Nationalism and racism

The racial politics of non-belonging, bordering and disposable humanities

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Theorizations of racism as set within the Western context have always run close to reckonings with the idea of nation; formative thinkers like Gilroy (2019), Goldberg (2002) and Yuval-Davis (1997) consistently grapple with the close affinities of the two formations. Racialization and the national imagination respectively are the two major nodes through which hierarchical conceptions of communitarian belonging have been both rendered and circulated within modernity. It palindromically follows that much race-making work will be channeled through conceptions of nationhood and that much nation-making work will be channeled through conceptions of race. Put simply, the two assertions of communitarian identity often act in concert, both discursively and institutionally. It is accordingly this joint expression that will be the focus of this chapter.

The powerful centrality of nation to how Western racisms are articulated has of course become once again, in light of recent electoral trends, a major concern of academic debate. The study of nationalism itself suffered, through the 1990s and 2000s, a brief hiatus. In the immediate wake of the USSR’s dissolution, and in line with the complementary analytic trends characteristic of the ‘end of history’ hubris, nationalism ceased to receive much critical scrutiny. The ills of nationalism were assumed by many to be a matter primarily of the past and/or to have been overstated in the first place. The political consolidation however of nationalism over the last decade, a consolidation that had been germinating over an extended period (Ansell, 1997; Bhatt, 2012; Kundnani, 2007; Lentin and Titley, 2011), has demanded a hasty analytic recourse to the appeal and conduits of nationalism. Whilst this has been partially achieved through a resurgent interest in the toxic politics of the far-right and fascism proper (Mondon and Winter, 2019), another line of reawakened analysis has formally centered nationalism as a force of modernity unto itself: requiring in turn measured understanding of how the nation has operated as the preeminent formation by which modern people have both conceptualized and organized their political life. Amidst this reawakening, scholars of race and racism have been insistent about the centrality of whiteness and racialized pathologization to formations of Western nationalism, a centrality that is often absent in more mainstream understandings of the topic.
This chapter will herein profile the different canonical debates through which this relationship between racism and nationalism has been made most productively evident. This discussion will include: first, a summary of classical theorizations of the nation’s place within modernity; second, an interrogation, through drawing upon formative works as developed within a critical Cultural Studies tradition, of the Western nation’s racial premises; and third, an engagement of a postcolonial theory lens that helps us theorize the nation beyond the particulars of a European modernity. The recurring emphasis of this chapter will be the exclusionary underpinnings and capacities of nationalist politics – racialized exclusionary capacities that are expressed both discursively (e.g. the forms of vilification and outsized political scapegoating of minorities) as well as institutionally (e.g. the suite of citizenship regimes and ‘bordering’ practices proliferating all around us). The chapter will accordingly argue, contrary to most classical reckonings with the subject, that nationalism is rarely just or even primarily a politics of belonging. It will instead become apparent that its political mandate most often rests on assertions of non-belonging – wherein nationalism is a politics of exclusion that renders the often racialized Other the oversized object of political anxiety.

Defining and historicizing the nation

The nation was, over an extended period, understood by many academics and popular thinkers alike as something fundamentally natural. But from the 1980s onward, mainstream scholarship realized a more aggressive deconstruction of how nations are themselves specific outcomes of modernity, something that was summoned into existence by the confluence of various historical factors from the 17th century onward. In other words, nation has been ably understood in most contemporary scholarship as being both an institutional and imaginative form unique to modernity.

This does not, however, obviate the truth that nationhood is still conjured in much popular culture as constituting a timeless unit that has always existed – as constituting the natural container by which different peoples are organized historically and culturally. As Tharoor (2018) put it in an entertaining take on what he calls Netflix’s ‘nationalism problem’:

It is a pity that so many historical films [on the streaming platform] feel so obliged to place the imagined nation at their emotional core. That not only distorts understandings of the past, but it suggests that the past can only be relevant and interesting if it supports conventions of the present. […] Nationalism becomes a kind of virtue that transcends time.

And whilst such popular appeals to an immemorial sense of the nation’s character might be easily rebuked, it is worth noting that there are some rather more refined academic schools that still to try to attribute some residual features of premodernity to the emergence of the nation idea. For instance, the influential ‘ethno-symbolism’ work of the late Anthony Smith (2009) maintains that the myths and symbols of ethnic community that predated the emergence of the modern state are equally vital for situating the longevity and reach of nationalism. Similarly interesting is Llobera’s (1996) deep reading of medieval texts in order to historicize the gradual emergence amongst elites of an attachment to nation, an emergence that gradually supplanted the role of formal religion in the political and cultural life of modern societies. His famous remark that nationalism is the ‘god of modernity’ buttresses the aforementioned Smith’s (2001[2010]: 38–39) own claim that, amidst the seeming dissipation of religion’s hold on society, it is the idea of nation that constitutes modernity’s staging.
of the ‘sacred’ – a sacralized sense of nigh metaphysical community whereby nationalism becomes in practice ‘a surrogate political religion’.

