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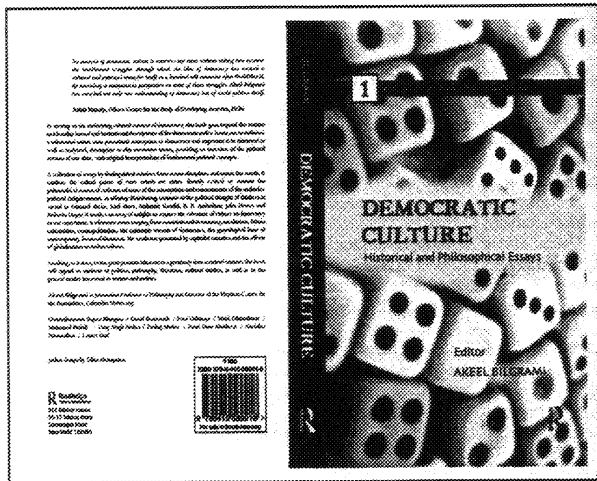
ERIC MIELANTS

Statelessness and Nation-States: Reflections on Conceptual (In)visibility

The term "stateless person" refers to someone who is not considered a national, in other words a citizen, by any state. Lawyers consider such a person a "de jure" stateless individual. A more loosely defined category would be a "de facto" stateless person who does not enjoy many rights most citizens do have, such as the granting of a passport or their inability to demonstrate their nationality. Few states actually have reliable statistics on the existence of stateless people. The UNHCR reported almost 6 million stateless people, but the true total may be closer to 15 million, depending on how one classifies groups of stateless refugees (Leclerc and Colville 2007: 4–9). That states do not consider counting stateless, or consider their plight a priority should not surprise us. They have not only created an indifference towards their people who are not considered "their own" citizens, but have also had an impact on social sciences' inability or unwillingness to study the stateless for a considerable period of time.

Nation states have, after all, only come into existence in Europe in the last 200 years and much more recently in the periphery (the second half of the 20th century), and when taken as a unit of analysis by political scientists and economists alike, they impose their arbitrary, if not artificial, temporal limits on us. It is therefore "not surprising that [long term history] should unsettle our analytical categories such as the nation state [...] for concepts are embedded in time" (Nederveen Pieterse 2006: 69). Thus when nation states are the preferred unit of analysis for political scientists or those academics who currently hold positions in various "departments of government," one easily succumbs to what Wimmer and Schiller (2003) have coined "*methodological nationalism*," where states are considered independent sovereign agents with particular cultural properties.¹ Not coincidentally, prominent social scientists as varied as Parsons, Merton, Bourdieu, Habermas, and Luhmann, located within the strongest nation states, produced "nation-blind theories of modernity" (Wimmer and Schiller 2002: 304).² It should therefore also not come as a surprise that many social scientists throughout the 20th century took their own nation state for granted. But even for those who undertook long-term historical research (historians),

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they often attempted to project the boundaries of the later emerging nation state, if not its cultural and political features, onto the same area before that nation state actually came into existence.³ The gradual institutionalization and concurrent expansion of the European Union in the last couple of decades may have a similar effect in the future with a substantially larger unit of analysis and longer time horizon,⁴ though with a remarkably similar intellectual agenda of gradually changing boundaries and debates what to do with "the outsider within."⁵

Consequently, not all social scientific studies that look beyond the nation-state as a unit of analysis are of equal value. If a Eurocentric depiction of globalization often implies a *long-term linearity* in which most agency is derived from the West, and if in such a meta-narrative one needs to study, implicitly or explicitly, almost exclusively the impact of the West on the non-Western world (or people), either in the past, the present (or as a matter of foreign policy, the future), the intellectual challenge is to produce scholarly research that "situates globalization in the *longue durée* [without...] reversing the current of Eurocentrism by centring the East and marginalizing the West, thus replaying East-West binaries in reverse" (Nederveen Pieterse 2006: 64).

