

Bringing the State Back into the Sociology of Nationalism: The *Persona Ficta* Is Political

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Abstract

This article re-examines two key questions from the sociology of nationalism – why nationalism resonates emotionally and to what extent nations are socially salient – and the implications of these for a sense of peoplehood and collective political agency. The particular focus is on the state. Instead of conflating statehood with nationhood, or seeking to expose it as illusory, sociologists should consider how the state – imagined and experienced as a permanent, trans-historical fixture structuring public power and authority – has crucial conditioning effects on society and politics. It will be posited that statehood is a more useful concept than nationhood for explaining the resonance and salience ascribed to nationalism and nations. Whether we favour reinvigorating or abolishing nationalism, the implications of this argument are profound, with contemporary cosmopolitan sociology in particular suffering analytically and prescriptively from a failure to recognise its tacit methodological statism.

Keywords

banal nationalism, cosmopolitanism, nationalism, post-colonialism, the state

Introduction

This article explores two inter-relating questions from the sociology of nationalism. First, that of why nationalism seems to resonate emotionally, as set out in seminal nationalism studies debates between modernist and ethnosymbolist schools of thought. Second, whether nations are as socially salient as the evident successes of nationalism (and/or self-presentations of nationalists) would suggest – a question posed in the equally seminal work of Billig and within cosmopolitan critiques of nationalism. The answers to both questions are important for obtaining a clearer view of how collective political agency might be enabled, and with regard to what sense of peoplehood.

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My contribution here will be to argue that if we apply a more complex and nuanced conceptual account of the state to these debates evidence emerges that *statehood* should be more central to analyses of nationalism than nationhood; and that the sociology of nationalism needs to further consider the extent to which our ideas surrounding peoplehood and political agency are conditioned by the state and associated structures and understandings of public power and authority. I will conclude by arguing that while the cosmopolitan case against nationalism is compelling, *statism* conditions political action and what popularly resonates *as* political to such an extent that even to conceive of political agency and global justice outside of the ambit of existing states remains difficult. The leviathan lives, and there can be no effective anti-nationalist, or anti-statist, politics unless the implications of this are more fully considered.

Nations and Nationalism

The article works with Smith's (2005: 98) definition of the nation – 'a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs'. Nationalism is defined as 'a political movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity on behalf of a population, some of whose members deem it to constitute an actual or potential "nation"' (Breuilly, 2005: 17). The deceptively simple answer nationalists give to questions regarding the relationship between state and society is therefore that societies can be defined as national, and these nations require political autonomy through their own state (Breuilly, 1993: 69). These historically novel principles of political legitimacy, by which ruler and ruled hail from the same national background, when combined with the enormous coercive capacities of the modern state, produce an 'institutional logic' for the formation of relatively ethnically homogenous states (Wimmer, 2013: 117).

In classical and late-20th-century historical sociology nation-states are portrayed as having superseded empires and monarchies thanks to processes initiated in Europe and North America from around the late 18th-century (Breuilly, 1993; Smith, 1986). From perspectives informed by post-colonial thinking, however, these accounts are accused of Euro-American parochialism. If the modern dynamics essential to nationalism's birth were tightly bound up with European colonialism's racialised dispossession and enrichment of the Global South and North respectively (Bennett, 2018; Bhambra, 2014), this suggests a mutually constitutive relationship, stretching well into the 20th century, between European imperialism, colonial hierarchies and the nation-state's emergence (Go, 2016; Kumar, 2019).

Regardless of how we characterise its birth, the nation-state form emerged triumphant following the murder and expulsion of ethnic and national minorities in Europe after the Second World War (Judt, 2005: 24–31) and the subsequent bloody liberation and consolidation of former European colonies (Wimmer, 2013). We live in a world overwhelmingly made up of states claiming to be nation-states, with contemporary notions of political peoplehood thoroughly imbued with and delimited by the idioms of nationhood and nationalism. As Valluvan (2017: 237) argues, '[n]o other modern social formation

has been able to generate the communitarian taxonomy and feeling that is . . . so central to how a society manages and expresses its sociopolitical transactions and ambitions'. In short, nationalism is the dominant political ideology of modernity (Malešević, 2010).

However, as Billig (1995) has demonstrated, away from relatively infrequent instances of explicit or violent nationalist expression, nation-states are most commonly reproduced in the mundane and everyday – through, for example, the unwaved, unsaluted flags on civic buildings; or via taken-for-granted nationalist language, the ‘revealing pronouns . . . that constitute a collective political subject – a “we”’ (Canovan, 1996: 72). As Malešević (2010: 194) argues, nationalism’s more virulent forms are ‘dependent on [these] workings of low-intensity everyday nationalism’, with nationalism effectively at its ‘strongest not when it is loud and barking but when it is trivial, ordinary and taken for granted’. Nationalism should not therefore be conflated, as it so often is in both lay and academic discussion, with ethnonationalist or far-right politics. It is far more prevalent than that.

