Editorial   Open Access

Anthropology and the Future of the Nation-State and Nationalism

Niccolo Caldararo*

Department of Anthropology, San Francisco State University, USA

***Corresponding author:** Niccolo Caldararo, Department of Anthropology, San Francisco State University, USA, Tel: 415-405-2536; Fax: 338-0530; E-mail: cald@sfsu.edu

Editorial

Events in Ukraine have again demonstrated the fragility of the institutions of states, and with the earlier examples, Yugoslavia and the impending breakup of the United Kingdom, indicate that the theory of the nation state is in trouble. While studying in Yugoslavia in the 1970s I had no idea what would unfold some 20 years later in civil war, yet there were blatant acts of discrimination against Moslems and ethnic slurs were common from Croats and Serbs. While Yugoslavia was a creation of the idea of races and peoples of the 19th century expressed at the end of World War I as a new form of democracy, it was a product of compromises concerning identities that were based on fictions of what nations were. Anthropology has been concerned with the idea of social identities and institutions, authors like Morton Fried delineated ideas of the evolution of social stratification and the state (1967), while the nature of change in societies was examined in the context of complexity, density and contact [1].

Our first problem regarding the situation in Ukraine is what is this place? Is it a state or a nation or something else? Discussions of terms for human associations inevitably revert to examples, for example, was Rome one entity or many, did it begin as a city-state and evolve into a nation and then one must contrast Rome with Sparta and Athens. Sparta being a city-state and Athens an empire. But then, why would Sparta not be a nation? In the study of archaic states and non-western societies anthropologists have often constructed specific formats for deciding these issues. Goldschmidt [2] set three basic requirements for a state: 1. it must have the power to render decisions in disputes among its citizenry; 2. and what follows, these decisions must be recognized as binding upon the parties involved; 3. the state must have a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Ukraine today lacks all three of these basic elements to be considered a functioning state. These requirements are consistent with ideas of state formation elucidated by major schools theorizing the factors behind states' origins [3,4].

The idea of nations was creation of the colonial conquests of the 19th century and fashioned to explain the power of European states over the rest of the world, the theory combined the idea of an industrial revolution with a new social form, the state, based on political and cultural identity. But as Chalmers Johnson noted [5] our modern age has been characterized by revolutionary threats to the nation state, yet the idea of revolution was present in the first organized state. Xenophon writing 2,500 years ago explains how Sparta attempted to thwart Athens' attempts to create empire, a process Kramer [6] described for the warring Sumerian city-states. In each era the extension of authority and control was justified by various symbols of supremacy. In our era it was predicated on the claim of modernity (and divine right), a unique break with history and justified the brutality and savage exploitation of non-western people in slavery and colonial paternalism.

Today we see increasing pressure across Europe for local independence based on ancient cultural identities and expressed as tribal forms of organization and belonging. One hundred years after the Great War (WW I) where European royalty derived from Germanic family histories, fought its (tribal) factions to dominate Europe and world colonial holdings, we find ourselves back with the unrest that represents the failed idea of the nation. Perhaps we need to reread Morton Fried's book, The Notion of the Tribe [7]. While internal force was necessary to maintain the fiction of national identity, as in the conquest of the Cathars, the Catalans and Basque, Fleming, Irish and Dutch, continued repression was necessary to blunt the success of their aspirations.

As Jomo Kenyatta noted in his study Facing (Mt. Kenya, 1934) of Soviet responses to indigenous people, the outcome was to attempt to mold them into as contorted a fiction as that of the capitalist west. Such minorities in Eastern Europe struggled against assimilation and this led to tensions across the Balkans in the early 1900s and in Germany, Poland and Russia. New forms of union are necessary as Toynbee argued in his book, Change and Habit in 1966. The challenge is whether technology can promote such new forms of identity or if the ancient mode of tribalism will demolish western pretenses of modernity. Some contemporary theorists/visionary/inventors like Kurzweil [8] believe that technology will overcome deficiencies in social organization like inequality, racism, fanaticism, etc. and produce an ever more efficient human super organism.