Despite all its limitations, Western academic discourse—hegemonic and continuously reproduced in contemporary "postcolonial" university settings and nation states—continues to dominate the intellectual field. The creation of the social sciences in the Western world and the manner in which they, in their own fragmented ways, think about past, present, and future conditions, cannot be separated from the way in which Western knowledge has been used to control, colonize and dominate the non-Western world, both in reality as well as epistemologically (e.g., Hira 2007), and to exclude from their analysis those who for some reason "do not belong" or do not fit (e.g., the stateless). If one studies their creation and use in tandem, that is *relationally*, one can raise critical questions about "state building" in the non-West (such as the implications for those who do "not fit") and the function of nation states in core zones (rather than taking nation states for granted as a unit of analysis or outright model). This is not to argue that nation states or their governments play a trivial role in our modern world, but that more attention ought to be given to other processes. If one can unthink 19th century assumptions about social science (Lee 2010), one is inevitably forced to rethink Eurocentric epistemological assumptions about temporal linearity and Western artificial spatial constructions such as nation-states. This in turn has major implications on public policy recommendations about what "to do" with people who do "not belong" to nation states.

Probably the major challenge of contemporary mainstream social science is to overcome its Eurocentric limitations in an attempt to make Western models "fit" the non-West. Many economic studies in the academic realm are good examples of this, similar to how Orthodox Marxist studies produced in the former Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite states were salient indicators of how past, present and future conditions across different times and areas of the world were molded to fit particular Eurocentric paradigms. The logical outcome of this Eurocentric thinking is to change groups of people or nation-states that have been problematized (Tucker 1999).

Eurocentric epistemologies and public policies have of course not only been applied to non-Western zones, but also within the West when Western intellectuals and governments had to deal with, classify, label and manage large groups of people that were somehow deemed "primitive," "non-Western," and so on. The stateless also fit into this category to a certain degree. If refugees, immigrants and ethnic minorities do not conform to the received educational model, they are labeled deficient. In Migration Studies, the focus is all too often on the immigrant as a deviant who needs to be subjected to intense scrutiny and who is in desperate need of reform (Mielants 2009), which only reflects the present criminalization of immigration in the core zones of the capitalist world economy. Essentially, this, of course, cannot be separated from the increased popularity of various anti-immigrant political parties during the last couple of decades, especially in core zones. As a result, international migration becomes for most politicians and academics a security concern rather than a humanitarian issue. The migrant, not unlike a "failed nation state," is measured, weighed, analyzed and compared to his/her ideal-typical successful contemporary Western counterpart. Often the lack of critical and relational analysis, and the inability or unwillingness to study the migration process critically, results in a focus on the (stateless) migrant as a deviant. At its worst, academics become intellectual mercenaries, providing the "fig leaf behind which those who decry immigration can hide their nativist sentiments" (Krisman 2005: 36).

Similar to the theoretical assumption that if poor countries implemented the "correct" public policies advocated by Western experts they would be able to witness the gradual 'take off' of their economies, ultimately achieving a standard of living comparable to those in the West who are already considered "developed," is the notion that "outsiders within" can gradually assimilate / integrate into modern society if they undertake the correct steps at the right moment in time. The implied stagism here is of course one of linear progress central to both Marxist and Liberal variants of the Enlightenment. Within both

neoclassical economics and the structural functionalist modernization variant in sociological literature it is argued that although progress is for the better, it is inevitable that some people (a statistical minority) will be negatively affected during a period of transition. In its most classical formulation, the transition from "mechanical solidarity" to the "organic solidarity" of a society with an increasing division of labor—as formulated by Durkheim (1997)—brings about some unfortunate side effects with which a society must cope (cf. Knöbl 2003). Specifically, concepts such as "anomie"—normlessness—can be used to classify those who suffer from the transition to industrialization and have a hard time dealing with the stress and other related problems of urbanization (e.g., crime) and mass migration (e.g. being rootless, associated with statelessness*), undermining the overall stability within society. Often the theoretical implication is that only a minority of the population will be negatively affected during a limited period of time. The dilemma then is to intensively scrutinize that minority in order to effectively assist them in overcoming the specific problems with which they are themselves incapable of dealing. It is further assumed that although the transition period is rather painful, this minority will inevitably benefit from the modernity once the transition process has been completed. For academics and public policy makers, the logical outcome of this particular way of thinking is to change those who have been problematized, allowing or forcing them to adapt as quickly as possible to the new reality that has unfolded. Not coincidentally, it is always those that are considered "abnormal" who are perceived as needing further study, and not large-scale processes themselves (such as rapid industrialization, civil war, massive privatizations, etc.) or, for that matter, Eurocentric terminologies deployed to study those considered in desperate need of salvation. The scrutinized minority within, or similarly, so called primitive underdeveloped societies frozen in time and "people without history" that stand in the way of progress, need therefore to be modernized, developed and civilized (e.g., Harrison 1985).

