THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

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The Uncertain State of the Nations

A Survey of Recent Articles

In the disorienting world that emerged after the end of the Cold War, both *subnational* ethnic groups and *supranational* organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the European Community (EC) seem to have become more important. Several major multiethnic nation-states—the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia—have split apart, peacefully or violently. Others—including India, Afghanistan, and Ethiopia—seem threatened by ethnic or religious conflict. Meanwhile, the UN has intervened, on humanitarian grounds, in Somalia, the former Yugoslavia, and elsewhere. What is the future of the supposedly sovereign nation-state and of the modern international system that emerged three-and-one-half centuries ago? Are national loyalties giving way to others—allegiances to ethnic groups, to religions, to civilizations?

"The multiplication of different types of actors, loyalties, and conflicts," Pierre Hassner, director at the Centre d'Études et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, writes in *Survival* (Summer 1993), is leading "to a return in some respects to the 16th century, to the power of merchant towns and religious wars. In other respects, it is a return to the Middle Ages when, in contrast to the modern nation-state and its monopoly of violence, order was based on a variety of actors, of authorities, territorial and not territorial, of loyalties, and of rivalries." Instead of the medieval emperor and pope, there are "an ambivalent emperor of sorts—the United States . . . and an aspiring pope and church—the United Nations." But they lack sufficient legitimacy, not least in each other's eyes, and sufficient resources "to impose order on the system as a whole," Hassner says.

During the Cold War, most international conflicts "tended to be seen through the prism of East-West confrontation," he notes. "Today, principles are much more universal—and universally accepted—but conflicts are more idiosyncratic." The small community, based on family or family-like ties, "feels threatened by modern society with its constant flow of people, goods and messages, with its bureaucratic and technological constraints, with its economic and cultural appeals." The nation-state represents a compromise between ethnic communities and the demands of that increasingly global society. "Through its language, its education, its shared memories and myths, [the nation-state] retains some relation to its roots and some elements of warmth and community. Yet, through its bigger size, its impersonal laws, its bureaucratic organization, it comes closer to fulfilling the requirements of modern society." The more the nation-state accommodates modernity, however, Hassner says, the more people shift their loyalties to ethnic communities. So, paradoxically, as the idea of "world order" becomes more popular, the world itself becomes more fragmented.

Nationalism emerged in England during the 16th century, writes Liah Greenfeld, a professor of social sciences at Harvard University, in an issue of *Daedalus* (Summer 1993) devoted to "Reconstructing Nations and States." Upwardly mobile commoners who had reached the top of the English social ladder "found unacceptable

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the traditional image of society in which social mobility was an anomaly, and substituted a new image for it, that of a *nation* as it came to be understood in modern times." The word had referred to a political and cultural elite, but these new social leaders "made it synonymous with the 'people' of England." Thus, "every member of the people was elevated to the dignity of the elite, becoming, in principle, equal to any other member."

"It is this quality that recommended nationalism to European (and later other) elites whose status was threatened or who were prevented from achieving the status they aspired to," she avers. It "ensured the spread of nationalism throughout the world in the last two centuries." Today, she says, the dignity conferred by nationality remains a potent force, and she sees no substitute capable of replacing it.

But Eastern and Western concepts of nationhood differ, Pierre Hassner insists. The Eastern concept, manifested in the breakup of several formerly communist multiethnic nations, is "an ethnic one (based on common culture defined in terms of race, language, tradition, or religion) rather than a constitutional one (based on state, territory, citizenship, and political principles) as in the West." Turning multiethnic nations into ethnically homogeneous ones, however, is all but impossible in the modern world. Borders are too permeable and ethnic populations too intertwined.

Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington maintains that nation-states will continue to be "the most powerful actors in world affairs." The chief force that will direct nations and other political "actors" in the new age will be not ideology or economic interests but culture, he argues in a much-noted essay in *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993): "The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics."

Throughout the world, he observes, economic modernization and social change "are separating people from longstanding local identities" and weakening the nation-state as a source of identity. They are also bringing people from different civilizations together, making them more aware of their differences and more conscious of their own civilizations. The revival of religion, often in fundamentalist forms, "provides a basis for identity and commitment that transcends national boundaries and unites civilizations."

There are "seven or eight" major civilizations, by Huntington's count: Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, and "possibly" African. They have fundamentally different views of "the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife." They also differ strongly on "the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy." The "central axis of world politics," Huntington predicts, will be "the conflict between 'the West and the Rest' and the responses of non-Western civilizations to Western power and values."

Responding along with a half-dozen others to Huntington in *Foreign Affairs* (Sept.–Oct. 1993), Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, a political scientist at Georgetown University and former U.S. ambassador to the UN, points out that the most violent conflicts in this century have taken place, not *between* civilizations, but *within* them, including "Stalin's purges, Pol Pot's genocide, the Nazi holocaust and World War II." Likewise, she notes, "the first target of Islamic fundamentalists is not another civilization, but their own governments." Modernization is "eroding the strength of local and national cultures and identifications," making identification with civilizations more important. But "the great question for non-Western societies," she says, "is whether they can be modern without being Western."

The power of Hindu nationalists, Islamic fundamentalists, and other traditionalists should not be exaggerated, argues Fouad Ajami, a Johns Hopkins professor of Middle Eastern studies, in *Foreign Affairs*. The lines between civilizations are far less sharp than Huntington believes, Ajami says, and the voices of tradition are often loudest "when people no longer really believe."

"The things and ways that the West took to 'the rest' . . . have become the ways of the world," Ajami says. "The secular idea, the state system and the balance of power, pop culture jumping tariff walls and barriers, the state as an instrument of welfare, all these have been internalized in the remotest places. We have stirred up the very storms into which we now ride."