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Citation: Walby, S. (2004). No one polity saturates the political space in a given territory. Sociology, 38(5), pp. 1035-1042. doi: 10.1177/0038038504047185

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Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038504047185

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Sociology
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Volume 38(5): 1035–1042
DOI: 10.1177/0038038504047185
SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks,
New Delhi

No One Polity Saturates the Political Space in a Given Territory

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Introduction

Bruce and Voas (2004) and I are in agreement about the importance of debating the usefulness of the concept of the nation-state for sociology. Our disagreement is over the theorization of polities, rather than the empirical evidence relating to the significance of religion. I am pleased to have the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings and to push forward this important debate.

My argument is that the diversity of types of polity in the contemporary world needs to be more fully appreciated and their inter-relations more subtly theorized. In particular, I argue that it is rare for just one polity to saturate the political space in a given territory. The typical approach, via the concept of the nation-state (e.g. Giddens, 1984), conflates important distinctions (especially between 'nation', 'state' and 'nation-state') and leaves out of focus points of disjuncture between these entities that are important in generating social and political struggle and change (e.g. stateless nations seeking a state of their own).

No One Polity Politically Saturates a Given Territory

Bruce and Voas (2004) defend the view that nation-states are about politics and religions about religion. My argument is that both are sub-types of polities and that they overlap within the same terrain, that of the governance of social relations. It is rare for one polity to politically saturate any given territory. No one polity controls all possible political niches and domains. Rather, polities variously cooperate, compete, fight and accommodate each other. And they overlap in the same territory.

The Weberian conception of the modern state as an entity that controls legitimate coercion in a given territory is inadequate to grasp the nature of

contemporary politics. There are more bases of governance than coercion. There are more types of polity than states. There is more than one polity in a given territory. The notion of a monopoly of political control must give way in the face of the evidence. The exceptions to the conventional notion of political monopoly constitute the norm, not the exception. Sociology should recognize the lack of monopoly; that no one polity politically saturates a given territory. It is in the tension between different overlapping polities within the same territory that many important sociological issues are located.

Bruce and Voas hold a zero-sum conception of power. This is fundamental to their argument that only if a religion were found to 'weaken' or 'threaten' or 'rival' a nation-state, could it be found that there were significant polities other than nation-states. My argument rejects such a zero-sum conception of power. The co-existing polities may support each other as well as be in opposition; they may be in a symbiotic relationship, even if unequal. Zero-sum conceptions of power are too simple to grasp the complexity of the relations between contemporary polities. Overlapping polities may co-operate as well as compete.

Bruce and Voas claim that 'a major portion of Walby's article is devoted to the claim that organized religion can be a polity and hence rival the state.' This is a misunderstanding of my argument. The term 'rival' lies at the heart of the matter. I do not think that religions have to rival states in order to constitute a polity. Organized forms of religion can constitute sources of governance in their own right, whatever their relationship with a state with which it co-exists in the same territory. Whether the relations between religions and states are co-operative or competitive does not affect my argument. Bruce and Voas devote half their article to a whirlwind tour of the world's religions in a misguided attempt at a rebuttal of a misunderstanding. (Indeed only two pages of my article concerned religion.)

More Nations Than States

Bruce and Voas do not offer a definition of 'nation-state', nor of 'nation', nor of 'state'. They do not explicitly reject my definitions of these concepts that I presented (Walby, 2003). Rather, they implicitly use different definitions. It is hard to discuss their formulations since they do not define them.

I define a polity as a form of governance involving one or more of a series of forms of power including coercion, economic, legal and symbolic forms that are coordinated in a range of ways, which is significant over a range of institutions and commands deference. Key to my definition of a polity is that it constitutes a form of governance, not that it has a monopoly of governance. There are more sources of the power used for governance than that of coercion. My examples of polities included empires, states, nations, the European Union and some organized religions. Thus it is not accurate for Bruce and Voas to claim that my only examples of non-state polities are the European Union and organized religion. States are usually polities and have the full range of powers asso-

ciated with governance. Nations are polities where they have a set of governing institutions that are able to command deference, although some nations are not so developed. Organized religions are polities when they have a set of governing institutions that command deference. Religion is not only a 'potent source of values' but also a form of governance. Empires have one key state and usually many nations.

I define a nation-state as an entity in which there is one nation, the whole of that nation and no other nation, and one state, the whole of that state and only that state co-existing in the same territory. It is a mistake to conflate 'state' and 'nation' within the concept 'nation-state'. This conflation hides more than it reveals, airbrushing away major sources of social and political tension.

I made the claim that while states were common polities, nation-states were rare. A key part of the evidential basis of this claim is that there are more nations than states, and that many entities that are superficially thought to be nation-states are, on closer examination, found not to be.

