

Politics Re-entered: The State in its Place

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Though we cannot turn our backs on it or imagine, or wish, that it will wither away, the idea that the state is by definition the sole locus of politics seems increasingly archaic. The price of retaining 'the statist conception of politics' seems to me that one would have to regard 'political' struggle as of limited relevance to the needs of our time. This is brought out by Michael Ignatieff's remarks near the end of his The Needs of Strangers (Chatto, 1985).

All the changes which impinge upon the politics of modern states are global in character: the market in which we trade and in which our economic futures will be shaped is global; the ecology in which we live and breathe is global. The political life of nation states is being emptied of relevance by the inconsequence and unimportance of national sovereignties. People's attachment to nations depends on their belief that the nation is the relevant arbiter of their private fate. This is less and less so. Political languages which appeal to us only as citizens of a nation, and never as common inhabitants of the earth, may find themselves abandoned by those in search of a truer expression of their ultimate attachments.

We could further question Ignatieff's own term 'ultimate attachments'. Our identities, powers and submissions are multiple, not only transcending 'nations', but more often being more 'local' or 'partial': think of the intersections of locality and class in the recent strike of British miners.

The Thatcher government seeks to 'abstract' the market individual/obedient subject by breaking up established communities and urban power bases, 'attachments' that fetter capital. Against this, progressive movements, especially feminist, ecological and Euro-communist, increasingly emphasise both local and trans-national networks as necessary bases for political struggle, as well as desirable forms of a to-be-established political life in a better world. It is its failure to break out of a restorationist approach to the National Welfare state that is the outstanding shortcoming of Labourism today.

Whereas the traditional notion of 'politics' is rooted in the idea of 'The Polity', the autonomous territorial sphere subject to the sovereign state, it seems to me increasingly important to ditch this ideology and the mode of speaking it carries with it. We need, I believe, to think in terms of more or less coherently intersecting and interlocking networks, relations implying more or less stable structures of power and conflict. In order to articulate the non-centralist, internationalist and participatory political values that a living socialism requires, in order to discuss viable forms of future society it is necessary, I believe, to begin with a completely 'open' conception of 'politics'. A shift in vocabulary, then, would not just be a 'verbal' preference but part of a shift in habits of thought.

It is in such a contemporary context that I would like to

defend against various criticisms views put forward some time ago.

POLITICS AS A DIMENSION

In an article 'The Stalinist Conception of Politics' <1> and in my book Ruling Illusions <2> I argued for a concept of politics in terms of which virtually all human situations have a 'political dimension':

By calling a structure or situation 'political' we are stressing the tension and at least potential conflict among the activities and interests that make it up. That these structures persist is a function of the continued cooperation among the different forces within them, cooperation sometimes given literally on pain of death. The carrying on of human activities requires the continuing support, cooperation, acquiescence or submission of other activities, or at an extreme, their destruction. Activities, then, can interrelate in a more or less free, more or less just, more or less democratic way: these are the key parameters of social life, and political activity is actively maintaining, contesting or transforming, more or less deeply, such 'forms'. Some, such as the drudgery of factory labour, of their very nature presuppose dominance-submission relations and require the elaborate backing of state apparatuses; a politics of 'nationalization' in these circumstances would obviously be, by itself, a superficial politics, leaving people's ways of working life in many ways fundamentally unchanged.

<3>

On this account, then, a slogan such as 'the personal is political' does not mean that everything an individual does and feels has major implications for a society's overall status quo, still less that domestic washing up arrangements will bring the patriarchal state to its knees. Those who interpret the slogan in this way characteristically reject it in the form of the claim 'there is nothing political about sharing the housework'. Now, my account intends to leave open the empirical question of the political importance of domestic life (a question which should be unpacked partly in causal terms) and claims this openness as an advantage against a priori exclusions of areas of life from political analysis. What I am arguing is that these situations are political 'in themselves' - that, even abstracting a couple from their location in wider political networks, their relation is political - crudely- who gets what to do what, and how? Thus, I argue for treating politics as a category or universal dimension of human existence, rather than either an activity focused on a specific institution, the nation state, or on a specific level of human practice: 'matters concerning the overall organisation of society' or whatever.

To talk of 'the politics of production' for example, is to talk of the rights and powers exercised or denied in the production process - to treat ownership, therefore, under its aspect of control. In this I disagree with the conventional way a writer such as John Rawls demarcates political from economic practice insofar as he thinks of production systems as economic rather than political <4>. And with Marx, who says that industrial struggles not aimed at changing laws are 'economic' rather than 'political' <5>.

