DEMOCRACY AND COMMON INTERESTS ACROSS BORDERS

JOHN RYDER

Abstract: Our conception of the nation state, and the borders that separate nations, is an anachronism. It derives from the 17th century origins of the European state, and the general roughly Newtonian ideas of the time, according to which individual things are entirely distinct from one another. If we shift our fundamental ideas and consider things, including nations, as relational, then borders take on different functions than they traditionally do. Furthermore, if nations are constituted in their relations with one another, then there are serious implications for our conception of democracy in general and international relations conducted democratically. Democracy, and democratic international relations, consists of the pursuit of common interests across borders and boundaries, domestic and international.

Keywords: Democracy; relationality; international relations; foreign policy; borders.

Borders of all kinds are both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand they are a blessing in that they allow us to distinguish between this and that. Importantly for philosophical purposes they allow us to individuate one complex from others, whether that complex is an individual human being, or an ethnic group, or a society, or a biological species, or indeed anything whatsoever. With respect to social groups they allow us to conceptualize the differences we encounter in experience—between genders, or ethnicities, or classes—thereby allowing us to categorize individuals. With respect to nation states they make it possible to fix the extent of the writ of national law, national policies and treaties of all kinds, and to formalize the meaning and implications of an individual’s citizenship.

On the other hand, they are a curse in many of the same respects. Philosophers, and I dare say many political theorists and practitioners, have made something of a fetish of borders and have, in their minds at least, fixed them so inflexibly that they have become a hindrance to both understanding and policy making. For example, philosophers for centuries have assumed that in order to individuate human beings there must be rigid borders between them, an assumption that has led to detrimental conceptions of mind, self and consciousness. Even at the level of physiology philosophers have failed to realize that the border between an individual’s body and his environment is so porous that it is impossible to fix the identity of an individual independently of that environment, and this is no less true with respect to psychology and personality than to physiology. Much the same is true for the distinctions we draw and the boundaries we establish between social groups. The category of race is a good example. In social and political theory for a long time it was assumed that race is a
clearly delineated category and that policy and other decisions may plausibly be made on the basis of the borders we establish to distinguish one race from another. In recent decades that assumption has fallen out of favour, and now that we are less confident that racial borders can be clearly or even coherently drawn, we are far less comfortable than we used to be in making racially grounded policy.

The borders between nation states present a distinct illustration of the general problem. The impact of Hegel and Marx notwithstanding, the residual influence of Platonism and Aristotelianism in European intellectual culture (and when I say “European” here I mean to include those intellectual cultures such as the North American and the Turkish that are heirs to the European) inclines far too many of us to understand nation states and their borders ahistorically. We have retained a decidedly Baroque conception of the nation state, which we can easily see in the example of international relations and foreign policy. Whether realist or liberal, we tend to assume a conception of the nation state that derives from the 17th and 18th centuries. Nation states are, we seem to think, discrete entities clearly delineated from one another, each with its own internally defined and determined characteristics and interests; these distinct entities, rather like billiard balls on a table, to use an 18th century metaphor, move about in a void, or a “state of nature,” to use another Baroque metaphor, with sometimes benign and sometimes detrimental effects. In this, and I am afraid all too common, understanding of international relations, the role of foreign policy is to manage the collision of nation states to minimize the damage and to advance as much as possible the interests of one’s own. This point of view is more or less the same as, or at least analogous to, the approach to the physics of the period, wherein the objects that constitute the material dimension of nature are discrete atoms interacting with one another in a void and governed by Newtonian laws of thermodynamics. Something similar may be said of the economics of the time, wherein economic actors each has his own interests and interact with one another in a state of nature to pursue their interests. Smith’s “invisible hand” may have been thought to manage this process automatically, but economic policy was also based on this assumption, and its desired effect was to maximize the economic advantage of some actors in the economic sphere. That this way of understanding nature in all its variety permeated the period can be seen when we realize that roughly the same assumptions underlay even musical composition at the time, wherein distinct individual melodic lines were woven together to produce a harmonious result. To this day students of musical composition continue to study the principles of Baroque counterpoint. Whether in music, physics, economics or international relations, the assumptions of the Baroque have defined our understanding of the nature of the subject matter. Physics and music have gone their own ways over the past 400 years, as has economics to a certain extent. The Baroque understanding of the nation state has proven to be more durable, to our collective detriment.

What might happen, I would like to ask, if we abandon the Baroque conception of the nation state and replace it with a conceptual perspective in which borders are differently understood? And further, what might be the implications for a democratic understanding of international relations?