Nor should nationalism be analysed by way of a more inclusive and open, ‘civic’ form associated with the West/Global North as opposed to the more exclusionary ‘ethnic’, cultural variety associated with the East/Global South; a distinction critiqued conceptually and empirically as leading to a tangle of contradictions (e.g. Bonikowski, 2016; Brubaker, 1999). We might consider, for example, the paradigmatic examples of ‘civic’ nationhood in France, Britain and the USA and how the liberal constitutions of these states developed within very specific socio-political contexts. Rather than being founded upon civic principles voluntarily adhered to by successive generations these inheritances are evidently very substantially cultural, arguably ‘ethnic’. Accounts of the emergence of these states’ ‘civic’ norms also imply a developmentally more advanced North, to which ‘the rest’ should aspire, while shrouding their exploitative colonial origins, not least in relation to transatlantic slavery (Tinsley, 2019).

While there are of course different manifestations and identifications of and with nationalism, attempts to construct a clear typological or moral distinction are in danger of missing the key global characteristic of nation-states – that their ‘perfectly legal and internationally sanctioned form of exclusion’ represents ‘the politically most stable form of ethno-national dominance’ today (Wimmer, 2004: 41–42).

The Resonance and Salience of Nationalism and Nations

Analysing nationalism’s emergence has been the subject of a dedicated field – nationalism studies – as mapped by Smith (1998). Smith’s own ‘ethnologist’ approach (1986), stressing the special temporal and symbolic power of pre-modern ethnic identities in the formation of nations, vies with the ‘modernists’ emphasis on contingency, imagination, invention and power (e.g. Anderson, 1991; Breuilly, 1993). A central debate within this literature relates to ‘the notorious issue of resonance’ (Özkirimli, 2003: 340) – the question of what ‘makes it possible . . . for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die’ for their nation (Anderson, 1991: 6–7); or, less gravely, what explains feelings of national pride and co-national solidarity. For Smith (1986: 212–214), this is explained by the successful mobilisation and renewal in modernity of ethnic myths and symbols, distinct to a national group, which enable a sense of continuity and

destiny. It is through perceptions of authenticity following from the successful discovery, reconstruction and representation of a culture transmitted down the generations and linked to a sense of homeland and the sacred that we can explain ‘the depths of the ties that bind the members of nations and the passions which such ties can arouse’ (Smith, 1998: 198). Without these the nationalist ‘project will fail’ (Smith, 1998: 198).

Wimmer’s (2013: 201) modernist response is that ethnicity and nationhood are not perceived as authentic and legitimate because of any ‘superior symbolic power or emotional depth’ but, rather, as a result of being ‘closely intertwined with the nationalist principles on which the modern state came to rest’. Breuilly (1993) similarly suggests that the modern state’s power and position vis-a-vis society encourages a new form of politics to be taken up by social groups and competing elites for purposes of mobilisation, co-ordination and legitimation. In contexts as diverse as early-modern Europe and 20th-century anti-/post-colonial Africa, nationalist ideology ‘provides a conceptual map’ (Breuilly, 1993: 13) for navigating some of the key puzzles posed by modernity – such as distinctions between public and private, state and society (1993: 69) – though any answers provided represent a doomed attempt to construct an impossible “‘natural” basis to politics’ (1993: 400). For these modernists, above all other explanations, the resonance of nationalism is contingent on modern forms of politics associated with statehood.

Smith’s counterargument is that explanations focusing on modern political dynamics are guilty of unduly instrumentalist and institutionally focused explanations for fundamentally *cultural* phenomena. Modernist analyses centring on elites and impersonal bureaucratic political transformation downplay the role of the masses and nationalism’s uniquely popular appeal (1998: 94) and therefore fail to adequately explain what Smith considers to be the historically evident resonance and communal power of national identities.

The debate on resonance therefore hinges on whether nationalist politics creates nations or vice versa. In other words, are national cultures and identities as important for society and politics as nationalists would have us believe? Modernists warn that nationalism’s evident political and social significance should not imply that nations are particularly salient social formations ‘strongly rooted in the thought and behaviour of people’ (Breuilly, 1985: 73). Such scepticism is apparent in critiques of ‘methodological nationalism’, the tendency for academic analysis to assume that ‘the nation . . . is the natural social and political form of the modern world’ (Wimmer and Schiller, 2002: 302). Qualitative research finds that nationhood only very rarely becomes ‘a salient frame for routine talk and interaction’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 540) in mundane, everyday contexts, with similar patterns found in the kinds of ethnically and nationally divided conflict situations where heightened salience might be presumed but where micro-associations involving friends and family come to the fore (Brubaker, 2006; Malešević, 2010: 220–223; Özkirimli, 2003: 348–349).

