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# STATES, NATIONS, AND RESOURCES: AN INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONSHIP?

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The world has changed: goodbye Berlin Wall, hello Berlin Mall. Basic assumptions about the role of the state are crumbling. The rise of nationalism and recent moves toward democratic pluralism and autonomy throughout the world demonstrate that highly centralized, top-down authority can vanish overnight. When societies in crisis begin to redefine themselves, it is most often cultural identity — not ideology or free market economics — that is the cornerstone of their bottom-up reorganization.

Nations are challenging notions that states are the only or even the best building blocks for global peace and environmental security, which surely rank high among the objectives of the international system. At stake is not the existence or even the legitimacy of states, but rather the survival of nations, struggles over cultural and religious freedom, language rights, and political autonomy. However, no single issue affects the survival of nations as much as the state appropriation of resources, especially land, that they require if they are to survive. Greed and the global appetite for resources are the primary threats to nations.

## Nations and States

There are nearly 200 states in the world today, an increase from the fifty or so at the time of World War II. These states encompass approximately 6,000 distinct nations.<sup>1</sup> Even though states portray themselves as permanent fixtures in the international system, with ancient histories and long-standing cultural traditions, the majority have been created since World War II. By contrast, most nations — generally characterized by distinct language, culture, history, territorial bases, and experience of self-government that predate the creation of modern states — have been around for hundreds and even thousands of years.

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1. Jason Clay, "Looking Back to Go Forward: Predicting and Preventing Human Rights Violations," in M. Miller (ed.), *State of the Peoples* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 64-71.

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Nations believe that states should have only as much legitimacy as is bestowed voluntarily by those incorporated into them. Furthermore, the legitimacy of states is by no means permanent. Oromo in Ethiopia do not think of themselves as Ethiopians; Kayapo do not think of themselves first or even foremost as Brazilians; and the Penan of Sarawak barely even know what Malaysia is, much less think of themselves as part of that country. States mean very little to nations. For example, there are more than 180 nations in Brazil, 450 in Nigeria, 350 in India, 450 in Indonesia, 300 in Cameroon and some 80 in Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup>

Simply put, there are no "nation-states." Virtually all states contain more than one nation, try as many of them might to eliminate them or assimilate them into the ruling group's conception of the national heritage. Every state is thus an empire in which one nation or a small group of elites often monopolizes power and resources at the expense of the state's subordinate minority groups. Such top-down rule leads many nations to challenge the status quo.

The refusal of states to acknowledge their cultural diversity, much less embrace it, is thus a major cause of the rise of nationalism and conflict throughout the world. More importantly, the elimination of nations by states has caused the loss of an extraordinary amount of information about the earth's resources and how they can be managed sustainably. The resource management knowledge that a single nation gathers over centuries cannot be duplicated, even by scores of scientists.

More nations have disappeared in the past century than during any other period in history. Brazil, for example, has "lost" one Indian nation per year since the turn of the century (one-third of the groups existing in 1900)<sup>3</sup> while government officials and planners have "developed" the Amazon into a wasteland.

At the heart of this matter is the state-building process, in which elites trying to consolidate their power see autonomous nations as a threat to the cohesion of the state. The process assumes that indigenous peoples and states cannot coexist. One way states get rid of peoples is to ban their languages or prohibit their teaching in public schools. It is impossible to know how many self-identified peoples have disappeared — many were unknown to outsiders — but language provides the best available data. Although it is not a perfect reflection of a nation's identity, language is an important window on the world's cultural diversity. More than half of the world's 15,000 known languages have disappeared already; only five to ten percent of the remaining six thousand to seven thousand are likely to survive another fifty years.<sup>4</sup>

Language is not the only attribute targeted by governments. States also attack cultural practices, local religions, and community-centered governments. States cannot exploit resources — such as land, forests, minerals and water — without denying the rights of the nations who have lived on and maintained this

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2. Clay, "The Ethnic Future of Nations," *Third World Quarterly*, October 1989, 223-33. See also Clay, "Looking Back to Go Forward."

3. Clay, "The Ethnic Future of Nations."

4. Clay, "Looking Back to Go Forward."

resource base and who often hold it sacred. States need to destroy nations if they are to appropriate and extract the resources that these groups possess. The issue is not merely whether the resources will be exploited or not, but rather who owns them and who will benefit from using them. A related issue is whose use, the nation's or the state's, will cause the least environmental and social impact.

