

Ervin Laszlo: HOLISM IN NATION-STATE POLITICS

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The current and now standard philosophy of contemporary politics and politicians is seriously outdated. It is based on an obsolete concept of the human being and human society. Seldom overtly acknowledged, it is this obsolete concept that underlies contemporary nation-state politics. Its operative assumption is that the universe is a chance-created mechanism, and life a random accident. The specific features of living species result from a succession of accidental events in the history of physico-chemical and biological evolution on this planet, and the features of human beings are due to the resulting fortuitous combination of their genes. The human mind is dominated by reproduction-oriented drives for sexual, self-preserving, and related forms of gratification. There is no higher order or guiding principle either in the natural or in the human world: force prevails, and is employed by those who possess it first of all to create wealth and power for themselves.

This is a mistaken and now seriously counterproductive concept of nature, life and society. The widely discussed ideas of Newton, Darwin, and Freud are held to be the basic sources of a scientific view, but this view has been overtaken by new theories, findings, and approaches in the sciences. The truly scientific view of the universe is not that of a lifeless, soulless aggregate of inert chunks of matter. As cosmologist James Jeans said over a hundred years ago, in the scientific perspective the universe is more like a great thought than like a great rock. Life is not a random accident, and the basic drives of the human psyche include far more than drives for survival, sex, and other elemental gratifications.

The influential and until recently seldom seriously challenged pseudo-scientific view has seriously negative consequences. It creates separation and self-centeredness, encourages all-out competition, and warrants the pursuit of individual, corporate and national interests without concern for the consequences for others. The pernicious effect of acting in light of the dominant view is particularly evident in the field of nation-state politics. Persisting with the dominant philosophy creates an international system replete with conflict, separation, all-out competition, and violence. Contemporary nation-state politics needs a new basic philosophy: a new paradigm.

The operative principle of the new paradigm can be derived as the practical, humanistic implication of the current findings of the natural sciences, in particular of quantum cosmology, quantum biology, and quantum consciousness research. We can resume it in a single sentence: what is good for the whole, is good for the part. Applied to politics, this means what is good for society as a whole, is good for every person and every structure and organization in society. If a politician is to represent the interests of the individual and his or her community, he or she needs to be concerned with the interests of the system in which that individual is embedded. The embedding system comprises human individuals, their organizations and institutions, as well as nature.

The still dominant but now outdated political philosophy differs from this conception. In its humanistic expression, it maintains that the good of the individual coincides with the good of

society. This is the philosophy of a liberal ethics where the individual is free to pursue his/her own interests without concern for the rest—as long as he or she acts within the formal or informal morality espoused in society. The updated science-based philosophy leaves the above coincidence open as a possibility, but does not affirm it as an invariant rule. The invariant rule is the converse: the good of the whole is always and necessarily the good of the individual part. This is the principle of holism applied to society: the core of what needs to be developed as a new paradigm for politics.

Traditional cultures have been mainly holistic: they they respected the good of the whole. In the context of society, their whole comprised individual human beings as well as their kinship and socio-economic communities and structures. It also included nature: the life-supporting environment. Traditional people recognized that what is good for their tribe or community in the embrace of nature is good for all members of their tribe or community. Modern nation-state politics disregards this principle. It extols the individual and his or her interests, and is not primarily concerned with the system in which that individual pursues its aspirations.

The operative principle of contemporary politics is the contrary of the principle of holism. It is based on the following “unholy” assumption: that what is good for the individual (or the individual business, community, state, or nation), is good for the system in which that individual (or business, community, state or nation) is situated. Humanistic politicians consider that if something is good for the people it is also good for their country—and very likely for other countries as well. Authoritarian politicians see no need to spell out why this should be so, but if pressed they may cite Adam Smith’s doctrine of the indivisible hand. This is the hand of the market, it harmonizes the interests of the individual with the interests of society.

However, the equitable working of the market presupposes a level playing field where all competitors have equal chances and opportunities. Such a playing field is not given in today’s world, and in consequence the invisible hand often turns into an invisible foot that kicks the poor and powerless but spares the rich and powerful. Resources—whether money, influence, or arms—tend to accumulate to the rich and powerful and create inequality and injustice. Contemporary nation-state politics “sub-optimizes” the world economic and political system, breaking apart the coherence of the system. It creates separation, conflict, and unbridled competition.

The dominant principle underlying contemporary nation-state politics is has been clearly enunciated in a U.S. congressional hearing by Charlie Wilson, then president of General Motors. Wilson famously told the Senators, “what is good for General Motors is good for the country.” Thus GM can pursue its own interests without concern for other people and other companies. Its good is the good of the U.S., and in the final count the good of the U.S. is the good of all the countries of the world.

The above unholy principle was adopted by Nazi Germany. It was expressed in the slogan, *Deutschland ueber Alles* (Germany above all). German politics was uniquely concerned with the good of the German nation, and not concerned whether this is the good also of other nations. In a less aggressive but equally potent form the same principle was expressed by Donald Trump when he declared, “America first.” Acting on it has lead the Trump

administration to withdraw the U.S. from the Paris Accord on Climate Change, reject wide-based multilateral cooperation with other states in the Western Hemisphere, engage in trade-wars with China, and reduce and even stop support for international organizations such as UNESCO and the World Health Organization.

Sooner or later, the pursuit of the unholy principle produces a backlash. At the end of WWII it created disastrous conditions for Germany, and if pursued (which at this time seems unlikely), it would produce disastrous consequences for America as well. A new paradigm is needed in nation-state politics; one that respects the interest of the whole system of societies, and recognizes that doing so is in the best interest of every society in the system.

Adopting the paradigm based on the philosophy of holism in politics is a daring move, but if major breakdowns are to be averted, it needs to be contemplated. It is in our most enlightened shared interest to realize that when it comes to nation-state politics, it is not America, not Germany, and not Britain (as the pro-Brexit advocates are beginning to realize) that comes first. The whole system of human societies on the planet together with the natural ecology in which it is embedded is what comes first.

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