

Liquidity and Precarity: The Challenges of State Partitions and Their Effects to Communities and Individuals. A Reply to Kolstø, Mohanram, and Woodward

Stefano Bianchini 

Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Italy
Email: stefano.bianchini@unibo.it

Some Introductory Remarks

Under many respects, state partitions in modern times are about borders, belonging, transnational movements, and power politics. In my view, these aspects are particularly affecting the European stability since the industrial and French revolutions. With this assertion, however, I do not deny that the phenomenon of partitions had previously occurred, and still is occurring, all over the world. Historically, it has been justified by a variety of reasons, from religious attractions (or hatred) to the desire of conquests, from commercial interests to beliefs of civilization expansions. All these are matter of fact. Nevertheless, when I approached this field of studies, twenty years ago, I was surprised to observe that the category “partitions” is rarely used by European scholars and in the international literature when focusing on the processes of state fragmentation in modern Europe. By contrast, the notion is widely applied in other world contexts, particularly in South Asia (and British India especially), despite plenty of similar examples being offered by European events (Mohanram and Raychaudhuri, 2019).

Furthermore, modern times are marked by an intense process of liquidity and precarity. Their role is deeply related to the perceptions of nationhood and statehood, as these interpretative categories manifest such a high flexibility to impact, both diachronically and synchronically, the understanding of politics, culture, memories, and economic perspectives of groups and individuals (Bauman and Donskis, 2013). The atlas of nation-state metamorphosis described in the first part of my book is aimed, at least in my hopes, to offer a metaphor of the liquidity of partition processes. It refers, in fact, to how borders, belonging, transnational relations, and power melt and solidify constantly, reshaping maps and empathies, with unpredictable effects on the everyday life of individuals and groups, as correctly grasped by my commentators.

At the same time, I am also aware that a scrutiny of modern partitions requires the contribution of a plurality of disciplines and assessments, as well as considerations and expertise, since this phenomenon cannot be restricted to a single approach (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012; Waters, 2020). Therefore, I am really grateful to my colleagues, who kindly accepted to expand, with their insightful comments, the issues that I tried to elaborate in my book, offering to our scholarly debate new fuel for further investigations. I also thank the Association for the Study of Nationalities and the editors of *Nationalities Papers* for soliciting and encouraging a broader examination of state partitions from different conceptual visions.

In particular, it seems to me that two main questions have been raised by my commentators: the first one is related to the human impact of partitions, with all the consequences in terms of trauma, cultural rupture, and memory (Langenbacher et al., 2015); and the second one is related to the

intersections between state and nation over time and according to the different geopolitical contexts. Moreover, these two aspects have been, in a different way, connected to the idea of Europe, its space, and its interdependence, both domestic and international.

1. The Human Impact of Partitions

First and foremost, my geopolitical approach to the European space does not identify it with Western regions only. On the contrary, as Radhika Mohanram effectively notes, I see Europe as a “single corpus” from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains, far beyond the short-living Cold War divisions. In my view, the history of the Continent is deeply interconnected, much more than it is generally supposed. Communications, cultures, arts, economy, the networks of channels and railways, as well as the transnational circulation of ideas and people should encourage the academic world and interested readers to assess the centrality of these dynamics and their relevance for the developments of the whole Continent. Truly, Europeans have been educated in the last two centuries, as soon as the public education system was introduced, to look at the past with lenses that are mostly focusing on their “supposed” national environments. As a result, they are encouraged to see the “end of history” with the establishment of their own independent state, whether this is Italy or Lithuania, Greece, or Finland. Consistently, they are unable to grasp the long-term interdependence that, for example, makes it possible to consider Shakespeare part of the Italian culture, as well as Bona Sforza, grand-Duchess of Lithuania and queen of Poland, a personality who was able to help reform the local agriculture taxation and land organization, drawing inspiration from the channels built by Leonardo da Vinci in Milan, before the latter spent his last years in France (Tygielski, 2015).

