

# Chosen Polities (stub), Parts I and II

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## I.

Strictly speaking, nation-states comprise both a *nation* and a *state*. Loosely interpreted, the “nation” component can mean a *people*, or even more loosely, a *population*. However, the meaning of nations remains bound up— both etymologically and effectively— with birth or natality. As it’s conceived and constituted, a nation is a population conjoined through the bonds of filiation rather than the bonds of association. Even where nationality avoids definition by ethnicity or consanguinity, it’s usually still conferred by birth or inherited from parents, rather than being chosen, earned, or assigned after birth. And this is a strange paradox in the modern nation-state: that modern nationality arose in parallel with a political discourse that was simultaneously delegitimizing the political privileges of birth. How then was nationality ever so tightly wedded to citizenship? Was one set to temper the other? We would have expected that the filial or familial impress of nationality would have been undercut by critiques, from theorists like Thomas Paine and John Locke, that vigorously distinguished the familial from the political relation. But no. While domestically we worked toward a conception of citizenship based (theoretically, at least) on “man’s free association with man,” globally, the political map has become scarcely distinguishable from a geographical caste system. This is embarrassing, to say the least.

Nationality *can* be conceived in terms other than filial or ethnic relations. It can be formulated around a “shared” language, culture, or experience, as it is in the work of Johann Herder or Benedict Anderson. However, these formulations are simply not our legal or political reality, which only in exceptional cases considers the languages one speaks, the experiences one undergoes, or the cultures one participates in. These are entirely secondary, because they follow that defining event of nationality: *birth*. Through the conjunction of nation and state, then, modern statehood is formulated as a social contract that is *entered into involuntarily*— without, in fact, even the legal capacity to consent. Minors can’t legally rent a hotel room but every newborn signs a contract that determines much of the legal and political status for the rest of their lives. Our free political association is, in its largest units, not free but predetermined at birth. How do we then create large-scale polities modeled upon association rather than filiation, choice rather than predetermination? Could there be “culture-states” that are not expansionist or imperial in the manner of Rome or European colonialism? And what problems arise with large-scale chosen polities that are absent or muted in the nation-state?

Modern nationality is primarily a function of both parentage and geography. It marks an intersection of time and space, of bloodlines with a fixed section of planetary surface. Most nations don't offer birthright citizenship as the United States does, but populations and territories are nevertheless seen as "belonging" to one another. This is not intrinsically the case, of course. Nations could be rigidly filial but nomadic or cosmopolitan, and states could keep their fixed partitions of the globe but allow for elective or continually shifting populations. These are two distinct aspects of nationality that can be critiqued separately or in combination. However, what they share is that they both assign nationality *at birth*, either by the nationality of your parents or by the location of your entrance into the universe. Therefore we can either separate nationality from citizenship, or just as radically, reformulate nationality in terms other than natality. If birth no longer serves as a defining event, the authors discern three main alternatives for the assumption of nationality or citizenship: they can be *chosen*, *earned*, or *assigned* at some other point in life, sometime after we're born.

In all three cases, newborns are necessarily prenatal, or born into a nationality only as a placeholder— a sort of transnational homeroom— prior to choosing, earning, or receiving their nationality or citizenship. For without experience or language— or frankly much of a personality— it makes no sense to speak of a newborn *choosing* or *earning* their nationality, their people. It also stands to reason that before you can choose what kind of people you join, you must figure out what kind of person you are. Currently, we have this reversed: nationality precedes socialization or subjectivation. But we can easily imagine an opposite world, in which we only become citizens or assume our nationality upon adulthood or as a political rite. And this world probably makes more sense than our own, though not without its own sticking points. Part of socialization and education, in our parallel world, would be in preparation for this rite or pledge, just as our socialization or education today is in preparation for which university we'd like to attend or which career we prefer to suffer. Instead of asking whether we want to live on the opposite coast from our parents or study engineering, we'd be selecting our hemisphere and our forms of cultural and political life (See: Module 2).