The central principle of studies critically exploring nationhood’s resonance and salience is therefore to question nationalist assumptions about how society and politics are organised. For scholars who adopt explicitly anti-nationalist, cosmopolitan perspectives, a post-nationalist society would better reflect the social, economic and political realities of an increasingly interdependent world where the nation-state has become an anachronism (Beck, 2006; Fine and Cohen, 2002). Empirical examples of the nation-state

'uncoupling' hailed by Beck (2006: 27) can be found in emerging patterns of de-nationalised citizenship (Joppke, 2019), in studies that aim to re-evaluate the role played by nationhood in contemporary society and politics (Bhambra, 2017; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008) and in the ethnographically observed 'processes of cohabitation and interaction' (Gilroy, 2004a: xi) that disturb dominant boundaries, borders and self-representations of nationalism in, for example, contemporary multi-ethnic England (Neal et al., 2013; Valluvan, 2019). At the same time, however, 'there seems to be no institutional form on the horizon of history' (Wimmer, 2013: 203–204) to rival the nation-state, and the optimism of cosmopolitan sociology can be starkly contrasted to some recent political science analyses of populism in the West that are explicitly (Kaufmann, 2018) or implicitly (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018) following Smith's lead regarding nationhood's purportedly special and enduring social and cultural salience.

If a core aim of political sociology is to produce a clear account of collective political agency and the identifications that might form the basis for emotionally resonant and ultimately effective political action; and if we acknowledge, as even the most sceptical must, the ongoing global significance of nationalism and the nation-state, then the unresolved questions regarding the resonance and salience of nationalism and nations outlined here are of critical importance. This article re-examines these debates in relation to an essential yet, in the recent sociology of nationalism, somewhat neglected dimension – statehood.

The Modern State

In traditional historical sociology, accounts of the modern state begin (tellingly earlier than those of nationalism) with the accumulation of power by the increasingly sophisticated bureaucracies of Western Europe's early-modern absolutist monarchies (Malešević, 2010; Tilly, 1975). Post-colonially informed scholars contest this location and timescale, claiming that Iberian imperialism in the Americas or Africa was inaugural to modern state centralisation (Bennett, 2018; Dussel, 1998). Here, as with criticisms of dominant academic narratives of nationalism's emergence, it is acutely important to replace notions of 'Europe as the sovereign subject of its own formation' (Bennett, 2018: 145) with global histories featuring, at their axis, processes of colonial dispossession. What all accounts agree upon is that the 20th-century state developed coercive capacities of historically unprecedented reach and depth.

There is some evidence for the recent attenuation of this power. Since decolonisation much of the Global South has been visited by transnational, neo-liberal forces radically destabilising state sovereignty (Go, 2016: 100). In the North we find a small number of examples of pooled or blurred sovereignty in post-conflict situations (notably in Ireland and the European Union). Nevertheless, states remain unrivalled in their capacity to underwrite and enable individual and collective rights, political representation and managed, potentially democratic, resource distribution – as conceded by some prominent cosmopolitan theorists (Habermas, 1998; Held, 2002). Echoing the above discussion of purportedly dissolving *nation*-states, any reports of the state's demise should not be exaggerated.

States claim, as Weber (cited in Lachmann, 2010: 1) famously argued, a 'monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order'. From this basis,

social scientists usually portray the state as ‘an established apparatus of government’ (Skinner, 2008: 360), as a juridical, territorial unit with the capacity to assert authority and physical force internally, towards a beholden population, and externally, towards other states. States ‘claim the authority to define all rights, and each individual’s rights are defined in relation to the state itself’ (Lachman, 2010: 1), effectively setting up a ‘neutral site’ for public authority and power – ‘the point of view overlooking all points of view, which is no longer a point of view since it is in relation to it that all points of view are organized’ (Bourdieu, 2012: 5). The state, as a self-referential, a priori font of political sovereignty, therefore possesses ‘God-like characteristics’ – seemingly omnipotent, indivisible and permanent (Brown, 2017: 70).

How the modern state’s power is exercised and why has been the subject of intense, varied analysis, the review of which here will be necessarily brief. Marxist accounts consider the state ‘a force of repressive execution and intervention . . . for the bourgeoisie and its allies’ (Althusser, 2014: 88; Hay, 2006), while Bourdieu et al. (1994: 4) argue that the state enables a form of ‘meta-capital’ with ‘power over other species of capital and . . . their holders’. Feminists critique it as fundamentally patriarchal or masculinist (Kantola, 2006; Young, 2003), while others portray racism (Goldberg, 2002) and Europe’s subjugation of the Global South (Bhambra, 2014; Gilroy, 2004b) as essential to the emergence of modern state power.

