

Covid-19: ...and when they woke up, the nation-state was still there

These days we must listen to -and fund- the healthcare professionals and the researchers on epidemiology, biology or medicine. The priority is to save lives and defeat the virus. Nevertheless, the social sciences are also useful to reflect on how this situation is governed, what are the patterns of social and political behaviour or what will be the effect of this crisis on the political culture of the population. What I want to highlight in this article is the rediscovery of the nation-state in the time of coronavirus. The state - mocked as a XIX century artefact- and the nation -repudiated as an identitarian construction in a cosmopolitan world- have lately experienced a strong comeback.

To begin with, intellectuals and scholars have been decreeing the death of the nation-state for decades. This political actor would be under siege from above -the European Union, the multinational corporations, the international organisations- and from below - increasing role of cities and sub-national regions. Other academics merely describe a *thinner* state and talk about its transformation rather than its death. In any case, its tasks would be those of regulation, leaving the execution of policies to third parties -this has been called the “governance model”. With the current crisis, however, it reappears the classical Weberian definition that many people had forgotten: the state as the holder of the monopoly of the legitimate use of coercion.

The current situation of emergency has awakened all the *Leviathan* by activating exceptional mechanisms both in autocratic and in democratic countries. The nation-state, despised by everyone, is showing a remarkable capacity of population control and internal sovereignty. Moreover, the actors that would defy its very existence are missing in action. Despite the shared idea that countries on their own are not able to address a global pandemic, there has been no transfer of sovereignty upwards -beyond some attempts of closer coordination amongst states. The powerful market is also the target of several governments, presumably conservative -such as France or Germany-, which have threatened with nationalisations and public control of the economy if needed. Regarding the sub-state units, central governments such as that in Spain have emerged as a single command to tackle the pandemic, turning the ideas of decentralization and shared sovereignties into worthless pieces of paper.

Closely related to the state, the other element that has strongly reappeared is the nation. The deployment of patriotic rhetoric has been constant throughout the speeches of virtually all global leaders. From the liberal revolutions of the XVIII and XIX centuries, the nation is the source of legitimacy of the modern state -and therefore the variable which explains the loyalty of the population to the political establishment. This idea is very relevant if the goal is to convince citizens to trust their governments and to accept the draconian measures against the virus. To protect “our” people, to fight the Covid “united” or to highlight how extraordinary is “our” country are some of the resources of banal nationalism that are being widely used these days. In places such as Spain, however, we have also witnessed the limits of patriotic rhetoric in multinational states, where the activation of the majority nationalism can clash with those regions that present alternative national identities -leading to problems of coordination and loyalty.

The assumption that we live in a world of nations and that those nations have the right of self-determination is still very much alive. Following the previous example, and unlike Italy regarding Lombardy or China concerning Wuhan, the Spanish government has

rejected to treat each region differently by stating that the virus ignores territories. Therefore, the virus would ignore territories-regions -such as Madrid or Barcelona, which must be subjected to the same measures and be ruled by the same government- but not territories-countries -such as Spain or Portugal, which can be subjected to different measures and must be ruled by different governments. Beyond this anecdote, useful as an example, it is quite clear that the duality nation/state has been strengthened: on the one hand, the nation is still a rallying factor as well as the element which legitimises the political power. On the other hand, the state is still the unquestionable sovereign, holder of the monopoly of coercion. This conclusion is highly relevant for the post-coronavirus world in two senses.

Firstly, all the institutional and ideological constructs that were meant to overcome the nation-state have not passed the “coronavirus test”. In case of emergency, the shared sovereignties and the supra or sub-national political structures appear either as a mere accessory or as a concession of the state, disposable if the state so decides. This fact supports those scholars who, in the minority, were vindicating the centrality of the nation-state in a globalised world. However, the *globalist* thinkers have also strengthened their position by claiming a normative rather than an empirical thesis: global problems need global solutions. We will never know what would have happened if a European or even a global governance of the crisis would have taken the place of the state in this pandemic. Our hunch is that, at least, it would not have been a waste of time. For the time being, the lesson of all of that resembles the famous micro-tale by Augusto Monterroso, published more than sixty years ago: “when they woke up, the nation-state was still there”.

Further reading:

- Agamben, G. (2005). *State of exception*. Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press.
- Billig, M. (1995). *Banal nationalism*. London: SAGE.
- Marsh, Smith and Hothi (2006). Globalization and the state. In Hay, Lister and Marsh, *The state* (pp. 172-189). New York: Palgrave.
- Ozkirimli, U. (2017). *Theories of nationalism: a critical introduction*. London: Palgrave.
- Smith, A (1995). *Nations and nationalism in a global era*. Oxford: Polity Press.

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