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Beyond State-Building: global governance and the crisis of the nation-state system in the 21st century

MARK T BERGER & HELOISE WEBER

The conclusion to this special issue reiterates some of the wider themes sketched out at the beginning and in the various contributions. At the same time it also foreshadows ways to move beyond nation-building or state-building as they are presently constituted. In contrast to nation-building in the cold war era, the instrumentalities available in the new age of state-building (as it is increasingly termed) are far more limited than they were in the decades immediately after 1945. In the context of the deepening crisis of the UN-centred nation-state system and the wider US-centred post-cold war and post-9/11 era, efforts at state-building in Iraq (which currently involves a major US occupation force) and elsewhere (where the USA or the international presence generally, and the geopolitical significance more specifically, is less profound) are more constrained than at any previous point in the history of the post-1945 nation-state system. As suggested at the beginning of this special issue, there are many trends that define the post-cold war era. One that is of particular importance in relation to state-building is that the contemporary world order can be characterised as having completed the long and uneven transition from exhausted colonialism and we have now entered a new era of exhausted internationalism. Thus, the prospects for successful US-led nation-building in the Middle East and elsewhere are the most limited they have ever been. Also, as suggested at the outset and generally confirmed by the contributions to this special issue, the focus needs to shift from quantitative approaches to nation- and state-building, which either ignore the wider historical context or assume that the right set of strategies can succeed regardless of the particular context. There is instead a profound need to look for and articulate new critical creative paths to achieving prosperity and peace in the post-cold war era.

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**The return of nation-building as state-building: the limits
of territorialised politics**

The end of the Cold War, and instability, terrorism and criminality in the marginalised regions and the apparent increase in failing or failed nation-states in various parts of the world precipitated the emergence (even before 11 September 2001) of a renewed emphasis on the connection between security and development. There has been a rediscovery of the earlier cold war preoccupation of viewing poverty and underdevelopment as a threat to global order. This shift is embodied in the growing links between strategies of conflict resolution and social reconstruction, and foreign aid policies. While the USA and other OECD governments have been engaged in the post-cold war state-building efforts that this reorientation represents, this task is also being shifted to new or reconfigured networks that combine national governments, public and private military establishments, myriad private companies and contractors and NGOs. This new merging of security and development, in a distinct post-cold war form, reflects the shift from the state-guided national developmentalism of the 1950s and 1960s to more 'free-market'-oriented strategies that were consolidated in the 1980s and have continued to be promoted and revised since then. At the same time, with the growing de-territorialisation of wealth and poverty, the chances of success for state-building in the early 21st century (measured in terms of the genuine social and economic uplift and political enfranchisement of the majority of the citizens of a given nation-state, as opposed to a more minimal goal of political stability) are more constrained, if not completely obsolete, than they were in the immediate post-1945 nation-building era.

By emphasising the growing de-territorialisation of wealth and poverty it is possible to capture the social and political consequences of the fact that the sites of power and authority that define social experiences and political practices are no longer, if they ever were, confined to the domains demarcated by the territorial boundaries of any given nation-state. This means that social and political relations that constitute the complex linkages between wealth and poverty are increasingly transnational. Such relations transcend the territorially based assumptions via which most commentators and the majority of the literature on international relations and state-building formulate their reading of social and political dynamics. Additionally, the actual experiences of deprivation and poverty are being intensified by a failure to acknowledge that inequality is not primarily a result of differences conceptualised through categories, criteria and indicators based on reified notions of nation-states. The annual UN Development Programme (UNDP) reports are a particularly good example of this problem, even though UNDP's Human Development Index treats development in ostensibly social and economic terms.¹ A qualitative analysis of the impact of development policy and politics, rather than one premised on narrow 'economistic' conceptions of development, results in the conclusion that social and political relations could never have been, and now more than ever cannot be, explained in national territorial terms.² Nor can we assume that poverty, deprivation and

inequality are experiences unique to the erstwhile Third World, the South rather than the North, or to developing countries, but not developed countries. On the contrary, class and gender inequities, and poverty and deprivation were and remain central to the history of the rise of the so-called developed nation-states before and after 1945. That said, during the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century, social and political vulnerabilities have been rising across a global space and political responses and initiatives (whether they are for or against the intensification of capitalist development) are becoming more transnational. Both growing inequality and reactions to it are increasingly constituted through concrete social and political relations that are transnational and/or global (such as the social and political organisation of the World Trade Organization (WTO)).³

