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The Nation-State as Failure: Nationalism and Mobility, in India and Elsewhere

Erik Ringmar
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The Nation-State as Failure

Nationalism and Mobility, in India and Elsewhere

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Abstract

Human beings make a life for themselves between the earth and the sky. In the Middle Ages we split our allegiance between the two, but since industrialization in the nineteenth-century, the nation-state has claimed a monopoly on both. This worked as long as mobility was restricted and migrants could be controlled. Today this is no longer the case. This is why the nation-state fails. Critics of industrial society always knew as much. In this paper we discuss the case of India as reflected in the writings of G.K. Chesterton and Mohandas Gandhi.
In the past few years there has been a lot of talk about “failed states” in reference to countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, the Central African Republic, Congo, Chad, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, and so on. Yet, as we will argue below, the reason these states fail is more than anything that the idea of the nation-state itself is a failure. The nation-state eventually always fails, and the cases most commonly given as illustrations are only the most obvious examples of the problem. It follows that people in Europe and North America have a lot to learn about their own nation-states from studying these non-European cases. Perhaps they can help us think more creatively about alternative ways to organize our communities and our politics.

The problem, we will conclude, is the kind of state that was exported to the non-European world during the colonial era: the nation-state in its European, nineteenth-century, version. By colonial masters and nationalistic leaders alike it was simply assumed that the European nation-state had universal applicability and this was consequently the kind of state with which the newly independent states were saddled. Yet this assumption was incorrect. In fact, the success of the European nation-state in Europe itself, such as it was, was dependent on idiosyncratic factors which only partially were replicated elsewhere. Above all, the fate of the nation-state was intimately connected with the twin processes of industrialization and urbanization as they took place in latter part of the nineteenth-century. The reason the nation-state was accepted was above all that large portions of Europe’s population were forced to move. Leaving their traditional communities in the countryside farm-hands and milk-maides were forced to move to cities to look for work. Here they suddenly felt both homeless and rootless and it was more than anything to these existential worries that the nation-state provided a convincing answer. Yet outside of Europe industrialization and urbanization never took place to the same extent and in the same fashion and there was nothing like the same degree of human mobility. Lacking existential worries, people had no need for convincing answers. The nation-state failed since it was not needed.

The defenders of modern society, be they liberals or conservatives, never understood the problem. Although they advocated quite different conceptions of the nation-state, neither liberals nor conservatives ever doubted that it provided a viable solution to the problems of the age. It was instead the lonely voices who were critical of modern society that sounded the alarm. Below we will discuss two examples of such critics: the English journalist G.K. Chesterton and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the leader of the Indian independence movement. Both of them were looking backward to a pre-modern era in which people had lived in an entirely different fashion and had entirely different allegiances. The problem with Indian

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1 The Fund for Peace, “The Fragile States Index 2015.”

2 A kindred argument, developed in a contemporary context, is Brooks, “Failed States, or the State as Failure?,” 1159–96; An unrelated argument is Chomsky, Failed States; See also Ringmar, “The Idiocy of Intimacy,” 534–49.
nationalists, said Chesterton, is that they are insufficiently Indian and insufficiently nationalist. If they really were nationalists on behalf of India, they would not so slavishly try to copy all things British. Gandhi agreed and added that as long as your independence is achieved on someone else’s terms, you will never be truly independent.

I Between earth and sky

It is between the earth and the sky that all human beings make a home for themselves. The earth is where we dwell; it is the earth which feeds us and it is in the earth that we one day will rest. But as long as we are alive we are open to the sky. The sky is infinite and boundless. There are no places in the sky where we can make a home for ourselves, instead everything we find here is on the move. It is to the sky that smoke rises, together with our dreams and prayers, and it is in the sky that our flights of fancy take place, before they come crushing to the ground. The sky illuminates the things that appear in it, revealing them and making them equally accessible to everyone. We could perhaps say that the earth is local and the sky is universal; the earth confines us to a certain place and gives us roots whereas the sky makes us boundless and free. All creatures of the sky are rootless and therefore irresponsible. We belong to a place but the imagination can take us anywhere.

