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**The European State in the Twentieth Century and Beyond\***

In the year of my birth the Aegean island of my forbears —Chios— and the city of Thessalonika were parts of the Ottoman Empire. I was born in the British Empire, in India, and so became a British subject which I have remained ever since. Today there is no Ottoman Empire and only a very little British Empire —just sixteen small islands and enclaves, residual and mostly unobtrusive.

Our century has been the graveyard of empires. The First World War destroyed the empires of Habsburgs and Romanovs as well as Turks. The Second destroyed not only the British Empire but all European empires overseas —French, Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Portuguese. The Soviet successor to the Tsars began and ended within the century. Japan's empire on the Asian mainland and in the Pacific likewise. The Nazi thousand-year Reich lasted little more than a decade. Of other imperial ambitions in and around the Mediterranean, now dead or floundering, it is embarrassing to speak.

We tend to congratulate ourselves on living in an age of disappearing empires but we should ask why we applaud their demise. They were not bad because they were multinational or even because they were big. They were bad because they were autocratic and saw themselves as above the law. They have been replaced by states which are not much better in these respects. The state has flourished and proliferated as never before. There are now nearly 200 of them in the world and the state is the supreme fact in the world's political pattern. But it is not what it appears to be or pretends to be. It has arrogated to itself rights and qualities which are not intrinsic to it and which it should not be accorded.

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The European state is not a natural phenomenon. It is on the contrary an historical artefact contrived by man and it is a comparatively recent creation. It became established out of conflict with empires—secular and religious—over which it prevailed. For Europeans the model was the Roman Empire. Rome was a city which conquered a peninsular and then half a continent, thus becoming an empire—a polity which was not only strikingly big but without theoretical or natural bounds, potentially universal and so perennially unsatisfied. It was essentially military and autocratic, not a cultural or national entity. It was secular in the sense that its emperors became gods and not the other way round: its gods became ancillary figures who never became emperors. The principal weaknesses of the Roman Empire were technical and economic. Varus and his legions and, after him, Trajan went a bridge too far in terms of the communications and supply technology of the age; and, secondly, the empire suffered from a deficiency of Professors of Economics to explain what you can and cannot do in a real world of material necessities such as equipping, employing and feeding large numbers of people. Beyond a certain point the empire grew only in the same way as La Fontaine's frog. Like the Universe itself the Roman Empire had to expand or implode.

But the Roman Empire continued to haunt the European imagination. In the east it pretended to be alive, if not always very well, until the middle of the fifteenth century and in the west it inspired from beyond its grave *ersatz* empires such as Charlemagne's (which collapsed because its roads were not as good as Rome's) and the Roman Empire of the German Nation which in English we quaintly call the Holy Roman Empire. It had also in Rome itself a would-be successor in the medieval Papacy. Together or more often in competition the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire embodied the universal pretensions of empire with an added ideological or religious element, but by the mid-thirteenth century both had passed their peaks. The winner was the European state—territorial, secular, dynastic.

This sequence is not specifically European. We see it replicated in Islam. In Europe the imperial pretensions of Papacy and Empire were sharpened by the notion of Christendom as a unitary power. This notion persisted in spite of the split between Rome and Constantinople in the eleventh century, the disruptive claims of conscience which underlay the

Protestant Reformation and the unsettling claims of reason which underlay the Enlightenment. So too the Dar ul-Islam aspired to undivided dominion, yet split when Shi'a Islam dissociated itself from the Sunni mainstream, but nevertheless maintained for centuries the vision of an integral Islamic entity. Now, still a step behind Europe, the Muslim world which stretches from Nigeria to Indonesia has fragmented into states which assert their sovereign individuality no less than the secular states of Europe. Both civilizations —Christendom and Islam— exhibit a dual conflict over the nature and the size of the political entity.

The state has considerable virtues. It has definition and identity and commands loyalty. It has developed powers of corporate decision and action. It has clothed itself with legality. It is the acknowledged sole component of the United Nations, as it was of the League of Nations. But it rests on uneasy, even false, foundations and it too frequently harasses sections of its inhabitants and menaces its neighbours. It stands in need of correction or modification.

