

Beyond the Nation-State

I.A. Crawford

(i.crawford@bbk.ac.uk)

First published as a letter to *Nature*, Vol. 358, p. 448, 1992

(<http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v358/n6386/abs/358448a0.html>)

Dear Sir,

Andrejs Baidins¹ has a naïve faith in the institution of the nation-state if he believes that a multiplicity of them will result in “an unprecedented leap of progress”. In a curious lapse into social Darwinism he asserts that “[This] is the way of nature ... more diversity, more cultures, more languages, more nations”, the “competition” between which will be a driving force for progress. I do not here wish to address the fallacies of social Darwinism, but I wish to make three other observations on Baidins’ pro-nationalist thesis.

(1) If biological analogy is relevant, the history of life on Earth is more a history of evolving ‘federalism’ than the reverse. Thus, some 1.5 billion years ago, simple prokaryotic cells came together to form ‘federal’ eukaryotic ones, and almost a billion years later these eukaryotic cells began to form the vastly larger ‘federal’ entities we know as multicellular animals. Many of these have in turn evolved ever more complicated social structures, which have resulted in even larger ‘federal’ communities based on the cooperation of many individuals.

(2) In particular, the species *Homo sapiens* has, over the past 50,000 years (and more or less in the following order), evolved political institutions appropriate for hunting and gathering, village agriculture, city states, military empires, and continent-sized federal states (a process begun at Philadelphia in 1787, and continuing to Maastricht in 1991). Each step in this political evolution, while resulting in fewer independent political units, has nevertheless increased the potential for human progress. Thus, in the third millennium BC, the Sumerian cities were able to undertake projects (for example temple construction and canal building) utterly beyond the abilities of their still-neolithic neighbours, while, in our own day, a federal continent such as the United States is able to take on projects beyond the abilities of old-style nation-states such as Britain and France (the landing of man on the Moon is an obvious example).

(3) While the disadvantages of “competition” between nation-states are obvious, owing to the inherent risk of military conflict, it is actually very hard to identify the benefits hinted at by Baidins in his letter. While there are a handful of technological inventions (for example radar and jet-propelled aircraft) that have appeared earlier as a result of military conflict than they might otherwise have done, this is not generally true of technological progress. What was the role played by international competition in the invention of the steam engine, for example, or of the dynamo, or of radio transmission, or of the airplane? None of these key inventions was developed by nations engaged in competition with other nations, but by individuals who were not obviously motivated by nationalistic considerations.

In short, there is little evidence that nations and nationalism have had a positive influence on human progress, and, if we consider all the pointless wars that have been fought between them, their net affect would seem to have been almost entirely pernicious. These considerations led Kant² to conclude that that nation-states “hamper progress towards [the] full development of man’s natural capacities”. Far from being seen as “the way of nature” within some social Darwinian world-view, nation-states should more properly be viewed as an intermediate step in the political evolution of human societies towards a world organised on federal principles. There are good reasons for believing that a federal world (complete with a federal government) would provide more opportunities for human progress than an anarchic world of competing nation-states.

References

¹Baidins, A., *Nature*, 357, 105, (1992)

²Kant, I., *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* (1784). Reprinted in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. T. Humphrey (Hackett, Indianapolis, 1983; pp. 15-40).