Kant, in his celebrated 1784 essay ‘Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View’, argued that of all the strands in the modern history of identity, cosmopolitanism has been most politically irresolute and socially irrepressible. It was in this essay that Kant made the connection between the social crises brought about by war and the impetus to political unification. It is an argument and text that resonates still:

though wars, through excessive and never remitting preparation for war, through the resultant distress that every nation must, even during times of peace, feel within itself, they are driven to make some initial imperfect attempts; finally after much devastation, upheaval, and even complete exhaustion of their inner powers, they are driven to take the step that reason could have suggested, even without so much sad experience, namely to leave the lawless state of savagery and enter into a federation of peoples.¹

Even as the concepts that structure Kant’s ‘unsocial sociability’ — ‘nation’, ‘federation’, ‘peoples’, and ‘cosmopolitanism’ itself — are all up for historical interpretation, the argument stands. Throughout the modern era, wars have inspired the radical rethinking of the nature of political sovereignty and inevitably, the meaning and significance of collective identities. Put another way, moments of crisis in modern world history have usually been accompanied by attempts to rethink the nature of subjectivity and thereby renovate political communities. We have tended to forget that nations as much as ‘world states’ are the imaginative offshoots of this conjunction of a sense of crisis and the possibility of reinventing identities, of federating peoples.

nations

It is an historical commonplace that in the nineteenth-century, the modern idea of the nation, and national identity, grew popular as an example of enlarged forms of sociability and political association. It is also true that the idea of the nation-state rose to the dizzy heights of its intellectual popularity in the nineteenth century in precisely this context of widespread political disillusionment and desperation. Two decades after Kant, the extraordinary *salonnière* and French writer Germaine de Staël, who had translated the German-speaking philosopher’s ideas for an unwitting French audience, elaborated and popularised a language of national difference, a Europe of nationalities, as the antidote to a Europe in crisis.

As many historians and literary theorists have commented, de Staël was, ‘one of the most important figures in the unfolding of early modern nationalism’, and of a ‘new Europe of nationalities’. What they rarely note is the provocation for this rethinking of the strategic significance of collective identity, namely the Napoleonic wars, and Napoleon’s seemingly insatiable appetite for conquest. De Staël rehearsed this theoretical link between crisis and identity during the French revolutionary period, when she argued that the *malaise* of cultural disorder and incessant political conflict of the revolutionary 1790s, could only be cured by the cultivation among Parisians of a new urbane kind of social subjectivity. Over the next decade, as Napoleon rose in the French military and political ranks, and eventually had himself crowned first Emperor of France, de Staël’s attention turned further in the direction of larger political units outside French borders and towards corresponding conceptions of political subjectivity. One of her most famous studies, *On Germany*, which deliberated the idea of Germany as a cultural entity and political unit, was begun in 1808, when the French army had annihilated Prussian military forces. Remarking on the absence outside France of an institutionalised sociability that might rally local men to successfully take up arms against Napoleon, de Staël confidently interposed the socialising potential of an unsocial national patriotism of a German kind: ‘In literature, as in politics, the Germans have too much consideration for strangers, and not enough national prejudices’. While individuals should abnegate themselves and esteem others, ‘the patriotism of nations has to be egotistical’. De Staël

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2 This argument about de Staël is drawn from: G. Sluga, “Passions, Patriotism, and Nationalism and Germaine de Staël”, *Nations and Nationalism* 15.2 (2009): 299-318.

encouraged the inhabitants of the politically unformed nation ‘Germany’ to cultivate a lack of respect for difference, ‘this holy antipathy for foreign moeurs, customs, and languages which fortify national bonds in all pays’. Similarly, in the novel Corinne or Italy (her most popularly enduring work published in 1807), opposition to Napoleon’s military ambitions among the myriad kingdoms and principalities of the Italian peninsula, provoked de Staël to configure an Italian national identity, and the political unification of territory she laboured to describe as homogenously Italian. Neither the Italian nor German nation that de Staël advocated was quite the federation of peoples in the interest of peace Kant imagined, but de Staël’s nineteenth-century readers thought of her as both the creator of nationalism, and of a cosmopolitan Europeanism.

Central to de Staël’s potent imagining of new communities and identities was the conceptualisation of a specific subjectivity: The fate of freedom was dependent upon the military defeat of Napoleon and successful opposition required driven soldiers inspired by national patriotism. De Staël went out of her way in contingent political circumstances to emphasise an emotional subjectivity that she believed underlay the requisite sociability for federating Germans and Italians.