The example of the social and political consequences of the establishment of the WTO is perhaps particularly obvious with regard to the juridical–political forms of emerging global governance complexes directly instated by the WTO agreement. But what is perhaps of greater importance is the compulsiveness with which the ideological framework of capitalist social relations in which WTO policy is embedded is advanced, accepted and implemented. The components of this ideological formation are grounded specifically in normative justifications derived from a liberal individualism and liberal theories of political, social and economic development.⁴

Thus, to better grasp the social and political crises and struggles that continue to revolve around both the emancipatory promise of the idea of the nation-state, and the concrete contradictions which this entails, it is necessary to offer critical historical accounts of state formation and nation-building together with a critique of the normative premises that have underpinned all such efforts. Such an approach not only challenges the dominant ahistorical and non-relational analyses of state formation and nation-building, it also draws attention to the problematic methodological implications of such approaches. These naturalise the nation-state system and conceal the increasingly transnational character of social power relations, including the way in which the disciplinary politics of global governance are framed and practised.

The articles in this special issue all provide specific examples of the social and political contradictions implicit in state formation and nation-building. What appear then as failing or failed states or collapsing or collapsed states only appear so, first, in relation to an ideal-type, while the practices of statecraft and the militarised zones of war and conflict become the permanent feature of that contemporary, elusive liberal peace which was invoked with particular enthusiasm in the early post-cold war era.⁵ A critical reading of the idea of liberal peace exposes the mass killings, hunger and struggles which are at the heart of the history and politics of development in Europe, North America and beyond. The dominant narrative on the rise of nation-states and the nation-state system either renders these invisible or is inexplicable from its analytical framework.⁶ Complementing the critical historical analyses of the rise of the nation-state system is the need for particularly critical engagement with the concept of sovereignty. While we will only touch briefly

on this issue here, it is nevertheless important to emphasise that it is a concept with important normative implications around which the contradictions and crises of state formation have played out.⁷

Critical studies of sovereignty and the political practices it engenders are already well established. For example, Justin Rosenberg's historical-materialist analysis of the underlying basis of international relations has problematised the non-relational and ahistorical implications of the dominant IR theories and the associated analyses of social and political dynamics that are routinely read off the nation-state system.⁸ Benno Teschke's detailed study of state formation, meanwhile, exposes the history of political dynamics in some detail to illustrate the complex relationship between capitalist development and the rise of the modern state system.⁹ Other writers, drawing on different approaches, have also problematised sovereignty and the state, highlighting the political implications and limits of state-centred analysis.¹⁰ These important and critical analyses notwithstanding, the notion of sovereignty, particularly national sovereignty, has long been and continues to be viewed as the key to emancipation. For example, even though struggles against colonialism occurred as a result of peoples attempting to over-come practices of injustices within a wider historical context of domination and exploitation, the 'formal' processes of decolonisation occurred against a backdrop of the inherently ethical notion of the self-determination of peoples, which was underpinned by the notion of a moral right to be realised through the 'sovereign' state system and a moral obligation to recognise this right. Nevertheless, that this was already beset with contradictions was apparent early on. Such struggles continue to this day, despite the profound limitations that remain in place in the wake of independence. This is demonstrated well in Simon Philpott's article on East Timor's recent achievement of independence under the auspices of the UN. Yet, not least because of the fact that social relations were never completely territorially bounded, once the politics of a sovereign people is observed more closely, the contradictions come to the fore.

During the Cold War, decolonisation and the universalisation of the nation-state system at least two competing conceptions of sovereignty prevailed. One was conceived in non-relational terms (formally, at least) by the governments of nation-states themselves and the vast majority of commentators in the liberal capitalist bloc (or First World). The other was formulated in explicit relational terms, by the governments of, and observers sympathetic to, the nation-states of the erstwhile socialist bloc or Second World.¹¹ The liberal capitalist conception of sovereignty, based on the non-intervention of one state in the affairs of another, and usually invoked as essential to maintaining the territorial integrity of nation-states, was a conception that was always beset with the problems that have been explicated in the critical studies of the nation-state system and state sovereignty mentioned above. This is a concern that is also implicit, if not explicit, in the introduction and most of the articles in this special issue. The liberal capitalist notion of non-intervention, of course, ignored and continues to ignore the actual social and political dynamics of relations between peoples

and the ways in which they are mediated through an array of sub-national, national and transnational institutions and social structures. Such an understanding of sovereignty has always, however, been in congruence with the conception of the liberal atomistic individual, which has been central to the justification of the fundamental importance of private property. On this basis competition rather than co-operation is emphasised. If the consequences of this liberal capitalist formulation of sovereignty are approached from a micro-social and political perspective, its myriad contradictions are exposed.