These states are rarely, if ever, created by those who are governed by them. Colonial empires gave way to an obligatory international state system in which the decolonized world had no choice but to adopt the centralized governing structures left behind by the colonial powers. Without the cost of maintaining empires, the West was able to preserve global stability and a dominant position in world trade. In essence, developed countries successfully sought trading partners who could ensure politically stable economic systems and the free flow of goods.

### Nations and Political Development

One major source of conflict between nations and states is the struggle for control over land and its bounty; nations account for 10 to 15 percent of the world's population but have traditional claims to 25 to 30 percent of the earth's surface area and resources.<sup>5</sup> Despite efforts to destroy them, there remain about 600 million nation people who retain a strong social and cultural identity as well as an attachment to a specific territory. Nations are distinguished from ethnic groups who, though much larger in absolute numbers, are usually immigrants in new geographical areas and have made an accommodation with states by trading away political autonomy for the ability to retain and practice other cultural beliefs. Recent political change in India, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union have shown, however, that ethnic groups can also push for autonomy or even assert national claims for independence. In short, ethnic groups can become nations, as Jewish immigrants to Israel have demonstrated by reclaiming their ancient homeland of *Eretz Israel* as the basis of political independence.

Since being decimated by colonization from 1500 to 1900, the world's nations have increased in size tremendously, especially since World War II, when most new states were created. Many states were thus established exactly when many nations felt that it was possible to push for more autonomy and regain the political independence that was denied them under colonialism. Unfortunately, most nations found that the newly independent states were little more than colonial empires that would dominate them and exploit their resources much as European empires did.

Nations have had many different experiences in their incorporation into post-colonial states. Some nations, like the Kikuyu in Kenya, decided to take their chances in the new states, becoming ethnic groups by choice. Other groups, like the Mbundu in Angola, knew that they had no chance of sharing power in

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5. Clay, "The Ethnic Future of Nations," 237.

the new state, so they took up arms immediately. Still other nations, like certain Indian groups in the Amazon, were so isolated that they were unaware of the political significance of decolonization. Finally, some nations, such as a dozen or so groups in Burma, negotiated local autonomy as a condition of independence only to see it taken away by military coups sponsored by dominant groups.

Since World War II, many factors have affected the willingness of nations to accept the *a priori* legitimacy of states. In most instances, "nation-states" have been created in the image of and are dominated by only one or a few of the nations in each state. When cooperation between nations breaks down, dictatorships and one-party states become the norm, as many states in sub-Saharan Africa have demonstrated.

The elites who dominate new states, particularly in the Third World, can be characterized by a winner-takes-all mentality. Those who control states make laws in their own interest. They manipulate foreign investment and assistance (both development and military), which are used to reinforce the power of those who rule. They often fix local commodity prices and control exports. These sources of income account for, on average, about two-thirds of state revenues. The remainder of state revenues are derived from taxes, often disproportionately levied on nations.

Those who rule decide state laws (including who owns which resources and which traditional resource tenure systems will be honored by the state), as well as the state religion, language, cultural traditions, and holidays. Because these cultural hallmarks are integral to the survival of nations, state attempts to regulate these issues often trigger violent confrontations.

Many assumed that the ending of the Cold War and the opening of political systems in developing countries would make them more democratic. While many states, particularly those in the former Soviet Bloc, have been quite successful in their first steps towards reform, in the short term economic reforms and political liberalization may actually exacerbate conflicts among nations or between nations and states, as has happened in the former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Tajikistan. Many former Third World client states of the two superpowers were torn by ethnic and national conflict as soon as the superpower-supported dominant group fell from power, making it impossible to democratize or gain from the so-called "peace dividend"; witness the recent events in Somalia, Angola (even after a United Nations-sponsored election), and Liberia.

### Nations and Natural Resources

Since World War II, humankind has become increasingly aware that the earth's resources are finite. This realization has led many states to appropriate these resources from remote nations, often based on dubious legal claims of state ownership; Indian land throughout the Amazon, pastoralists' land throughout Africa, oil from the Kurds in Iraq, and timber from the Penan of Malaysia, for example, have all been appropriated by states in this manner. Those who control

the state then profit from the sale of these resources. In this manner, traditional resource rights of nations that may have been constitutionally guaranteed as a condition of independence are often subsequently denied. Understandably, this denial leads to conflict.