These tangents aside, the precise emergence of the nation is these days historicized with relative scholarly ease, wherein the vicissitudes and imperatives of early capitalism (intertwined with colonial expansion) and the 19th century era of cultural Romanticism are straightforwardly identified as the two defining stages (Rabinbach, 1974: 127-153). Commonly dated to the 1648 Westphalian Treaty, the nation-state proper, as a form of centralized territorial sovereignty (Anderson, 1983: 7), is now seen as only emerging amidst the debris of the ‘religious’ wars that tore asunder Europe. It is modernity therein – as a particular historical force that ‘territorializes’ political sovereignty into one centralized unit – that is seen as incrementally promulgating a political belief that the legitimacy of government must always be vested in an idea of the national people that the territory comprises.

This analysis has culminated, in the wake of the cultural and linguistic turn in social theory, with the now famous conception of nation as ‘narration’ (Bhabha, 1994[2004]), nation as ‘discourse’ (Calhoun, 1997; Wodak et al., 2009[1999]) and nation as ‘a category of practice’ (Brubaker, 1996: 15): this being the notion that the idea of the nation – comprising its many myths, its symbols, its nominal values, and also the historical events that it ritualizes as iconic – becomes only something that is told, said, gestured, and performed. Nation is namely only a narration, but a narration with formidable institutional backing and consequences – given that it is in the name of the nation that the modern state is said to exist.

This observation helps prise open the most celebrated accounts of nation and nationalism, the publications of which clustered around the early 1980s. This includes the famous ‘imagined communities’ account of Benedict Anderson (1983); it includes Gellner’s (Gellner, 1983 [2006]) functionalist reading of how nationalisms emerged in accordance to the imperatives of the industrial capitalism; and it also includes the Marxist social formations account of Hobson (1990), Thompson, 1963 [2013]), and also Balibar (1990). A series of canonical concepts took shape here. For instance, Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ and Balibar’s (1990: 349) ‘fictive ethnicity’ both signposted the manner in which an illusory sense of national community takes concrete shape, cutting across more deeply–worn and materially embedded divisions of geography, gender, politics and, crucially, class (Garner, 2010: 49). Also apparent here is the integral play on temporality. It is often forgotten that national identity is not merely spatial – i.e. an ideal of ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ (Anderson, 1983: 7) operating symbolically across a geographic expanse. Nation is also a claim on transhistorical time. As Anderson argued, a sense of ‘simultaneous temporality’ arises that is affectively intoxicating as well as cognitively satisfying; wherein people, through their investments in prevailing narrations of nation, believe themselves to be joined by historical projection with those who have long been dead alongside those who are yet to be born. After all, it is not at all uncommon to hear in everyday speech claims about how ‘we’ did this and ‘we’ did that: how ‘we’ invented the wheel; how ‘we’ fought off the Romans; how ‘we’ invented the number zero; how ‘we’ built the pyramids; how ‘we’ defeated the Nazis; how ‘we’ resisted the Ottomans; and so forth. Central to this memorialization of a ‘deep time’ that the idea of nation stages is what Hobson and Ranger (1983) coined as being the ‘invention of tradition’. The invention of tradition refers here to the important monumentalization of a particular iconic history definitive of the nation. This is namely the selective and often distorted terms by which a particular retrospective understanding of history gets cemented: a history that extolls the nation as constituting an unbroken ethnic coherence, as possessing a shared culture, and as having a distinct political purpose and destiny.
Amidst this expansive academic consensus, there is little scholarly necessity to further establish the specifics of the nation-state’s socially constructed historic contingency. The notion of social construct remains after all a truism of contemporary social science, whatever the subject matter being mooted. The more credible and worthwhile critical intervention regarding the specificity of nationalism is accordingly to be had elsewhere. Put differently, it is not the constructed nature of the nation but how it is necessarily constructed that critical scholars of nationalism are most inclined to unpack. In other words, it is an interrogation of the process of making in itself, as distinctive to nationalism, which is of more meaningful political value. It is also in this that the nation’s story of race and racism will become more immediately visible.