The Soviet perspective on sovereignty, on the other hand, placed an emphasis on co-operation both in formal terms and in relation to concrete practices between peoples, albeit through their respective political institutions. Here a notion of social solidarity and public ownership (at least formally) was emphasised. While a conception of the social conceived in relational terms prevailed, these relations were embedded in a conception of development which foregrounded national economic growth and national modernisation projects over which the state-party presided unopposed. As has been demonstrated abundantly in theory and in practice this approach embodied fatal contradictions. Meanwhile, during the Cold War the peoples of the postcolonial states, the one-time Third World, were involved in, among other things, a struggle over these two conceptions. These struggles, when viewed with historical hindsight, reveal that the assumption of internally harmonious constituents of the respective blocs is fundamentally flawed, having always been eclipsed by contradictory relations and contestations that were transnationally linked. While potent forms of anti-colonial nationalism and powerful and organised struggles for national liberation contributed to some degree (and continue to do so to this day in many cases) to manage the internal contradictions involved in the establishment of postcolonial nation-states and the pursuit of modernisation via state-led national development, nationalism and the idea of national liberation could not resolve the social crises and inequalities that continued after, or were compounded by, decolonisation. Here, it is important to appreciate the complex and dialectical way in which (and this is particularly obvious in any examination of the cold war era) geopolitical understandings of state formation and nation-building interacted with conceptions of national development and national liberation in what were and are global political struggles over how to achieve development and modernisation. In the post-cold war era, of course, the liberal capitalist conception of sovereignty has triumphed: this is reflected in both its dominance in IR and political theory and in the veritable universalisation of private property rights which have always been the touchstone of liberal capitalism.

Beyond nation- and state-building: the politics of de-territorialisation

Against the backdrop of the growing limits on, and in all too many instances the unmitigated failure of, nation- and state-building there is an increasing need for an analytical and a political move away from the spatially

circumscribed notions of development infused with atomistic conceptions of individuals (which are all too often obscured by contradictory appeals to national solidarity and national interest) towards more comprehensively conceived social beings. Without denying the importance of empirically oriented substantive analysis, ethical dimensions need to be far more effectively interwoven into the practices of the politics of resistance. The latter have developmental aims but can not be adequately addressed within the established frameworks of state-building, the current nation-state system and the dominant conceptions of national sovereignty that prevail today. What is needed, among other things, is an approach that broaches the differences between postcolonial analysis and its focus on identity and culture, and the concerns of traditional redistribution-oriented progressive politics, germane to a historically informed study of state formation, nation-building and changing global orders.

Many critical studies have already demonstrated that in the contemporary context the formation of a properly global political economy encompassing juridical–political reach which extends across a global space is already actively being advanced and implemented, by and through various actors and institutions. The type of rules and policies for development offered by this transnational project does break with the past. At the core of these new policies, be they for poverty reduction or local development, are conceptions of private property rights, which increasingly reach into what was previously considered to be public goods or the public sphere: services or space available to all, regardless of one's ability to pay. This includes the privatisation of basic services and human essentials, such as water, health care and educational services. The increasing intensification and commodification of social life under the new reinvigorated international development agenda is simply reproducing the misery of uneven capitalist development.¹² Yet, to be sure, justifications for this contemporary trend proceed on the premise of expanding individual freedoms together with all the promises of development which are to be achieved through market-based relations. This is reinforced by conceiving of social beings in reductionist terms: as atomistic individuals who are first and foremost economic agents set on accumulating and producing wealth, not to mention active and even voracious consumers. This discourse is now coupled with attempts to reinvigorate a conception of national identity and national development. Unmasking the ideological content of such attempts is part of critical analysis, as is the task of indicating the potential spaces of hope that might enable social and political change beyond state-building as it is currently conceived.

