

Not by Leviathan alone

An exercise in
post-nation-state worlding

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Political Imaginaries: New Imperatives



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“The great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any very considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching this Leviathan”.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

“It matters what thought think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowleges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories”.

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

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Guidelines for readers

In this book I continue delinking from the consecutive, linear, logocentric and often positivist logic of conventional academic texts. The work weaves together essays, speculative fictions and dialogues/interviews, constantly shifting between explaining and showing as fundamentally different yet equally important modes of inquiry. Different writing registers do not follow one from another but address various aspects of the complex problem considered in the book, using several approaches. The impossibility of adequately presenting the main subject in a linear way called for a constant switching of media and genre registers, which is indicated with special milestones placed for the readers. I invite you to come up with your own reading paths and patterns, not necessarily following the sequence of the printed text. You can, for instance, start with reading only the more academically conventional essays, select the fictional trail or concentrate exclusively on dialogues. You can also easily mix and recombine these modes as you please. Unconventional parts of the text, interrupting the main narrative but also helping to see connections and relations that would otherwise be missed in a monotonous, single-genre, mono-episteme linear writing, are indicated as 'intermezzo' in the book. To make it easier for the readers to differentiate between the more traditional academic writings, short stories and dialogues, the titles of fictional pieces and dialogues are printed in bold italics in the contents.

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I warmly thank my long-term co-author and co-editor Tony Fry for our numerous and fruitful dialogues on various aspects of the current multi-crisis while working together on *A New Political Imagination. Making the Case* (2021), *Democracy and Crisis* (2020), and the international workshop *Hothouse: A New Political Imagination* (2022), as well as for his willingness to launch together a new book series on this important and understated topic.

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My special thanks go to a numerous, globally dispersed, volatile deep coalition of people for whom nation-state affiliation has never been the primary political factor of their worldview or self-awareness. It is with them that I have been engaged in an endless dialogue for many years, and their voices and faces are invisibly present in this book as I attempt to reimagine the world of the near future on some different foundations. This invisible community is the main audience for the book.

I am very grateful to the amazing editorial team of Vernon Press for initially believing in our series with Tony Fry on *Political Imaginaries. New Imperatives* and especially for being open to such unconventional, experimental and not so easily marketable texts as this book is.

I would like to acknowledge the two anonymous readers of the first draft of this book. Their constructive and well-meaning suggestions and comments helped make the manuscript more accessible and rounded.

Finally, paradoxically, I am grateful for this remarkable and challenging moment of transition in which I am living. This is far from a joyful change, one that promises no happy future, but it does open up additional opportunities for understanding and critical (self)reflection, which were essential when working on this text.

Prologue

This book is far from my first work, which was latently dictated by attempts to understand my own paradigmatic non-belonging to any national identities, both imperial and colonial in their genealogies, and a deep suspicion and mistrust of the nation-state as an institute, always grounded in the exclusion of others. As someone who ended up being born in a hostile outland (Moscow), who has lived most of her life as a migrant in different countries (Russia, Germany, the USA, Sweden), and who has been unable or reluctant to fit in the national cultures to which I belonged by blood (Circassia, Uzbekistan) or citizenship (USSR, Russian Federation, Sweden) I have been all my life interested in similar contradictory identifications in literature, art, cinema and philosophy. Many of my previous books and articles were based on the analysis of such works and sensibilities. This is my punishment as an eternal outsider whose connection with conventionally native cultures is purely speculative and rarely affective, but also my conscious choice of recognizing the advantages of this involuntary multi-perspectivism.

However, in this book, I would like to address directly the phenomenon of the nation-state which is, in my view, an institution that is dying out, and is unlikely to survive the challenges of the near future—economic, geopolitical, environmental and technological. I would like to reflect on potential alternatives, without which it is impossible to practice political imagination otherwise. At the same time, I am not going to rethink the nation-state as a political scientist. Rather, I am doing it with full decolonial skepticism in relation to disciplinarity as a symptom of epistemic coloniality. Therefore, I will not plunge here into an instrumental analysis of specific mechanisms and policies for implementing political alternatives to nation-states. Rather I will try to imagine how one could feel in the world put together differently, as much as this is still possible, and what can be done to make this coming political environment a better place for survival.

The gradual revival of geopolitics in its crudest forms in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century has put forward once again the old unresolved contradiction between the right of nations to self-determination and their right to defend their sovereignty. It is no news that this contradiction has and continues to be resolved in international politics and law in a hypocritical double-standard way depending on whose sovereignty and whose right to self-determination we are talking about, what powers stand behind the nations in question, if political scientists, public intellectuals and propaganda classify them as ‘democratic’ or ‘authoritarian’ and who benefits from maintaining or breaking the status quo that has existed until recently. The dark phase of

neoliberal globalization gives rise to conservative resentment and mass attempts to escape into the nation-state as an illusion of protection, order and security, although the mechanisms and institutions called upon to ensure this order, including international ones, have long ceased to fulfill their obligations and are in an extremely chaotic, if not terminal stage of a radical reassembly and possibly a breakdown. Even strong and rich states are not capable of or interested in providing protection and security to their citizens anymore since the original meaning of the contract between the state and its citizens has changed beyond recognition or evaporated. The state is decreasingly willing to ensure rights and increasingly exercises control, surveillance and violence. In many cases it seeks material and symbolic profits at the expense of its citizens and especially non-citizens. As John Gray points out in his recent critique of contemporary state as a new Leviathan, including in this category not just the so-called authoritarian states but also the alleged democracies where liberalism has long been replaced by profit-centered neoliberalism and where the liberal spirit has reached its apex and turned into its opposite, “the new Leviathans offer meaning in material progress, the security of belonging in imaginary communities and the pleasures of persecution” (Gray, 2023, p. 18).