**Nation and exclusion**

It is not uncommon to encounter claims that either defend the merits of nation and/or exculpate it of its most inconvenient and problematic features. For instance, there are many who see the commitment to nation as testament to a healthy appetite for democratic community. These are the pervasive formulations where a noble patriotism is seen as constituting the basic premise for collective concern and civic duty. There are others of a more Marxist/post-Marxist vintage who see national identity as the basis for the shepherding of popular working class vernaculars around which a critical anti-market, anti-establishment and anti-elite politics can take shape. There are also those of an International Relations disciplinary inclination who press the nation as a necessary practicality by which otherwise anarchic global relations and processes can be pooled into functioning territorial units. This position – famously critiqued by both Ulrich Beck (2007) and by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) as exemplary of ‘methodological nationalism’ – also marries with certain anthropological intuitions that see nations as the proxy index for culture. This is the inferential tendency to see national identity as corresponding to different cultural formations: say, Swedish versus Italian culture or Australian versus Indian culture. There are then others who see in the collective spirit of nation a crucial antidote to the atomizing, individualizing and excessively rationalized bureaucratic underpinnings of modernity. This more quietly textured orientation sees the binds of nation as returning to people a sense of purpose, attachment and affect that modernity otherwise denies. This is the abiding legacy of Romanticism that, as harnessed to other complementary political programs and temperaments – be it conservative, Marxist, liberal or realist – that continues to vest in the idea of nation a popular validity, pragmatism and spirituality alike.

The treatment of nationalism as informed by a race conscious critical commentary places its emphasis elsewhere. Troubled by these various terms by which the nation continues to leverage a popular credibility, race driven analyses draws its most concerted attention to the exclusionary premises by which the nation obtains its primary and most visceral political mandate. These scholars, particularly those associated with 1980s analyses of the emergent ‘new’ and ‘cultural’ racisms, developed an understanding of nation as always being premised on what is often called Oothering. Just as Stuart Hall (1992) and Edward Said (1978 [2003]) famously conceived of colonial ideas of the West as being tied to the conjuring of a semiotic Other (be it the ‘Orient’ or ‘the Rest’), critical scholars of nationalism have tended to emphasize the terms by which the emphatic identification of a ‘Significant Other(s)’ is how the nation itself can be asserted in a substantive manner (Triandafyllidou, 1998). In line with the maxims of structural linguistics underpinning wider analysis of culture and ideology, scholars of the racism/nation nexus have tended to focus on two key fronts of nationalist
assertion. First, the respective European nation-state’s civilizationist affirmations of difference vis-à-vis the colonized elsewhere. But also the terms by which racialized domestic minorities become the negational foil for the majoritarian nation. As regards the latter, the 19th century role of anti-Semitism (McGeever and Virdee, 2017; Mosse, 1978) is seen as a particularly emblematic marker of how nationalist politics has always revolved as much on internal distinction as it has on distinctions as placed at the ostensible frontier.

This more structuralist minded unpacking of the nation’s ‘self/other’ configuration has been further aided by later poststructuralist deconstructions of the very idea of culture that is often indexed to nation – a notion of cohesive cultural identity that is often framed antagonistically against a nation’s minorities. It remains a commonplace feature of modern discourse to tie conceptions of cultural difference to mappings of nation and ethnicity. The habitual prevalence of such ‘culturalist’ (Brah, 1996: 80) logics that nationalisms help uphold was put herein under sustained stress amidst the ‘textual turn’ in cultural theory; it becoming increasingly apparent that the claims to cultural content as demarcated by the boundaries of nation lacked empirical credibility. To pose a perhaps flippant example, there is very little cultural commonality that can harmonize the dramatic class and geographic contrasts that separate the Liverpool of Wayne Rooney from the Cotswolds shires of Zara Tindall (née Phillips). Culture remains, in other words, too relational, localized, fluid, and unstable a set of practices and orientations to be meaningfully situated at the level of national populations. Conversely, in accordance with some of the globalization oriented analysis of the 1990s and 2000s, the determinations of contemporary culture are often better accounted at the level of a transnational commercial industry as oriented around motifs of Americana and the mythopoiesis of the American Dream more broadly. As Hobsbawm and Kertzer (1992: 8) noted in a wry snipe about far-right politics:

> Culturally, the most militant gangs who beat up immigrants in the name of the nation belong to the international youth culture and reflect its modes and fashions, jeans, punk-rock, junk food and all. Indeed, for most of the inhabitants of the countries in which xenophobia is now epidemic, the old ways of life have changed so drastically since the 1950s that there is very little of them left to defend. It actually takes someone who has lived through the past 40 years as an adult to appreciate quite how extraordinarily the England of even the 1970s differed from the England of the 1940s, and the France, Italy or Spain of the 1980s from those countries in the early 1950s.