One way to change the dynamic of this line of reasoning is to interrogate the normalcy of nation states, as well as their policies of dealing with those who are considered statistically "abnormal." I contend that World-System Analysis has created the relational concepts of core, periphery, and semi-periphery to good effect (Wallerstein 2004) to counter such Eurocentric ways of thinking. I would also like to suggest that they demonstrate quite well how a majority of the world's population is in a very vulnerable position in the entire capitalist world-economy, not only a group of stateless who need to be rescued from their plight by state agencies.

So the spatial World-System concept of "zone" could be an improvement over talking about nation-states and nation-state concepts. Of course, it depends on how it is used: debating to what degree "Brazil" is or when it became a semi-peripheral nation state leads certain world-system scholars to import problematic forms of methodological nationalism into their analyses. So one should keep in mind that zones are constantly evolving spatio-geographical entities. In doing so, social scientists can utilize world system analysis to study the existence of core zones within the periphery, and simultaneously the proliferation of peripheral zones within the core, or what Wallerstein (1995: 161) has previously called "the phenomenon of the 'Third World within' the core." There are, in other words, "multiple layers of coreness and peripherality" (Wallerstein and Smith 1992: 255) with many people continuously on the move within them.

In suggesting an epistemological shift by embracing non-Eurocentric paradigms, I do not suggest that national boundaries or passports do not (or no longer) matter: they certainly do. The nation where we are born is the single greatest determining factor of our life chances and prospects for upward social mobility. As Korzeniewicz and Moran (2009) point out, too much research on inequality focuses on the experiences of those who live in wealthy nations, where even people considered "poor" have more opportunity for social mobility than the vast majority of individuals in nations at the bottom of the wealth distribution scale. This will not be disputed by tens of thousands of Urdu speaking Biharis in Bangladesh, hundreds of thousands of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, or tens of thousands of the so-called *Bidoon* (meaning "without" in Arabic) in various "nation-states" in the Middle East.

My argument here is that one needs to be careful who or what to focus on and to problematize in isolation of a larger context. After all, "understanding peripheral zones such as Africa and Latin America as regions with a 'problem' related to 'stages of development' concealed Western responsibility for the exploitation of these continents. The construction of 'pathological' regions in the periphery as opposed to the normal development patterns of the 'West' justified [...] treating the 'Other' as 'underdeveloped' and 'backward'" (Grosfoguel 2003: 20). The subsequent production and dissemination of parochial social scientific "truths" as universalist forms of knowledge throughout the "rest of the world" is of course intrinsically interlinked with "our" western perspective, methodology, units of analysis, concepts, abstractions or visualizations of "national unity and social cohesion" and (mutated) self-interests, in nationalistic or personal (academic) form (see Grosfoguel and Mielants 2006).

The current university system, created by the bourgeois Western nation state in the 19th century, with all its disciplines and subsequent limitations, has taken the unit of analysis of nation-states for granted for far too long (Wallerstein 2001). Many social science policy-centered studies "inevitably reproduce the state-centered, nation-building optic in their framing and prescription of ways to achieve" (Favell 2005: 52) specific social outcomes such as the integration of immigrants, ethnic minorities and stateless people. This cannot be separated from the fact that historically, the creation of the welfare state in the core was intrinsically linked with the creation of ever higher barriers against the free circulation of labor and migration flows in general. Unions, and their socialist political affiliations, had on this aspect—despite their internationalist rhetoric—always been more nationalist than internationalist (Lucassen 1991: 158–173). This is not so surprising since welfare states (existing in the core) simply had to keep their borders closed to mass immigration in order to construct and maintain a welfare state in the interstate system (Freeman 1986: 52; Entzinger 2007). Welfare regimes are after all "built upon the foundation of nation-states [which then] develop internal distribution of political power" (Baubock 1993: 44). In addition, the notion of citizenship, popularized in the aftermath of the French Revolution, is by definition an attribution of legitimacy to human entitlements and rights within a specific territorial unit (a nation-state) of the world-system (Halfmann 1998: 523–524).