If the nation state is not to be taken by analogy with a Newtonian atom in a void or a ball on a billiard table, what is a plausible alternative? The answer to this question has already been suggested when we mentioned the alternative conception of human identity. At the
most general level, the alternative to an atomic understanding of any entity is to conceive it relationally, which is to say that any entity whatsoever, any complex, is constituted by the relational interactions in which it participates. Thus a human being, for example, is not a discrete mind, or spirit, or even body, but a complex entity that has the character that it does by virtue of the many relational interactions that it undergoes and undertakes. Any individual’s physiology is to some extent a function of the relations it has with its environment. Some of those relations are more relevant than others to his nature and identity, but all are constitutive. Similarly, an individual is also constituted by the social relations in which he stands—a son or daughter, a father or mother, an employee or employer, a scholar or football player, a citizen, a Russian, Serb, Turk or American, to mention only a few of the many relational contexts in which each of us stands. We are, each of us, not discrete entities that merely happen to stand in each of these relations. On the contrary, we are the individuals we are by virtue of these relations. They are, in other words, all constitutive of us. We are not atoms in a void; we are relationally constituted complexes.

We should, I am suggesting, understand nation states in the same way. A nation state is not a discrete entity, with its nature and interests internally determined, that just happens to interact with other nation states in a web of political, economic, social and military relations. On the contrary, a nation state is the state that it is by virtue of the political, economic, social, military and many other relations in which it participates. Some of those relations are more relevant than others in the case of any particular nation state, but for any state all of its relations are constitutive, which is to say that taken together its relations are the state. Louis the XIVth was wrong. Even an absolute ruler is not the state, though the more absolute his power, the more relevant a constituent relation is his interaction with the other relations that together constitute the state.

What happens to our conception of borders when we construe the state in this sort of diffuse, relational way? First, it enables us to acknowledge at the most general conceptual level something of which we are all aware in our experience: borders are loose, flexible, porous and shifting. Our political borders change from time to time, usually creating all sorts of problems; most of our nations are faced with the more or less difficult problems that result from the fact that the porous nature of our borders enables only limited control over immigration and emigration; our borders are also porous, perhaps even irrelevant, in relation to communication, particularly contemporary forms of electronic communication; borders are often obstacles in the face of contemporary processes such as economic globalization; and perhaps most importantly, the most serious of our contemporary problems, from terrorism to financial stability to the environment are impervious to the divisions among us that our nation states and their borders have established.

This is not to say that borders are or should be treated as irrelevant, but it is to say that they are not to be understood as firm and inflexible barriers between or among our respective nations. They are, if we need a new metaphor, not walls between us but more like permeable membranes that help to set off one entity from another. And like cellular membranes, they are as much the condition that enables our interaction in the sense that they can help to provide mechanisms through which we may draw on one another’s resources and support. If we understand nation states to be entities constituted by their relations with one another, and with other factors such as their own respective citizenries, then borders help to establish the
terms in which nations interact purposefully with one another, rather as membranes help to enable cellular interaction and growth.

The biological metaphor is not accidental, and it is instructive to notice that as a science biology developed little until the older Newtonian assumptions about the nature of material entities, and the conception of the fixed universe in which those assumptions resided more comfortably, were superseded by the evolutionary and then genetic revolutions in biological thought. The metaphorical picture of the Newtonian universe is no more suited to biology than it is to international relations, and we are served well to shift our conception of nation states and their interaction to a more biological, indeed environmental metaphor. Nations are not atoms in a void; they are elements of an ecosystem, to put the point directly. With this shift in metaphor we are able to see more clearly not only how we might understand national borders, but also the related notions of national interest and the character of a democratic interaction among nations.

Our understanding of national interests has for too long been a captive of the Baroque understanding of the nation. We have assumed that as self determined entities nations can develop their understanding of their interests internally, and then complete with those interests they enter the arena of international relations with a foreign policy designed to achieve them. But if nations are to be understood as complex entities the nature and character of which are defined by the relations in which they stand to other nations, and to the many other factors such as historical traditions, cultural forces, ethnic relations, economic development, legal principles and structures, and ethical expectations that constitute them, then it makes little sense to think that a nation’s interests can be defined or determined independently of its ongoing interactions with its environing conditions. We may well say that it is when a nation insists on defining its interests without due regard for its relations with its political, social and economic environment that it gets itself, and others, into trouble. The American inclination to allow its bankers to run wild is an example, as is the Israeli insistence on maintaining its settlement policy, or the Iranian pursuit of its nuclear capacity. It is precisely because nation states are not atoms in a void that it is entirely misguided to understand national interest as we traditionally have. On the contrary, given the proposed understanding of nations as one among many factors in a political, social, economic and moral ecosystem, it is far more sensible to realize that even national interests are to be understood and constructed only by bearing in mind the relations with other nations and global forces that constitute the state itself. If this is the case, then the traditional realist and liberal approaches to foreign policy also need to be rethought, and with them even our traditional understanding of national sovereignty.

