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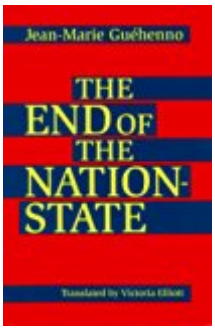
Jean-Marie Guehenno. *The End of the Nation State.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. 160 pp. $21.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8166-2660-1.



Reviewed by David Schoenbaum

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Take one of those world-class moral essayists who seem to flourish in France as nowhere else; put him in charge of the planning staff of a major foreign ministry, beginning in 1989. Then charge him - or, better still, let him charge himself -with preparing a position paper on the state of the world after the Cold War.

At least to readers of French, the result has been available since 1993, when Jean-Marie Guehenno's remarkable little book first appeared in Paris as "The End of Democracy." Since then, it has sold some 10,000 copies.

"There is a particular category of books whose authors just happen to act as 'social barometers,'" the author himself observes with some reason. "They felicitously express the intellectual disequilibrium of the moment, throwing ideas into the spotlight, just as politicians throw the spotlight on the social debate" (p. 82).

"Felicitous" expression may be stretching it. Short as it is, Guehenno's book is not a breezy read. The equation with politicians and social debate is also slightly off the mark. In fact, their declining candor, effectiveness, even relevance, are among the author's major concerns.

But "social barometer" is right on target. Guehenno rewards his readers with apercus, epigrams, and genuine insights on subjects as different as organized humanitarianism, designer fashions, European identity, politicized Islam, and Japanese semiotics. But his real contribution is the most elegantly comprehensive and economical big picture of our "intellectual disequilibrium" now available on a large and ever growing geo-intellectual futures market.

Our post-Cold War tristesse is largely a case of mistaken identity, according to Guehenno. Actually, nearly everything that currently ails us has been coming for decades. The Cold War just made it easy for us to look the other way.

With the end of the Cold War, we may seem to be back to 1945, before the Cold War emerged from the devastation of World War II; or in 1917, when the Russian Revolution catalyzed a new era of murderous ideological passions. In fact, Guehenno argues, the collapse of the Soviet empire hurls us back to the eighteenth century and the

triumph of "We the People." Ever since, for better or worse, people and peoples around the world, including Americans, have learned to regard the democratic nation-state as the primary, even the only, goal and measure of civic and sovereign identity.

The problem, Guehenno contends, is that what we took to be universal was specific to place and time. Of course, there is more to the post-Cold War world than Lebanon or Yugoslavia. Guehenno himself acknowledges South Africa as a hopeful case. There are more - Israel and Arab Palestine, Vietnam, Estonia, Ukraine, Northern Ireland, for example - where not only have bad things been averted, but positively hopeful things have happened. Yet in much of the world, the democratic nation-state is out of reach for geographic, demographic, cultural, and historical reasons. And even where it exists, plummeting voter turnout alone confirms that it no longer delivers the physical and psychic goods the way it used to.

On the other hand, this hardly means the return of the ancien regime or the Holy Roman Empire. What we face, according to Guehenno, is not deja vu, but a whole new ballgame. The real challenges of our times are, first, to understand the changed rules, and second, to write new ones.

The good news, in his view, is that the age of hierarchy and central government is behind us. Better still, the big passions, big armies, big wars, and imminent threat of the Big Bang that all went with it are probably behind us too.

The bad news involves not so much an emperor without clothes as an empire without an emperor. In our post-modern world of cellular phones, where a "formidable energy...carries the interchangeable units of the human Lego toward ever more contacts and connections," and "the malls have replaced the cathedrals" (p. 124), sovereignty is more and more permeable, and citizenship less and less fun. Public and private sector, internal and external security, crime and politics - all become harder and harder to separate.

What is to be done? The author's clear, bleak, and imperative answer is that we must begin by recognizing the novelty of our civic space, then do our best, difficult as it may be, to redefine our civic identity accordingly. "Those still unknown continents, ecology and bioethics" (p. 128), he suggests, might be a place to start.

Given the American passion for the latest French craze in virtually anything (except ice cream), the delayed appearance of Victoria Elliot's serviceable translation is a bit of a mystery. Yet ironically, the anglophone reader is a winner for that delay.

First, the U.S. title comes somewhat closer to what the book is about than the French original. Second, a new epilogue corrects the implied, but unintended, determinism that made some earlier readers suspect that Guehenno sees heroic resignation as our only course. It incidentally confirms that the author, now French ambassador to the West European Union, is a very professional foreign service officer and a shrewd political observer, not least of the United States.

Americans are no longer able to isolate themselves; absorb the world's tired, poor, and huddled masses; or dream of remaking the world in their own universalist image, Guehenno notes. The "vigor" of their "nationalism" therefore surprises "the old nations of Europe, which have too long a memory to ignore the dangers of nationalism, and too many 'national' habits of mind to feel the need to reaffirm their national identity at every opportunity." But this is precisely the problem, he quickly adds: "an identity that affirms itself without the underpinning of a great collective project runs the risk of hardening into fanaticism - arrogant self-affirmation taking the place of a true ambition" (pp. 137-38).

If nothing else, a passage like this might remind us what allies are still good for in our "new" new world. For all that we huff and puff about their protected farmers and TV markets, Guehen-

no's insight might also remind us why the French are among our oldest allies.

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