7 The Scylla and Charybdis of nation-building

In the previous chapter we argued that nation-building is a necessity to create viable states that are strong enough to both meet the demands of their citizens and play a self-confident role in the global community. Fragile states, too, are forced to take up this challenge of playing their role in the world of nation-states. However, there is a serious caveat here. Twentieth-century history tells us that building strong states has its downsides. The idea of the nation-state went awfully wrong when nationalism pulled Europe into two devastating wars with the battlefields of Northern France and the Holocaust. The nation-state became tainted by nationalistic, exclusionary discourse. Instead of serving as the flag for change and modernity as it was meant to be during the 19th century, nationalism became a dark ideology. These events of the 20th century in the name of the nation-state mean that we cannot afford to entertain a romantic approach to or notion of nation-building. There will always be the risk of falling prey to fiercely nationalist movements that try to hijack the nation-building process to establish ethnic, religious or regional dominance. It would be naïve to close our eyes to that dark side of the nation.

Some would argue that nation-building is becoming ever more redundant in the world of diversity in which we live today. Processes of globalization and migration, ongoing interaction and interconnectedness make the idea of a national identity something of the past. Homogeneous societies no longer exist and it may thus be a chimera to think that we can create a meaningful national identity. In our dealings with the nation-state, I believe, we find ourselves in the classical story of Odysseus who has to sail between two mythical sea monsters (Scylla and Charibdis) to pass the Strait of Messina between Sicily and the Italian mainland. The dilemma of having to sail between two hazards is what we are confronted with. The Scylla of nation-building is the nationalist, exclusionary process, in which rivaling groups try to establish their specific identity as the dominant one and subsequently deem others inferior and second-class. The Charybdis of nation-building is to completely sideline the importance of building a sense of belonging and shared identity for holding a society together. The Charybdis is to believe that all we need is a state without a nation, because we are, with our differences in ideas, beliefs and convictions, all equal citizens in an ever more globalizing world. The only obligation the state bears is to deliver to its citizens.
The Scylla of nation-building: Identity as exclusion

The titles of the publications *Nation Impossible*¹ and *Patriotism is like Racism*² reflect the perspective that nation-building inescapably leads to either exclusion and the denial of full citizenship to parts of the population of a country, or to conflict and war with people of another country. In the domestic politics of nation-building the identity adopted and proclaimed as ‘the’ national identity will by default exclude elements of identity of some of the groups in society. Language is a common example: The ambition of national leaders to build a national identity on a common language makes all other languages second-class and marginalizes them to the status of ‘dialect’. The same goes for religious ceremonies and celebrations. In international politics, national interests or even national pride can be taken as the legitimizing ground for dominating other countries. Some nations see themselves as superior to others, believing their nation is special, chosen, more advanced, or fulfilling a historic mission. That feeling of superiority is considered to legitimize the confiscation of territory or natural resources and the bullying of other societies in the international arena. History is rife with examples of this. Feelings of superiority marked the colonial era and more recently the horrible events in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia were also based on exclusionary politics. When the Hutus started to talk about Tutsis as cockroaches the path was leveled for the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis. Mass killings similarly ensued when the Serbs started to spread the idea of their historic mission (battle on the Field of the Blackbirds – 1389), designating the Kosovars, Croats and Bosnians as their enemies.

Nationalism and the strengthening of national identity are therefore strongly criticized from the perspective of moral universalism, which has the equality of people and therefore universal rights as its cornerstone. From the perspective of moral universalism, nation-building is laying the fundaments for exclusionary politics. We definitively need to round this Scylla.

The Charybdis of nation-building: Silencing identity

Turning our back to the national identity issue and merely promoting the notion of the new man in the globalizing world would be tantamount to the Charybdis of nation-building. It would mean that we push the globalization

