

Is a Post-Nationalist Europe Still Possible after Catalonia?

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On October 1st, 2017, the region of Catalonia held a referendum for its independence from Spain. Through this defiant referendum against the Spanish national government, millions of Catalans decided they wanted an independent Catalan Republic. The Spanish government headed by Mr. Mariano Rajoy avenged by nullifying Catalonia's status as an autonomous community, and claimed direct rule over it. Yet, on the 27th of the same month, the region's Parliament finally declared an independent Catalan state.

It is hard to know whether or not the Catalans will succeed in their independence movement. However, the momentum exhibited in the entire Catalan secession drive – by both Catalan independence-seekers and opposing Spaniards – is clearly vehement. The yes-saying Catalans did produce an impressive display of civil disobedience, whilst the national police tried their best to stop the Referendum from taking place at all on the voting day (in evening thereof, Mr. Rajoy announced that “no vote had been conducted”, only to be contradicted by the later vote counts). The hail of rubber bullets shot by the police could not stop voters from smashing their way to ballot boxes. Catalan authorities claim that on the voting day alone, more than eight hundred people were injured in their clash against police. With a turnout rate of 43%, a 93% final “yes” rate to the independence call is telling. On the other side of the story, the Spanish Prime Minister, supported by countless Spaniards who have faith in the unity of a Spanish nation, is still trying his way to undermine the legitimacy of this move.

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Theorists and pundits still struggle to understand the event. Some have confirmed the national government's dismissal of the Catalan claims to independence as illegitimate on grounds that the vote violates the extent of self-determination allowed for an autonomous community as prescribed in the Spanish Constitution of 1978. Some with a realist-like bent speculate that the Catalan government may use the independence drive as a bargaining chip with the national government. Others approach the Catalan's desire for independence as an attempt to preserve Catalonia's own sizable, vibrant economy from the stagnancy that plagues a struggling Spanish economy. These are all legit theories that support either the Catalan state or the Spanish government. However, we cannot fully appreciate the full picture of this chaotic independence drive by looking at what is happening in Catalonia alone. Instead, we must look at an underlying and much deeper conflict that is present globally – one between the post-national vision of unity and the recurring waves of nationalist awareness.

This theme is especially worthy of further exploration given the recent series of global events – from Brexit and Trump's election to global Islamophobic sentiment. For several decades, the word "nationalism" has been seen as not only distasteful, but also as obsolete as a Walkman. Thinkers solidify that claim by declaring that the Western world has entered a post-national world, where the nation is dismissed as a mute category. Following this logic, liberal politicians have attempted several great transnational projects, and no doubt, the vision for European Integration is one of them. That very project rests upon the assumption that the discrepancies between European nations are small enough to be negligible, and thus a Europe without nationalist division is possible; following closely from that proposition is the radical call for the common market, supra-national governance and homogeneous culture around Europe. That would be a great picture of Europe's future, if only it could be achieved. Hence, Europe in the post-war seems largely one-dimensional: one that is pushing itself to the vision.

II

Europe in the post-war era is characterized by the unchecked

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progression of integration and super-nationalism (from the Roman Treaty that establishes the European Economic Community, through the Maastricht Treaty that establishes the European Union, to the creation and wide adoption of the common currency- the Euro), and the constant retreat of nationalism. That trend has stopped in the recent years, signaled by a series of global events. Britain's decision to quit the European Union (EU) that signals the victory of Eurosceptic, the challenge posed by far-right Marine Le Pen in the French presidential race, and the strong show of anti-refugee Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany in the parliamentary election all point to the same fact: the nationalist sentiment, long regarded as obsolete in Europe's political discourse, is back. Aside from the recent addition of anti-Muslim elements, this wave of nationalism takes on its tradition of Euroscepticism, that is, a fundamental distrust and opposition to the EU as a political entity and to European integration as an ideal. The independence movement in Catalonia does not simply add to that list; it shows an even more fundamental challenge to the creed's post-nationalism. By that I do not mean the level of anger and agitation each side

of this conflict has, though that is a visible aspect if we look up photos of rallies in Barcelona. What I do mean is that, not only that the man-made vision of a European federation is fiercely challenged, those multi-national states that have been there for long (e.g., Spain, which include the Basque and Catalan nations; the United Kingdom, comprised of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) are also at stake. Regional secessionism in multi-



What do you mean it's not made in Spain? It's *sherry*, for Pete's sake!