Moreover, for a considerable number of nations or, to put it more cautiously, ethno-cultural groups, protecting their sovereignty or obtaining it continues to be extremely urgent and promises to become even more urgent in the coming decades, when the world is likely to disperse into a chaotic disorder with several power centers, each of which has its own zones of interest and claims to someone else's sovereignty. Most often, fighters for their national sovereignty or those who defend it, reflect on sovereignty in nation-state terms simply because modernity has left nothing else for the collective political imaginary, having wiped out, discredited and delegitimized all other options of political co-existence. But reproduction of the national liberation tropes from the nineteenth and even the twentieth centuries in today's or even more so in tomorrow's political reality can hardly bring any results except the purely rhetorical ones. And the global challenges ahead make this clinging to the political narratives of the past and inability to imagine alternatives, quite dangerous for the defenders of sovereignty themselves.

I am personally invested in this dilemma because I am concerned about the fate of Circassians, to whom I belong on my father's side of the family and whose tragic historical fate and uncertain future worries me for obvious reasons. The Caucasus is yet another of my paradoxical non-homes, my homeland where I was not born, although grew up, and the only place where I would like to go back to. Circassian history has been marked by centuries of wars with various enemies and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries mainly with the Russian empire whose idea was to take over the territories of

the north-west Caucasus, geopolitically and strategically important for Russia's inter-imperial squabbles with other actors. These were the lands where Circassian tribes mostly resided and that the empire planned to populate with settler colonists. The fate of Circassians was thus decided in the form of the Circassian genocide (still not recognized by Russia, although recognized by Georgia and recently by Ukraine and potentially Lithuania), with the physical elimination of the majority of population, deporting of the remaining fraction to the Ottoman empire and displacing and distributing the handful of those who had submitted to Russia into reservations (Richmond, 2013). My childhood was spent in one of the military fortresses, which was later turned into a village, then a town, that in the first decades of the twentieth century became the capital of an autonomous republic assigned for two North Caucasus ethnic groups artificially settled together. The colonial origins of this city were still way too obvious even when I grew up in the 1970s and early 1980s. Circassian diaspora in the Middle East, including not only Turkey but also Syria, Jordan, Israel and many other countries throughout the world is one of the largest among the stateless nations. For we are stateless as no one would seriously consider the puppet Soviet autonomous republics or current strange political entities in the North Caucasus among which the remaining Circassian population was artificially divided through imposing on them centrally designed identities, literacy and culture, to be full-fledged states. Circassian flag over the parliament does not mean having sovereignty or the right to self-determination.

The events of the last two and a half decades show that the Russian Federation is no longer interested in supporting even the superficial manifestations of cultural, economic, social and any other development of the North Caucasus or any of the Circassian republics in particular, methodically curtailing educational and research projects, keeping the population on the verge of physical survival and continuing to place representatives of the comprador colonial pseudo-elite at the head of the republics. In these colonial outskirts of the half-collapsed Russian empire, the demands for loyalty to the metropolis are much higher than in Moscow. Russia seeks to make the Caucasus indistinguishable from other regions with a predominantly ethnically Russian population by means of forced and accelerated Russification and the final erasure of indigenous cultural and linguistic identities. Therefore, Circassian scholars and activists involved in the study and preservation of national culture, history or literature, are labeled terrorists and extremists and often end up in prison, just as in Soviet times they were convicted under the article of 'bourgeois nationalism' if they went beyond the framework of theatrical Soviet multiculturalism.

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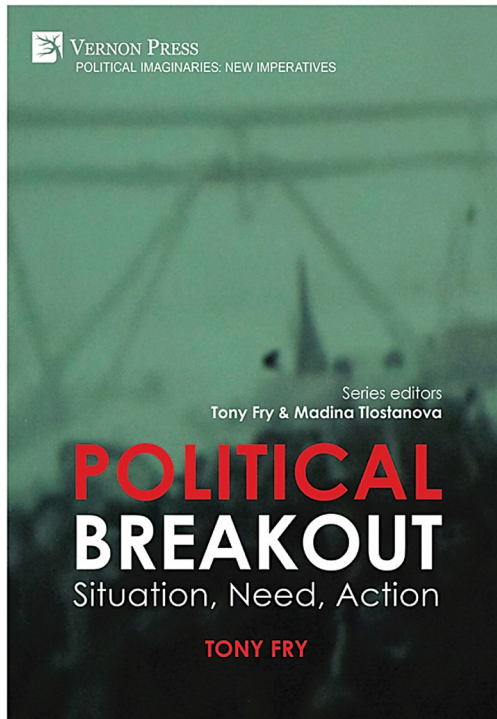
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