

Nation-State, Nationalism and the Need for Roots

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The State is a cold concern which cannot inspire love, but itself kills, suppresses everything that might be loved; so one is forced to love it, because there is nothing else. That is the moral torment to which all of us today are exposed.

Simone Weil [\[1\]](#)

The influence nationalism has today can be attributed to the sense of uprootedness people experience in the contemporary neoliberal globalization. The human need for feeling part of a community within familiar territorial and temporal environment remains heavily neglected by the dominant heteronomous paradigm of individualism and exploitation.

Rootedness appears as one of the most important, but overlooked, human needs. People are rooted when they, not only feel protected by, but actively and organically participate in the life of their community, preserving in this way alive certain traits of the past and expectations for the future. When brought to life, every human being is connected to a certain place of birth, cultural traditions and social environment. As Simone Weil writes: *Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.* [\[2\]](#)

In the current state of uprootedness, however, The Nation-State, and eventually nationalism, appears as the last remnant of human collectivity related to actual geographical territory and historicity amidst digitalized global flows of authority

and capital.

The contemporary pseudo-rational paradigm that places consumption and individual success as the main target of life has come to degrade all social links and bonding imaginary significations. As Castoriadis explains in his article *The Crisis of Modern Society*, these processes have come to produce a crisis of insignificance in the so-called developed liberal societies that is slowly spreading to all their satellites in the developing world[3]. In this crisis social bonds are being diminished even on family level and the only entity that remains to provide any sort of identity, both on social and individual level, which links the future, the present and the past, appears to be the Nation-State.

The reality, however, is much different. There has been, and to some extent there still are, many other levels of human collectivities related to common ground on much smaller, decentralized and humane scale like the municipality, the city, the town, the village, the province etc. The nation or in other words – the State – has come to replace all of these, homogenizing the various cultures and traditions within its borders in its effort at establishing its authority as the only legitimate one. **Thus the national identity has come to replace or dominate every other bond of attachment.** As philosopher Simone Weil suggests: *[m]an has placed his most valuable possession in the world of temporal affairs, namely, his continuity in time, beyond the limits set by human existence in either direction, entirely in the hands of the State.*[4]

The Emergence of Nation-State

Nations are a recent invention, if we take into account the time span it occupies within the whole human history. It is tightly related to the logic of *etatism* and the emergence of the Nation-State. But before its domination over social imaginary, people's continuity in space and time was

expressed, for example, through their shared experiences in medieval cities and towns. There was still **a sense of belonging**, but it was of a more fluid nature; without being exclusively set within strict territorial borders, specific language or narrow cultural traits.

What did not exist prior to the emergence of the Nation-State was that permanent, strictly-defined patriotic devotion, on a mass scale, to a single object. Feelings of belonging and loyalty were much more diffusive and dispersed, constantly varying according to shared similarities and changing threats. Their character used to be far more complicated as they varied between interconnected groups and territories: belonging to certain professional guild, town, region, community, leader, religion or philosophical tendency. There was not one single extra-social national identity above all other intra-social interactions.

All this has changed with the emergence of Nation-States.

By shifting the role of sovereign from the vibrant public life to the lifeless bureaucratic body of the state, nationalism (as the absolute internationalization of national identity by society) attempts at summing the total of people who recognize the authority of one and the same statist formation. Thus, as Weil suggests, when one talks about national sovereignty, he really means the sovereignty of certain Nation-State.[\[5\]](#) In statecraft, i.e. the art of making statist politics, the authority does not lay in the collective disposal of the people but it is being absorbed completely by the inhumane, merciless and bureaucratic *etatist* mechanism.

The latter's complete hold on power, exercised through constant policing of everyday life, provokes on the one hand, popular feelings of mistrust, hatred and fear, while on the other, the national element demands absolute devotion and sacrifice to the very same structure, strengthening its total domination on material and cognitive level. These seemingly

paradoxical characteristics complement logically each other. Total concentration of power in the hands of one extra-social bureaucratic entity requires for it to appear before its subjects as an absolute value, as a loveless idolatry, to which Weil adds the rhetoric question – *what could be more monstrous, more heartrending.* [6]

Unlike absolute monarchies of the past, in which the kings were being presented as direct descendants of God, modern nation-states present themselves as desacralized. But they are still embedded in a metaphysical imaginary: one that is not related to religion or God, but on hobbesian fears of the people and weberian bureaucratic rationalism.

State is not a sacral idol, but a material object which serves “self-evident”, nationally determined purpose, that must be forced above everything else. It allocates, as Kurdish revolutionary Abdullah Ocalan suggests, a number of attributes whose task is to replace older religiously rooted attributes like: nation, fatherland, national flag, national anthem and many others. [7] The notion of national unity comes to reminiscent and goes even further than religious concepts such as the “Unity with God”. It becomes divine in an absolute manner.