It may well be that the more explicit ‘globalization’ thesis as hinted at by the authors has become somewhat subdued over the last few years. It is, however, undeniable that an Anglophone social/digital media that supersedes nationally instituted cultural vehicles remains particularly pronounced in the present; this reality lending in turn further weight to the overarching argument that cultural formation is increasingly to be situated along a global scale.

We see herein, in the raw circumstantial specifics of locality on the one hand, and the transnational scale of social/American media on the other, that the indexing of culture to national identity is simply a bankrupt proposition. It follows therefore that the enduring political appeal of nation cannot be naively read as being simply a natural expression of cultural commonality. This is, however, a conceit that has been forcefully institutionalized through various means – after all, it is in the nation’s name that the state is authorized. In other words, the belief that one’s nation wields an immanent cultural integrity is routinely rehearsed through the institutional mechanisms central to what (Bhabha, 1994[2004]: 212-230) describes as the ‘pedagogic’ demonstrations of the nation-state. As realized, for instance: through the concerted
standardization of a common language, a standardization that proved and continues to prove much more difficult than commonly presumed (Balibar, 1990: 344); through the active intervention in the telling of an official history, particularly in school curriculums (Doharty, 2018); through the preferential institutionalization of state churches/religions or, as in France, the sacralization of a principle of laïcité, a principle that is said to be unique to the nation; through the oratorical tropes of figures of state; through the funding and commercial structures of popular culture productions but also academic research financing; and, also, through the more ceremonial rituals that stages national unity (Byrne, 2014) and ethnic custom – rituals that comprise a set of seemingly banal practices that Billig (1995) termed everyday ‘flagging’.

In sum, there prevails a significant investment by dominant institutions in the idea of nation. It is, however, also the case that the notion of a nation’s well-demarcated cultural cohesiveness is only an institutional and discursive insistence that, by its very falsity, is often uneasy and incomplete (Bhabha, 1994 [2004]). As mentioned previously, it is evident that such institutional attempts to ‘flag’ the nation will always remain fragile, struggling to convincingly account for the marked localisms, the pronounced class fractures, as well as the decidedly global cultural mediations that all cut across such claims to nation. Critical accounts have therein noted that the substantiation of nationalist politics is best sourced elsewhere. As Valluvan (2019) has argued elsewhere, purported investments in national identity are in themselves inadequate to account for the fuller galvanizing force of nationalist politics. Any claim to national identity is in itself too substantively thin, too conceptually unstable, and too affectively illusory to carry all that is generally asked of a politics of nationalism.

It is here that the most distinctive aspect of this chapter’s argument becomes visible. Nationalism might, namely, be seen less as a politics of belonging and more as a politics of non-belonging – a politics that takes its cue from the aforementioned processes by which other figures vis-à-vis the nation are summoned into being. Figures that are, of course, frequently racialized. Inspired by the decisive critique issued by Hannah Arendt (1951 [1973]) in her Origins of Totalitarianism, a deep body of scholarship has asked us to note the exclusionary terms by which nations obtain symbolic definition and against whom nationalisms orient their political energies. Arendt is particularly helpful here because of her relatively prescient attentiveness to the colonial forms of ‘race-thinking’ that were in fact feeding into the embryonic nation-state imaginations being contemporaneously cemented within Europe. Arendt (1951 [1973]: 275) famously understood the story of nation-state politics as being the situation, which was played and replayed across the 19th and 20th centuries, where the ‘nation conquers the state’. Already primed in the intrinsic logics of the French Revolution itself, nationalism was for Arendt the terms by which the ostensibly egalitarian ideals of the bourgeois revolutions found material and ideational articulation. Put differently, the ‘freedom of man’ as championed across the revolutionary ecstasies of nation-state formation in Europe was in actuality, the freedom of the nation and its self-declared majoritarian selves. This is the politics of nation where any notional freedom turns fundamentally and necessarily on the unfreedoms and demagogueries as asserted against those peoples understood as being not of the relevant nation.