The control of frontier transit is among the greatest powers the states actually exercise in the "inter-state system" (Wallerstein 1991: 79). This applies of course for both products in a commodity chain that sustains core-periphery relations as well as human beings. As Wallerstein (1979: 291–92) has argued, capitalists need the state (and the interstate system) in order to keep the ceaseless accumulation of capital to continue. Both the interstate system and the capitalist world economy have one, single integrated logic (Chase-Dunn 1981; Burch 1994: 57).⁷

Those who are the most disadvantaged in the modern world system, that is stateless refugees, are the ones most likely to be looked upon as a threat, be it economic, cultural, or political by those who take the existence of their own nation-states for granted. The latter does not only apply to far-right xenophobic political agitators; the "criminalization of migration" (Engbersen and van der Leun 1998: 216–217; den Boer 1995: 102–104) occurs on a wide scale in most core countries. An indication of this process is the fact that "the great growth area of migration studies in Europe and the US is about how to control, reduce, and eliminate immigration in developed countries" (Sutcliffe 1998: 331). Once again, international migration has become for most politicians and academics a security concern rather than a humanitarian issue (Abiri 2000: 72;

Vernez 1996; Tsardanidis and Guerra 2000).

Ever since core countries started to impose heavy fines on any business that is responsible for bringing illegal immigrants in their territory (Rasmussen 1997: 126), an increasing number of stowaways on ships sailing to core zones are now being mercilessly dumped in the ocean by crews who do not want to risk getting a pay-cut because of these fines. Equally dangerous are the practices by many smugglers who just dump their human cargo in the Mediterranean the moment the coast guard comes in sight (Salt and Stein 1997: 82). The crossing of other borders (e.g. the Arizona desert by immigrants) is also very dangerous (Cornelius 2001). Although the quest for ever more ceaseless capitalist accumulation will continue to demand a certain influx of (stateless) immigrants in the core zones, which explains why some (illegal) immigration to the core will always be favored by some entrepreneurs in certain sectors (Jahn and Straubhaar 1999: 37), most citizens of strong nation-states are likely to force their governments to decrease constant and increasing immigration in what they perceive as "their" territory. However, the desired policy to diminish mass migration from the periphery to the core is quite impossible to implement efficiently with effective results. Restrictive policies do of course have very serious and dangerous implications for the journey to the core, but once arrived there, the main result of legal restrictions is that it only perpetuates the majority of immigrants into illegality inside the core (Vandepitte *et al.* 1994), which causes an even greater competition on the bottom of the labor market since illegal immigrants cannot have access to social welfare, have no political rights, and cannot unionize.

That said, the number of people massively migrating across international borders is greater than it has ever been and the widening demographic and socioeconomic gap between the haves and have-nots in this world can only increase the *potentiality* of ever more migration to the core as the total migrant population constitutes today only circa 3% of the entire world population.⁸

As "exclusive territoriality" is being destabilized by economic globalization and mass migration, the legitimacy of the nation-state is likely to be undermined in the long run (Sassen 1996). This in turn can provoke the upsurge of the far-right in many core-zones of the capitalist world-economy where permanent forms of discrimination and racism are structurally preventing outsiders within to "catch up." In other words, immigrants can only fulfill their socioeconomic function in the core if they are discriminated against and are trapped in "a situation in which [they] are incorporated into certain areas of society (above all the labor market) but denied access to others (such as welfare systems, citizenship and political participation)" (Castles 1995: 295).

