

How to Reconcile Borders with the Promotion of a More Open, Integrated and Democratic World?

by Simone Martuscelli

In "Neither Victims nor Executioners", a series of essays published by the French magazine *Combat* in November 1946, Albert Camus introduces the concept of "international democracy": "The only way out is to place international law above governments, which means that that law must be made, that there must be a parliament for making it, and that parliament must be constituted by means of worldwide elections in which all nations will take part".¹

Today, many have come to question the role of philosophers in interpreting global events or in proposing modes and approaches that seek to change the contemporary world. Yet, such exercises are arguably needed more than ever,

¹ Albert Camus, "Neither Victims nor Executioners", in Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi (ed.), *Camus at Combat. Writing 1944-1947*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. 268, <https://adamgomez.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/camus-neither-victims-nor-executioners.pdf>.

rediscovering the intuition, and urge, to try to imagine new democratic processes suited to an increasingly interdependent and connected world. In this context, efforts that seek to reinvent or reconsider the value of borders are also needed and welcomed.

In 2018, Rana Dasgupta, a British Indian writer and novelist, penned an article for *The Guardian* entitled "The Demise of the Nation State".² In it, the author argued that the relatively recent model of the nation state had failed. For Dasgupta, the affirmation of this model of political organisation following the demise of empires in the early 20th century was favoured by the perfect, albeit no longer replicable, correlation between political and economic boundaries. The limited mobility of capital provided governments at the

² Rana Dasgupta, "The Demise of the Nation State", in *The Guardian*, 5 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/8cfx8>.

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time with real room to manoeuvre, allowing them to respond to the demands of citizens while encouraging the development of a balanced social contract.

In recent decades, however, the increased financialisation of the economy and the emergence of a global and deregulated market have substantially limited the meaning and power of states: the correlation between the economic and political boundaries has weakened, and the latter have not adjusted to the demolition of the former. This is valid for rich countries, caught in an “existential” crisis caused by “the assault on national political power by global forces”,³ as it is for low-income countries, often incapable, despite de facto independence, to develop strong political structures capable of overcoming the dynamics of neo-colonial subjugation.

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has further shuffled the cards, stressing the need for economic borders to be closer to political ones. The decision-making capacity of nation states has returned to the forefront, both with regard to the health management of the crisis and the economic one: setting a precedent that could be valid to address other global crises, like climate change or the regulation of big tech companies. The shock of the pandemic and its impact on the global system was such that even the *Financial Times* spoke of the end of globalisation.⁴

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kaye Wiggins, Antoine Gara and Jamie Smyth, “Business Leaders Warn that Three-Decade Era of Globalisation Is Ending”, in *Financial Times*, 22 May 2022, [https://www.](https://www.ft.com/content/0599878e-a820-4657-8e52-f069bb10d512)

This return of “dirigiste”, or state-led tendencies, does not find a suitable application model for modern societies. While on the one hand, the power of states is now insufficient to adequately respond to the major crises of our time, on the other, organisations set up for these purposes, most notably the United Nations, have often proved unable, for a variety of reasons to fulfil these functions.

Regarding the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, the UN Secretary-General himself openly admitted the Security Council’s “failure” in avoiding the outbreak of conflict.⁵ Similarly disappointing are the results achieved in Ukraine by the OSCE, present in the country since 2014 with a monitoring mission, which ended last March.⁶ The World Health Organisation’s handling of the pandemic also has raised several concerns both regarding ineffective health management of the crisis and the diplomatic tensions it has generated. The disappointing outcomes of the COP26 talks in Glasgow – that risk exacerbating now in Sharm el Sheik –, especially regarding commitments to the poorest countries most affected by climate change, testify to the weakness of the current international order.

The alternative, however, cannot simply be a return to nation states. In 2014, writer and journalist Debora

[ft.com/content/0599878e-a820-4657-8e52-f069bb10d512](https://www.ft.com/content/0599878e-a820-4657-8e52-f069bb10d512).

⁵ UN Secretary-General, *Secretary-General’s Opening Remarks at Press Conference with President of Ukraine*, 28 April 2022, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/263293>.

⁶ See OSCE website: *OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (closed)*, <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine-closed>.