Some scholars are more concerned with burying than explaining modern statehood. Foucault (1994: 124) claims that ‘the state can only operate on the basis of other, already-existing power relations’. Here power is more effectively figured as a productive, generative force running through society and subjects than as located or accumulated within institutions. Political theory regarding sovereignty should ‘cut off the king’s head’ (Foucault, 1994: 122), breaking down classical distinctions between micro and macro scales, public and private power, state and civil society. This querying of analytic binaries combined with a methodological focus on ‘subjugated knowledge’ (Foucault, 1980: 77) is evident in the work of anti-racist and feminist scholars (Aretxaga, 2003; Collins, 2000) for whom the state is most profitably considered ‘as an *outcome* of politics rather than something with which to explain politics’ (Hay and Lister, 2006: 18, emphasis added). Go (2016: 100–101) goes as far as to suggest that the parochialism of the state concept, ‘rooted in a specific Euro-American metropolitan context’, should incite social scientists to develop ‘alternative concepts capturing different social processes’.

All of these accounts portray the state as an ‘ensemble of discourses and practices of power’ (Aretxaga, 2003: 397) that enable a ‘symbolic effect of coherence’ (Bourdieu, 2012: 170) by objectifying otherwise arbitrary power-relations. These studies, to varying degrees, aim to demystify, ‘to doubt the reality of the state and find an underlying, more real reality under the veil of appearance’ (Bartelson, 2001: 154). It is class struggle or gendered/racialised power-relations that can properly account for the state; or, alternatively, the state concept, and the language surrounding it, represent misleading pathways for analysis and political action.

However, by revealing the ‘truth’ or ‘theoretical discontinuities’ of the state concept, these critiques also effectively *preserve* its existence (Bartelson, 2001: 185). Attempts to expose and transgress the state ‘are themselves quite unable to provide an escape route out of this conceptual structure . . . [as] they invariably assume what they set out

to criticize' (Bartelson, 2001: 181). For Bartelson (2001: 185), while we might disagree over its meaning and 'ontological status . . . it is virtually impossible to envisage constellations of authority and community beyond the state without ceasing to be either political or scientific . . . in any recognizably modern sense of those latter terms'. Indeed, to analyse contemporary political structures and experiences of power without 'the state' would require a conceptual architecture and terminology far more revolutionary than Foucault's or Bourdieu's. Just as we, in everyday practice, act as if money embodies wealth despite the fact that we 'know very well that there is nothing magical about [it] and . . . that it is simply an expression of social relations' (Žižek, 1989: 31), the state, its related structures and understandings of authority, ultimately leave the academic mill intact.

If we concede this point, even partially, then studies defining and analysing what the state does instrumentally, explaining it in relation to specific histories, social identities and hierarchies, or seeking to radically reorient our perspective on power, are, at the very least, in danger of failing to properly account for the state's important conditioning effects on how we conceive of power and authority – that is, of downplaying how the state 'is itself, in its own terms . . . an integral part of the political process' (Runciman, 2003: 33). What is therefore required is greater conceptual clarity regarding the state – a vantage point from where, for the purposes of this article, the state's effects on questions surrounding nationalist resonance and salience are illuminated. To this end, the following section will introduce recent interpretations of Hobbes's seminal contribution to state theory.

The *Persona Ficta* State

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes (cited in Skinner, 2008: 342) argues that in order to exit 'a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man' – his famous 'state of nature' – we freely submit to a common power. To liberate ourselves from fear, the multitude of individuals authorises absolute obedience to a sovereign (whether an individual or council) representing and carrying 'the person of' the state (Skinner, 2008: 346). Through this covenant, the multitude becomes a political community.

Runciman (2003: 29) suggests that 'the state' in Hobbes's theory cannot be considered a relation between individuals or groups, as set out, for example, in a constitution. A relation cannot 'go to war' or repay debts – what *can* do this is an association. However, the state-as-association cannot be defined, as it so often is, purely in relation to the power it generates – its sovereignty or a monopoly on legitimate violence – as this power requires attachment to or possession *by* the state. The state's relationship to this power is more complex (what makes the sovereignty exercised by states *state* sovereignty exactly?) (Runciman, 2003: 29). Nor can the state be reduced to governments, with personnel subject to replacement, which cannot assume full responsibility for state actions and debts. Similarly, the state cannot be identified with its beholden population – Hobbes's 'multitude' – through birth and death an 'ever-changing . . . crowd' (cited in Runciman, 2000: 272), again unable to 'assume personal liability' for state actions (Runciman, 2003: 28). Finally, the state is distinct from the purposes it is directed towards achieving. We cannot, from an analytic perspective aiming for clarity vis-a-vis the state's

conditioning effects on politics and society, conflate purposes with the concept and instrument employed towards achieving them (Runciman, 2003: 29).

Hobbes's 'state is therefore an association that cannot be identified with its members, its constitution, its powers, or its purposes' (Runciman, 2003: 29). Foreshadowing more recent theory, Hobbes (cited in Skinner, 1999: 2) readily concedes that the state is 'but a word, without substance', an 'apparent abstraction'. Imbued with tremendous force and presence, the state is at once materially and politically tangible yet fundamentally elusive, never finally identifiable 'with anyone, or anything, in particular' (Runciman, 2003: 37).