The majestic analysis that Arendt provided here has proved invaluable for so much critical reckoning with the nation-question. As has been widely commented upon, however, she does also remain a somewhat clumsy and uneven observer of these overlapping logics of nation, Othering, and race (Valluvan, 2019: 218). These themes and their joint pivots are herein more efficiently and expansively gleaned through engaging the arguments of various late 20th century scholars, not least those formed in the decorated British cultural studies (CCCS) tradition as well as postcolonial theory’s strident remaking of how we understand modernity, belonging and hierarchy.
Racism and nation

It ought to be self-evident to any observer of Western politics that the structures of national Othering germane to its recent memory have rarely been restricted to the simple imperatives of territorial closure. In other words, nationalist agitations are very seldom strictly ‘xenophobic’ in character – xenophobia as the ‘undiscriminating’ aversion to all outsiders *sui generis*. Again, except for the acute but generally temporary theatre of regional war, it is apparent that the recent forms of nationalisms typically ascribed to Western Europe have rarely traded on purely national distinctions *vis-à-vis* other nations (Brubaker, 2017: 1211). Instead, these post-war nationalisms have tended to be more exercised by the recurring racialized distinctions that are often expressed along overtly ‘civilizational’ terms. Put simply, it is not nation contra other nations, but instead, nation contra racialized outsiders that has often engendered the primary fault-lines evocative of Western nationalisms’ political traction.

Important to this understanding is the oft-ignored reality that nationalism, as a distinct genre of politics, often tends to take primary issue with its own interior domain. Namely, the national psyche is often most agitated by certain internal minorities that are any given point framed as being iconically problematic. These minorities are certainly of the ‘territory’, having been in most instances born in the relevant country, but they are still apprehended in the popular imagination as constituting some form of alien community. As Gilroy (Gilroy, 1987[2002]) clarified with searching depth, many nationalist conceptions of fear, threat, decay, excess, and repulsion work through a disavowal of such insider racialized communities. Or, as regards the ascendant nationalist politics of today, consider here the discourses about so-called second and third generation minorities ubiquitous across so much of Europe. As is perhaps most pithily captured in the ‘allochtoon’/‘autochtoon’ (Essed and Trienekens, 2008: 62-63) distinction that governs much Dutch political deliberation of lineage and belonging, racialized minorities often suffer from an asterisked relationship to the nation. An asterisked relationship that renders them vulnerable to extended political scapegoating and handwringing. And even if a round of nationalist assertion is indeed about the border and the foreigner, properly speaking – via, for instance, assorted anxieties about the imminent arrival of immigrants/refugees – this is an anxiety that still hinges in the first instance on a racialized aversion to the insider minority. This is in other words a brand of nationalist disquiet where prospective outsiders (e.g. refugees from Muslim majority countries) threaten to replenish the vilified internal minorities (racialized Muslim communities) who are already perceived as being too many.

Nationalism is herein only rarely about taking issue with external forces in their own right (e.g. the global flow of finance capital, belligerent neighbors, international trade wars, or foreign cultural hegemonies). Though such forms of protectionist defensiveness are always relevant to a nationalist moment, nationalism as a distinct form of contemporary politics can be better defined within tighter parameters. As Valluvan (2019) has argued elsewhere, nationalism is perhaps best understood as the terms by which certain ‘constitutive outsiders’ as already located *within* the nation becomes the ‘overdetermined’ object of culpability when accounting for a nation’s perceived social, economic, cultural and/or security concerns. Nationalist alarms become herein tightly knotted by the racialized categories of non-belonging so constitutive of Western sociopolitical life. It is namely the racialized outsider who acts as the Western nation’s most resonant and fetid constitutive outsider. (Note that the inverse formulation also applies: it is through being impugned as the nation’s constitutive outsider that certain communities become further racialized). It is of course true that a nationalist invocation of the Other, to whom a political malaise is ascribed, does not by definition need racialized orientations. But
‘race-thinking’ does nonetheless act as the complementary logic that either precedes and/or amplifies any such conception of a malignant deluge.

The discursive techniques by which such a conception of deluge finds expression are varied. Most often, these racialized ascriptions often construe the relevant Other as being *culturally incompatible* with the white majority. This is what Mishra (2017:4) has recently described as being the ‘neo-anthropological’ speak of contemporary nationalists:

In [this] vision, cultures rather than biologically defined races were presented as exclusive and unchanging across time and place, with cultural difference treated as a fact of nature – ‘rooted’ identities, in [David] Goodhart’s phrase – that we ignore at our peril. Preferring our own kind, we apparently belong, in defiance of human history, to an immutable community bound by its origins to a specific place, and should have the right to remain distinctive. Hectically naturalising cultural difference, the neo-anthropologists were careful not to preen about their superior origins and heredity as the supremacists of the past had done. They could even claim to be aficionados of racial diversity. ‘I love Maghrebins,’ Jean-Marie Le Pen declared, ‘but their place is in the Maghreb.’