Bruce and Voas do not systematically address my critique of the conflation of nation and state in the concept of nation-state. They make the claim: 'Nations exist; states exist: very often they coincide.' This is followed by a list of examples 'e.g. in much of Latin America and in some of Africa' and 'Citizens of Ghana are quite clear about being Ghanaians.' No texts are cited as evidence for these claims. Further, they claim 'elites in these countries… do not typically find the idea of the nation-state an irrelevance', however, this is not evidence contradicting my claim that there are more nations than states.

I provided examples from the UK to illustrate the existence of more nations than states; that is, in the UK there is one state and several nations or parts of nations. Do Bruce and Voas think that the Scottish are not a nation? Do they think that McCrone (1992) is wrong to describe Scotland as a 'stateless nation'? Or that there is not an Irish nation? Do they think these nations are irrelevant? Is the social and political strife over the location of the border between Ireland and the UK really of such little consequence? Or the struggle for a national parliament for Scotland? Do they really think that these nations are merging into one British nation, since Bruce and Voas state 'In those instances where at the outset they [nations and states] did not [coincide], there is a tendency for nation-states to emerge'?

My argument is that the disjuncture between the boundaries of nations and the state in the UK is sociologically significant. Nations have contested the boundaries and nature of the UK state with tremendous consequences, from terrorism and militarization of Northern Ireland, to upheaval in parliamentary institutions, to the differential regulation of education and health care. Disaggregating 'nation' and 'state' can be more helpful for sociological analysis than conflating them in a spurious unity of 'nation-state'.

The UK is not the only pluri-national state. Keating (2002) describes four such examples in the developed world – the United Kingdom, Spain, Belgium and Canada – as well as the European Union.

Empires have historically been important examples of polities that were not nation-states. For example, in the British Empire there were many nations, but only one state. The claim that Bruce and Voas make about the British Empire and 'the nation-state that controlled it' not being the same entity misses the point, which is that a large number of the world's peoples did not live in a nation-state when they lived within the British Empire. These nations did not have a state of their own. Many millions did not live in a nation-state of their own, but in an Empire controlled by the British state.

Over 300 developed or emerging national groups worldwide are detailed in the 2432 page book by Minahan (2002) on stateless nations. Cohen (1997) estimates that there are around 2000 'nation-peoples', around ten times as many as the states that are recognized by the United Nations. Europe is criss-crossed with nations and many would-be nations, overlapping but not perfectly aligned with states (Boje et al., 1999; Brubaker, 1996; Therborn, 1995). There are many more nations than states. There is no evidential basis to the claim that nations and states 'very often... coincide' in the contemporary world.

The conflation of nation and state in nation-state prevents sociology from understanding the nature of governance in the modern world. This conflation should be rejected and replaced by a more nuanced appreciation of the diverse forms taken by polities.

Not Nested Hierarchies

Bruce and Voas claim that polities usually exist in nested hierarchies, in which the higher level determines the powers that can be exercised by the lower level. While nested hierarchies often exist in federal political systems, they rarely exist in relationships between other polities, such as those between the Member States and the European Union, and those between states and religions. The federal USA is an inadequate analogy or template for understanding relations between most polities.

In particular, Bruce and Voas seem to misunderstand the nature of the European Union. They underestimate the power of European level. They do not appreciate the complex distribution of powers between the Member States and the various EU institutions, especially the Commission, Council, Parliament and Court. In some of these institutions, such as the Council, the Member States have greater individual voice, while in others, such as the European Court of Justice, they have little (European Commission, 2003; Weiler, 1997). Further in different domains the relative powers of the Member States and the EU varies, being greater for the EU in issues of economic governance and greater for the Member States in law and order (Hoskyns, 1996; Supiot, 2001). There is no overall nested hierarchy in which either the Member States or the EU is pre-eminent. Bruce and Voas claim that states have 'simply agreed to adopt certain results of deliberation within European institutions as part of its own policy'. But this does not provide an adequate account of the nature of the

decision making processes since Member States can and are taken to the European Court of Justice by the European Commission if their domestic policies are found to fall short of EU requirements. It is not merely in 'unusual situations' that 'individuals may have avenues to appeal over the heads of their national governments', but in all instances where the EU has passed a legally binding Directive. Indeed national courts are bound to follow EU law where it exists in priority to their own domestic law. The EU is not a simple multi-level political entity, since it is only in some domains that the powers of the EU are superior to those of its Member States, not all.

The example of the regulation of the quality of Danish beer is used by Bruce and Voas to trivialize the nature and extent of EU regulation. It is not only control over their beer that the Danes have ceded to the EU, but the power to regulate many aspects of the Danish economy, from employment regulation to trade negotiations. The loss of the power to regulate their economy is a significant transfer of power and not a trivial one. It calls into question the extent of the capacities for autonomous action of Member States, which are traditionally assumed to be an intrinsic part of the political capabilities of a nation-state.

