Denationalized States and Global Assemblages

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Magnus Wennerhag: Today, there is an obvious difference between the rhetoric of liberalism — that is, liberalism as political ideology — and the actual workings of the state in liberal-democratic politics. From an historical perspective, how should we understand this difference?

Saskia Sassen: I would distinguish two issues. One is that liberalism is deeply grounded in a particular combination of historical circumstances. Most important, it is the struggle by merchants, and merchants as agents of the binomial, who used the market as the institutional setting that both gave force and legitimacy to their claim. The other is that the liberal political project of a newly empowered project to the whole of society. This is the crisis today's liberalism has been attacked by the employers of all kinds of political elites, including segments of the political left. On one hand, a decay of the institutional setting that Keynesian liberalism could function. So the struggle is no longer a struggle for representation, but rather a struggle for the liberal democratic participation and representation of those who were excluded from the liberal political project. What we used to call liberalism, it is now called liberal democracy. Between the two, it is not necessarily a simple extension of liberalism. The answer to your question, I think, is that this is more of an emerging trend, not necessarily based on historical liberalism itself. The question is, what precisely is the role of the state in liberal democracies? Is it to simply represent the will of the majority, or is it to protect the rights of minorities? The answer is, it depends on the context.
This does not mean that the aspiration of democratic participatory political systems is going under. On the contrary. But its historical liberal form is ... in the US, where there was even a proposal to make undocumented immigration into a criminal act and status. This is new.

MA: Around the turn of the last century, the discovery of the “social question” and the rise of the workers’ movement transformed the liberal notion of citizenship. It was no longer just about individual rights, but also about the rights of the collective. The liberal state was becoming more inclusive, but the political rights of immigrants were still limited. This was a period of struggle for inclusion. In the US, for example, the 19th century saw the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which excluded Chinese laborers from legal status. This was a significant moment in the history of immigration policy. But it was also a period of resistance. Immigrants and their advocates fought against these exclusions, and eventually, through a combination of legal and political action, they were able to gain more rights and protections.

SS: This brings up an important point about the history of immigration policy. In the US, as well as in other countries, there has been a long history of excluding certain groups based on their race or ethnicity. This exclusion has been justified in many ways, often using arguments about national security or public health. However, it is important to recognize that these exclusions have been based on racist and xenophobic ideologies.

MA: You mention some of the subjectivities at work today in what you interpret as new political spaces. Do we also have to invent new forms of rights that include those on the outside?

SS: This brings up a critical dynamic, but one that is elusive and often obscured by the hatreds and passions of a period. Some of the best social and civic rights we have today, such as those for access to public services and protection from discrimination, were achieved through struggles for inclusion. But these struggles were not always recognized as rights. They were often fought against the backdrop of racism and xenophobia. The fight for a more inclusive political system is ongoing, and it requires a commitment to recognizing the rights of all individuals.

MA: The political work was often the work of individuals and groups who had to fight against the status quo. In many cases, this work was done by minorities in their struggles for recognition and inclusion. But it typically involved a struggle against the prevailing political and economic order. This was hard work. In my work, I emphasize that these types of struggles for inclusion become more and more common as the global economy requires that national states change some of their key laws and regulations so that there is a global space for economic activity and political participation. In my new book, I argue that the global economic and political order is a critical arena for recognizing the rights of all individuals, and it is through these struggles that we can incorporate what we might call the good and the bad guys into the political system.

SS: I agree. The global economic and political order is a critical arena for recognizing the rights of all individuals. It is through these struggles that we can incorporate what we might call the good and the bad guys into the political system. This is a critical arena for recognizing the rights of all individuals. It is through these struggles that we can incorporate what we might call the good and the bad guys into the political system.
have been. I like to emphasize that these struggles contained the work of making rights – in fact, often making new rights. This was not only about asking for something but about creating something new. In some cases, it meant “making new” rights, especially civic and social. This is a long history in what was largely a Europe of cities.

Today the landscape is confusing – confusing in the sense that it does not make visible all the elements, and in that sense, hermetic. We need to detect all the pieces, and the bigger picture, but in a way that we see that they are there. This is why I spent quite a lot of time talking about the private sphere – the home as well as the market – has for long been the target of criticism, from progressive theorists as well as social critics. There is an agenda that criticizes the private sphere, especially in the United States, but also in Europe. Today, there are many different private systems, but what is different, or specific to the current transformation? At the deepest level, I argue, it has to do with a changing logic of organizing the division between the private and the public.

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Yes, definitely. I think one critical element is the notion of repossessing the state apparatus for genuine liberal democracy. The liberal state has been hijacked... by these systems, which are also hijacking, for neoliberal modern despots, even new types of very modern despots, less heavy-handed, more intermediated through propaganda machineries, etc.

