

August 12th, 2007

Homeland Security: what we need to know that politicians and pundits will never say (VI)

BY Stan Goff

Part 6

The term “nationalism” is a little like the term “love.” People use it all the time to mean many things and would be hard-pressed to provide definitions for any of them.

Calling nationalism a “love of one’s country,” then, is not just tautological, it is multiply-ambiguous. It is also ahistorical.

The State emerged only with the social constitution of mass class domination, made possible by agriculture and writing (one necessary for accumulation of vital wealth, and the other for administration). In the scope of the whole human story, it is a very late arrival.

The nation-state is generally seen as something that came into being in 19th Century Europe.

Nation — without the hyphenated-state appendage — has long been seen as something akin to contiguous ethnicity, with shared language and culture.

To re-hyphenate, there had to be a political boundary (geographic state) that was drawn around a supposed contiguous ethnicity, with shared language and culture.

State, as a stand-alone term, is described in Wikipedia as “*a political association with effective dominion over a geographic area. It usually includes the set of institutions that claim the authority to make the rules that govern the people of the society in that territory, though its status as a state often depends in part on being recognized by a number of other states as having internal and external sovereignty over it.*”

Sovereignty:

the exclusive right to exercise supreme political (e.g. legislative, judicial, and/or executive) authority over a geographic region, group of people, or oneself. A sovereign is the supreme lawmaking authority, subject to no other, and most often the head of state. Thus the legal maxim, “there is no law without a sovereign.”

Right:

In jurisprudence and law, a right is the legal or moral entitlement to do or refrain from doing something or to obtain or refrain from obtaining an action, thing or recognition in civil society.

Yet civil society is subordinated to the State... and so it goes. What is law? What is morality?

This is such an intellectual thicket that it is little wonder most people get a headache thinking about it. So they take the aspirin of naturalization or religious-predestination. Nature or God becomes an authority that settles the question, and builds a wall against horror vacui.

Bumper sticker: *God said it. I believe it. That settles it.*

Of course, given the actual history of nation, state, and nation-state — and with them nationalism — we can see that these are neither a product of Nature or God, but *contingent* (neither timeless nor universal) products of social organization. The universality of nationalism cannot be imputed to it even to this day, because the many forms of nationalism are not only different, but in many cases identifiable by their antagonisms.

In the last installment, we quoted Mahmood Mamdani. Let me quote him again:

[I]f political identities are singular, cultural identities tend to be cumulative.

Culture is an accumulation of social experience, rising from below, that is recognizable as identity. Citizenship (political identity) is granted by the State, from above, recognizable only in law. Cultural boundaries shift. People move over the land, they intermix, and the culture evolves. Political boundaries are not as permeable or as permeating; and they are often changed by the most top-down activity of all: war.

In earlier installments, we discussed the contradiction — described by [David Harvey](#) — between the financial logics of power and territorial logics of power. Finance has become trans-territorial. The State is, by definition, territorial. The cultural-nation (akin to ethnicity) is expressed as a *communal*-territorial logic of power. The State moves according to a *legal*-territorial logic of power.

The nation-state attempted a fusion of these logics. This remains problematic.

Most of us in the United States have come to see “country” as synonymous with “nation.” This is immensely confusing, and the reason we have to clarify a taxonomy for the purpose of this thesis on “Homeland Security.” Homeland is a *national* idea, that has been conflated with the US state, when there are multiple national identities residing inside the US... itself named the United **States**, plural. As if there were 50 separate, *sovereign* political entities within our boundaries.

Kind of erodes the fixity of the definition for “sovereign.” But then, the current Iraqi “government” makes a mockery of the whole concept...

When culture is mobilized for the purpose of disrupting and-or seizing the political power of a State, Mamdani calls this the “politicization of culture.” He therefore makes an extremely important distinction between — in the US — religious evangelism (the mandate to recruit to the faith), religious fundamentalism (belief in the literal truth of the Bible), and political Christianity (the mobilization of faith-communities to contest for political power — often of the State itself). While these overlap in time and space, they are *not* the same things.

