NATIONS AND NATIONALISM IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Introduction

One of the historically unique characteristics of modern international relations is that they are interactions between formally equal and equivalent nation-states; it is this ‘global monoculture’ of nation-states that differentiates the modern international order from its more heterogeneous predecessors (Phillips and Sharman, 2015: 1). Over the years, the discipline of IR has produced a substantial body of historical and theoretical literature on the ‘state’ side of the nation-state (e.g. James, 1986; Jackson, 1990; Spruyt, 1994; Bartelson, 2001; Branch, 2013; see de Carvalho and Leira, 2021 in this volume). In comparison, the ‘nation’ side of the nation-state been relatively neglected by IR scholars, even as it has been subjected to detailed analysis by sociologists and historians (e.g. Gellner, 1983; Hobbsawm, 1992; Anderson, 2006; Hirschi, 2012). The neglect of nations and nationalism in IR is rather surprising for a discipline that, after all, derives its name from the nation. Nations and nationalism are absolutely central to the theory and practice of modern international relations, yet their role has been systematically downplayed or ignored by IR scholars. As will be detailed below, the neglect of nations and nationalism is no mere oversight, but a constitutive disavowal that makes it possible to analyse international relations as interstate relations.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section provides a historical overview of the development of nationalism, highlighting the ambivalent relationship between nationalism and the state. The second section describes the conceptual frameworks through which IR scholars have grappled with the ambivalence of nationalism and how, in the process, they have transformed international relations into interstate relations. The final section explores the difficulties that plague attempts to move ‘beyond’ the nation-state and what such a move might entail for IR as a discipline.

Historical overview

At the core of nationalism is the concept of the nation, which derives from the Latin natio and originally signified a community of birth. In the medieval period, this term was used to designate groups of people sharing a common origin, such as university students hailing from geographically or linguistically related regions (Hirschi, 2012: 78–81). It was during the transition from the
late medieval to the early modern era that the word ‘nation’ started to be used with reference to the population of a country in several European languages, thus imbuing this concept with a new political dimension. Some of the earliest examples of the political use of the term can be found in England and the Netherlands in the sixteenth century. The backdrop to this semantic transformation was the Protestant Reformation and the resultant upsurge of confessional and constitutional strife, which heralded the fragmentation of medieval Christendom (Gorski, 2000). In the context of these upheavals, the formerly universal Catholic Church splintered into a multiplicity of ‘national’ churches and religion was subordinated to state-building endeavours. Not only did religious identities acquire a newfound significance in defining the foreign policy choices of states (de Carvalho, 2014), early modern state-building initiatives also spurred attempts at ‘national’ homogenisation through the conversion or expulsion of heretics from the state’s domains (Rae, 2002).

The growing body of scholarship on the early modern origins of nationalism offers a vital corrective to the prevailing ‘modernist’ view, which has seen nationalism as the exclusive product of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (e.g. Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1992). Nevertheless, it would be misleading to claim that the nationalism of the early modern period was identical to that of the modern era. In contrast to the secular and territorialised guise of modern nationalism, early modern nationalism remained deeply embedded within a religious and dynastic framework. The early modern era was the era of the ‘confessional state’ rather than the ‘national state’ (de Carvalho, 2014). As Caspar Hirschi (2012: 3) notes in his important survey of the pre-modern roots of nationalism, ‘there was a remarkable time lag between the creation of nationalist language and the implementation of nationalist politics. By the end of the fifteenth century, the concept of the nation was almost fully developed in scholarly literature, whereas in political practice, imperialist, dynastic and religious principles would prevail for another three centuries’. It was not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the religious principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* gave way to the nationalist principle of *cuius regio, eius natio*.

The rise of modern nationalism is largely coterminous with the rise of popular sovereignty, which wrested sovereignty away from God and placed it in the hands of the people. In the words of Bernard Yack (2001: 517), ‘wherever popular sovereignty leads, nationalism seems to follow’. The reason behind the close association between the two discourses is that popular sovereignty revolves around an aporia: who are the sovereign people? Taken by itself, the principle of popular sovereignty is unable to demarcate or legitimate the boundaries of the political unit (see de Carvalho, 2021 in this volume). Modern political nationalism offers the solution to this quandary by grounding the abstract political unit in a concrete ethnocultural conception of the people as a nation that is both prepolitical and territorially delimited (Connor, 1981; Yack, 2001; Abizadeh, 2012). In the oft-quoted words of Ernest Gellner (1983: 1): ‘Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent’. Or, in the more succinct formulation of Eric Hobsbawm (1992: 19): ‘nation = state = people’.