As discussed previously, this increased ‘culture talk’ (Mamdani, 2002), which scores the fault-line between belonging and non-belonging, does trade on thoroughly disingenuous understandings of culture’s relationship to ethnicity and nation. But also looming large within these nationalist harangues are the recurring intimations of a law and order security threat – via prevailing ascriptions of both black and increasingly Roma/Eastern European criminality (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy, 2012), but obtaining a particularly sharp militaristic strain through contemporary discourses regarding terrorism and Muslim fundamentalism. Elsewhere, the threat that the Other poses is imagined along primarily economistic terms. This more left-wing inflected narrative presents the racialized minority/outsider both as a threat to the economic health and work-ethic of the nation, but also as a threat to the ‘native’ working-class – owing to the purported undercutting of wages and/or crowding out of employment opportunities (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Shilliam, 2018; Virdee, 2019). This latter anxiety, which has become particularly prominent in contemporary nationalist-populisms, also marries with more general concerns about resource scarcity – be if welfare state provisions or access to housing and urban space.

**Bordering**

As is already likely apparent, much of the nation’s racial politics as germane to the contemporary West has been staged via the totemic issue of immigration – an issue that has taken on a nigh unprecedented importance in governing European politics. And whilst the presentation of these anti-immigration anxieties could notionally operate independently of racialized assignations, it is observable that it is this racialized tenor that allows harangues against immigration to operate so viscerally and expansively in the public imagination. Put differently, racism lends the charge of both national decay and deluge a decidedly more fetid, rousing and even ‘animalizing’ (Goldberg, 2015) resonance to the threat being derided.

This attentiveness to how the ‘specter of immigration’ (Lentin, 2008) organizes contemporary nationalisms also draws attention to perhaps the key institutional mechanism through which such nationalisms find material and technical expression. Put bluntly, it is the hardened regimes of bordering multiplying across the world that constitutes the starkest material manifestation of today’s nationalisms. Borders represent here the most immediate
means by which a nation can police and structure the populations it considers undesirable. A politics that is realized through a suite of interlocking measures – such as increased fortification, the conditioning of citizenship, and the hollowing out of various human rights obligations characteristic of 20th century liberalism. And as will become apparent in this section, the politics of bordering necessarily traffic in a discourse of dehumanization that again harnesses the ‘raciologies’ (Gilroy, 2000[2004]) and related forms of ethnic chauvinism characteristic of modernity.

Bordering can certainly be as simple as not allowing certain people access to a country. These are the ‘death-worlds’ (Mbembe, 2003: 40) that have been increasingly normalized in those interstitial spaces that separate borders. The abyssal depths of the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean intertwine with the refugee camps proliferating across various global nodes to produce particularly haunting expressions of such exclusion-cum-indifference; an expression of human expendability as actively engendered by the bordering practices that has become a fixture of modern statecraft (James, 2019; Trilling, 2019). Similarly, bordering also denotes those processes by which suspended zones of national law are brokered: wherein the outsourcing of border-control to other countries and/or the increased recourse to detention centers allows for a more callous domain of legal jurisdiction to be consolidated. Put less abstractly, this is the increasingly normalized scenario where ‘outsiders’ deemed undesirable can be ‘housed’, often indefinitely, and without them obtaining the human protections that national regimes of liberal law and supranational treaties would otherwise mandate. Notorious examples of this include the Manus, Nauru and Christmas Island arrangements as overseen by Australia’s immigration policy (Davidson, 2017; DW, 2019); mooted proposals in Denmark to convert a facility on a sparsely populated island previously designated for the quarantining of infected farm animals into a migrant detention center (Sorensen, 2018); but also the more general practices by which powerful nation-states and regional entities can outsource, through financial and political incentives, the ‘warehousing’ of migrants to other countries (the EU arrangements with Turkey, Libya and others having receiving considerable media coverage[Henley, 2018]).

