

A Specter from the Past: the Balkanization of Europe?

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Liquid Nationalism and State Partitions in Europe, by Stefano Bianchini, Cheltenham, UK, Edward Elgar, 2017, 360 pp., \$158.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781786436603.

Drawing on a long career of research into the history of nationalism and ethnic politics in Europe, Stefano Bianchini has written an erudite book on how the nationality factor affects European politics – state formation and state partition in particular. He presents a wide-ranging survey over *la longue durée*, and also argues a case: that state partitioning should be avoided whenever possible, as it creates many more problems than it solves.

This book has much to offer to readers who are willing set aside time to accompany the author on his journey through the history of Europe over the last century or so. There is a wealth of factual information, together with interesting perspectives and analyses. However, although one might expect a book with such a broad scope to be suitable as a text for graduate students, I do not think that is the case. Bianchini apparently expects his readers to be well acquainted with modern European history already before embarking on this journey: otherwise, they may easily get lost in the many detours *en route*. Indeed, experienced readers may be excused as well for feeling confused at certain times about where they are before returning to the main road. The most basic organizing principle in the book is chronology, but within each chapter Bianchini frequently switches between chronological, geographical, and thematic structures.

The title of the book offers a clue to the author's thesis, but only to some degree. The metaphor of "liquidity" does not appear in the text until page 56, and then as a passing reference to Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* and *Liquid Times*. Exactly how the Baumanian concept of liquidity applies to the topic at hand—nationalism and state formation in Europe—is not spelled out, but it seems to refer to the fact that borders between states have been constantly changing, with new states emerging and disappearing.

As I read this book, it struck me that "liquidity" is a suitable metaphor also for its narrative style. The story flows like a lengthy waterway where we explore not only the main river course, but also its many tributaries. In the first chapters, the tempo is relatively high, like a mountain creek that gushes forth – an entire decade can be covered in a few pages. Then, as we approach our own times, the vistas open up, and in the lowlands the mighty river meanders through the landscape, passing by scattered cities, countries, and events. Luckily, the book is equipped with maps that travelers can consult if they lose track of the story. However, these maps have been copied from diverse sources and are of varying quality, some more legible than others.

Whereas the book's title itself may appear somewhat cryptic, the titles of its parts are more illuminating: Part I is aptly called "An atlas of nation-state metamorphoses across the twentieth century" and draws attention to the book's strong focus on geography. We learn not only about state partitions, but about *all* border changes in 20th-century European history with any degree of

political significance, including those that have not led to a reduction or increase in the number of states. This is probably the most comprehensive available catalog of border changes in recent European political history. And of course, it is more than a mere catalog: it also explains the politics preceding the territorial-political readjustments and the political fallout afterwards.

Part II is titled “State dismemberments and their implications for Europe: how partitions affect the nature of democracy.” Here the author steps out of his role as chronicler and engages the reader in normative discussions on the merits and hazards of state partitions. It is here we should look for the author’s message to the world.

Bianchini’s primary focus of expertise is the Western Balkans, and his views on the perils and benefits of state partition are clearly colored by his in-depth knowledge of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Although it is not the only country that fell apart after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe – the same happened also with the USSR and Czechoslovakia – Yugoslavia is allocated much more space and attention. Perhaps this is because it is the case which the author knows best, but it also clearly reflects his conviction that the *modus operandi* of state partition is one of violence, not “velvet divorce” as in Czechoslovakia.

Indeed, that is the main lesson which the readers, and European political leaders, ought to recall when they contemplate the possible breakup of other European states such as Spain, the UK, or Belgium:

These divisive dynamics mentally prepare people for partition and violence. In this respect, the lessons not learned from the Yugoslav experience deserve careful observation, because they illuminate what could be the aftermath when, within a multinational institutional framework, concurrent economic, institutional and cultural crises meet uncompromising movements, aiming to impose homogenous behaviors, force alignments and blackmail moralities. Accelerating the politicization of the “us–them” dichotomy undermines the nature of democracy [...]. At worst, war could erupt. (194–95)

Violence, Bianchini seems to say, is the twin brother of partition.

At the beginning of his narrative, before World War I, the eastern part of Europe consisted of a few multinational and multicultural empires. Their breakup resulted in the creation of a large number of smaller states, proclaimed as “nation-states.” Since the populations of these empires contained large ethnic and national minorities which were (or saw themselves as) oppressed, the construction of nation-states was widely hailed as a step towards greater democracy.