In order to achieve this total absorption of all social life, it strives at systematically destroying all organized and spontaneous forms of public interaction, so as to remain the only link between the past and the present, as well as the only social and individual signification. This antagonism between State and society, that takes the form of the former’s efforts to constantly degrade public space and time, has low but ceaseless intensity. This process is invisible for the social conscience, because of the cautiousness that is required for the statecraft to not lose its supremacy that nationalism provides. The outcome of this national bureaucratization of everyday life is the infliction of traits

of servility, passivity and conformity into people's imaginary, so as to make social interaction beyond Nation-State hardly imaginable.

Nation-State and Borders

The dynamics of State and nationalism enclose those that are situated within their frontiers, both on territorial and temporal level. On the one hand it encloses through its territorial borders, while on the other, through the subordination of people's imaginaries to patriotic identities. Thus the social flow of ideas through space and time is being obstructed. These national compartments restrain human creativity, and although not dulling it completely, they still seriously limit it's potentials by placing on its way border check ups, bureaucratic formalities, patriotic dogmas and national antagonisms. Simone Weil suggests that a closer examination of history will reveal the striking difference between flow of ideas and cultures in pre-national periods and the modern age of statecraft and capitalism.[\[8\]](#) Without romanticizing the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, one can see in those periods the fluid, creative, curious relationship inhabitants of cities and regions from different cultural and territorial backgrounds had with each other, as well as with their history, present and future.

Today on the contrary, when (while) we are supposedly connected globally with each other, and the planet has become, as the popular saying goes, one "giant village", we see more suspicion to the foreign, more fear from the unknown, than our access to knowledge, science and technology should suggest. One of the main reasons for this is the deepening enclosure of public space and time by statecraft and nationalism. Similar processes have been observed by other thinkers like David Graeber, who in his book *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joy of Bureaucracy*[\[9\]](#) observed the unfulfilled promises of the highly scientific, technological

age we have already entered. These failed expectations he attributes to the civilizational shift from the real to the simulational, which is a direct result of the capitalist and bureaucratic dynamics that have uprooted our societies from organic experience of and intervention with public space and time.

The National Sense of Injustice and Loyalty

In the national context of statecraft, every notion of justice is being expropriated by and submitted to the expansionist nature of the State. As being an entity aimed at concentrating authority, it is always in antagonistic relationship with other similar formations, as well as with social uprisings for power redistribution. States always present themselves to be in position of injustice regarding their national mission for complete domination.

According to Hannah Arendt: *tribal nationalism [patriotism] always insists that its own people are surrounded by 'a world of enemies' – 'one against all' – and that a fundamental difference exists between this people and all others.* [\[10\]](#)

Justice loses its meaning and from a matter of public deliberation it is being absorbed by the patriotic discourse. It is being turned into a tool through which the Nation-State processes and condemns its opponents on geopolitical and on inner/structural level (as national threat and as national traitors, respectively). This inflicted sense of national injustice is used to fill the gap left by the uprooted imaginary significations that relate people and their communities to actual territorial environments and vibrant cultures. It attempts at turning acts, done in the name of homeland, into struggle against universal injustice.

But since this feeling of national injustice is of simulative rather than of organic character, it often leads to extreme

attitudes like xenophobia, racism, discrimination etc. Thus it comes as no surprise when Weil concludes that *fascism is always intimately connected with a certain variety of patriotic feeling.* [\[11\]](#)

By breaking all organic bonds of public life and replacing them with patriotic justice, the state becomes the only entity to which one can **pledge loyalty**. In such way monstrosities that are being conducted by national bureaucracies are being often adopted by the common folk as just. As radical geographer David Harvey explains, *national identity is the primary means by which the state acquires legitimacy and consent for its actions.* [\[12\]](#)

This is the reason why people willingly engage in wars that will cost them much, if not even their lives, while empowering, without to place in danger, their rulers, which have provoked the conflict in the first place. It is because of this imaginary signification of national loyalty against the ultimate injustice that has led societies to massacre each other. It is also most certainly the engine of the current rise of xenophobia and racism among people in the developed countries. Nationalism leads them to view themselves as victims of those that seek refuge from the rubbles of the Third World, neglecting the fact that it was the pillage and exploited conducted by their own nations that have provoked these current migratory waves.

Reproduction of Hierarchies

The sense of uprootedness slowly penetrates the social imaginary. The long tentacles of the dominant bureaucratic mechanisms embed themselves within the everyday life of people, making it almost impossible to not view everything in terms of nations, states and capitalist relations. Thus the current heteronomous worldview is often being recreated by those who rebel against it. Social mobilizations that rise against authoritarian regimes or exploitative/parasitic

capitalist systems tend to slowly replace the initial democratic traits with erection of hierarchies and leadership cults that mimic the patriotic loyalty to the Nation-State. This is especially true for, but unfortunately not limited to, movements that strive at achieving social change on representational level since, as Max Weber correctly concludes, *no party, whatever its program, can assume the effective direction of the state without becoming national.* [\[13\]](#)

By being uprooted from their physical and temporal environment, with only the lifeless bureaucratic machinery of the State as a linkage between the human being and the world, people are compelled to embrace leaders, whose role resembles that of the statist Leviathan. We can see this logic in pop culture, and particularly in cinema, where manufactured stars play characters that resemble contemporary popular perceptions of the state: either the flawless superheroes and top agents from the Cold War era, or the cynical and vulgar, but effective, antiheroes that have sprang during the ongoing crisis of political representation.