Part of the process of unmasking the social power relations that constitute the organisation of global capitalism entails revealing the political consequences of methodological choices, and here we have focused on the merits of moving beyond state centrism. This has implications for both understanding political processes as constituted beyond the spatial scale of the formal political sphere, demarcated in terms of territorial nation-states and the nation-state system. However, methodologically, shifting from spaces of territorial states to a global space (methodological cosmopolitanism) will not

suffice, rather the focus must be firmly on social relations.¹³ Additionally, we would argue that the quality of such relations matter; if they are conceived and explicated in liberal individualist terms, with all their policy and political implications, we would be retaining the core basis of liberal capitalist ideology and practice. To move beyond this would entail a re-engagement of classical development theory and its meta-theoretical assumptions of who we are and considering how this relates to private property and our relations with each other. Any attempt at social and political change would have to be conceived in terms of renewed forms of social solidarity: for this, a recognition of the social relational dynamic of human identities, and of the fact that their respective material and social positions is constituted through such relations, is important. How such relations are established and reproduced is a political question as well as a sociological one. We cannot address the complexity of this dynamic here, but we are suggesting that more than ever it needs to be brought to bear in the context of the renewed concern with state-building. Any progressive attempt at addressing the question of security and development in relation to “collapsing and failing”, or “collapsed and failed”, states ought to at least operate with a notion of social solidarity that carries us beyond the liberal capitalist conception of development and the naturalisation of the nation-state system that has been central to the dominant conceptions of state-building in the 21st century.

Notes

- 1 Even if one were to consider liberal modernisation-based development as good in itself (and not in relation to quality-of-life-based arguments), Thomas Pogge has recently shown how the dominant approach to poverty analysis is seriously flawed. While there are many problems associated with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Pogge has provided an excellent critique of the internal inconsistencies and problems of method relating to the first MDG, which proposed to reduce by half the proportion of people of living in poverty by 2015. He contrasts this with the previous declaration made at the World Food Summit in 1996 to simply reduce the number of people living in poverty. He shows how the calculations of purchasing power parity (PPP) among other things appear inflated in some instances and non-representative of actual life experiences. He also offers a good ethical critique of the perversity of the idea of celebrating a declaration to help only half of those who are suffering. T Pogge, ‘The first united Millennium Development Goal: a cause for celebration?’, *Journal of Human Development*, 5(3), 2004, pp 377–397.
- 2 See, for example, C Thomas, *In Search of Security: The Third World in International Relations*, Brighton: Wheatsheaf/Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1987; and S Halperin, *In the Mirror of the Third World: Capitalist Development in Modern Europe*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- 3 By using the concept of transnational our intention is not to approach analyses of global social and political dynamics from a state-centred perspective and then proceed to make a case about increased inter-dependence, which often remains grounded in a methodological territorialist analytical framework. Rather, we use it to capture global social relations of power and hierarchy, expressed still in part through the formal institutional categories of the inter-national, but extended and experienced beyond and outside its categorical reach and prescriptive framework.
- 4 For a critical discussion of the WTO Doha Development Agenda, see R Higgott & H Weber, ‘GATS in context: development, an evolving *lex mercatoria* and the Doha Agenda’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 12(3), 2005, pp 434–455. For a critical analysis of efforts to both organise and implement new property rights-oriented initiatives through the poverty reduction and (international) development agenda—in particular through the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) initiative—see Heloise Weber, ‘Reconstituting the “Third World”? Poverty reduction and territoriality in the global politics of development’, *Third World Quarterly*, 25(1), 2004, pp 187–206.

- 5 See R Devetak, 'Incomplete states: theories and practices of statecraft', in J Macmillan & A Linklater (eds), *Boundaries in Question*, London: Pinter, 1995, pp 19–39.
- 6 See J Saurin, 'The end of International Relations? The state and international theory in the age of globalisation', in Macmillan & Linklater, *Boundaries in Question*, pp 244–261; M Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, London: Penguin, 1998; and M Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- 7 MT Berger & H Weber, *Rethinking the Third World: International Development and Global Politics*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2007.
- 8 J Rosenberg, *The Empire of Civil Society: A Critique of the Realist Theory of International Relations*, London: Verso 1994.
- 9 B Teschke, *The Myth of 1648: Class, Geopolitics and the Making of Modern International Relations*, London: Verso, 2003.
- 10 For example, M Hardt & A Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000; RK Ashley, 'Untying the sovereign state: a double reading of the anarchy problematique', *Millennium*, 17(2), 1998, pp 227–262; and RBJ Walker, 'International/inequality', *International Studies Review*, 4(2), 2002, pp 21–22.
- 11 C Thomas, *New States, Sovereignty and Intervention*, Aldershot: Gower, 1985.
- 12 See, for example, the social consequences of the politics of micro-credit programmes, advanced as a poverty reduction agenda by development institutions and practitioners, in H Weber, 'The "new" economy and social risk: banking on the poor?', *Review of International Political Economy*, 11(2), 2004, pp 356–386.
- 13 N Brenner, 'Beyond state-centrism? Space, territoriality, and geographical scale in globalization studies', *Theory and Society*, 28(2), 1999, pp 39–78.