What is it then? In contrast to governments and populations, states are seemingly *permanent*. Their authority exists in apparent perpetuity, allowing them to take on the burden of responsibility for the past, present and future in a way that relations, governments and populations cannot. For Skinner and Runciman, the Hobbesian state can therefore fruitfully be conceptualised through the legal concept of *persona ficta* – an artifice granted the legal status of a person that can enter into contracts, incur debt, own property and so on (Law, 2018) (examples include corporations, companies or partnerships). Unlike a real person, a *persona ficta* cannot "own up" to what is done in their name' (Runciman, 2000: 271) other than 'through a kind of pretence on the part of those real persons who are committed to the illusion' (Runciman, 2000: 278). The dynamics of Hobbes's covenant are such that final political responsibility is ascribed to the state by both multitude and sovereign. The state to which they commit, 'distinct from both rulers and ruled' (Skinner, 2008: 362) and imbued 'with an artificial eternity of life' (2008: 364), thereby conditions how public power and authority are structured and conceived of, as well as the political identities and sense of community that might flow from these. This state is not merely an impersonal, juridical, institutionalised and infrastructural territorial form (though it is all of these things), constituted by specific power-relations and hierarchies (though these may well be encoded within it) – it is, in itself, a seemingly permanent *persona ficta*, constructed by, and iteratively shaping the political and social outlooks and actions of, government and society.

The word 'seemingly' is important here. '[N]othing can be immortal, which mortals make' (Hobbes, 2017 [1651]: 263), and Hobbes personally experienced revolutionary state change following the Civil Wars. Since then empires have risen and fallen, and of the hundreds of nation-states emerging in their place some are deemed to have 'failed'. Nevertheless, in *principle*, the vast majority of states are, by self-definition, constructed as permanent, with threats to their legitimacy and continuity closely associated in the historical record with large-scale political turmoil and violence (Malešević, 2010; Wimmer, 2013).

We do not need to subscribe to Hobbes's fearful justification of absolutism, nor his notion of a foundational, covenantal surrender of sovereignty, to consider this basic conceptualisation of the state as potentially very useful. Understanding the state as *persona ficta* seems particularly apt for considering the critical limits and ambivalences raised in the previous section – the analytic sliding between the state as, on the one hand, an ontologically 'real' concept and entity, fundamentally important for modern social and political formations, and, on the other, as essentially socially constructed, artificial and intangible. The remainder of this article demonstrates the ways in which this account of the state informs questions surrounding the resonance and salience of nationalism.

The *Persona Ficta* State and Nationalism's Resonance and Salience

This section will explore two seminal nationalism studies accounts of resonance and salience – the ethnosymbolist/modernist dispute and Billig's banal nationalism thesis – in light of the preceding section's discussion.

As outlined above, Smith argues that the modernist focus on the impersonal, bureaucratic and legalistic modern state fails to adequately explain the passions roused by nationalism. I would suggest that by reconsidering this debate in relation to the *persona ficta* state a bridge can be constructed between modernism and ethnosymbolism – though in its focus on state power's enabling and constraining relationships with collective politics my argument ultimately supports modernist claims.

The bridge in question is supported by Foucaultian accounts of power and agency with regard to the state (despite these usually looking *beyond* the state). Butler (1997: 2) suggests that power 'initiates and sustains our agency' – it 'is not simply what we oppose but also . . . what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are'. In this context, for Brown (2017: 83), '[p]olitical sovereignty . . . provides horizons and compass points for knowing and belonging and carries . . . the promise of protection'. Here the state is positioned, in a quasi-Hobbesian manner, as crucial 'for social and psychic integration and for political membership' (Brown, 2017: 38). Just as the preservation of boundaries (gendered, racialised and so on) at the level of the individual psyche, for Butler (1997: 8), simultaneously subordinates the subject while providing the 'continuing condition of possibility', the creation or renewal in social and political practice of a state – as a *persona ficta* – constrains and enables definitions of political *peoplehood* and a sense of *collective* agency and sovereignty. With political agency and intelligibility tethered to state power in this way, it is unsurprising that state designations and identification categories, such as 'British', 'Jamaican', 'Indian' and so on, can resonate among populations.

As Brown (2017: 116) suggests, there is an important *theological* dimension to this. The state can be usefully conceptualised as a seemingly neutral political location, the 'unmoved mover' foundational to political sovereignty (Brown, 2017: 71; see also Bourdieu, 2012). When perceived as permanent, omnipotent, elusive, authoritative and responsible, it can take the form of a secular yet God-like 'invisible person' (Brown, 2017: 71), off-stage but structuring authority through a conditioning of social and political action. Instead of locating feelings of historical authenticity and destiny in trans-historical national communities and cultural identities, as does Smith, it is therefore perhaps the *persona ficta* state and its 'artificial eternity of life' (Skinner, 2008: 364) that explains how nationalist ideology can seem to transform 'fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning' (Anderson, 1991: 11). By this account, while the perceptions of temporal continuity so central to Smith's account of authentic resonance *are* important, their foundations are not to be found in national cultural narratives but in subject-forming power-relations conditioned by the permanent and omnipotent *persona ficta* state. Indeed, we might reverse Smith's argument about the impersonality of the modern state by claiming that this rigid and alienating character – essential to its elusiveness, authority and pseudo-religious character – is at the very core of nationalism's resonance

and salience. And if we therefore consider nation-state populations to be, in large part, *politically* rather than culturally constituted collectives, then we should question the extent to which primarily state categories of identification ('British', 'Indian', 'Brazilian' and so on) are, much of the time, *national* per se by the terms of the definition set out at the start of this article.

