

State building and nationalism: the lesson of Pietro Grilli di Cortona

Giampiero Cama

UNIVERSITY OF GENOA

Introduction

The related development of states and nationalism in Europe was one of Pietro Grilli's several fields of research. Also in this area of interest he showed his peculiar style, especially a peculiar ability to combine theoretical and empirical analysis and a skilful use of the historical comparative method. Pietro addresses this issue mainly in a very interesting and seminal book, *Stati, nazioni e nazionalismi in Europa* (il Mulino, 2003), where we can find a remarkable and exhaustive longitudinal analysis of the birth and evolution of states and nations in our continent. In this work he shows, as usual for him, his skill to organize different and complex variables in clear and effective conceptual and theoretical frameworks. In my tribute to a dear friend and to a prestigious scholar I will try to illustrate some relevant implications of this specific contribution. Firstly, I think that the conceptual maps and the hypothesis used to explain different routes of state and nation development in Europe could be successfully employed in the study of non-European countries. Secondly, many theoretical insights contained in the book could be useful in order to address and understand some relevant issues of the contemporary world: the outbreak and solution of ethnic and civil wars, the uprising of neo-nationalism in western countries, the problematic relationship between democracy and nationalism. Some of these topics will be discussed in the following lines.

The conceptual and theoretical framework

Before illustrating the theoretical framework, it should be specified that there are two types of nationalism: state nationalism (or nationalism of majorities) and nationalism of minorities. The first one is characterised by states willing to create a single and homogeneous nation, based on common identity. This goal needs progressive reduction of cultural and linguistic differences (the path followed by France). The book's focus, however, is on the nationalism of minorities, that holds out against centralisation and assimilation processes put forward by political centres. The latter is generated especially by stateless nations, that aspire to get political sovereignty or, at least, some form of self-rule. This type of nationalism is important because, as we will see later, it seems not doomed to decline in the contemporary world, but, instead, to transform its features, adapting to evolving circumstances.

The book singles out the set of variables (related to each other) – the first two bringing together the principal independent variables, the third the intervener variables – that have variously shaped the evolution of state and nationalism in Europe.

The first set concerns the state building configuration. In this regard Pietro underlines the timing of state building along with the strength and precocity of nation building; and the type of relationship between centre and periphery. Both variables, then, are connected to different models of state building: states that originate from a centralistic process, following a top-down project (centralistic model) and states arising as a result of voluntary agreements among different political communities (federal model). The centralistic model is less inclined to recognise and accept internal differences, while the federal model is ready to arrange them through institutional compromises. The relation between model of state-building and nationalism is not linear, but, nevertheless, precocious federal states are assumed, more likely, to limit nationalism and successfully defuse domestic conflicts.

The second set pertains the sequences between state-building and nation-building. When state-building precedes nation-building and are both chronologically close, national mobilisation is supposed to decrease in number and frequency.

The intervener variables that can modify, deviate and diversify the effect of the dependent ones are three. The first intervener variable refers to the international system. Even when international events seem to be favourable, nationalist movements have to achieve a sufficient level of legitimacy that enable them to get consensus or, at least, not hostility from great powers. The second intervener variables relate to the emergence of mass politics and democracy. Because of them, nationalism becomes a mass ideology, it undergoes a radicalisation process and amplifies its mobilising thrust. Democratisation, moreover, transforms nationalisms conveying them toward party politics and giving them new opportunities of political participation and ideological expression. The third intervener variable, lastly, is the influence of other cleavages. When they overlap (or cross-cut), territorial cleavages can amplify (or mitigate) the politicisation and mobilisation of the nationalism of minorities. This variable, that refers to the Rokkan works, explains why simple linguistic and ethnic differences are not sufficient to trigger a conflict. Religious rivalries and economic antagonisms often have a decisive role depending on whether they were overlapping or cross-cutting with regard to ethnic-linguistic conflicts.

In summary, the analysis of the complex relations between state and nation-building clearly shows as nationalism has exerted a double pressure towards states. On the one hand, it has been a powerful factor of state-building, but, on the other hand, it has contributed many times to dismantle and break up long-standing experiences of unified states, with volatile combinations of disruptive and constructive effects.

Civil war, ethnic-religious conflicts and terrorism: the relevance of this theoretical framework

We believe that the contribution of this book could be appropriate in order to better understand some of the problems that are plaguing our time, particularly the spread in contemporary world of civil wars caused by ethnic and religious conflicts and the proliferation of terrorism. The conceptual map and the set of hypotheses suggested by Pietro Grilli can help us to clarify the origin and development of various conflicts that characterise many pluralistic states today, especially in African and Asian countries.

A large number of non-European countries, indeed, are an example, on the one hand, of countries without coincidence between state and nation (that is, housing pluralistic

societies), and, on the other hand, of stateless nations (like Kurdish and Palestinian people). In both cases the European history – illustrated in the book with abundance of empirical examples and analytical acuteness – has often anticipated problems and issues successively faced by the rest of the world.