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national western European states has not been active for decades, since Northern Ireland independence fights became quiet. Recent events in Catalonia motivate us to rethink the stability of multi-national states, on which many have cast doubt. The much more radical and demanding idea of post-nationalism and the formulation of European integration based upon it are in serious trouble. After all, if we are no longer even sure whether a few nations can cohabitate if their national links are strong enough, how can we expect a good many of nations to form a community based on ideas alone?

III

In order to further appreciate the vision for a post-national Europe, I invite the reader to consider one of its most celebrated formulations, made by German intellectual Jürgen Habermas. In his book, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, Mr. Habermas crafts an image of what he calls “a universalist vision of political life”, that is, a kind of political structure that is neither bounded by territorial values or group identities. He recognizes that historically, people are either united because they are genetically linked to one another (familial identity in the narrower sense, or ethnic identity in a broader sense), or because they have been close both physically and personally. Resulting from that paradigm is a heavy reliance on group identity as the organizing principle of social and political lives. That is, each person is attached to one particular group with which he or she identifies, at the time becomes antagonistic to all other groups. With time going on, each group will develop distinct structures, customs, and discourses, and those differences will make it rather hard to have inter-group conversations. A foremost example of this kind of structure is the formation of nation-states, that is, the political states that exclusively join the member of a nation in the socio-cultural sense. In the perfect form, each nation-state has a distinct language that is not intelligible to people outside the nation, is highly intolerant of foreigners (because they are also members of other nations), and forbids global communication because it can undermine each nation’s purity.

Habermas’s liberal tendency makes him think of this as a horrible picture of the human condition. In a traditional political

vision under nation-states, each person lives under fragmentation. That person is bonded to the customs and traditions she has been brought up in, without the likeliness to think or live beyond what has been set forth for her. Following a tradition that stresses politics' role in expanding human freedom, Habermas insists we think of an alternative political structure where each person is free to live up to his or her best physical and intellectual possibilities, without the hindrance of the *particular* condition that the said person lives in.

To make individual freedom achievable and a universal community possible, Habermas proposes the radical abolishment of particular grouping altogether. Instead of the status quo where human people identify with their nations and center their lives around them, he calls for all people to be united. To do that, each individual must take on shared, non-territorial values and be able to constantly communicate, so that a human community in its broadest sense (one that is inclusive of all human beings on earth) is possible. Countless thinkers have expressed an interest in creating a vision where "the world is one", where the differences between the people around the globe will be reduced, or even eliminated, and they will be united into one single group. That properly characterizes the principle of post-nationalism, featured in the political thoughts of Soviet leader Leon Trotsky, Nobel-winning economist Paul Krugman, as well as Canadian statesman Justin Trudeau. Habermas's brand of post-nationalism is unique because it seeks to promote a new political order based on a global agreement for rational ideas, termed "verfassungspatriotismus" (literally, constitutional patriotism). The basic explanation for that term is the belief that political attachment "ought to center on the norms, the values and, more indirectly, the procedures of a liberal democratic constitution" (Jan-Werner Müller). It can be understood as a middle ground between the radical proposal of the global human community and the traditional formulation of nation-states. Unlike some other pro-globalization thinkers, Habermas does not champion the comprehensive abandon of grouping of individuals as a way of organizing the political sphere so that human beings are unified as one, because that idea is naïve in the sense that it pretends national differences do not exist. He does recognize the importance of the affection one has for the group

to which one is attached (in the case of the nation-state, this is often termed “patriotism”). What Habermas does support, is a new kind of grouping and love thereof. He believes that the identity based on rational political belief will finally supersede the identity based on ethnicity, culture, and civil life.