The *Culture Talk* he described, wherein we are led to substitute cultural explanations for political behaviors — calling political Islam “Islamic fundamentalism”, for example — is part of an ideologically-loaded writing of history that caricatures, and therefore renders unintelligible, the real motives and historical development of so-called terrorists. There are Islamic evangelicals (recruiting to the faith), Islamic fundamentalists (literalists in whichever tradition), and political Islamists (mobilizing the faith-communities to contest for the political power of the State, *using a religious idiom*). they are not only *not* the same, but not the same within each category. Osama bin Laden is a Saudi-Sunni political Islamist. Muqtada al-Sadr is an Iraqi-Shia political Islamist.

We will set aside the question of “terrorism,” a tactical orientation, until later.

The cultures are organized religiously. The authority that confers unambiguous meaning is theological. The cultural language — the idiom — reflects this. So it is easy to misrepresent a political antagonism as religious (cultural).

In speaking of the Bush administration, how often we have heard, “*Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.*” This is a quote from the Book of Proverbs (16:18), in the King James Bible. Yet when we say this, no one derives a purely cultural explanation for what we say, or for our opposition to this regime. We are not called “Christian extremists.” We already know that this is a *political* statement in a culturally-recognizable idiom.

But then we are the norm, eh... ..

The war between the US and others in the region is in *deed* political and in *word* cultural. The Western perceptual disconnect that makes this obvious fact invisible is intentional (and highly racialized); and it is aimed primarily at the *citizens* of the US... that is, those with political agency (having the vote). It is perhaps appropriate, then, to quote from the last installment to connect the implications:

Political power in the American democratic system (it is dishonest to deny that there is a form of democracy that still requires elected officials, no matter how fixed the system is, to win over voters) operates within its own time fractal. Every two years for the House; every six years for the Senate; and every four years for the Executive. Other cycles at other levels of government. Policy development and implementation, then, is geared to winning these elections — where cake-and-ice-cream — along with other forms of short-term bunkum — is always and inescapably

more marketable than the truth.

The US State derives its very legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens from this vote. Without that legitimacy, the State would quickly lose its power. So the election system is one where the ruling class has to expend vast effort and resources to gerrymander the outcomes. It is not under total control. This is why alternative narratives to things like “Islamic fundamentalism,” and new taxonomies that include more nuanced language, like “political Islam,” are necessary. Explaining official perfidy is an essential step in delegitimizing official power.

Being identified with the delegitimation of power, when that power begins to unravel, places one in a position of credibility to answer the question, “What now?”

Studying the contradictory relationships between nations (contiguous historical communities with shared language and culture), states, and nationalisms sheds a great deal of light on our general historical conjuncture, and in particular the joined questions of “homelands” and “security.”

I said above that “the many forms of nationalism are not only different, but in many cases identifiable by their antagonisms.” Let me explain with a uniquely American example... African America, that is.

Looking at the combined issues of nation, state, citizenship, and sovereignty, we can begin with the development of the USA. The nation was white, patriarchal, and mainly English... and the nationhood — what separated this community from its former identity as English was a multi-generational geographic separation from England, and a structurally antagonistic set of interests. These geographic and cultural differences created a Yankee identity, which once consolidated, led to a political struggle for independence.

Nations are defined against the Other.

The Yankee identity was defined against the British (and against Europe), as well as against the indigenous people whose land was being expropriated by the Yankee through genocide. In the American South, the American subject was defined against the African slave as well.

The State was established locally, and 13 of them confederated under a provisional Constitution. So there were States within a State.

Citizenship — or State recognition of political agency — was defined as white, male, and owning property; and changes to that norm were obtained by hard social reform struggles.

The question of where sovereignty really resided was left unresolved until 1860, when the resolution was forced in the struggle over slavery.

The African was not yet seen by the State as a political subject, but after generations of slavery, a common culture and language had formed the prototype of a contiguous community of people who were neither African-born nor American political subjects, but Africans in the United States of America. That contiguous community and culture was fundamentally forged inside the institution of slavery; and the identity was therefore defined against the white slave-owner and the American slave society. African America was a nation in formation, but one which was excluded from the white nation’s state that enveloped it.

