

Estoril Political Forum 2018
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Thoughts on the Nation State

We live in an imperfect world; or, more accurately, we are imperfect beings. As Hans Sachs has it, in his great Wahn monologue in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, throughout history and at all times 'people torment and flay each other in useless foolish anger, until they draw blood... driven to flight, each one thinks he is hunting; he hears not his own pain when he digs into his own flesh, he thinks he is giving himself pleasure...' Looking around the world in 2018, it would be hard to maintain that torment and mutual flaying are not apparently ineradicable features of human behavior and life. Throughout history: we haven't suddenly emerged into an era in which human nature is quite unlike what it has been in the past. Improvements can be pointed to, to be sure, but as recently as June 2018 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees pointed out that there are currently more refugees and persons displaced for predominantly political/military reasons than ever before in the history of the world (some 68.5 million).

True, we have other, more angelic qualities, but no one can deny anger and worse in our hearts. Fine words and high ideals, religious or otherwise, might hide the inner demon, even our own inner demon, but with each of us, unless we are saints (and maybe even if we are saints), the negative in us will all too often find another way of manifesting itself. The moralizing will to power, so well skewered by Nietzsche, is as prevalent (in each of us?), as is the potential for naked aggression. The actual experience of the 'peace and love' generation of the 60s, has morphed into the bleaker, more realistic message 'never trust a hippy'.

However, whatever the dismal truth about human nature, original sin if you like, it is also true that there are and have been eras and places where the flaying and tormenting have receded, with life being more peaceful, orderly and pleasant. Most of us here benefit from living in such conditions, which makes it the more imperative that we understand and maintain the conditions that make and are making such a mode of life possible.

At the most basic level Pascal has it right when he says that justice without strength is a contradiction, because there are always wicked people, yet strength without justice is an indictment, so the two must be joined. Yet he goes on to say that while strength cannot be argued with, justice is always open to wrangling. (*Pensees*, 135) So, how do we combine strength and justice, and avoid the degeneration of justice into wrangling?

My hypothesis is that, in the words of J.S.Mill, echoing those of John Jay in *Federalist 2*, strength with justice is best secured where there are 'common sympathies' between the inhabitants of a land which 'do not exist between them and any others', and which are based on 'identity of political antecedents; the possession of national history and the consequent community of recollections; collective pride and humiliation, pleasure and regret connected with the same incidents in the past' - in other words within a stable nation state. (See J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism, on Liberty and Representative Government*, ed G.Williams, Everyman, London, 1993, p 391)

In saying this I am standing in conscious opposition to the dominant figures in political philosophy, Locke and Kant. Locke and his successors will place the justice of a political order in contract and choice, real or imagined. But choice cannot project the sympathy and

loyalty necessary to bind a population together, to found the unspoken sense of belonging which makes the strength necessary to enforce justice tolerable, or to sustain the unargued agreement in judgement and sensibility which makes explicit argument and contract possible. Wittgenstein, whose thought I am here echoing, speaks here of agreement 'not in opinions, but in form of life'. (*Philosophical Investigations*, 1.241) Agreement in form of life becomes increasingly problematic when the great swell of contemporary philosophers and legislators will allow us no more than recourse to abstract rational principles.

Kant adds to the Lockean notion of rational contractors founding a polity an ingrained cosmopolitanism and distaste for the nation state. In *Perpetual Peace* he says that nation states must 'renounce their savage and lawless freedom, adapt themselves to public coercive laws, and thus form an *international state*, which would necessarily continue to grow until it embraced all the people of the earth.' (See Kant's *Political Writings*, ed H. Reiss, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p 105.)

Kant's vision – which is embodied in part in such transnational organisations as the EU, the World Bank, the IMF and in agencies of the United Nations, and their supporters in politics and academia – is partly inspired by a sense that nation states (barbaric, coarse and brutish in their mentality, according to Kant) will forever engage in wars and conflicts with each other. It is also rationalist in the sense that the international state he advocates will be formed from scratch by agreement among its members (nation states, presumably) on a priori principles. Models here might be the EU and the United Nations, though in theory neither of these organisations are actually committed to eradicating national customs and boundaries. (In theory: there is, of course, a constant dynamic in the EU to 'ever greater union', pervasive rhetoric about 'moving forward' and not just rhetoric: the single currency and removal of borders within the EU are big strides in the direction of the federalist ideal).

Nation states, by contrast, tend to have emerged from pre-existing loyalties and sense of community and have often developed in piecemeal quasi-empirical fashion, responding to changing conditions and circumstances as required. Of course, not all such states are successful or, to outsiders anyway, desirable. Some are doubtless objectionable in all sorts of ways to insiders as well. But where, as in the case of the Anglo-American and Western European democracies, they do work, they are among the most stable and prosperous countries the world has known, and also countries in which internally there is some balance of strength and justice, and the worst of human nature is tempered and controlled.

It would also be hard to argue on the basis of these examples to-day that nation states are inherently aggressive, and here we might make a distinction between empires and nation states. Some nation states have had militaristic pasts and some have had imperial ambitions and histories – e.g. France under Napoleon, Britain in the nineteenth century particularly, Germany under Hitler, where other nations had their sovereignty suppressed and were brought under the rule of one nation. On the latter point it is noteworthy that both Burke and Mill – defenders of the British nation - were critics of the British empire, which they saw as attempting to exercise control over distant peoples with whom people in Britain had little knowledge or sympathy. For the record, Burke defended the rights of the Irish against the English ascendancy, the American revolutionaries against the British Crown and was coruscating in his objections to Warren Hasting's adventurism in India.

It is also the case that in the right circumstances established nations often exist in peace with other nations. Nor is nationalism incompatible with sharing universal ideals of basic rights

and freedoms, and here we need to distinguish between universalism (an ethico-political ideal which can be shared by different peoples in a variety of circumstances and be implemented within national boundaries) and cosmopolitanism (the political project advocated by Kant of eliminating national boundaries and differences). Indeed universalist ideals of individual rights and the rest have flourished most notably within western nation states, all committed to the preservation of life, liberty and property, but within distinctive contexts and traditions, historical and ethical.

In the dispute between nationalism and internationalism, we have a case of the classic tension between rationalism and empiricism, and also that between the better and the best. In the latter case where what works reasonably well in some circumstances and up to a point, is undermined or taken over by a new, as yet untried state of affairs, supposedly much better. This new putative best is not based on experience and does not command loyalty or affection. In the case of cosmopolitanism is in its own way inherently imperialistic, sweeping away national feeling and custom in the name of a cold perfectionist vision, motivated only by the bloodless gruel of what Jurgen Habermas, one of its advocates, calls 'constitutional patriotism'.

NOTE. These thoughts were a brief reply to William Galston's 'In Defense of a Reasonable Patriotism', his Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture, both given at the 2018 Estoril Political Forum. In them I have drawn on Galston's lecture and also on Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, New York: Basic Books, 2018.