

Language Rules

Michael Bell argues that globalization of language will muzzle the nation-state

In “Ending the Nation-State Myth,” Devin Stewart recently argued that the nation-state is past its sell-by date. I wholeheartedly agree. Here I offer some insight into the reasons for its existence, and the coming reasons for its nonexistence.

Human beings have a hard-wired drive to associate with each other in groups, which intensified during the evolution of homo sapiens from primate ancestors. The need to belong operated originally at the kin-group level, or the tribe or village. And as the size and complexity of human settlements increased, this innate sense of belonging attached itself to the larger units that developed — cities initially, and entire polities later on (“we Roman citizens,” as Cicero noted).

The sense of belonging is flexible in a human: As Stewart points out, you can be both French and from the Loire Valley. In modern cultures, group membership also forms a key part of self-identity.

But while evolution equipped humans to cooperate with each other in groups, it also provided for competition between groups; in fact, the two processes are inseparable as a social adaptation. Humans are naturally xenophobic — people belonging to different groups tend to compete, often through bloodshed, and this tendency scaled up with the formation of bigger groupings.

Language was not necessarily one of the original cognitive innovations that accompanied the emergence of the group, but when it arrived it certainly sharpened the differences between competing groups. Indeed, much of the power of the nation-state resides in the linguistic concepts that define it: National culture is embedded in its own particular language. The attachment of the French to their language, noted by David Singh Grewal in “Speaking Fairly” (*Policy Innovations*, June 2008), is based on the fear that their treasured culture will disappear along with their language.

For the nation-state to acquire and exercise power over its citizens, a means of communication between state and people was necessary, and this was lacking in medieval Europe where elites spoke French or Latin and the peasantry spoke vernaculars. Education and proselytizing required laborious copying of manuscripts and was restricted to a small proportion of the population. To a large extent, the church acted as moral arbiter and educator of the masses.

The nation-state, therefore, didn’t really coalesce until the invention of printing allowed monarchs or governments to educate their citizens in what Benedict Anderson calls national print-languages. The nation-state, in its modern form, can therefore be said to have emerged during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is reasonable to interpret the nation-state during its heyday as steering the group-centered loyalty of its citizens for its own purposes, initially benign for the most part but culminating with the genocides of the 20th century which have given nationalism a bad name.

So what will stop it? Globalization, of course. There can be debate over the degree of fairness of globalization, but there can’t be any dispute that it is happening. The most important globalization of all is language, driven by technology — radio, satellites, mass travel, and above all the Internet.