The Death of the Nation-State?

David Clinton

A World beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation-State

If the nation-state is indeed dying, who will be the mourners at its funeral? Not the many figures in contemporary academia who have denounced it as the haven for institutionalized oppression and international aggression, at once too weak to deal successfully with transnational problems like environmental pollution and too powerful for the safety of its tyrannized inhabitants. Among the figures at the graveside, however, will be at least one political thinker whose academic credentials will be difficult to denigrate. Pierre Manent does not dispute that powerful forces do indeed threaten the survival of the nation-state in many parts of the world, but he argues convincingly that this development is to be regretted, because of its deleterious effect on democratic citizenship.

At its heart, his argument is that effective citizenship requires that one be a citizen somewhere. Without the community provided by an identifiable group of fellow citizens, set off from the rest of the world by their possession of common political traditions and a shared sense of the purposes of that regime, democratic deliberation is impossible. The history of Western civilization is in large part an account of the repeated rediscovery of this truth in a variety of historical and institutional settings. Although a tension exists in the relation of the national group and unadulterated democracy—because a nation consists of a pre-existing community that is thought to be “natural” and not the product of the free choice of each individual member of the community or even of the majority of its individual members, and because nation-states have traditionally rested on the security provided by institutions organized on principles other than equal liberty and majority rule, such as the armed forces—the nation exercising control over its own sovereign state has come to be the form in which the problem of the coexistence of individual freedom and communal self-government is most nearly successfully solved. Just as some degree of economic self-sufficiency has traditionally been thought necessary to the well-being of the national state, and all the individual citizens it represents, so a political self-sufficiency, or independence, has been considered a corollary to citizens freely reasoning together about the policies that will best serve their common life. Lacking the national community, they are strangers...
to one another, with little ability to discuss among themselves (because the object whose future they are debating is unclear) and less willingness to make sacrifices for the common good, if indeed the shared good of a heterogeneous, apparently randomly collected, group of people can be identified.

Given what would seem to be its considerable contribution to human flourishing, why would the nation-state find itself under such stress that its very existence is said to be imperiled, if in fact, as is often asserted, it has not already come to an end? Manent finds his primary answer to this question in the analysis of democracy by Tocqueville, who may be said to be the intellectual godfather of the volume, even if Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Kant are cited a greater number of times. Tocqueville saw the power and the inevitable advance of equality, understood as fundamental likeness, which was the definition of “democracy” he employed in *Democracy in America*. Democracy in this sense of leveling had two enormously important consequences central to Manent’s theme. One was that equality mandated the attitude that “my opinion is as good anyone else’s,” which implied that the only legitimate laws were those that the individual had agreed to himself; “democracy” as a general sense of equality laid the groundwork for the specifically political institutional arrangements of democratic government: regular, free elections, conducted under universal suffrage, of authorities whose power would be limited only by the restraints (such as constitutions) set in place by the people themselves. The second effect was the delegitimizing of all differences because the very idea of distinctions ran counter to the principle of sameness. In its dissolving effect on ancient institutions like hereditary class structures, the advance of equality in this sense made possible the emergence of the nation, which, when combined with the acceptance of democracy as the only legitimate form of government, opened the way for the liberal democratic nation-state that, for Manent, is a praiseworthy regime.

Because of the illimitable quality of the leveling process, however, it could not be confined only to those distinctions incompatible with a number of independent nation-states, within each of which a lively non-hierarchical democratic polity prevailed. All differences would sooner or later be held illegitimate, and Manent discusses several instances of this trend, including the pressure under which traditional views on the proper roles of men and women, and the privileged legal position of indissoluble heterosexual marriage, would be placed. For present purposes, the most central distinction to be questioned would be that between fellow citizens and others—in other words, the boundaries of nation-states themselves. The “religion of humanity,” as he calls it, would recognize no rightful repository of authority between the autonomous individual, on the one hand, and the undifferentiated association of all human beings, the entire human race, on the other.

In turn, two consequences flow from carrying equality to this extent. One is to confirm the tendency of citizens to withdraw into a concern only for the happiness and economic well-being of themselves and their families and to see no connection between pursuing their self-interest and exercising the duties of citizenship. This effect is “individualism,” the deleterious character of which Tocqueville analyzed. The second consequence is more readily apparent in our own day than in Tocqueville’s and is described at greater length by Manent: the deference given to any institution labeled “international” over one the nature of which was only
“national,” and the draining away of the legitimate authority and independence of nation-states.

For Manent, the combined effect of these two trends is almost completely malign in choking off deliberative democratic participation. Without constant reminders of Tocqueville’s “self-interest rightly understood” (which held that in acting as citizens the inhabitants of a state were in fact serving their most important self-interest: protecting their liberties), individualism reduces citizens to consumers. Meanwhile, the international institutions that gain power at the expense of national governments generally contain few means of popular control, and in any case evoke no passionate loyalty from the people they govern that would prompt them to defend, much less attempt to direct, the distant bodies that regulate their lives.

Manent adduces three contemporary developments in international relations to demonstrate his argument, and in doing so he raises doubts about what in many quarters are regarded as indisputably beneficial curtailments of the power of outdated sovereign states: the freeing of international trade; the extending reach of judge-made law, and particularly international law; and the expanding European Union. Recognizing that all these developments respond to abuses committed by nation-states or to incapacities demonstrated by them, he wishes to remind us that they diminish the control that people, acting collectively, exercise over their own lives.

