

Understanding the (nationalist) state: a response to my reviewers

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When presenting the book's findings to colleagues I have regularly voiced the concern that my interdisciplinary approach could inadvertently steer it between the cracks, as neither politics nor sociology, nationalism nor racism studies, fish nor fowl. It is therefore gratifying that the colleagues contributing here, hailing from three key target constituencies (very crudely - political science, nationalism studies and the sociology of racism), apparently found the book interesting and useful. Their critical comments have in turn been very useful to me. Perhaps predictably, given the broadness of the book's approach, the core criticisms are situated on each colleagues' home turf – namely (again rather crudely) the state (Sandelind), nationhood (Antonsich) and race (Valluvan). Before addressing these criticisms I will introduce the framework for understanding nationalism that feeds into my response.

Drawing on Breuilly (1993) and Wimmer (2013) I consider nationalism to be a form of politics engendered by the modern state. The radical expansion of the European state's coercive reach and depth (Malešević 2010) produced a novel form of general public interest – a specialised and autonomous political sphere (Breuilly 1985). The idea of the nation offered a means to bridge the divide between a state experienced as increasingly intimate to people's lives and, simultaneously, more distinct and alienating (ibid). Nationalist ideology thus offered a pseudo-solution to the unique challenges staged by modern statehood (and modernity at large), with emerging social groups in diverse contexts appealing to 'the nation' to justify, mobilise and legitimise political action (Breuilly 1993). The ideology's core principle of political self-rule for the putative nation, Anderson's (1991) imagined community subsuming and over-riding all other stratifications and public identities within the state, served to delegitimise more steeply hierarchical state forms – notably those controlled by 'imperial, aristocratic or theocratic elites' (Wimmer 2013, 24) – thereby sparking emancipatory and often extraordinarily violent political dynamics.

The outcome of the World Wars and decolonisation from Europe's empires is a world made up of states legitimised by nationalism above all other political ideologies. Most states self-identify as nation-states, and we are (nearly) all categorised as nationals even if we do not identify with a nation (though most of us do). The unequal treatment of individuals by states for reasons grounded in nationality and nation-state citizenship is a legal, social and political norm accepted globally, notwithstanding some significant but limited gains for universalist notions of human rights. Today's populist sloganeering regarding national sovereignty (regaining or retaining 'control') and the prioritisation of our nation (putting it/'us' 'first') does not therefore represent some kind of perverse outgrowth, it is merely the more explicit, garish expression of the nation-state's basic principles.

The congruence between state and nation idealised through nationalism (Gellner 1983) is of course undermined by the multiplicity of ethnic and national groups within most 'nation'-states, and by the emergence and endurance of cosmopolitan, transnational and diasporic identifications. It is also, as Breuilly (1985, 73) notes, a mistake to 'assume that the self-evident success of nationalism means that nationalism is very strongly rooted in the thought and behaviour of people'. Influential critiques have urged a reckoning with methodological nationalism, the assumption that 'the nation...is the natural social and political form of the modern world' (Wimmer & Schiller 2002, 302), revealing how nationhood is rarely, if *at all*, salient at the level of everyday lives and consciousness (Fox & Miller-Idriss

2008), and how national mythologies and academic nationalism studies alike tend to obscure the Euro-American nation-state's colonial heritage (Bhabra 2015, Tinsley 2019). What each such approach demonstrates is the persuasive, increasingly empirically grounded argument that, outside of conditions of intense coercion and violence, a resonant sense of nationhood (of 'national identities') is difficult to detect both historically and today. At the same time, however, 'there seems to be no institutional form on the horizon of history' to rival the nation-state in binding 'the interests of political elites and masses' (Wimmer 2013, 203-4). We therefore find a paradoxical situation where nationalism as principle and ideology of state legitimation is extremely strong but nationhood itself is very weak; where nationalism remains the dominant political ideology of the age yet we can plausibly claim that no state 'has ever come within measurable distance of being a "nation state"' (Oakeshott, 1975, 188).