Here, we must briefly digress unto explaining what Habermas means as “the identity based on rational political belief”. As a thinker whose main academic training is in continental philosophy, Habermas’s vision of politics is deeply rooted in his theory of human nature, for this has been the traditional approach of political philosophers, ever since Thomas Hobbes. Specifically, Habermas is committed to the idea that each individual of the human species possesses a rational faculty that allows reasoning, and that person is endowed with the ability to communicate what he or she gets out of that reasoning process. Therefore, Habermas argues, we can expect them to each work out a rational system of political formulation, and together come to an agreement on the basic institutions of politics – laws, rules of governances, values, and the state apparatus – together known as the human species’ common *constitution*. Because each person comes into that agreement not under coercion or custom, but because of his or her personal consent, we can expect that person to love that system of rule of the constitution, a sentiment that Mr. Habermas denotes “constitutional patriotism”. Following the State of Nature principles of such great thinkers as John Locke (whose thoughts largely inspired American founding fathers) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Habermas grounds the advantage of constitutional patriotism (again, in which people are willingly united after thinking for themselves) over national patriotism (in which people are united only as a default set forth by traditions and blood ties) because the former involves each individual’s volition in their self-determination. That is, states are formed because of each subject’s consent to the political principles by which those states were founded. The legitimacy of post-national state will be the equal recognition of a common political culture, in the place of traditional national culture, as the organizing principle of citizenship. Unlike Max Weber’s classic definition of the state as a “monopoly on violence” that coerces the citizens to remain stable, Habermas implies that it is acceptable that people are entitled to the freedom of leaving those states if they no longer identify with

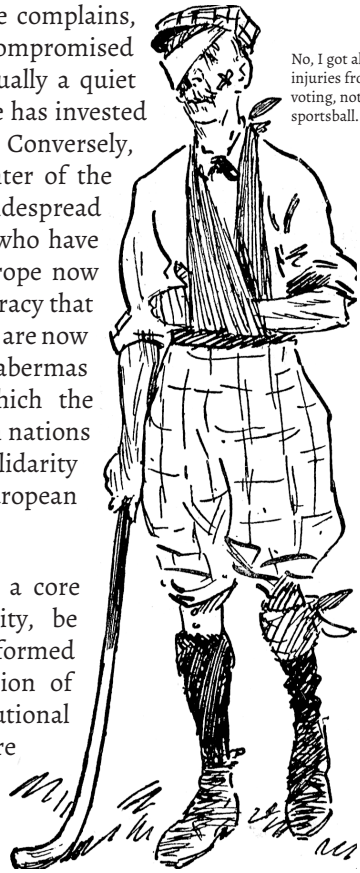
those principles; Habermas reasons that they will not, because the structure of human rationality dictates that we will land on the same political beliefs by rigorous contemplation alone, assuming no *selfish consideration* interferes with that reasoning process.

In the light of Habermas's theory of post-nationalist constitutional patriotism, it would be easy to understand the particular stance he takes as a globalist in relation to the vision of politics. More sophisticated and nuanced a thinker than some radicals, Habermas does not blind himself from admitting differences of blood or historical experience or creeds of faith do exist; however, he believes it is possible – as well as desirable – that we progress into a new phase of history, where political attachment is based on loyalty to a constitution. It can be implied that rather than traditional nation-states, Habermas prefer super-national federations as the basic mode of political states, in which consent to the same political beliefs provides the cohesion to the community. Hence, Habermas promotes a particular brand of globalism, that is, supra-national federation.

