Jürgen Habermas has provided a valuable overview, necessarily compressed, of the contingent way in which the historically distinct ideas of nation and state came together in theory and practice. This account, which derives substantially from the historical sociology of Marx and Weber, serves Habermas as a point of view from which to consider the current challenges posed to the nation-state, notably by globalization and by the politics of subnational cultural identity. His main purpose is to ask how the nation-state can be transformed to provide a model and a machinery for supranational forms of governance, legitimation, and peace.

The argument covers much important material that could be fruitfully engaged, not least the argument that it is in the history of the nation-state that we might find clues to its future. But I will focus my own comment on just one dimension of Habermas’s ideas, which concern his normative intuition about what the history of the nation-state might offer to a world in which nation-states no longer monopolize sovereignty. Before I raise a few questions about the normative vision implicit in Habermas’s essay, let me say that I agree with much of what he has to say about the history of the nation-state, about the process by which subjects become citizens, about the tensions between nationalism and republicanism, about the contradictory tendencies evident in current processes of globalization, and about the absence of any clearly political forms of sociation that appear well-suited to the functional roles till recently played by the nation-state. It is precisely because there is much that is valuable in this essay that it is useful, indeed urgent, to engage in a critique of its main normative proposals.
As Habermas pithily puts it in his discussion of the unity of political culture in the context of a multiplicity of subcultures, “republicanism must learn to stand on its own feet.” By this I take him to mean that it must cease to depend on the artifice of national cultural homogeneity, which is plainly an invention. It is also a peculiarly dangerous invention, insofar as it frequently tends toward internal ethnic cleansing and external aggressiveness, both of which have been amply evidenced throughout its short history. As Habermas brilliantly observes, “From a normative point of view, the social boundaries of an association of free and equal consociates under law are perfectly contingent.” The organic conception of peoplehood (Volk) supplies the idea that the nation is somehow organically unified, thus necessary. Put another way, various organic/cultural theories of national peoplehood (whether based on soil, language, blood, or something similar) answer the question about why a particular group of national citizens draws any boundaries at all around itself.

Habermas thus wishes to solve a massive historical and conceptual problem. Can there be a group of citizens in the modern sense who “come together to regulate their common life by means of positive law” without relying on a prior or posterior sense of elective affinity based on organicist criteria? A part of Habermas’s answer to this question is stated briefly in this essay, though it has been more fully developed elsewhere. It consists of the proposal that what he calls “constitutional patriotism” ought to take the place of nationalism. By constitutional patriotism Habermas appears to mean a form of attachment to a constitutional order that is a particular national interpretation of more general—and widespread—constitutional principles such as popular sovereignty and human rights.

Faced with criticisms that this bond might be too weak for complex societies, Habermas appears to have moved to a stronger view of what it may require for constitutional patriotism to serve as a principle of attachment or integration: “Democratic citizenship can only realize its integrative potential—that is, it can only found solidarity among strangers—if it proves itself as a mechanism that actually realizes the material conditions of preferred forms of life.” In this enriched sense of “constitutional patriotism,” Habermas attaches a price tag to Charles Taylor’s “politics of recognition” (or something very much like it) and adds an argument about the “enjoyment of social and cultural rights” to the classic liberal core of individual civic and political rights. The historical examples Habermas uses to defend this fortified sense of constitutional patriotism come from the successful welfare states of post–World War II Europe before the recent phase of globalization.

Before I go on to engage Habermas’s effort to link this revised idea of consti-
tutional patriotism to the problems faced by the nation-state in the era of globalization, let me pause to ask some prior questions about the idea of constitutional patriotism. Here Habermas blurs the relationship between three dimensions of the politics of the modern nation-state: the problem of “legitimation” (a central issue in much of Habermas’s work, including his famous book on “the legitimation crisis”); the problem of “integration,” which is essentially a problem of logistics, power, and procedure; and the problem of what I prefer to call “full attachment,” by which I mean just that mysterious surplus of attachment which, in Habermas’s own words, appeals more strongly, for modern citizens, “to their hearts and minds than the dry ideas of popular sovereignty and human rights.”