The unrivalled political resonance of nationalism in modernity cannot therefore be explained by ascribing a special cultural salience to nationhood – it is instead symptomatic of the form of politics 'so closely intertwined with the...principles on which the modern state came to rest' (Wimmer 2013, 201). As such, I disagree with Sandelind's contentions that 'any congruence between a political collective and a state cannot be classed as nationalism' and that there 'must be some imaginary of the nation that can make sense of such congruency'. To ascribe sense-making to the national imaginary gets things back to front. It risks taking nationalists' self-understandings at face value by mistaking a form of politics for the emergence or reproduction of a cultural group (for whom a fundamentally political 'backlash' might then be portrayed as some kind of legitimate cultural grievance). The departure point for studying nationalism has to be the political processes through which 'culture, race, values and so forth' are galvanised and national groups and identities produced. This process is perhaps especially stark in the case of Anglo-British nationalism – historically rooted in elite struggles over state institutions and sovereignty (Pocock 1992) – but remains true for all nationalist mobilisation vis-à-vis the modern state.

This disagreement over the extent to which nations are political collectives underlines all of Sandelind's main criticisms. For Sandelind I conflate nationalism with a more general territorial statism, which leads me to erroneously categorise as nationalist 'most expressions of statism or compatriot partiality and anti-immigration attitudes [as articulated by my research participants]'. Here I think Sandelind is downplaying the extent to which contemporary statism and compatriot partiality are intrinsically nationalist. When participants in my research voiced anti-immigration attitudes they were speaking a specifically twentieth century political dialect structured by the grammar of the modern nationalist state. The tightly-controlled and managed state borders for which some participants yearned, which almost all of them tacitly normalised, have only really existed, and indeed made much sense politically, in the age of nation-states and the nationalist logics that encourage a specific kind of demos. The 'we' participants mobilised rests upon the historically recent entrenching of 'our' equal membership of a specific, purportedly national people associated with a nationalist state and delimited territory.

In the Anglo-British case, these contemporary outlooks can be contrasted to the more geographically diffuse, aspirationally universalist and ethnically heterogeneous (but deeply racist) understandings of statehood that the modern Empire legitimised; or the religiously infused and sharply stratified realms that overlapped and preceded this (Kumar 2013). As Sandelind notes, competing perspectives on state legitimacy and identification reminiscent of pre-nationalist formations *do* emerge in my analysis, most markedly among liberally-minded participants who idealise a substantially more porous and cosmopolitan demos than that circumscribed by nationalists. However, nearly all of these participants also at some stage deployed the idioms, categories and identifications which are the legacy of nationalism. Their views were still shaped and finally demarcated by the particular constraints nationalist ideology places on our political actions and imagination, and the assumption that 'our' territorially compact nationalist state can justifiably exclude those hailing from other similarly organised

and defined nation-states. Despite some evidence for more open, cosmopolitan attitudes regarding what constitutes the legitimate demos, these outlooks thus finally snapped back into nationalist shape. In the book I describe this pattern as indicating a kind of zombie nationalism – an ideology dragging along a concept of nationhood but denuded of its national life-force.

I would therefore argue that the politics of immigration espoused by my participants were more characteristically nationalist than indicative of a generic statism or ‘territorially defined political collective’. I agree with Sandelind’s criticism that it would have been useful to foreshadow this more effectively in earlier parts of the book but also feel that many political theorists who rightly emphasise the importance of statehood to contemporary politics (e.g. Ypi 2012) could give more due to the influence of nationalism on contemporary statism and the highly restricted ideas of peoplehood to which our state identifications remain tethered.

Antonsich makes the similar argument, from a somewhat different perspective, that my analysis is too focused on the explicitly political. He advocates a looser definitional approach to nationhood, because applying one that is too formal to the analysis of social practice risks overlooking the ‘mundane or trivial acts, practices, small talks and habits’ crucial to the everyday reproduction of nationhood. While I do not doubt that, as Antonsich claims, some of the important cultural and embodied habits and practices of my research participants are distinctive to the people of England, I would nonetheless query the extent to which the analysis of these is critical for understanding nationalism. I argue in the book, and maintain here, that when social scientists categorise everyday acts such as watching particular TV programmes or eating particular foods (as usually described by research participants in qualitative interviews) as un-problematically ‘national’ this can inaccurately conflate localised everyday practice with the political sense of peoplehood or identity with which the study of nationhood is concerned.