From comments and especially from reviews it is evident that these views have been found neither universally perspicuous in their meaning nor clearly acceptable.

John Torrance <6> says that the idea that 'everything is political' has, despite authorial intentions, a 'totalitarian' implication. The idea seems to be that such a perspective reduces all situations to common terms and thereby opens them up to becoming arenas of struggle. Even though the struggle may have libertarian marching tunes it nonetheless entails the oppressive onslaught on oppression 'wherever it occurs' (everywhere).

But as my claim is that all situations are political, this would entail that conflicts and contestations are at least implicit or potential in them already, which is not to bury or prejudice the nature of the co-operation there 'at the same time'. Secondly, no prescription for priorities is intended by my account. Many situations have oppressive aspects, but it might be the case that to attack that oppression merely aggravated it or took energy away from something more important. The whole point of my account would be to open up the possibility of seeing the complexity and multi-dimensionality of situations, rather than to reduce them to common terms. Moreover, although it is inherent in oppressive ideologies of 'left' or 'right' to seek to deny the bases of conflict within the structures they legitimate, my analysis is not as such intended to prejudice what is important and unimportant in life. One of the points of my position, in opposition to the sort of utopianism that Marx and others encouraged with their notions of the 'end of politics' and of the purely 'administrative' nature of communism's problems, is that conflict is a permanent social feature: even assuming ideological consensus, decisions will always involve differential losses and benefits and hence mobilise conflicting tendencies, even if it is a matter of the siting of the minibus shelter in utopia. The modesty of the utopianism this permits is conducive to a recognition that some evils may always be necessary ones and inimical to the fanatical commitment to hurling oneself at the enemy on all fronts at once. Thirdly, different kinds of situation exist in human life, involving different values and priorities. To talk about 'the politics of education', for example, as if education, which entails a movement from ignorance to understanding, did not raise special questions of appropriate power and authority relations, would be absurd. From my endeavour to see a particular classroom situation in political terms it certainly does not follow that I must see teachers as standover men exercising illegitimate power over helplessly caged victims. What I do want to see are the contesting forces at work in the classroom; the actives prevented or suppressed, the rights exercised and denied. As a philosopher of education I am interested in this under the aspect of what is being learned, its validity and value.

IS PANPOLITICISM CONSERVATIVE?

In a lengthy discussion in Radical Philosophy <7>, to which I shall return, Joe McCarney says, by contrast, that by treating 'power and conflict' as universal I tamely bolster the status quo by ruling out the possibility or necessity of change. This is fallacious, since my view, although it would encourage scepticism about visions of utter harmony, in no way entails that any particular antagonism is inevitable. It seems to me, for example, that production is likely to be a permanent focus of complex conflict, that the idea of complete joy and unity in work and distribution is a beguiling

fantasy (whose nightmarish obverse is a major barrier to the credibility and attractiveness of socialism). This does not commit me to accepting that we now live in the best of all productive worlds.

McCarney tends to assume a Big Boss model of power, authority and conflict, one according to which conflict cannot be among equals let alone good friends and neighbours but must be class conflict, and according to which power relations cannot be among equals either but most only be among sovereigns and subjects, dominants and submissives.

Thus McCarney rejects my conception of politics in favour of one which he correctly attributes to Marx and Lenin: politics and the state are 'tied firmly together' as 'instruments by which class societies conduct their business' <8>, as if class societies, ex hypothesi split into conductors and conducted, could 'conduct their business' at all.

McCarney continues of my analysis:

In implying that one's relationship to the police may be conceptualised in the same terms as one's relationship with one's mother it dissolves the brutal specificity of the state's mode of operation and represents it as a natural feature of the human condition. <9>



McCarney does not offer illumination of this 'brutal specificity' but in the light of the fact that part of the point of my analysis was to argue that the state was an historically 'specific' form and hence should not have its peculiar features, brutal and otherwise, projected onto human affairs as such, the accusation is surprising <10>. At the most abstract level, it does not follow from the fact that the ideal society and the most brutal status quo share dimensions, exhibit conflict and co-operation, that they are not to be radically contrasted along those dimensions.