Furthermore, cultural enlightenment penetrated in Ukraine through Russia, as a consequence of the cultural policy of Catherine II, while the Central European Empires, as well as the patrician republics of Venice and Genoa or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, rooted in their territories a fluid sense of belonging, which led aristocracies and intellectuals to manifest a multi-language education preserving double/triple names and surnames. Similarly, Greeks, Arabs, and Normans forged Sicilian past, and Germans played an influential role from Estonian lands to Central Italy, while French was the language of the Russian aristocracy. The Italian Renaissance would not have been developed without the contribution of the Dutch painting, and the modern theatral performance and the actors’ profession would not be imaginable without the theoretical and practical contribution of Konstantin Stanislavskij, as well as Rudol’f Nureev for ballet.

These are but a few examples of an interdependence that might be extended to religious competitions, music, and folklore, as well as the shared belief that tyrants should be assassinated. Such a revolutionary activism, stimulated by various personalities from Mazzini to Czartoryski, from the Narodniks to Gavrilo Princip, also had a counterrevolution policies advocacy, from De Maistre to Jarosław Kaczyński. If monitored from this standpoint, the European space is really a “single corpus” whose features, contrasts, and developments encompass also the inputs stemming from the colonized peoples, who penetrated the European societies under many respects. However, most of the current European states have not had a colonial experience. On the contrary, they experienced diasporas and socioeconomic emigrations across Europe or overseas.

This background has definitely impacted the liquidity of belonging, affecting the history of perception of modern nationalism in Europe, either because preexisting social links radically changed or because they were even broken. Bridges of communications were still preserved, although not regularly, and according to the policies adopted by the countries of origins (Fahy et al., 2007; Harzig et al. 2007). The question raised by Radhika Mohanram on this specific issue is very pertinent and should be related to the process of immigrations and/or depopulations that these states have experienced (or are experiencing). I will come back to this later. Here, I wish to stress my shared belief with Radhika Mohanram that the process of partitions is comprehensive because it affects “spaces of the single corpus.” Therefore, it shapes not only the institutional structures but

also human beings, families, communities, social life organizations, cultural practices, rituals, habits. And when they are severely cut off, the whole “corpus” suffers from it. The current war in Ukraine is the most recent confirmation of such a trend (Minakov et al., 2021).

In fact, the unsettled trauma of border divisions affects multiple geographies, not only states, but also regions, districts, cities, houses, families. Suffice it here to remember the impact on territories such as Istria, Silesia, Dobruja, Punjab, Kashmir, Sandžak, and Galicia or urban areas – for example, Nicosia, Gorizia, Cieszyn, Komárno, and others – whose traumatic repercussions are still, in some cases, alive and generate alternative or opposite memories. The Polish dramatist Sławomir Mrożek sarcastically presented the consequences of frontiers separation in the play “The House on the Border.” Written in 1967, with reference to the Cold War confrontations, the performance is also vividly pertinent to state partitions’ consequences on human beings.

On the other hand, national remembering and forgetting are crucial, although controversial processes, since memories of the past might be incoherent with the narratives of the newly established statehood. As a result, past heroes might later become traitors or terrorists (or vice versa). The opposite is also true, since memories can have a beneficial effect in encouraging reconciliation by reestablishing bridges of communications where they had been torn down. But this requires great courage, even if this is not always the case. Similarly, however, forgetting may play a double role by encouraging either a rejection of past experiences (for example, the communist decades) or attenuated assessments of hurtful events (as in the case of Nazi collaborationism and holocaust cooperation), as Jelena Subotić has effectively investigated for Croatia, Serbia, and Lithuania (Subotić, 2019).