The best real-world example of the attempt to establishing a supra-national federation is the attempt to integrate Europe. Indeed, Mr. Habermas believes there exists a strong centripetal force as a recurring theme in Europe's history. Despite the multitude of nations inhabiting that Europe, he observes they all live up to the same "European ideal". It is no coincidence that Europe has the highest concentration of liberal-democratic regimes; that is explainable by the wide subscription the liberal-democratic ideals has on that continent. In that sense, Habermas thinks of his own theory a continuation of Europe's great tradition: no matter what language one speaks, what church one goes to, or what kind of life one leads, one identifies as a European, embodied by the constitutional code that is deeply rooted in one's minds. Conversely, Habermas believes that Europe is the best field where his constitutional patriotism theory can be applied to the real world. If a post-nationalism state can be realized anywhere, a Europe under integration must come first.

Even Habermas himself is not fully sure whether any super-national alliance will be a success, not to mention the much more ambitious project of European integration. He writes that, globalization alone does not make a political order good; much more is required so that a liberal democracy can survive a post-national world. In his essay "Zur Verfassung Europas" ("On Europe's Constitution"), he argues that the pressure posed by political and financial crises have allowed power to quietly shift from people to the hands of questionable legitimacy, such as the European Council, that are full of technocrats without concern for the real issues and the reverence for the constitutional rules by which European integration was formulated in the first place. Instead of making a true European democracy possible, he complains, the European community has been compromised by the frenzy of a few. This is effectually a quiet coup d'état against the trust each state has invested in the common European platform. Conversely, he believes the corruption at the center of the European platform is the cause of widespread Euroscepticism. It is because people who have trusted the idea of an integrated Europe now feel betrayed by the European bureaucracy that anti-European-integration sentiments are now popular. To tackle that problem, Habermas urges international citizenry, by which the constitutional integration of European nations is made possible, to take actions in solidarity and fight back the power from the European bureaucracy.

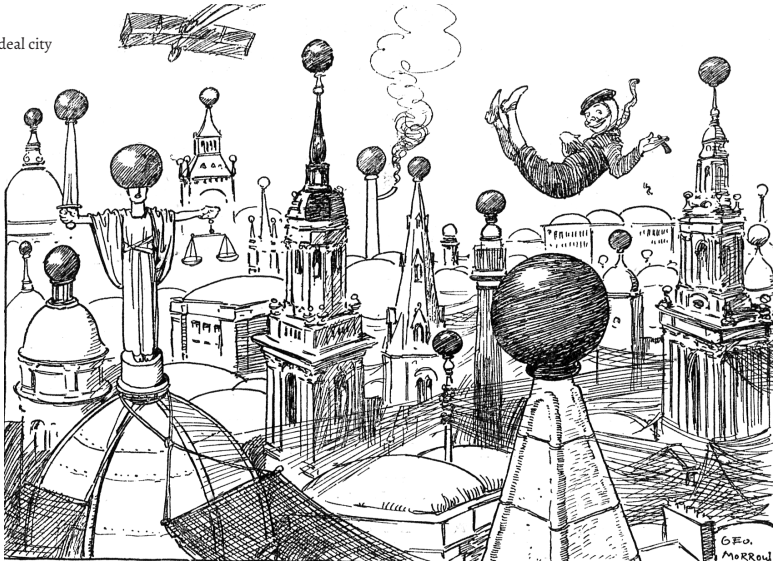
Habermas's account does identify a core problem of any super-national entity, be it a multi-national state that was formed on political grounds, or the federation of an integrated Europe with constitutional patriotism as its bond. Wherever there is a political union, there is a common decision-making mechanism. In a



No, I got all these injuries from voting, not from sportsball.

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An ideal city



dictatorship, it is the supreme leader; in a monarchy, it is the king or the queen; in a parliamentary democracy, it is the representative government. No matter to what degree a government represents the will of the people, as long as it is comprised of real human beings, it has its own interest. That is the source of the constant antagonism between the people and the government, as noted by many American libertarians. This is also the problem Mr. Habermas has with the European bureaucracy. However, there is an even more serious problem that he fails to recognize: when a political community is multi-national, the question of the disparity between nations comes into play. Even though the decision-makers are perfectly selfless, they are unlikely to make every group feel as though they have been treated fairly in all cases. This constitutes part of the motivation the Catalans rise in rebellion against the Spanish state.

