

theirview

Liberty and the nation state

The relationship between liberty and nationalism is at once close, complex and contradictory

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is a civil servant. These are his personal views.

Central to the European Enlightenment, the concepts of liberty and nation state have profoundly shaped the modern world. Beginning with the English, American and French Revolutions in the 17th and 18th centuries, these forces also inspired anti-colonial movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the struggle against authoritarian, communist and fascist regimes that rages to this day.

That the same concepts should lie behind modern democratic and authoritarian regimes is something of a conundrum. The relationship between liberty and nationalism is at once close, complex and contradictory. It is unsurprisingly widely misunderstood.

These tensions are apparent from the writings of the great political thinkers who shaped modernity, and have not been resolved to this day. Jean Jacques Rousseau drew a distinction between natural liberty, the freedom to pursue one's own desires, and civil or moral liberty, the freedom to follow the general will.

Does the state exist primarily to protect individual rights or the general will? John Locke and Thomas Hobbes took different positions based on opposing notions of man. For Locke, man was by nature a social animal. In the state of nature, though insecure, men mostly kept their promises, honoured their obligations, and were peaceful and pleasant. Locke's view was that the state exists to preserve the natural rights of citizens. When governments fail in that task, citizens can withdraw support and even rebel.

John Stuart Mill, one of the most intransigent defenders of individual liberties, went further to argue that such freedoms also needed to be protected from transgressions by the state. The American constitution is informed by this 'negative' concept of liberty as it seeks to limit the reach of the state on individual freedoms.

Herein lie the roots of modern libertarianism wherein the individual is free to pursue whatever he wants, including offending, but not harming, others. In the words of Voltaire, "I disagree with everything you say but shall defend to the death your right to say it."

Running counter to this 'negative' concept of liberty is the positive concept that flows from Rousseau's civil or moral liberty. According to Hobbes, man is not by nature a social animal. The state of nature is violent, where life is "nasty, brutish and short". Human society could not exist except by the power of the state. Rights were conceded to the state in return for life. Whatever the state does is just by definition. Rights are not natural but given to citizens by the state. Society is a direct creation of the state, and the common will a reflection of the will of the ruler.

Till very recently, human societies were intensely local, with most people rarely travelling beyond their village. It was the technological revolution of the industrial era that made possible rapid mass transportation of people, goods and ideas across long distances. This laid the basis of the absolutist state that undermined local state-like autonomies and the birth of civil society, without which the emergence of national identity was difficult.

This led, first, to the decline of the great empires like the Hapsburg, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman, with submerged nationalities forming their own states in the wake of the French Revolution, and subsequently to nationalist movements in the colonies and the decline of European imperial empires, such as the British and French.

Although originally a liberating force, the intellectual roots of the nation state lay in the positive concept of liberty. It did not guarantee greater individual freedoms, which could be subordinated to the com-



mon will embodied in the state. The nation state led to the rise of both liberal democracies in Europe on the one hand, and communist and fascist regimes on the other. Most post-colonial nation states were authoritarian dictatorships of the right or left.

Just as the nation state emerged at a particular point in history as a liberating and integrating force, it is currently being undermined by globalizing forces and is now more a constraining force, dividing people and with a mission creep extending far beyond protecting life and natural rights. Technology that once undermined medieval localism through the communications revolution is now undermining the nation state through the digital revolution, empowering people through greater choice in goods, services, ideas and relationships that transcend national boundaries. Macroeconomic policies devised for closed economies are becoming ineffective through increasing cross-border trade, capital and policy spillovers which have made the US dollar the global currency and the US Federal Reserve the global central bank. Post-war institutions of global governance centred on the nation state, such as the United

Nations, World Trade Organization and Bretton Woods have become dysfunctional. Conventional war among nations has become irrelevant where there is a vast technological gap between the greatest military power and the rest. Warfare has already acquired a post-nation state form: stateless, global and directed at individual rather than national liberty.

The nation state is also giving the state greater controlling powers reminiscent of the Orwellian classic *1984*. Nationalist sentiments are now strongest among rising powers where there are the greatest constraints on individual liberties even as they weaken in freer societies. It may well be the case that individual liberty can now thrive best in a post-nationalist world. Plurilateral arrangements like the European Union and the resurgent G20, disorderly as they might presently appear, and beyond that science fiction like *Star Trek*, give us a glimpse of what lies beyond the nation state. But the new institutions of global governance are yet to take shape.

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