

Ghosts in the War Machine

As I was re-reading Stuart Chase's remarkable book *The Tyranny of Words* (1938), it struck me as how relevant it is even now in the context of the new instalment of the Israeli-Palestinian war, begun on October 7th 2023.

Chase's book was an influential popularization of Alfred Korzybski's theory of **General Semantics** –which is concerned with how events translate to perceptions, how they are further modified by the names and labels we apply to them, and how we might gain a measure of control over our own cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Proponents characterize general semantics as an antidote to certain kinds of delusional thought patterns in which incomplete and possibly warped mental constructs are projected onto the world and treated as reality itself. *

I will argue in this essay that such abstract words as “**nation**” and “**nation-state**” are delusional constructs –as opposed to real living individual human beings– and that the latter are infinitely more important than the former.

The idea of a nation-state was and is associated with the rise of the modern system of states, following the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). However, most historians see the nation-state as a 19th-century European phenomenon. **

Before the 13th century Eurasia, most aggregates of people were identified by ethnicity (such as Celts, Vandals and Huns) or as subjects of a kingdom or empire, or by their religious practices. There was a Christian world and a Muslim world. The only multinational entity in Europe was the “One Holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church.” The word “catholic” (in Greek, *katholikos* –καθολικός–) meant universal. Territorial boundaries of these aggregates were very seldom fixed and depended on very fluid migration patterns or on war acquisitions.

Susan Reynolds –British Medieval Historian– has argued that many European medieval kingdoms were “nations” in the modern sense, except that political participation in “nationalism” was available only to a limited prosperous and literate class; while Adrian Hastings –also a British historian– argues that English nationalism begins with the translation of the complete bible into English in the 1380s.

Philip S. Gorski –an American sociologist– has argued, however, that **the first modern nation-state** was the Dutch Republic. The United Provinces of the Netherlands, officially the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, and commonly referred to in historiography as the Dutch Republic, was a confederation that existed from 1579 until the Batavian Revolution in 1795. It was a predecessor state of the present-day Netherlands. **

In *The Roots of Nationalism* (2016), David A. Bell traces the modern concept of the nation to the period prior to the French Revolution. He writes that "...in the turmoil of pre-revolutionary politics and culture, this definition of the nation changed, and became much more demanding. French elites came to see a nation not simply as a natural community, but as a spiritual one, bound together by shared values, shared laws, and by a host of what we would now call shared cultural practices, including the same language." ***

Thus, the existence of modern "nations," whose territorial boundaries delimit a group of people defined strictly by their unique ethnicity, language and religion, is a recent offspring of the last 230 years. On the other hand, what defines a true "nation-state" is completely blurred. It has included an enormous variety of political entities, from constitutional democratic republics, constitutional monarchies and soviet socialist republics, to fascist dictatorships ruled by racialism such as Nazi Germany.

Whether the genocidal wars perpetrated by modern nation-states are an improvement on those of ancient kingdoms and Barbarian hordes, I leave to the reader to decide. But I do believe that our present nation-states have in their arsenals and are using lethal weapons that are thousands of times more powerful and kill a thousand times more efficiently than the slings and arrows of our ancestors. Are they delusional or criminal?

May the children of Gaza and of Kfar Aza Kibbutz come back to life to stand in judgement.

Written by Pascual Delgado, October 18th 2023.

* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Chase

** <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation>

*** <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/roots-of-nationalism/>