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Nation-Building 101

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LONDON – In the aftermath of the Afghanistan debacle, some claim that Western forces might have succeeded had they just come out of the bunker and engaged more with local groups. Others claim that, in the absence of the civic habits and culture of cooperation required by a functioning state, all efforts at nation-building in places like Afghanistan are destined to fail. Both positions are misleading, if not mistaken. Exhibit A in the case against the skeptics is that nations *have* been built, and not just in homogeneous societies like Japan or Scandinavia. India constructed a vibrant democracy despite a traumatic partition, continent-like size, and a plethora of languages and ethnicities. Brazil has a strong national identity and functioning democratic institutions despite sharp income inequality and deep regional and ethnic cleavages. The United States pulled itself together after a civil war that killed one American in 40.

But those three examples are also Exhibit A in the case against the pollyannas: nation-building is no task for foreigners. One would be hard-pressed to find a historical example of a functioning and cohesive nation-state being imported at the barrel of a gun. Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, and Brazilian democrats like Fernando Henrique Cardoso were not just locals; they built *local* symbols and practices of shared values.

The evolution of human cooperation can help us to understand successful nation-building. Evolution wired humans for certain kinds of cooperation. A hunter who did not collaborate closely with his fellow hunters risked being stomped to death by a woolly mammoth. But we are not good at cooperating with everyone. Along with solidarity with those in our hunting party comes hostility toward others who might want to hunt “our” prey.

Nation-building boils down to “expanding the circle” of moral concern (the philosopher Peter Singer’s phrase). Successful nation-states – large or small, rich or poor – have one thing in common: citizens’ sense of a shared past and future. No matter how different we are, some of your concerns are also my concerns.

The Us-versus-Them divide comes from our intuitions, or what philosophers call “heuristics”: decision-making rules that evolved so that we could decide in an instant

whether the guy behind the tree was friend or foe. Those intuitions came from our own experience, from what our parents taught us, and from the cues we picked up from relatives and neighbors. And they, too, acquired their intuitions from a mixture of experience and imitation.

If our intuitions come from experience and learning, they can evolve. Sometimes, cultures and deeply held beliefs evolve very slowly. Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam speculated in 1993 that higher levels of “social capital” – including trust in others and willingness to join charities and voluntary organizations – in richer and more developed northern Italy than in southern Italy reflected contrasting political experiences in 1000-1300, when some Italian city-states became independent. A subsequent study comparing 400 Italian cities found a strong and positive statistical relationship between measures of social capital today and cities’ status – free or not – during the medieval period.

This does not mean that we necessarily have to wait millennia until our moral and cultural intuitions evolve. Culture can change quickly. Consider beliefs about fairness. Some people grew up hearing that hard work pays, and came to believe it; others believe that success is due to good luck or good contacts. Are we stuck with such beliefs come what may? Apparently not. Growing up during a recession makes a big difference: seeing many hard-working people lose their jobs makes one more inclined to believe that outcomes reflect fortune, not effort.

Or consider the effect of living under Communism. Growing up in East Germany made people view state intervention more favorably than did people who lived in West Germany, but this effect has been fading since reunification. Alberto Alesina and Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln estimated it will take one or two generations – not centuries or millennia – for attitudes to converge completely.

Most important, moral and political evolution happen not just by accident, but also by design. Leadership and policy matter. After independence, Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta consolidated power by playing off tribal divisions. In neighboring Tanzania, by contrast, Julius Nyerere emphasized a single Tanzanian national identity and the use of a single language. While post-independence Tanzania distributed public investment in education, health, and roads equitably across regions and groups, Kenya’s regime heavily favored Kikuyu areas that formed the core of Kenyatta’s political support. This pattern has been a recurring feature of Kenyan politics, commonly referred to as “our turn to eat.” And it is not rulers’ tribal identity, but rather the institutions under which they operate, that explains the pattern.

Ted Miguel of the University of California, Berkeley, found that these contrasting approaches affected values and outcomes in Kenya and Tanzania. Ethnically diverse communities manage to govern themselves better – by raising more money for schools or water wells – in Tanzania than in Kenya. For prolonged periods of time,

“Tanzanian economic growth rates were also substantially faster than Kenyan growth rates..., measures of governance and institutional quality consistently better, and national politics less violent.”

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A sense of national belonging depends on symbols and shared rituals as much as it does on policies. Leaders can reset citizens' expectations and build trust. Gandhi chucked his barrister's suit, donned white garb, and led a 240-mile (386-kilometer) march to the sea to make salt. Nelson Mandela put on the jersey of the Springboks, South Africa's historically all-white national rugby team, and 65,000 fans chanted “Nelson! Nelson! Nelson!” There it was: a newly-democratic nation united under the banner of equality and mutual respect.

So, the skeptics are wrong: nations have been deliberately built in the past, and they will be again. But the task is much more subtle, difficult, and time-consuming than naive optimists from abroad ever guessed. The men – and especially the women – of Afghanistan will now pay the price. May an Afghan Mandela or Gandhi come their way sooner rather than later.

ANDRÉS VELASCO

Andrés Velasco, a former presidential candidate and finance minister of Chile, is Dean of the School of Public Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is the author of numerous books and papers on international economics and development, and has served on the faculty at Harvard, Columbia, and New York Universities.

ADNAN KHAN

Adnan Khan is Academic Director of the School of Public Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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