In other words, forgetting and remembering have a critical relevance for reconstructing shared narratives, but they are also a double-edged sword in national contexts. Violence plays a key role here. Both Kolstø and Mohanram have elaborated in their comments about violence from different angles. In a way, Kolstø contends that violence is not necessarily “the twin brother” of partition. By contrast, Mohanram stresses how violent traumas lead to the “sense of loss of the past.” Actually, we have cases of “velvet partitions.” I have devoted one chapter on the Czechoslovak example, but also Norway and Montenegro achieved independence peacefully. Partially, this is also true for the Baltic republics.

Nevertheless, historically, violence is so far the rule, in cases of partition. This has an impact on the way peoples, states, and the educational systems elaborate memories and promote selected forms of forgetting of the past, according to new narratives. Moreover, violence is often connected to victimization feelings. Long-term remembrances are promoted through the revision of the past, even in terms of competition between, for example, the memory of wars or the war of memories (Karačić et al., 2012). Therefore, memories and forgetting do not necessarily help both reconciliation and the process of rapprochement of the preexisting social and cultural links. On the contrary, they might be constructed in confrontational terms, in order to perpetuate the “us” and “them” polarization.

2. The Intersections of States and Nations

These considerations lead me to add some considerations to the relations between partitions and nation-state, societal homogenization, and civic nationalism – that is, a topic which is dear to both Susan Woodward and Pål Kolstø, who widely mentioned it in their in-depth and stimulating comments. In this perspective, however, I would like to dwell on the nexus between the first and second part of my book. Considering the complexity and comprehensive framework of my topic, I have focused first on the geopolitical arrangements that affected Europe in the last two centuries, and then I have elaborated further about the relations between partitions and democracy, taking into considerations some more recent case studies, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Baltics, and the immigration waves of 2015–2016 within the context of globalization (Klaus, 2017; Tzifakis, 2012).

At least in my view, connecting these two parts helps the reader understand how the constant process of liquefaction and solidification affects the different perceptions of national belonging and transnational movements over time. Susan Woodward correctly notes that I did not define the “nation-state” and raises the question of the consequences of not using the term at all. However, I did not define the “nation-state” because its meaning and its content vary over time and according to power interpretations. Suffice it here to recall that both Masaryk and King Alexander I regarded, respectively, the Czechoslovak republic and the Kingdom of “one people with three names” as undisputable implementations of the “nation-state.”

The same terminology has been used by the Yugoslav successor leaders when the federation collapsed and new independent “nation-states” were internationally recognized (Anastasakis et al., 2020), and similarly by the Czechs and the Slovaks, or the post-Soviet Baltic republics. The latter, in fact, even before the formal international recognition of their independence, claimed the re-establishment of a “continuation line” from their “nation-state” experience between the two world wars and their post-Soviet time (Gerwarth, 2016; Jović, 2017). But are we sure that an analogy exists between the “nation-state” terminology and its content across the time?

Furthermore, nation and states are synonyms in English, and, in fact, New York is the headquarter of an organization called “United Nations,” which, however, does not include, for example, the Kurds, the Northern Cypriots, the Catalans, the Scots, etc. (Duursma, 2021; Kolstø, 2006). Or, perhaps the latter are not nations? Or, maybe, they are nations without a state? What is, then, the scope of the organizational institution hosted in New York City? Therefore, instead of defining what a “nation-state” is, I preferred to highlight the *liquid* form of this terminology, its ability to change the significance, and to adapt itself to different contexts, while, in substance, we are speaking of states or countries, whose sense of belonging is reshaped constantly, according to power needs and their forms of legitimacy.