Mothers and children; among otherwise positive remarks, Ben Parekh says that my panpolitical view that

All the classical questions of political philosophy apply to schools, factories, families, to any human relation: questions of 'obedience', or 'legitimate authority', of 'consent', of 'freedom', of 'justice', of 'democracy', of 'equality', or 'the common interest', and so on! <11>

is 'absurd'. Parekh does not say why, but attention needs to be focused on this issue.

Some activities are functionally defined:

building a bridge

teaching English as a foreign language

so that to treat the situation of such activities as political could be said to overlook the contrasting fact about political life that such definition is not given. Thus, for example, belonging to a country does not entail any defining goal of one's life as a member of that society. The goals of British people, then, are open and contestable, hence call for 'political' decision, in a way that technically given goals are not. So, it might be said, mothering is a more or less clear role or task. <12>

It should I think be accepted that to the extent that a situation is merely technical, it is non-political, or at least it presupposes the settlement of political issues ('All right we will build this sort of bridge. What, given our available resources and commitments, is the best way to do this?'). But in the real world, the approach to a purely technical situation is along a path where, not only are goals contested

(should children of immigrants have to learn the host language?) but alternative means entail collisions among different ends, values or interests. In this context some comments are called for in defence of the idea that the parent-child relation can be seen 'politically' and that this perception is not reducible to observations of the relevance of experience of family structures to attitudes to state authorities.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

Views which assimilated the state-subject relation to the father-family, parent-child relation characteristically functioned to rule out democratic institutions by emphasising the unquestionable love and wisdom of the sovereign in relation to his gratefully obedient subjects. Hence, since Locke, the familial model of the state, hence of politics, has become discredited. But Mill was able to say that 'Not a word can be said for despotism in the family which cannot be said for political despotism' <13> and more recent feminists have brought the politics of the family to the attention of all but the students of politics in our universities. We know that parenthood in our society, both in its biological and social aspects, is no longer an utterly involuntary status and that it entails a differential impact on the lives of the male and female parent, a difference which involves at least potential conflict of interests and values and which involves exercises of power in physical, 'economic' and 'cultural' forms. We know as well that in societies where birth control is more difficult and where sons are a source of income and pride but daughters a burden, in rural Turkey for example, baby girls, last in line for scarce resources, have a higher mortality rate, while in China, for reasons also connected with state restrictions on family size, there is an alarming incidence of the murder of daughters. Children are related to both as dependent and relatively weak beings and as sources of identity, pride, companionship and income - or their opposites. Children learn to exercise more or less power, more or less 'legitimately', in relation to these parental needs, acquiring 'political' skills in playing parents off and so on, showing incidentally that political power is not only a function of physical strength.

McCarney's immaculately conceived parents are just as capable of damaging or spoiling their charges, physically or spiritually, as is the nation state, while most parents retreat, almost from Day (or Night) One, from a position of omnipotent despotism. This gives us enough to go on with of the comparative politics that occupies parents as they wait outside their children's schools. But we ought also to remember (just as we should when examining the state, the school or the factory) that we are thinking of the historical institution of the family, locked as it is into institutions of property and within forms of architecture, and hence that we ought to be thinking of the patterns of adult-child activities that the institution, various as we know it, fosters and the patterns it precludes, marginalises or suppresses. (I would argue, for example, that engulfment within the family sphere radically undevelops children's practical and emotional capacities to their own and adults' detriment.) This institutional focus enables us to see that the child who 'always gets his own way' develops 'his way' within a restricted sphere and to remember that the main thing about a gilded cage is that it is a cage.

Opening up the family to political analysis is perhaps threatening: we fear a can of worms. This very fear, though, is partly a function of the holy family analogy, which, ironically signals, as in schools, that 'disenchanted' criticism will leave nothing standing.

Now some political theorists have seen families as, whoever else they may be, political entities. Douglas McCallum, for example, in an excellent opening chapter <14> to a comprehensive Australian collection, Pieces of Politics, urges something like the radically pluralist conception I have been proposing <15>. He stresses the 'dialectic' of interdepend-

ence and conflict, dominance and equality, that weaves through all social life. McCallum, however, tends to place much weight on a major plank of traditional political philosophy, that of authority:

When members of a family are squabbling about which television programme to watch and the dispute is settled by the authority of a parent, we might recognise a political situation.

