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RESPONSE TO VEIT BADER

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IT IS VERY DIFFICULT to respond briefly to so complex and sophisticated an essay as Veit Bader’s. So I shall deal with only a few of the issues he raises.

First, why the focus, in my work and in that of so many other political theorists, on the (nation-)state? There are two arguments that I want to rehearse here, which Bader dismisses, it seems to me, without fully considering. The first has to do with security and the second with welfare. I acknowledge immediately that both arguments can be reversed: the state is often the enemy of its own people’s, and of other people’s, security and welfare. But this is necessarily the case: the power to protect is also the power to endanger. Would we do better to entrust this power to substate or transstate formations? Perhaps; I have never meant to exclude these possibilities. But the alternative formations will have to meet the same tests that states have at least sometimes met.

(a) They must guarantee the physical and cultural survival of their members. It is not because of some historical misunderstanding that Jews, Armenians, Palestinians, Kurds, Estonians, and Tibetans lay claim to and even fight for sovereign statehood. And once any of these peoples (or others like them) win a state, its purposes are bound to be the same as those of the preceding national movement: to assure the survival of this group of men and women and to foster and reproduce its cultural life. It is a hard question how one could “disentangle” a state of this sort from the nation for whose sake it was created. But I would put this question a little further down on the philosophical/political agenda than Bader does. After survival is assured, after these people are safely possessed of a public forum for their politics and culture, then we can consider how to redistribute state power in better ways.

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(b) The new formations will have to guarantee the welfare of the state’s citizens. When Bader calls citizenship a “quasi-feudal” privilege, he underestimates how hard it was to come by and how long (and still incomplete) the struggle has been to extend its benefits to the weakest members of the political community. It is a harsh fact of political life that the extension has been most successful, the welfare system strongest, in the most homogeneous Western states. America’s heterogeneity, and even its more or less successful disentanglement of citizenship and ethnicity, go a long way toward explaining the shoddiness of our welfare system. That is not a reason to regret either the heterogeneity or the disentanglement, but it just sets the terms of political struggle—and we still have a state and associated conceptions of loyalty, solidarity, and common purpose to appeal to in the course of the struggle. Where would the appeal go without these?

Consider the fairly extensive international redistribution now in progress—although unmentioned in Bader’s article—of jobs, factories, and investment from the first to the third world. The problem (for Bader and for me) is that this redistribution takes place under the aegis of capital and at the expense of the most vulnerable first-world workers. (I leave aside here its third-world effects: exploitation, pollution, and “trickledown” benefits.) Who can protect American workers after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)? Without an agent capable of and committed to such protection, further and better redistributive schemes would be very hard to defend. And for now, the state is the necessary agent: only it can mobilize resources and invest in new industries, job retraining, worker relocation, and so on. I can at least imagine the motives that might lead to this mobilization and investment; they are the same motives we have appealed to in the past in working toward a decent welfare state. In the absence of welfare and job protection at home, what motives does Bader believe will carry an internationalist redistributive program and lead people to accept the risks and sacrifices it entails?

Second, what does it mean to “disentangle” citizenship and ethnicity? This is a quintessentially American project, which I strongly support in America. But it is relatively easy here, in a society of immigrants that is, with the exception of the remaining Native Americans, no one’s homeland, and where all the ethnic (and religious and racial) groups are radically dispersed. Without these conditions, in countries where ethnic groups are territorially based and anciently established (however they were constituted and even if their ancient establishment is in large part mythic), the project is much harder, morally as well as politically. Some concrete disentanglements are obviously desirable, above all, breaking the link, wherever it exists, between citizenship and race or “blood.” But does Bader really mean to advocate a French state, say, entirely neutral with regard to the preservation and enhancement of
French culture? How would he go about, democratically, persuading the French to accept such a neutrality?

Of course, once neutrality was accepted, everything else that Bader advocates would follow—open borders, most obviously, since it would no longer matter who the citizens of this new France were. Indeed, it would not matter if the ethnic French (again, how this group was formed is not relevant here) became a minority in France, just as English Americans have become a minority in what they once thought was “their” America. (So this is not a “black prophecy,” but an indication of what Bader’s argument for open borders, when the only qualifications are prudential, actually means.) But is the moral and political relation of the French to France the same as that of English immigrants to America? Is all the world America? It seems to me that Bader does not take sufficient account of the different kinds of states in the world today.

These two arguments—first for what might be called the moral usefulness of the (nation-)state and the solidarity it generates, and second for the possible legitimacy of the citizenship/ethnicity or citizenship/culture connection—do not commit those who accept them to resign themselves to the “drastic inequalities” of international society. They only require that the fight against those inequalities begin within existing political communities and that it aim at the progressive expansion, but not the abolition, of existing solidarities. The policies that I would defend fall short of the radical alternative that Bader offers—either large-scale redistribution or open borders. But they embody partial versions of each: the admission of refugees to full citizenship; increased foreign aid, economic unification, and cooperation across borders; multilateral political and, if necessary, military interventions for humanitarian purposes; extensions of sovereignty to stateless peoples; experiments in regional devolution and transnational agency. And the motive for all this can only be the hope of ordinary people in their diverse national, religious, and political communities for their own survival and well-being, and for that of their neighbors, under conditions of peace and justice.

Michael Walzer is a professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. His most recent book is Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad (University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).