicians and others use the term national interest when they really mean state interest (we shall discuss interests a little later). Even the term international relations lacks in precision, since it really means inter-state relations. It is well known that the expression 'international' came into use through the famous mistake made by Jeremy Bentham when he coined it to describe the system of law between sovereign states as a translation of the term *ius gentium*, which the Romans used to refer to the corpus of rules, controlled, of course, by Rome. Perhaps 'inter-nation relations' would be a less woolly term.

Unlike with the word 'state', it is difficult to fully grasp the term 'nation-state': it seems to be a utopian ideal at best or an oxymoron at worst. The fixation with the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 by many IR analysts and historians has rather muddied the waters, since there are claims that the concept of sovereignty arose out of the various associated treaties. While it is recorded that various sovereign German states were created out of the Holy Roman Empire, and that they were able to choose whether to be Roman Catholic or Protestant, and that the principle of equality between states was established, Jean Bodin had already established the current concept of sovereignty in 1576, in his work *Les Six Livres de la République*, in which he argued that a state should be sovereign. There are also differing interpretations of sovereignty, perhaps one of the more extreme versions being encapsulated in Louis XIV's statement '*L'état, c'est moi'*, underpinned by Richelieu's emphasis on the king as sovereign. This form of absolutism was also shared by Hobbes, although he also emphasised the idea of a social contract.

As for the Peace of Westphalia's contribution to the idea of sovereign states respecting each other's sovereignty, it could even be argued that it served as a failed attempt to establish a permanent peace, since it led to further strife, this time between nominally sovereign countries, perhaps because de Groot's ideas on international law, encapsulated in his book *On the Law of War and Peace*, published in 1625, were not to every sovereign state's liking. Let us also recall that the treaties themselves did not mention nation-state. This was left to all manner of later theoreticians, each with their own axe to grind, whether political or academic.

As to the idea of Westphalian religious freedom, in 1685, France revoked the Edict of Nantes, which guaranteed freedom of worship to Protestants in 1598, and England continued to discriminate against Roman Catholics until well into the nineteenth century. Religion and nationalism continue to be a problem to this day, as the case of the break-up of Yugoslavia and, at a world level, Moslem fundamentalism and Christian Zionism demonstrate. Attempts to create states based on nations have failed, as, for example, the case of the Kurds and Yugoslavia dramatically show, and continue to show, and as a glimpse at Albanian nationalism, and Bosnia-Herzegovina show. The nation-state is simply an ideal, rendered impossible because the word 'nation', with its emotional, atavistic and ethnic content, clashes with the cold and rational state. A homogenous nation governed by its own sovereign state is more of an ideal than a reality, although Iceland and Japan may claim to a measure of convergence between state and nation. Having now established a clear idea of the recent origins of statehood, and criticised the muddled concepts of the nation-state, let us move closer to our aim of demonstrating its dangers, and how trying to equate the nation with the state is misplaced.

In recent times, we have heard much about 'national' interests. Richelieu is credited, with his *raison d'état*, with pursuing and justifying state interests. But then the word 'national', with its ethnic connotations, began to complicate matters. Following the French revolution's emphasis on nations, new states were formed. State interests began to takeover and, in many cases, transcend, ethnic national interests, with economic interests coming to the fore. In this connexion, the Balkans provide a fascinating example of external interests and religious and ethnic clashes, where foreign state interests combined with nationalism into a dangerous cocktail.

As we now move closer to sorting out the semantic conundrum, we can posit that the term 'nation-state' has its roots primarily in France and Germany. In France, the first attempt to marry the state and the nation dates back to the years of the French Revolution and, in particular, to Abbé Sieyès. In his political pamphlet 'What Is the Third Estate?', published in 1789, he wrote that that the third estate comprised the people of France, constituting a complete nation within itself (Sieyès, 98). In other words, 'nation' was the 'state' and vice-versa. It was the turning point, when the very idea of sovereignty shifted from the rulers to the people, creating a new kind of state. Thus, the French Revolution, together with German Romanticism (and Johann Gottlieb Fichte foremost), gave birth to the idea that the nation creates the state. However, with the state apparatus becoming bigger and more powerful throughout the Nineteenth Century, the balance between nation and state had changed. It was now the state sitting on top of the nation.

This idea was first popularised in the German Empire by Friedrich Meinecke and his concept of *Nationalstaat* which was based on his obsession with *raison d-état*. His ideas were then followed up by Americans. The Oxford English Dictionary's earliest evidence for the term nation-state is from 1895, in *Political Science Quarterly*, an American publication. It later became one of the major principles of classic realism in IR theory. One of the founding fathers of realism, Hans Morgenthau, provided a supreme example of how the US took over the mantle of state interests in the name of national interests (Morgenthau, 54). For him national interest combined the national and the state interest, although it was clear that common people had very little say in formulating that interest; it was primarily the state that used its mandate and position to speak for the people (or even instead of the people).