Of these three ideas, the question of integration is tied up with Habermas’s views of the long-term functional evolution of the modern state and is not directly relevant to my main concerns in this brief comment. What is relevant here is that Habermas tends to conflate the problem of the “legitimation” of the modern state (which he rightly sees as a problem in the context of the desacralization of the modern political order) with the problem of patriotism, or of what I have referred to as “full attachment.” The problem of legitimation is in fact tied up with issues of consent, compliance, and the procedural recognition of the modern state by its citizens. The problem of full attachment (or patriotism or loyalty, in more common terms) involves something more than the imputation of legitimacy to a sovereign state by its citizens. Its surplus of affect (which is also the justification for using the concept of “full attachment” rather than the easily available ideas of patriotism and loyalty or, simply, nationalism) is more libidinal than procedural. Though Habermas is right to recognize that modern states test this surplus of affect through various forms of mobilization and conscription, there is nevertheless something here that exceeds the problem of legitimation.

The central issue here is one that yields no more easily to Habermas’s approach than to Benedict Anderson’s historiography of the nation-form. The question of why large groups of individuals united by some sort of republican commitment to a modern legal-political order should experience an order of attachment to each other and to the state-defined territory with which they identify, which allows them to kill and die in its name, is an unsolved puzzle. It is even more puzzling when we consider that (as Habermas notes) these individuals often have prior local or subnational attachments that have to be explicitly erased by national propaganda in order for nationalism in its strong form to exist. No theory of folk identity, however plausible, can account for the affective side of nationalism, since it is only through the vehicle of the nation-state that such theories come to be at all successful. Likewise, it will not do to assume or imply that the nation-
state simply continues to exploit the transcendent, religious, sacral mystique of just those orders which it has, in other respects, served violently to repudiate. In short, the largeness, historical diversity, and abstractness of the social relations encompassed (and valorized) by the modern nation-state make it difficult to understand the willingness of modern citizens to kill and to die for it. Thus full attachment is especially puzzling in view of the extent to which modern political orders require a virtually transcendental commitment to rules, procedures, and impersonal structures of authority, a feature that Habermas, following Weber, takes very seriously.

The puzzle of full attachment is impervious to three widespread and influential interpretive moves. Benedict Anderson’s important thesis about print-capitalism and the spread of nationalism from the Americas to Europe and then to the colonies (and the many subsequent extensions of this argument) does not offer any decisive breakthrough on this question, although it sheds important new light on the links between racism, imperialism, and cults of death. An offshoot of Anderson’s general theory, which links nation to narration, is also interesting and suggestive but only shifts the explanation of full attachment to the domain of mass mediation and narrativity. The third view, so widespread that it is hard to find an original author for it, is that modern nation-states produce this surplus of affect by various kinds of rituals and symbols (flags, holidays, commemorations, exhibitions, cemeteries, stamps, cenotaphs, and the like). The trouble with this latter approach to full attachment is that it assumes, wrongly, that rituals stoked by calculation can mechanically produce durable collective effervescence. This alchemical view of ritual—which is frequently underwritten by an equally unspecified sense that any sort of national propaganda simply works by definition—finds little sustenance in any close analysis of actual ritual processes.

The idea that modern nation-states borrow the mystique of some form of primordial folk identity to complement the force of democratic legitimation provided by the voluntary association of free and equal citizens is not entirely wrong. But it obscures what may be a more disturbing mechanism by which the modern nation-state secures what I have called full attachment, apart from any claims to legitimacy. Full attachment, rather than coming from an authentic prior sense of shared community (whether based on language, history, soil, or some other primordium), might actually be produced by various forms of violence instigated, perhaps even required, by the modern nation-state.

This proposal reverses the argument made at a crucial point in Habermas’s essay, although it draws on much of the same evidence. Habermas implies (and
many other theorists of nationalism would agree) that the modern nation-state is able to mobilize, conscript, and deploy its citizens in warfare (or preparation for it) because it already has some prior (and plausible claim) to full attachment. But a more parsimonious explanation would be that the modern nation-state requires various forms of violent mobilization in order to “produce the people” (in Bhabha’s terms) and, in Foucault’s terms, to deploy the techniques of modern governmentality (census, mapping, sanitation, surveillance, incarceration). Put more simply: Violence (internal violence associated with ethnic cleansing; blander Foucauldian techniques of surveillance and schooling; and external violence associated with expansion, empire, and colonialism) produces full attachment, rather than the reverse. This is a different approach to the problem of state-sponsored military adventures than the one Habermas notes when he speaks of the misuse of nationalism by political elites, as a technique for the diversion of social tensions associated with capitalist expansion and empire.

On this view, even a fortified theory of constitutional patriotism (tied to a political economy of recognition) cannot supply what Habermas is rightly seeking: a peaceful, nonpredatory basis for full attachment. If my theory of state-sponsored violence as being the historical prerequisite for full attachment, rather than its product, is correct, then we face two possibilities for solving the problem of full attachment in the era of globalization, the subject of the last few, highly suggestive pages of Habermas’s essay.