This already happens for some, or in a certain stratum of society, but not without the deliberate legal and political inertia of nationality— uncoincidentally the same inertia or *habitus* of social reproduction once reserved for one's choice of vocation, partners, interests, and social status. This is after all the purpose of social taxonomies by birth: to assure the ineluctability of social reproduction, to somehow fix the social order as *a priori*— prior to experience and thus impossible to change. Like all conservative orders, its purpose is to lend the social the appearance of the natural. This "naturalness" or "unchosenness" of nationality does have its nobler aspects, as articulated by Benedict Anderson:

*"Something of the nature of this political love can be deciphered from the ways in which languages describe its object: either in the vocabulary of kinship (motherland, Vaterland, patria) or that of home (heimat or tanah air [earth and water, the phrase for the Indonesians' native archipelago]). Both idioms denote something to which one is naturally tied. As we have seen*

*earlier, in everything 'natural' there is always something unchosen. In this way, nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage and birth-era – all those things one cannot help. And in these 'natural ties' one senses what one might call 'the beauty of Gemeinschaft'. To put it another way, precisely because such ties are not chosen, they have about them a halo of disinterestedness.*

*While it is true that in the past two decades the idea of the family-as-articulated-power-structure has been much written about, such a conception is certainly foreign to the overwhelming bulk of mankind. Rather, the family has traditionally been conceived as the domain of disinterested love and solidarity.”*

Put another way, family and society both confront the same essential problem of co-existence: we are thrown into the cosmos together and, whether or not we like or *are* like one another, must *learn* to live and thrive in solidarity, and cling together against the darkness. The rosy “disinterestedness” that Anderson describes— that approaches an unconditional love for the political realm— does indeed break down once our politics are chosen, once we are bound to others for particular reasons or interests or upon certain conditions. However, the authors have some doubts about the disinterestedness of a nation-state system predicated upon the preservation of power relations. This disinterestedness would be more credible or acceptable if we humans were politically grouped *completely at random*, drawing straws like a kickball team, and being forced to pull together as a team, with what we might instead call the “beauty of *Mannschaft*.” Or if, in keeping with a Rawlsian conception of fairness, the political map were drawn out and filled in from behind a “veil of ignorance” by citizens unsure where they would ultimately find themselves on that very map. This was the essence of “*Passportation*,” a game once proposed by the authors, through which our citizenship would be re-assigned every decade by the spin of a colored wheel, with colors corresponding to a set of non-contiguous zones around the globe. As an added thrill, participants whose spin stopped on the black wedge of the wheel got to enjoy their next decade of their lives in a “troubled nation” or war zone such as North Korea, Syria, or Yemen. What would happen to the design of the international system if, instead of birth and inheritance, our citizenship or nationality were universally determined, every ten years, by an exciting round of *Passportation*?

Module 1: *Passportation* Board.



Module 2. *What Color is Your Flag? What Color is Your Parachute?*

*Xerox is seventeen years old and in the midst of her Pledge Year Crisis. She had always gravitated toward the languages and literatures of Euronorth, but then suddenly, only two years prior to Pledge, found herself helplessly lured by the West Pacific, politically and socially— especially by the Cooperative Ring stretching across Southeast Asia and the islands of Japan, Indonesia, and the former Philippines. As with most teens, her parents and teachers had encouraged her to travel extensively during Level 4, dabbling in the varieties of political and cultural life in order to make “an informed decision.” However, at this point, she honestly just wanted someone to force her hand. As Pledge Day approached, her inbox was overflowing with brochures from every league and polity you could think of, hardselling teens on music scenes, sports teams, the integrity of elected officials, celebrity endorsements, or the ease of life in their metropolitan areas. This clamor only made her indecision worse. After all, five years was a big commitment— and Level 5 would be her first time out of the nest. Her family wasn’t helping. They’d always been partial to the Opal League, but Xerox long suspected it was because of their plentiful and conveniently sunny locations. Her mom’s favorite actor was also Opal League, so there was that. But despite their good-natured nudges, Xerox’s mom and dad understood perfectly well that Level 5 was ultimately up to their daughter. After all, there could be no more essential a freedom than the freedom to choose your place in the world.*