This discrimination of immigrants also promotes growing awareness in (and polarization around) ethnic identities while (legal and illegal) immigration increases, which in turn feeds upon already existing racism. The interstate system, based on territorial boundaries of nation-states (and *ipso facto* the inclusion of some and exclusion of certain rights to others) and its ideological legitimacy (nationalism) is in itself a condition for the perpetuation of racism and discrimination as long as it continues to exist (Balibar 1991: 37–67). As Marfleet (2006: 289) put it: “immigration control, racism and exclusion are inseparable.” Even when stateless or illegal immigrants have finally become “citizens” on paper, they are, because of their color of skin or perceived static cultural differences, often still considered as “foreigners” by the majority of the public opinion within a nation-state (e.g. Baud 1992: 318). Some, such as gypsies, may officially belong to a specific nation-state but are treated as such second-class citizens or non-citizens they do not feel part of a specific nation-state, for which they are subsequently stigmatized.

Most potential immigrants in the periphery, and certainly most stateless immigrants do fit into this category, simply do not have the means to migrate to the core. It is therefore likely that they can obtain easier access to the semi-periphery than to the core (e.g. “guest workers” in the OPEC countries),⁹ while it is logical that most people moving to the core do so from the semi-periphery, though there are always exceptions. This may lead to a specific problem of invisibility: as long as stateless refugees do not make it across the border of strong nation-states, it is likely their specific plight will continue to be ignored by governments as well as by academics who will not be bothered to study “them.”

Since the polarizing logic of the world economy will induce ever increasing numbers of (illegal) immigrants to move from the periphery to the semi-periphery and from the semi-periphery to the core, thus challenging the existence of the interstate system, it is also likely that more immigrants within the core will use the *arguments of liberalism* to make their own justified claim to equal rights. As immigrants will keep on moving in the highly stratified world-economy, using ingenious strategies of relying on various affiliations and networks to overcome the barriers created by core states to prevent them from coming (cf. Massey and Espinosa 1997), their fight to get “legalized” and get the same (political, economical and social) rights as other citizens in the core, implies a squeeze on the sovereignty and financial burden of various core states. This, in turn, cannot be separated from the ongoing debate between those who favor the protection of popular sovereignty for various reasons (e.g., to bring about a redistribution of wealth within a nation-state) and so-called “global egalitarians” (Weiner 1996: 176), i.e. those who are concerned by global inequalities and the exploitation

of (illegal) immigrants within core zones (cf. Van Parijs 1992: 163–164).¹⁰

Essentially, mass migration of people between core zones as well as the very existence of stateless individuals has to be interpreted in the context of a theoretical framework that reflects the interdependency (power) relations between core, semi-periphery, and periphery as they constitute an essential background of why (and how) families, indeed entire households, deploy survival strategies.

Only the proposition to push through the transferability of social rights between zones for all people regardless of citizenship or legal status (Baubock 1993: 45), resulting in universalizing entitlements and a “globalization of the welfare system” (Halfmann 1998: 528), would be an alternative strategy to deal with the enormous extent of deprivation in the periphery, but by doing so one would push liberalism and its notions of progress and universal rights into practice and change the very nature of the current capitalist world system. However, from a liberal ideological point of view, it is difficult to construct ever more barriers against unwanted and undesired others: individual human rights, including the freedom of movement—as in the freedom of movement for capital, goods, technology and knowledge—(Lim 1992: 139; Vernez 1996: 6) and the right for the pursuit of happiness, can hardly be claimed for the capitalist entrepreneur alone (Emmer and Obdeijn 1998: 12). The “very different regimes for the circulation of capital and the circulation of people” (Sassen 1998: 66)—with the exception of wealthy entrepreneurs and tourists (Bauman 1998:89)—may very well not be defensible in the long run. A continuing policy of exclusion and protectionism, which may “save” the core zone by maintaining a world order of “Global Apartheid” (Richmond 1994; Alexander 1996), is after all completely the opposite of liberal ideology which is still defended by most political parties in power, as well as their academic allies in the ivory tower.

The principle of the nation-state which claims that the world is divided in sovereign states and that only those who are citizens are entitled to certain rights (politically as well as—though less overtly—socio-economically) implies that “foreign citizens, permanently residing in a state are excluded from democratic participation and processes” (Sorensen 1996: 61). It follows that the political realm of a nation-state in the world economy is constructed in favor of its own electorate and not in favor of people from the “outside” who seem to threaten its institutions.

