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WHETHER NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY?: CULTURAL IDENTITIES IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi
Centre for Mass Communication Research
University of Leicester
104 Regent Road
Leicester LE1 7LT
ENGLAND

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Introduction:

This paper focuses on the theoretical and actual challenges to the sovereignty of the nation-state as the central actor of our time. I examine the challenges to the sovereignty of the state, explore some of the inherent tensions between the nation and the state, and the contradictions of a 'national cultural environment' within a globalised context. I argue that national cultural hegemony can be regressive and repressive, and that the role of states needs to shift from 'control' to 'steerage', promoting a dynamic cultural environment not through negative controls but through the active support of human and cultural rights and the nurturing of civil society. While such theorizing has most immediate relevance for advanced industrial nations, much of it stemming from Europe in particular, it is not without important implications for other societies.

The various dynamics of globalization:

It has almost become a truism of our times to say that the nation-state is in crisis. As Daniel Bell has said, writing about the role of the US in the new global disorder, the nation-state is "too big for the small problems of life, and too small for the big problems of life" (Bell, quoted in McGrew, 1992, p. 87). It is globalization that is most often connected to "the crisis of the territorial state" (McGrew, 1992, p 87 ) but, of course, globalization is itself a most hotly disputed concept and an equally complex reality.

In what ways might the dynamics of globalization threaten the sovereignty of the nation-state? This can be explored across a number of different spheres of activity:

In the political sphere, it is argued (Cooper, 1996, p. 25) that in the postmodern world, there is a breaking down of distinctions between domestic and foreign affairs as states accept principles of mutual interference in their traditional domestic affairs and mutual surveillance; reject force as a means for resolving disputes, and accept the codification of rules of behavior. The growing irrelevance of borders (helped by various new technologies such as missiles, cars, satellites) and the mutual security of states — which is increasingly based on openness, transparency, interdependence -- also implies mutual vulnerability.

In the economic sphere, production, consumption, money and labour are less and less bound by national borders and increasingly global in scope. The growth of global communications networks, digitalization and miniaturization in computer technologies support rapid exchange of information and collapse the significance of space. The expansion of international trade, the outsourcing of labour, the growth of multinational and transnational corporations —many of which employ more people and make more money than do many small countries— all pose challenges of economic management for the state. Liberalization of international finance means that capital enjoys unprecedented mobility, and global financial markets and transactions far outstrip the holdings of any nation's central bank. Indeed, foreign exchange trading now exceeds the volume of traded goods, suggesting a new and parallel globalized arena (Axford, 1996) Labour remains far less mobile than capital, although
economic migrants and the euphemistic "guest workers" constitute a significant part of the massive global movements of people. But there is also significant evidence of a global shift from production to service economies based around data-processing and information using high technologies, in which scientific innovation, knowledge, skills and creative management matter more than the traditional inputs of labour, land and even capital (Carnoy et. al, 1993). While arguments rage over the coherence or disorganization of the global economy, its new zonal patterns and its new inequalities, it is clear the logics of the global market have come to dominate public discourses, with states increasingly at the mercy of the market, rather than vice versa.

While the increasingly globalised technologies of communication—satellites, telecommunications networks, transatlantic optic-fibre cable, broadcast media—have finally come to be recognised as key instrumentation of the global political and economic spheres, they have also dramatically affected what we might, for analytic purposes, call the cultural sphere. Among the most fundamental changes brought about by new media technologies are the collapse of time and space, and the disembedding of social relations (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1989). Rapidity of interactions has collapsed the significance of distance, and social relations are increasingly lifted out of local, known, contexts of interaction and stretched across the globe. While such abstract models have been critiqued for not acknowledging the unequal insertion of groups of people into the new globalized environment, what Dorren Massey calls "power-geometry", it remains the case that many local environments and people's local experiences are impacted upon by globalizing forces of various kinds.