As a result, at least in my view, the distinction between “ethnic” and “civic,” which Kolstø suggests particularly in reference to the Scots, sounds effective for the academic world, whose ability to grasp complexity is the rule, but it seems irrelevant when politics matter. In other words, the “civic” dimension of the nation is politically weak and can easily be disregarded as soon as the collective “risk perception” is intensifying. In this case, the appeal of the authorities or party’s leaders to “national solidarity” prevails in terms of “protecting sovereignty,” preserving the prerogatives of “nationhood” through symbols, induced and selected memories, glorifications of the (often imagined) past, against rules “imposed” by a supranational body. Brexit was a good, “soft” example of such a behavior. The conduct of Poland and Hungary is more radical, although both still remain anchored to the EU, either because they are too weak to perform autonomously or because they are strongly convinced they can see the EU gradually evolving into an organization of states. In other words, realistically speaking, the “ethnos” is always permeating the idea of nation to the detriment of its potential “civic” dimension. In fact, other, more explicit manifestations aim stubbornly to preserve the “homogeneity” of language, culture, religion, white male superiority, gender hierarchies, despite and against the challenges stemming from an increasing societal plurality. Such extremism has been experimented to a large extent in the Yugoslav successor states, but it can be recognized in a variety of movements all over the world. In other words, despite variations, however deep they are, “ethnic” and “civic” narratives politically coexist to the point that their factual differences become negligible to the detriment of the latter, when the nation/state legitimacy faces democratic demands of diversity management, which is unable to be sorted out (Kolstø, 2022 and 2014).

Let me try to better explain this issue by focusing firstly on the EU and, secondly, on the societal structure.

The European Union, in fact, had the potential to develop a “civic” and networking society (a term that I prefer than “civic nation”). Nevertheless, the EU failed the exam when it succumbed to the re-nationalization of domestic and foreign policies of member-states. This trend powerfully developed during the 2007–2008 economic crisis, although it had been acting for some years since

the Constitutional treaty was rejected by France and the Netherlands. Subsequently, the trend was reinforced by new polarizations, particularly aggravated by austerity measures, based on monetarist and budgetary policies, which socially devastated Greece and raised high concerns in Southern EU. Then, under these circumstances, the EU postponed indefinitely further promised enlargements toward the Balkans and faced the migration flows of 2015–2016 (Bianchini et al., 2018).

In particular, the “enlargement fatigue” left unsettled the enforcement of peace in South-East Europe. Accordingly, the regional uncertainty persisted, giving new impetus to the perception that an exclusivist approach was marking the EU external strategy. Meanwhile, a huge number of asylum seekers and migrants were leaving countries devastated by military conflicts incited by Western interventions (for example, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Kosovo). Recent studies of the flows show that, in particular, young people from the Albanian cultural world joined the Balkan route with the hope to enter Germany and other Northern EU countries. With the exception of a short-lived open access allowed by chancellor Merkel, this mass mobility of people was rejected with racist and ethno-national arguments, even by transit countries. A distribution policy of refugees among member-states based on GDP and population was never achieved. The Dublin regulations were not reformed, while the issue of borders (either national or EU) forcefully entered the political agenda.

Meanwhile, anti-immigrant arguments were widely spread by policy makers. They were mainly justified during public protests by referring to the “fear” that national habits, cultures, and traditions (religion included) would have been altered by newcomers, therefore affecting the “national identity” (Czyżewski, Kulas, and Golubiewski, 2011). As a result, ethno-national arguments were stimulated in order to attract consensus for building border fences, put under question Schengen, deploy the army along the borders, and violate the International Law of the Sea in the Mediterranean and Aegean basins. In few words, while a number of people died or were tortured or raped along the route of their hope, a ruling class that was unprepared for the challenges of globalization reacted by reinvigorating cultural protectionism and social exclusivism, disregarding human rights, and claiming the ethnic component of the nation as an effective shield against the “invader.” Consequently, the transnational societal structure, encouraged by the freedom of movement, was questioned, even within the EU (Iveković, 2022).

In short, to greater or lesser extent, this behavior affected European societies, even those which proudly aim to present themselves as “civic nations.” Actually, as I mentioned in my book, Merkel’s Germany accepted one million refugees in the fall of 2015 in a compassionate effort to respect and welcome asylum seekers, according to a strategy aimed to change Europe in depth. However, she failed to convince the EU member-states to support her open approach. On the contrary, the Schengen agreement was put in danger. Ethno-national narratives prevailed, in contrast with the fluidity of identities that were stemming from the intensity of cultural syncretism.