My preferred version is a denationalized state. I am not keen on nationalisms. Another critical element is the notion I talked about earlier: that the formal political apparatus accommodates less and less of the political and hence the growing importance of informal political actors and political struggles. I see a lot of this emerging.

Besides what I said earlier, these politics also include a sort of denationalizing of the claim to the right to have rights. And, at the other end, a politics of the denationalizing politics – this is not about exclusive allegiance to the state, this is about a denationalized politics.

The title of your new book indicates that the concept of "assemblages" is central to your analysis. What role does this concept have for the description of the hierarchies of power in today's world? And how does it relate to your earlier research on the global city?

A key yet much overlooked feature of the current period is the multiplication of a broad range of partial, often highly specialized, cross-border systems for governing a variety of processes both inside and across nation-states. These systems include at one end of the spectrum private systems such as the lex constructio... of these earlier revolutions was to eliminate the distance between the people and a putatively divine sovereign (state).

This signals for me the beginning of a reconstituting of sovereignty. With the notion of denationalization I try to capture and make visible a mix of dynamics that is also altering sovereignty but is doing so from the inside out, and that are now oriented towards building global systems inside the national state. From there, then, the term denationalization.

But also begins to eat away at some participatory democracies. Clearly these trends are far more developed in some countries than in others.
some of the new global formations that emerged in the 1980s but was not itself the beginning of the new order as is often asserted.

These cross-border systems amount to particularized assemblages of bits of territory, authority, and rights that used to be part of more diffuse institutional domains within the nation-state or, at times, the supranational system. I see in this proliferation of specialized assemblages a tendency toward a mixing of constitutive rules once solidly lodged in the nation-state project. These novel assemblages are partial and often highly specialized, centered in particular utilities and purposes. Their emergence and proliferation bring several significant consequences even though this is a partial, not an all-encompassing development. They are potentially profoundly unsettling for what are still the prevalent institutional arrangements — nation-states and the supranational system. They promote a multiplication of diverse spatio-temporal framings and diverse normative orders where once the dominant logic was toward producing unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings.

This proliferation of specialized orders extends even inside the state apparatus. I argue that we can no longer speak of "the" state, and hence of "the" national state versus "the" global order. We see a novel type of segmentation inside the state apparatus, with a growing and increasingly privatized executive branch of government aligned with specific global actors, notwithstanding nationalist speeches, and we see a hollowing out of legislatures which increasingly become confined to fewer and more domestic matters. This realignment weakens the capacity of citizens to demand accountability from the executive and it partly erodes the privacy rights of citizens — a historic shift of the private-public division at the heart of the liberal state, albeit always an imperfect division.

MW: Lately, several "grand narratives" of globalization have been formulated by theorists such as Manuel Castells, Michael Hardt, and Antonio Negri. In what ways does your own theory resemble, or differ from, these?

SS: I share much with them, and I know them all. There is much political trust among us. But since you ask about possible theoretical differences, let me answer. One way of starting is to say that their effort has been to map the emergent global. And I agree with what they see and the importance they give to this global. But that is not what I am doing.

Very briefly, my struggle over the last twenty years has been to go beyond the self-evident global scale, and detect the global at sub-national levels. From there comes my concept of the global city, for instance. One way of putting it is that I like to go digging in the penumbra of master categories. The global has become a master category, and is so blindly clear that it puts a lot of places, actors, and dynamics in a deep shadow. My current work on the denationalized state — no matter how intense the renationalizing also is — is yet another instance of the global that is not self-evidently global. I am interested in the ways in which the global might be endogenous to the national. For example, much global capital is actually denationalized national capital. Strictly speaking, there is no legal persona for the global firm. But there is a global space for their operations, a global space that is the result of states denationalizing bits and pieces of their national systems — it took a lot of work by over a hundred states to do this. The human rights regime offers another type of example. When a judge or a plaintiff uses human rights in a national court for a national court case, it partly, and in very specialized ways, denationalizes a national law system.

By the way, this, again, points to the multivalence of many of the key categories I have developed to do my type of research. The denationalizing that happens through the demands of global firms is not so good, whereas the denationalizing that happens through the use of human rights in national courts is very interesting, and mostly positive.

These are just two examples of how I work. It is, thus, quite different from just focusing on the global per se. Focusing on the global firm or the human rights regime as global entities is critical. But it needs to be distinguished from the making of that possibility. I am interested in the making. I think this approach also has consequences for politics: we can perform global politics through national state institutions — and in so doing, will, of course, partly denationalize our state, which is fine with me as it begins to build a multi-sited infrastructure for global politics — a global politics that runs through localized sites rather than a world state.

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