Thus uprootedness breeds further uprootedness, or better yet – it expands itself, constantly securing the continuation of dominating bureaucratic organisms and power relations. The dangers of these processes have been examined by thinkers like Hannah Arendt, for whom the loyalty to religious or national groups and identities always leads to the abdication of individual thought. [\[14\]](#) But we are not doomed to remain uprooted and thus easily controlled and manipulated. Possibilities for rooting can be found all around us that lay beyond the ideological mystifications of the contemporary heteronomous system.

Putting Down Roots

Putting down roots means restoring the sense of belonging that one feels towards his social and cultural environment, through

shared responsibility. There is the need to make, as Andre Gorz suggests, “one’s territory” livable again.[\[15\]](#) People should be linked to their cities, towns and villages, through grassroots direct participation in their management and shape them according to actual social needs in the constantly changing world, instead of following predetermined and sterile bureaucratic planning. As Gorz puts it, *[t]he neighborhood or community must once again become a microcosm shaped by and for all human activities, where people can work, live, relax, learn, communicate, and knock about, and which they manage together as the place of their life in common.*[\[16\]](#) Democratic confederations, instead of Nation-States, can ultimately coordinate the activities of such emancipated and rooted communities, allowing them to reclaim their public space and time from the nationalist supremacy.

This requires for the constant creative activity of the public to once again be irritated. The Ancient Greek notion of *Astynomos Orgè*[\[17\]](#), i.e. the passion for institution-making, must become vital social and individual signification that gives meaning to life, so as to allow for the responsible participation to replace the irresponsible consumption propagated by capitalism.

Such rooting cannot be “ordered” from above by “artificial” (i.e. extra-social) structures like electoral parties or powerful leaders, for reasons that we already explored above. Instead they should be guided by democratic organizations that emerge in ecological manner in the midst of everyday life by day-to-day necessities. Germs of such organizational type already exist on embryonic level in our contemporary surroundings in the form of neighborhood assemblies during urban insurrections, markets without intermediates during economic crises, and even the regular meetings between neighbors that live in the same condominium. Political activists and organized groups should encourage and nurture the political element in such occurrences and spontaneous

social movements, since politics is what allows societies to reclaim their space and determine their temporality.

An example of such rooting can be observed in the **Paris Commune** and how this was indicated by certain changes in the language. By taking direct control of their city, Parisians' reclamation of public space and time could be observed through the replacement of the terms *mesdames* and *messieurs* (ladies and gentlemen) by ***citoyen*** and ***citoyenne*** (female and male for citizen). As Kristin Ross observes, the former formula, used mainly by the French bourgeoisie, indicated **the saturated time of Nation.**[\[18\]](#) It confirmed and inscribed the existing then social divisions (i.e. the superiority of the bourgeoisie over the working class) and the continuation of a certain politico-historical tradition of statecraft and hierarchical stratification.

The introduction of *citoyen* and *citoyenne* by the communards, according to Ross, indicated a break with the national belonging. Instead we can suggest that it addressed revolutionary withdrawal from the artificial/extra-social national collectivity and heading toward popular rooting in another politico-historical tradition, dating back to the emergence of the Athenian *Polis*. It indicated new politicized relationship that people obtained with their surrounding and temporality and the way they linked themselves to their city and history: On the one hand, they began viewing themselves as **stewards of their city**, managing it collectively; on the other, they began conceiving of history as **creation**, in which they take an active part. *Citoyen* and *citoyenne* was not a reference to a certain social strata, part of national entity, but an expression of equality and shared passion for political participation in public affairs. We could only imagine how this new democratic culture could have developed in the long run if the Commune was not brutally suppressed by the French army after only three months of existence.

Conclusion

Today we see how our society of uprooted people willingly embraces narratives like nationalism that provoke hatred and fear, which ultimately leads to social degradation and cannibalism. The pseudo-dilemma before the modern individual is either to stick up with the Big Brother, i.e. the Nation-State, which to offer him a sense of belonging, or to become a kind of neoliberal "space cowboy" that wanders the world on his own in search of things and experiences to consume without any sense of self-limitation or ethical boundaries. But both these options strengthen each other and create a vicious cycle.

What seems to be hidden from the "naked" eye is the third option of rooting people through the recreation of public space and political time on the basis of direct democratic self-emancipation. This means detaching history from the sterilization of the Nation-State and linking it instead to the organic experience of life in our cities, towns and villages. Historic facts should not be distilled by the means of statecraft but by the imaginary context of each epoch and society, allowing communities to determine their temporality. This would also mean that the spaces we inhabit become truly public, i.e. controlled and managed directly by those that inhabit and depend on them, and not by bureaucrats or capitalist markets.

This approach will not solve all our problems, neither will put an end to history, but it will get us closer to the paradigm of social and individual autonomy, which in its essence can provide people with the freedom to determine their past, present and future. The historic popular efforts at self-emancipation have shown the potential of such paradigm shift, offering us germs for us to use in our efforts today. It is in our hands to determine how our societies will move on.

References:

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