As more and more people live in mediatized environments, media play a significant role in these dynamics, sometimes creating a global simultaneity around key events (broadcast sport will presumably create millions of global 'couch potatoes' this summer). Key arguments here have centered on the dominance of the US, or the West more broadly, as the global cultural hegemon, with the over-riding concern that imbalanced and one-way cultural flows of various kinds are creating a global homogeneity. The political-economic analysis of the media industries also shows its strong tendencies toward conglomeratization as in the well-known examples of Time-Warner, News International, etc, and the growth of media moguls who, it has been argued, wreak as much cultural havoc as the earlier Moghul invasions (Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1995). Critics worry that rampant consumerism, violent popular culture and greasy fast food bind populations together at the lowest common denominator, and erode national identity and humane values.

No society is immune from transnational problems such as pollution, drugs, AIDS. The rise of transnational communities or points of identification (religious; intellectual; cultural; lifestyle) challenge any identification with the nation. Thus across the various spheres of human activity, political, economic, educational, religious, cultural, there are challenges to the coherence of the state and the efficacy of state policy within such a complex cultural ecology. One of the clear effects of the debates about "globalization" is the challenge posed to the simplicity of the national level of analysis; indeed, of many guiding assumptions about the nature of
'societies' as independent units. Globalization requires new multi-level analysis.

Challenges to the State:

The challenges to the sovereignty of the state are numerous.

Supranational forces: The last two decades have seen the rise of numerous intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international regimes, so much so that in most areas of state policy there now exists a corresponding international regulatory institution or agency (for example, on finance and trade, the IMF, G3/G7, OECD, GATT/WTO; in law and policing, INTERPOL, International Court of Human Rights; on nuclear weapons, the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); for telecommunications, the ITU, etc.) (see Cooper, 1996; Hirst and Thompson, 1996).

Transnational forces: There are also numerous non-state organizations that operate at a transnational level. These include organizations such as Greenpeace, Amnesty, Oxfam; the International Olympic Committee; academic and scientific organizations; religious structures (e.g., Catholic Church; Organization of Islamic States); transnational corporations; drug cartels; trade unions; social movements. Hamelink (1994) clusters many of these as PINGOs and BINGOs, public interest organizations and business interest organizations.

There is also the growing importance of "regional" structures: If the Cold War period was based around geo-political regional groupings (NATO/Warsaw Pact, SENTO, CEATO) then the post-Cold War era has witnessed the strengthening of economic regions (European Community, ASEAN, NAFTA; MERCOSUR; OAU). Indeed, the EU is an exercise in regional administrative integration (coal and steel authority; common market; common agricultural policy; common foreign and security policy, common social provision, eventually a common currency). The current beef crisis interestingly reveals the twin dilemmas of the British polity trying to encourage its citizens to become greater stakeholders at the same time as it tries to persuade its fellow Europeans once again to become steak-eaters!

Thus the actual power of states is increasingly constrained by various international, regional and global power structures which include international regimes and organizations; the increasingly dominant logic of the world economy, the constraints of international law, the declining security capabilities of states. Rosenau (1990) talks of a "multi-centric world" emerging. So there is considerable erosion of state authority, some willingly entered into, "from above".

But there are also powerful challenges to state authority "from below":

The post-Cold War period has witnessed the powerful re-emergence of subnational forces and identity politics: Nations have splintered under the force of competing ethnicities (the Balkans); internal religious antagonisms (Lebanon, India); tribal conflict (Rwanda). Uncivil strife
engulfs Liberia, while civil society still appears frail in many countries (China; Burma, Nigeria, to choose only three examples).

"Community" enjoys a new vogue as an antidote to extreme individualism and sub-national and local identifications are encouraged; the French sociologist Maffesoli calls this "the time of the tribes" (1996). But one problem is that many countries face significant forces of fragmentation and separatism, and ethnic and local politics may command greater attachment than national.

