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The nation-state as a territorial myth of European construction

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ABSTRACT.— This paper examines the concept that the nation-state is a territorial myth of European construction. The nation-state is a central concept in the narrative of European integration. It is perceived as having a mythical function. However, this conceals the fact that the European Union is first and foremost a spatial odyssey. Its foundation is based on circulation and mobility, focusing on shared sovereignty and territory. In theory, the ingredients of this very new European experiment consist of a wide geo-historical range of both sovereignty and territorial categories. Equating European identity with the nation-state is an obstacle to the acknowledgement of this experiment. Demystifying the place in Europe held by the nation-state as a political territory may contribute to our understanding of what Europeans are in the process of building for their future.

EUROPE, EUROPEAN UNION, NATION, STATE, SOVEREIGNTY, TERRITORY

RÉSUMÉ.— L'État-nation comme mythe territorial de la construction européenne.— Le concept de l'État-nation dans le discours sur la construction européenne a une fonction mythique. Ce mythe masque que l'Union européenne est avant tout une expérience spatiale. En effet, elle repose sur la circulation et la mobilité; et son ressort est un processus de mutualisation de souveraineté et de territoire. Dans les faits, c'est un très riche répertoire géohistorique de régimes de souveraineté et de territorialité qui rend possible cette expérience inédite. L'équation Européens = État-nation fait écran à son appropriation. Démythifier la place de l'État-nation comme territoire des Européens par excellence contribue à la compréhension de ce que les Européens construisent et à leur projection dans l'avenir.

ÉTAT-NATION, EUROPE, SOUVERAINETÉ, TERRITOIRE, UNION EUROPÉENNE

Discourse on European construction has always held the nation-state as the centerpiece, starting point, or gauge, of its building process. One of the most sensitive spatial questions raised by European construction is the status of the nation-state in the territorial fabric of the European Union (EU). Here, the term territory refers to the area embodied by the sovereignty and by the public policies of a state, hence the expression “national territory”.

Territory in European countries is not just the legal space wherein society is organized by public authorities. It is also a political space. Within this arena, electoral competition unfolds between parties and movements that aspire to represent citizens in governing bodies. This leads to the implementation of these

public policies across the national territory, and to the control or regulation of whatever occurs there. State territory is the space over which authority is supposed to be exercised as a last resort by the state's different bodies, i.e., the administrative, the judicial, the legislative, and the executive. In this sense, territory is the space over which administrative sovereignty is held in place by government. Finally, territory among the European member states espouses the notion of national community, which embodies popular sovereignty and in which democracy, the legitimacy of governments, and state sovereignty are firmly rooted. In European countries, state territory is synonymous with national territory. State territory, therefore, holds a central position in the political life of Europeans because it is organized by the state both symbolically and materially. It is also the level at which political culture is most commonly addressed in the different European countries. The nation-state territory in Europe is, therefore, the space over which the state plays out its sovereignty as well as a space for its citizens of "self-referential identity" (Debarbieux, 2012), through which national culture is publicly displayed.

The European integration process is nonetheless fundamentally new in the sense that it places all the member states on an equal footing. Given the context of qualified majority voting, the European Union is the only organization in which a sovereign state can be driven to implement decisions that it initially opposed. This is an expression of the supranational nature of the EU, which has extended its spatial footprint through free consent and self-determination to a growing number of participating nations and states. On that basis, Pierre Hassner (2008) qualifies the EU as a center-free empire, while Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande (2007) refer to it as a "cosmopolitan empire". In this process, European construction is constantly adjusting and redefining the relative value of each nation's territory.

These observations call into question the importance of the nation-state as an overarching concept, or myth, in European construction. This essay investigates the central role of the nation-state in European integration by examining the two main factors that contribute to this myth: on the one hand, the identity of Europeans, which has been shaped by the nation-state — with two archetypes that account for all the nation-states of Europe and of the world : the French and the German; and on the other hand European construction, which is a post-national process that is superseding the declining concept of the nation-state.

