

Nationalism and Transnationalism in Times of the Coronavirus Pandemic

The current Coronavirus pandemic strengthens a type of narrow-minded nationalism that the international community seemed to have already left behind. During the last decades since the end of the Cold War, some considerable progress has been made to establish transnational institutions which are capable of tackling the great challenges of our time. Now, however, national instincts return precisely at a moment when the spirit of transnational cooperation is needed more than in less demanding times. At the first peak of the crisis in March 2020, even some of the well-established international rules and agreements were on the verge of collapsing. What would be appropriate, instead, is a considerable increase of global cooperation. Furthermore, in my view, the step to be taken in this situation is to establish transnational institutions which cannot simply be ruled out when resentments of nationalism occasionally re-emerge. I think of firm and stable institutions of global crisis management.

The position I want to argue against is normally not explicitly defended. It is rather an implicit one but one that is largely shared: I call it the *dogma of nationalism in politics*. It is hardly disputed by anyone that the nation-state and the national community is the ultimate foundation to organize politics. But this dogma leads us into a highly ineffective and unwelcome global situation when it comes to transnational problems like the current pandemic.

One phenomenon that makes this palpable is the shutdown of national borders at the beginning of the Coronavirus crisis. Even in EU Europe, including the Schengen Area, national border controls have been widely re-established. The new inner-European border controls were extremely strict and almost insurmountable, at least for the majority of citizens, including unmarried couples living on both sides of a border. The spirit of free travel and free trade broke down within only a few days. And quite surprisingly, almost nobody protested against it. Strictly speaking, however, the line of action taken by national administrations without Brussels being involved violates EU law and neglects the sense of the contracts: the border closure was not multilaterally agreed upon but a simple unilateral decision of each single nation-state. The respective neighbouring countries were not asked for their consent, sometimes they were not even informed before the measure was taken. What is worse: concerning the fight against Covid-19, the shutdown of inner EU borders had no positive effect at all – it did not even improve the chances to control the spread of the disease. In order to limit the dissemination of the virus, one has to trace single cases under a local and regional supervision. A lockdown that reduces social contacts does not necessarily include the control of borders. It isn't helpful to close the border between Germany and Poland to successfully reduce the number of Covid-19 cases in Görlitz and Zgorzelec. Rather, this was a symbolic measure, symbolic for a robust defence of the national interests, undertaken by the national governments to calm the fear and resentment of the broader public. It is an expression of the dogma of nationalism.

But simultaneously, it is a fatal symbolic gesture, especially for the EU, which is the only serious promising transnational project worldwide. This fatal behaviour communicates the

message that, in times of crisis, what ultimately counts is the nation-state. It is the national community, so the story goes, that is the best agency (or should we say: a secure fortress) to deal with a global pandemic and to organize resistance against it. But at a closer look, this turns out to be an absurdity: as a matter of fact, each of the 193 nation-states alone, even the strongest and richest among them, is unable to adequately respond to this sort of challenge, which is a global one. Moreover, it is unnecessary to find national solutions to the problem since the pandemic concerns all countries equally: it emerges in warm and dry countries as well as in cold and rainy ones and it hits people in each country likewise. The pandemic shows no nation-relative specificity. It threatens and kills Americans as well as Asians, females as well as males, Muslims as well as atheists. What does make a difference is whether a patient is old or young, asthmatic or in a healthy condition, has access to medical care or not. But this has nothing to do with nation-states. And so the WHO guidelines formulated at the beginning of the crisis, in principle, proved themselves correct; those states that followed them are now in a much better position than those that ignored or marginalized them or believed in the bold idea of a 'herd immunity'.