The power of all nation-states is diminished in the face of the growing complexity of world politics; the state is no longer the only source of global governance, and has to adapt to a milieu in which its sovereignty is no longer paramount. Yet, despite such pressures, it is clear that states remain key players on the global scene, although their scope and domain have altered. Giddens (1990) has argued that the rise of nation-states is a key element of modernity. The bloody conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, and the struggles for statehood by Palestinians, Kurds, Basques, Armenians, Tamils, testify not to its diminution but rather to the enduring significance of the state level of political actor.

For advanced states, the lack of military activity, for the most part, is also evidence that some kind of balance is now at work and that 'territorial imperatives' are no longer operant. While that does not mean an end to war or political violence, this is less likely, but it also means that without war and significant enemies to mobilise against, the state becomes less important to its citizens and national identification weakens (Hirst and Thompson, 1996, p. 179). A parallel shift is also evident, away from dependence upon tangible power resources such as economy, technology, military hardware, to the increased significance of intangible power resources such as ideology, knowledge, education, cultural products, what Nye (1990) has called "soft power". Thus power is less readily convertible to governance and forms of coercion, and more disposed toward coordination, cooperation, learning, growth. The cynical might argue that to those who have tangible power, also accrues the intangible; that hegemony is the humanised face of coercion. But that avoids the difficult process of examining the implications of these arguments for non-dominant, non-Western countries.

States v. Nations:

The legitimacy of the nation-state remains as a guarantor of social space and protector of the national economy. Indeed, far from the new "borderless world" that Ohmae (1990) describes, one of the most important functions of the state continues to be a "container" of peoples within demarcated territory, involved with the policing of boundaries and the control of the flow of peoples both in and out (the growing "Fortress Europe"). The state still controls a kind of national "belonging", defining who counts as a citizen and whether "non-natives" can join, who qualifies for a passport, who receives a visa, and so on. The state polices the borders of the nation, provides citizens with security and represents their interests. Citizenship becomes the key to affiliation. As Hirst and Thompson (1996:171) argue, "the democratic state's role as the possessor of a territory
in which it regulates its population gives it a definite legitimacy
internationally in a way no other agency can have in that it can speak for
that population."

This suggests a rather different kind of relationship between the state and
its citizens than the historic, perhaps idealised, relation between the state
and the nation. As Appadurai (1990) has said, "the state and the nation are
each other's projects"; that is, each embryonic 'nation' has desired
recognition as a state to become a player on the international stage, while
equally, each state has historically constructed and maintained a cultural
homogeneity, a sense of belonging to a nation, as one of the ideological
underpinnings of its legitimacy. In the global environment, it appears
that the state is losing - or at least loosening - its grip on the 'nation'.

National vernacular languages; national educational systems with defined
curricula that disseminate the historical narrative of the nation and its
literature; national media that bind audiences with time schedules,
common news and information, shared cultural codes; "invented
traditions" and symbols of nationhood all still operate.

It's not even very clear how many "nations" there are. A 1995 "USA
snapshot" in USA Today suggested that there are varying numbers of
"nations" depending on the categorization and who is doing the
categorizing.

Among many contemporary arguments about national identity, let me just
highlight some crucial issues: Firstly, few nations (certainly in Europe,
and elsewhere) were culturally homogenous; rather "modern nations are
all cultural hybrids." (Hall, 1992, p. 298) The construction of national
identity was not free of power dimensions, internal divisions and cross-
cutting allegiances, usually the dominant ethnie imposing its cultural
hegemony over the rest (as with the English in Britain). In the current
period, global processes of migration, particularly from the South to the
West - but not solely - have dramatically reconfigured the ethnic mix in
the US, Europe and elsewhere, further unsettling the contours of national
cultural identity