Much of this article focuses on the relationship of Third World states to nations, but so-called developed countries are not unwitting observers in this process. The West created the international state/trading system, as well as most Third World states (as they currently exist), in order to maintain global stability in the wake of decolonization, to facilitate free trade, and to reduce the costs of governing far-flung empires. Investments, political intervention, and foreign and military assistance have helped to maintain the dictatorships and single-party states that dominated the world until the last few years. It is likely that any political or economic support that is given to fledgling pluralistic governments will assist the free flow of resources needed by multinational corporations to feed the voracious appetite for consumer goods in developed countries. Per capita consumption in the developed world is neither a sustainable nor an appropriate model for the rest of the world.

Still, nations that resist the authority of the state are destroyed, Western assistance notwithstanding. Nevertheless, of the world's six thousand nations, many have taken up arms in the past two decades as their political and cultural autonomy and their resource base have been curtailed. Of the 120 or so shooting wars in the world today, 80 percent are between nations and the states who claim them as citizens.<sup>6</sup>

Since World War II, at least five million people have been killed as a result of such conflicts; even larger numbers have died as a result of malnutrition and famine caused by violence and displacement.<sup>7</sup> While at any one time some fifteen million people are officially classified as having fled across international borders as refugees (with maybe an equal number going unnoticed), more than 150 million others have become internally displaced.<sup>8</sup> Most of this displacement has occurred in the name of "national" integration, development, or the appropriation of resources for the benefit of the entire country.

Displaced nation people, whether they cross international boundaries or not, cause environmental degradation and conflict with local groups. For example, the government-sponsored resettlement program in Ethiopia during the recent famine led to the clearing of nearly eight percent of Ethiopia's remaining forests in 1985 alone.<sup>9</sup> Displaced nation people also suffer from malnutrition, disease and poverty. Ironically, much of this displacement results from bilaterally and multilaterally funded development programs.<sup>10</sup>

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6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Clay, "Ethiopian Famine and Relief Agencies," in B. Nichols and G. Loescher (eds.), *The Moral Nation: Humanitarianism and U.S. Foreign Policy Today* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 255). See also Clay and B. Holcomb, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cultural Survival, 1985) and Clay, S. Steingraber and P. Niggli, *The Spoils of Famine: Ethiopian Famine Policy and Peasant Agriculture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cultural Survival, 1988).

No state ideology adequately protects nations or promotes pluralism better than any other. States of both the left and right, as well as religious and sectarian states, deny the rights of nations. Those who control states see nations as a threat to "national security" and justify the forced assimilation of nations in the name of progress.

As governments feel the need to use force against nations in order to secure resources, the amount of money spent on the military inevitably rises. Nearly half of all Third World debt was accumulated by purchasing weapons that are used to engage in armed conflict with nations who are already citizens of the state. World military expenditures are greater than all social and development programs combined. For example, in 1988, states spent an estimated \$25,000 per soldier yet spent less than \$350 per student.

Foreign debts have often required states to implement austerity measures and have provided the rationale for the further appropriation of nations' land and resources. Taking additional resources from nations leads to further conflict, which in turn sends the country further into debt as it requires more military weaponry. This additional debt requires the government to extract more resources, and the never-ending spiral continues.

State control of nations is seen as essential to state survival; yet the measures taken in the name of "national security" fuel hostility, making control imperative. State-sponsored relocation, colonization, resettlement and villagization programs ensure the control of nations as well as their lands and resources. Food and famine become weapons in the resulting conflicts between nations and states. In the 1980s, for example, food production in Africa dropped to 20 percent below the 1970 level. The World Bank estimates that it will take forty years for Africa to reach the food production levels of the colonial period.<sup>11</sup> Displacement, malnutrition, environmental degradation, refugees and genocide become commonplace.

The end result is that state control of nations and the dismantling of nations' socio-political organizations create dependent populations from formerly self-sufficient ones. Third World states are thus faced with populations that can only look to the already heavily indebted state for basic necessities. Because these populations often face systematic discrimination, however, they receive little or no help; instead, they seek assistance from the international community. The assistance given, however, tends only to reinforce the power of the central state.<sup>12</sup>

Some larger nations can defend themselves and their resources from states, or at least hamper the invasion of their areas. Smaller nations, however, can rarely defend their homelands. If the rights of these groups are to be protected, they must be defended at the level of state or multi-state organizations. How-

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10. For an explanation of how this works in Africa, see Clay, *World Bank Policy on Tribal People: Application to Africa*, AFTEN Technical Note No. 16 (Washington: World Bank, 1991).