Thus we come to democracy. I use the term “democracy” not so much to refer to one or another system of selecting political leaders, such as a multi-party electoral system, or of making political decisions, such as a representative governmental structure or direct decision making through town meetings or ballot initiatives and referenda, though presumably its meaning does include such processes and systems. I use it rather more broadly to refer to some set of general principles the purpose of which is to establish and maintain the greatest degree of individual, social, and political freedom for all a nation’s citizens and the conditions necessary for maximum individual and social development. Democracy in this broad sense is far more than a matter of making political decisions; it is, as others have for long said, a way of life.

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I would like to be able to stipulate without argument, if only for lack of time, that it is a desirable way of life. Whether it is the most or only desirable way of life is another question. For one thing, democratic development requires certain conditions. Without them, it may in fact be counter-productive to insist on the form of democracy if to do so is to undermine its substance, and such circumstances do indeed arise. The situation of the media in Russia is an example. For much of the past decade the Russian leadership has been routinely criticized for its domination of the larger and most influential media outlets in the country, the assumption being that the status quo ante was a more desirable alternative. But the situation during the 1990s was one in which the more influential national media outlets were in the control of a small number of owners who used them for their own personal interests while ignoring the interests and needs of the population at large. There was nothing democratic about that despite the fact that there was little public control of the media during that period. What appeared to be democratic form in fact undermined democratic substance. If conditions in the country are such that the only realistic alternatives for the time being are private manipulation of the media for the personal gain of the owners or governmental domination of the media, it is not at all obvious that the latter is not preferable to the former.

Many of us who are inclined to endorse a democratic way of life tend to insist on its superiority to all others on the grounds that it above all is the way of life best suited to human development, but we need to be careful about that. There are nations that are decidedly nondemocratic but we may not necessarily want to say that the development of their citizens is thereby impeded. Consider for example the emirates in the Arab world. Some of them are ruled by emirs who are in full and authoritative control of the nation, its policy and its resources. In such an emirate nothing at the macro level, whether economic, social, cultural or political, happens without the approval of the emir. Nonetheless it is possible in principle, and in some cases in fact, for the population to live full, rich and developed lives culturally, socially and economically. It would be the height of arrogance for any of us to insist that because such a nation is not a democracy its citizens are thereby developmentally stunted. So let us for now be content with the more modest claim that democracy is a desirable way of life that is conducive to the development in all relevant respects of those who live in it, and leave open the possibility that other people may do just as well in other situations.

We have suggested that a nation state’s interests are to be understood fully within the relational context in which in finds itself. We may just as well have said that given a relational understanding, i.e. on the metaphor of an ecosystem, a nation state’s interests are to be constructed democratically, and the reason we can put it this way is that to develop interests in a relational context is to pursue common interests, and the pursuit of common interests, one can plausibly argue, is a defining characteristic of a democracy. Domestically democratic societies function on the assumption that all citizens have equal and legitimate interests in pursuing their individual interests in consort with their compatriots. This implies that individuals pursue and when necessary construct their interests in common with those within the many communities they inhabit, and with those across the borders of their own communities. Thus I may most appropriately pursue my own interests only by seeking and supporting decisions and policies that accord with the interests of those beyond my own relatively narrow circumstances. Not only do my own democratic impulses push me in this direction, but the health of the entire society, which is to say the political, social and economic
ecosystem of which I am a part, requires it. This is the sense in which the relationality of the state and the democratic condition converge. Thus domestically the pursuit of common interests across the borders of one’s own communities is the democratic expectation.

The situation is the same in the international arena. Any nation state that takes seriously its commitment to democracy has as an obligation the pursuit of common interests with those beyond its borders. In some cases such common interests are easily identifiable. In other cases they require more creative policy-making. In fact in some cases the democratic obligation is not so much to pursue common interests as it is to construct them. The more difficult cases of foreign policy fall into this category. For example, there are many respects in which the United States and the Russian Federation have obvious interests in common—the defence against terrorism, financial stability, the solution of environmental problems, to name just a few of the more obvious. But there are other respects in which common interests need to be consciously developed, for example with respect to American and Russian relations with former Soviet republics. Examples such as this can be multiplied indefinitely across the globe.

The point toward which I have been driving throughout is precisely this: the most appropriate general conception of the nation state and its relations with other states, and the general democratic commitment, both imply that it is especially important in the more difficult cases like this that policy be construed to take the interests of others into account, and in fact that where necessary common interests among all parties be constructed. Nothing less accords with the relational reality of nation states and the commitment to democracy that many of our states and governments publicly endorse. To do this systematically would not be easy because it would require a revision of many of our long-held assumptions about the state, foreign policy, national sovereignty, national interests, and for that matter about citizens’ patriotism. It is to be sure a cosmopolitan conception, and to that extent runs contrary to the nationalism now so strong in many societies. Nonetheless, it is the approach that both nature and democratic principle suggest.¹