As soon as the state took over the nation, the latter started to lose its initial meaning and influence. It is not surprising that the most extreme totalitarian models of the Twentieth Century, including Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy, perverted the whole idea of nation, making it little more than a symbolic instrument in the hands of a powerful bureaucracy. The Soviet Union switched the concept of the nation for 'the people', trying to get rid of the cultural and traditional roots of the nation, but it made little difference in the end, because it was only the all-mighty state that mattered.

We can therefore posit with a fair degree of certitude that the all-mighty concept of the state began in Germany, with German logic, and was then taken up by America, albeit with Morgenthau's German origins. In this connexion, let us quote Leo Tolstoy, who appears to have had a perceptive view, if irritating to some, of this logic:

A Russian is self-assured just because he knows nothing and does not want to know anything, since he does not believe that anything can be known. The German's self-assurance is worst of all, stronger and more repulsive than any other, because he imagines that he knows the truth – science – which he has himself invented but which is for him the absolute truth (Tolstoy, 505).

At this point, before we conclude, it is difficult to avoid mentioning ethnicity and the racial theories that grew out of the Enlightenment, as components of the totalitarian state. Unlike Soviet socialism, which recognised only one race (the human one), the Germans and then Americans latched onto racial superiority (the Germans with their 'super-race', and the Americans with their attitude towards indigenous Americans and Blacks). Nor were the British excluded: Sir Francis Younghusband (famous for having led the invasion of Tibet in 1904) wrote: 'our superiority over them [Indians] is not due to mere sharpness of intellect, but to the higher moral nature to which we have attained in the development of the human race' (Huttenback, 15). Not to be outdone, a Liberal Member of Parliament, Sir Charles Dilke, considered America as the agent of Anglo-Saxon domination, predicting a great racial conflict from which 'Saxendom would rise triumphant' with China, Japan, Africa and South America soon falling to the all-conquering Anglo-Saxon, and Italy, Spain, France and Russia 'becoming pygmies by the side of such people'. Then we have the revered explorer, mining magnate and politician Cecil Rhodes:

I contend that we are the finest race in the world and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race. Just fancy those parts that are at present inhabited by the most despicable specimens of human beings what an alteration there would be if they were brought under Anglo-Saxon influence, look again at the extra employment a new country added to our dominions gives (Flint, 248-252).

By the Twenties and Thirties, racism was well ensconced in the politics of the West, as for example Mosley's Blackshirts and the French Croix de Feu demonstrate. While racism may not have been the main driving force behind authoritarian statism, it was surely a useful tool in the hands of Nazis.

Today people can hardly imagine their social environment without a state. The irony of history is that despite the rise and the fall of ideologies rejecting the state or trying to limit it (anarchism, liberalism, libertarianism, communism), the state has gradually become stronger, particularly in the Twentieth and Twenty First centuries. Enormous state bureaucracies, powerful ruling parties and regulation of most aspects of living, are considered to be acceptable elements of everyday life. A recent example is the Covid lockdown, accepted by most, although seen by critics as exaggerated, and even as a social experiment.

A government can be seen as a natural and integral form of organisation of the political life of a society or community, whereas the state is an invention, a machine that bestraddles society. For Thomas Hobbes, who created a modern concept of the state, it represented the idea of a 'mortal god, to which we owe under the Immortal God, our peace and defence.' (Hobbes, 227). But as soon as the state was created, there was only one way for it to evolve, in the direction of control, rationalisation of social life, and even coercion. Peace and defence came at a price that everyone had to accept and pay. Today, regimes, political parties and rulers can gain or lose legitimacy, but the state as a machine will never lose it, because it is a structure that no one really rejects. People can be angry about the state, they can criticise it, but all they can do through democratic or revolutionary means is change who manages the state.

French post-structuralists like Michel Foucault argued that we all live in certain social structures that surround us from the moment are born and get socialised. We accept power structures and certain hierarchies, often subconsciously; we may dislike them, but we understand that they are part of the surrounding world, just like nature. However, the state is not only a machine, but creates knowledge, norms and rules which people are obliged to follow. The idea of the state does not depend on ideology or morals, but is deeply rooted in major social and political institutions like education, the military, government, science, and often the church, even if initially all these institutions arose when the state barely existed. They were absorbed and transfigured by the leviathan. But the state could not

do it all by itself, which is why it has often hidden behind the interests of the nation or the people, acting in the name of progress and goodwill.

States grew out of a need among national groups to create order and effective government. Later, national groupings grew increasingly subservient to the state, a process which detracted to some extent from their culture and identity. Put in another way, the stronger the state became internally, the less the influence of atavistic national groupings. Weak state structures and administration have led to incipient confusion as, for example with the Weimar Republic, eventually resulting in a totalitarian system. As it appears that we cannot live without the state, we must better learn how to defend our individual independence within it, rather than be bolts and screws in a soulless machine. When all is said and done, in order to avoid impending totalitarian tendencies, a better balance needs to be found between the nation and the state. Using the oxymoronic term 'nation-state' (a veritable mental manacle), as if the state and nation were one and the same, will not help us to do this.

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