

Some aphorism on the Concept of Nation State, on Indispensability of a Transnational Approach, as well as a Footnote on IS

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Introductory remarks:

In the following, some hypotheses - the gist of which boils down to saying that the nation state as the main subject of international relations has not only become obsolete but even dangerous in the sense that it limits the problem-solving capacity of mankind - will be formulated. The closely connected suspicion that political systems - which use the nation state as their main framework of reference, be it party political democracy, one-party-system or otherwise - are necessarily intertwined with the nation state and thereby become dangers to the same degree as the nation state.

I am aware of the fact that such hypotheses sound somewhat heretic and that they will necessarily provoke the question of what kind of historical subject should take the place of the nation state. Despite this, I would like to ask the counter-question whether criticism is only valid if a substitute of the object of criticism is presented immediately.

Should we not grant ourselves the luxury to criticize obvious irrational facts of the case, even if we are not able to present a concrete alternative? The argument “you are not able to describe an alternative to what you are criticizing” is a knock out argument which serves the perpetuation of the status quo even if its irrational nature is obvious. I strongly believe that there is a momentum of progressivity contained in criticism and that criticism or – in the Hegelian sense – simple negation, already carries a momentum of progress which will unfold even if, for the time being, its concrete nature remains undefined.

The following train of thoughts is of a fragmentary character in the sense that it puts some riders on some non-systematic observations. It is supposed to function more in the sense of a research program instead of claiming theory-status. The aim is not more but also not less than directing attention to a possibly very dangerous development.

The Problem

The Norwegian sociologist and political scientist Johan Galtung has coined the concept of “structural violence”. This somewhat misleading term is supposed to apply to a situation which is characterized by avoidable derogation of basic human needs and by the fact that the degree of satisfaction of requirements is below the level of what would potentially be possible.

Nobody can seriously deny that in today’s world a lot of structural violence in the above sense can be diagnosed.

In this context I would like to discuss the hypothesis that a great deal of structural violence in the above sense can be explained by the fact that the present structure of international relations is mainly based on the concept of the so called “nation state” while the most serious problems mankind is faced with are of transnational nature. Such problems are a. o.:

- 1) Greatly uneven distribution of natural resources such as energy, water, minerals which leads to dangerous tensions over and over again.
- 2) Other transnational problems are: climate change, pollution, migration, hunger, diseases, poverty et al.
- 3) Another set of transnational problems is composed of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, spread of transnational organized crime and terrorism et al. There is the danger or even trend that these three evils would amalgamate into a triple pole-threat with the capacity to even question the very survival of mankind in no distant future.

The above hypothesis can be acuminated in the sense that transnational solutions to transnational problems are imaginable only to the degree to which the idea of the nation state as **the** historical subject is abandoned. One could argue that we are already on the way to develop possibilities of transnational problem solving by creating multilateral forms of cooperation between nation states. Yet, all these associations (with the United Nations being the most inclusive one) are associations of nation states and decisions taken by them are the outcome of a parallelogram of forces called “constellation of nation states”. Accordingly, taken decisions cannot but always reproduce the limitations of the nation state and not really solve problems of transnational nature.

In a nutshell: “transnational” does not refer to the involvement of a smaller or greater number of nations or nation states, but it refers to facts of the case which signify a completely new quality of problems as well as solutions to problems both of which are situated in a “dimension” which essentially transcends a world of acting subjects called

“nation states”. It was James Fenimore Cooper, who in one of his novels let somebody ask “do you want to hunt the wind with a cloud?” In the same vein we can ask “can we solve transnational problems if we carry on considering the nation state as the unquestioned historical subject?”

Excursus: Some brief remarks on the concept of “nation state”

The nation state is a historical phenomenon without any claim to universality. It has come and it will go away again. The nation state is a framework of identification which is a creation happened in roughly the second half of the 18th/first half of the 19th century. There was no such thing as a nation state before and in not too distant a future there will be no nation state any more either. The nation state came into existence to the degree to which traditional frameworks of identification such as: family, extended family system, tribe, clan, local community etc. lost their function of providing a “home” both in terms of material safety as well as in socio-psychological positioning. Observing more closely what brought about the rise of the nation state we can find that **it was not the nation which created nationalism as a means of self-realization, but it was nationalists who created nationalism.** This is to say that due to mainly socio-economic developments, traditional frameworks of identification lost the ability to provide what I called “home” and as an implication, growing number of individuals felt compelled to create the fiction of a wider “togetherness” which was supposed to make up for the lost “home”. The creators and propagators of that new fiction were the “nationalists”. Their desire of nation building met the interests of power elites which saw nationalism as an apt ideology for sustainability of their interests in volatile times. They “borrowed” the fiction of the nation from nationalists and started the process of “nation building” by providing symbols of a wider togetherness: The fiction of the nation became political reality. These are extremely simplified remarks on the rise of the nation state about which an abundance of literature exists. What is important to note though is the historical nature of the nation state; it came into existence for reasons one can understand and it will disappear again once it is realized that it fails to fulfill its function. A lot should and could be said about “political” and “romantic” nationalism, about the role of the historical myth in the process of nation building and the historical tragedies which were implications of the nationalist ideology; yet I would like to leave it at that.