11. John Darnton, "'Lost Decade' Drains Africa's Vitality," *New York Times*, 19 June 1994, 20.

12. See Clay, *World Bank Policy on Tribal People*; Clay, Steingraber and Niggli; and Clay and Holcomb.

ever, it is difficult to identify either organizations or mechanisms that might protect nations. Most states actively deny the rights of nations. Many, if not most, would rather see nations disappear. Thus, while it is a fact that we have more national and international laws, treaties and conventions on human rights than ever before, it is also arguably the case that we have had more genocide and ethnocide as well.

Still, international solutions are probably the only ones that have a chance of success. It is possible that states or confederations of states will attempt to protect nations within other states either because of their commitment to human rights, or due to a perceived self-interest (e.g., their knowledge or their ability to conserve resources). If this type of intervention is to work, it will require not only the protection of nations' rights to exist as a collection of individuals, but also their right to those things which make them unique as groups (e.g., language, religion, culture) and which allow them to exist (e.g., a resource base). To date, treaties and conventions aside, these prerequisites have not been well-protected.

### **Nations' Knowledge and Resource Rights**

In the recent rush to discover, catalog and save the world's biodiversity, corporations, scientists, NGOs, and governments have done a considerable amount of prospecting in what is probably the last great resource grab of the twentieth century. The recent United Nations International Convention on Biological Diversity, written and signed by most states, recognizes states' sovereignty over resources, including genetic and biochemical resources.

In the name of saving the world, or at least salvaging information before it disappears, shamans, tribes and groups of people are being cheated without a second thought. Basic agreements — such as contracts and licensing or royalty agreements — that would be signed with any Western researcher seeking information are routinely denied to groups that provide culturally specific discoveries that have taken generations, even millennia, to test and develop.

This is not to say that nations or individual shamans should possess all the rights to genetic or biodiversity materials or even necessarily to medicines and cures that they have discovered and developed. The point is, rather, that they should have the same rights as scientists, countries and corporations. Without the cooperation of all these players, few raw materials would be developed into new products. Nations are unique, however, because they are without exception excluded from profiting from their information.

### **Nations and Resource Management**

Recently, another line of argument has been put forward by research scientists and government officials to justify the state control of nations' resources as well as their resource management practices. Many now argue that nations degrade their own often fragile ecosystems, and that the world should not permit this to happen. Instead, it is said, such resources should be seen as the common heritage

of mankind. The next cure for a disease, it is argued, could be going up in smoke in the rainforest. While this issue is usually couched in rhetoric claiming that the greatest good must be sought for the greatest number, the situation is "good" only for the few people who have political or consumer power.

What then is the record of nations as conservationists; do they merely use resources or do they manage them? Anthropologists, who have done most research on the economic activities of nations, frequently err on the side of romanticism in their views of such peoples as "the once and future resource managers."<sup>13</sup> Yet many practices are indeed conservationist even though their "scientific" basis may not be understood. It should also be noted that nations have domesticated most of our basic foods (60 percent coming from the New World alone).<sup>14</sup> In fact, field trials of new crops and management systems continue. It is doubtful that researchers or scientists conduct even five percent of the field trials. The rest is done by nations and peasant farmers trying to find a better way to make a living.

Nations, because of the romantic views concerning their pristine lifestyles, are often forced to adhere to a different standard than everyone else. It is clear, however, that their resource management systems, unlike our own, are in a relatively sustainable stasis with the environment, as they have been for centuries.

World views and beliefs about the environment that distinguish nation peoples lead to culturally-specific systems of resource management. These systems are rarely random or even mostly opportunistic. Nations are not preservationists; they are actively involved in manipulating their environment. They are, however, conservationists; they know that they must use their resources but leave enough to guarantee the survival of future generations. Some of their systems are sustainable over time, others are not. Some are sustainable under certain conditions but become destructive under others. Some individuals are more cautious and conserving of resources than others in the same groups.

Unfortunately, in many societies undergoing rapid change, young people no longer want to learn the methods by which their ancestors maintained fragile regions. Little time remains if this information is to be maintained for future generations.

Resource management systems of nations stress sophisticated and extensive knowledge of local environments. They are based on the view that the environment is the source of life for future generations and should therefore not be pillaged for short-term gain and long-term loss. Unlike farmers in mid-latitude areas who depend on machinery, specialized seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides and increasingly view the land as their adversary, nations traditionally see the land and other resources as their lifeblood.

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13. For a review of this, see Clay, *Indigenous Peoples and Tropical Forests: Models of Land Use and Management from Latin America* (Cambridge, MA: Cultural Survival, 1988).

14. K. Smith and T. Yamamori, *Growing Our Future: Food Security and the Environment* (West Hartford, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 1992), 61.