The cases of non-coincidence between state and nation, for instance, are subdivided by Pietro into various subtypes (in their turn diversified on the base of other institutional and socio-economic details), that could be used to understand many situations characterising our day. The first one is the “predominant” model, in which a stronger nation has been the driving force of state-building, while other nations have endured, or even opposed to, this process (a potential source of future troubles). The second one is a sort of “equal model” where state-building is led by diverse nations, without the domain of any of them. This route usually generates multinational states, resulting from a compromise based on institutional features able to mutually ensure different social identities. In these cases the success (or, vice versa, the failure) of peaceful coexistence is only measurable in the long-term and relies on more specific, and often complex, set of factors well illustrated in the book. The third sub-type includes cases in which no coincidence between state and nation is due to a state that contains only part of the nation that carried it out. This situation can provoke a sort of “step by step” state-building, sometimes doomed to remain at length unfinished or prolonged. This, in turn, is supposed to stir up waves of mobilisation aiming at completing the state-building process and to bring about, obviously, political tension with neighbouring countries.

Equally interesting is the manner in which the cases of stateless nations are examined, one the most important determinants of ongoing political instability. Firstly, in this regard, he distinguishes, on one side, region-nations striving for founding their own states and, on the other side, region-nations aiming only to escape from unwanted sovereignty (mainly to unify with kinship states). The implication arising from the two situations in terms of international relations can be, of course, very different. Secondly, we can find a helpful enumeration of elements that could cause success or failure of stateless nations’ claims: intensity of political mobilisation (that can be weakened by socio-economic conditions or by migratory phenomena); impact of religion, when it supports resistance of peripheries and preservation of their traditions and identities; coexistence in the same territory of more opposing nations, a factor that makes peaceful solutions of antagonistic aspirations particularly difficult; availability (or not) and desirability (or not) of alternative solutions to remain in the hosting state. One final element is not related to domestic politics, but to the international system. In particular, he underlines the geo-political location of region-nations and, above all, the possible existence of a foreign country taking up the task of supporting and safeguarding interests and goals of a minority nation. Also the general conditions of the international system are relevant, especially when it faces a transitional process in the balance of power, a situation that creates a window of opportunity for new political settings.

The problematic links between nationalism and democracy

The long and rich experiences in European history also illustrate the complex relation between nationalism and democracy. In his analysis Pietro Grilli highlights the concurrent presence of areas of contiguity and antagonism in this respect, helping us to

better understand and address many current political troubles. He treats democratic regimes both as independent and dependent variables.

In the first case, he investigates the role of democracy in conflict prevention and solution. In this regard, the relation is not linear. Liberalisation and democratisation are not ever the best way to avoid the outbreak of nationalistic conflicts. Sometimes, on the contrary, they create more problems than they solve. Claims for autonomy and collective rights, indeed, can provoke crises in the original polities and even their fragmentation, with risks for democracy itself. The European experience teaches us that when state and nation-building successfully anticipate democratisation, ethnic and national conflicts are less likely. When they are incomplete or weak, on the contrary, democratisation can probably trigger strong nationalist mobilisation.

Democracy can be evaluated, moreover, on the ability to manage and solve already existing nationalistic cleavages. In order to clarify this issue Pietro identifies three configurations: states with consolidated democracies, states that have undergone regime instability (with alternation between democracy and authoritarian rule), and states suffering from discontinuity (following the breaking of their unity). The empirical analysis shows that in consolidated democracies nationalistic mobilisations achieve concrete results that, in the end, make the mitigation of political tensions easier. Authoritarian regimes, instead, limit themselves to coercively freeze cleavages (often favouring a single ethnic or linguistic group), paving the way for future radicalisation of conflicts. Other interesting cases are those in which, like in many areas of crisis today, the processes of democratisation and state-building have been concurrent and overlapping. These contexts are supposed to generate a sense of insecurity among ethnic and linguistic groups, that, in turn, jeopardise their pacific coexistence. Even if democracies encourage political élites to pursue negotiated solutions and institutional compromises, the book underlines, however, that there is no lack of important exceptions, such as the cases in which (like Northern Ireland and other European countries) a minority group feels threatened by groups that could take on predominance in the near future. In these circumstances (like others pointed out in the work), therefore, also democracies encounter serious difficulties to peacefully settle nationalistic disputes.

Democracy has been considered by Pietro as a dependent variable as well. Like other scholars he highlights the problematic relation between this type of regime and ethnically divided societies. In particular, he contends that it is impossible to consolidate democracy without first setting a negotiated and consensual solution of state-building process, further evidence that nationalistic conflicts are the most difficult to handle also for democratic regimes.

The lesson of method

This book, like many other works, illustrates the peculiar approach of Pietro to his fields of research. In general, he was very close to the “classic tradition” of Political Science, that of the great masters of the discipline, from Weber to Rokkan, etc. From them he took up the taste for wide-ranging studies and for comparative analysis. Within this framework he shows, moreover, specific and remarkable skills.

Above all a peculiar attitude to manage complex sets of variables, without losing analytical clarity. In this way, he was able to elaborate useful systems of classification and

insightful middle-range theories for every topic he addressed. He was not very inclined to find out a general theory concerning his principal areas of interest, preferring instead a configurative approach, more appropriate, in his view, to the complexity and fluidity of political phenomena. That does not mean the abandoning of any theoretical ambition. He always tried, through his typology and his middle-range hypotheses, to make the apparently chaotic flow of political events intelligible.

Finally, he had another peculiar ability, that to make large cross-country comparative analysis using mainly a qualitative approach. At a time when cross-country studies are mostly carried out through quantitative approach, this aspect is in my opinion appreciable. Pietro did not dislike quantitative methods, on the contrary he was interested in them and curious about their use in comparative politics. But his works, like that examined in this text, proves the usefulness of this traditional approach and its complementarity with the new ones.