We find some equally problematic state-shaped holes in Billig's (1995) analysis of nationalism's banal social reproduction. He argues that evidence for nationalism's salience is located in language – the taken-for-granted national 'us' or 'we' of 'the nation', 'the (implicitly national) Prime Minister', 'our people' and so on – which represents national 'homeland-making'. These are the boundary-instating, collective equivalents of home-building utterances in private contexts such as 'our family', 'the kitchen' or 'the living room' (1995: 108). Perhaps, however, this language more closely chimes with equally mundane but rather different everyday phrases such as 'the office' or 'the bank', 'our employer', 'our solicitors', 'our caseworker', 'our doctor'. Each phrase contains potentially significant emotional resonance at an intimate level yet implies impersonal, contractual (hierarchical, possibly reluctant) and associative rather than homely arrangements. Everyday phrases such as 'the car' or 'the light-switch' may similarly instate boundaries but only rarely in a *homely* way. Ultimately, I would suggest that the language and symbols Billig identifies as nationalist are more often referencing the institutionalised, seemingly permanent, background authority of the state than nationhood in any cultural or communal sense. We might also consider the rituals he analyses, such as the daily pledge of allegiance to the flag in the United States (1995: 50). If it is the state that imposes 'shared objective referents' for the passing of time and the symbolic ordering of societies (Bourdieu et al., 1994: 14) then these ostensibly national rituals may be no more indicative of a sense of nationhood than state-sanctioned school holiday periods. It is above all by reproducing the state, its hierarchies and coercive capacities as a *persona ficta* that society comes to normalise, honour and reify what we call nation-states.

From this perspective, Malešević's (2010: 194) argument that a 'low-intensity everyday' nationalism underlines political preferences for 'our own', and therefore nationalism's more virulent manifestations, should be reconsidered in relation to the crucial role played by a low-intensity, taken-for-granted *statism*. If the processes by which particular categories are identified with indicate the inherited and reproduced power and politics of the modern state more than national identities or cultural communities, then we should be very cautious about any assumptions regarding the extent to which nationhood itself is salient to nationalist political discourse. As with Smith, we must query to what extent the rather abstract, largely unconscious sense of collectiveness Billig analyses accurately refers to *nation*-states, unless we are to utilise that term rather loosely, with regard to any politically institutionalised and territorially defined polity. Without such scepticism we, including those like Billig who are highly critical of nationalism, risk muddying our analysis by introducing the social, political and methodological assumptions set out by nationalists (Breuilly, 1993).

This argument leads us to the key difference between the statism outlined here and so-called 'civic' nationalism. Rather than (or as well as) analysing nationalists' self-proclaimed 'national identities' (civic/ethnic, open/closed, voluntarist/organicist and so on), the above analysis suggests that it is crucial to analyse, inductively and with renewed

conceptual rigour, how and *whether* nationhood is salient to nationalist politics (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008); the dynamics by which modern statehood frames and provokes ideas surrounding nationhood (Breuilly, 1993; Wimmer, 2013); and how other state formations, political identifications and ideologies compete and overlap with the nation-state, national identities and nationalism (Bhambra, 2015; Halperin, 2017; Kumar, 2019). As the final section will discuss, such analysis is crucial if we wish to account for the solidarities, loyalties and identifications required for political mobilisation – historically, today and *in potentia*.

Contemporary Debates Regarding Statism, Nationalism and Nationhood

This section will consider the theoretical and practical implications of these arguments with regard to two important perspectives on contemporary politics and society – arguments in favour of reinvigorating nationalism, and arguments for dissolving nationalist states.

Even if we disagree with its more ambitious claims about cultural resonance and salience, nationalism may retain some prescriptive value. If the structures and understandings of public authority and sense of peoplehood associated with statehood are as powerful as I have suggested then perhaps nationalists' goals of constructing a distinctive public culture and sense of communal identity offer the most practical route to enable political co-operation, trust and obligations (whether for conservative, liberal or redistributive ends). Such arguments are made in political theory (Canovan, 1996; Miller, 1995) and in some recent high-profile work of Global North academics and journalists (Goodhart, 2017; Hazony, 2018; Kaufmann, 2018) for whom cosmopolitanism 'is more likely to invite the dominance of neo-liberal capitalism than to usher in an era of world citizenship' (Calhoun, 2007: 166). For these authors, if we seek democratically sanctioned resource redistribution, then national sovereignty and identities – locating us 'somewhere' rather than 'anywhere' (Goodhart, 2017) – provide the only resonant basis for generating compatriot solidarity and a public sphere with which citizens can identify. The policies recommended for achieving this include restrictions on immigration, re-energised national stories and new forms of national service.

