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BOOKS IN  
REVIEW

## DISCOVERING THE “STATE-NATION”

*Ashutosh Varshney*

***Crafting State-Nations: India and Other Multinational Democracies.***  
By Alfred Stepan, Juan J. Linz, and Yogendra Yadav. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. 308 pp.

For its conceptual innovation, erudition, and real-world applicability, this book deserves to be widely read. It helps us to reconfigure the debate on the relationship between ethnic diversity and political institutions. The authors tell us that the goal of their analysis is “to expand our collective political imaginations” (p. xiv) about how to combine democracy and ethnic diversity. They have brilliantly succeeded in meeting that goal.

At the core of the book is the idea of the “state-nation.” The authors contrast this concept with the more familiar notion of the “nation-state,” as well as with others such as “multicultural states.” Empirical illustrations come primarily from India, but reflections on the experiences, institutions, and practices of Belgium, Canada, Spain, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, and the United States make clear the argument’s larger relevance. The concept of the state-nation is deployed to explain why some states fail in crafting national unity, while others succeed.

A nation-state, as Ernest Gellner explained in his 1983 classic *Nations and Nationalism*, is a place where the territorial boundaries of a state and the cultural boundaries of a nation coincide. Modern France is viewed as the best historical example of such fusion. In the current literature on nationalism, however, the French model of undifferentiated citizenship is viewed as a nineteenth-century curiosity, to be studied primarily to understand why the Basques and Bretons did not rebel against Paris and

its profoundly assimilationist thrust. In his classic 1976 study *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*, Eugen Weber showed how the French central state, using military conscription and compulsory public schooling, turned Catalans, Corsicans, Gascons, Normans, Picards, Vendéens, the aforementioned Basques and Bretons, and a host of others into Frenchmen. As part of this project, the diversities that once so vividly characterized France were deliberately and systematically flattened. And vivid these diversities had been: As E.J. Hobsbawm reports in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, at the time of the French Revolution more than half of all those living in France spoke no French at all, and “only 12–13 percent spoke it correctly.”

Today, Japan, Portugal, and some Scandinavian countries approximate the French nation-state model. Most of the rest of the world comprises either countries marked by strong ethnic diversity, *some of which has a territorial aspect* and may give rise to demands for independence, or multicultural countries where ethnic diversity is spread around and lacks a politically charged territorial focus. The United States is an example of this latter type—its Civil War was a constitutional and, some would say, cultural fight among people of essentially the same stock who spoke a common language.

Stepan, Linz, and Yadav call the former class of political entities—those with strong ethnic diversity, some of it territorially concentrated—not “nation-states” but “state-nations.” Belgium, Canada, India, and Spain are state-nations, as are Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Each has geographically concentrated ethnocommunal differences. The book’s arguments, therefore, will have resonance in many societies.

Nation-states tend to be assimilationist. Among their key features is the erasure of ethnic and cultural diversities. State-nations, by contrast, work on two levels: They strive to create a sense of belonging with respect to the larger political community, and at the same time they put in place institutional protections for politically salient diversities having to do with language, religion, or sacrosanct cultural norms. If such diversities are territorially specific, they normally require the protection afforded by federal arrangements.

This double-barreled character sets the state-nation apart from Arend Lijphart’s consociationalism, which focuses solely on setting up institutional safeguards for ethnoreligious diversity and pays no heed to the task of nurturing countrywide loyalties at the same time. The concept is also to be distinguished from Will Kymlicka’s “multicultural citizenship.” Kymlicka, too, emphasizes recognition of certain forms of diversity, but not a coexistence of centrifugal and centripetal institutions.

According to the state-nation view, one can be both a Catalan and a Spaniard, a Québécois and a Canadian, or a Punjabi and an Indian.

Undifferentiated and singular Spaniards, Canadians, and Indians do exist. But a lot of citizens in such countries tend to have multiple, though complementary, identities. The wisdom of the state-nation approach is the recognition that trying to hammer together these various identities into a single national identity would not solidify the state, but instead would shatter it.

India is an especially complex case. It has diversities of caste, religion, language, and tribe, the latter two of which are territorially concentrated. Because of this, language and tribe—the former, especially—have become Indian federalism’s main concerns. Fifteen languages form the basis on which state lines are drawn within India. Each state (there are 28, plus 7 union territories) has its own official language. That language serves as the medium of instruction in government schools. Dealings among states, or between a state and the federal government, go on in English or Hindi, which is the *lingua franca* in six states. Most of the fifteen languages are both the main language of a single state and scarcely spoken outside that state.

Major language groups were given a direct stake in the Indian system as well as separated from one another. Their stake came in the form of a politically legitimized regionalism. A political party in Gujarat, Karnataka, or Tamil Nadu cannot easily go against the commonly held notions of Gujarati, Kannada, or Tamil cultural pride. But claims supporting Tamil heritage, for example, mean little outside the state of Tamil Nadu. Hindus, Muslims, and Christians can be found in most states (and the various castes are spread out as well), but speakers of state languages such as Gujarati, Kannada, or Tamil are found only in small numbers outside their respective home states.

