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A plethora of politics

The state, the nation-state, and the ethnonational state

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The nation-state has become a fixed component of our world. It seems to belong to the realm of common sense; a world organized otherwise seems far from feasible. Today, however, the alarming recrudescence of far-right ideologies—ideologies that selectively and anachronistically share anthropology’s interest in culture but repudiate anthropology’s refusal to view culture as racially transmitted¹—calls for a reconsideration and recalibration. The capture of concepts of nationhood by ethnic extremism, brutally realized in the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation and the civil war in Sri Lanka (among many other cases), shows that focusing exclusively on the state blunts focus and specificity.

“Nation-state” is a problematic term in two senses. First, it assumes that observers and citizens alike agree on what constitutes a nation. Second, it presupposes a corresponding transparency in the meaning of the term “state.” These assumptions are both dramatically incorrect.

If the nation were simply the population of a territory governed by a state, there would be no issue. The usual focus on the semantics of “state” without a corresponding scrutiny of “nation,” however, has allowed a gradual ethnicization of the nation concept to creep into everyday discussion. Early uses of the term “ethnonational” notwithstanding (Connor 1973; Tambiah 1989), the implicit equivalence of national identity with a biological descent group appears to undergird even those ideologies whose proponents insist that they are about “culture” rather than “race.” Admittedly, current Islamophobia seems to produce virulent attacks on religious

culture, but for many Europeans the implications continue to include the fear of biological miscegenation.

In a book recently written for an Italian audience (Herzfeld 2024), I suggested that current Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni’s concern with producing more babies bore a disturbing relevance to the fascist obsession with the Italian *stirpe* (“stock”). I suggested that she could easily solve the demographic issue by welcoming immigrants and giving them work; by encouraging them to marry Italians, she could certainly reverse the dramatic numbers with which pronatalist rightists signal their alarm. Clearly, she is not going to take that advice, any more than Donald Trump shows analogous inclinations in the US. The same implicit, perverse logic, moreover, afflicts most other rightist governments faced with a declining birth rate. The usual excuse is that the fears of immigration have to do with culture and economics rather than with race. This is sometimes plausible, as when Italian cities have occasionally tried to prohibit the sale of “ethnic food” in the “historic centers” of Italian cities; the implication here is clearly of cultural contamination. Nevertheless, the behavior of officials charged with regulating borders often shows that racial prejudice still lurks behind the cover of cultural defense. Occasional expressions of “white nationalism”—a suggestive term that today often masquerades as “Christian nationalism”—are especially revelatory of an abiding unwillingness to embrace common humanity instead of constructing borders designed to protect national purity.²

1. For a consideration of the historical terrain that anthropology shares with far-right ideologies, see, e.g., Bassi (2023) and Holmes (2000).

2. It is also clear, as De Genova (2017) and his collaborators have noted, that such defenses have proved remarkably porous.



The nation-state is a modern invention. Claims that it emerged from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), while broadly true, overlook the fact that the original entities fostered by that agreement were primarily religious in character. It was only with the expansion of the mercantile European empires that these entities became national in the contemporary sense. Colonialism not only produced territories that were eventually destined to morph into nation-states, their ethnicities sometimes crudely defined by the colonial powers as an administrative device of their “divide and conquer” policies. It also generated reactions in the territories it did *not* conquer, those I have called “crypto-colonial” (Herzfeld 2002). Examples include Greece, Iran, Nepal, and Thailand. In these polities, emergent bourgeoisies eagerly embraced ethnonational logics as a way of promoting their own civilizational discourse and status. These aspects of bourgeois identity worked to exclude ethnic minorities while also deflecting the threat of invasion by the European powers with which the national leadership created socially unequal but economically and politically advantageous alliances.

In the colonies and crypto-colonies alike, certain tribes, castes, and social and ethnic groups were locally promoted in ways that anticipated an eventually ethnicized nationhood. The dominant religion was either that of the largest segment of the population, as in India, or was that of the colonizers, in which case, by the time of independence, it tended to merge—again as in India—with the ethnic majority. In the crypto-colonial countries, by contrast, the process of replacing religious with national identity was slow and uneven. Nepal considered itself a “Hindu monarchy” despite large Buddhist populations. Thailand’s eclectic mix of religious influences coincided with an initial willingness to contemplate the nation as an amalgam of ethnic traditions; both changed in tandem, with recent moves to consider making Buddhism the nation’s official religion and a growing lack of interest in the country’s once vociferously proclaimed diversity of cultural roots.

