

THE END OF THE NATION-STATE

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Comments to **Murray N. Rothbard's** paper: **NATIONS BY CONSENT: DECOMPOSING THE NATION STATE** For Mont Pèlerin Society Regional Meeting, Rio de Janeiro, September 1993.

I would like to begin by expressing my satisfaction for the way in which Prof. Rothbard approaches the subject of nationality: if it is common to see how liberal and anarchistic thinkers demythologize the concept of State, it is less frequent to find the idea of nation discussed in the same manner. There is no doubt that the present international scene has thrown into relief there is nothing sacred about the nation as such, that the concept itself is both diffuse and unclear, that it has nothing to do with ultimate or transcendent realities, as any brief examination of human history could show. In the same fashion it is worth noticing that many sociological studies show how loyalty and affective bonds in human beings are basically referred to much smaller groups than that of the nation, inside which we find ties considerably stronger than those belonging to wider social groups.

Having in mind this important point let us now consider the pure anarcho-capitalist model presented by Prof. Rothbard. I share his idea that this approach could be useful as a guide to the complex problems the nation-State is showing at the turn of this century and from which some alternatives are rising which may reduce the role of the State facing the civil society. But I think this model also has some weak points which are necessary to take into account so that it will have more possibilities of gaining a practical shape.

From my point of view, the goal should be the definition of the political conditions in which individual freedom reaches its highest point, that is, the kind of political organization more suitable -or, in fact, less of a hindrance- for the development of freedoms and human rights. This approach may serve then as a starting point for the evaluation of the several political units that could be actually established, whether they are empires, nations, nations by consent or even a kind of State or world federation.

I will not talk of the evident restrictions which the present system of nations-States impose on freedom, because they are plainly noticeable and we live daily with them in the present. Instead I think of interest to consider the restrictions that minor units could impose on human action, like the "nations by consent" referred to in the paper, since they are not so evident at first glance.

In the first place it is important to make clear that there are certain political problems that exist no matter what the size of the units we consider are: a majority could impose their opinions and generate regulations that violate the basic freedoms of a human being, and this could happen anywhere, in a village council or in an Imperial Diet; the bureaucratization of decisions may occur at any level, as certain modern decentralization processes show. These processes have sometimes led to an increase in the number of management units -and therefore to a higher public expenditure- adding in this way new encumbrances to the free development of the people. But, beyond these problems, there are specific threats that may rise from small political units, even if they are organized by consensus.

When groups of this kind are formed it is possible that the very homogeneity of opinions and ways of life generate a kind of cult of uniformity that proves to be much harder to fight than the sometimes distant tyranny and the little effective actions of the State. A small community is apt for intervening and controlling aspects of the private life of the individuals to which a nation-State will never have access. I understand that these social pressures are of another nature than the political and bureaucratic regulations imposed by the current nation-States, but not for that these restraints could be put aside, because they may lead to a more intimate and damaging oppression for the individual. It is true that a person unhappy with the way of life of a given community could emigrate in this case more easily than where nation-States are concerned. But that could turn out to be an unpractical solution should intolerance be rampant, because the costs of moving and relocation could grow to be unbearable.

There are two other problems, perhaps more significant than the former, that are worthy of mention. The first refers to the difficulty, in such a case, of providing the public goods which the majority of the people deems meaningful to have. We are not just talking about the traditional requirements of communications or important works, that were solved in the past by the construction of roads and other similar public works, apt for privatization today in great measure, but of communication services and other similar ones typical of today's technology. I am thinking about telephone networks, satellite services, television and many other goods that, either require a global layout with definite standards to make them compatible, or can not be supplied -for reasons of economy of scale- if offered to very small markets. In this case one would have to think, therefore, of more comprehensive economic communities or agreements, perhaps of global range given the present technological development, that would link the micro-nations that could be formed.

The last critical observation, similar in some measure to the former, refers to the classical problems of security and defense. It can not be put aside -for on the contrary, it seems most probable- that some nations by consensus would have obvious expansionist intentions that may lead to a kind of feudal warlike quarrel, with constant demands, conflicts and even wars. The case of the former Yugoslavia, mentioned in the paper, is also useful for illustrating this point.

As I see it, the majority of these problems could be resolved by appealing to a kind of supranational authority of certain characteristics. I am not by all means thinking of anything resembling to what the European Community has established in the Maastricht agreements, in which rivers of ink have been wasted in determining from the duration of the day's work to the percentage of fat a cheese should have, also not of the current Security Council of the United Nations, which is more an extension of the big State-nations than a global authority accountable to the citizens of the world.

My idea comes from the acknowledgment that, in the present circumstances, there are two great global tendencies, apparently in contradiction, that is possible to reconcile. In the first place is the appearance of new "nationalisms", more particular and direct, which are alluded to in Prof. Rothbard's paper. This trend seems to be accompanied by a reborn of the citizen's concern for the responsibility of the rulers and the honesty of their management. Italy, in this respect, is the best example that can be mentioned.

But there is also another trend, not as obvious and noisy as the former, but that is expanding with steadiness: I am talking of the integration of world trade and technology, to the break of all isolation of communication and a greater mobility of the capital and the people. The actions of the Security Council of the United Nations and the increase of the international agreements of economic integration are barely the expression -bureaucratized and statist- of a much deeper movement that comes from the expansion of communications and other technologies of our age.

The confluence of these two large historical movements explains in great measure the confusion and the convulsions of the current international scene; both, on the other hand, show threats and promises to human freedom. We have already talked of the first of these two possibilities, although without going over the positive aspects already mentioned by Prof. Rothbard. As to the emergence of some kind of supranational power I must say that the risks that this implies are not, obviously, small: the image of an empire such as the one seen on *Star Wars* could be summoned easily to our imagination.

But a perfectly fixed and restricted power, guided by what is said in the tenth amendment of the American Constitution, could be a proper complement to a world constituted of nations by consensus, of small dimensions, that were capable of expressing the free decisions of their members. A power of this nature, in principle too far to interfere in local affairs, could in return watch over the fulfillment of the contracts established among the nations, furthermore guaranteeing that none of them could start expansionist adventures of any kind.

It is clear that, in such a case, the process followed by the United States could repeat itself: becoming independent of the states which have delegated their powers on it, the central government has assumed more and more functions, up to the point of becoming a gigantic political machine hardly accountable to the citizens.

I have the definite feeling that the emergence of a supranational power is actually very probable in the long term. Whether it turns out to be a costly and coercive bureaucracy or a simple ruler of relationships among powerful nations that have drastically diminished the power of the State, will depend on us.