A state-nation means more than just a safe way to institutionalize diversity. It also, as the authors stress, means *a simultaneous nurturing of commitment to the larger Indian polity*. In India, the institutions that have played key roles in generating loyalty to the Federal Republic include the Congress party, the armed forces, the federal civil service, the Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institutes of Management, central high schools, the Supreme Court, and (over the last two decades) the Election Commission.

Shielding diversity while building unity is not always an easy two-step to dance. India’s record is not perfect, and secessionism has not been unknown. The authors examine the insurgencies in Kashmir, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Punjab, finding that each arose largely because New Delhi seriously departed from the state-nation model. (In Kashmir, India-Pakistan tensions have caused additional problems as well.)

On the whole, we learn, state-nation policies in India have yielded remarkable success. In nationwide surveys, more than 85 percent of those polled say that they are “proud” or “very proud” of India—numbers that roughly match what pollsters uncover in Australia, Canada, and the

United States, and are higher than those commonly reported by Belgians, Brazilians, Germans, or the Swiss. In other surveys, only about a fifth of randomly sampled Indians say that they consider their identity to be mostly or completely drawn from their home state rather than India as a whole.

Thus the simultaneous pursuit of nationalism and subnationalism has been reasonably successful in India. Even in 1989–90, as secessionist revolts raged in both Punjab and Kashmir, only about 5 percent of India's vast populace was directly affected. Across most of the country, life went on more or less normally. Commitment to the larger polity has been achieved not by a suppression of diversities, but by their recognition.

Two chapters comparing and contrasting how India and Sri Lanka have dealt with their respective Tamil populations underscores this point. Sri Lanka's dominant Sinhalese might have adopted federal institutions in order to reconcile the Tamils, who live mainly at the north end of the island country, but instead pursued French-style nation-state policies, much to the detriment of democracy and national unity alike. India gave its Tamil minority far better treatment, including a state where Tamil is the official language. As a result, Tamil separatism was nipped in the bud, and today most Tamils feel that they have a serious stake in the Federal Republic of India.

As much as I like this book, I do have some criticisms to offer. First, although the term "multinational" might make sense for Belgium, Canada, or Spain, it does not for India. Territorially concentrated ethnic diversity may well be a favorable ground for nationalist insurrection, but it does not have to be. India's various geographically based groups are at best ethnic groups, not nations. Even before a state-nation model was explicitly embraced after independence came in 1947, most linguistic groups had shown no desire for independence. Feeling a regional as well as a larger all-India national identity has been a feature of Indian politics at least since the freedom movement became mass-based under Mahatma Gandhi in the 1920s. Indeed, it is striking that Kashmir, Mizoram, and Nagaland were all places where the British or princely authorities did not allow the freedom movement to emerge, and all would be wracked by secessionism after 1947. Punjab is a prominent exception to this pattern (it had an active freedom movement yet witnessed secessionism). Still, the pattern remains strikingly suggestive.

Second, was France not turned into a nation-state *despite* some territorially concentrated diversities? Is that not one way to read Eugen Weber? If so, would it not be more accurate to say that France became a "nation-state" due to the exigencies of early-modern times, and not because it lacked territorially specific diversities? Would today's minorities readily accept the superiority of a "high" culture imported from and imposed by Paris and the Ile-de-France?

The question has implications that go well beyond the French case. These point in the direction of constructivism, now the mainstream

view about national (and ethnic) identities. All nations are constructed. But in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, heavy-handed nation-building *à la française* seems neither possible nor desirable. It is too likely to undermine rather than bolster unity, even as democracy suffers collateral damage amid violent ethnic or ethnosectarian struggle. Arguments about some languages, races, or ethnic groups being intrinsically superior will today be called colonialism in another form, and resisted as such. That was not so in the late eighteenth century when France as we know it today came into being: Ernest Gellner's "high culture" could more easily spread and assert its systematic dominance over "low cultures" because the localism of the "low" cultures had only raw custom or inarticulate habit on its side, and could not draw on a powerful modern doctrine such as anticolonialism to spur it to resistance.

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## BOOKS RECEIVED

*The books listed below were recently received by the editors. A listing here does not preclude a review in a future issue.*

### *Advanced Democracies*

***The Constitution Before the Judgment Seat: The Prehistory and Ratification of the American Constitution, 1787–1791.*** By Jürgen Heideking. Edited by John P. Kaminski and Richard Leffler. University of Virginia Press, 2012. 552 pp.

***Democracy Despite Itself: Why a System That Shouldn't Work At All Works So Well.*** By Danny Oppenheimer and Mike Edwards. MIT Press, 2012. 245 pp.

***The End of Race? Obama, 2008, and Racial Politics in America.*** By Donald R. Kinder and Allison Dale-Riddle. Yale University Press, 2012. 309 pp.

***Faith and Race in American Political Life.*** Edited by Robin Dale Jacobson and Nancy D. Wadsworth. University of Virginia Press, 2012. 320 pp.

***Georgia Democrats, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Shaping of the New South.*** By Tim S. R. Boyd. University Press of Florida, 2012. 302 pp.

***In Chambers: Stories of Supreme Court Law Clerks and Their Justices.*** Edited by Todd C. Peppers and Artemus Ward. University of Virginia Press, 2012. 445 pp.

***Political Communication in Direct Democratic Campaigns: Enlightening or Manipulating.*** Edited by Hanspeter Kriesi. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 265 pp.