## II.

The Peace of Augsburg (1555) established the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*—“*whose realm, his religion*”—proclaiming that the religion of any territory within the Holy Roman Empire would be left to the decision of its prince. Nearly a century later, in 1648, the Peace of Westphalia consecrated national sovereignty among European states—that states had the right to self-govern and negotiate their own international relations, without interference from other powers. Augsburg and Westphalia were, in essence, compromises that brokered accord on the Contingent by suppressing larger hegemonic ambitions, such as empire or a universal church. However, Augsburg did not establish anything like freedom of worship or conscience, as we think of it today. And in Westphalia, *national* sovereignty was certainly not construed as *popular* sovereignty. The self-determination laid out in Augsburg and Westphalia was for states and princes, and not so much for subjects. In the centuries since, some states have established the religious and political self-determination of its citizens, but unlike national sovereignty, this has not become a requirement for respect and membership in the Westphalian system. Consequently, we find ourselves in the dubious position of respecting national sovereignty even in the absence of popular sovereignty or any democratic self-determination—even for the most punishing and inescapable of dictatorships. As with Augsburg and Westphalia, the justifications for doing so are primarily in the name of political expediency and peace (or more accurately, *appeasement*). But, really, what could it mean to respect national sovereignty without the consent of the governed? Could it be anything other than a category mistake to act on a population—politically, economically, militarily—according to the caprice of a single person? Isn't this a bit like settling neighborly disputes by conferring with their family dog?

Modern autocracies are, therefore, doubly unchosen. First, populations of autocracies can rarely flee or emigrate; they are bound to their nation-states by birth, a bond enforced not only by their homeland but equally by all other countries as well. Second, condemned to live in their birth-country, they must accept the social and political order imposed on them by their unchosen leaders and overclasses. Interestingly enough, the Peace of Augsburg did allow subjects to emigrate to realms of their religious preference, permitting subjects some freedom of conscience through emigration, and the authors would like to see this right of emigration elevated to an international principle: that in addition to respecting national sovereignty only in the case of the consent of the governed (if not entirely popular or democratic), populations are always permitted to immigrate to the state of their choosing, or in the absence of territorially-defined states, to their chosen form of political life. Ideally, they should be able to vote by ballot, but failing that, by their feet. These two conditions should be enshrined in law as a minimum for membership in the global community, not merely for the hopefully obvious moral reasons, but so that international relations will tend

to precisely that: the relations between nation and nation. Even if this more credible relation is war or confrontation, it would be between neighbor and neighbor, rather than neighbor and the dog next door. The conditions vouchsafe a double legitimacy: first in the selection of a state or polity; then secondly, in the selection of leaders and forms of governance. At the same time, the conditions deal a double blow to illegitimate regimes, first by withdrawing international support for tyrannies and second, by depopulating unpopular forms of governance, and possibly, hopefully, quickly driving them to extinction.

This invites us to envision a strange political panorama, one in which states or political communities compete for members, rather than citizens for membership. Part of its strangeness is that this panorama encompasses both utopian and dystopian variants. No doubt we can detect a neoliberal tinge in the idea of “choosing” one’s nationality or citizenship as one would a phone company, and the usual dangers arise: that encoded in these “choices” would be the sacrifice of others rights and powers; that our political expectations could be negotiated away or undemocratically foreclosed in exchange for citizenship. At the same time, if our rights and powers were protected by a tough-minded legal framework, we might see “elective nationality” putting in motion a healthy competition for the better and better forms of political and cultural life. This framework would also have to protect against the inverse arrangement, in which citizens would have to “earn” their citizenship. This is already partially the case, to the degree that citizens are selectively welcomed and naturalized by “desirable” nations like the United States or those of Northern Europe according to income, connections, economic value, and so forth. However, if this was universally the case, if *all* citizens had to earn their citizenship—essentially by demonstrating their usefulness—this would likely lead to an incredibly perverse stratification of the globe, worse than it already is. In fact, while open to discussion, the authors have trouble picturing a political universe in which “earned” citizenship or nationality does not promote appallingly uneven development. Outside of exceptional cases, the right to choose must remain with populations rather than states.