<16>

Suppose a pattern of viewing evolves next door to the McCallum home, punctuated by paternal claims such as 'I'll send it back; I paid for the bloody thing!' and maternal claims that such 'garbage' has become too much to bear, big sister's protests about disturbances to homework and big brother's insistence that as he forwent his favourite programme last week he should have his choice this week etc. It turns out that father and older sister have similar tastes and that this creates an alliance difficult for mother to break despite her claims to rights of relaxation after (in this unreconstructed household) doing the dinner. Younger brother finds it necessary to resort to bed-time brattishness to get attention to his claims.

This homely tale, short of interesting focus on the territorial boundaries created by television as a private and domestic form of communication (and devoid of meliorist touches made possible by multiple sets which enable feuding members to watch programmes in separate rooms) serves to remind us of the complex 'forces' at work in the family. Rather than think as if the pattern of viewing is the function of the response of an authority (who happens to be a very interested party), it would be more illuminating to see the situation in terms of a resultant of competing, colluding and also of common demands ('sharing the experience') and legitimating values, no one of which may be 'authoritative' let alone predominant. Assuming this balance is largely assented to, you can call the result 'authoritative' if you like, but that will only mean that it tends to prevail at least, for a time and is generally accepted and defended as 'proper'.

SYSTEMS THEORY AND SYSTEMS PRACTICE

Now McCallum legitimates his non-Andersonian slip into conceptual authoritarianism by reference to David Easton, whose views I criticise in Ruling Illusions as typical of a 'statism' whereby the state emerges from behind the space-age foliage of Systems Theory jargon as identical with 'the political system' and as the 'authoritative' 'allocator of values'. McCarney castigates this claim in the following terms:

(The discipline's) leading practitioners have been united by the determination not to allow the state anywhere near the centre of the conceptual field. No one has expressed the sense of its theoretical inadequacy more trenchantly than David Easton and it is surely a straightforward misrepresentation of his views to say, as Skillen does, that he 'identifies "the political system", not as a structure of interacting forces but with the state itself'.

<17>

Let us examine Easton's view especially as developed in The Political System more closely. That McCarney is Easton's misrepresentative is clear, since the latter is concerned to reject the 'pluralist' 'power relations' analysis of people like Lasswell, Key, Catlin and Dahl, on the grounds that their definition of 'politics' is allegedly so broad as to deprive the term of distinctive meaning. Easton writes

For these writers, the hierarchical arrangement of relationships within a criminal band or in a respectable fraternal club both testify to the existence of political life there. ... The realisation of this implication where politics is described as power pure and simple reveals the excessive breadth of this definition.

<18>

He goes on

We reserve the term 'political' for public or social matters.

<19>

Political life concerns all those varieties of activity that influence significantly the kind of authoritative social policy adopted for a society and the way it is put into practice.

<20>

Political science is concerned only with authoritative allocations or policies.

<21>

A policy is authoritative when the people to whom it is intended to apply or who are affected by it consider that they must or ought to obey it.

<22>

Having thus brought de jurism to the point where political life threatens to disappear into Sunday School, Easton then produces a definition of acceptance of authority such that it covers obedience out of 'respect', 'fear' or 'apathy'!

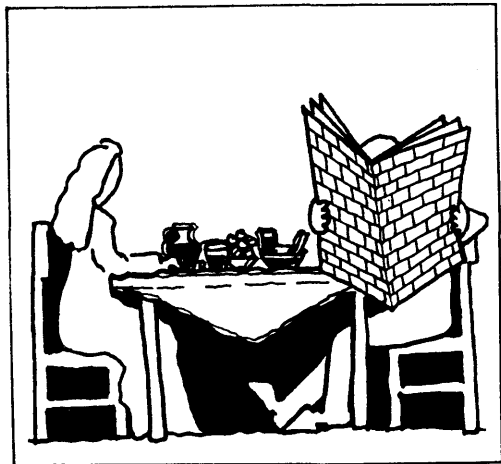
In other words, having blessed with one hand political policies (outputs of the political system) by declaring that they must be authoritative and not merely powerful, he profanes 'authoritativeness' with the other to the extent that you 'accept authority' if you 'obey' out of fear or apathy. That we are in the heady world of vacuity here is evidenced some pages later:

As we know from our own strife, industrial, civil and international, violence itself is a recognized, even though usually a deplored, procedure for arriving at authoritative policy. <23>

which echoes an earlier remark that

When disputes among states flare up ... it has been normal for the great powers to step in to speak with the voice of the international society. <24>

Such malodorous 'output' is a smugly desperate manoeuvre to include Great Power Politics as 'politics' in his sense and hence, perhaps, to give ad hoc legitimacy to the presence of International Relations specialists in departments of political science, not to mention lucratively fetid government think tanks.