European identity is underpinned by the nation-state

European history is often summarized as follows: 1/ Europeans are emerging from a pre-national age, which is portrayed as an alien and somewhat dark age of political fragmentation; 2/ the age of nations is one of states, structure and reason; 3/ European integration brings harmony among the nation-states, pacifies them, exorcizes their political demons, civilizes them... while risking a loss of identity and of democratic sovereignty. The debate between federalism and confederalism (i.e., over level of integration under a common policy), which touches upon the wider political debate of the European project, postulates the nation-state as its centerpiece (if only to subsequently override it).

Regardless of their minor differences of opinion, Benedict Anderson (1996), John Breuilly (1993), Ernest Gellner (1989), Eric Hobsbawm (1992), Miroslav Hroch

(2005), and Anne-Marie Thiesse (1999) have established the nation-state as a modern phenomenon¹. In spite of what has been stated in some national literature, the nation is not the expression of a cultural reality frozen in time, an avatar of some ethnic ontology or essence. A basic building block in the national collective imagination is national territory, which is not a fixed legacy. National territory is an integral component in the process of inventing nations and nation-states. For these authors, the emergence of nationhood and of the first nation-states does not go further back than the 19th century (although some historians specializing in earlier periods may dispute this in a number of cases relevant to Western Europe: see, e.g., the work of Colette Beaune, 1985, on France).

What is of real concern here is that most of the scientific literature mentioned above tends to be eurocentric², and therefore self-referential. The nation-state in Europe is systematically presented as a European invention that became a worldwide export. The work of experts from Southeast Asia³, and from China, Korea, Japan, and Iran, however, provides an invitation to draw a more globally inclusive geo-historical comparison likely to challenge this eurocentric presumption and call for its deconstruction.

The Eurocentric narrative is made simple and straightforward by reducing the nation-state to one of two archetypes — the German model and the French model, which were each outlined in celebrated lectures by Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1807) and Ernest Renan (1869)⁴, respectively. Territory plays a central role in each of these archetypes. In the French case, the nation is shaped over a long period of time by the state through progressive territorial expansion. This is followed by the assertion of popular sovereignty over the acquired territory. In the German case, the state aspires to unite speakers of a common language, who prior to unification remained scattered amongst smaller German-speaking states, outliers and enclaves.

The French model thus portrays a configuration in which the state precedes the birth of the nation, and begins with extending control over a particular territory. In the name of a rationalist and contractualist concept of the nation, the state (the public authority) decides who are to be its citizens. It is understood that the fact of being born or of residing long-term on the national territory permits allegiance to that nation and authorizes citizenship status under state rule.

The German situation portrays a configuration in which the nation precedes the birth of the state. In this romantic conception, the idea of nationhood lies in shared traditions and other cultural characteristics (e.g., language, or, more sporadically, “race”). The national territory is defined by the spatial distribution of the people, or folk, that share this common heritage. Thus, the nation generates a state which espouses a territory that already exists.

Designating Europe as the world’s birthplace of the nation-state and selecting two European countries to be its archetypes amounts to reducing each European country to one of these categories. Since the end of the 19th century, the nation-state has gradually become the predominant model within the European political fabric. Successive population displacements and border shifts caused by two world wars have shown how deep-rooted the nation-state had become as the reference frame of political geography. Even so, to consider that each European country is above all a nation-state is only possible if one is prepared to depart from the two archetypal models and to agree on a more generic definition than the two narrow versions embodied by France and Germany. The nation-state is a mappable territory outlined by precisely

1. Taken from, Sandrine Kott and Stéphane Michonneau (2006) “Introduction.”

2. European version of methodological nationalism. In relation to the question raised here, see contributions of Jacques Lévy and Ulrich Beck (2007), in Wieviorka M. (ed.), *Les Sciences sociales en mutation*.

3. Notably those of Michel Bruneau (cf. Bruneau, 2014, same edition), Denys Lombard and Christian Taillard.

4. For a symptomatic analysis, albeit remote, of these two stereotypes, see Jacques Lévy (2011, p. 78-87).

defined political borders. It corresponds to the population ruled by state-defined criteria pertaining to the national culture; but also to a state apparatus by which sovereignty is exercised fully and legitimately within the political borders that separate the territory from neighboring states. In the name of the people, the state rules over the residing population and over the wealth produced on national soil. In the nation-state, popular sovereignty and citizenship are founded on the constitution of a national community carried by the people.