Regarding political culture and political systems of nation states we find an amazing array from dictatorial, authoritarian, as well as democratic systems (in all variations). From the historical point of view the first nation state originating in France towards the end of the 18th century was intertwined with the quest for democracy in the sense of political co-determination: The absolute king's advisory body called "la nation", which consisted only of representatives of nobility and clergy, became the object of political ambition in the sense of co-determination of the rising "Third Estate", the "bourgeoisie": The "bourgeois" wanted to become part of "la nation" as well and exert political co-determination in that body and in this sense became a "nationalist".

History though has shown that it is very well possible that nation states can come into existence without that ingredient of extended political co-determination or quest for democracy which characterized the French nation state: The auto-stereotype of a society can very well be the nation state without what we are used to call "democracy": Nazi-Germany e.g. considered itself a nation state, as well as all sorts of socialist dictatorships and "caudillo-states".

A closer look at failure of "nation building"

There are 193 so called "nation states" which constitute the membership of the United Nations. Only in recent times (beginning in the 1940ies) most of these states left behind their colonial status and later were proclaimed as "nation states". Historical accident has defined the boundaries of post-colonial nation states: Pseudo identities were conjured up with regard to territorial entities. These were carved out according to the power position held by respective colonial powers at the time of de-colonization. In most cases it was the departing colonial power which – directly or indirectly – enthroned first generation power elites. These power elites had to embark on what is euphemistically called "nation building" in order to defend their position within mostly highly heterogeneous geographic entities. Unlike in 18th and 19th century Europe, when, in the wake of industrialization dissolution of traditional patterns of identification gave room to the introduction of a wider and more abstract framework of identification, namely the "nation" and the "nation state", in most post-colonial entities "nation building" referred to the introduction of symbols of unity or belonging, which in reality did not exist. Such symbols are: National flag, national anthem,

national airport, national army etc. which were complemented by historiography supposed to prove that since the remotest past the territory in question was geared towards re-establishing a unity which allegedly had already existed during some remote “golden age”.

To cut a long story short: A multitude of so called “nation states” which have emerged from the rubble of decolonization are **highly artificial constructions held together more by particularistic krypto-dictatorship of respective power elites than by the feeling of togetherness on part of a highly fragmented society which is only able to fit into the artificial “national framework” as long as the state can satisfy a minimum of aspirations.** Failing this, the state unavoidably turns a failing state and national unity reveals its true illusionary nature.

I would like to leave it at these few fragmentary remarks and mention one example to show the lack of problem-solving capacity on part of nation states as well as allude to reasons for this.

My example is the rise of the so called **Islamic State** which mercilessly points to the lack of problem-solving capacity on part of the political class of established nation states.

The Islamic State (IS) has taken roots in areas where, due to the continuity of traditional frameworks of identification, pseudo-nation states found fertile ground to originate. Nation building was conjured up and enacted by deeply authoritarian or dictatorial power elites and was never able to permeate society on its whole. This state of affairs could maintain a certain stability as long as the pseudo nation state was able to deliver the goods - meaning to provide an acceptable minimum of material security. Failing to do so the pseudo nation states collapsed and the true structure of society, namely a conglomerate of tribes, extended family systems, clientele systems, often intertwined with one each other, came into existence: During the “low ebb of delivery of goods” on part of the pseudo nation states the smooth “sea-surface” of false conjuration of unity disappeared and revealed the true lacerated nature of the not at all smooth “seabed”.

This was the right moment to offer replacement for the discredited framework of identification called “nation state” and the idea of a new transnational order could take roots in societies which in reality were deeply fragmented.

In a nutshell: The failing of pseudo-nation states has opened up vast opportunities for transnational ideologies such as the ones on which success regarding recruitment on part of IS, is living. **This context has not yet sufficiently been taken cognizance of by the political class which is mostly not used to abstract thinking. This again is due to the selection process through which in party political democracies the political class is constituted. The result is that politicians in most cases are not really able to understand a phenomenon such as IS - let alone to efficiently tackle problems which are caused by that phenomenon. The average politician is used to turn a blind eye to problems which transcend his world of problems in which the nation state is the God-given historical subject and party political democracy the only system in which people disposing of problem solving capacities can rise.**

In that sense it is the **obscene parochialism of the political class** which allows for the solution of problems such as the ones caused by IS **only once the maximum damage has already occurred. Until this has happened we must expect that political decision makers will doggedly cling to a mindset they are used to, yet is unable to come to terms with phenomena which are situated beyond the small world which is constituted by the quest for re-election and vane fuss of media-prone activism.**

Regarding IS I'm afraid that one of the top experts on terrorism, a former director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism, is right in saying that the "jinni is already out of the bottle". We should not entertain any hope that politicians who run the show today will be able to "bottle it up again" with the mindset at their disposal.

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