Easton, though unhappy with the vagueness of the term 'state', is a paradigm statist thinker, his own surrogate terminology being marked only by a superficial scientificity. I would argue that an orthodox 'Eastoner' would be hard pressed to offer a decent account of even those governmental processes marked out as the doctrine's stamping or rather creeping ground.

Economic theorists of both Western and Eastern societies are beginning to recognize the colossal role of the 'informal' or 'black' economy, micro and macro (think of the Euro-Dollar, slushing around the world by the billion, outside any 'official' auspices). No doubt there needs to be equal attention to the many levels of informal politics. By this I mean that whatever constitutions say, with their characteristic, if sometimes ambiguous, assumption of a primary norm

or ultimate sovereign, relations both within state institutions and between such institutions and other institutions and forces are seldom such as to accord with Easton's 'authoritative allocation of values' recipe. Nor does this fact entail that national governments are utterly impotent or that there is utter chaos in society, though it does help us to notice impotence and chaos. Police corruption and with it the corruption and intimidation of politicians and public servants, for example, can persist, even grow, over generations and can become a critically important fact about local or national political life. The networks of power and powerlessness that this entails would be a constitutive part of 'the political system'. And it will not do to say that such activities are necessarily 'illegitimate', that they could be eradicated by 'authoritative action' ('something must be done') or that they are not politics proper. Though they might be illegal, gambling and drinking, even prostitution may be as 'legitimate' in the only relevant sense, that is the cultural sense, as many legal activities. Moreover, those in official positions in constitutional governments get themselves enmeshed in powerful nets, subject to sanctions just as certain and 'brutally specific' as any they could, as legislators, strive to impose - and just as much the proper study of political theory. Easton's grasp of reality is much more precarious than Weber's but even Weber insisted on including 'legitimacy' in his violent definition of the state, ignoring the possibility, not only that states can fail to gain 'acceptance' as opposed to submission but that all kinds of legitimate and illegitimate violence goes on within and beyond their ken.

TOWARDS DOMESTICO-PLANETARY CITIZENSHIP

My claim is that neither 'territorial' nor 'authoritative' definitions of politics are analytically useful to the study of 'politics', which should be seen as a pervasive dimension of life at all levels. (In this context, even to talk of the 'international level' could mislead one into seeing nation states as the units of global political currents). Not only is analysis thereby liberated, so is philosophy in its concern for fundamental political values and their social embodiment in its most general form. We need, for example, to reconsider the a priori monopoly too often accorded to the national state institution in matters both of 'law and order' and or 'welfare', especially at a time when protagonists of left and right are being forced to confront the vulnerability and ineffectuality of state policing and welfare agencies conceptually and practically detached from an attenuated 'community' and locked into the black comedy of helpless appeals for 'community support' for institutions predicated on the very absence of community.

In the protracted cultural crisis of our time there seems to be a renewed glow in the ashen ideologies of 'nation' at one level and 'family' at the other. Part of my motivation in continuing to question 'the statist conception of politics' is the belief that these rafts cannot bear the burdens we are inclined to place on them, battered as they are by global, regional, local, not to mention gender and generational forces that ought to be conceptualised in political theory as other than debris. There is, one might put it, no more a polity than there is an economy. This hyperbole's aim is not to ignore the nation state's major role in political life but it is to rethink it, so that it becomes, for example, puzzling why nations are so much a powerful persistent phenomenon in today's world <25>.