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¹ Pandian 2009.
² Gomberg 1990, p. 144-150.
of economies and markets further by claiming that we are global citizens and that our differences in culture, religion and language are historically or locally contingent. It means claiming that in essence we are unique individuals and that identity is an individual not a collective issue. I believe that such a claim presents a serious misunderstanding of our social nature and moreover denies the reality of the origins of conflict. Identity conflicts are dominant in the conflicts the world is facing today. The Islamic State and its agenda to establish a pure, untainted caliphate is the most urgent of the current identity conflicts. But there are so many more examples. The civil war in the Ukraine revolves around issues of national identity, with the eastern part of the country identifying itself as Russian. In the Central African Republic religion plays a dominant role in the internal conflict, even if some will argue that this is just a pretext for other conflicting interests. The political crisis in Pakistan is the product of a religious and regional identity conflict and in neighboring Afghanistan the traditional divide between the Pashtun south of the country and the Northern Alliance, dominated by Tadjieks and Uzbeks continues to destabilize the country. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been deliberately framed by the Israeli government as a religious-identity conflict by emphasizing the Jewish identity of the state of Israel. The problem of the Kurds in Turkey, of conflicts in the Caucasus (Abghazia, Nagorno Karabach), the mounting problems of China in Xinjian blaming the Uigurs, the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines ... all are examples of identity-driven conflicts. In his recent book Moïsi analyzed the actual geopolitical development from the perspective of emotions and the way we are perceived by ourselves and the rest of the world. His thoughts on emotions as part of the crisis in the Arab world urge us to integrate this aspect into political analysis instead of keeping it outside the political equation, supposedly for being irrational and dysfunctional. Emotions are real and legitimate even if they do not fit into a rational policy discourse.

These examples come from non-Western countries. But in Europe, too, identity issues increasingly play a divisive role. Indeed, the actual political crisis in Europe revolves around identity issues. The Front National in France (founded in 1972) and the Vlaams Blok in Belgium (founded in 1978) are increasingly joined by many other parties in Europe, which all exploit people’s fear that their national identities are threatened by Europeanization and globalization and by the influx of migrants from non-European countries. Rhetoric about the Russian soul, the unique French culture or

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3 Moïsi 2009.
the British identity (see the 2016-Brexit referendum) touch a nerve among the population and the mainstream political parties on the right and the left seem unable to find proper answers to this identity agenda.

The European embarrassment with identity deserves a closer look. If one would expect identity to become redundant in states that have a well-functioning economic and juridical system that guarantees justice and prosperity to citizens, why then is identity such a charged issue in Europe? I believe the explanation lies in Europe’s history of the first half of the 20th century. Fierce nationalism not only resulted in the loss of millions of lives and physical devastation, but also brought moral devastation: The senseless slaughter of World War I and the Holocaust of World War II put Europe on the path of denouncing the promotion of national identity as a risk to avoid at any costs. The founders of the European Union were eager to build a framework that would be able to keep the beast of nationalism in check. The successful reconstruction of Europe after 1945 convinced European leaders that their policies to make identity redundant by constructing well-organized societies based on prosperity and justice made perfect sense. However, the backlash of the developments of the last fifteen years with the emergence of nationalist, identity-driven political parties shows the void in the mainstream political agenda. Politicians have been pushing the European unification process as the answer to the traditional nationalist rivalries, but at the same time they blocked the process of developing a European identity. It shows a discomfort with the issue of identity as a dangerous issue that is best left untouched.

This attitude is proving counterproductive. I share Horowitz’ position: ‘(I) t is, as I shall suggest, both fruitless and undesirable to attempt to abolish ethnic affiliation, but not at all fruitless to attempt to limit their impact’. The challenge for mainstream politics, I believe, is to put their notions about culture and identity as social constructs into practice and make it the basis of their strategies to invest in the construction of national and/or European identity in an interconnected world that is marked by diversity. At the moment, European politicians of mainstream parties are seriously foregoing their responsibility not only to lead their societies in economic and financial issues, but also to develop clear identity policies that are responsive to and factoring in the reality of migration and globalization.

In fragile states, the challenge of diversity and therefore the challenge to construct identity out of diversity is not a recent one. It is the essence of their nation-state, most of which were artificially constructed in colonial times

4 Horowitz 1985, p. xiii.
and contain a rich diversity of identity groups. The above argument is not meant to deny that inequalities in power and resources are an important source of conflict. However, there is a strong correlation between unequal power relations (political and economic) and identity. From the African Americans, the Indigenous peoples in Latin America, the Muslims in the Philippines and the Pygmies in Central Africa to the Algerians in France and the Moroccans in the Netherlands, the correlation between power and identity is strong.5

We have to round Charybdis by addressing the national identity issue as a relevant and pressing issue.

