The demise of the nation state
After decades of globalization, our political system has become obsolete – and spasms of resurgent nationalism are a sign of its irreversible decline.

By Rana Dasgupta  Thu 5 Apr 2018

PART I

What is happening to national politics? Every day in the US, events further exceed the imaginations of absurdist novelists and comedians; politics in the UK still shows few signs of recovery after the “national nervous breakdown” of Brexit. France “narrowly escaped a heart attack” in last year’s elections... neighboring Spain goes so far as to say that “the rule of law, the democratic system and even the market economy are in doubt”; in Italy, “the collapse of the establishment” in the March elections has even brought talk of a “barbarian arrival”, as if Rome were falling once again....

But the convulsions in national politics are not confined to the west. Exhaustion, hopelessness, the dwindling effectiveness of old ways: these are the themes of politics all across the world. This is why energetic authoritarian “solutions” are currently so popular: distraction by war (Russia, Turkey); ethno-religious “purification” (India, Hungary, Myanmar); the magnification of presidential powers and the abandonment of civil rights and the rule of law (China, Rwanda, Venezuela, the Philippines...)

What is the relationship between these various upheavals? We tend to regard them as entirely separate... In each country, the tendency is to blame “our” history, “our” populists, “our” media, “our” institutions, “our” lousy politicians. And this is understandable, since the organs of modern political consciousness – public education and mass media – emerged in the 19th century from a globe-conquering ideology of unique national destinies. When we discuss “politics”, we refer to what goes on inside sovereign states; everything else is “foreign affairs” or “international relations” – even in this era of global financial and technological integration. We may buy the same products in every country of the world, we may all use Google and Facebook, but political life, curiously, is made of separate stuff and keeps the antique faith of borders.

Yes, there is awareness that similar varieties of populism are erupting in many countries. Several have noted the parallels in style and substance between leaders such as Trump, Putin, Modi, Orbán and Erdoğan. There is a sense that something is in the air – some coincidence of feeling between places. But this does not get close enough. For there is no coincidence. All countries are today embedded in the same system, which subjects them all to the same pressures: and it is these that are squeezing and warping national political life everywhere. And their effect is quite the opposite – despite the desperate flag-waving – of the oft-remarked “resurgence of the nation state.”

The most momentous development of our era, precisely, is the waning of the nation state: its inability to withstand countervailing 21st-century forces, and its calamitous loss of influence over human circumstance. National political authority is in decline, and, since we do not know any other sort, it feels like the end of the world. This is why a strange brand of apocalyptic nationalism is so widely in vogue. But the current appeal of machismo as political style, the wall-building and xenophobia, the mythology and race theory, the fantastical promises of national restoration – these are not cures, but symptoms of what is slowly revealing itself to all: nation states everywhere are in an advanced state of political and moral decay from which they cannot individually extricate themselves.
Why is this happening? In brief, 20th-century political structures are drowning in a 21st-century ocean of deregulated finance, autonomous technology, religious militancy and great-power rivalry. Meanwhile, the suppressed consequences of 20th-century recklessness in the once-colonized world are erupting, cracking nations into fragments and forcing populations into post-national solidarities: roving tribal militias, ethnic and religious sub-states and super-states....

Since 1989, barely 5% of the world's wars have taken place between states: national breakdown, not foreign invasion, has caused the vast majority of the 9 million war deaths in that time. And, as we know from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Syria, the ensuing vacuum can suck in firepower from all over the world, destroying conditions for life and spewing shell-shocked refugees in every direction. Nothing advertises the crisis of our nation-state system so well, in fact, as its 65 million refugees – a “new normal” far greater than the “old emergency” (in 1945) of 40 million. The unwillingness even to acknowledge this crisis, meanwhile, is appropriately captured by the contempt for refugees that now drives so much of politics in the rich world...

After so many decades of globalization, economics and information have successfully grown beyond the authority of national governments. Today, the distribution of planetary wealth and resources is largely uncontested by any political mechanism. But to acknowledge this is to acknowledge the end of politics itself...Half a century has been spent building the global system on which we all now depend, and it is here to stay. Without political innovation, global capital and technology will rule us without any kind of democratic consultation, as naturally and indubitably as the rising oceans...The current political system must be supplemented with global financial regulations, certainly, and probably transnational political mechanisms, too. That is how we will complete this globalization of ours, which today stands dangerously unfinished. Its economic and technological systems are dazzling indeed, but in order for it to serve the human community, it must be subordinated to an equally spectacular political infrastructure, which we have not even begun to conceive.

The first step will be ceasing to pretend that there is no alternative. So let us begin by considering the scale of the current crisis.

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PART II

Let us start with the west. Europe, of course, invented the nation state: the principle of territorial sovereignty was agreed at the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. The treaty made large-scale conquest difficult within the continent; instead, European nations expanded into the rest of the world. The dividends of colonial plunder were converted, back home, into strong states with powerful bureaucracies and democratic polities – the template for modern European life.

