

## Dissecting a Democratic Illusion

*A World Beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation-State* by Pierre Manent. Trans. Marc LePain. Princeton University Press, 2006.

A former assistant to Raymond Aron at the College de France and a founder of the quarterly *Commentaire*, Pierre Manent teaches at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. *A World beyond Politics?* is his third contribution to Princeton's "New French Thought" series. In his earlier works, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (1994) and *The City of Man* (1998), Manent undertook an indirect defense of modern liberty against its critics. Intellectuals and students, mostly on the Left, had asserted that Western democracies are but a façade of ideologies masking the reality of power. On this view, political action must be undertaken to unseat the merely "legitimate" or "procedural" regime, and to install (or "liberate") "authentic" ways of life. Rather than mounting a directly political response, Manent investigated the philosophical foundations and sources of the liberty inherited from the moderns. His basic point was that one cannot critique what one does not know. For his part, Manent would provide a philosophical history of modern liberty, with all of its complications, reversals, and paradoxes.

Now that the 1960s generation has grown up, its educated classes stand ironically at

the helm of the very institutions they once sought to subvert: universities, states, bureaucracies, and business corporations. While somewhat chastened by the events of 1989 and the demise of Communism, these '68ers, as they are known in Europe, still are drawn to a utopian view of liberty. For Manent, they have not reconciled themselves to the resources and constraints of the kind of liberty envisaged by the moderns. Where we once witnessed efforts to create a revolutionary political order, we now see a wholesale retreat from politics as something unworthy of and unnecessary to our liberty. In the span of a single generation, we have seen the passage from a hard to a soft utopianism.

In *A World beyond Politics?* Manent deeply criticizes the quest for a completely depoliticized order of liberty. It will prove to be his most controversial book, among other reasons because his touchstone is the fifty-year project of constructing a united Europe. In eighteen short chapters, Manent discusses issues which, for Europeans at

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least, are almost beyond the pale of public discourse. He argues that the European Union fails to provide a properly political order even as it strips away the political forms of its members; that rivalries between nations are an ordinary aspect of political vitality; that refusal to admit properly political uses of war blinds Europeans to the function of politics in achieving peace; that the political constraints necessary for liberty cannot abide the transformation of lifestyle choices into universal human rights; that globalized commerce and communications are not sufficient to tame and orient human liberty. Along the way, Manent treats the problems of anti-Semitism, Nazism, Communism, homosexual marriage, and religion. It is necessary at once to add that he is never strident; very little of the book will strike an American audience as at all polemical.

The French edition of *A World beyond Politics?* was published in 2001. Many things have happened in the meantime: wars, broken alliances, economic instabilities, and of course, the failure of Europeans to ratify a constitution. But Manent's basic thesis does not need revision. It can be put as follows. Europeans are trying to separate the democratic regime "from any underlying conception of what it means to be a people." Europe thus becomes a new substance underlying its national and territorial accidents. This substance can be called a civilization or a culture without borders or national rivalries. Above all, it is a culture without war.

This Europe is a bodiless sovereignty, a rule-based order serving things both higher and lower than political life. Rules higher than the polity, of course, would be human rights. Rules lower than the polity include the laws of commerce and the global infrastructure of communications. "The feeling grows that politics is an oppressive and archaic superstructure that should be abol-

ished or restrained." European polities, which were the seedbed of the nation-state after the Westphalian treaties of 1648, have embarked on a "methodical process of self-erasurement."

What are the causes of this flight from the burdens and mediations of political order? The most obvious causes can be seen in historical terms. After more than a century of wars, civil wars, and relentless national energies exercised upon all of the institutions of everyday life, the European nation-states after 1945 began to fade into a permanent frost of political exhaustion. Beginning with the Great War, historic rivalries and wars cast into doubt, indeed into shame, the *amour-propre* of nations. Manent compares the Great War to the Peloponnesian War, from which the political form of the Greek city-state never quite recovered.

The disasters of the nation-state, however, are not sufficient for explaining the contemporary flight from politics. We must also consider globalization and the communications which make plausible the idea (for Manent, the illusion) that the nation-state is an outmoded framework for human flourishing. Today, we can begin to imagine an economic and monetary unity without a "body," without a real political "domain." Indeed, a "domain" today more often denotes a "site" in cyberspace than what our ancestors, ancient and modern, meant by a political realm. The idea of a spontaneous order, or what Hobbes called a "mere concourse of wills," has long been a dream of the democratic mind. Commerce tames the excessive veneration given to the state, redirecting energies to the non-political spheres. From Warsaw to Seattle, such an order would seem to be in the hands of every teenager holding a mouse in front of a computer.

Manent's account of globalization, commerce, and technology is very illuminating. The ancient notion that a polity is a

*communitas perfecta*, something self-sufficient for human well-being, is bound to wither when the material factors governing our daily reproduction of the human world are not determined (or so it seems) by real material boundaries, beginning with the territorial “site” of politics. “Globalization,” Manent writes, “diminishes the feeling of economic self-sufficiency that until recently was inseparable from what defines a nation.” On the other hand, “the progress of world communications arouses, if I may say it, a sort of universal discontent with one’s own particular culture.”