Theories of popular sovereignty were already circulating among medieval political philosophers, but these ideas were not yet implemented in political practice. Political legitimacy was instead derived from various other sources, including divine right, royal blood, right of conquest, right of inheritance, and/or the provision of services such as protection. What all of these pre-modern sources of legitimacy had in common was ‘the negative presumption that legitimacy had nothing to do with those who were ruled. The masses were solely the object, not the source of political authority’ (Connor, 1981: 207). As a basis of political practice, popular sovereignty did not acquire widespread currency until the American and French Revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. In 1787, the political fiction of ‘we, the people’ was institutionalised in the constitution of the newly independent United States (Taylor, 1999: 226). Two years later, the French
Revolution reconfigured the political meaning of the nation concept. The terms *nation* and *patrie* had been a recurrent feature of French political debates for several decades, but they had no bearing on political legitimacy structures and could be invoked by supporters and critics of the royal government alike. Prior to the revolution, the concept of the nation remained ‘a highly generalized rhetorical figure that was compatible with all sorts of different political or constitutional orientations’. It was only from 1789 that the nation was ‘redefined […] from a diffuse sentiment to a specific program for political and constitutional action’ (Sewell, 2004: 96). This shift was epitomised by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, promulgated by the French National Assembly in the first year of the revolution, which proclaimed that ‘the source of all sovereignty resides essentially in the nation’ (quoted in Connor, 1978: 382). In addition to revolutionising domestic legitimacy structures, the French Revolution and the ensuing Napoleonic Wars also transformed the nature of external relations between European polities from a dynastic to a national model, paving the way for the emergence of modern international relations (Bukovansky, 1999).

The significance of the American and French Revolutions notwithstanding, it must be emphasised that ‘nation-formation is a process, not an occurrence or event’ (Connor, 1990: 99). Until the end of the nineteenth century, even in seemingly long-standing nation-states like France, national consciousness remained an elite phenomenon. The penetration of national consciousness deeper into the social fabric required a massive expansion of literacy rates and transport networks that was only achieved after the industrial revolution gathered speed in the second half of the nineteenth century (Weber, 1976). If the spread of nationalism ‘vertically’ to the lower rungs of society was a drawn-out and uneven process, the same is true for the ‘horizontal’ propagation of the nation-state globally. By 1920, following a series of anticolonial revolutions in Latin America, the national unifications of Italy and Germany, and the dissolution of the Habsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires, the bulk of the Western hemisphere was divided into nation-states. However, European imperialism still prevailed over a large portion of Asia and virtually the whole of Africa. This imperial arrangement was underpinned by civilisational and racial hierarchies that effectively rendered the nation-state a privileged preserve of the white West (see Bayly, 2021 in this volume). It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that this imperial order was dismantled, as anticolonial movements appropriated nationalist language and extended its application to the colonies (Manela, 2007; Getachew, 2019). Today, there is hardly any state, whether democratic or authoritarian, that does not claim to exercise political power in the name of a nation or people.

Given that nations are historical artefacts rather than natural entities, their boundaries are always open to contestation by other nations and nationalist movements. Indeed, the number of potential nations is infinitely greater than the number of states that have ever existed (Connor, 1972; Walby, 2003). This inherent contestability of nations inscribes a crucial ambivalence into the relationship between nationalism and the state. As Rogers Brubaker (1998: 300) observes, nationalism can take both ‘state-framed’ and ‘counter-state’ forms. In its state-framed variant, nationalism is the principal source of state legitimacy in the age of popular sovereignty. In its counter–state variant, by contrast, nationalism constitutes an ever-present threat to the integrity of the state by legitimating secessionist and irredentist claims. Modern nationalism thus suffers from a kind of autoimmune disease that leads it to constantly turn against its own creations: no sooner has a nation-state been established that its boundaries are subjected to nationalist contestation from within and without. Paradoxically, nationalism is both poison and cure for the legitimacy issues of the modern state. As the next section demonstrates, this ambivalent relationship between nationalism and the state also explains IR’s contradictory attitude toward nations and nationalism.
Nations and nationalism in IR theory

The presumed equivalence of ‘nation’ and ‘state’ has been one of the defining features of IR theory. In spite of its name, the field of IR has traditionally taken the political concept of the state rather than the ethnocultural concept of the nation as its principal point of departure. Terms such as ‘national interest’, ‘national security’, and ‘national defence’ are thus habitually and unthinkingly used by IR scholars with reference to sovereign states. As Felix Berenskoetter (2014: 263) observes, there is a widespread tendency to ‘collapse the nation into the state by conveniently assuming that the former is supervened by the latter’. Even those IR scholars who take the role of culture and identity in world politics seriously tend to use the terms ‘national identity’ and ‘state identity’ more or less interchangeably (e.g. Bloom, 1990; Doty, 1996; Lebow, 2016). For example, in an article intended to clarify the meaning of ‘national identity’ in IR, Paul Kowert (1998: 4–5) differentiates between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ dimensions of the concept. Internally, national identity is about ‘the cohesion or uniformity of the nation-state’s parts’, while externally it refers to ‘a nation-state’s distinctiveness, as compared with other nation-states’. Both dimensions of national identity are thus explicitly defined in relation to the state or nation-state as a political unit, rather than the nation as an ethnocultural entity.