In Europe, in the Middle Ages, people simultaneously belonged to the earth and to the sky and it was easy for them to pay allegiance to both. There was one local community and one universal. The local community was made up of people who lived in the same place — the same village, the same valley — and who shared a way of life and interacted with each other on a daily basis. They were firmly rooted in the earth, in one place. As a result, people embraced entirely separate traditions and cultural practices, and for that reason medieval Europe displayed an immense cultural variety. Yet, in addition, people felt a strong allegiance to the sky, to the universal community defined in religious terms as the corpus Christianum, the body of the Church of which everyone was a member — except Jews inside Europe and Muslims outside of it.

It was mobility more than anything that dislodged people from their separate locations and turned them towards the same sky. In pilgrimages they temporarily severed their roots and moved to religious centers which were common to all Europeans — Rome above all but also, such as during the Crusades, Jerusalem.

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4 Turner, Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors.
These pilgrimages took people away from their local communities and forced them to interact with people with whom they had next to nothing in common except their destination and their faith. On the road, and at the sites of pilgrimage, they learned how to imagine themselves as people of the sky, and in the process they forged a new community and a shared identity for themselves. Once the pilgrims returned home, they retained this universal allegiance, which was reinforced by ritual practices performed on a daily basis. All Europeans, regardless of their location, recited the same prayers, in the same language, in the same manner, directed to the same god.

II Mobility and the nation-state

The sovereign state as it came to be established in early modern Europe inserted itself between the earth and the sky and soon declared war on both. The representatives of the sovereign state insisted that it provided the only earth and the only sky people needed and that no allegiances were allowed except those mediated by the institutional structures of the state itself. This feat was accomplished as mobility was restricted. Through the Reformation, people’s connections to the corpus Christianum were severed. Instead, the king was made head of the Church; the liturgy was said in the vernacular and the rituals were given a national character. The pilgrimages ceased entirely in Protestant Europe and in Catholic Europe they were increasingly redirected to national sites. The aim of the sovereign state was to control people and to make sure they were firmly attached to the earth. After all, people who stay in one place are a lot easier to tax, to call up for military service and to subject to various reforms. The police, as it came to be established as an organized force in the course of the eighteenth-century, had repression of vagrancy as one of its principal tasks, targeting anyone who lived an unsettled life: the Roma, the Yenis, the Sami, Irish travelers, tinkers, hobos, circus people and “wandering Jews.”

Yet this was never going to be a stable solution. The sovereign state could never keep people in their places. This became obvious, if not before, in the course of the nineteenth-century when a new class of migrants emerged. As a result of the industrial revolution, people’s labor was no longer needed in the countryside and instead they were forced to move to cities in order to find work. During no other time in human history have more people been on the move: in the course of the nineteenth-century some 85 percent of Europeans migrated — 70 percent within their respective countries and the rest abroad, chiefly to the Americas. The new city-

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6 Ibid., 67.
7 Schulze, States, Nations and Nationalism, 141; Osterhammel, The Transformation of the World.
dwellers left the earth, left their homes and traditional allegiances, and went on a journey that took them to centers — the centers of pilgrimage of the industrial era — where they were forced to interact with people with whom they had next to nothing in common. Life in the city, as a result, was inherently insecure and your value as a human being was bound up with the price — of your labor, of your investments — set by economic markets. Meanwhile, the traditional safety-nets, which had provided social and psychological support in agricultural society, were ripped apart. People were uprooted from the earth and made homeless.

It was to these existential worries that the idea of the nation provided a response. In the course of the nineteenth-century, the repressive machinery of the sovereign state, first established in the early modern era, came to be combined with the notion of a community, forming a compound noun — a “nation-state” — which from now on was to command people’s allegiance. The nation was the new home of the homeless and the new earth in which they were required to reroot themselves. The nation-state, differently put, was established through a far-reaching process of cultural destruction. Everything, which up to this point had attached people to the earth, was rejected in the name of “development” and “progress.” People were denuded of their habitual garbs. The multitude of languages was replaced by a national language; local customs replaced by national customs; people’s histories by a national history. Knowledge no longer belonged to a particular place but was instead generic and ready to be employed wherever the market and the state required. The local forms of life that remained were confined to ethnographic exhibitions and nostalgic regards en arrière. This is how peasants were made into Frenchmen, Italians, Bulgarians and Finns, and how the dual allegiance to the earth and the sky was replaced by a single allegiance to the nation-state.