A by-product of Hobbes's illusory, artificial state is that those attempting to construct it as 'a coherent enterprise . . . will frequently look for something tangible in the real world with which to identify it' (Runciman, 2000: 278). As Breuilly (1993) demonstrates, those associating nationhood with such coherence employ nationalist ideology to self-referentially evoke culture despite their politics being, at root, politically reactive to the modern state. To ascribe a foundational cultural dimension and source of political agency to nationhood is to confuse the direction of the relationship between nationalism and the state, effectively taking the ideology's own word for its natural fit with statehood. Ultimately, nationhood and national identities are, and can only be, disconnected from the fundamentally impersonal, fictive modern state. This is why nationalism's imposition of purported coherence on culturally diffuse societies, combined with its logic of homogenisation and exclusion, has historically required highly centralised and coercive state action; why most of the nation-state's most impressive democratic and redistributive achievements followed

periods of extraordinary violence (Runciman, 2018: 73–77); and why these achievements would be very difficult to replicate in anything resembling a liberal society. The populist politics, anti-immigrant hostility and racism witnessed in contemporary nationalist contexts as diverse as Britain, India and Brazil, are therefore not exceptional – they are nationalism’s very warp and weft.

Should the progressively minded therefore commit to an anti-nationalist, and indeed *anti-statist*, politics? As outlined in an earlier section, there is some evidence for emerging cosmopolitan imaginaries and salient trans- or post-national solidarities and practices. These patterns are heralded as signalling a cosmopolitan ‘common sense’ (Beck, 2006: 68), a novel practical reality sometimes related to principles of global justice (Fine and Cohen, 2002). Valluvan (2019: 202), in the British context, has argued for ‘an urgent shift to an alternative, post-national popular politics’ for which ‘the realities of everyday multicultural . . . constitute . . . a ready-made counterpoint’, while Tinsley (2019: 359) suggests that progressive political hopes lie ‘in global social movements that transcend the idea of the nation’. Such accounts are explicitly anti-nationalist and often implicitly anti-statist, through a commitment to strengthening politics ‘outside the purview of the state’s institutions and its matrices of power and control’ (Walia, 2013: 11).

There is a clear moral case for cosmopolitanism given modern states’ roots in Euro-American imperialism and the arbitrary life-enhancing or -denying effects of state membership. However, anti-statist arguments encounter difficulties when interacting with practical politics. There is no indication for the emergence of any viable public spheres to rival those prefigured by state association. Whether a state is primarily profiting from or buffeted by transnational capital, our understandings of public authority, perceptions regarding legitimate coercion and the capacity for planned resource distribution all remain overwhelmingly state-centred. Notwithstanding some relatively successful transnational political movements (e.g. anti-globalisation or environmental) the only contemporary cosmopolitan ideologies and identities with effective global institutional purchase are neo-liberal or religious. In the European Union, which offers perhaps ‘the world’s first example of fully institutionalised trans – or post – national political rights’ (Favell, 2010: 188), political participation and identities remain stubbornly parochial and state-bound even among some of its most mobile citizenry (Favell, 2010: 201). Cosmopolitan attitudes within the EU and globally are nascent, uneven and socially stratified (De Wilde et al., 2019), associated with elitist patterns of political organisation and identification strikingly similar to the empires and city-states that predated nationalism’s emergence (Halperin, 2017). In the rare recent instances where new states are formed (e.g. Kosovo, East Timor) or proposed (e.g. Scotland, Catalonia) these are primarily nationalist, emphasising national self-determination, rather than supranational or regional in character. And in multi-ethnic contexts, such as England, where qualitative research suggests nation-state boundaries and identifications are routinely disturbed in social interaction (e.g. Neal et al., 2013), the vast majority – inclusive of many who feel partially or entirely excluded from ‘the nation’ – identify with a ‘we’ demarcated by state boundaries (e.g. Condor et al., 2006; Leddy-Owen, 2019; Skey, 2011).

Therefore, although social practice in a globalising world might rightly be considered substantively cosmopolitan, perhaps increasingly so, any apparent dissolution of relationships between the *state* and a resonant sense of political peoplehood, actual or prospective, runs up against the durable authority and perceived permanence of the *persona*

ficta state. Cosmopolitan sociological analyses flounder at the more practical level of political identification, agency and action.