Habermas’s characterization of globalization, drawing largely on Giddens, is a reasonable general account. He is certainly right to argue that as supranational processes steadily erode the sovereignty of nation-states, some sort of transformation in global systems of governance will be required. He furthermore implies that, given the insecure basis of many national sovereignties, traditional international legal and economic arrangements are unlikely to be effective and that the United Nations and its affiliated organizations show few signs of supplying effective supranational forms of governance, much less of allegiance. As I understand his argument, Habermas appears to support the transformation, rather than the abandonment, of the nation-state, mainly as a means for providing positive, voluntary, and peaceful forms of supranational consociation. In the absence of such forms, Habermas rightly argues that we will enter an unpredictable and unregulated form of supranational politics, dominated by the unfettered play of large-scale global organizations unattached to specific socio-moral communities. In other words, Habermas wants some sort of moral counterpoint to the unfettered play of global capital, and he believes that, even though the era of national sovereignty may be coming to an end, some form of constitutional patriotism may be
salvageable and applicable to the building of morally and socially meaningful lifeworlds in which politics, of some positive sort, can continue.

I am in sympathy with Habermas’s quest for peaceful forms of supranational politics which might provide the sort of glue that nationalism provided for the nation-state in an earlier era, but minus its built-in violence and artifice. I have no superior alternative to offer and much sympathy with the formulation of the problem of supranational politics in the era of globalization. However, given my skepticism about even the strong form of constitutional patriotism (which Habermas somehow appears to think is mutable into some viable and peaceful form of supranational attachment), I would suggest a line of thinking that departs more radically from the conceptual architecture of the modern nation-form.

Habermas’s model, while recognizing the crisis of sovereignty that besets not just individual nation-states but the very system of nation-states, nevertheless assumes the logic of the nation-state as the central form of articulation for modern politics. Indeed, he notes in the first part of the essay that the telos of the modern nation-state is based on processes of abstraction, integration, and rationalization that have important functional virtues which can be structurally expanded and further abstracted in the era of globalization. This mode of thinking continues to see meaningful forms of translocal political association as nonoverlapping, formally equal, spatially bounded envelopes containing meaningful clusters of citizens, cultural loyalties, resources, and legal-political procedures for the provision of justice and the monopoly of violence.

However, as I have argued at greater length elsewhere, we may need to abandon precisely the idea that space, cultural identity, and distributive politics need to be contained in formally equal, spatially distinct, and isomorphic envelopes, the design which undergirds the architecture of the modern state. In the modern system of nation-states, international governance normatively relies on a single and homogenous set of units—nation-states—which inspire and negotiate all forms of supralocal political interaction. But the world in which we live is formed of forms of consociation, identification, interaction, and aspiration that regularly cross national boundaries. Refugees, global laborers, scientists, technicians, soldiers, entrepreneurs, and many other social categories of persons constitute large blocks of meaningful association that do not depend on the isomorphism of citizenship with cultural identity, of work with kinship, of territory with soil, or of residence with national identification. This observation converges perfectly with Ben Lee’s essay in this issue of *Public Culture*. Here he points to the growing tension between efforts of the government of the People’s Republic of China to define a uniquely national cultural form of “Chineseness”
and the reality that a variety of other local public spheres involving Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and also the United States and Canada are producing a complex, interactive, delocalized sense of a pan-Chinese culture, uncontained by the mainland nation-state.

These kinds of de-linkage are clearly threats to the architecture of national sovereignty. But are they also sources for thinking of new forms of full attachment that are peaceful, politically productive sources of well-being and effective mechanisms for the distribution of security and dignity to large populations? Is it possible to think, in the first instance normatively, of a world in which the logic of citizenship and the logic of full attachment (what, in a problematic way, is produced in classical nationalism) do not require a single common political container, the nation-state?

Put another way, can we think of a global politics that admits of a heterogeneity of overlapping forms of governance and attachment (some national, some statist, and others neither), rather than one that requires a homogeneous set of interacting units? This sort of heterogeneity, which might involve negotiations between many kinds of large-scale political organizations, raises a host of practical problems about rights, wrongs, and peaceful large-scale governmentality. But the prior problem is conceptual and normative: Are we prepared to think of a world in which the procedural virtues of the modern legal-bureaucratic state and the moral and cultural needs of human groups for all sorts of attachments, including what I have called full attachment, are not played out in isomorphic, mutually exclusive, spatial-political envelopes?

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