**Moderate patriotism**

Is there a way out of the Scylla and Charybdis dilemma of nation-building? Can promoting moral universalism and building a national identity be reconciled? Can we adhere to universalist concepts like human dignity and equality and at the same time invest in the specific adherence to and love for the nation? In his Lindley lecture at Kansas University in 1984 Alasdair MacIntyre formulated that debate as between universalism and patriotism.6 Natanson further developed the idea that universal ethics and patriotism are not inherently irreconcilable.7 ‘Moderate patriotism’, as Natanson calls it, sharply distinguished from what I would call blind patriotism, can include universal ethics. Patriotism does not necessarily have to put the nation first at all cost; finding a balance between universal ethics and the love of the nation is possible. Nussbaum defends this idea of the compatibility of patriotism and universal ethics (see also the previous chapter). She refers to the importance of great humanists like the Indian Rabindranath Tagore and Martin Luther King, who have contributed to the development of the national identity from a humanist perspective. Being connected to our specific ‘imagined community’ does not exclude the possibility of engaging with and caring for others outside that community. The engagement will be different in emotional intensity, but both can be

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5 The notion of correlation presupposes a mutual relationship, regardless of the direction of cause and effect, which is a different subject not touched upon here. I believe that both issues have to be addressed simultaneously.
governed by universal ethical principles. It is in this direction that the Scylla and Charybdis dilemma of nation-building will have to be resolved.

The moderate patriotism approach resembles the approach developed by Rogers Brubaker when he addressed the civic-ethnic distinction in the nationalism debate.8 Civic stands for open, universal and inclusive; ethnic stands for parochial and exclusive. Brubaker rightly argues that, if one would apply this typology in a strict way, the reality is that most nations find themselves in the middle ground between civic and ethnic and that pure ethnic or civic nations hardly exist. It is on this middle ground that I position the efforts of a nation-building program that complements state-building.

This approach makes it possible to put into practice the widely shared theory that identities, also national identities, are social constructs, which are open to change and development. The Netherlands nowadays likes to present itself as the champion of libertarianism in social-ethical issues: Abortion, gay marriage, euthanasia. Many Dutch citizens are proud of that identity, but they may not realize that only sixty years ago the Dutch identity was very much that of a traditional society based on conventional family values. We would belie our history if we pretended that our current values are part of our historic heritage.

Sound historical analysis will prove for almost all countries that national identities are ever changing and very capable to integrate new elements that were not there before. Exclusion of others (other ideas, others persons, other groups) is not the unavoidable fate of a national identity. And while it is not an easy process, it is part of social and political leadership to take the changing identity issue seriously and to actively address it in order to keep our societies healthy and stable. This is a challenge for every country, but probably most urgent in fragile states in order to realize the stability that both the people living there and the international community want to achieve.

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8 Brubaker 1999.
**Vignette**

**NGOs blamed as allies of opposition in Burundi**

When I visited Burundi in 2011, I met representatives of NGOs who informed me about the mounting pressure by the incumbent government on their organizations. Because they had expressed themselves critically about the government they were perceived as supporters of the political opposition. The government tried to clamp down on them with legislation to shrink their space and by intimidation to silence them. The executive of one of the independent radio stations received death threats, which urged Cordaid to get him out of the country for a couple of months. Being blamed for supporting the political opposition put them under constant pressure to prove that they are promoters of justice, transparency and accountability, regardless of the incumbent political powers.

It is a battle many NGOs have to fight in fragile states (and sadly also in stable states). Promoting good governance and human rights puts you in the corner of the opposition and makes you a target for intimidation. Sometimes opposition parties cleverly use the rhetoric of good governance and human rights to profile themselves even though, once in power, they would most likely not behave any better than the incumbent. And if it is not for party politics, NGOs are deemed to be agents of Western organizations and Western agendas that try to model the country according to their own systems. Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Museveni in Uganda have played that game often and profiled themselves as the defenders of authentic African culture and identity. By creating this cleavage between African and Western values they delegitimize international concern for certain developments in their countries.

During my frequent visits to fragile states I observed that values of good governance and human rights are universal. People do not like governments that squeeze citizens and entrepreneurs only to enrich themselves. They do not like to pay extras for every permit or registration paper. People do not like governments and security forces that beat up those who protest against injustices or put them in jail. People suffer all over the world from a culture of terror and fear that is created by security forces to crack down on opposition forces.

NGOs are in the front line of that battle. Like in Burundi they have a difficult task to balance in the polarized political arena, to uphold their message as an authentic agenda of people who demand a government that cares about people.