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In praise of the nation

Why progressives can't leave civic patriotism and the nation state to right-wing populists

Read this article in German or Russian.

A hymn to the nation state? A plea in defence of the nation? Why not also toast to jingoism or stand up for exclusion and hate?

This, at any rate, seems to be the widespread thinking in newsrooms, cultural organisations, church congresses, party conventions and among economists and social scientists. The nation state is regarded as backward-looking and impractical, as lacking a sense of solidarity, and as ineffective and obsolete in view of the global challenges ahead. And that is to say nothing of the nation itself.

Didn't Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels leave no doubt that the solution of the working classes to the social question will overcome 'the particular characteristics of individual nationalities'? And don't social scientists rightly refer to 'imagined communities'? The deconstruction of the nation seems to be a natural step on the path towards a peaceful future for humanity in which, as John Lennon sang, there are no countries, no national borders standing in the way of a global brotherhood. This is why supranational alliances and regions that cooperate at the local level are needed, if not as a 'global government' then at least as a 'Republic of Europe'. 'It's easy, if you try!'

But here's the thing. If the concept of the nation is indeed a backward-looking social construct, as impotent as it is ideologically dangerous, then why are citizens the world over refusing to consign it to the dustbin of history, where it practically and morally belongs in the eyes of progressive observers? Because a majority of people quite obviously do not share this opinion, that's why.

In the most recent 2014 World Values Survey, researchers polled citizens about the role of the state in almost 100 countries, from Algeria to the Democratic Republic of Congo. Eighty-six per cent of the respondents reported being 'very proud' or 'fairly proud' of their nation, while the

proportion of people who felt 'absolutely no pride' in their nationality was a meagre 1.7 per cent. More recent research from YouGov has yielded very similar results. Over the summer of 2017, the opinion pollsters examined the relationship between national and European identity in seven European countries. Only between one and three per cent of the respondents viewed themselves exclusively as Europeans on average, with three per cent of German, two per cent of British, one per cent of French and zero per cent of Finnish respondents identifying only as European. These figures show that there is still widespread attachment to the nation and the nation state, much like there has always been. They also seem to reflect a deeper need for a particular kind of collective 'we'.

But isn't the rejection of the nation one of the central lessons of modern history – particularly from a German perspective? Who in their right mind would cling to the ingredients of the toxic mixture that fuelled the murderous hubris of the Third Reich? While this argument is certainly valid, it should be remembered that the widespread contempt of German elites for nationalism even in mild forms is anything but a consensus in Europe. From a Danish, Norwegian, Polish or Dutch perspective, the nation and the nation state haven't served as a means of aggression, but rather as a protective shield – not least against attacks from Germany. Against this background, the current, well-intentioned attempt by Berlin to exorcise the nation state seems almost bizarre, particularly when it is dogmatically and unambiguously directed at those nations that have suffered from German nationalism the most.

This critical attitude towards the nation state is also problematic in view of political necessities. In light of all this talk about how the nation state has fallen from grace, progressives should remember that there simply can be no democratic participation, justice, solidarity or integration in a globalised world where there is no nation state to act as a forum for progressive policy.

Hyperglobalisation versus the nation state

Even a superficial glance at the current global challenges reveals that the problem we are facing today is too little rather than too much statehood. At a global level, only the nation state has so far turned out to be a democratically legitimate actor that can also build a political fence around economic hyperglobalisation. Certainly, globalisation has pulled hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. At the same time, however, it has also resulted in declining wealth for the middle classes in developed countries, a development that has driven the continuing

populist revolts. Branko Milanovic convincingly illustrated this trend with his 'elephant curve'. In fact, the positive effects of globalisation have primarily emerged in places where the process has been integrated into national development strategies and overseen by an active and strong nation state rather than a lean and neoliberal one.

Certainly, Globalisation consequently shouldn't be flattened with the bulldozer of protectionism. However, what is needed, is an alternative path that takes advantage of its benefits, while also curbing the drawbacks felt by many in the middle classes in industrialised nations. Such a middle ground can only be achieved through a political process of *re-regulation*, so the reinforcing of *state* options. This type of 'sensible globalisation', to use the phrase coined by Dani Rodrik, is channelled in constructive directions and aims to reinforce rather than to overcome the competences of the nation state.

This also holds for international cooperation in general. Ambitious global projects such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris climate agreement cannot be implemented without nation states, but only with them. Less nation state won't result in more control over unequal globalisation, increased global security, or higher levels of international cooperation and development.

If democracy fails, Europe fails

But what about Europe? What should we make of the widely shared hope that we can achieve supranational control through European integration? Although this logic seems to hold up in theory, the sobering, practical truth is different. Rather than correcting trends that have spiralled out of control, institutions such as the EU seem to have so far accelerated globalisation. In contrast to what populists are saying, this is not because EU lawmakers lack the resolve to do so. Rather, the complexities of decision-making at the supranational level are to be blamed. These complexities often impede regulatory efforts at 'positive integration' as the process of reaching a consensus on key questions cannot be rushed.

