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# MIND THE GAP

## On Post-National Idea(l)s and the Nationalist Reality<sup>1</sup>

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*Hong-luen Wang*

As globalization becomes a buzzword in the contemporary world, it is now fashionable to speak of 'transnational' or 'post-national' idea(l)s. It is common to assert that nation-states are undergoing fundamental transformation, that state sovereignty is undermined in one way or another due to supra-national (re)structuring of the world, that citizenship based on the national model is giving way to a post-national or 'de-nationalized' one, which has lesser or no reference to the nation-state, that national boundaries are blurred or that states' territories are becoming more porous, that global governance is called for to cope with world-level issues, such as environmental protections and global financial turbulences that are beyond the administrative capacity of any given nation-state, and that cosmopolitan democracy, along with the ideal of 'global/world citizens,' is regarded as a desirable paradigm for organizing political life of all people around the globe.<sup>2</sup> The laundry list can go on and on, but does all this indicate a sea of change that leads us from a national toward a post-national era?

That could be the case, but perhaps not at this moment, and certainly not without any qualifications. The post-national idea(l)s of cosmopolitan sorts, which have been ardently advocated by *inter-nationally* renowned scholars such as Beck (1999), Held (1997) and Nussbaum (1996) in various manners, are surely admirable, but there exists a wide if not often overlooked gap between the optimistic view of post-national models and the not-so-optimistic reality, which I characterize as the 'nationalist reality.' True, there is always a gap between ideals and reality, but we might stumble hard if we proceed unwittingly without paying heed to the widening gap on the ground.

It has to be made clear from the onset that what is at stake here is not the popularly evoked 'global vs. national' dualism. As I have made clear

elsewhere, 'the global' and 'the national' are two sides of the same coin that went hand in hand in history (Wang 2000). What I intend to tackle here, rather, is the idea(l)s pertaining to the 'post-national,' which should not be quickly equated with 'the global.' The major problem with "post-national idea(l)s," it seems to me, resides in two areas. The first is concerned with terminology, the second with the tendency to overlook the institutional reality of the contemporary world.

To begin with, what is a 'nation' (or 'post-nation') anyway? Before one can speak of any ideas pertaining to 'the national' and 'the post-national,' one must be able to clarify what is referred to by these two terms. Students familiar with the literature on nations and nationalism know immediately how notoriously elusive the concept of nation is. Above all, there has been a hopeless conflation of 'nation' and 'state,' observed not only in mundane usages but also in academic discourse (Connor 1994, Oommen 1997). As a result, the 'nation' will lose analytical precision, if used without any qualification. To transcend chaos, an institutionalist approach to nations and nationalism, advocated by Brubaker (1996) and Meyer et al. (1997), has proven more fruitful. From this perspective, then, the nation should be understood, neither as a substantial entity, nor as an aggregate of men and women tied to each other in certain bonds, but rather as an ensemble of intersecting institutions that can be roughly classified into civic-territorial and ethno-cultural types.<sup>3</sup>

In this light, the very notion of the 'post-national' appears particularly suspicious. In order to have something to 'follow after' (as in the case of 'post-modern,' 'post-colonial' or 'post-structuralism'), the term 'post-national' seems to assume an essential, predetermined, or *a priori* existence of the nation. This, however, is not true. As Hobsbawm (1990) has rightly pointed out, nations can only be identified *a posteriori*. By prefixing 'post-' to a term that has no definite connotations and that can only be identified *a posteriori*, the 'post-nation' appears to be no less elusive a concept than 'nation' is.

Next is the problem of reality. All societies need some sort of common knowledge to organize themselves. This is the Durkheimian legacy attributable to sociology, which has been reasserted by students in various social science disciplines. As Bhaskar (1998: 48) has put it:

just as a social science without a society is impossible, so a society without some kind of scientific, proto-scientific or ideological theory of itself is inconceivable (even if it consists merely in the conceptions that the agents have of what they are doing in their activity).

This commonly shared knowledge, be it scientific, proto-scientific, or ideological, further supplies members of society with a sense of reality (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1967). In the modern era, the common knowledge that has been employed to organize societies around the world is the nationalist ideology. I use the term in its singular rather than the plural form, because I am referring here not to nationalism of any particular nation-state but to the universalistic belief behind all nationalist doctrines—that is, the belief that the world is justifiably divided into several mutually exclusive nations, each with its own character, destiny, and above all, political autonomy (Gellner 1983; Smith 1995).<sup>4</sup>