As a result, new forms of exclusivism made evident the limits of liberal democracy – that is, its (in)ability to deal with diversity management, the consequences of refugees’ hospitality, and demands of employment in increasingly intercultural frameworks. Although demands to democracy were acquiring a broader dimension – far beyond the “free and fair” institutional representation, the respect of the balance of powers, and the rule of law – forms of resistance were strengthened by governments and political parties (Mabry et al., 2013; Meka and Bianchini, 2020).

By contrast, globalization, time-space compression, e-communications, and the claims for new transnational civil rights are transforming democracy, which is expected to meet the new societal needs, adopt a deliberative model able to foster intercultural claims, and assess new policies, adequate to a context based on porous borders (Steiner et al., 2017). Societies, in fact, are increasingly interdependent (as the pandemic has also confirmed) and plural. Under these circumstances, as Woodward observes, the “distinction between nations and ethnic groups/ethnicity” is not necessarily “unclear” but fluid and undefined. Even if the problem is polarization (often within the existing states) rather than heterogeneity, the societal complexity is the first victim of the “us” and “them” confrontation, which affects the wealth of the society, the aspiration of

equality, and the potential development of democracy as a political, cultural, and institutional expression of syncretism (Andreopoulos and Rosow, 2022).

Woodward is right when she says that, originally, protests in the Balkans, since the beginning of the 1800s, were “against taxation, fiscal policy and policy of redistribution.” However, they quickly turned into claims of independence under the belief that this development would have been the best pathway to achieve social goals. Nevertheless, in the 21st century, at least in Europe, the national frame is too limited, culturally and territorially, to achieve similar results. In this sense, the expectations of candidate countries to be included in the EU represents a significant change from the past. Nevertheless, it is also evident that member-states are unprepared to face the consequences of the networking political culture, the claims of interculturality, the consistent reshaping of both the deepening of EU institutions, and the widening of its geopolitical space (Podunavac, 2011).

This leads me to another, final consideration. Referring to the Balkans, Woodward elaborates further about the role played by external factors in the peace negotiations between 1995 and 2001 by creating, in all the mentioned cases, a “*fait accomplis*.” This is true, although such post-war arrangements did not lead to an effective governance: “quite the contrary [...] the external actors [...] interrupt domestic processes of state-building” (251), as Susan Woodward has critically observed in her last book on the “Ideology of Failed States” (Woodward, 2017). To sum up, the evidence shows that imported democracies do not emulate the EU pattern, epitomized by the German-French reconciliation and the consolidation of integrative processes. In other words, without the real inclusion in a broader networking and transnational society, the intrinsic fragility of the newly established states persists. The domestic situation of the Yugoslav successor states and Albania, still excluded from the EU, is a patent confirmation of their prolonged socio-political uncertainty, aggravated by brain drain, emigration trends, and local depopulation.

Admittedly, however, forms of resistance against “external factors” also affect EU member-states. For example, Poland or Hungary have adopted a policy of “selective inclusiveness” by implementing the EU rules and values “à la carte.” Their criticism is mostly related to the role played by the EU communitarian institutions, such as the Commission, the Parliament, and the Court of Justice, which are considered excessively intrusive in the member-states prerogatives. As is known, however, the EU conditionality is frequently powerless once a state has become full member. Therefore, the regulations are often implemented differently within the EU. As a result, this behavior affects also the EU’s external image, which suffers from criticism of NGOs and post-colonial states regarding the application of double standards. And yet, such hesitant processes of integration (summarized by the restrain of the “deepening” and postponing of the “widening”) maintains the vagueness of the pathway toward new integrative perspectives of the EU. As a result, the intrinsic fragility of the EU project enables the reaffirmation of ethno/national interests, triggering a detrimental cultural and political setback for European peace and security. This is the reason why, to answer the final comment of Pål Kolstø, I remain skeptical about the future of the “nation-state” model, whatever this notion means.

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