The phenomenon of globalization rests on the shared desire of all persons to enjoy access to the widest array of goods at the lowest possible price. Manent here is most representative of French thought in fearing the deadening sameness that unrestricted international commerce may bring. Arriving at the lowest common denominator, in this case achieving the globally competitive price level, is incompatible with the care, craftsmanship, and resulting cost required of goods that truly reflect the delightful variety of life across societies; or, as he puts it, “trade, as it becomes generalized and intensified, tends to erase the limited horizons that men need in order to produce the things they wish to exchange.” The World Trade Organization best illustrates the emphasis on lowering the cost of production, above all other policy objectives, as well as the transfer of power from democratically controlled governments to an international body guided by an international law superior to the formerly sovereign state.

For law to conform fully to the imperative of equality, it must enforce rights that are the same for all persons, and it must be applied equally to all persons. The former imperative leads to an ever-extending catalog of universal rights, applied and often authored by supposedly neutral judges rather than by democratic assemblies that might be captured by some citizens and not all; the latter, to the growth of cosmopolitan law, with an attendant enthusiasm for humanitarian intervention and decay in the principle of non-intervention. In all this, there is much that reflects the well-intentioned but never quite fully realized desire to substitute the equality and neutrality of law and administration for the conflict of politics; there is also the assumption (necessary to cosmopolitan equality, though rarely borne out by reality) that all persons everywhere rationally desire the same list of rights and value the peaceful preservation of these rights over any other objective.

Likewise, the “construction of Europe” expands the rights—to travel freely between countries, to pursue a career within any of them, to enjoy the judicial protection of a common list of human rights—equally held by all individuals within the borders.
of the Union, but by transferring ever more powers to European institutions marked by the “democratic deficit,” it lessens the ability of those same individuals to deliberate together on the best means of defining and pursuing the good life. Politics of a kind may go on behind closed doors, but democratic politics withers; if nothing of importance is decided by the nation, no particular reason exists to be and to act as a citizen. Someone else will take care of any responsibilities—to enforce a lengthening roster of universal rights approved as such by the European Parliament: the power of the United States; to populate European countries with birth rates that have plummeted well below replacement levels: an increasing supply of immigrants, from the new countries that have joined the Union and beyond.

For Manent, then, a world that has gone beyond the politics that could be practiced under the norms and institutions of democratic nation-states is also a world that has left behind citizenship, patriotism, responsibility, and culture. It is an unattractive, limited, flattened world, that, if it avoids the tyranny of which totalitarian states were guilty in the twentieth century, obviates as well the opportunity for the individuals who live within it to grow into citizens. It is also a world in which, without the grandeur of the country or the principles of one’s regime to evoke loyalty, there is very little reason for anyone to sacrifice much of anything for the sake of any purpose. Humanitarian intervention, for example, will be prompted by feelings of universal compassion, even as it is deprived of the willingness to apply the force that would make it effective.

The author makes clear from the beginning of the English translation of this work that he is interpreting Europe for America, and it is worth briefly considering in conclusion why the attitudes he describes so well are more powerful in the Old World than in the New (though they are not unknown here). One explanation is that despite the fact that his argument is framed in terms of universal trends responding to the desires of humans qua human beings, in reality the historical experience has been different on the two sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, two terribly destructive wars in the first half of the twentieth century discredited national pride as a worthy ideal, the swift collapse of the imperial project in the second half undercut its claim to be making a contribution to the welfare of civilization, and the turn-of-the-century appearance of an international order framed by continent-sized great powers made the states of Europe appear too small to meet the challenges of security and economic prosperity on their own. None of these things has been true to the same extent of the United States.

A second possible answer sits strangely beside Manent’s analysis of the loss of all hierarchy and distinctions: that the United States is a more purely democratic country than its European cousins. For all the claims of social democracy to be more fully equal, and therefore more fully “democratic,” than liberal democracy, in the United States general public opinion has a greater force over public policy than in most of the capitals of Europe. One might find public opinion polls reflecting at least plurality support for capital punishment among Europeans as well as Americans, for example, but only in the United States is that backing from the public at large able to overcome elite opposition to the practice and make it public policy. Likewise, the great unwashed have never demonstrated as much attachment to the European project as have elites; and the furthering of European integration has by and large been undertaken without reference to the wishes of the public, even as
it has constructed a framework of institutions far from democratic in their spirit.

Such transatlantic contrasts mean that, while Manent sees no prospect, and therefore suggests no prescriptions, for reversing the developments he observes and recreating a richer—because more fully political—society in Europe, he does not insist that he is describing the inevitable destiny of the United States. Indeed, he predicts increasing difficulties between the two precisely because an ever-more non-political Europe will press for humanitarian policies without equipping itself with the instruments of power to accomplish its goals on its own, while a still-political America will retain the material and psychological capacity to fight, but will continue to balance compassionate concerns against strategic ones.

If the United States is to have a chance of remaining a nation-state—if, in response to the question in Manent’s title, we are to see the emergence not of a “world beyond politics” but only a region that has abandoned the political self-identification of its peoples as citizens—then Americans will need to appreciate his rich argument, which links sophisticated political thought with immediate and very practical questions of political action. They will need to avoid the peculiarly American temptation to define the United States simply as the bearer of equally universal and abstract notions of right and law, forgetting the needed ballast of a country, possessing a defined territory and a recognized assembly of fellow citizens. Without realizing what is at stake, he implies, the United States could undergo a similar depoliticization. If it escapes that fate, it will owe much to the perspicuity and passion displayed in this volume. In that case, Manent’s warning would not be realized to its ultimate extent, but one can expect that this result would not disappoint him. No doubt he would be pleased to arrive at what he expected to be the funeral of the nation-state and find several healthy members of the family standing at his side.