The powers of the Member States and the EU are not a zero sum game. The EU enables Member States to achieve economic goals, for growth and development, which they would be unlikely to accomplish if they had remained apart (Milward, 1992). It is by giving up some forms of power that these political goals have been accomplished. Again, the complexity of the diverse new forms of polities needs to be recognized, not denied, if it is to be adequately grasped and understood.

Likewise, the relationship between religion and states is rarely a zero-sum game, nor is it a nested hierarchy. Rather, there are complex interactions, mutual adaptations, overlaps, and changes in the extent to which particular policy domains are within one or the other. The reconfiguration of the boundaries of Protestant Churches and states concerning both territory and remit during the reformation were complex struggles and mutual adaptations (Gorski, 2000). The policy domains that may variously be within the remit of a religion or a state include not only personal life (Helie-Lucas, 1994) but also other areas, such as the negotiation of the acceptability of usury between Islam and developing states (*Economist,* 2001).

The Power of Myth

Bruce and Voas misunderstand my position. I never say that the idea of the nation-state is irrelevant. I never say that there is not pressure to become a nation-state. Myths are powerful. Ideas move people to action. Invented traditions have effects (Hobsbawn and Ranger, 1983). A myth is a narrative story that is considered to represent a tradition and to provide information about core values and the conduct necessary to achieve them.

The myth of the nation-state is that a nation will find full and true expression of its values and secure its economic well-being only if it has a state of its own in a territory of its own; and that it is possible to achieve this, evidence for this being that there are believed to be many examples of successful nation-states. It is predicated on the assumption that it is possible and desirable to bring into alignment in one place, culture, economy, and political representation through a state.

The myth of the nation-state is a very powerful force. It does not depend upon there being any actually existing nation-states, only a belief that there are. Many national movements believe that it is possible as well as desirable to achieve a nation-state. The myth of the nation-state has launched many political movements and militarized conflicts.

The nation-state is a powerful myth about purity. It is about a nation having a state of its own so that it can self-regulate its environment in conformity with its values. The nation-state myth is about the close fit of a nation and its own state, with its own politics, economy, and culture mapping onto one another in the same territory.

The desire of a nation, or would-be nation, for a state of its own is a tremendous force in human history. On the one hand it can be understood in terms of a discourse of self-determination, of community, of democracy, of the realization of a society in conformity with the values of the nation, free from the impositions of invasive, colonialist, exploitative, foreign powers. On the other hand it is also a terrible force. It can unleash militarism and armed struggle, by regular armies, guerrillas and terrorists, as nations seek to establish a state of their own in a territory of their own. It can be a force that seeks purity where there is none, driving genocide, ethnic cleansing, communal murders, and pogroms.

Bruce and Voas (2004) produce sketches of world religions as stable bounded groups of people at peace with the states and world in which they live. There is little reference to the complexity of the partial overlap with nations, states, and other religions and the ensuing tensions.

My view is that many contemporary militarized conflicts have as a key element a contestation over the non-overlap between nation and state and territory, which are compounded when religion is involved. The Middle East has two nations, Israelis and Palestinians, seeking to form their own states in partly the same territory. The tension between India and Pakistan stems from the lack of neat overlap of nation, religion and state in their border regions, never resolved at their independence from the British Empire. Northern Ireland has two nations in one territory seeking alignments with two different states. The Balkans war involved the non-alignment of nation, religion and state.

The European Union was founded in the aftermath of bloody conflicts over nation and state. Its founders explicitly sought to eradicate the origins of the many wars in Europe in nationalism, by proposing a new kind of polity that diffused national sentiment (Hallstein, 1973; Walby, 1999). They were correct in their analysis and successful in their achievement. The EU is the leading

example of a post-national constellation (Habermas, 2001), or a network state (Castells, 1998).

Conclusions

The political world is better analysed by differentiating between different types of polities than using a 'one-size fits all' approach and squeezing them into nation-states. There are nations, states, religions, the EU, and empires. Coercion is only one of the forms of power that polities utilize to underpin governance. The EU does not have a military arm, yet is still a powerful polity.

Polities and other domains such as culture and economy do not often map neatly onto one another in the same territory. Rather they are likely to have different spatial and temporal reach (Walby, 2005 forthcoming). The tension that is a consequence of their lack of fit is a major force for social struggle and change.

The nation-state is a powerful and resilient myth. The aspiration of nations for a state of their own is a powerful driving force in contemporary politics. However, they seldom achieve a state just for themselves and usually have to settle for some sort of messy compromise with other nations and polities. If it were known just how few nation-states are actually achieved, perhaps the pursuit of some nations for a state of their own might be less ferocious.

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