The nation-state thus described existed in two competing versions — one liberal, the other conservative. The liberal version took the dislodged, denuded and atomized individuals to be its constituent units. These individuals met in a civic arena — imagined as a large public square — where they all were citizens and all were equal. This is how the nation-state came to guarantee its citizens access to the universal values which traditionally have been associated with the sky — to human rights, the right to life and liberty, and to civil rights such as the right to vote and freedom of expression. In the conservative version, it was instead the earth that was recreated. This was the language of fascist states which proclaimed that the Heimat, the “homeland,” would provide a secure place for everybody who shared the same Blut and the same Boden. But the rhetoric of home existed in a left-wing version too. In Sweden in the 1930s, the ruling Social Democrats promised to make the

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9 Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen
10 On generic knowledge, see Gellner, Nations and Nationalism; Cf. Scott, Seeing Like a State.
country into a *folkhem*, a “home for the people,” in which every Swede would find a secure place.\(^\text{12}\)

### III Mobility and nationalism in the colonies

Much as in medieval Europe, life in societies outside of Europe often combined an allegiance to the earth with an allegiance to the sky. People lived their distinct lives in their respective places and as a result there was everywhere an astonishing variety of languages, customs and ways of life.\(^\text{13}\) Yet, at least in the Arab world and in much of Asia, the gods were not local but universal; they were gods of the sky and not of the earth. And here too it was pilgrimages that temporarily uprooted people and allowed them to become members of universal communities. The pilgrimages took people far away from their homes and forced them to interact with people with whom they had next to nothing in common except their destination. The pilgrimage changed them; they were born again, into the *ummah* or the *sangha* of the faith. In *Hind Swaraj*, his treaties on Indian home rule originally published in 1910, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi discussed pilgrimages in these terms.\(^\text{14}\) Our ancestors, Gandhi pointed out, knew that the gods perfectly well could be worshiped at home, but they insisted that India must be made into one nation:

> Arguing thus, they established holy places in various parts of India, and fired the people with an idea of nationality in a manner unknown in other parts of the world. Any two Indians are one as no two Englishmen are.\(^\text{15}\)

India, thus understood, was a spiritual and not a political community and, according to Gandhi, it included all people who moved, not only Hindus but Muslims and Sikhs as well. Moving between their homes and these holy sites, between earth and sky, a dual identity was created among all people of the sub-continent.

In the case of India, as well as everywhere else outside of Europe, this dual allegiance was undermined as a result of colonialism.\(^\text{16}\) Much as in Europe itself, the aim of the colonial authorities was to insert the state between the earth and the sky.


\(^{13}\) Laos, to this day, has over 150 different ethnic groups and Papua New Guinea over 700.

\(^{14}\) Gandhi gives Rameshwar Wadi (Sheverbhundu Rameshwar), Hardwar, Jagannath Temple in Puri (Juggernaut) as examples of such holy places Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 36.

\(^{15}\) Ibid.

\(^{16}\) This development was not confined to colonized states only. Cf. Thailand discussed in Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*. 

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This destroyed existing loyalties and created new ones, but outside of Europe this process of creative destruction concerned only the members of the small native elite. They were the ones who begun to move. This happened above all in response to the new educational opportunities presented to them by the colonial administrators but also as their subsequent administrative careers required. Boys with the right aptitude were given a chance to go to school, often far away from their native villages, and the really successful among them often moved on to universities in Europe to complete their education. The result was a well educated professional state bureaucracy and a new Europeanized elite.