By the end of 19th century, European nations had acquired uniform attributes still familiar today – in particular, a set of fiercely enforced state monopolies (defense, taxation and law, among others), which gave governments substantial mastery of the national destiny. In return, a moral promise was made to all: the development, spiritual and material, of citizen and nation alike. Spectacular state-run projects in the fields of education, healthcare, welfare and culture arose to substantiate this promise...

During the period of decolonization that followed the second world war, the European nation-state structure was exported everywhere. But westerners still felt its moral promise with an intensity peculiar to themselves – more so than ever, in fact, after the creation of the welfare state and decades of unprecedented postwar growth. Nostalgia for that golden age of the nation state continues to distort western political debate to this day, but it was built on an improbable coincidence of conditions that will never recur. Very significant was the structure of the postwar state itself,
which possessed a historically unique level of control over the domestic economy... The destruction of state authority over capital has of course been the explicit objective of the financial revolution that defines our present era....

The picture is the same all over the west: the wealth of the richest continues to skyrocket, while post-crisis austerity cripples the social-democratic welfare state. We can all see the growing fury at governments that refuse to fulfill their old moral promise – but it is most probable that they no longer can. Western governments possess nothing like their previous command over national economic life... There is every reason to believe that the next stage of the techno-financial revolution will be even more disastrous for national political authority... Big data companies (Google, Facebook,) have already assumed many functions previously associated with the state, from cartography to surveillance...

Governments controlled by outside forces and possessing only partial influence over national affairs: this has always been so in the world’s poorest countries. But in the west, it feels like a terrifying return to primitive vulnerability. The assault on political authority is not a merely “economic” or “technological” event... There are outbreaks of irrational rage, especially against immigrants, the appointed scapegoats for much deeper forms of national contamination. The idea of the western nation as a universal home collapses, and transnational tribal identities grow up as a refuge: white supremacists and radical Islamists alike take up arms against contamination...

PART III

In the world’s poorest countries, the picture is very different. Almost all those nations emerged in the 20th century from the Eurasian empires. It has become de rigueur to despise empires, but they have been the “normal” mode of governance for much of history. The Ottoman Empire, which lasted from 1300 until 1922, delivered levels of tranquility and cultural achievement that seem incredible from the perspective of today’s fractured Middle East. The modern nation of Syria looks unlikely to last more than a century without breaking apart, and it hardly provides security or stability...

Empires were not democratic, but were built to be inclusive of all those who came under their rule. It is not the same with nations, which are founded on the fundamental distinction between who is in and who is out – and therefore harbor a tendency toward ethnic purification.

Nevertheless, in the previous century it was decided... that empires belonged to the past, and the future to nation states. And yet this revolutionary transformation has done almost nothing to close the economic gap between the colonized and the colonizing. In the meantime, it has subjected many postcolonial populations to a bitter cocktail of authoritarianism, ethnic cleansing, war, corruption and ecological devastation.

If there are so few formerly colonized countries that are now peaceful, affluent and democratic, it is not, as the west often pretends, because “bad leaders” somehow ruined otherwise perfectly functional nations. In the breakneck pace of decolonization, nations were thrown together in months; often their alarmed populations fell immediately into violent conflict to control the new state apparatus, and the power and wealth that came with it. Many infant states were held together only by strongmen who entrusted the system to their own tribes or clans, maintained power by stoking sectarian rivalries and turned ethnic or religious differences into super-charged axes of political terror.

The list is not a short one. Consider men such as Ne Win (Burma), Hissène Habré (Chad), Hosni Mubarak (Egypt), Mengistu Haile Mariam (Ethiopia), Ahmed Sékou Touré (Guinea), Muhammad Suharto (Indonesia), the Shah of Iran, Saddam Hussein (Iraq), Muammar Gaddafi (Libya), Moussa
Traoré (Mali), General Zia-ul-Haq (Pakistan), Ferdinand Marcos (Philippines), the Kings of Saudi Arabia, Siaka Stevens (Sierra Leone), Mohamed Siad Barre (Somalia), Jaafar Nimeiri (Sudan), Hafez al-Assad (Syria), Idi Amin (Uganda), Mobutu Sese Seko (Zaire) or Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe).

Those dictators could never have held such incoherent states together without tremendous reinforcement from outside, which was what sealed the lid on the pressure cooker. The post-imperial ethos was hospitable to dictators, of course: with the UN’s moral rejection of foreign rule came a universal imperative to respect national sovereignty, no matter what horrors went on behind its closed doors. But the cold war vastly expanded the resources available to brutal regimes for defending themselves against revolution and secession. The two superpowers funded the escalation of post-colonial conflicts to stupefying levels of fatality: at least 15 million died in the proxy wars of that period, in theatres as dispersed as Afghanistan, Korea, El Salvador, Angola and Sudan. And what the superpowers wanted out of all this destruction was a network of firmly installed clients able to defeat all internal rivals....

