

## Nation-State as Symbolic Construct

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### Abstract

Research on nationalism has been especially preoccupied with those aspects of the phenomenon that are most destabilizing for existing institutions, thereby assuming that in the absence of violent upheavals, nationalism in established democracies is simply a *fait accompli* rather than a source of continued social and political change. In contrast, more recent studies have turned their attention to everyday forms of nationalism, arguing that the primacy of the nation-state as a unit of political governance and collective identification is continually reinforced – and sometimes subtly altered – through routine cognitive and affective orientations that are themselves products of institutional and ritual practices. This article provides an analytical overview of this literature, identifying its contributions, limitations, and potential for achieving a more complete understanding of nationalism in contemporary societies.

### Introduction

Nationalism is one of the central ideologies of the modern era. Not surprisingly, its hegemonic rise over the past 200 years has attracted considerable attention from historians, sociologists, and political scientists. Researchers have been especially preoccupied with those aspects of nationalism that have been most disruptive for existing social and political institutions, from the emergence of collective identification in newly forming nation-states and the struggle for statehood by minority groups to the sudden eruptions of nativism and xenophobia in otherwise stable societies. Much of this literature has been based on the implicit assumption that in the absence of violent upheavals, nationalism in established democracies is simply a *fait accompli* rather than a source of continued social and political change.

In contrast, more recent studies have turned their attention to everyday forms of nationalism, arguing that the primacy of the nation-state as a unit of political governance and collective identification is continually reinforced – and sometimes subtly altered – through routine cognitive and affective orientations that are themselves products of institutional and ritual practices. Such work has shown that meanings attached to the nation are not uniform within a given national community, but systematically vary across individuals and social groups and are associated with other socially and politically relevant attitudes and behaviors. This article provides an analytical overview of this burgeoning literature, identifying its contributions, limitations, and potential for achieving a more nuanced understanding of nationalism in contemporary societies.

### Traditional Nationalism Scholarship

The majority of research on nationalism falls within three broad traditions that investigate the origins of the nation-state as an institutionalized political form, the rise of new independent nation-states in the post-War period; and radical nationalist ideologies in contemporary societies.

Focusing on the historical emergence of the nation-state, the first approach is grounded in the observation that prior to the

eighteenth century, the political authority vested in statelike institutions was rarely absolute or uncontested. Most states ruled over diverse populations sharply divided along lines of ethnicity, cultural tradition, religion, and language. It is only with the rise of the modern nation-state and its constitutive ideology of nationalism that state sovereignty became codified in both a territorial and cultural sense, with state subjects increasingly viewing themselves as members of a community with shared descent, customs, and collective fate (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1983). In the process, the nation became the source of the state's legitimacy and the congruence of the state's political and the nation's cultural boundaries became a taken-for-granted reality. Of course, this process was far from teleological; the rise of the nation-state came in fits and starts and was accompanied by protracted conflicts and institutionalized forms of intergroup domination.

The second tradition documents the rise of independent nation-states in the post-War period, most recently during the postcommunist transition in Eastern Europe. This literature is rich in case studies, but has been less effective at formulating general conclusions about nation-state formation and diffusion. Among the exceptions is Hechter's (2000) *Containing Nationalism*, which argues that nationalist movements are mobilized by centralized states' direct rule over culturally heterogeneous but territorially bounded populations. Viewing this as a problem for state stability, Hechter advocates policies that grant autonomy to minority populations. Another important theoretical contribution is Brubaker's (1996) study of ethnic relations in former Soviet republics and satellite states, which he sees as characterized by three distinct types of nationalism: 'nationalizing nationalism' of the newly sovereign states, 'minority nationalism' of domestic minority groups, and 'homeland nationalism' of coethnics in bordering countries. The interaction between these three political forces gives rise to state-driven social exclusion, oppositional struggles for minority rights, and occasional eruptions of violence directed against states and their majority populations.

Finally, the third body of literature focuses on radical nationalist movements. Rather than aiming to reconfigure the political boundaries of existing nation-states, these movements attempt to mobilize members of dominant groups to resist changes to the nation's symbolic boundaries brought on by

immigration or the extension of rights to oppressed native-born populations. These mobilization efforts are typically motivated by racially, ethnically, or religiously essentialist conceptions of the nation that explicitly exclude entire categories of people based on ascribed characteristics. Much contemporary research in this tradition focuses on Europe, which has experienced a resurgence of radical right-wing politics with strong ethnic nationalist tendencies (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2007; Bale, 2013). A distinct but substantively related line of research on the United States has focused on the country's long history of exclusionary politics based on nativist, racist, and fundamentalist ideologies (Higham, [1955]2002; Burris et al., 2000; Blee, 2002).