India provides an example. By 1890 some 60,000 Indians had matriculated in the school system, chiefly in the liberal arts and law, and the top-performing students among them completed their degrees in England. The hope of the British authorities was that this deracinated class of native civil servants would be loyal to the empire, but while they often became great lovers of cricket and tweed, the imperial institutions themselves commanded only formal deference. Instead the Anglophile elite came to constitute the core of new nationalist leadership. Again, the logic is that of the pilgrimage: on their educational and administrative journeys they had encountered people who were very different from themselves but who shared an outlook on life. Before long the esprit de corps was transferred to the spirit of the nation. Gandhi’s own life provides an illustration. Born in the small seaside town of Kathiawar in Gujarat in 1869, he left for England in 1888, only nineteen years old, and studied law at the Inn’s of Court in London. Here he met Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the future first president of Pakistan, and Jawaharlal Nehru, the future first prime minister of India. It was in England that these youngsters for the first time saw India as united and free. In 1893, now a 24-year old lawyer, Gandhi settled in South Africa where he became an activist on behalf of the Indian diaspora. In 1915 he returned to India and in 1920 he became the leader of the Indian National Congress.

IV The failure of the colonial nation-state

The colonial administrators, in India and elsewhere, had not always had such reformist goals. Until the 1830s, the British East India Company had governed its Indian territories much like any other Indian power. The directors of the Company were pashas of European descent who lived out their Orientalist fantasies in the most

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17 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 57.
18 Moore, “Imperial India, 1858-1914,” 431.
19 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 55.
20 Guha, “A Prophet Announces Himself.”
opulent of settings. They dressed in the Indian fashion, took Indian mistresses, and Christian missionaries were banned from the country so as not to spoil the good time everyone was having. Native students were taught Sanskrit and Arabic according to a traditional curriculum. This Orientalist dream was overturned with the appointment of William Bentinck as governor-general of India in 1829. Bentinck was a Benthamite and a utilitarian and his aim was to improve the life of all Indians by means of a series of far-reaching reforms. To improve India, according to the utilitarians, was necessarily to make it more British. One area where reform was long overdue was education, which was recast according to a curriculum in which English was the medium of instruction. After all, “a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.”

To the utilitarian reformers it was obvious that the model of the European nation-state applied also in this colonial setting. The European nation-state, they were convinced, fit all societies and all circumstances. More than anything this presumption was a legacy of the Enlightenment. There are rational solutions to the problems that confront mankind, the philosophes had taught, and since all human beings are equally capable of reason these solutions can be extended to everyone everywhere. It is true of course that institutions often differ from one society to the next but this is due to the fact that progress is uneven. Some societies are “behind” and have yet to “catch up.” In the end, they will all opt for the most rational — that is, the most European — solution. To this Enlightenment hope nineteenth-century liberals added a doctrine regarding the virtues of free trade. In an exchange in an open market in which many options are available and people are free to choose, the best, most rational, solutions will eventually prevail. This is how civilization spreads and how Europe was to create a world in its own image.

Although members of the native, nationalistic, elite were opposed to European colonialism, they were often eager to adopt European institutions. They too wanted to insert the state between the earth and the sky. Many among them were genuinely impressed with Europe’s achievements, which they hoped one day their own countries could rival. Many were also convinced by the Enlightenment arguments and by the power of markets. Japan’s successful modernization in the 1880s, and the country’s victory over Russia in the war of 1905, seemed to prove that non-European countries really could make it. If nothing else, the logic of the independence

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21 Pitts, A Turn to Empire; Spear, “Bentinck and Education,” 78–101.
22 As Thomas Babington Macaulay put it in his report on the future of the Indian education system, 1835. Macaulay, “Minute upon Indian Education
23 Ringmar, Liberal Barbarism.
25 Srivastava, Growth of Nationalism in India.
struggle itself required the nationalists to mimic Europe’s institutions. Only a country, which had its own army, together with all the other accoutrements of a European nation-state, would be able to successfully make itself free. In order to defeat a tiger, you too have to become a tiger. Finally, if rather more cynically, the members of the new native elite had all hitched their careers to the colonial nation-state and they all knew that their fortunes would rise and fall with it. In the end, their own personal success depended on the success of a European idea.