Conclusion

The rapid population growth in the periphery and semi-periphery as

opposed to the core zone and the processes inherent to the capitalist world economy (in which multinationals exploit cheap labor in the periphery, only to pull out to other peripheral locations the moment wages rise somewhat) produce masses of workers in the periphery without jobs and who have high expectations that cannot be fulfilled locally. At the same time, a growing number of ecological refugees, while being primarily an immediate disaster to countries located in the periphery, may threaten the stability in the interstate system in the near future (e.g. Reuveny 2010).

Since core states are militarily, economically, and technologically stronger than peripheral ones, it is the desperate masses of the latter that constitute the greatest threat to—and arouse the greatest fear of—core states in the world economy (King 1998:125). But instead of looking at international mass migration as a threat, one should recognize it is first and foremost as “an expression of spatial inequality” (King 1998: 54). This might actually lead to better treatment of those stateless individuals located at the bottom of the global hierarchical structure.

As we proceed further into the 21st century, the “receiving” countries in the core will be less hospitable and tolerant to (illegally) arriving immigrants from the semi-periphery and the periphery, while peripheral and semi-peripheral countries are likely to increase their opposition to the schizophrenic new world order which demands more open borders for capital and goods, but ever tightened borders for human beings (Andreas 2000). Indeed, as true convergence in socio-economic conditions between core countries on one hand and peripheral zones on the other is very unlikely to occur in the near future (Reinart 2008), non-core zones increasingly become dependent on the revenues received from (illegal) immigrants working in core countries who send money back home (e.g., Lorey 1999:164–165)¹¹ since the countries they originated from are structurally incapable of creating enough jobs for their own population (Martin 1997:20; Hammar and Tamas 1997: 8). Once governments of peripheral and semi-peripheral countries will finally decide to officially promote and support the (international) migration of all their “excess populations” to the core (cf. Levy 1999: 220; van Hulst 1995: 86), the inability of Eurocentric paradigms to deal with the current crisis, might result in a rethinking of current policies as well as the intellectual foundations that support them (cf. Wallerstein 2005). Hopefully the latter will subsequently result in a better treatment of stateless people, asylum seekers and other disadvantaged refugees in the years to come.

Notes

¹ This has, of course, implications regarding how one writes about “stateless” people if one bothers to acknowledge their existence at all. We will return to this “problem” of the stateless refugee (or immigrant) below.

² See also the problems with “Nation-State Centricism” in the study of globalization as discussed by Robinson (2004).

³ The famous Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, and his *Belgian Democracy: Its Early History* is a case in point.

⁴ Contemporary and future European historiography may “serve as an ideology to legitimate current European policies” (Mitterauer 2006: 270).

⁵ This term, originally conceived by Patricia Hill Collins, referred to African American women as a group but has been used for many other groups as well. It could be used to reflect upon challenges the stateless face also.

⁶ See Marfleet (2006: 201).

⁷ It therefore remains very doubtful to what extent the contemporary world economic system can continue to operate without the existence of an interstate system with clearly defined territorial boundaries.

⁸ This often quoted figure does of course not include various kinds of refugees that are displaced within a specific nation-state.

⁹ The use of a specific terminology such as “guestworkers,” embraced by international organizations such as UNESCO until well into the 1980s, of course have implications: that people who have crossed borders to work have only done so temporarily, and that they are likely to go back where they came from in due time. The reality of the migration process is of course much different.

¹⁰ The question remains, as Mariens suggested (1999: 226), to what extent unions and their political affiliations in core zones will show solidarity with (potential) immigrants from the periphery since most people in the core are after all (indirect) benefactors of “transfer value” (Köhler and Tausch 2002). The dilemma can be summarized in the question: if mass migration can imperil the right to economic security of people in the receiving (core) country, whose (human) rights have priority? The rights of those of already residing in the core or the (human) rights of (potential) immigrants? The answer to this question is likely to depend on whether one takes ‘our own country’ or ‘our planet’ as the unit of analysis (Sutcliffe 1998: 335).

¹¹ Worldwide remittances of immigrants residing in core zones to their countries of origin often outweigh the amount of official development assistance to “developing” countries. It is therefore logical that the latter will become increasingly involved in the treatment of their subjects abroad, defend their rights and even increasingly will promote migration of their own population to the core zone as a policy.

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