Corinne, or Italy, like On Germany presented the selfless passion for patrie as fundamentally masculine. In the heterogeneous undisciplined and unsocialised principalities and kingdoms of the Italian peninsula, like those of the German-speaking lands, where there were no centralised governments or social institutions that could conventionalise gender roles, women were allowed free reign, rendering them the rivals of men, rather than the objects of their chivalry. The successful defence of liberty required a national expression of patrie built on a foundation of immutable and complementary gender roles and emotional subjectivities. States that had been able to successfully deter Napoleon (and here de Staël always thought of England) fostered gender roles that not only encouraged order, but the chivalric military code that also inspired the enthusiasm of their male citizens to their duty as soldiers.5

In the early nineteenth century, a widespread sense of political crisis was the imperative to change, and the provocation to radical reimaginings of individual selves and sovereignty in ways that also introduced culture or kultur to political life. The link between destabilisation and the new is itself not novel. Norbert Elias

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4 François Rosset, Écrire à Coppet: Nous, Moi Et Le Monde (Genève: Slatkine, 2002), 92-3.  
5 Ibid., 524.
long ago made the point that during the French revolutionary period that was
the backdrop to Napoleon’s rise, individuals became more conscious of their
personal identities as things they ‘owned’, connecting ‘physical consciousness,
individual identity and state formation’. In that same vein, Sarah Knott has re-
cently argued that the American war for independence played a crucial role in
raising the transnational status of sentimentalism and linking it to ‘new modes
of fraternity, citizenship, and nation’ at an important formative moment in the
history of nationalism. The turbulent decades of the late eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries encouraged the articulation of culture as political norms
and cultural subjectivities anchored in new forms of national identification and
gendered emotions. As the world grew closer, and the capacity for catastrophe
grew increasingly global, the political responses also grew more territorially and
conceptually ambitious. In the twentieth century, anti-national political forms,
from empires to world government, have had a similar conceptual trajectory,
premised as the remedy for war and conflict, as the model of ever-widening
forms of unification and federation of peoples.

internationalism

The 1940s international romance with cosmopolitanism took many political
and cultural forms. The obvious provocation was the Second World War, as
yet another conflagration in a half century of conflict and violence suffered
on an unimaginable scale, and now blamed on rampant nationalism and
in some cases its by-product, imperialism. In this period, crisis was a
commonly evoked word in discussions of ‘world affairs’, and the future of
colonialism.

Ironically, in this same setting, even empires appealed to their subscribers
as models of cultural cosmopolitanism, the antidote to dangerous national
chauvinisms (those same national chauvinisms de Staël thought so important
to induce). This was despite accumulating public consciousness in European
metropoles of the anti-democratic and racist foundations of colonialisms, and
despite the moral force increasingly placed behind claims to universal human
rights. In the intensified setting of crisis, even empire could be presented as a
model for federating peoples in a politically fragmenting world.

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In 1942, Hans Kohn, an expatriate of the Austro-Hungarian empire and the proclaimed ‘father’ of nationalism studies advocated the return of an ancient concept of empire affording to all peoples the equal protection of a common citizenship and of a rational law. ‘This Empire’, he argued, ‘would mean the end of all imperialism, it would be the consummation and the justification of the best tendencies inherent, though not realized, in the liberal imperialisms of the nineteenth-century’. In this same period, René Cassin, the French jurist and framers of the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights, envisioned the legal implementation of universal individual rights as the only safeguard from future annihilations of whole peoples even as he conceived of France as the manifestation of those rights and a cosmopolitan empire in which Jews, such as himself, and Muslims, white and black found politico-cultural convergence as French citizens and Patriots. Cassin’s true France (the equivalent in some ways of de Staël’s France sans Napoleon) was the historical fount of the human rights he promoted as both universal and respectful of cultural diversity.

H. G. Wells, icon of political cosmopolitans at this time, deliberated a narrower vision of cosmopolitan imperialism in the final years of the Second World War. Wells enjoined the necessity of a world state, even as he described himself as ‘a Cosmopolitan patriot’ who celebrated the ‘profound satisfaction and inspiration’ he found in Milton’s phrase ‘God’s Englishman’, whose works were as evident in the civilising mission of the British empire.

It was also in the setting of ‘crisis’, that the federation of European peoples, and the cultivation of a European political identity, began its practical course of invention. Even as this European ‘community’ was a response to the depleted moral and political status of European ‘civilisation’, it was also, like Kohn’s ancient imperialism, and Well’s British-inflected world state, evidence of the force of the impetus to rethink political sovereignty, and identity. World Community, European community, empire, each constituted historically-specific versions of the crisis-oriented contemplation of the federation of peoples.