Yet the European nation-state was next to always a failure. Although the record is mixed — Japan was indeed the most successful case and India itself was spared many of the worst excesses — the post-colonial nation-state commanded little allegiance. The reason is that people in general never were forced to move. Since there was little by means of industrialization, the peasants were not taken away from the earth and forced to make the long deracinating pilgrimage to factories in the cities. At most there were scattered groups of migrants moving to mines and plantations, but these movements were never extensive enough to turn peasants into Sudanese, Burmese or Tanzanians. People in general were not sufficiently dislodged, denuded and atomized to constitute the citizens of a new public sphere and a new civil society. Since they were not homeless, they needed no new homes. Instead the traditional, dual, allegiances remained strong. People felt an allegiance to the earth; they remained “tribal,” that is, and attached to their “clans.” But since the universal pilgrimages did not stop they maintained their allegiance to the sky too. They were members of the ummah and of the universal communities of Hindus and Buddhists.

All that really was created in the end was an enormous gap between the mobile, Europe-trained, native elite and the multitude of ordinary people who lived their lives in the countryside. This is more than anything why the post-colonial nation-state failed. The nationalist elites were united as a group but isolated from the nations they were supposed to lead. The truth is that there never was such a thing as a “nation,” and this is of course why, in the rhetoric of foreign aid agencies, it had to be “built.” Indeed, “state-making” and “nation-building” were the twin tasks of all leaders of the newly independent states. And if the nationalist leaders could not accomplish these tasks themselves, foreign experts were called in to advice them and “development aid” was allocated to the task. Despite these efforts the nation-state remained a rickety construction. The first generation of nationalist leaders were often killed off in bloody coups. The second generation often established repressive regimes, which in reality were nothing more than coercive machineries designed to extract resources on behalf of its operators. Alternatively, the nation-state was captured and run by one or another of the ethnic groups which made up the newly independent country. Of course the states failed; how could they not?

\[26\] Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, 14; Cf. Nandy, The Intimate Enemy.
V The true meaning of home rule

Although liberals and conservatives, colonial masters and the native leaders of the independence movements, all agreed on the value of the European-style nation-state, there were also a few critics. Not coincidentally they were critical not only of the nation-state but of modern society in general. They did not like industrialization and were deeply worried about the far-reaching consequences of urbanization. Above all, they worried that modern society made people too dependent on others and thereby undermined their ability to rule themselves. Perhaps these critics are best described as reactionary romantics — thinkers who harkened back to a pre-modern world in which people had lived very different lives and had very different allegiances.

On September 18, 1909, the English journalist G.K. Chesterton published an article in the Illustrated London News in which he discussed Indian nationalism.27 “The principal weakness of Indian Nationalism,” he argued, “seems to be that it is not very Indian and not very national.”28 What the Indian nationalists are saying is:

‘Give me a ballot-box. Provide me with a Ministerial dispatch-box. Hand me over the Lord Chancellor’s wig. I have a natural right to be Prime Minister. I have a heaven-born claim to introduce a Budget. My soul is starved if I am excluded from the Editorship of the Daily Mail’ ...

But, said Chesterton, “we invented all these things,” meaning we English, and “[i]f they are so very good as you make out, you owe it to us that you have ever heard of them. If they are indeed natural rights, you would never even have thought of your natural rights but for us.” The fact that the Indian nationalists want all these institutions, Chesterton concluded, is evidence that they really want to be English. As a result, “[w]e cannot feel certain that the Indian Nationalist is national.”29

It is all about Herbert Spencer and Heavens knows what. What is the good of the Indian national spirit if it cannot protect its people from Herbert Spencer? … One of the papers, I understand, is called the Indian Sociologist. What are the young men of India doing that they allow such an animal as a sociologist to pollute their ancient villages and poison their kindly homes?30

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27 On Chesterton, see further Pearce, Wisdom and Innocence.
28 Chesterton, “Matthew Arnold, among Much That Was Arid and Arbitrary ...”
29 Ibid.; See further Maitra, “India for the Indians.”
30 Chesterton, “Matthew Arnold, among Much That Was Arid and Arbitrary ...”
Mohandas Gandhi, who was visiting London in September 1909, read Chesterton’s article when it first appeared and, according to a biographer, he was “thunderstruck.”31 Already the following day, when writing the preface to an essay on Indian nationalism, he echoed Chesterton’s conclusions. “India, which is the nursery of the great faiths of the world,” as Gandhi put it,

will cease to be nationalist India, whatever else she may become, when she goes through the process of civilization in the shape of reproduction on that sacred soil of gun factories and the hateful industrialism which has reduced the people of Europe to a state of slavery, and all but stifled among them the best instincts which are the heritage of the human family.32