When the state first took shape in Europe out of the debris of Empire, it was the more or less coherent estate of a lord powerful enough to create and sustain it. Early French and English kings were more powerful in their kingdoms than Popes or Emperors. France and England were their possessions and the word possession has persisted into our own days to describe the lands subject to a state. When Louis XIV famously declared: "L'état c'est moi" he was right. But he was also out of date, for the 17th century monarch, however splendid, was no longer able to meet the costs of his *état* out of his own pocket. He was therefore dependent on others —still king but no longer monarch (sole ruler). His slow retreat from power to ceremony and symbol had begun and the dynastic state was on its way to becoming something different. This was the most critical moment so far in the history of the state. What it became is what we have now and it is in two important respects a sham. It calls itself a sovereign nation state and it is neither of these things.

Sovereignty is a legal doctrine and a legal fiction. It is the gift of the lawyer to the statesman. A legal fiction is useful up to a point but beyond that point it is dangerously misleading. The doctrine tells the man who has power that he is entitled to it and that his right to it is not far short of absolute. It tempts him to be overbearing and to overreach

himself. Further, sovereignty rates all states equal in status since sovereignty knows no degree. But power does. So the doctrine of sovereignty confers on all states rights which most of them are incapable of exercising. You may be sovereign and yet impotent: or sovereign, impotent and unaware of the impotence. The fiction is still useful in the intercourse between states but it leads governments to suppose that they may do things which either they cannot do or ought not to do. They tyrannize minorities in the name of the sovereign right of the state and claim immunity from outside intervention when they do so; and they delude themselves with frequently disastrous results when, for instance, they purport to determine the value of the state's currency. A finance minister may declare that his currency is worth so-and-so and he may even believe that he has the power to make it worth what he says it is worth; but in fact a currency is worth what somebody else is willing to give for it. Very few countries, if any, have sovereignty in economic matters. While bamboozling themselves and their domestic audience, finance ministers are leaving the field open for international speculators to despoil and mock them by exploiting the gap between a currency's economic value and its posted value. More generally, the modern state operating in a global economy essays, like Louis XIV, to do on its own things which bankrupt it.

The second major illusion about the modern state is that it is a nation state. This is a misnomer. When the monarch ceased to be the embodiment of the state he was supposedly replaced by the People —a much vaguer sovereign and, rhetoric apart, an unsatisfactory and sometimes sinister basis for legitimacy. But the state and the nation are two different things. There is no such thing as a nation state and to pretend otherwise is merely political prestidigitation. Even the smallest Pacific island state has national tensions and conflicts and it is painfully easy to find examples of a people who were better treated in an autocratic empire than they are now in a successor state. At least the vanished empires did not pretend that minorities did not exist which, adding insult to injury, the modern state is apt to do.

I should like in passing to note a curious difference between English and continental usage of the People as a political factor. *Das Volk*, *Le Peuple*, *O Dimos* —these are singular nouns for a plural concept, used to justify in the name of an abstraction a course of action allegedly

undertaken in the name of countless individual human beings. In English, however, *The People* is a plural noun used to invoke a singular sovereign—the smartest trick in the political humbug’s vocabulary. I do not attempt to decide which of these slippery usages is the more shameful.

In its external affairs too the “nation” state is a turbulent actor. Contrary to much optimistic belief, the post-dynastic state has not proved less belligerent than its dynastic predecessors. This should not have been a surprise. Plato pointed out ages ago that states live perpetually at war with one another. The modern state’s very strengths—organizational, psychological—have made it the more dangerous. Besides harassing its subjects, it distrusts its neighbours, while national leaders seek power and sustain personal ambitions by playing on ethnic fears and prejudices, encouraging instead of defusing the belief that the people next door are inferior, nasty, uncivilized. Secular nationalism is easily harnessed with religious intolerance and hatred. Dynastic states were prone to war with distressing frequency and ferocity but national animosities outdo the quarrels of dynasts in venom. On balance the modern state has not been a force for peace. We can see this sorry state of affairs in parts of Europe not so many miles from where we are meeting today and although national leaders in that region have set a particularly loathsome example they are by no means untypical. Many of the 200 or so wars which have taken place in the world since the end of the Second World War have been not only terrible misfortunes but inherent in the idea of the state as nation.