On the other hand, descriptions of contemporary social tensions parallel those described by Gibbon during the disintegration of the Roman state and as detailed in an economic context by Rostovtzeff [9]. This may result from the cultural foundations on which modernity rests both with Christianity and capitalism as systems to maintain and balance inequalities. Western colonial boundaries continue to haunt national economic and political integrity from Thailand to South Sudan to Iraq. Today we find the UN cautioning Russia over intervention in Ukraine, if Texas seceded from the USA would a similar caution be directed to Washington? Anthropologists have long investigated manifestations of identity and its relation to history, culture and place. Our discipline has for over 150 years analyzed the nature of social complexity. There have been tremendous advances in our work since S.N. Eisenstadt ("Anthropological studies of complex societies," Current Anthropology, v. 2, n. 3, June 1961) summarized these efforts, yet the impact our work has had on policy has been minimal. This knowledge needs reflection in the present context of internal national strife. Ashley-Montagu [10] produced a guide to understand and modify the social foundations of racism and we need a similar approach to those of power and social identities. While Redfield [11] pointed out the power of technology to change traditional society, Wade Davis [12] has identified the unrestrained power of modern societies to transform social life as the central threat to a human life. Priscilla Robertson [13] wrote of how in the 18th and

19th centuries as technological change accelerated the disappearance of the traditional ways Europeans lived there began to grow resentment and this exploded in revolution, especially that of 1848. Hobsbawm [14] documents these rebellions into the 20th century as the rural way of life evaporates into mechanized routines, a monumental erosion of continuity that Polyani [15] called the Great Transformaiton. Are we to see humanity simply domesticated to each new mode of life in rapid succession in turn changing the definition of what it means to be human? Both Marx and Herbert Spencer were believers in progress, both imagined futures of different kinds and today we find the reaction to progress in an increasingly fanatic attempt to achieve stasis in social life whether it manifests itself as Boko Haram, the Naxalites or the Tea Party. The question is, can anthropology inform the present to achieve some positive future in a way Margaret Mead [16] expected it might?

Anthropologists have been engaged in the study of human adaptation over the past 7 million years, and we have attempted to forge perspectives addressing the stresses of change. This has not always been a fruitful endeavor as van Willigen [17] has noted. We need to reexamine our writing and find why we have so little influence and why anthropologists are seldom called upon to explain to people through the major media the nature of social action.

Reference

1. Banton M (1966) The Social Anthropology of Complex Societies. A.S.A. Monographs 4, London.
2. Goldschmidt, Walter (1965) Exploring the Ways of Mankind. New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
3. Carneiro, Robert (1970) Theory of the Origin of the State. Science 169:733-738.
4. Claessen, Henri JM, Skalnik, Peter (1978) The Early State Theories and Hypotheses In Henri JMC and Peter Skalnik, Mouton Publishers.
5. Chalmers Johnson (1966) Revolutionary Change Basic Studies in Politics. Boston, Little Brown and Co.
6. Kramer NS (1963) The Sumerians. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
7. Fried MH (1967) The Evolution of Political Society. New York, Random House Studies in Anthropology.
8. Kurzweil R (2005) The Singularity is Near. Viking Press, New York.
9. Rostovtzeff MI (1925) The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
10. Ashley- Montagu (1942) Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race. Harper, New York.
11. Redfield R (1953) The Primitive World and Its Transformations. Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
12. Davis W (2001) Light at the Edge of the World. Vancouver, Douglas & MacIntyre.
13. Robertson PS (1952) Revolutions of 1848. Harper Books, New York.
14. Hobsbawm EJ (1959) Primitive Rebels. W.W. Norton, New York.
15. Polanyi, Karl (1944) the Great Transformation, New York, Holt, Reinhardt and Winston.
16. Mead, Margaret (1964) Continuities in Cultural Evolution, New Haven, Yale University Press.
17. Van Willigen, John Applied (1993) Anthropology: An Introduction, Westport, Bergin & Garvey.