On his way back to South Africa two months later, Gandhi developed this argument in book-length form, and the result was Hind Swaraj.33 In order to obtain home rule, Gandhi insisted, we must first make sure that we have a home which is truly ours. This is a fundamental point which many Indian nationalists have forgotten. “You want the tiger’s nature, but not the tiger.” That is, you want to make India English, but if that comes to pass it will no longer be “Hindustan” but instead “Englistan.”34 For a country to be independent, it must be defined in independent terms. India must be herself, not a version of Britain. Starting from this premise, the rest of the book is an elaboration on what home rule, in the true sense of the word, really means.

Chesterton and Gandhi were reactionary romantics, we said, and they were quick to denounce the evils of modern society. “It is machinery that has impoverished India,” Gandhi argued, and in particular the factories of Manchester that had wiped out India’s cotton industry.35 Gandhi’s famous response was to learn how to spin his own yarn using a hand-loom, and to make his own clothes. This, he argued, was the way to make India self-sufficient and only a self-sufficient India would be able to rule itself. Chesterton was no less scathing in his critique of the evils of dependence. Merrie old England has disappeared, he lamented, and with it “the whole English power of self-support.” Everywhere around him he saw

31 Furbank, “G.K. Chesterton”; See also Green, Gandhi, 266.
32 This was the introduction to “A Letter to a Hindu” by Leo Tolstoy. Gandhi, “Introduction”. Gandhi’s text is dated September 19, 1909.
33 Gandhi, Hind Swaraj. The book was initially published in Gujarati in South Africa in 1910, and promptly banned by the British authorities, but translated into English and published in India itself in 1919. Other authors who, according to the bibliography to the book, influenced Gandhi included Tolstoy, Carpenter, Mazzini and Thoreau.
34 Ibid., 15.
35 Ibid., 95.
the growth of cities that drain and dry up the countryside, the growth of
dense dependent populations incapable of finding their own food, the
topping triumph of machines over men, the sprawling omnipotence of
financiers over patriots, the herding of humanity in nomadic masses
whose very homes are homeless ...\textsuperscript{36}

The solution was what Chesterton called “distributism.” The distributists
emphasized the sanctity of property but sought at the same time to make sure that
property was as widely distributed as possible. Communism was a sin, but so were
industrial monopolies and financial capitalism.\textsuperscript{37} The economy should serve society
and not society the economy. No one needs more than what is enough. Workers
must be protected and everyone should be able to live a decent life.\textsuperscript{38} Only in this
way could people take charge of themselves and their communities.

VI The critique of mobility

Chesterton and Gandhi were never more scathing than in their critique of modern
modes of transport. Although he occasionally used them, driven around by his
female secretary, Chesterton profoundly disliked motor-cars.\textsuperscript{39} By allowing you to
cover too much ground too quickly, he argued, the motor-car will never allow you to
understand the places you pass through. Although it certainly may be exciting “to
whizz in a motor-car round the earth, to feel Arabia as a whirl of sand or China as a
flash of rice-fields,” Arabia is not a whirl of sand and China is not a flash of rice-
fields. These are ancient civilizations — “with strange virtues buried like treasures”
— and if we want to properly understand them we must have “the loyalty of children
and the great patience of poets.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet cars make us impatient and they never allow
any lasting loyalties to form. Since speed destroys distance, modern modes of
transport make the world smaller, not larger.