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Between 1942 and 1948, the essence of this post-war mood, was neither imperialism nor nationalism, but rather an internationalism directed at rethinking the relevance of the territorial sovereignty of nation-states. Historians such as E. H. Carr argued that ‘the tradition which makes the drawing of frontiers the primary and most spectacular part of peace making has outlived its validity. The urgent need now is to alter not the location but the meaning of frontiers’. Arnold Toynbee proposed small city states under international supervision, or new federal conglomerates in the Balkans and Central Europe. Responding to crisis with new conceptions of sovereignty and identity was not only the provenance of intellectuals. The 1940s saw the rise of popular movements, a plethora of World Citizenship Clubs, World Federation organisations and societies, concentrated according to the relatively limited evidence we have, in British, United States and French settings. Most famously, Wendell Wilkie campaigned as a Republican candidate in the 1940 US Presidential election under the slogan of One World (he was beaten by a famous architect of the UN, the incumbent F.D. Roosevelt.) Even the Australian Minister for External Affairs, and supporter of the White Australia policy, H.V. Evatt commended the other kind of campaign run by Gary Davis, an American bomber pilot who in 1942 renounced his US citizenship, created his own world passport, and dubbed himself the ‘First World Citizen’. Davis lived and travelled as a stateless world citizen, often risking imprisonment. The mood was catchy. In England, the writer (and one-time Unescan) J. B. Priestley proposed an Order of World Citizenship.

The cosmopolitan tenor of this war-induced mood was captured in early 1945 by Mohandas Gandhi, in a public statement prior to the international meeting held in San Francisco that was to determine the shape of a new international organisation and inaugurate a new era of international democracy, Gandhi recalled a famous All India Congress Committee Resolution from August 1942 that had envisioned the solution to the problems of the modern world in ‘a world federation of free nations’:

Such a world federation would ensure the freedom of its constituent nations the prevention of aggression and exploitation by one nation over another, the

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Manu Bhagavan argues that Gandhi’s view of internationalism was more radical than the idea of communion of self-interested nation-states, ‘rather a siblinghood of equal states answerable both to their people and to the larger world community’. Certainly by 1945 the terms ‘one world’, ‘world community’, along with ‘world consciousness’, had come to the fore of political activity associated with the creation of the UN and its specialized agencies such as UNESCO. A new kind of world citizen was at the heart of this reimagining of world citizenship, and it was the UN and UNESCO’s job to make both a reality.

Even as intellectuals and activists responding to the crisis of world disorder posited empires, a European community, or a world state as the answer, the representatives of the organs of the UN envisaged a more egalitarian and inclusive internationalism that required the fostering of ‘world consciousness’ and ‘world citizenship’ — both never more than opaquely defined. The question what it meant to be ‘human’ came to the fore in the context of debates about universal rights, and the purpose of an educational organisation such as UNESCO. The UN directed UNESCO to interrogate the scientific consensus on race, and UNESCO took on itself the propagation of a ‘world community’, engaging social scientists to work on projects such as ‘tensions in international understanding’, and the rewriting of history textbooks.

Simultaneously, discussions took place in this international forum regarding the new ‘international man’. What type of individual might best suit the new cosmopolitan ideal – should they be loyal to an international institution, or was their patriotism still due to their nation? Were human beings naturally inclined to internationalism or to nationalism? Could, would, and should, new cosmopolitan identities be assumed, or did they go against the natural grain of being human, and even more importantly, who could make claim to being ‘human’, and sharing in the new ‘universal human rights’? Whose idea of being human should underwrite the description of those rights? (Could animals also have rights?) What was the best way of conceiving of human dignity, in terms of individual, or collective rights?

Such questions were taken as relevant to women as to the status of the colonised

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12 As cited in, Bhagavan, "A New Hope", 8.
13 Ibid., 17
populations of the world. Lakshmi Menon, a prominent Indian feminist, delegate to the UN, and erstwhile chief of the UN’s new Commission for the Status of Women, complained that women’s claims to human rights was still predominantly perceived as the reward for their national roles as mothers or fighters, rather than due to them on the basis of their individual human dignity. The significance of approaching rights as pertinent to humans identified as individuals with equal claims to human dignity, rather than as members of groups, was, on Menon’s view, also brought home by the introduction of cultural relativism into the debates on human rights.