Let me rehearse my argument so far. I am not saying that the European state is about to disappear. On the contrary I cannot imagine Europe without states. I am saying that the state is neither sovereign in any other than a technical legal sense nor is it national; that it aspires to be the one and pretends to be the other; and that these illusions and delusions are malign. However, these bogus characteristics are not the state’s prime or essential feature, for its one inescapable feature is that it is a territorial polity. So the territorial state needs to be re-defined in theory and in the imagination. It must cease to think of itself as co-extensive with a nation or people and it must cease to claim to be a law unto itself. This involves restraints on the rights and actions of the state. But there is nothing new about such constraints. They have existed for centuries. The laws of war, for instance, which go back to the early

Middle Ages, are predicated upon the idea that the state may neither make war nor conduct a war except in accordance with rules not of its own devising. Recent times have witnessed the creation by states of supra-state bodies with the express purpose of constraining the freedom of action of the state not only in making war but also in other departments such as the treatment of minorities and the observance of human and civil rights. At the same time the globalization of economic affairs has stripped even the most powerful states of their ability to regulate markets and control the flow of money. In consequence an international economic regime based on the sovereign state teeters on the brink of anarchy as international economics are increasingly driven by the avarice of speculators and criminals. Both anarchy and speculation are horribly expensive in lives as well as money. Markets need constraints no less than states and since states themselves need to be constrained something has to be found to constrain both.

In this panorama there is a gap which needs to be filled. I have stressed the territoriality of the state. But beyond the state there is at present no political entity which is fundamentally territorial. The United Nations is grounded in universality; it is universal, not territorial. The OAU and the OAS are open to all in a region so wide that it lacks any feel of geographical definition or political coherence; they are notoriously feeble. They are not entities but collectivities and they are perennially doomed to disappoint. Yet other bodies, of which ASEAN is an example, confine themselves to a limited functional range. Europe is different. It presents an exception which is also an opportunity.

Europe is small, about the right size in politico-geographical terms for modern times. It has a certain cultural coherence. It is an intelligible entity, not just a geographical expression. It has had for over 2000 years a taste for political debate and experiment. It has enviable resources in wealth, skills, education, confidence and the maturity which historical scholarship brings to the contemplation of past successes and mistakes. It has also a pressing need to improve its political behaviour. The two great wars of the present century originated in Europe. The horrors which attended them and the more recent dissolution of the Yugoslav federation show that Europeans can be just as uncivilized and incompetent as Central Americans, West Africans or anybody else in the world. It is hardly possible to claim that the European Union or NATO

has done better in Bosnia than ECOWAS has in Liberia. If the Dayton accords have stopped the fighting in Bosnia they have done so only by sanctifying those forces of nationalism and ethnic cleansing which drove what are ironically called ordinary people to practice horrifying bestialities. This chapter in history, like those which began in 1914 and 1939, is —to put it mildly— evidence of a malfunctioning political system.

The European Community, conceived in the later years of the Second World War, formalized by the Treaty of Rome forty years ago and amplified as the European Union in 1992, is by far the most serious attempt ever made to better this system. If it succeeds it will be the biggest revolution in the constitution of Europe for 500 years. If it fails, or if it only half succeeds, Europe will carry on with —at best— parts of it doing fairly well so long as no grave crisis supervenes —a most precarious proviso. The issue therefore is very large. So are the obstacles. The most immediate is the untimely proliferation of the Union's membership. A Community of six has become a Union of fifteen and the new applicants for membership outnumber those fifteen. Numbers alone create considerable practical problems, organizational and financial. They also aggravate the constitutional debate which is focused round the word federal. This is to some extent a contrived debate. All polities, except the very smallest or the most dictatorial, face the question of the distribution of power between one level of authority and another. Settling the question can be complex and tedious; it poses the delicate question how a union of thirty or so members may be welded into an entity capable of making decisions and taking action. These are genuine difficulties but they are familiar and secondary.