More important, however, is the question of democratic participation at the European level. The response to the existing deficits of the European project in its current form simply cannot be a call for more democracy. On the contrary, the one-size-fits-all approach of a consensus decreed by Brussels won't offer a way out of the multiple crises at a time when the neoliberal reality of 'rescuing the euro' increasingly conflicts with the lofty visions of a social Europe. What is needed instead is a *saneEuropeanisation* that accepts the differing needs and political

preferences of the various member states. Attempts to forcefully create a European *demos* through a sweeping transfer of competences to the European Parliament, on the other hand, are likely to aggravate the centrifugal forces of the Union and derail any unification agenda. Anyone who truly wants to 'take a chance on more democracy' at the European level will also have to make room for more democratic national statehood, for instance, by strengthening the oversight powers of democratically elected national parliaments.

Yes, we need more Europe. But not an undifferentiated Europe, and not everywhere. We need a *confederate* Europe focused on consolidation in some political areas and on the strengthening of national options in others. This wouldn't be the 'Republic of Europe' that particularly enthusiastic pro-Europeans have advocated for, but it would also steer clear of being a haven of reaction precisely for this reason. In fact, a Europe of this kind would in all likelihood simply be *popular* rather than *populist*.

Migration and homeland

We also need the nation state in order to address the major issue of migration. Solidarity is one of the core preoccupations of progressive policy. Solidarity in practice, however, cannot only focus on other people; it also needs to be carried by a 'we'. Against this background, migration also represents a challenge to the social welfare state. Left-wing politicians who tiptoe around the subject of migration limits while simultaneously pleading for humanitarian generosity, and those who remain mute on the issue altogether, aren't just wasting their ability to take action. They are also putting two key traditional concerns at risk: the welfare state based on solidarity and comprehensive social integration.

In his speech on the anniversary of German unification in 2017, German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier called for the rehabilitation of the term 'homeland' (*Heimat*), arguing that 'the longing for a home … is something we simply cannot allow to become a nationalist prerogative.' In Steinmeier's view, home 'is a place where "we" takes on meaning.' In his 2016 presidential campaign for the Austrian presidency, Alexander Van der Bellen also emphasised that progressives *can* claim home as a concept. Yet whether progressive forces *should* focus on this concept remains a controversial question. Isn't the term too 'exclusionary', and hasn't it been tarnished by the blood-and-soil romanticism of the National Socialists? The obvious answer would seem to be yes. But rejecting the notion of homeland also means that it cannot be harnessed at the very level where it is most politically effective.

When it comes to the romantic notion of neighbourhoods or the cultivation of regional dialects, homeland certainly seems to have become an increasingly acceptable concept for progressives. Marc Saxer for instance recently called for 'a progressive and decent home' rooted in 'local traditions'. [http://www.ipg-journal.de/schwerpunkt-des-monats/heimat/artikel/detail/linke-heimat-2614/] There is something to be said for this. But why does this kind of definition shy away from the meaning of homeland that is in fact the most common? Why does it shy away from home*land*?

It is exactly this blind spot that is a burden for integration. A neighbourhood after all doesn't guarantee political emancipation, but being a citizen in a national community does. This is why 'homeland' *and* a 'nation' that is open to the world are not exclusionary terms. They are concepts that make acceptance, integration and participation possible in the first place. The 'civil patriotism' of the Scottish National Party offers an instructive example of this.

Underlying the plea for a left-wing rehabilitation of the nation state is the belief that it precisely does *not* amount to pandering to the nationalist zeitgeist. On the contrary, it involves a rediscovery. The centre-left has in fact always won electoral majorities when linking justice and the proud legacy of internationalism with a commitment to a strong state. Olof Palme recognised this in the Swedish term for the concept that underpinned the country's welfare state – *folkhemmet* or the people's home. So did Willy Brandt. It was no accident that he took up the chancellorship in 1972 with a slogan that probably seems more fitting for a party like Alternative for Germany (AfD) today – 'be proud of our country'. And in 1987, Brandt pointed out that 'the matter of the nation – in a peaceful attitude and in the awareness of Europe's responsibility – has been better served from the outset by the democratic left than by others.' Today, the outrageous statements made by the AfD prove week after week just how right he was. The critical problem is precisely that a positive, civil patriotism that is open to the world becomes more unlikely the more progressive forces protest against it. This is exactly why the political left needs the nation state, but also why the democratic nation state needs the left.

Progressives, then, need to articulate an enlightened, patriotic 'we' – a progressive identity that doesn't try to circle the wagons in ethnic terms but also doesn't oppose European and global cooperation. A nation state rooted in this type of identity would snatch the claim to sole representation away from extremist voices and could stem the rise of political tribalism. At the same time, it would return to progressives the area in which they have celebrated their greatest successes. In short, a

state of this kind would be a worthy articulation of an open and clear left-wing praise of the nation.

This essay is an extract from the book Lob der Nation. Weshalb wir den Nationalstaat nicht den Rechtspopulisten überlassen dürfen (In praise of the nation. Why we can't leave the nation state to right-wing populists). To be published in April of 2018, approximately 112 pages, ISBN 978-3-8012-0528-7.



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