What conditions, then, encourage nations living in fragile environments to conserve resources? The most important factors, it appears, are resource rights (e.g., to land, timber, water, and, at the very least, the ability to oppose the destructive extraction of minerals), the ability to organize themselves to protect their land and resource base, and the ability to transform traditional resource management systems to meet modern needs. It is in fact the adaptation of traditional resource management systems, rather than their abandonment in favor of more "advanced" agricultural technologies, that will allow nations to develop more rational, long-term land-use patterns.

These peoples' very existence demonstrates their ability to maintain the earth's resources for centuries without destroying them. Respect for resources reveals itself in many societies in such beliefs as the "sacredness" of the earth, the spiritual characteristics of the environment, or taboos on using certain resources during crucial periods, if at all.

However, it must be remembered that much of the pressure on nations' resource bases come not from within, but from the insatiable consumption patterns and non-sustainable resource utilization practices in industrialized countries. Whether nations will be able to survive, often in fragile habitats, will depend in large part on halting or reducing the practices in the industrialized regions of the world that threaten both the world's cultural and biological diversity.

### The Shape of Things to Come

As the United States, Europe, and Japan begin to reconsider seriously the roots of their debt, unemployment, and social malaise and adopt new policies for getting their own houses in order, they will also reduce their overall assistance to other states. Cutting the umbilical cords to elites who dominate Third World states will unleash changes similar to those that have carved up the former USSR and many parts of Eastern Europe.

In fact, as the developed countries shift their attention to their own internal problems, regional conflicts will, in all likelihood, become even more violent; conflicts long thought to be dormant, for example, are now being rekindled because superpower patrons have greatly reduced their military assistance, long used to keep ruling elites in power. Conflicts do not require sophisticated weaponry, however. In Rwanda, machetes, knives and sticks have been used to kill hundreds of thousands of people.

Further adding to the carnage of ethnic conflict, the number of intra-state conflicts is increasing precisely when the weapons of war have become easily available. NATO and former Warsaw Pact countries and their arms manufacturers are trying to dump obsolete weapons as their militaries' budgets are cut, while Third World arms producers are seeking to expand sales in order to subsidize their own weapons needs and earn foreign exchange.

Such conflicts will continue to spawn huge numbers of refugees and displaced people, not to mention untold environmental degradation. Such conflicts inevitably disrupt food production as well, making "development" impossible.

More importantly, more children will become malnourished and the quality — even the very existence — of the education they so sorely need to help them face the next millennium will suffer. This is not a worst case, doomsday scenario. Considerable evidence already points to an increase in internal, regional conflicts in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East during the 1990s.

The next millennium is upon us. Within a generation, the struggles between nations and states will be decided. If we cannot invent new forms of states, perhaps in the form of confederations, that both embrace and reflect diversity, then the earth will lose most of its biological and cultural diversity. In short, we will lose most of the tools that we will need to solve problems in the future.

While there is no crystal ball to tell us what types of states might best accommodate nations in the future, there are some general principles that might guide our search for appropriate models. First, it seems clear that, just as there are many different nations on the planet, there could also be a number of different kinds of states. The state structures represented by the United States and Western European countries are not the only forms of state, much less the best forms for many parts of the world.

Second, states that focus on eliminating nations are likely to spend so much money on armies and “national security” that they will be at an economic disadvantage in comparison to more democratic and pluralistic states, which will be better able to invest their resources to promote growth and stability.

Third, more appropriate systems of government might allow more local autonomy for nations while still incorporating them into larger regional or international confederations of states. Such an arrangement would enable nations to govern many of their own affairs — particularly those relating to local resource utilization — thereby giving them a stake in the larger polity, and the government a larger stake in them.

Fourth, to date, the basic building block of the most successful states is the democratic incorporation of local communities, whether they are different nations (as in Botswana) or immigrant populations (as in the United States, although the United States has not done well by its indigenous nations). Given that most of the regions of the world have many different nations, states will not only have to embrace the differences, but reflect them if nations are to be successfully incorporated into larger political entities. What would such a state look like? It is possible that the basic structure might not be so different from the federation of states that comprise the United States. In addition, there would need to be separation of powers as well as different types of representation. The “House” and the “Senate” of new states could be based on ethnic or national groups, reflecting their proportion of the entire population as well as their proportion to other groups in the country, respectively. The structure of the United States polity, it should be noted, is to a large extent based on that of the League of the Iroquois. Perhaps we could do well to explore how such a model could be implemented in other parts of the world.