This neglect in Habermas's account is not unexpected. As a believer of post-nationalism, Mr. Habermas is committed to the belief that nations are no longer one of the fundamental categories (if it is one of the categories at all) in today's political life; hence, he is reluctant to think in a nationalist's terms. In that discourse, the Catalans' anger is solely explainable by the Spanish government's

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betrayal of democratic ideas (for the latter have attempted to undermine the region's autonomy) and its unfavorable economic policy given to that region. Similarly, Britain leaves Europe only because EU's bureaucratic working method is at odds with the UK's needs for economic advancement, and alt-right dogmas become viral only because people do not want a large population (with no regard to what that population consists of). Those are all of course valid theories, but they only count as part of the explanation. It is clear that in our age that nationalist thinking is still a common mode thought in politics. It is simply too radical an idea for political thinkers to assume we already live in a post-national world. Real-world political events, such as what happened in Catalonia in the past October, seem further confirming that we are not. In such a world, to deny the existence of nationalist thinking is only to promote hypocrisy and self-blinding from the truth, both unworthy of Mr. Habermas as a social scientist.

V

Half a decade before Habermas even rose to prominence, the conservative German jurist Carl Schmitt has warned the world of the dangers of what he terms "political universalism". In his 1932 book *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt argues that "the high points of politics [are where] the enemy is, in concrete clarity, recognized as the enemy". By that he means that the friend-enemy relation is fundamental to the political sphere, because it is by the concrete recognition of the other as enemy that one can establish one's own identity. Therefore, any attempt to deny one's adherence to a nation (*qua* identifying with a group of friends) in opposition to members of other nations (understood as "enemies", though not necessarily with hostility) risks losing all personal and communal identities. An identity-less person, according to Schmitt, cannot lead a public life, nor can the said person even assert his or her own status as a human being. In other words, any attempt to suppress national identities will result in massive and catastrophic *depoliticization* and *dehumanization*.

In Schmitt's account, post-nationalism in specific is a more dangerous type of anti-identity sentiments, because it claims

to speak in the name of “universal humanity”. Recall, from Mr. Habermas, the vision for constitutional patriotism rests upon the premise that all human beings can use their rational faculty to work out a global agreement for political arrangements and thereafter love the political order based on the agreement. Mr. Schmitt suggests that ideas like Habermas’s refers to “humanity as such, and [it] as a whole has no enemies”. If that were accepted, he continues “‘Humanity’ would become an asymmetrical counter-concept. If one discriminates within humanity and thereby denies the quality of being human to a disturber or destroyer, then the negatively valued person becomes an unperson, ... and must be destroyed”. That is to say, Schmitt is alerted of the danger of a radical tyranny inherent to all ideas of rule by universal humanity, including that of Habermas: if anyone is opposed to the post-national political arrangements, which, according to Habermas, is to be a human consensus, then that person violates the human consensus, can therefore disqualifies him or herself from even being human. In such a world, no diversity will be accepted and anyone with a dissent view will be regarded as the common enemy of all of the humankind. All that can be resulted would be massive killings and brainwashing aimed at eradicating all differences, just as what happened in France under Robespierre, or in Russia during the Soviet era.

VI

After the independence drive in Catalonia, we are forced back to reflect on the post-national vision for a unified Europe. Post-nationalism, at least as Habermas understands it, requires ethnic identities be replaced by rational-ideological bonds as the cornerstone of state-formation. Whether that political theory is valid remains up to debate. Yet, we must admit that post-nationalism is not the reality. The idea that we now live in a world beyond national and ethnic divides is nothing more than a preposterous pretension; radical pushes toward European integration, without regard for national awareness, will surely prove to be unwise.