In Greece and Turkey, even as late as 1924, following the Treaty of Lausanne signed in the previous year, the exchange of populations—nominally about “Greeks” and “Turks”—defined these groups in terms of their religions rather than language and culture. Many supposedly Greek refugees arrived in Greece unable to speak any Greek at all. Conversely, while visiting Turkey in 1990, I encountered “Turkish” refugees from Crete—Muslims all—who still spoke their dialect of Greek and

were sometimes adept at versifying in that dialect. One elderly lady who had come to Turkey during the population exchange could only say “Good day” in Turkish. Yet they were now unequivocally classified as Turks. States could decide who was a member of the nation and who should be excluded. The exclusions, ostensibly based on essentialist definitions of ancestry, reproduced older religious rivalries that had not been about statehood at all, and were easily ignited by using widely accepted folk models of kinship based on “blood.” Such models fused all too easily with supposedly scientific ideas about biological descent. Loyalty to a religious creed sometimes gave legitimacy to such racist cosmologies (as Kapferer [1988] has observed in Sri Lanka).

Nazism was historically perhaps the most comprehensive form of the toxic amalgam of kinship and ethnicity, and the one in which it was translated into the harshest reality, but the basic pattern reappears repeatedly today. The clan-based code of vengeance broadly typical of much of the southern Balkans, for example, was horrifically realized during the wars that dismembered the Yugoslav Federation, in the abuse of children who were kept alive as members of the group that had raped and murdered their mothers. When patrilineality serves as the basis of clan conflict, it often encounters local mechanisms of reconciliation. At the level of the nation-state, such mechanisms are no longer internal to the parties engaged in conflict, and horrific violence rages unchecked. In the case of Israel and Palestine, checks on revenge killings that existed in traditional culture are not relevant in a situation where entire nations, ethnonationally self-defined, are at war—hence, in part, the difficulty of arriving at a resolution.

Thus far, I have written as though the concept of the state was a constant, a dependable factor against which we could more clearly see the extreme conceptual instability of nationhood. Yet that, too, is far from being the case. Giambattista Vico allegedly wrote his only prize-winning essay on the etymology of the state. Sadly, that essay is lost, but a close reading of Vico’s *New Science* prompts the thought that he would certainly have pointed up the civic disabilities concealed by a word that is cognate with “static” and “stability.” States are not all alike, but, when they adopt a “national” posture, they all conform to Anderson’s (1983) hunch that people remain loyal as long as “the state” continues to promise a collective immortality transcending the mortality of all its citizens. Joined together in international organizations such as UNESCO, their claims of national uniqueness



look, ironically, remarkably alike. Such arrangements reinforce the mistaken impression that all polities are cut from the same cloth, and the illusion itself, an inheritance from colonialism, survives intact. What state leaders know and citizens exploit is another story: that of the “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2016) that, as I have argued, is the other glue that holds national loyalty in place along with the collective immortality noted by Anderson. Leaders cannot openly admit to the significance of cultural intimacy, but its secretiveness is in reality also its strength.

By talking about an anthropology of the state, we overlook the possibility that other forms of political association may have preceded the state or co-existed with it. Again, language can be misleading. To speak of the ancient Greek *polis* as a “city-state” begs the question, as does the attribution to it of democracy. These are anachronistic formulations; one might argue that Greece really became a true democracy when, in 1981, it elected a party (Andreas Papandreu’s PASOK) that was not particularly favored by an external major power such as the US.

Talk of the *polis*, moreover, leads me to ask why we should even use the term “state” when “polity” is more generic and therefore avoids begging crucial historical questions. The term “polity” is etymologically cognate with the Greek *polis*. I have suggested, however, that we can also disrupt the hold that classical Greek has on our technical vocabulary by examining how the word is used in the *modern* language—a tactic that disrupts facile assumptions about European cultural history (see Herzfeld 2022: 4, 99–104).

In modern Greek, *politia* can mean “way of life” and has overtones of the conditions that allow people to live together. It does not *exclude* the idea of the state, but often, in a country where people frequently lament the absence of “the state” in the sense of administrative efficiency and fairness, it seems to stand in opposition to the state (*kratos*) as a term for a powerful, often capricious, and not necessarily benign presence in people’s lives. In a parallel move, I strongly suggest considering notions of civil society in relation to a common Italian use of the cognate term *civile* in opposition to civic obedience; for many Italians, it is *civile* to hide undocumented immigrants from officials whose treatment of those they track down is considered brutal. These are related moves, all within the dominant political mythology about the emergence of a European ideal. In Latin, the *civitas* was the equivalent of the Greek *polis*. Its os-

tensible meaning, too, like that of *moeang* in Thailand, has now dwindled to that of “city,” reflecting the relocation of power to the metropolitan city centers.