The above three approaches have generated many rich insights about the origins and continued importance of nationalist ideology in modern society. Yet, this classic work has largely ignored the more mundane – but no less important – aspects of everyday nationalism in stable democratic countries.

### Nationalism in Settled Times

As a growing number of studies have demonstrated, the political significance of nationalism is not limited to periods of major political transformation or national crisis; nationalism exerts distinct effects on political change in settled times, although its impact is likely to be more subtle (Swidler, 1986). To understand this process, the analytical lens must shift from explicit political ideologies to tacit understandings of the nation's symbolic significance within a given polity. While most citizens of contemporary societies take for granted the legitimacy of the nation-state form, they often disagree in important ways about what their nation-state means to them. This variation – both within and across populations and over time – is an important feature of political culture that influences political behavior and drives policy change. Scholars have explored this dimension of nationalism from two vantage points: first, historical, ethnographic, and interpretive studies have explored the meaning-making processes that produce and maintain national identification; second, survey-based research has sought to map the variation in nationalist attitudes within and across populations and to demonstrate the impact of these attitudes on other political beliefs. Together, these approaches have laid the groundwork for a more complete understanding of nationalism in politically settled times.

### Interpretive Studies of Everyday Nationalism

A long line of work in political sociology and political science has focused on how meanings attributed to the nation affect people's self-understanding and how such conceptions relate to a given country's overarching political culture. Classic studies in this tradition were based on a functionalist understanding of culture as a coherent system of agreed-upon values that facilitates social cohesion; this logically implied that the task for nationalism scholars was to uncover each nation's essential and stable cultural characteristics. For instance, in *Continental Divide*, Lipset (1990) argues that the national identity of the United States consists of the central tenets of the American

Creed: antistatism, individualism, populism, and egalitarianism. In contrast, Canada – Lipset's comparison case – prioritizes a distinct set of principles, including deference to authority, collectivism, elitism, and group-based particularism. Such large-scale cultural generalizations were typical of post-War scholarship, as exemplified by the work of Myrdal (1944), Hartz (1964), and the broader enterprise of consensus history.

An influential legacy of the functionalist approach has been the distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism, initially made by Friedrich Meinecke ([1907]1970) and subsequently elaborated by Hans Kohn (1944). This binary opposition assumes a stable character to national identity, but differentiates between two alternatives: the first based on ascriptive criteria such as race, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or language and the second on elective criteria, such as commitment to the country's core ideology, subjective identification with a national community, and respect for the nation's laws and traditions. This dichotomy has been used to classify the central ideologies of specific nations – with Germany as the prototype of ethnic nationalism and France of civic nationalism – and occasionally entire world regions.

The view of national culture as stable and homogenous has been challenged by more recent research. Rogers Smith's (1997) work on citizenship law in the United States, for instance, reveals a layered and often contradictory patchwork of legislation and court decisions informed by three distinct ideological perspectives (i.e., liberalism, republicanism, and 'ascriptive Americanism'), which have competed for dominance over the course of American history. Others have critiqued the ethnic-civic distinction on theoretical and empirical grounds for attributing essential properties to entire countries and regions and glossing over considerable within-country heterogeneity (Kaufmann, 2000; Shulman, 2002; Brubaker, 2004; Ceobanu and Escandell, 2008).

Despite its limitations, functionalist research on national identity has generated a number of valuable insights. Perhaps most importantly, it has helped scholars recognize that even though nationalism has become a hegemonic ideology in modern society, the content of nationalist beliefs can be highly variable. This work has also highlighted the inherent tendency of nationalism toward social exclusion: given that nationalism is predicated on a fundamental belief in the unique characteristics of each nation, it inevitably draws sharp symbolic and social boundaries around national communities based on a range of arbitrary criteria. Of course, the need for distinguishing between members and nonmembers is necessary for every state's ability to fulfill its core functions, such as generating tax revenue, managing economic development, providing social programs, and ensuring national security, but how such distinctions are made and maintained is an important object of study.