Over the past 20 years, the slow, post-cold-war rot in Africa and the Middle East has been exuberantly exploited by these kinds of forces...Their political technology is charismatic religion, and the future they seek is inspired by the ancient golden empires that existed before the invention of nations...Several ethnic groups, meanwhile – such as the Kurds and the Tuareg – which were left without a homeland after decolonization, and stranded as persecuted minorities ever since, have also exploited the rifts in state authority to assemble the beginnings of transnational territories. It is in the world’s most dangerous regions that today’s new political possibilities are being imagined....

But there is no possibility that al-Shabaab, the Janjaweed, Seleka, Boko Haram, Ansar Dine, Isis or al-Qaida will provide that way out. The situation requires new ideas of political organization and global economic redistribution. There is no superpower great enough, any more, to contain the effects of exploding “quasi-states.” Barbed wire and harder borders will certainly not suffice to keep such human disasters at bay.

PART IV

The three elements of the crisis described here will only worsen. First, the existential breakdown of rich countries during the assault on national political power by global forces. Second, the volatility of the poorest countries and regions, now that the departure of cold war-era strongmen has revealed their true fragility. And third, the illegitimacy of an “international order” that has never aspired to any kind of “society of nations” governed by the rule of law....

This is not a small endeavor: it will take the better part of this century. We do not know yet where it will lead. All we can lay out now is a set of directions. From the standpoint of our present, they will seem impossible, because we have not known any other way. But that is how radical novelty always begins.

The first is clear: global financial regulation. Today’s great engines of wealth creation are distributed in such a way as to elude national taxation systems (94% of Apple’s cash reserves are held offshore; this $250bn is greater than the combined foreign reserves of the British government and the Bank of England), which is diminishing all nation states, materially and symbolically. There is no reason to heed those interested parties who tell us global financial regulation is impossible: it is technologically trivial compared to the astonishing systems those same parties have already built...In the process we must also think more seriously about global redistribution...the systematic transfer of wealth from rich to poor for the improved security of all, as happens in national societies.
Second: global flexible democracy. As new local and transnational political currents become more powerful, the nation state’s rigid monopoly on political life is becoming increasingly unviable...The EU is the major experiment in this direction, and it is significant that the continent that invented the nation state was also the first to move beyond it. The EU has failed in many of its functions, principally because it has not established a truly democratic ethos. But free movement has hugely democratized economic opportunity within the EU.

We need more such experiments in continental and global politics. National governments themselves need to be subjected to a superior tier of authority: they have proved to be the most dangerous forces in the nation-state era, waging endless wars against other nations while oppressing, killing and otherwise failing their own populations. Oppressed national minorities must be given a legal mechanism to appeal over the heads of their own governments – this was always part of Woodrow Wilson’s vision and its loss has been terrible for humanity.

Third, and finally: we need to find new conceptions of citizenship. Citizenship is itself the primordial kind of injustice in the world. It functions as an extreme form of inherited property and, like other systems in which inherited privilege is overwhelmingly determinant, it arouses little allegiance in those who inherit nothing. Many countries have made efforts, through welfare and education policy, to neutralize the consequences of accidental advantages such as birth. But “accidental advantages” rule at the global level: 97% of citizenship is inherited, which means that the essential horizons of life on this planet are already determined at birth.

If you are born Finnish, your legal protections and economic expectations are of such a different order to those of a Somalian or Syrian that even mutual understanding is difficult...But in a world system – rather than a system of nations – there can be no justification for such radical divergences... Deregulating human movement is an essential corollary of the deregulation of capital: it is unjust to preserve the freedom to move capital out of a place and simultaneously forbid people from following.

Contemporary technological systems offer models for rethinking citizenship so it can be de-linked from territory, and its advantages can be more fairly distributed. The rights and opportunities accruing to western citizenship could be claimed far away, for instance, without anyone having to travel to the west to do so. We could participate in political processes far away that nonetheless affect us: if democracy is supposed to give voters some control over their own conditions, for instance, should a US election not involve most people on earth? What would American political discourse look like, if it had to satisfy voters in Iraq or Afghanistan?

On the eve of its centenary, our nation-state system is already in a crisis from which it does not currently possess the capacity to extricate itself. It is time to think how that capacity might be built. We do not yet know what it will look like. But we have learned a lot from the economic and technological phases of globalization, and we now possess the basic concepts for the next phase: building the politics of our integrated world system. We are confronted, of course, by an enterprise of political imagination as significant as that which produced the great visions of the 18th century – and, with them, the French and American Republics. But we are now in a position to begin.

“The Demise of the Nation-State” Questions

PART I

1. What is the author’s view for the reason behind increased nationalist movements around the world?

2. What problems have nationalism and the creation of nation-states caused?

3. Why does the author believe the power of the nation-state is decreasing?

PART II

4. What actions did European nation-states take in the early modern and modern periods?

5. What does the author argue has happened to the nation-state’s power over its national economy?
6. According to the author, what are fundamental differences between empires and nations?

7. What reasons does the author give to explain why many countries decolonized after WWII have fallen prey to violence and instability?

8. What are the three proposed solutions by the author to the problems of our current geopolitical situation? What are his arguments for each solution?

9. Do you agree with the author’s arguments in this article? Parts of it? Why/why not?