A wide range of variants of the nation-state exist in Europe. Although the nation-state model does not account for all situations, it can nonetheless assist in understanding them. However, the French and German types are unlikely to provide a basis for understanding all currently existing situations. Even a list of four or five types would not account for all of the European nations. There are many ways of classifying nation-states depending on perspective. Classifications may involve criteria such as language, conflict-mongering tendencies, level of belligerence, age of accession to political independence, degree of sovereignty or of independence between the society and the state, spatial range of influence of a given centre of power, degree of imperialist behavior, openness or connectedness, level of geographic eccentricity, level of integration into the European area (Kahn, 2008). It remains thus difficult to establish a single typology capable of accounting for all European nation-states. Moreover, favoring one classification over another is likely to be interpreted as nationalistic bias.

Many member and non-member states of the European Union would fail to answer to the definition of the standard French and German nation-state archetypes — among these Luxemburg, Switzerland, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Belgium, Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, and even Greece. This may arise from a number of reasons: for example because administrative authority by the state over the land and the people is weak or fragmentary; or because state sovereignty is partly an illusion (particularly so in the case of Greece); or because the nation itself is held together by artificial means (e.g., Belgium); or because the nation is not founded on linguistic unity but rather on a negotiated linguistic, denominational and/or cultural plurality of distinct communities (e.g., Switzerland); or because the state comprises only a proportion of speakers of a given dominant language; or finally because the nation-state includes strong national minorities that are natives of a larger neighboring state. None of these variants, however, prevent citizens of such nations from feeling a sense of national affiliation, which is based on the connection with a land that the people consider as their national territory — nor do they exclude the possibility of an allegiance among individuals to other sub-national countries or supranational entities.

To summarize, the nation-state is anything but a profound or evenly distributed force in shaping European identity: Europeans have, instead, created such a wide variety of nation-states that no single one stands out as indisputably more credible than the other. Should all the member states of the European Union and the European Economic Area be considered to be nation-states, then the tapestry requires to be embroidered with as many ornamentations of sovereignty and national territory as there are nation-states.

Whether it is spun around by political figures, the media, or textbooks, the narrative of European integration nonetheless focuses intensely on the nation-state. This suggests two apparently contradictory things. On the one hand, European construction does not mark the end of the nation-state in Europe any more than that of any specific

European nation-state. On the other hand, the nation-state is not the keystone of political and social identity building in Europe. Although the nation-state has been a major feature of shifting political lines throughout recent European history, it is far from being the only one — otherwise there would never have been such a variety of nation-states in Europe⁵.

Post-national European construction takes over the declining nation-state

Let us now address the notion that European construction is operating in a post-national age, and that it might be superseding, and perhaps heralding the demise of, the nation-state. This notion is above all undermined by a series of events relating to European integration. Peace, economic and mental recovery following periods of material and moral destruction, and maintaining wealth and relative influence of European nations on the global stage (Grasland, Grataloup, 2008), are three outcomes among European countries that have strongly contributed to European construction. This sums up the title of *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, a classic book from 1992 by Alan Milward (2000), who wrote: “The reinvigorated nation-state had to opt for surrendering a proportion of its national sovereignty in order to sustain its reassertion”. European integration is, therefore, also a modality adopted by European nation-states for adapting to a new age after having emerged from periods of extreme weakness. We are thus faced with this counter-intuitive paradox of a strengthening (or at least preservation) of the nation-state despite having gone through a (still ongoing) reform of both state sovereignty and popular sovereignty.

Assuming that the notion of the nation-state is not obsolete, has anything changed as a result of European construction? European integration is based on the occlusion of two narratives: the myth that the nation is top of the scale among popular values, and the myth whereby the states, which coincide with and underpin these nations, are themselves distributed according to a hierarchy. This double narrative played an important role throughout the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th. The occurrence of the First and the Second World Wars may even partly be explained by the overpowering value of the nation-state at the time.