Pierre Manent

In two important chapters on the human body, Manent explains that *political* disembodiment is only one facet of the problem. The word “nation” of course comes from *nascere*, to be born. For pre-democratic peoples, begetting and filiation are the elementary locus and analogate of human order, for in the household the material boundaries of human identity have their strongest natural roots. But modern philosophers taught that we are in fact born free and equal into a “state of nature.” Our humanity is universal from the outset, wholly manifest in each person. Although the modern philosophers also taught that the state of nature makes all the more necessary the construction of a political order—man *reborn*, as it were, through the social contract—this is not the moral of the story today. The structures of politics now must serve an abstract and universal “man,” who is only incidentally situated as a citizen—or, for that matter, as a spouse, or a child.

“In reality,” Manent proposes, “our society is the one in Western history that most systematically reduces the role of the body.” The erosion of the political therefore corresponds with the erosion of the family. This

point can be made without rehearsing controversial political slogans. The natural world is not homogeneous or equal, but rather teems with differences and inequalities brought together in marriage and family. Though the state is an artificial creature of the human will, states themselves are not homogeneous or equal. A specific territory, upon which ensue differences of size, resources, and opportunities, makes equality impossible for nation-states. Can democratic man ever respect that which is not equal? This question cuts downward toward the family and upward toward the nation-state. Embodiment, whether natural or artificial, scandalizes democratic man. Indeed, it would seem that only the non-democratic part of our soul can ever truly love the nation-state.

In sum, the disastrous wars made the traditional boundaries of states seem dishonorable—something unworthy of, and dangerous to, our humanity. “One could say that after the wars of the twentieth century nothing can subsist any longer or retain its validity in the political order except the universal.” At the same time, commerce and communications make plausible a democratic regime without borders and without any coercion, except a disincarnate “rule of law” that speaks in the name of humanity rather than a real people, politically constituted.

More penetrating still are Manent’s reflections on the nature of the democratic regime as such. He shows that the democratic spirit always contained, *in nucleo*, both options. That is to say, organization of democracy into the political “form” of the nation-state and the potential for dissatisfaction with any political forms.

Manent argues that pre-democratic societies were organized according to “alter-

nation,” which is to say various modes of ruling and being-ruled in turn. Even medieval natural law, emphasizing “participation” of the human mind in the eternal law, followed this model. But modern liberty is organized on “separations.” In order to understand the “form” of the classically modern nation-state, we need to understand these separations. Manent discusses six. First, the separation of professions and expertise. Second, the separation of powers, which in limiting the power of the state induces us to turn our attention to other domains where our power is relatively harmless. Third, the separation of church and state. Fourth, the separation of civil society and the state. Fifth, the separation of the represented and the representative, which filters power and multiplies interests. Sixth, the separation of facts and values, or science and the human world. The democratic nation-state provides the framework for these separations, and thus achieves a kind of unity suitable for human liberty.

The price paid for this order, however, is that democratic man is “never quite whole anywhere.” How can such a political system work and remain stable over time? Manent tries his best to defend the nation-state. He reminds us that its framework did in fact supply an order agreeable to liberty. The separations, properly organized, make possible a special solidarity between citizen and citizen precisely because the state is not a tool of power serving a single interest. Along with Tocqueville, he insists that the separations are not the last word, for democratic man evinces a sympathy for and recognition of others as equals. The nation-state, moreover, fosters the scientific, technological, and commercial energies needed for human development. Finally, because the state has Man rather than God or Nature as its author, a successful state can be a subject of honor as the human achievement of a particular people. Ideally, the nation-

state provides the best available way to hold together the universal and particular aspects of the democratic regime.

If I understand Manent correctly, every tendency to the erosion of political “form” that Europe now experiences is something built into the democratic regime itself. And in the end, Manent mentions three great emancipations which together would seem to poison any hope for the recovery of vibrant European states. First, the emancipation of commerce, which binds individuals but not citizens. Second, the emancipation of right, which allows judges to rule directly in the name of humanity. Third, the emancipation of morality which, detached from its social framework, becomes “pure human rapport of one human being to another.”

Commerce, right, morality: these are the three systems, the three empires that promise the exit from the political. Each in its own form: commerce, according to the realism, the prosaic character of interests rightly understood; right, according to the intellectual coherence of a network of rights rigorously deduced from individual autonomy; and finally, morality, according to the sublime aim of pure human dignity to which one is joined by the purely spiritual sentiment of respect.

These three empires are logically consistent not with a political order, but with a state of nature. We shouldn’t be surprised, for Manent tells us that the “separations” imply that the political zone is an “empty place,” and that we should look for our happiness elsewhere, in mediations other than the political. The neutral framework of separations guarantees that the full content of one’s humanity (one’s chosen lifestyle, the greatest artifact of modern liberty) cannot be adequately recognized in the political sphere. Surely, our cultural wars tell us that this is correct. How, after all, can the state *respect* what it cannot *recognize*? With exquisite understatement,

Manent concludes: “We are here at the heart of a great difficulty of our societies.”

In this, his most political work, Manent remains ever the subtle thinker. He puts distinctions into play and allows them to collide paradoxically. A story begun from one point of view is reversed and seen from another. Importantly, Manent does not mean to say that politics will disappear “without a trace”; rather, it will become “the instrument of these three great non-political realities.” “This,” he concludes, “is where we have arrived.” Perhaps so. Even Americans, who, for the time being, maintain a robust nation-state, will not need to

leave home to feel the gravitational pull of the great non-political empires of commerce, rights, and morality, all superintended by judges who speak in the name of humanity. The moral of Manent’s story is that the disembodied character of modern liberty will always provide fresh temptations to utopianisms, whether hard or soft. No political order will ever seem quite worthy of the liberty posited by modern democracy. But to revel in the liberty of the moderns while rejecting their sober assessment of the political framework needed for its realization does not promise a happy ending.

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