This form of repulsing certain populations, condemning them thereupon to a forcibly sequestered fixity (Mbembe, 2018b), speaks of course to well-established racial scripts by which the dehumanized/‘infrahuman’ (Gilroy, 2000[2004]) have been rendered disposable (Mongia, 1999). The above constitutes however a fairly conventional, if of course critical, reading of what nationalist bordering constitutes. It is worth noting how bordering also represents those processes by which access to a certain territory is in fact permitted but only in a distorted form. This partial access pertains to those situations where certain denizens’ access to resources, rights and protections are either withheld or withdrawn (Back and Sinha, 2018: 138; Jones et al., 2017). Elsewhere, migrant access to the state and territory is characterized by its temporary, fixed-term nature (e.g. the restrictions as applied to non-EU student visas and work-permits). Recent research on deportation and citizenship deprivation has also drawn attention to another particularly stark dimension of today’s bordering – wherein those who might initially enjoy rights are then deprived of them (de Noronha, 2019; Kapoor, 2018). This often transpires through a racialized assessment of a putative ‘security threat’ (e.g. those accused of being ‘aligned’ (Austin, 2019) to Islamist terrorism) and/or a racialized assessment of criminality (e.g. the ongoing deportation of black Britons to Jamaica). And whilst ‘deprivation’ might remain a relatively marginal feature of contemporary bordering, it not only brings into relief the racial contingency of ‘belonging’ but it might also constitute a wider portend of the even more diffuse authoritarianism that could await us in a ‘mutant, post-judicial future’ (Kapoor, 2019).
Fundamentally, as the ‘racial state’ (Goldberg, 2002; Sharma and Nijjar, 2018) perspective has helped demonstrate, this weaker form of national denizenship allows for the racialized engendering of populations whose presence and activity is always circumscribed – always vulnerable to surveillance and review vis-à-vis the expediencies of the state and its attendant nationalist-populisms. But when apprehended from a more avowedly Marxist perspective, bordering of this sort also reveals a striking stratification of labor (Bhattacharyya, 2018). There are namely profound class effects to the engendering of ‘multi-status’ (de Noronha, 2019) populations. Multi-status denotes here the terms by which a population is fractured by differential legal and political entitlements – including, most acutely, those who are ‘undocumented’ and therein lack any political recognition whatsoever. Amidst such a formal fragmentation of the polity, people’s relationship to labor too becomes differentially conditioned, open therein to different levels of exploitation. For instance, less-than-citizen populations often provide low-wage work but without them being integrated into the complementary protections of the welfare state. Elsewhere, access to work for certain migrants, and those on student or spousal visas, is often dependent on a ‘salary threshold’. Another implication of the latter is that should the relevant person suffer a deterioration in their earnings, they then promptly surrender the right to be in the country.

This brief scan of both the sadism but also the classed effects of national bordering helps accordingly foreground the distinctly institutional and material dimensions to the racial politics of the nation-state. This emphasis on bordering attests in turn to a wider shift in emphasis as regards contemporary critical scholarship. Much previous analysis of nationalisms’ racial politics, as situated within Western Europe, centered on the theme of integration. Integration was read here as the governmental instruction, often presented within a loosely liberal guise, that the racialized minority and/or migrant community remains in ethnocultural terms a font of dysfunction unless demonstrably altered (Favell, 1998; Lentin and Titley, 2011; McGhee, 2008). It was rightly noted here that much pontification of a nationalist bent traded on some marshaling of such integration agendas/discourses. The critical focus on such integration discourses has however been supplanted of late by the perhaps more explicit theme of bordering (El-Enany, 2019). Given contemporary nationalisms’ outsized emphasis on issues of immigration and citizenship, there has been a corresponding analytic push towards surveying the aforementioned materiality of bordering. This being a research program that reminds us that the racial politics of nationalism is never merely a discursive consideration – i.e. how it shapes political deliberation, mobilization and stigmatization (Valluvan, 2019) – but is also about its demonstrably material articulations and cruelties.

The postcolonial perspective

Given the immediate context of my own research experience in Britain and Sweden, much of this discussion has presumed a Western and perhaps even European location. Needless to say, debates about nationalism do extend well beyond the provincialism of Europe, and has indeed been debated far more intensely and generatively in other non-Western contexts. These commentaries, often hosted under the auspices of a wider postcolonial theory conversation, have understandably given the specifics of race and racism only a peripheral analytic berth. These perspectives are instead more inclined towards weighing the putative merits but also the excesses and hazards of the Global South’s respective investments in the nation-state form. Particularly relevant here are the wider ethnic chauvinisms and majoritarianisms that have afflicted much of the Global South’s attempts at nation-state formation – chauvinisms that very much resemble the majoritarian workings of a racialized inferiorization that I have hitherto attributed to Western nationalism.

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This observation helps bring through a conceptual clarification salutary to this chapter’s general thesis. Namely, what has been until now understood as the national politics of racialization is itself often acting contiguously to other communitarian formations as construed along ethnic and religious taxonomies. It is, for instance, instructive to remember that the forms of racialized nationalism that Gilroy (1987[2002]) brought to bear in his landmark There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack did not operate through an unduly circumscribed conceptualization of racial identity. Indeed, it was his parallel concept of ‘ethnic absolutism’ (66) that helped properly ground the exclusionary logics that nationalisms turn on. It is therein important, with an eye on the wider insights of postcolonial theory, to understand race and ethnicity as often doing a mutually complementary and often-comparable communitarian work.