Once the dominant organizing principle in the world, the nationalist ideology has been pursued and practiced literally in every corner around the globe. The total effects of this nationalist ideology, through its legacies and institutional devices, constitute what I call 'the nationalist reality.' By 'nationalist reality,' I refer to the reality that is defined, reified, and reproduced by the institutions of nation-states or their agents. In such a reality, two types of institutions of the nation—namely, civic-territorial and ethno-cultural ones—constitute the basic frame of reference of what Michael Billig (1995) has perceptively called "banal nationalism," which means "the ideological habits which enable the established nations [in the world] to be reproduced." In this light, we are not only heirs to nationalism, but are also practitioners of "banal nationalism." Since notions of nationhood are deeply embedded in contemporary ways of thinking, banal nationalism manifests itself in routine speeches of politicians, in daily newspapers and TV broadcast, and in the unsaluted flags waving in front of public buildings—all of which are termed by Billig the continual "flagging" (reminding) of nationhood. The omnipresent flagging in the recent frenzy of the World Cup, for instance, is merely one of numerous vivid illustrations. As the expansion of the interstate system has made institutions of nationhood ubiquitous, banal nationalism has become an endemic condition worldwide through inculcation of daily routines. Even the 'natural,' non-human world—the weather—has become nationalized too. In daily newscasts, weather reports are primarily based on the intra- and inter-national administrative units that have been made by and for nation-states. To borrow Bourdieu's term, banal nationalism has become 'the global *habitus*' of our time—a mechanism that articulates the relation between the subject and the world and a mental disposition that internalizes external structure, thus reproducing the structure of the world.

In light of the above two points, let us turn to an assessment of post-national models. Generally speaking, post-national models usually assume

two things. First, the days of the concatenated nations/nation-state/nationalism are gone, giving way to a post-national era. Secondly, nations, nationalism and nation-states are dark, reactionary forces that 'progressives' should cast aside as history. From an institutionalist perspective, however, the two assumptions are untenable. As I pointed out above, the notion of 'post-national' states or identities seems to be an overly essentialist argument. The nation is institutionally defined, and its definition is strongly associated with the state. The institutional persistence of sovereign states offers little reason to believe that such states will be easily replaced, especially in the near future, by an alternative structure for organizing human political life (Krasner 1988: 76). Moreover, nations are defined and substantiated by states as an institutional framework for social classification. Thus, unless there is only one state in the world, there will be a plurality of political communities that can justifiably be called 'nations,' however 'nation' is defined. In this light, nationhood is less about language, blood, ethnicity, or primordial traits but more about institutional arrangement—and its self-reflection—of 'what the world is made of.' As such, it is both a *modus operandi* and *opus operatum* that constitute the *structuring* cultural/cognitive map as well as the *structured* political/territorial map. Therefore, as long as there is more than one central administrative authority governing people's lives, it is unlikely that the notion of 'nation' will be totally overthrown. For instance, is the 'queer nation' a nation or post-nation? Is it a nation at all? If, one day, institutional arrangements are created to substantiate such a political organization, then chances are that it will remain a 'nation,' rather than a 'post-nation,' with the definition of 'nation' merely being modified to accommodate this change. The history of nation-states and nationalism has shown one clear fact: the meaning of the nation has been evolving from its ethno-cultural connotation to one that leans more towards civic-territorial senses. If, following authors such as Soysal (1994) and Delanty (2000), one defines 'post-national' as 'rights/membership by residence' instead of 'rights/membership by birth' (which is considered as the 'national' model), then it is implied that we have already been 'post-national' for centuries, ever since the burgeoning of the national era!<sup>5</sup> In this sense, what's new about being 'post-national' anyway?

Secondly, is nationalism necessarily a bad thing that should be left behind? To be sure, the portrayal of contemporary nationalism as a dark, regressive force comes as no surprise. The success of any nationalism necessarily entails the redrawing of boundaries over an existing political/territorial map, while nationalist politics almost completely hinges on the approval of others (as does national identity). Understandably, there is a

near international consensus that the established nation-states are generally hostile to polity-seeking nationalism today; otherwise our contemporary world will be much more fragmented than it is today.

But behind this mentality, there is a more profound but less manifested ideological habit — the global habitus of banal nationalism. If established states are hostile to polity-seeking nationalism, then why not those ‘practitioners’ of banal nationalism? Indeed, Billig pointed out perceptively such a contrast: while the routine, daily ‘flagging’ of banal nationalism (of established nation-states) has gone unnoticed, ‘nationalism’ as a political issue and scholarly concern has been conceptualized in pathological terms as a problem of ‘others.’ It is ‘other people’—putatively in the non-western world—who are practicing nationalism, but not ‘us.’ Writing from the position of subaltern studies, Chatterjee (1986) offers a similar criticism. Nationalism nowadays is a pathology of non-western Others, which are then characterized as primordial, irrational, and backward. For instance, in his last posthumously published work, Gellner, one of the foremost scholars on this topic, reiterated the “pathological nature” of nationalism, which “calls for a more specific diagnosis and more specific remedies or palliatives” (1997: 103). But why must nationalism need remedies and palliatives? How about the ‘banal nationalism’ of established nation-states that is practiced everyday? Does it need remedies too? I raise these questions not to encourage mutual finger-pointing. One forgets too easily that nationalism has its historical roots in Europe, and that even today we are still practicing it everywhere. In fact, there is nothing shameful about admitting to be a nationalist, provided that nationalism is properly understood. Insofar as we practice banal nationalism in our daily routines, we are all nationalists of one kind or another.<sup>6</sup>