These moves are not merely language games. We have inherited a political vocabulary that is soaked in assumptions about our cultural inheritance from a distant past constantly represented in ideological terms. Such is the genealogy of “the European idea” (see Pagden 2002). It inflects discourses of the populist right as well as those of liberal democrats. Vico pointed to the way in which the history of our political language reveals transformations of the actual political structures within which human beings operate, and we ignore his insight at our peril.

When we talk about an anthropology of the state, therefore, we must resist the temptation to reify the state. One critic of my Italian book has accused me of doing just that (Vereni 2025; cf. Herzfeld 2025). Yet my argument is precisely that the agents of state policy find it useful to reify the state, just as state officials may perform a whole scenario of their subjection to the stern control of “the state,” not because it is true, but because it conforms to local cultural assumptions about the state’s indifference (Herzfeld 1992). Such indifference, which may also present itself as a form of impartiality, allows bureaucrats to help as well as to hinder citizens, but in either case it is a performance that enables social action. It conceals its performativity through appeals to higher authority, but it is often the only way the business of the state can actually get done. Whether in what Hans Steinmüller (2013) so evocatively calls “communities of complicity” or through the familiar tropes of fate and predestination that I have discussed in the Greek context (Herzfeld 1992: 128–49), performances of state inflexibility are precisely what makes flexibility possible. The way such performances work is subject to local cultural habits, and the performances must be credible to be effective; but the pattern is much the same wherever people must turn to a bureaucracy they regard as the custodian of services to which they are entitled.

That description as a custodian of services characterizes the modern nation-state. Problems arise precisely when those who consider themselves truly “national” question the allegiance of “others” within. At that point, the outcome is often a battle over resources and rights. When the logic of ethnonationalism prevails, the deliberately misinformed cruelty of race-based selection prevails.



In the final part of these remarks, I want to go back to the *polis* and to another entity with which it has been compared, the southeast Asian *moeang*. The latter entity looks even less like a modern nation-state than does the *polis*. It was essentially a projection onto the world of the cosmological diagram of the mandala. Its center was a phallic column, or stupa, representing the regenerative power of the king, and this was surrounded by concentric circles representing different degrees of subjection to the central authority. Today, that model lives on in the word for a city (also *moeang*), much as a modern Greek city is also a *poli* (the modern form of *polis*). What do we gain by treating these entities as states? By calling them polities, we run a much lower risk of projecting onto them our own preconceptions based on the modern nation-state. This is an inverse version of the local development whereby the meaning of a term representing the all-inclusive polity dwindles to that of “city”—a mere subset of the self-styled nation-state.

This, consequentially, allows us to see how the conflation of state with nation rigidifies entities, rendering them, in Scott’s (1998, 2009) terms, more “legible.” The proliferation of bureaucratic paperwork for identifying people by nationality (e.g., Laungaramsri 2014 on Thailand; see Cabot 2012 on Greece) exemplifies that process. State bureaucrats and legislators present such classification as a necessary step in protecting the nation, overlooking the potential dynamism of ethnic diversity.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that “the state” has too easily become conflated with “the nation-state” and that it is therefore high time to stop talking about “the state” *tout court*. Instead, I suggest, we might more usefully insist on separating out the state as a bureaucratic institution, refusing its automatic association with nationhood but reserving the plural term “ethnonational states” for those polities in which ethnic identity has become the exclusive criterion of membership and access to rights. By reinvigorating the term “polity,” we can also canvass a wider array of forms of social bureaucracy—an array in which the ethnonational state emerges as just one form, and a highly problematic form at that, of territorial governance. Indeed, in that setting it will start to look like the “way of life” envisaged by European fascists rather than as a system of governance and resource allocation. It is a polity, but not of a type to which most of us would aspire.

Perhaps we should relabel our mission “the anthropology of polities.” The plural “polities” would signify resistance to the reification that always lurks around

mention of “the state”—especially when the latter is assumed to be ethnonational. The state itself would take its place as a particular form of governance, and its increasingly unquestioned association with majoritarian identities would come under the scrutiny that such conflation deserves.

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