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 polities. From an historical perspective, how should we understand this difference?

Saskia Sassen: I would distinguish two issues. One is that historically, liberalism is deeply grounded in a particular combination of circumstances. Most important is the struggle by merchants and manufacturers to gain liberties vis-à-vis the Crown and the aristocracy, and the use of the market as the institutional setting that both gave force and legitimacy to that claim. Seen this way, why should liberalism not have decayed? What rescued liberalism was Keynesianism, the extension of a socially empowering project to the whole of society. This is the crisis today: Keynesianism has been attacked by new types of actors, including segments of the political elite. What is happening today is on the one hand a decay (objectively speaking) of liberalism even as an ideology — being replaced with neoliberalism, attacks on the welfare state, etc — and, on the other hand, a decay of the structural conditions within which Keynesian liberalism could function. So the struggle today has been renamed: one key term is democratic participation and representation, and those who use this language will rarely invoke liberalism. When we praise liberalism, it is often a situated defense: as against neoliberalism, as against fundamentalisms and despotisms — this is not necessarily invoking historical liberalism, which at its origins was defending the rights of an emerging class of property owners, but the best aspects of a doctrine that had to do with the fight against the despotism of Crown and nobility.

MW: In your new book,1 you call the development of the US state "illiberal". Is this a more general development that can be seen in other countries as well?

SS: Theoretically speaking, I would say that we will see similar trends in other liberal democratic regimes that are neo-liberalizing their social policies, hollowing out their legislatures/parliaments, and augmenting as well as privatizing or protecting the power of their executive or prime ministerial branch of government. That is to say, we will see these trends where we see the conditions I identify for the US, even though they will assume their own specific forms and contents. I would say that Blair’s reign in the UK especially since the war on Iraq has clearly moved in this direction. Instead of being guided (and disciplined) by the Cabinet, which is parliament based, Blair set up a parallel “cabinet” at Downing Street from which he got much of his advice and confirmations of the correctness of his decisions. This had the effect of hollowing out the real Cabinet. This may also explain why some of the leading figures of the real Cabinet resigned: Robin Cook, Clare Short. All of this is well known and much commented on in the UK. At the same time, I would argue that even though Berlusconi’s regime had some of these features, it was more a consequence of corruption and manipulation of the political apparatus than the type of systemic development I am alluding to. The answer to your question is also empirical: we need research to understand where this systemic trend is emerging and becoming visible/operational.

MW: Many European countries are currently contemplating introducing some type of “citizenship tests”. In Sweden, the traditionally social liberal Folkpartiet has pursued this issue and proposed that immigrants have to pass a language test to become Swedish citizens. Generally, the party wants to apply more paternalistic political measures — “tough on crime”, more discipline in schools — especially regarding immigrants. The corresponding political party in Denmark has, during its time in office, brought this development even further. Speaking of liberalism as a political ideology, do you see it as being in the midst of a crisis, or is it simply adapting to the conditions of the prevailing (economic, political, legal, etc) order?

SS: I would say traditional liberalism is in crisis, or at least being attacked by the governments themselves as well as by powerful economic actors and certain traditional society sectors, such as fundamentalist evangelical groups in the US. Why should it last forever? Nothing has — except the Catholic Church, I guess. But to do so it has had to reinvent itself regu-
This does not mean that the aspiration of democratic participatory political systems is going under. On the contrary. But its historical liberal form is...m a contrast. 

SS: This is a critical arena. It is an issue which illuminates few others that are particularly important to us. But there is no ready-made solution lying on a shelf. There is no solution. We have lost the historical sense of "making".

This political work is often the work of minorities in their struggles for recognition and inclusion. But it is also the work of many of the emergent social forms - these new social forms can incorporate what we might call the good and the bad guys.

The struggle between the "good guys" and the "bad guys" was hard. In my work, I emphasize that these types of struggles for the liberal state to handle the social question - given the type of liberalism that has evolved over the last two decades - the state is more willing and able to make new forms of rights that include the outsider.

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 political movements have been carried out by people who are...m and". In contrast, the US has always been a bigger political arena than the UK, and it has been more contentious. But in the US, the notion was more: You want to come in? Fine. But you are on your own.

MW: That brings us to the question of the...m in new ways. Those who have failed to...m in new ways. Those who have failed to incorporation. This is a critical area. It is an issue which illuminates few others that are particularly important to us. But there is no ready-made solution lying on a shelf. There is no solution. We have lost the historical sense of "making".

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have been. I like to emphasize that these struggles contained the work of making rights—indeed, making new rights. This was not only about asking for recognition of existing rights, but also about demanding that the personal be political, and that the state apparatus be expanded to include multiple aspects of the private, but not necessarily all aspects. This means that 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 movements and political dissenters. This is a complex issue and one I have spent quite a bit of time teasing out in particular in this book. Yes, the division as historically constructed is under stress. And yet it is not just about the erosion of surveillance technologies and the fact that the personal is political. By the very act of protests and demonstrations, the private was brought into the public sphere.

What is different, or specific to the current transformation? At the deepest level, I argue that it has to do with a changing logic organizing the division of powers, but also with a shift in the way power is exercised. The executive branch of states—whether the Crown or the state—now has the power to make decisions that are not only about the expansion of markets, but also about contesting absolutist powers of the Crown. My question is: what is the logic that underlies today’s changes? It is impossible to do justice to the subject, but here are some elements of my answer. The idea of the private sphere—the home as well as the market—has for long been the target of criticism, a fortiori in the case of the systems you mention in your question. It is the case that systems of private institutions—such as private arbitrations and private courts—have a long history in systems of judicial governance. This is a long history in what was largely a Europe of cities. Today, we see a complex landscape of institutions and new possibilities coming out of the withering away of old dividing lines between the private and the public.

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cism of the global justice movement, of
corporations and institutions like the WTO and the IMF, and its demands for more transparent and democratic governance, can play a positive role in this?

SS: 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... 

MW: 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?

SS: A key element of the current period is the multiplication of a broad range of partial, often highly specialized, cross-border systems which shape processes both inside and across nation-states. These systems include at one end of the spectrum private systems such as the lex constructio... 

MW: Sovereign authority can be seen as state sovereignty, but also as popular sovereignty — the collective self-realization of the people, in contrast to mere delegation. Is there any difference in how "de-nationalization" exerts an influence on these different kinds of sovereignty?

SS: There is a revolutionary clause in all the new constitutions framed in the 1990s — Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, South Africa, and some others. It has gotten very little attention, which surprises me. It's a matter of the constitutional legitimacy of the people, in the language of the constitution itself. Authors of the worldwide new constitutions are constrained by their own nation-states. In national constitutions...
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 blindingly 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.

Notes