This kind of approach becomes particularly problematic when it clouds the fundamentally statist wellsprings of nationalism. Just as Bottero (2004) suggests the concept of ‘class’ retains its distinctiveness and power by being related to specifically economic concerns, those of us studying nationalism must be careful to always keep one eye on the politics of modern statehood. In my study all participants, regardless of whether they subverted or reproduced ‘the nation’ in their talk and everyday practice, articulated the membership of a demos sharply delimited by statist conceptions of public power and authority. The state itself is of course the product of everyday acts and gestures, and therefore open to everyday subversion (Herzfeld 1997), but we must also acknowledge how its durable, seemingly permanent and substantially autonomous presence (Bartelson 2001; Skinner 2008) is of central importance to nationalism and nationhood (Leddy-Owen 2020). For me the implications of this presence for *all* modern politics *on any scale* merit much more attention in both the everyday nationhood literature and among those sociologists of racism, such as Valluvan (2019), who valorise the political potential of informal multi-ethnic social practice.

These are not implications I am particularly comfortable with. Valluvan rightly notes my emphasis on the ‘exclusionary drives’ inherent to nationalism. The book builds on a mountain of evidence regarding the close relationship between nationalism and racism,¹ and as with Sandelind’s suggestions regarding statism, the early chapters could have been strengthened by a theoretically richer discussion of the racialized foundations of the modern nation-state. But while I am much more pessimistic than Antonsich regarding the potential for a progressive, anti-racist sense of nationhood in Britain (or anywhere), Valluvan correctly observes that I am more pessimistic than *he* is about dispensing with nationhood anytime soon. Through studying nationalism, and thanks to some personal (second-hand) experiences of its cruelty, I have come to loathe it. However, I am also convinced, as will be clear from the preceding discussion, of the practical and enduring purchase nationalist states have on our political imaginations and identifications. Those participants in my study who rejected nationhood, sometimes

as a result of personally-experienced racism, also routinely expressed a taken-for-granted identification with the state and the political 'we' it circumscribes (cf. Condor, Gibson & Abell 2006). Indeed, as Favell (2020) notes in a review of Valluvan's (2019) own recently published book,ⁱⁱ multi-racial manifestations of British/English nationalism are likely to become increasingly prevalent and important in the coming years and decades. In lieu of an alternative, popularly resonant and institutionally embedded anti-nationalist politics, for the foreseeable future it is principally through existing states, and the shared norms of political organisation, mutual responsibilities and co-dependence these facilitate, that we can plausibly conceive of a motivationally sustainable and politically feasible collective politics (Ypi 2012). In the arena of effective political agency we (the global 'we') can 'disavow but not escape' the world of nationalist states and identifications to which we are conscripted (Scott 2004, 130).

An aim of the book's final chapter is, in Sandelind's words, to consider 'what kinds of principles should underlie...a sense of political community at the state level'. The position I lay out seeks to recognise, openly engage with and ultimately work against nationalism's inbuilt exclusionary violence while also acknowledging the necessity for our most important political action to sit within or adjacent to the institutions, identifications and idioms it has bequeathed. Whether this attempted compromise is any more or less likely than the book to resonate with or slip through the cracks of the fierce and rather crowded academic debates regarding nationalism, racism and the politics of immigration remains to be seen. In the meantime I am very grateful for colleagues' assistance in working through and clarifying some of the central issues at hand.

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ⁱ The only criticism from the reviews I categorically refute is Antonsich's suggestion that I conflate 'minorities and immigrants'. Any conflation of these categories in the book is firmly from the perspective of the nationalist views articulated by participants, something I am careful to clarify and build into my analysis at different points in the text (e.g. Leddy-Owen 2019, 84; 129; 142-3).

ⁱⁱ As I quipped in a short speech at the launch of my book, at which Valluvan was present, 'If you're going to buy one book on nationalism this year, make it *The Clamour of Nationalism*; but if you're going to buy two ...'