Somatic States

Confident in the belief we had successfully deconstructed the nation-state and exposed its fictitious nature, academics have been taken by surprise by the resurgence of “old fashioned” forms of geopolitics expressed through corporeal imagery, and an attendant obsession with borders. Almost in spite of ourselves, the state continues to hold our collective political imagination.

This lecture, based on a forthcoming book, is a study in the conceptual link between the nation-state and the body. Taking in earnest the everyday organic framing of political events and crises, routinely described through turns of phrase such as “nervous breakdowns,” “heart attacks” or “mutilation,” Somatic States argues that this corporeal language is not simply poetic or allegorical but that it reflects a genuine association of the individual body with the national outline, and that this identification has been greatly facilitated by the emergence of the national map. Evidently subject to ideologization and state manipulation, organic narratives have been historically deployed in support of nationalist, chauvinistic, and totalitarian ideologies, and metaphors of mutilation and dismemberment that permeate issues of territorial loss have proven highly effective. Yet, while these narratives undeniably demonstrate the discursive potency of corporeality as vector of patriotic affect, it is perhaps hasty to dismiss them as purely state-driven. In the turbulent times we are currently living through, it has become crucial to recognize the depth and vigor of patriotic attachments as a force that is harnessed by, but also extends beyond, state narratives and ambitions.

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