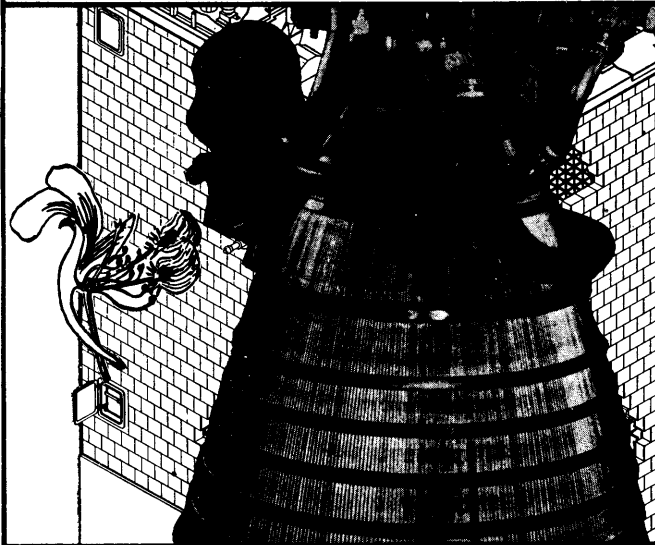
In a second article, I propose to illustrate and to some extent test the suggestions of the above line of thought in relation to the British miners' strike of 1984-5. I will argue that any account of the 'politics' of that strike which fails to examine their interlocked levels: from transnational (world energy supplies and demands) to intrafamilial (husband-wife-child), not to mention the obvious complexities of the significance of balloting (a mere issue for the 'national media'?) and picketing tends to give rise to simplistic illusions.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Radical Philosophy 2, 1972.
- 2 Harvester Press, 1977.
- 3 op. cit., p. 43.
- 4 A Theory of Justice, Harvard University Press, 1971, especially pp. 545-6. It is interesting that Rawls describes 'a society' in the following terms:
 ... although a society is a co-operative venture for mutual advantage, it is typically marked by a conflict as well as an identity of interests. There is an identity of interests since social co-operation makes possible a better life for all than any would have if each were to live solely by his own efforts. There is a conflict of interests since ... they each prefer a larger to a lesser share.
 (p. 4)
- 5 While questioning the corporatist notion of 'a society' as 'a venture' and the national fetishism this quietly implies, as well as the individualist picture of the units of political life, what Rawls here points to are general features: co-operation and conflict in human life at all levels.
- 6 Letter to Bolte, 1871, Selected Works, Vol. II, Moscow, 1962, p. 467.
- 7 British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 50, No. 3, September 1979, p. 378.
- 8 Radical Philosophy 27, Spring 1981, pp. 36-40.
- 9 op. cit., p. 37.
- 10 ibid.
- 11 Political Studies, Vol. XXVIII, 1980, p. 335.
- 12 Ruling Illusions, p. 43.
- 13 Slavery can be seen 'technically', yet it is paradigmatically constituted by power relations.
- 14 On the Subjection of Women, Everyman 1919 (1974), p. 250.
- 15 'What is Politics?' in Pieces of Politics, edited by Richard Lucy, Macmillan, Australia, 1975, pp. 2-10.
- 16 McCallum's work is influenced by the pluralist position of John Anderson from whom my own views are illegitimately descended. See A.J. Baker's Anderson's Social Theory, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1979.

- 16 Pieces of Politics, p. 8. McCallum has cheerfully confirmed to me that the politics of his family's television viewing is more interestingly problematic than a quoted account of such things.
- 17 McCarney, op. cit., p. 36. He is referring to my remarks on pages 21 and 22. McCarney rightly accuses me of shamefully blotting out the American Pluralists from my picture. My excuse is that in practice, their work collapsed into superficial pressure group analysis (aided by a crudely verificationist concept of power which aided a focus on the obvious, that is, on the behaviour of more or less official elites, the incumbents of 'roles' in 'political systems'.)
- 18 D. Easton, The Political System, Knopf, 1953, p. 123. Rather than operate on the theoretical terrain defined by his opponents, Easton resorts to dogmatic assertion in the form of a negative 'paradigm case argument' - 'you cannot call these things political'. He fails to show that the 'political system' as he understands it exhibits processes different in kind from those denied by him to be 'political'.
- 19 op. cit., p. 128.
- 20 ibid. This 'authoritativeness' becomes reified in systems theory into an authoritative 'political system' 'producing outputs' and obtaining and processing 'feedback' from non-authorities. See Varieties of Political Theory, Prentice Hall, 1966, p. 152. As Easton's book, with J. Dennis, Children in the Political System (McGraw Hill, 1969) is entirely concerned with children as pre-political animals acquiring attitudes to the official institutions and personnel of the American State, a more appropriate title would have been 'Children outside the Political System'.
- 21 op. cit., p. 131.
- 22 op. cit., p. 132.
- 23 op. cit., p. 141.
- 24 op. cit., p. 138.
- 25 See Imagined Communities by Benedict Anderson (Verso, New Left Books, 1983) for a searching discussion of this issue in terms of the 'anomalous' status of nation states for Marxism. At a more abstract level, R.A. Dahl's After the Revolution? (Yale, 1970) provides useful categories for analysis of social forms, national and otherwise, whatever their temporal relation to revolutions.

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