

The Breakdown of States

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The role that Fourth World nations play in state breakdown and collapse is little studied and yet vital to understanding how to create stable political structures. Most multinational states are short-lived and fragile because they are incapable of generating a single cultural life that is sustainable. Every state has three basic functions: (1) expansion (securing new sources of wealth and land); (2) consolidation (assimilating captive nations, refugees, and immigrants); and (3) maintenance (managing income, resources, infrastructure, and defense). The failure of nations to resist expansion and consolidation leads to assimilation and the destruction of that nation. On the other hand, state failure to capture and consolidate these nations can contribute to a failure of state maintenance resulting in break-up (two or more states emerge from one state) or break-down (federation within state boundaries).

Assimilation is far less common than break-up. More than ninety percent of all states that have ever existed ended in collapse. For instance, the expansion of the city-state of Rome into a multinational empire embracing thrice the number of non-Romans as Romans eventually collapsed as long repressed nations reemerged and the costs of putting down these rebellions exceeded the revenues of the state. Modern history repeats the pattern: in 1945 there were forty-six international states but by 1993 there were 191. On average, nearly three states per year have emerged since 1945. This shows that large states are rapidly fragmenting into smaller states and nation-states. In the 1990s alone we have witnessed this process twenty-five times beginning with Namibian independence in 1990, the collapse of the Soviet Union into fifteen new states in 1991; the break-up of Yugoslavia in six states in 1992; the New Years Day 1993 separation of the Czech and Slovak nations, and finally last year's separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia.

On average, nations outlast states. Out of 191 states, 127 are less than fifty years old. A generous figure for the geographical and political continuity of a modern state is 500 years old (Spain). Compare that with Euzkadi (Basque Country) that may be 10,000 years old. Friesland predates all the states that claim her by more than a thousand years. The aboriginal nations of Australia can claim 40,000 years of history.

This means nations endure beneath the boundaries of states like bedrock as ephemeral state boundaries shift like wind-blown sand over the surface. Latvia offers a modest example of nation endurance. The Baltic nation lost its independence to the Teutonic Knights in 1242, only to recover it again 727 years later with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the sixth occupying

state. Albania presents a more dramatic example since 2,537 years elapsed between occupation by Greeks in 625BC and independence in 1912.

The observation that nations generally outlast states does not explain state collapse but the endurance of old nations and the pace of state breakups does suggest that nation resistance to consolidation plays a role. To isolate nationalism in single factor analysis is not very useful for understanding state collapse. It also contributes to the newspaper portrait of an “ethnic scourge” that destroys states. In reality the assertion of national identity is one of a complementary set of structural problems incurred by the state in the process of annexing and occupying nations:

1. Expansion encounters nation resistance (eg. Afghani nations resisted Soviet occupation).
2. Occupied nations resist consolidation (eg. Palestinian resistance to Israeli colonization).
3. Expansion replaces cultures appropriate to the area of occupation with one that evolved elsewhere and is usually inappropriate (eg. European farming techniques are a failure in Australian deserts and Brazilian rainforests).
4. Other states will resist a state’s expansion for reasons of security, trade, or similar claims (eg. international resistance to Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait).
5. The increased scale of territory under centralized control can lead to colossal planning failures (eg. failure of Soviet irrigation schemes that dried up the Aral Sea).
6. Cultural genocide destroys knowledge of strategies for coping with diverse environments (eg. libraries of indigenous knowledge burning down with the rainforests).
7. Expansionist states tend to breed cultures of consumption that destroy resources at an exorbitant rate (eg. the expansion of Americans across depopulated American Indian lands bred a consumer society with a belief in boundless natural resources).
8. Excessive concentration of resources breeds corruption that drains the state economically and fosters perceptions of illegitimacy (eg. Mobutu’s Zaire).

These problems and others do not result from nationalism but from state expansion. The geopolitical antagonism between states and nations is a by-product of this. States claim by occupation and seek out treaties with other states to recognize the annexations. Older nations persist with claims to their cultural homeland. When the breaking point comes, many states fracture along the boundaries of these old enduring nations. This is not because nations prove to be more militarily powerful than states but because expansion involves a variety of synchronous problems that lead to break-up (synchronous geopolitical factors).

The collapse of the Soviet Union provides a case in point. Nationalism converged with economic, environmental, and social forces. From a core in Moscovy (Moscow) a series of monarchs engaged in territorial expansion for state maintenance. The Soviet Union from 1917 continued this pattern of expansion. Ultimately the annexation of the Baltic States in 1940 completed the basic outlines of a state that claimed one-sixth of the earth’s land area, and embraced more than one-hundred nations. Resistance to occupation persisted throughout all seventy-five years of Soviet rule necessitating expensive internal policing, crackdowns, and army occupations. Coupled

with the costs of the cold war (another form of expansion), environmental breakdown (eg. Chernobyl cost 14% of the GNP in 1988), economic breakdown owing to failed five year plans, and social breakdown in the form of a failure of legitimacy, small, poorly armed, nations were able to assert a powerful geopolitical force. By 1991, the Soviet Union withdrew from a ring of fifteen nations around the original Russian core, that it could no longer afford to occupy. Nationalism, then, was not the downfall of the Soviet Union but rather a host of structural problems related to occupying nations. This includes occupying recalcitrant nations.

If the process of expansion and consolidation are faulty, the solution is unlikely to be more of the same. Given the large numbers of Fourth World nations (6,000 to 9,000) and the frequency of state collapse, “nation- building” by nation destroying seems to be a failure. Nonetheless, it is the tactic most modern states continue to follow. It dates from the Jacobin effort in 1789 to unite more than a score of nations into a single state culture with one revolutionary ideology and one language for sharing it. After some two-hundred years of Frenchifying “France” most of these old nations like Alsace, Lorraine, Brittany, Burgundy, Provence and others endure in one form or another. In fact, from 1982 France began an ongoing process of devolving power to some 22 official regions corresponding to old nations.

There is evidence that break-up can be deferred with an approach that awards substantial territorial autonomy to Fourth World nations. This process differs from the ideology of nation-building by recognizing that states and nations do not have to be mutually exclusive polities. Identification with the state as a legal conception (citizenship) or an emotional one (patriotism) does not have to interfere with the sense of belonging to a nation. Peace can be a dividend from carefully distinguishing national and state territories in such a way that problems pertaining to the national level of sovereignty are handled there (cultural issues, schooling, environment, etc.) while concerns affecting more than one region (international trade, monetary policy, defense) are taken care of at appropriate scales. Under this principal, known as subsidiarity, there are middle tier commissions that facilitate problems and plans that involve any group of regions.

The post-modern state with this structure of autonomy for nations and regions; and subsidiarity as policy, is already evolving. Spain and Belgium’s autonomous communities and even Italy’s South Tirol provide models. The entire European Union is also studying the possibility of a Europe of Regions including Fourth World nations, city-states, and cultural regions that might cooperate on this basis. These state-nation relationships represent a form of federation that preserves the integrity of state boundaries, reduces cultural conflicts, and by a process of devolution addresses some of the problems created in the process of expansion. The endurance of nations, the ephemeral nature of states, and the general historic failure of assimilationist policies indicates that some form of confederation or federation is required to address the instability of the state structure consequent to a history of state-building by nation annexation.

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