This paradigm change is often qualified by the adjective post-national. Jürgen Habermas (2000, p. 141) thus sees the European Union as “the first example of a democracy beyond the bounds of the nation state”. However, in the same vein, J. Habermas (2000, p. 105) holds the view that “blending national identities of member states into one ‘nation called Europe’ is neither possible nor advisable”. The adjective post-national is ambiguous. The conclusion could be drawn from it that European integration implies the abdication of the nation-state. Yet, nation-states are among the principal players of European construction, a process by which they transform and evolve but which was never designed to bring about their downfall.

The expression *post-nationalist* thus affords an accurate representation of European construction because the disrepute and marginalization of nationalism are necessary imperatives for ensuring European construction. The term itself is nonetheless widely discussed. It has, for example, been refuted by Alain Dieckhoff (2004), an expert on nationalism for whom the acceptance of European integration by Europeans occurs primarily out of calculated interest. Otherwise, Europeans remain highly attached to their

5. See also Bertrand Badie (2013, p. 216), Yves Lacoste (1997, p. 318-319), Jacques Lévy (2008, p.428), and Virginie Mamadouh and Herman Van der Wusten (2009).

national identity. According to Dieckhoff, “Europe has yet to move into a post-nationalist phase”. The term post-nationalist is nevertheless a useful concept provided one is willing to consider that nationalism is not just an attachment to national identity, and that it can also be articulated with a popular attachment to European identity.

Nationalism is an ideology through which a hierarchy between nations is established, with one’s own at the top. Nationalism thus goes with the disempowerment of neighboring nations. The national community ranks highest in public policy and in the exercise of state authority. Nationalism “ontologizes” and denigrates all that is deemed foreign. Nationalism is rarely disconnected from xenophobia. Nationalism justifies, and therefore makes possible — without necessarily leading the way directly, however — actions that seek to dominate, conquer, colonize or even suppress and destroy other nation-states or other human communities by seizing their territory.

In 20th century Europe, nationalism became an excuse for barbaric behavior and became a basis for political regimes and public policy. Regional planning is almost always one of the public policies most important to nationalistic regimes. The territory considered as national is sacred, which makes the idea intolerable or very worrying that it can be populated by communities or individuals who are foreign to it. Nationalist ideology is characterized by the aspiration, and even the fantasy, of an ethnically uniform national territory, ridden of those who are considered as foreigners or intruders into the national arena. A nationalist political regime will endow itself with the means of achieving this aspiration, as observed in Germany between 1933 and 1945 and in Serbia between 1989 and 1995. Ethnic purification and genocide are the most extreme nationalistic regional development policies.

One of the serious questions posed by this radical newness is that of inevitability: Does the nation-state inevitably result in a nationalistic regime? Can there be a nation-state without nationalistic policy? Hannah Arendt, quoted by Bernard Debarbieux (2014) in his study of spatial concepts in her writings, was among the first political scientists to figure out the consequences of nationalism on the state. For Hannah Arendt, European history leads to the conclusion that the nation-state fosters the most extreme forms of nationalistic abuse. The nation-state is a “tragedy” because public authority ceases to protect and grant human rights (any rights) to minorities on grounds that they can never become members of the national community⁶.

In direct response to this observation, note that this analysis led Hannah Arendt (1940, 2007) to consider with some benevolence all state organizations whose territories were decoupled from any sense of national belonging. Quoting the *Commonwealth* as an interesting case in point (despite its flaws), she wrote: “One does not cease to be Indian or Canadian when belonging to the British Empire”. This modern geo-historical situation allowed her to likewise envisage a decoupling between national and state territories in Europe. “There may come a time very soon, she wrote, where belonging to a territory will be replaced by belonging to a federation of nations in which the federation itself as a single body has a political authority of action. Thereupon, a common European policy could support all nationalities simultaneously”. Such an evolution is likely to occur, she went on to write, given that Europeans have been drawn to the conclusion by recent events that nations in Europe are no longer “protected by their territory”.