\textsuperscript{36} Chesterton is here referring to the works of the early nineteenth-century English pamphleteer
\textsuperscript{37} Chesterton’s distributism was to a large extent inspired by the social teachings of the Catholic
Church, as expressed in Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum”; Chesterton’s article on distributism are
collected in Chesterton, \textit{The Outline of Sanity}.
\textsuperscript{38} On the long-term impact of distributism, see Glover, “Utopia and Fantasy in the Late 1960s,” 185–
211; See further “The Distributist Review.”
\textsuperscript{39} Pearce, \textit{Wisdom and Innocence}, 453.
\textsuperscript{40} Chesterton, “On Mr. Rudyard Kipling and Making the World Small,” 52.
Gandhi, likewise, devoted an entire chapter of *Hind Swaraj* to a discussion of the evils of the railroad.\(^1\) “Formerly,” he said, “we had natural segregation,” but now, as a result of the introduction of railroads, “[b]ad men fulfill their evil designs with greater rapidity.” Thus, while the holy sites previously only were visited only by the pious and devout, they are now visited by all sorts of rogues practicing their roguery. “Good travels at a snail’s pace, and it can, therefore, have little to do with the railways.”

Those who want to do good are not selfish, they are not in a hurry, they know that to impregnate people with good requires a long time. But evil has wings. To build a house takes time. Its destruction takes none. So the railways can become a distributing agency for the evil one only.\(^2\)

What is at stake here is the kind of community which railroads create. As we saw, Gandhi believed an India-wide community to have existed since times immemorial, but this was a spiritual community, not a political or an economic one. For a spiritual community to form, pilgrimages are crucial, but proper pilgrimages necessarily take time to complete. Pilgrims walk, following a trail, and they do it in the company of other pilgrims. By walking together pilgrims spend time together, sharing experiences, stories, and the anticipation of their common destination.\(^3\) This is how a community of believers is created. Saving time by means of a faster mode of transport makes no sense when it is the journey itself which is the goal. Even today pilgrims tend to walk, and in Tibet there are still people who move towards Lhasa one headlong prostration at a time.\(^4\)

In addition, and as both Chesterton and Gandhi point out, it is when traveling so quickly and understanding so little that we start to pay more attention to differences than to similarities. It is more than anything the experience of difference that motivates our journeys. What we want to see are the exotic features of a foreign country; indeed we insist that the foreign country must present itself to us at its most exotic or we will quickly be bored.

The man in the saloon steamer has seen all the races of men, and he is thinking of the things that divide men — diet, dress, decorum, rings in the nose as in Africa, or in the ears as in Europe, blue paint among the ancients, or red paint among the modern Britons. The man in the

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\(^{2}\) Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, 35.

\(^{3}\) Canterbury Tales is no doubt the most famous example, but there were similar collections of stories for example in the case of pilgrimages undertaken in Tokugawa Japan.

cabbage field has seen nothing at all; but he is thinking of the things that unite men — hunger and babies, and the beauty of women, and the promise or menace of the sky.\textsuperscript{45}

Gandhi made the same point in reference to India. In the olden days, he said, our leading men traveled on foot or in bullock-carts, they learned each other’s languages and “there was no aloofness between them.”\textsuperscript{46} It was only once we received a British education and started traveling by railroad that “we began to believe in distinctions” and “imagine that we are many nations.” This is the hubris of the modern age. Yet everything that human beings truly need is always within the immediate reach of our bodies.\textsuperscript{47} With the help of our hands and our feet we tend our fields, feed ourselves, raise our children and assist our neighbors. It is only the foolish and the proud that seek to surpass these limits. “In thus attempting the impossible, man comes into contact with diverse natures, different religions, and is utterly confounded.”\textsuperscript{48}

The only people who need to move quickly in the end are those on some economic or political business. But this is exactly the kind of travel that severs our connections to the earth and makes us rootless and homeless. The result is confusion in the lives of individuals and constant upheavals in society as a whole. In the case of India, this was how an Anglophile, cricket-playing and tweed-loving, elite of nationalist leaders had come to be created. They were the ones who in their ignorance and hubris made the European nation-state into their home. This was bad enough, but the prospect of all Indians becoming Anglophile nationalists was truly terrifying. Surely an Indian nation-state, much as the European, would proceed to destroy the great diversity of Indian life. “Development” and “progress” would be the end of India. Before long they would all be riding on the railroads without any understanding whatsoever of whom they really were.