While the functionalist approach attempted to identify the shared attributes of a given political culture, more recent work in cultural sociology has focused on national narratives, which serve as focal points for collective identification. This tradition is inspired by the classic Durkheimian insight that in order to maintain social solidarity, collectivities must engage in ritualistic practices that imbue shared symbols with moral meaning. Thus, studies have paid particular attention to ritualistic events such as parades, concerts, festivals, and sporting events

(Waldstreicher, 1997) as well as commemorative practices, such as the construction of national memorials and monuments (Collins, 2012). These empirical sites often reveal not only widely shared narratives, but also processes of contestation over the dominant interpretation of a nation's past, its core values, and its future aspirations. Once such symbolic conflicts subside, the symbols produced in the process come to serve as tacit reminders of the primacy of the nation-state in everyday life. This is as true of memorials and holidays, as it is of more banal manifestations of the nation-state, such as currency, commemorative street names, or flags waving over private homes and businesses (Billig, 1995). These ritual practices are not merely by-products of collective identification, but are essential for the reproduction of the national community.

### Survey-Based Studies of Everyday Nationalism

One of the key insights of interpretive research on national identification is that the meaning of the nation-state is not uniform across a national population. Case studies of specific commemorative conflicts, however, are unable to map the full variation of national beliefs and determine their association with other social and political attitudes and behaviors. This task is more appropriately handled with survey data that enable population-level inferences based on representative samples of respondents. Most of this work has relied on a handful of multiple-wave, representative-sample surveys systematically administered across a wide range of countries.

Survey researchers face a considerable challenge, however, in operationalizing nationalism in a way that makes it amenable to quantitative analysis. This task has proven even more difficult, given the general lack of consensus in the literature about what nationalism actually entails. In an effort to organize the varied survey-based literature, we identify four ways of defining nationalism: as national attachment; national identity; national pride; and national hubris. In our view, these four labels represent different aspects of a single overarching phenomenon: the repertoire of meanings attached to the nation-state, through which modern-day nationalism maintains its hegemonic status. Under certain circumstances, these meanings also drive political change, although typically within the largely unquestioned auspices of the nation-state.

National attachment refers to identification with the nation over and above other collective entities. Social identity theorists have long argued that individuals possess multiple identities that are shaped and reproduced by institutions (Stryker and Burke, 2000). The salience of particular identities varies over time for any given individuals but it is also likely to vary, on average, across individuals. Given that the former is notoriously difficult to study outside of the laboratory setting, most scholars interested in national attachment focus on the latter, typically using basic survey questions that explicitly ask respondents about the absolute or relative importance of the nation in their lives (e.g., "How close do you feel to America?").

Some scholars view national attachment as a particularly useful measure of nationalism, because it is largely devoid of ideological content: whether a nation is important for an individual tells us little about the meanings that the individual ascribes to the nation (Huddy and Khatib, 2007). Furthermore, national attachment is related to but distinct from other

concepts of interest to nationalism scholars, such as attitudes toward minorities, sentiments toward state institutions, and feelings of national superiority.

Studies have demonstrated that heightened national attachment is systematically associated with measures of political knowledge and participation (Huddy and Khatib, 2007) and prosocial behavior (Rahn, 2000). At the same time, greater attachment can activate ethnic forms of national identity, thereby promoting animosity toward minority groups (Sidanius et al., 1997). The nature of the relationship between national attachment and antipathy toward perceived out-groups often depends on how a particular issue is framed in public discourse. A national crisis, such as 9/11, can raise the relative salience of the nation in people's identity hierarchies, but whether the same occurs for ethnic identities depends on whether the narratives that mediate people's interpretation of collective events are framed in ethnically essentialist terms (Li and Brewer, 2004).

Ethnic identities, however, are only one form of collective affiliation with which national attachment interacts; people are simultaneously members of local, national, and in some cases, supranational communities, and these collective affinities often exhibit mutual complementarities and contradictions. Indeed, given the growing importance of subnational and transnational communities in the era of globalization, such place-based identities have become increasingly complex and multifaceted. Much of the research on these multilayered identification processes has been conducted within the context of the European Union (EU), the largest supranational integration project in recent history. For many years, the consensus in the EU literature has been that European and national identities are inherently opposed and that full European cultural integration depends on the gradual erosion of national loyalties. Recent studies, however, have shown that the two sets of identities can coexist, and in fact often reinforce one another, particularly among educated cosmopolitan elites (Díez Medrano and Gutiérrez, 2001; Fligstein et al., 2012).

The second dimension of nationalism – national identity – consists of specific criteria of inclusion and exclusion that are seen as legitimately defining the nation's symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wimmer, 2008). This aspect of nationalism has generated considerable attention, because it is directly tied to processes of social stratification. Groups that are viewed as external to the national community are frequently denied fundamental rights and excluded from equal access to resources and opportunities. At the individual level, exclusionary conceptions of national identity are associated with anti-immigrant sentiments, as well as support for restrictive immigration policies and cultural protectionism (Ceobanu and Escandell, 2008; Schildkraut, 2003).