As Ypi (2012: 173) argues, for cosmopolitanism to become something other than a 'pious wish' requires recognition that the most propitious conditions for political agency – albeit in highly varying and imperfect circumstances – and the effecting of global justice lie within states. Non-ideal and contingent though they are, states, more than any other political association, circumscribe shared norms of political organisation and action, mutual responsibilities and co-dependence, providing an unrivalled institutional basis for motivationally sustainable and politically feasible collective political action (Ypi, 2012). Even if states, as so often, are deemed unrepresentative, unresponsive and alienating, they provide by far the most solid footing for recognisable, intelligible forms of collective politics, both practically and affectively; and even if our ultimate goal is a cosmopolitan political order, it is primarily through state mechanisms, and from the perspective of this article the popular resonance and authority associated with the durable, ineffable *persona ficta* state, that this might be achieved.

Crucially, I would argue that the enduring salience of the state implicitly underlines much contemporary sociology of nationalism that is anti-nationalist to the core yet methodologically statist. We see this in studies declaring cosmopolitan sympathies but focusing on a particular state, in similarly state-bound reviews of academic fields, and in conclusions that are politically optimistic yet prescriptively weak. If it is difficult to intelligibly account for how political and socioeconomic justice, at any scale, might function without the imposition of 'rules which cannot be breached with impunity' (Oakeshott, 1975: 40) then the world being imagined by anti-nationalist sociologists is very difficult to picture without some kind of state-like arrangement. Though the resonance and salience of nationalism and nationhood are rightly critiqued, for as long as anti-nationalist sociology fails to provide any viable alternative to how we might conceive of public power and authority statism survives, all but untouched, as methodological background and tacit enabling condition for feasible large-scale political agency and practical action.

Conclusion

I have argued that the resonance and salience of nations and nationalism are explained to a very substantial extent by modern statehood. The hypothesis is that the conditioning effects and power of seemingly permanent states are critically important for how we construct and perceive a sense of peoplehood. The emotional resonance associated by nationalists with nationhood is primarily accounted for not by deep sociological or cultural solidarities and symbols but by the enduring political structures of public authority, political responsibility and collective agency enabled by the seemingly permanent and omnipotent state. By figuring the *persona ficta* state into our analyses we find compelling, above all *political* explanations for the noisy, virulent nationalism analysed by Smith and the underlying, banal nationalism identified by Billig. Further empirical investigation into the resonance and salience of nationalism with regard to statehood is required, along the lines set out within the 'everyday nationhood' research agenda (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008). In a radically unequal world, it will be particularly important to

comparatively analyse variation by state and region, by relatively sovereign and more dependent states. Further research will also therefore benefit from recent insights provided by post-colonial genealogies of nationalism and the modern state (Bennett, 2018; Bhabra, 2017; Tinsley, 2019).

I have also argued that while we must avoid the analytic pitfalls of methodological nationalism, the durability of statehood cannot go unheeded. As the most salient font of public power and authority, states remain *the* key enabler of democratic politics and resource distribution, and of feasible, sustainable political agency. A tacit methodological statism can be detected in contemporary sociology that accurately critiques the salience of nationalism and nationhood, historically and today – not least via evidence of everyday cosmopolitan sociability – but which leaves the basic conditioning effects and implications of statehood largely unexamined.

Modern states are symptomatic of ‘a single, shared world . . . brought into being by European conquest’ (Asad cited in Scott, 2004: 117), an inheritance that we can ‘disavow but not escape’ (Scott, 2004: 13). Even if our aim is to move beyond statist particularism then the state itself, its resonant categories and identifications, offers the most conducive ‘cultivating ground . . . [for] global justice’ (Ypi, 2012: 86). If we wish to abolish nationalism and statism, if we wish to create progressive patterns of global governance, then we need states and their attendant identifications. From the perspective of the South, the use of politically ambivalent categories and concepts has long been debated vis-a-vis ‘strategic essentialism’ and the deployment of national identifications in the service of anti-/post-colonial struggle and state-building (Go, 2016: 62). In the North, the most nuanced and sophisticated attempts to navigate this path are found in late-20th-century multiculturalist theory (e.g. CMEB, 2000; Kymlicka, 1995) where inherited nation-state identifications and state structures are analysed in tension with reflections on historical violence and contemporary prejudice in globalising, increasingly multi-ethnic polities. If, as I have argued, ostensibly national categories are often not national, nor therefore necessarily nationalist, and if politics circumscribed by sovereign states remain our best hope for effective political action, then multiculturalist theory regarding the reshaping of political communities within state limitations will repay a revisit (Modood, 2019); though I would suggest that an explicitly *anti-nationalist* idiom should be developed alongside already well-developed anti-racist foundations (Leddy-Owen, 2019: 161–163). The task of considering how existing political structures, categories and identifications associated with nationalism might be employed for the long-term goals of cosmopolitan justice is ‘a much more arduous and subtle task than that of rejecting all existing institutions and tastes’ (Ypi, 2012: 159), but it requires urgent consideration in the contemporary sociology of nationalism.

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