The dogma of nationalism does not only lead to inefficiency but is also fatal under these circumstances, and in my opinion this point is highly underemphasized in the current debate. What would really contribute to a solution of the terrible challenge is a worldwide initiative to exchange experiences that have so far been made with the disease and to bundle and combine research efforts. But this presupposes multilateralism and, what is more, transnationalism, i.e. global institutions. To reserve face-masks or medical knowledge in the national interest of a country is nothing but childish and inappropriate. One should express this plain insight as clearly and explicitly as possible in order to stop the ongoing national mythologization of the Coronavirus pandemic as well as the useless discussion about ridiculous conspiracy theories. The spreading of the virus has nothing to do with national identity or citizenship; it was not willingly caused by anyone, but it possibly affects everybody. As becomes more and more obvious in these present weeks, the disease (and future epidemics of a similar kind) must be seen as part of the great challenges of the transnational, the global community and – to put it solemnly – of humankind. The pandemic in this respect resembles climate change, world poverty, global hunger, the scarcity of resources, the financial crisis of 2008, or the refugee problem of 2015 (which by the way did not cease to exist): like them, it cannot be resolved by nation-states, and all attempts to find national solutions are insufficient, stupid, or cynical. Nation-states may compete in getting a vaccine for their populations earlier than for the rest of humanity or in organizing the greatest amount of protective gear for their citizens. But in the cold light of day, it would be in their own prudential interest if international cooperation worked more efficiently than it has so far. Evidently, it would make a considerable difference whether a vaccine and a remedy are available in six months or in two years. And this depends on transnational cooperation and the free flow of ideas.

One might say that, in times of crisis, people are typically tempted to return to anachronistic attitudes which already seemed to have been left behind. But there is even more irrationality in what we currently observe. Since the beginning of the spread of the disease, there was this widely shared impression that security measures should be organized on the national level. The danger was seen as something coming from abroad. Many people believed that the problem was basically a foreign one, maybe even intentionally caused by the Chinese, or transferred (as the U.S. president absurdly claimed) by the Europeans. Many

were convinced that the problem was exaggerated by the media or intentionally created in order to reduce the civic liberties of free individuals. But all of this turned out to be wrong. In the end, no country could and can isolate itself, and no country was or is successful in ignoring or marginalizing the issue. All sorts of ethnic discrimination turned out to be absurd: the discrimination of people from Wuhan and from Hubei province by their Chinese fellow-citizens, the discrimination of Chinese people in Europe, as well as the discrimination of Europeans by the U.S. administration. However, this fatal attitude is still at work and we should do everything now to overcome it.

The distrust in multilateralism is not only detrimental for each single state, its consequences are also highly immoral. In the poorest countries, the situation of Covid-19 is much worse than in the wealthy ones – and will probably deteriorate dramatically within the next months. The basic problem at stake here is the global system of nation-states which are at best loosely connected in international organizations. If the international organizations are independent, such as the WHO, they are under the permanent suspicion of serving specific interests (as it has occurred in the last weeks); and the transnational institutions that really are under the control of big nation-states, such as the UN Security Council, prove to be silent and more or less inefficient.

In order to establish a morally sufficient world-order in a case such as the current pandemic, we need a transnational system of institutions devoted to problems like health-care, hunger, climate-change etc. which can independently decide on the best measures to meet these challenges and which can enforce its decisions. It takes a power that is not only entitled to formulate guidelines and rules, a transnational *vis directiva* – to put it in terms of classical political philosophy. Additionally, it takes a power that is able to implement these guidelines and rules, a transnational *vis coactiva*. To characterize this idea, I prefer the expression ‘normative transnationalism’ to the usual term ‘cosmopolitanism’ since my position is not restricted to global citizenship; it is not built on the idea that human individuals should be ‘citizens of the world’. It is about the institutionalization of measures that, under current global conditions, cry out for realization but cannot be realized due to national egoism. Note that the nationalization of politics and the de-globalization have increased during the last years while the problems threatening the world-community have become much more urgent in this same period.