In light of the institutional ubiquity of banal nationalism, therefore, the plausibility of post-national models must be re-evaluated. As a descriptive idea, ‘post-national’ lacks the analytical precision to capture the reality of the contemporary world; as a prescriptive ideal, it fails to acknowledge the resilience of institutions of the nation, thus has few or no strategies to cope with an institutionally sustained nationalist reality. As I have argued previously, globalization does not take place in an institutional vacuum; rather, the seemingly amorphous flows of people, culture, capital and goods must still run through institutional conduits of the nation-state (Wang 2000). Those who are quick to predict the decline of the nation-state seem to overlook the persistence and resilience of institutions, in which nation-states and nationhood constitute the fundamental grids of social classification schemes by furnishing political/territorial and cultural/cognitive maps of

the world. In addition, those who advocate 'transnational' or 'post-national' features of our age also tend to neglect the conflation of nation and state. The state is said to be losing control, but the nation as an institutionalized form is still quite alive. As a matter of fact, whether the state is really losing control is also questionable. Since the importance of institutions overall has been neglected, the monolithic argument that globalization will lead to the waning significance of nation and nationhood overlooks the promiscuity of institutions. Global restructuring does not necessarily weaken the nation-state. Some may weaken it, but some may reinforce and enhance it by granting institutional prerogatives to the nation-state. Thus, the sphere of transnational civil society is not as autonomous as theorists often posit. While it transforms the political landscape in certain aspects (Köhler 1998), it can hardly escape the tyranny of the nation-state. The problem does not only involve accessibility of participation (as has been the focus of most previous discussions) but also deeper ontological and cognitive issues.

Similarly, the ideal of cosmopolitan democracy faces some fundamental limits, when viewed in this light. It depends too much on the presumption of universal 'world citizens,' while the definition and classification of these citizens, ironically as it may seem, hinges on the institutions of the nation-state system. Moreover, the regulative bases to cope with transnational issues, such as environmental protection and health promotion, still rest very much on the institutional foundations of nation-states. In such circumstances, nation-states can easily exercise its influences on either transnational society or cosmopolitan democracy through a variety of institutional means.

Banal nationalism, in its institutional form, has become the framework of our 'global taxonomy,' which enables us to name, classify, and recognize the reality of this world. Institutions of the nation-state system, as a world-level *modus operandi*, have provided the ontological and cognitive foundation upon which we conceive of the 'social reality' of the entire globe. Thus, far from being 'post-national,' the 'social order' of contemporary world society still rests on an entrenched nationalist reality. I am not arguing here that nation and nationhood are essential *sine qua non* in the modern world, nor am I defending state-centered politics in the least. The Leviathan of the modern nation-state, which has sprawled across the world over the last two to three centuries, is both gigantic and monstrous. But ignoring it does not mean that it does not exist. Worse yet, if we never learn how this Leviathan lives and operates, we will have little chance to combat it. This is precisely why we need to take heed of the widening gap between post-national idea(l)s and the nationalist reality. If we sit back contently,

thinking that we are simply moving from a national to a post-national era, it is not only wrong but also dangerous. To be 'realistic,' institutional reforms that aim at cosmopolitan ideals should confront the nationalist reality and go deeper to the ontological and cognitive level. If one hopes to realize cosmopolitan ideals, it is essential to transcend the ongoing, taken-for-granted nature of the nationalist reality.

## NOTES

1. I wish to thank Allen Chun for his comments and help, which made this essay possible. Part of the argument in this essay was presented at the conferences on *New Cultural Formations in an Era of Transnational Globalization*, Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan, October 6-7, 2001; and *Cosmopolis: Democratizing Global Economy and Culture*, Helsinki 2-4 June 2000.
2. The body of literature on related topics has grown too vast for any comprehensive review. For a selection of studies, one may refer to Appadurai (1996); Archibugi, Held and Köhler (1998); Falk (1994); Jacobson (1996); Lipshutz (1996); Roche (1992); Sassen (1996), Smith (1998), Soysal (1994); Walzer (1995); Wapner (1995). By juxtaposing these authors side by side, however, I do not imply that they share a common theoretical ground with each other, nor do I intend to erase the differences and nuances between the arguments made by these authors. What is common in this body of literature, it seems to me, lies in their tendency to conceive of a world that is no longer organized around the principle of the nation-state. Explicitly or implicitly, they also assume the organizing principle of the world is shifting from a national towards a post-national paradigm.
3. Due to space limitations in this paper, I will not be able to elaborate the institutionalist theory in detail. For a full account, see Wang (1999).
4. Nationalism is often considered to be exemplary of particularism, as opposed to universalism. This, however, is quite misleading. As many scholars have pointed out, nationalism is an embodiment of the dialectical process of the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism (cf. Robertson (1992, 1991) and Wallerstein (1991) ).
5. Naturalization and rights granted to immigrants are barely new to our era, while the civic-territorial model of nation has paralleled the ethno-cultural one since the first cases of nation-states were born (cf. Brubaker 1992).
6. Two prominent scholars in this field have endeavored to defend nationalism in this global era. Smith (1995), on the one hand, defends the nation by its functional necessities, while Anderson (1998), on the other hand, argues for the "goodness of nations" with some human touches. My argument here shares no normative bearings with the previous two authors, but it may well complement their arguments by supplying an alternative institutionalist point of view.

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