Second, the nation is no longer (if it ever was) the key "imagined
community" to use Anderson's evocative but overworked phrase (1982), and
many other levels and kinds of identifications and solidarities compete for
popular support. These might be supranational affiliations to world
religions, ethnic and language groupings and to international
organizations and social and environmental movements that may prefigure
a global civil society. Or these might be subnational ties to place and local
community. And there are many that exist across levels, that may cut both
ways like the women's movement or gay and lesbian rights. Indeed, it has
often been said that women have weaker allegiance to the nation-state,
partly perhaps because it has often offered them weaker citizenship and
representation, yet have proved themselves excellent at organizing at both
local and at global levels. As Virginia Woolf once said, "as a woman I have
no country; as a woman, my country is the whole world".
Third, identity is not singular; rather people feel many, different and sometimes contradictory affiliations and "national affiliation" is only one among many. Although nations still conjure up great loyalty and affiliation, and yet this increasingly competes with other loci of identification and cathexis.

Fourth, culture has never been isomorphic to territory. In the new globalized environment, that is even less the case. While there is evidence of an emerging global cultural ecumene (Hannerz, 1992), there is far from cultural homogeneity; a Big Mac might taste the same, but does not mean the same thing, in Moscow as it does in New York. Rather, cultural products are localized and indigenized, utilised within existing frameworks of meaning and social habits; occasionally setting up new dynamics of retraditionalization and revival of indigenous culture.

Fifth, as the comparatively young media and cultural industries of the South gain confidence and experience, the global flow of media products is more complex than ever before. The productivity of the Indian film industries, the endless construction of endless Telenovelas in Latin America are well-known; but African music, Arabic international news, Japanese cartoons are also findings global audiences. Research evidence suggests that when local or regional media products are available in competition with Western programming, that the local wins; Latin Americans prefer tele-novelas to 'Dallas'; Indian audiences prefer Zee-TV to MTV (see work by Straubhaar; Goonasekura and Sepstrup). It appears that there is as much disjuncture and difference evident in the global cultural environment as there is commonality in the various "scapes" of human interaction (Appadurai, 1990).

The cultural space of the nation is porous, it cannot be policed, controlled, disinfected: movements of people bring money and mixing, values and vices, dreams and diseases. Not even the most security-minded state can prevent traffic in images, ideas and ideologies.

"Cultural homogeneity becomes increasingly problematic: 'national' cultures are merely members of a set of cultures in which people participate for different purposes. Cosmopolitan and national cultures interact. Complete cultural homogeneity and exclusiveness are less and less possible. Cultures that aim to be dominant over their member individuals are increasingly projects of resistance to and retreat from the world. Inward-looking nationalism and cultural fundamentalism are, to put it bluntly, the politics of losers" (Hirst and Thompson, 1996: 189).

A new role for the nation-state?

Nationalism was essentially a claim that political power should reflect cultural homogeneity. With the weakening of the cultural glue of nationhood, the question becomes what can now bind the motley inhabitants of a particular territory together? More and more, the answer seems to be the political invocation of citizenship and support for the "public sphere" both as the key fount of legitimacy for the state and as the space wherein citizens practice, experiment and enjoy their diverse forms of belonging within the territorial auspices of the state. That is democracy and 'soft power' increasingly come to underpin the security of the state, not
authoritarianism and "hard power". The state becomes a form of steering mechanism, more a lean manager than a fat controller. In a recent issue on "missionary government" by the independent British think-tank DEMOS, the language that reverberated through many articles was the need for the state to build trust, loyalty and commitment; of creating a new ethos of personal responsibility and cooperation, of creating a context in which it is possible for society to organise itself. Mulgan (1996, p. 10) argues that "states now understand their position better as servants than as masters, as dependent upon underlying cultures of trust and commitment, as part of the base of society rather than its superstructure. The implication of a truly democratic culture is to make the state more dependent upon its citizens rather than vice versa".

It is clear that there is a continued role for the state but a changed role. There is an implied feminization of the role of the state: a move from hard power and the masculine language of control, prevention, bans and censorship to a softer language of protection; nurturance; cultivation (the old root meaning of culture).