After the American Civil War, provisional Black citizenship flourished for a time (in the period known as Reconstruction), and elements of sovereignty were seized upon which concentrated a somewhat more independent Black cultural (national) identity.

So the struggle against slavery was won, but after 1877 — when Reconstruction was abandoned — African America in the South — a nation within a nation of white political subjects — was subjected by States within a State to a system of strict politico-economic Apartheid, called segregation. Blacks now had *de jure* citizenship that *de facto* no longer existed.

Throughout this, contiguous communities of African Americans with shared culture and language continued to exist and evolve; and the sense of identity of African Americans was inextricably bound to this culture. This is the juncture of what might be termed “objective” and “subjective” nationality. Even if it is not explicitly named as nationality, its cultural norms as well as the individual personalities formed within them make the subjective intuition of shared community and history the reflection of an actual (even if unnamed) nationality.

Framing the question of African American subjugation as “inequality” was an ideological trick of the dominant white class; but control over the means of social production translates into control over the production of [epistemology](#). Even those on the wrong end of hierarchies internalize the “ideas” of the dominant class. Workers buy into the “good worker” idea. Women buy into the idea of the “good woman for a good man” idea. Black communities — even under ferocious oppression — heard the clarion call of (abstract, legal, ahistorical) Equality.

So when the next great struggle was engaged by African America, it was not for sovereignty; it was for citizenship within the American State. The key to this citizenship was the emblem of political agency: the vote. Thus began the Civil Rights Movement.

Remember the definitions above?

[Right:](#)

In jurisprudence and law, a **right** is the legal or moral entitlement to do or refrain from doing something or to obtain or refrain from obtaining an action, thing or recognition in **civil** society.

This movement was also an expression of political Christianity. Black Christianity — a cultural phenomenon — was politicized.

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., quoting the Bible (Amos), galvanized the movement in the Biblical idiom:

‘Justice will rush down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

At the edges of this movement, epitomized by figures like [Malcolm X](#), another trend did make explicit reference to Black nationhood — an intellectual tradition that had taken root at the turn of the Century with figures like [Marcus Garvey](#). [Black nationalism](#) did not demand abstract equality. It recognized that Black “inequality” was a structural relationship too deeply rooted in the system to be extricated with a ballot. Black nationalism demanded *sovereignty* for African America.

[Sovereignty:](#)

the exclusive right to exercise supreme political (e.g. legislative, judicial, and/or executive) authority over a geographic region, group of people, or oneself. A sovereign is the supreme lawmaking authority, subject to no other, and most often the head of state. Thus the legal maxim, “there is no law without a sovereign.”

Black nationalism was conceived as a political project in a nation-for-itself.

The threat of the secessionism that once was in defense of slavery — and resolved *against* secession, by necessity, to break the institution of slavery — was now being raised by the grandchildren of slaves.

With the ascendancy of the Civil Rights movement, and the grant of the legal (*de jure*) franchise, Equality and the chimera of a multi-national/national identity (melting pot... which had semi-successfully assimilated a white nation) served to marginalize the diverse currents of Black nationalism. Then King was assassinated, and the Black Nation exploded in its rage.

Riots broke out in more than 100 US cities. Over the next few years, [Black nationalists gained a huge and militant following](#), until their organizations were infiltrated and finally destroyed by the US government using counter-insurgency doctrine against the Nation within a Nation.

These Black struggles related themselves to *national* liberation movements around the world; and that subject will be covered in some detail further along.

* * *

White nationalism still existed, and continues to exist to this day. Black nationalism existed, and continues to exist to his day. Both are called nationalism. Yet we know in our gut, even before we examine the elephantine social fact of power, that these are not equivalents. Their very existence is defined in their antagonism.

There are nationalisms, and there are nationalisms. One size does not fit all. How they intersect with the state is a key part of the story of homeland security, and the history that got us where we are today.

Now, at last, we can go back to the years immediately after World War II and pick up the thread.

End Part 6

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Stand by for Part 7

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