Scholars typically distinguish between forms of national identity based on ascriptive (ethnic) and elective (civic) traits. There is some tension, however, surrounding the analytical utility of the ethnic–civic distinction, because of its origins in research on essential national character and the persistent finding that national identity is in fact heterogeneous within countries. Scholars have employed two strategies to resolve this tension: they have used the ethnic–civic binary at the individual level – allowing for within-country variation – or they have replaced the dichotomy altogether with more nuanced typologies.

In a study emblematic of the former approach, Jones and Smith (2001) demonstrate that both civic and ethnic forms of nationalism are found within the countries in their sample, although there is some variation in the degree to which religion is valued as a criterion of national belonging (see also Citrin et al., 1990; Hjerm, 2003). Representative of the latter approach, Citrin et al. (1994) build on the ethnic-civic binary by identifying three distinct understandings of American national identity: cosmopolitan liberalism, nativism, and multiculturalism. Similarly, Schildkraut (2003, 2011) identifies four distinct varieties of national identity, which are highly predictive of individuals' policy preferences and political behavior (for a related approach at the cross-national level, see Bonikowski, 2013).

In addition to classifying conceptions of national identity, researchers have also attempted to identify the factors that affect the prevalence of these beliefs within national populations. At the individual level, respondents who hold ascriptive views of national identity tend to have lower levels of education and lower income, be more religious and older, belong to ethnic majority groups, and have resided in the country for a longer period of time (Hjerm, 2001; Jones and Smith, 2001; Kunovich, 2009; Wright, 2011a). At the national level, countries with a lower prevalence of ascriptive national identity are typically more developed, democratic, urbanized, and culturally globalized, and are characterized by greater internal ethnic differentiation (Jones and Smith, 2001; Kunovich, 2009; Green et al., 2011; but see Ariely, 2012 on globalization); they also tend to have more generous welfare state policies (Wright, 2011b).

While national identity reflects beliefs about criteria of legitimate membership in the nation, national pride refers to the affective evaluation of the nation-state. Some researchers prefer the term patriotism to distinguish this ostensibly innocuous sentiment from a more invidious nationalism. In support of this distinction, studies have found that pride in the nation-state's institutions is uncorrelated with out-group prejudice (e.g., De Figueiredo and Elkins, 2003), while others go further to argue that pride actually leads to more tolerant attitudes (Green et al., 2011). This evidence is contradicted, however, by studies that show patriotism to be linked with a variety of authoritarian attitudes (Staub, 1997). To overcome this conceptual ambiguity, Schatz et al. (1999) distinguish between 'constructive' and 'blind' patriotism and argue that blind patriots are more chauvinistic and feel more threatened by minorities, while constructive patriots have a greater sense of political efficacy (Hjerm, 1998; Parker, 2007, 2010).

In contrast to research that views national pride as unidimensional (whether positive or negative), other studies argue that national pride is itself heterogeneous and domain specific, consisting of distinct sentiments toward national institutions and the nation's cultural heritage (Hjerm, 1998; Bonikowski, 2011). Indeed, this distinction is consistent with historical research on nationalism, which has sought to understand how political units (i.e., states) come to be viewed as legitimate authorities over imagined communities of shared fate (i.e., nations). The two varieties of national pride appear to have distinct associations with other aspects of nationalism, as demonstrated by Ariely (2011): pride in the nation – what he

calls "cultural patriotism" – is correlated with ethnocultural conceptions of national membership, while pride in political institutions (i.e., 'political patriotism') lends itself to civic forms of national identity.

The final dimension of nationalism prevalent in existing scholarship is national hubris – or more conventionally, chauvinism. While the other aspects of nationalism are inward oriented, hubris is concerned with judgments of the nation's position vis-à-vis the rest of the world (much as individual hubris involves perceptions of superiority to other people). For some scholars, particularly in political psychology, hubris is coterminous with nationalism as a whole, typically in juxtaposition with the ostensibly more benign patriotism.

The primary reason for the scholarly interest in national hubris is its association with support for bellicose foreign policy (Kosterman and Feshbach, 1989) and authoritarian politics (Blank, 2003). A heightened sense of national superiority logically lends itself to the belief that the nation should pursue its interests against all odds, even if this places it in conflict with others. Not surprisingly, such views go hand-in-hand with uncritical support for the state that is a hallmark of 'blind patriotism.' It is likely that the effect of hubris on aggressive policy preferences is partly mediated by general out-group antipathy, as measures of hubris are also correlated with prejudice against minority groups (Blank and Schmidt, 2003; De Figueiredo and Elkins, 2003).