But was it? There were also sizable minorities in the new states, where the quality of democracy often left something to be desired, to put it mildly. Therefore, “the lessons not learned” from state partitions could arguably be said to go further back than the breakup of Yugoslavia, dating all the way back to 1919. That being said, it would be a tough job to try to convince today’s Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Croats, Slovenians, etc. that they would have been better off if they had remained within their respective multinational federations. However, Bianchini does not shy away from what he rightly calls the “crucial question:” “are the nineteenth-century categories of the nation-building processes and the ‘freedom of people’, however contradictory, still valid and applicable to the twenty-first century?” (181). His answer is a decisive *no*.

Does that mean that the idea of the nation-state as such should be consigned to the dustbin of history? Or is it only the particular ethnic variety of nation-building which has dominated in Eastern Europe that is so problematic? Are other, better, nation-state models possible? Again, the answer for Bianchini seems to be “no,” but presented somewhat less bombastically this time. At one point, scholars discussed civic nation-building as an alternative to the ethnocentric model, but the “civic” label has since gone out of fashion. While political leaders present their policies whenever possible in inclusive, civic terms, the ethnic or ethnocratic agenda often shines through. After independence, Latvia and Estonia restricted the rights of their Russian populations by using legal arguments—those who had arrived in the country under occupation should not be granted full

citizenship rights. However, the ethnic, anti-Russian intention behind this citizenship policy was rather transparent: the Balts, Bianchini argues, “remain mentally anchored to the past” (223).

The post-Yugoslav lessons are even clearer: the Western mediators in the Yugoslav conflicts would no doubt have preferred a civic nation-state model for Bosnia-Herzegovina, but were unable to enforce that on the local populations. “[S]tate failure in Bosnia-Herzegovina depends to a large extent on the nation-state political culture that the diplomacy of the US and EU perversely continued to comply with” (246). The Dayton Constitution classifies Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs as “constituent peoples,” and Bianchini remarks: “[w]hether these single peoples should be considered part of a (civic) nation, or identified with one (ethnic) nation alone, remains contested” (229). The arrangement of post-Dayton Bosnia-Herzegovina, he maintains, “has an emblematic and admonitory value, keeping the political destiny of partition alive as a seductive option” (226).

To be sure, post-war Europe has not been characterized solely by ever-increasing fissures and partitions: an equally important feature has been states drawing closer together under the EU umbrella. Which of the two forces – EU integration, or ethnicity-driven partitioning – will prevail? Again, Bianchini comes out on the pessimistic side. One of his arguments concerns the EU’s ineffective approach to the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, which, he believes, revealed “the extent to which European leaders are willing to compromise with nationalist extremism” (245). The EU’s failure to solve the Balkan debacle is seen as symptomatic of a more general European predicament: “the EU crisis is currently so deep institutionally, economically and in relation to mutual trust that, without a powerful *political will* to cross the boundaries of the existing nation-states, the renationalization of domestic and foreign policies is likely to dominate again and reduce the EU perspective to ashes” (258, emphasis in the original).

With Bianchini’s warning against the possibly dire consequences of state partitions also in Western Europe, I find it odd that he has so little to say about the drive for an independent *Scottish* nation-state. There may be many solid reasons for skepticism about Scottish nationalism – but as far as I can judge, its program is convincingly “civic,” not ethnic; moreover, the Scots are not less pro-European than the English, but considerably *more* so; and the danger of any breakup of Britain turning violent seems very remote. And also in Catalonia, even with the bloody legacy of the Spanish Civil War, I doubt that many observers believe that the Castilians and Catalans will start fighting it out among themselves with weapons in hand. (On the other hand, in the 1960s and 70s I suppose only the most hard-core pessimists would have predicted the Yugoslav carnage of the 1990s.)

Let me end with a somber quote from Bianchini – one which I personally find excessively alarmist, but which captures the gist of his message:

[T]erritorial and ethno-national questions are still considered unsettled by a variety of parties or movements in Europe. Some of them may appear, and actually are, marginal or just an expression of folklore. Nevertheless, no-one can predict whether and under what circumstances they might become significant at the international level. In other words, the issue remains politically highly sensitive and controversial, corroborating the rationale of the processes that generated two world wars in the twentieth century (276)