This view takes one step toward the idea of sharing territories. At the end of World War II, Arendt’s close associate, Karl Jaspers, considered that the time had come to draw practical conclusions regarding the “destructive contradictions that

6. Cited in Debarbieux (2014) § 35.

belie the exertion of absolute sovereignty by any state” (Jaspers, 1946, p. 526). The notion of relative sovereignty in international relations leads either to imagine a form of sovereignty limited by an overarching or supreme body that is called in as a last resort, or a form of mutual sovereignty in which several states pool all or part of their individual sovereignties.

European integration has suppressed neither national territories nor sovereign nations. Each of the member states participate in the name of their sovereign people. The Council is a house of nation-states that are granted crucial decisional powers. As member states of the European Union, European nation-states therefore define Community legislation and public policy for the European Union — which itself is a kind of multinational and supranational state.

No citizen from any member state is required to give up all or part of his or her nationality under the pretext of European integration. In fact, for members of the European Union, citizenship and nationality remain additive attributes — which is not the case in Canada, for example. However, since the Maastricht Treaty, Europeans have formalized a version of European citizenship that was first set out at the time of the first European parliamentary elections of 1979. Every national from any member state, wherever he or she may reside within the European Union, is a European citizen with a right to vote in municipal and European elections.

The territorial identity of the European Union is based on mutual sovereignty

Political observers concerned by the transformations of sovereignty in the context of European construction resort to an image that distorts the understanding of what is really at work. Paul Magonette writes of European construction that “the concept of sovereignty has lost one of its historical features: its link to territory... meaning, in other words, that it no longer hinges on a sense of place” (Magonette, 2000, p. 157).

Quite to the contrary, one should instead endeavor to imagine the features of the new territory produced by the regime of sovereignty invented by European construction. Contrary to the views of P. Magonette, European territory is defined as a space over which community-level authority and jurisdiction are exercised. Given that the territory of the European Union is equally that of its member states ; given further that — each in the domains of expertise that they have chosen to pool together within the European Union — the member states consider that it is their duty to enforce in their respective countries the laws and public policies of the European Union, sharing sovereignty and territory is clearly the main feature of European integration.

In other words, the distinctiveness of territory in Europe lies in the following feature: it is the area brought together through voluntary sharing of territorial control among nation-states with other member states of the European community. Each state willingly participates in the sovereignty that is enacted on other territories beside its own, and accepts that the sovereignty exercised on “its own” territory can be shared with its neighbors. European construction therefore introduces a new concept of territorial sovereignty.

This reciprocal process of sharing, more often (and less precisely) referred to as “delegation” or “transfer” of sovereignty, is sometimes presented as a facet of the erosion of nation-state sovereignty brought on by globalization. The two should be distinguished,

however. John Agnew (2009) has shown that perfect sovereignty exists only in theory — and that was true long before current globalization. European integration is not a transnational non-governmental power trying to bypass, counteract, or diminishing national sovereignty. It is based, instead, on the institutionalization of new state-like protagonists such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the European Central Bank. As a state, the European Union organizes, controls and regulates the legal and legislative processes affecting its territory, and carries through an increasing number of public policies. From the point of view of nation-state members of the European Union, the political philosopher Jean-Marc Ferry indicates that “sovereignty sharing is the name of the game — and it occurs between the member states of the European Union”, in the sense that “nations no longer have a monopoly over setting norms for their own territories” (Ferry, 2005, p. 154-155).

The territory where these actions and prerogatives are exercised is, however, much less coherent than in the case of the national territories of European Union member states. This arises for four reasons: firstly, because the European Union borders are not well established — despite the fact that the borders of the European Union member states are believed to be stable or even intangible (clearly not the case, however) ; this, incidentally, reinforces the narrative concerning the centrality of the European nation-state. Secondly, because European Union sovereignty gets deployed over an area made up of the territories belonging to each of the member states. The European Union is both a territory all to itself and an assemblage of states each defined by their territorial sovereignty. This hybrid status is evident, for example, in that it is sufficient for a state to withdraw from the European Union, or to join it, for the territory of the Union to change. Thirdly, the sovereignty exercised by the European Union is lawfully permitted to change its scope of action: it will apply to certain areas and to varying degrees depending on a range of factors. The source of such variability arises from negotiations between national governments, given that only states have the power to modify the treaties that define the powers of the European Union. Fourthly and lastly, the territory over which EU sovereignty applies is itself a moveable feast, given that negotiations between member states commonly involve exemption clauses whereby a given country may demand the right to opt out of certain policy obligations. This has been clearly demonstrated in the case of the Schengen area (which, moreover, includes non-member states of the European Union), and by the geometry of the Euro zone.