### Limitations and Future Directions

As this article demonstrates, research on nationalism is rich in empirical findings and, increasingly, in theoretical sophistication. The literature does, however, suffer from conceptual confusion and a tendency to conflate specific aspects of nationalism with the concept as a whole. In what follows, we identify possible areas for further theoretical and methodological elaboration that may help overcome some of these limitations.

The first step for future research is to take seriously the role of meaning-making in people's collective understandings of the nation. Drawing on insights from cultural sociology and cognitive psychology, scholars should shift their focus from specific attitudes to the relational structures of meaning that constitute collective representations of the nation. People are not merely patriots or chauvinists – their schemas of the nation are likely to combine the four dimensions of nationalism (attachment, identity, pride, and hubris) in complex webs of meaning. Mapping these cultural networks and understanding their causal role in political behavior and policy change is an important task that is beginning to be taken up by nationalism scholars (e.g., Bonikowski, 2011, 2013; Centeno and Abascal, 2012).

A second important objective for future research is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between cognitive and affective components of nationalism. Nationalism has long been understood as an ideology that evokes a complex array of emotions, such as fervent pride toward the nation-state, revulsion against perceived out-groups, or superiority compared to other national populations. Indeed, without



the deeply emotional content of nationalist beliefs, it would be difficult to explain the more extreme forms of behavior fueled by nationalist ideology, such as people's willingness to risk their lives at wartime in the name of the national community. But emotions are likely to play an important role in routine forms of nationalism as well with important consequences for political behavior and intergroup relations (Feinstein, 2013). As the empirical study of emotions becomes increasingly prevalent in cultural sociology and political sociology, the timing is opportune for a more explicit focus on affect in nationalism studies as well.

Third, nationalist beliefs need to be studied over time. For much of its development, the literature on nationalism has treated its object of study as temporally stable. This is as true in studies of country-level nationalist ideologies, where essential features of national character are presumed to date back to a given nation's founding moment, as it is in survey analyses, which implicitly view individuals' responses as indicative of their time-invariant attitudinal orientations. Yet, these stability assumptions are in tension with a growing volume of research that shows the intensity and content of nationalist ideas to change in reaction to exogenous shocks to the nation, shifts in political discourse, and life-course events. To resolve these contradictions, more work needs to be done on the dynamic aspects of nationalism and particularly on situational factors that increase the salience of national identities for individuals and collectivities (Collins, 2012).

Finally, in addition to studying nationalism itself, researchers should also gain a better understanding of the relationship between nationalism and other political belief systems. For instance, a large literature in political science and political sociology has become interested in the rise of right-wing extremism in Western European polities (Taggart, 2000; Mudde, 2007). These studies often refer to the radical parties using seemingly interchangeable labels, such as populist, nationalist, conservative, xenophobic, and anti-immigrant. It is clear that supporters of these political movements subscribe to particular conceptions of the nation-state and that the rhetoric of the movement leaders is intended to resonate with such beliefs. At the same time, however, nationalism is only one element of the multifaceted ideological strategy utilized by extreme parties. Just how nationalist concerns interact with other arguments that do not necessarily evoke the nation is an important topic for future study.

## Conclusion

Despite pressures from globalization, the nation-state remains a predominant unit of political governance, cultural integration, and collective identification. Indeed, the international nation-state system is so thoroughly institutionalized that most people view it as a natural way of organizing human society. Yet, the meanings attributed to the nation vary considerably within and across country borders. Over the past two decades, scholars have begun to investigate this variation from a number of complementary perspectives. The resulting studies have produced a wide range of

consistent findings about the effects of multiple aspects of nationalism on intergroup relations and public policy preferences, as well as the impact of sociodemographic and country-level predictors on nationalist attitudes. Although this work has its limitations, it has opened the way toward new approaches that can better account for the multidimensionality, dynamism, and emotional content of nationalism, as well as its ongoing interaction with other salient political ideologies. Given these developments, the future of research on contemporary nationalism looks promising.

**See also:** Collective Identity; Commemoration; Culture, Cognition and Embodiment; Formal Methods of Cultural Analysis; Nationalism, Historical Aspects of: The West; Nationalism, Sociology of; Nationalism: General; Networks and Meaning; Organizations and Culture; Religion: Nationalism and Identity; Religious Nationalism and the Secular State; Symbolic Boundaries; War and Nationalism.

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