Mackenzie interviewed several scholars about the supposed end of the nation state and possible alternatives for the *New Scientist*. Jan Zielonka, Professor of European politics and society at Oxford University, argued that “the future structure and exercise of political power will resemble the medieval model more than the Westphalian one”,⁷ in reference to the peace of 1648 which is considered the founding act of the modern concept of the nation state.

Today, it is precisely within the continent where this form of government was originally born, that the most advanced and interesting attempts to reconsider and reform this model are taking place. If political boundaries are too narrow, in times characterised by the collapse of economic barriers, a possible solution can be found in political collaboration among several states. The European Union, despite many shortcomings, seems today to have rediscovered its ability to act as a single coordinated body in response to recent crisis: the Green Deal to combat the climate crisis, the Recovery Fund as a united response to the pandemic, sanctions against Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine, are all examples of joint and effective responses to major global issues.

In this regard, the European experiment has embraced the path towards an architecture capable of giving sovereignty to EU institutions on issues of common interest, while giving single member states powers in areas

that need closer proximity to citizens, such as social security. This in turn has given new meaning to the EU's internal borders. There is still enormous work to be done: for example, towards strategic autonomy in the EU's foreign and defence policy, or increased efforts for the harmonisation of taxation systems.

Finally, improvements also need to be made with regards to the democratisation of EU institutions. Kathryn Lavelle, Professor of World Affairs at Case Western Reserve University, points out in the preface to *The Challenges of Multilateralism* that “in the international organizations that promote multilateralism, decisions are made through voting and not through conquest of war or bilateral diplomacy”.⁸ These organisations are therefore called upon to establish decision-making mechanisms that enable them to legislate more effectively. In this sense, overcoming the principle of unanimity in European institutions decision-making processes remains a priority.

Despite its limitations, the ambition and uniqueness of the European project make it not only the most innovative model in the current political landscape, but also an important example to follow in efforts to reform other supranational global organisations.

The idea of a “global government”, democratically expressed and aimed at maintaining peace is not just the philosophical reflection of authors

⁷ Debora Mackenzie, “End of Nations: Is There an Alternative to Countries?”, in *The New Scientist*, 3 September 2014, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22329850-600>.

⁸ Kathryn C. Lavelle, *The Challenges of Multilateralism*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2020, p. x.



such as Kant or Rousseau: even Woodrow Wilson, in the elaboration of a project that led to the establishment of the League of Nations, was not just affirming the principle of self-determination of peoples but also aimed to create a framework of common rules within which newly independent nations could exercise their freedom and sovereignty.

In *Global Democracy: For and Against*, political scientist Raffaele Marchetti argues that the ultimate goal of global democracy should not be limited to the achievement of peace, but to the pursuit of political justice through a scheme of representative participation that directly involves the citizens of the world.⁹ A mechanism that would not only increase the decision-making capacity of populations, but also restore credibility to institutions that seem to have lost the ability to influence decision-making processes.

This idea is further articulated by philosopher and jurist Danilo Zolo in *Cosmopolis*.¹⁰ In it, the author argues that the key to achieving a stable world balance cannot include the transposition of centralised power from nation states to the global level. Instead, he argues for a more complex structure that guarantees a good level of local and regional autonomy but at the same time assures a degree of central coordination, backed by democratic legitimacy.

⁹ Raffaele Marchetti, *Global Democracy: For and Against. Ethical Theory, Institutional Design, and Social Struggles*, London/New York, Routledge, 2008.

¹⁰ Danilo Zolo, *Cosmopolis. Prospects for World Government*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1997.

Both of these perspectives, which complement each other, could be realised within current EU institutions. This can be achieved through a process of reform that does not require the creation of new organisations, but an increase in democratic mechanisms for the choice of representatives. At the same time, it would give new impetus to national constructions, integrated into a system that reaffirms the competences of individual states, but recognising the limits of its jurisdiction vis-à-vis supranational institutions which are equally democratically legitimate.

The EU has a long way to go to achieve this objective. It is not only threatened from the outside, but also by forces within states themselves that are recovering strength. Indeed, it will be necessary to find ways of making criticism of European institutions a driving force for their democratisation. Overall, however, the idea that to be together means to be stronger seems to have taken root in the minds of Europeans in a definitive way in recent years. This has rendered the European model, while no doubt still improvable, the best possible spirit to preserve and pursue.

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