The fundamental ethical problem behind our deplorable current situation is global inequality. The system of independent and sovereign nation-states implies that it is legitimate to defend the interests of one’s own population against the interests of all others. Every politician under these conditions is elected to act in favour of his or her fellow-citizens, even at the cost of the rest of humankind. This is a systematic flaw in how politics currently works across the globe, and only if an ethically sensitive population in a wealthy country demands (or is expected to demand) a moral gesture is politics prepared to act accordingly. But the normative basis of an appropriate world-order cannot be but egalitarian. I fail to see why it is justifiable that a poor child born in Cote d’Ivoire grows up under harshly suboptimal conditions while a child born in Norway deserves to live under more favourable circumstances. The adequate picture, I think, of how we should formulate the normative claims of each human should be the idea of a global ‘original position’ in which imaginary persons choose their social conditions in front of a ‘veil of ignorance’. Given that this transfer of an influential thought-experiment (which John Rawls, the splendid philosopher of

domestic justice, notoriously rejected) from the national to the global sphere makes good sense (as I do believe), nobody would choose to enter into a world-order such as ours. The risk to be born into the poorest social setting in Cote d'Ivoire is not outweighed by the promise to be rewarded by the position of the Norwegian child. No one would opt for a world-order in which even the global disasters hit the poorer countries much more severely than the rich ones and in which the transnational institutions are seen as a danger for the bizarre freedom of nationalism.

Many critical observers of the current global development share the impression that the Covid-19 pandemic is only a precursor to the perhaps even greater difficulties we will be confronted with when the climate crisis fully hits us in the years to come. If the pandemic can be seen as some sort of test for a challenge that might be much worse, then we have to concede that we are, in this moment, gloriously failing that test. Admittedly, the perspective of a transnational institutionalization that tackles the great global challenges of our time is a demanding one. But at least we should not accept that the few existing structures, such as the EU and the United Nations, are further weakened by the most dramatic current plague, i.e. by nationalism.

I would like to emphasize that the pragmatic advantage of having transnational institutions is not the predominant aspect of what I want to defend here. Sure, it is undoubtedly much easier to fight a pandemic if the global knowledge and experience are shared in order to support the worldwide efforts of doctors and researchers. However, the core idea of normative transnationalism goes much beyond this. It is about global justice. And I think that this consists of mainly two elements: *global participation* and *global juridification*.

The first point arises from the observation that the population of the world has never been asked which sort of world-order it might voluntarily select; to the world-population, as the 'political sovereign' of the world according to the conceptual self-understanding of democracy, this is an astonishing denial of democratic competence with regard to one of the most important questions of all. The 7.754.847.000 people currently living on this planet cannot even be confronted with this question since the existing system of 193 independent nation-states is, following the dogma of nationalism, widely acknowledged as some sort of eternal and immutable administrative system of the world. But the fact that it implies a strategic and prudential attitude of each nation-state towards each other makes it highly inadequate from a normative point of view. I think that the global population would never vote for it if asked in an election and especially if acting in front of a veil of ignorance.

The second point concerns the insufficient establishment of rightful relations among the inhabitants of the planet. According to classical political thought, each individual is in a 'state of nature' (*status naturalis*) with each other as long as there exists no or no sufficient legal order which installs rights and obligations among the individuals. A legal order (*status legalis*) has to guarantee basic rights to everyone, especially the human rights of the late 18th century and the rights of participation. Normally, each individual is citizen of one of 193 countries and hence a stranger in 192 other countries. And so, each human being is, in the current world-order, in a gradual *status naturalis* with approximately everyone else in the world. One might object that the Hobbesian terminology of *status naturalis* cannot be applied to our contemporary global order since there exists some law, even if a defective

one. But exactly this is what the world-population would never have selected if it had the chance to choose among possible world-orders.

The normative ideas of global participation and global juridification have substantial implications: what we need to establish are some state-like transnational institutions which, nevertheless, do not amount to a real 'world-state'. A full world-state – which is for many contemporaries the institutional bugaboo in the first place – is not necessary since the problems to be resolved on the global level can be confined to the urgent issues that are now inappropriately dealt with due to national egoism. The transnational institutions working against pandemics, poverty, or ecological disasters and the like need not have more and deeper competencies than necessary to do their respective job. But their institutional design must transcend the arbitrary decisions taken by national administrations, such as the denial to pay the annual contributions or a withdrawal from the institution.

Those who are against this type of proposal should, in my view, wonder whether they are not committed to what I called the dogma of nationalism. It would be a big progress if a general consciousness might arise that such a dogma dominates politics and that it undermines the steps that are necessary in the current crisis.