The influence of postcolonial theory as regards the question of nation also derives from its formidable attempts to re-historicize the nation-state as well as re-conceptualize its contingent properties. This has involved an attempt to better parse the genealogy of the non-European nation-state. In most authoritative accounts, the nation-state imagination, wherever it might manifest, is largely understood as constituting an inheritance of ‘colonial modernity’ (Kalra and Purewal, 2019). This remains largely undisputed. But searching questions have been asked about how the nation-state, as subsequently rendered independently of European influence, does partially constitute a cooption of the form. Similarly, in working postcolonial nationalisms away from an analytic reference that is excessively European, there arises also an overarching reevaluation of whether the idea of nation can be salvaged in the charting of anti-imperial futures that are inclusive in form.

This is partly achieved through better affirming how postcolonial nationalisms do embark upon their own histories and contingencies – that they do, in other words, partially escape the determinations of the European nation-state model (Chatterjee, 1986[1993]). McClintock (1993: 67) once derided with a tidy clarity the Eurocentric orthodoxy of formative thinkers like Hobsbawn:

Nationalisms are invented, performed and consumed in ways that do not follow a universal blueprint. At the very least, the breathtaking Eurocentricism of Hobsbawn’s dismissal of Third World nationalisms warrants sustained criticism. In a gesture of sweeping condescension, Hobsbawn nominates Europe as nationalism’s ‘original home’, while ‘all the anti-imperial movements of any significance’ are unceremoniously dumped into three categories: mimicry of Europe, anti-Western xenophobia, and the ‘natural high spirits of martial tribes’.

This insight into the presumptuous arrogance of much European theorization is well observed. But the perhaps more interesting analytic provincializing of Europe is also achieved through noting how postcolonial nation-states produce and authorize their own distinct exclusionary and chauvinistic structures (Anand, 2012; Jayawardena, 1986 [2006]; Mamdani, 2003; Spivak, 1987 [1994]). As much work on South Asia in particular has shown, the autonomy of postcolonial nationalisms is most efficiently established not through expiating it of the sins of nationalism (as is the condescending temptation that still lurks in certain quarters), but instead, through attributing to it its own distinctive violences.

After all, as Mbembe (2018a: 1) recently reminded us in an arresting diagnosis of our current global conjuncture,

Europe is no longer the center of gravity of the world. This is the significant event, the fundamental experience, of our era. And we are only just now beginning the work measuring its implication and weighing its consequences. Whether such a revelation is
an occasion for joy or cause for surprise or worry, one thing remains certain: the demo-
tion of Europe opens up possibilities – and presents dangers – for critical thought.

In relation to the specifics of my own chapter, such an important observation invites us to
demarcate a set of socioeconomic and sociopolitical forces relevant to contemporary postco-
lonial nationalisms that are no longer merely derivative of the geographic ‘West/non-West’
relationship. Or as Osuri (2017: 2428) puts it,

Contemporary colonialisms and imperialisms may be best diagnosed through the lens of
identifying forms of sovereignty [as comprising, in part, nation-state logics] rather than
relying on the geopolitical framework of West/non-West recognisable in the conceptual
vocabulary of postcolonial theory.

And though this is ultimately a call for a ‘theorization of the postcolonial nation-state as
engaging in its [own] expansionary colonial project’ (2432), it also helps to situate the
imperatives and violations of the nation-state imagination in the distinctiveness of the present.
Put differently, this move helps us better understand how the different nationalisms across
the Global South trade in a variety of intersecting exclusions as construed by ethnicity, reli-
gion, caste, and race whilst also inhibiting a broader transnational class solidarity as well as
the global ecological consciousness so necessary for the present.

Conclusion

The nation remains perhaps the most decisive political unit known to modernity – the unit
through which moderns have been asked to pool their political goals and imagine their sociopolitical selves. The political allure of nation has accordingly endured across modernity, and is enjoying today yet another revival. This is, needless to say, troubling. As the race-
conscious cultural and postcolonial theory surveyed here has made evident, the nation enjoys
very little that is benign or redeemable – trafficking necessarily in a whole host of exclusion-
ary assertions that are not only violent (e.g. bordering) and degrading (e.g. pathologisation)
but also preclude the possibilities of cosmopolitan and pluralist solidarities that render politics
possible and lives inhabitable. The recurring utopian analyses of so many searching anti-racist
scholars (such as Fanon, Gilroy, Mbembe and Wynter) appeal in turn to these other memories and possibilities – to realize a transcendent politics that might recover and affirm the tex-
tures of each other’s humanity when less arrested by the myopias, aversions and even hatreds
intrinsic to the racial and ethnic politics of nation.

References