Yet, when P. Mignette writes that sovereignty no longer holds a place within the European Union, he implies that without a territory and a clearly defined scale, of governance, we end up in a situation of sovereignty without a territory. The subtext of his assertion is clearly the concept of nation-state, but he fails to point out the territorial foundations of this regime of mutual sovereignty. Instead of concluding that a shared sovereignty has no territory, a much more challenging hypothesis would be that the sharing of territory is what makes mutual sovereignty possible.

European construction has effectively suppressed neither national sovereignties nor national territories. European sovereignty has not substituted itself to national sovereignty. European sovereignty has its own logic and dynamics, while at the same time upholding national sovereignties. In this perspective, it can be said that European integration is post-nationalist rather than post-national. It stitches national territories together and produces a European territory that differs in many respects from the

national territories. This territory is also, for a fluctuating but large number of citizens, a political space and one of growing identity.

The concept of “Europe without territory”, which can be extrapolated from the analyses of P. Magnette, can only be maintained if it restricts the definition of the territory to a nation-state or to a regional planning policy⁷. The nation-state narrative actually obscures the primary importance of territory and of its perspectives of enrichment through European construction. In doing so, the stubborn emphasis on the nation-state overshadows two other aspects. The first is that, throughout history, Europeans have also developed territorial identities other than the nation-state. Although novel, the current European Union sovereignty regime over territory is made possible by past experience from a large geo-historical repertoire of territorial experiments of limited relevance to the nation-state. Among the more conspicuous alternatives to the nation-state is the existence of a territorial network. The diversity of nation-states mentioned above is an indication in itself of the size of this repertoire (for example, Luxemburg is a nation-state and also an outlier of principalities and city states). Governing and implementing policies over a territory that is primarily a space of socially defined communities rather than the space of an ethnically or linguistically homogenous people, is not without precedent in Europe (e.g., the Austrian crown of Austro-Hungary, Switzerland, Belgium...). The march of the European Union toward a situation of statehood is, therefore, not new.

The second aspect overshadowed by constant reference to the nation-state is the point to which the shaping of European integration is, at heart, a geographic project; its driving principles are: mobility and circulation; an erasure of state borders while maintaining their political existence ; the construction of a new territory with its specific characteristics of sovereignty, with a sense of belonging that is interrelated with existing territories — and therefore the creation of a new sense of territory. Nowhere else nor at any other time has a political project on such a scale relied so strongly on territorial reorganization.

Conclusion

At least under the hypothesis that we have sought to test, the nation-state can play a key part in European construction on condition that it is presented as a myth, not as an actual geo-historical reality. With European construction, the nation-state in Europe has moved into a phase of dynamic transformation. By mistaking this transformation with a process of national eclipse, decline, or collapse, the nation-state in the minds of Europeans becomes the keystone of the narrative behind the Europe they are really constructing: a voluntary co-operative process of mutual sharing of their national territories and of the sovereignty embodied in each of them.

To move forward into the future, Europeans have everything to gain in leaving behind their vision of the nation-state and the idea of eurocentric sovereignty that collectively claims to represent them. Considering the situation in Europe from a global perspective, given the place that Europeans have reached in history, and considering what European integration is really about, it is clear that the myth of the European nation-state is a distraction from what Europeans are truly living through and trying to develop. The simple European myth of the nation-state was relevant to European construction in earlier decades. However, not only is this today no longer the case, but quite the reverse is true.

7. This idea is maintained by Claude Husson on grounds that the word territory in this sense is absent from the Treaty of Rome and that the European Union, at the start of the 21st century, it was not adopted by a regional planning policy *stricto sensu*.

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