The main objective of the reactionary romantics was to stop the nation-state from inserting itself between the earth and the sky. The alternative they advocated was to hold on to the dual allegiance which had characterized life before the British arrived. Chesterton was quite explicitly a medievalist, but he was also a Catholic, and his loyalties to Rome were always more clearly expressed than his loyalties to Westminster.\textsuperscript{49} Indeed, he went on pilgrimages to Rome on several occasions and had a private audience with pope Pious XI.\textsuperscript{50} Gandhi, meanwhile, did all he could to shed his Anglophile persona. He discarded his bowler-hat and tweed for the white

\textsuperscript{46} Gandhi, \textit{Hind Swaraj}, 36.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{49} He was, for example, a reluctant democrat. Chesterton, “Church and State”. Cf. the medieval fantasies of Chesterton’s fellow Catholic, J.R.R. Tolkien.
\textsuperscript{50} Pearce, \textit{Wisdom and Innocence}, 379–82.
loth of a sadhu. Gandhi was skeptical of the institutions of democracy, but he famously organized his own pilgrimage — the 390 kilometer long Salt March, and the campaign of civil disobedience which followed in its wake. During 24 consecutive days in the winter of 1930, all Indians followed Gandhi and his fellow marchers, on foot, one step at the time, from his ashram near Ahmedabad to the ancient salt-works in the seaside town of Dali.

VII Why nation-states always fail

The nation-state presupposes mobility. Economic markets move resources to where they can be most productively used. These resources include labor, that is, human beings. As markets expand we are forced to move, and the quicker the pace of the economic transformation, the more extensive the mobility. As a result, we must constantly break up from our communities, allegiances and identities, and we are constantly forced to look for new homes for ourselves. When this process occurred on a massive scale in the latter part of the nineteenth-century, the migrants were captured and held by the nation-state. All in all, this was a convincing solution to the existential anxieties of the age. The migrants paid allegiance to the nation-state since it successfully mediated their connections both to the earth and to the sky.

But the nation-state is also undermined by mobility. Markets have continued to expand — today we talk about “globalization” — and the migrants have moved on. Today labor is pushed in all directions, creating waves of migrants which swamp the old nation-states, leading to conflicts with their existing inhabitants. Yet the people who take it upon themselves to “defend” these relics of the political economy of the nineteenth-century are surely fighting a losing battle. The nation-state can no longer successfully mediate between the earth and the sky, and its feeble attempts to do so are convincing neither to conservatives nor to liberals. The home provided by the nation-state is today too confining and its earth too shallow; its public sphere, and the democratic institutions and civil rights it protects, are increasingly irrelevant.

If this indeed is the case, perhaps an opportunity could open up for reactionaries and romantics, people like G.K. Chesterton and Mohandas Gandhi? It is often said after all that we are moving into an era of “neo-medievalism.” Perhaps we could revive the double allegiances of the Middle Ages? Perhaps it is time once again for a life where we go on the occasional, time-consuming, pilgrimage while never

51 “If the money and the time wasted by the Parliament were entrusted to a few good men, the English nation would be occupying to-day a much higher platform. The Parliament is simply a costly toy of the nation.” Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, 17; On the salt march see, inter alia, Nanda, “The Dandi March”; PBD2015, The Great Salt March (Part I).
extending our daily ambitions beyond that which our limbs can reach? Yet this solution is surely not very convincing. While some people go on pilgrimages to universal institutions to be sure — visiting the EU in Brussels or ISIS in Al-Raqqah — few of us are happy to stay put in the same place for very long. Somehow or another we need the kinds of communities, and the kind of politics, that can follow us as we move. We need homes fit for nomads.\footnote{See further Ringmar, “Order in a Borderless World”; Ringmar, A World Without Borders.} The dichotomy between the earth and the sky always worked differently for nomads. For them the earth is not a place where you dwell but neither is the sky a limit which you try to reach. Instead both are mediums that you pass through in order to get to where you are going. The sky is infinite but so is the steppe, the desert and the tundra, and in any case the two blend perfectly together at the horizon. There is no rootedness to be sure but also no rootlessness. \textit{Omnia mea mecum porto}.\footnote{Seneca, “Moral Letters to Lucilius.”} We too need to learn how to carry everything we need with us.
References