Indeed, state control over the national cultural space can have perverse outcomes. Attempts to build a kind of cultural strategic defence, a national shield against cultural incursions are almost doomed to failure. Indeed, the illicit actually becomes more desirable, and a political cachet is gained in its use. In Iran, a country with which I am very familiar, ordinary families who hardly drank set up stills for the production of liquour when its consumption was outlawed by the state. Satellite dishes that were banned, were taken down for a few weeks, and then reinstalled, covered with rice sacks as protection and camouflage. When video rental shops were closed down, neighborhood door-to-door delivery services were set up. Smuggling of hardware (e.g. satellite dishes) and software (video films; pornography); piracy and black and grey economies tend to develop. A pragmatic disjunction between a public face of acquiescence and a private sphere of quasi-illegal practices creates an unhealthy social psychological atmosphere. The dangers of the patriarchal state are not only its unequal gender dynamics, or that out of a lack of trust it treats its citizens like children, but that because of its fatherly over-protection, there is nothing left to protect, only an ominous silence (Cooper,1996, p.18)

A too strong state kills civil society.

There may still be some scope and use for the traditional tools of national media policy, including economic support for fledgling and other national cultural industries through provision of subsidies, tax relief, etc (at which the French excel); through the regulation of media ownership, including limits to foreign ownership, as well as national cross-media ownership; through the development of regional production facilities and quotas, as have been developed in Europe. But it seems to me that more important than specific policy recommendations, is the need to determine the general goals that undergird such policy and to link media policy with a broader cultural policy.

Principles such as the promotion of cultural identity; cultural diversity; creativity, participation and access could undergird such policy-making, building an open environment that allows experimentation, diversity and facilitates debate about public policy on the cultural environment, media
industries, support for the arts. Indeed, in Europe, Canada and elsewhere, the debates have shifted in this way, from the control of content to the facilitation of cultural production and broad democratically-oriented structural regulation. This broader policy strategy in turn feeds into a political environment in which citizens feel they have an investment in the state, and the state invests in its citizens.

It is civility, trust, participation that appear to be keystones to the new participatory managerial states of the twenty-first century. Thus if the state can no longer (if it ever could) control the cultural environment, it can play a role in nurturing culture, in providing a supportive environment in which a range of aesthetic and expressive forms and sociopolitical concerns find their modes of expression. This means a shift from an instrumental or economistic understanding of culture to a more anthropological, inclusive notion that culture is not a thing but a practice; culture is what people do. That is cultures do not exist outside their making; they are constituted in action. Culture is the practice of the people at large.

This kind of argument brings me to the place I would have preferred to start: down in civil society, amongst the people in all their raucous diversity, clamouring for access, for a voice, for cultural and communicative rights, for human rights. The place, indeed, where so many other contemporary media analysts (Hamelink, White, Garnham) are speaking from and about. While I have argued that there are indeed other sites of allegiance and other forms of identification than the nation, it remains a key location of allegiance, loyalty and participation. It seems to me that if states are not to fracture, that participatory democracy is the stuff that stable states will be made of, the guarantor of a heterogeneous, multivocal nation, but a nation nonetheless.

Modernity, with its globalizing thrust, brings each person a radical freedom to choose a life; modern states must trust their citizens to make appropriate choices. Axelrod has argued that "in the interests of individual liberty and the values of cosmopolitanism and cultural diversity, we should be grateful that states can make fewer and less credible claims on our imaginations and beliefs" (Axelrod, p. 181)

It is not national culture, but national interests that remain "the common ground on which to organise citizens, societies and institutions in the global information economy...the political leaders of the 1990s will have to think local, relating to their own people, while acting global to reach out to the flows of power and wealth that form the structure of the international system. What has not changed in the global economy of the information age is that politics, not economics, is the stuff of which our dreams and our nightmares are made" (Carnoy et. al, 1993, p. 164). We have to strive to let the dreams win.
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