A more serious issue is that of identity —the loss through merger of identity and cultural distinction. There is some substance in this worry but not much. It arises from the equation of the state, which is a political institution, with a people, which is a cultural phenomenon. But a people is much older than any state and a people which relies on a state to preserve its identity and traditions no longer has much worth preserving. And identities are tough. Take, for example, the merger of Scotland with England. The crowns of these distinct kingdoms were joined nearly 400 years ago, the kingdoms themselves nearly 300 years ago. But do not, I advise you, try telling a Scotsman he has lost his identity.

A more recondite obstacle is the power of words: in this case the

word state. We find it extraordinarily difficult to think of the state as anything but a supreme being and the natural embodiment of such phrases as the national will or the national interest: fuzzy phrases which do more to obfuscate than to clarify. I have already pointed out that the state is not a fact of nature nor is it an act of God; and I repeat that the proposition is not to uproot it but to re-imagine it as a potent entity within an entity larger than itself and in some matters with authority over it. There is here an intellectual revolution to be made without which the political revolution will be rejected by the body politic.

There is a final point which is the most important of all. We do not operate at large. We operate within limits of two kinds. The first is our present condition —where we are. The second is that part of our past which we must keep. Our present condition is an uncommon one. We have just come to the end of the Cold War. The Cold War did not directly kill enormous numbers of people but it was a very long war —ten times as long as the Second World War and half as long again as the Thirty Years War which is often cited as one of the two or three major determinants of the shape and mind of Europe. The length of the Cold War as well as its gravity so absorbed the attention of statesmen that they had comparatively little time for other items on the international agenda. These other items were subordinated or submerged. But when the Cold War ended, European affairs —for Europeans at least— moved to the top of the agenda and, with the collapse of the Soviet Empire, Europe became once more an intelligible and integral political concept. All this constituted an abrupt change of gear and few European leaders of the Cold War generation have been able to adjust to it. The extreme manifestation of this shackled retrospection is the time spent in searching for a new role for NATO which was a prime instrument and symbol of the Cold War but, with that war won, is now out of a job but —unwisely in my view— is looking for one. Public debate on European Union has been ill-informed and even fatuous, particularly I regret to say in England. The liberation of Europe from the imperatives of the Cold War and the pains of Soviet domination has created opportunities for Europe's leaders to re-think and re-fashion the status of the state but with few exceptions these leaders have been loath to lead. Europe needs fresh minds, younger minds.

The past imposes restraints. There are things in our past experience



which we have learned to regard as fundamental. They are, however, few. They are democracy, law and education —the legacy of ancient Greece and Rome, of Europe's schoolmasters: Isocrates, Pericles, Cicero. You cannot have a polity which is fair, decent and orderly without democracy and you cannot have democracy without law and education —democracy because without it the rights and happiness of individuals are at risk; law because law gives precision to rights and ensures equality in safeguarding them; and education because without an informed and enlightened populace a democracy lapses into the fractiousness which invites the seizure of power by a dictator or a cabal. To give power to the people is right but to give it without education is criminal folly. And fine ideas need strong institutions to buttress them. The Second World War destroyed fascist regimes but it would be folly to suppose that it destroyed fascism too, any more than the collapse of the Soviet Union destroyed communism. Regimes may die but it is part of the prerogative of ideas that they do not die. The essentially necessary institutions are: a parliament chosen by universal adult vote; an independent judiciary operating in public; and an uncensored educational system freely open to all of school age. The European Union's institutions are at present inchoate. The parliament in particular gives the impression of being a sop to theory rather than a serious working and influential body. These are now the gravest matters, for an undemocratic Europe would be a fearful monster.

To conclude: over 2000 years or more we have seen the expansion of the functioning political entity from city state to empire; its compression to dynastic and then post-dynastic state; and now once again its expansion into something which, from our standpoint in the state, we see as a federation of states. The principal engines of these transformations have been technical and economic and they are still at work. Our own century has seen not only the demise of a dozen European empires but also the divestment of the European nation state —an even more momentous shift but by no means a sorry one. A new pattern is emerging. It will either be shaped by human wisdom and inventiveness or it will grow like a cancer. Who decides? We Europeans may decide.