In the early years of the UN, the colonial powers put the case that human rights could not be imposed on colonial subjects because of the political significance of their racial/cultural difference. Menon argued for the universal application of human rights as rights pertinent to all individuals, including colonial subjects ‘since it was there that violations of human rights were unfortunately most frequent’.14 She shared René Cassin’s perspective on the threat posed by minority rights to culturally-diverse societies for similar practical reasons:

I have a feeling that insofar as we pay any attention to the problem of protection of minorities, we are unconsciously undermining the basic concept of all human beings as born free and equal in dignity and rights. Discrimination could and should be fought with rectitude only as a violation of fundamental human rights and not by means of protecting the rights of groups (be they national, linguistic, cultural or religious), which try to resist the forward march of humanity to universal brotherhood.15

Cassin’s own view, developed in the context of the interwar exploitation by states such as Nazi Germany of minority rights issues, and their denial of the citizenship rights of Jewish Germans, was that the protection of human rights should trump nation-state rights; human rights should have international jurisdiction.

The Allies dropping of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the UN conference in San Francisco reinforced the urgency of creating a community that transcended national borders. This strategy appeared the most realistic path to permanent peace and a guarantee against future annihilation. Albert Einstein wrote in 1946 that it was necessary to create a world government able to solve conflicts between nations by judicial decision, rather than the resort to war and increasingly available weapons of mass destruction. Well into the 1940s

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14 Draft of first international covenant on human rights and measures of implementation, Meeting 294, Thursday, October 26, 1950, Lake Success.
15 Ibid.
and 50s, the political scientist Hans Morgenthau, a German-Jewish emigré from Nazism, and Romanian-born British citizen David Mitrany’s *A Working Peace System* echoed a general view of the obsolescence of the nation state:

> We proposed that the first step toward the peaceful settlement of the international conflicts which might lead to war was the creation of an international community as foundation for a world state. We find that the creation of an international community presupposes at least the mitigation and minimization of international conflicts so that the interests which unite members of different nations may outweigh the interests which separate them.16

Of course, none of this history of the conceptions of states and subjectivities invited by the sense of world crisis is straightforward. If you pick at its seams, the threads of multiple historical specificities and myriad contexts easily unravel. The pressures of ‘world crisis’ and ‘colonial crisis’ that provoked the San Francisco UN conference in 1945, hardened some British delegates in their views that ‘peoples’ at different stages of social and political ‘development’ had different claims to rights. The British delegate Lord Cranborne insisted on the relevance of the ladder model of political evolution, with black races on the bottom rung. After 1948, Cassin himself acquiesced (albeit unhappily) to instructions from the French embassy to argue for the culturally relative status of human rights in the more ‘backward’ colonies. This argument was baited with the assumption that each ‘culture’ has the right to determine the political and social status of its women. Despite the more radical efforts of Cassin, Menon, and others, the United Nations ultimately reinforced a world order organised around state members. Internationalist H.V. Evatt, who feared the impact of universal human rights and international jurisdiction, fought hard for racial determination of Australian citizenship and identity.

It could be argued that human beings lurch from one crisis to another. But only some crises have led them to the more radical re-inventions of states and subjectivities. And crises have also partnered more paranoid relapses into xenophobia (One World ultimately fell victim to the Two Worlds of the Cold War). On the one hand, the impetus to federation, to wider and wider forms of identification, has accompanied the greatest crises in modern his-

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tory, whether in the face of threatened conflagration, annihilation, or economic meltdown. On the other, these have been just as quickly forgotten.

At the end of the Second World War, an elaborate UNESCO project for the writing of a world history that would help prevent war and ensure permanent peace by giving all humans a shared history, and providing us all with alternative versions of the past – of our propensity as humans to imagine cooperation or to dream of global unification – soon fell apart. It began as the brainchild of Unesco’s first Director-General, the zoologist Julian Huxley, who saw the world history project in the mode of H. G. Wells: as an accumulating scientific narrative (drawing on natural history in the first instance) of objective truths about the past. It ended as a multi-vocal narrative, imploding into endless versions that established only the lack of agreement on the past, on any of its key moments of crisis or change, or on the form of human identity, or gender, that drove it (the class view of the Soviet Union? the capitalist man of the Americans? the world citizen of the cosmopolitans? Did women count at all?). Twentieth-century historians, like everyone else, without the sense of crisis or urgency to drive them, hitched themselves to the narrative driven by the engine of national identity, and put in motion the previous century, as the answer to an earlier crisis.