When the nation and the state are treated as interchangeable, nationalism can be understood as the glue that holds a sovereign state together: ‘the better the state’, Kenneth Waltz writes, ‘the more nationalistic’ it is. In this framing, nationalism is the ‘centripetal force’ that makes it possible to conceive of states as coherent agents (Waltz, 1959: 177–178). This understanding of nationalism as a source of the state’s sovereignty is rarely explicitly theorised but instead tends to form an unthinking background assumption that allows IR scholars to focus on what they are really interested in: the interactions between pregiven nation-states. More common is the inverse argument focusing on state failure. Hence, the ‘failed’ or ‘quasi’ states of the Global South are characterised as ‘nation-states only in name’ (Mayall, 1990: 112) or as ‘state–nations’ rather than ‘nation–states’ (Rejai and Enloe, 1969). In his study of Third World statehood, for example, Robert Jackson (1990: 41) asserts that ‘very few new states are “nations” either by long history or common ethnicity or successful constitutional integration’. What is required of the new postcolonial states, or so the argument goes, is a process of ‘nation-building’ to construct a solid national identity to underpin the state. State-framed nationalism is thus posited, implicitly if not explicitly, as a key criterion of successful statehood. Seen in this light, the discipline of IR represents one of the best (or worst) examples of ‘methodological nationalism’ – namely the assumption that ‘the nation-state is the natural and necessary form of society in modernity’ (Chernilo, 2006: 6). Significantly, IR’s methodological nationalism is not reducible to the use of explicitly nationalistic terms such as ‘nation–state’ or ‘nation–building’; it is also sedimented in seemingly neutral analytical concepts like ‘sovereignty’ (Heiskanen, 2019) and ‘anarchy’ (Zarakol, 2017). The basic theoretical toolkit of IR is deeply intertwined with a nationalist worldview that considers the territory of the earth to be neatly divided into congruent and self-contained nation-states.

Although the political use of the word ‘nation’ is widespread in IR, the older meaning of the word as an ethnocultural entity has not disappeared. In fact, the equation of nationhood with statehood has been the subject of periodic criticism precisely on the grounds that it distorts the original meaning of the word ‘nation’. In a classic article published in 1978, for example, Walker Connor (1978: 383) argues that names such as ‘United Nations’, ‘International Relations’, and ‘International Law’ are all ‘mismers’ insofar as they actually have the political concept of the state as their point of reference. Much confusion could be avoided, Connor suggests, if the discipline of ‘International Relations’ were renamed ‘Interstate Relations’. Two decades later, the same line of argument was restated by Lowell Barrington (1997) in an article on ‘the misuse of key concepts in political science’. For the
likes of Connor and Barrington, the nation is first and foremost an ethnocultural community of people, and thus something very different from a state, which is a legal and political institution. A similar opposition of nation and state also characterises the IR literature on nationalist conflict. According to Stephen Van Evera (1994: 11), for instance, an important measure of the likelihood of regional war is ‘the nation-to-state ratio’, where a nation is understood as a community of people united by shared ethnocultural characteristics. If the nations of a given region outnumber the states, Van Evera argues, this increases the likelihood of conflict in that region. Likewise, Benjamin Miller (2007: 20) considers ‘the regional state-to-nation balance’ a key variable in assessing whether a region is war-prone. Instead of treating the nation and the state as complementary or interchangeable, these scholars view the nation as something very different from, or even directly opposed to, the state.

When the nation and the state are depicted as opposites, nationalism is no longer seen as a source of, but as a threat to, the state’s unity and legitimacy. According to J. Samuel Barkin and Bruce Cronin, for example, nationalism entails a ‘historical tension’ between ‘state sovereignty’ and ‘national sovereignty’. In different historical periods, one or the other principle has been dominant: when prevailing international norms favour state sovereignty, state borders tend to be stable, but when prevailing international norms favour national sovereignty, secessionist and irredentist movements tend to triumph. Ultimately, however, the two principles are irreconcilable: ‘it is impossible to completely satisfy the statist and nationalist principles simultaneously’ (Barkin and Cronin, 1994: 108). A similar conceptual dichotomy informs James Mayall’s *Nationalism and International Society*, which represents one of the most thorough explorations of the role of nationalism in international relations. In Mayall’s account, the modern international order emerged out of an ‘ideological confrontation’ between the conflicting principles of state sovereignty and national self-determination (Mayall, 1990: 35–36). In this oppositional framing, nationalism is cast as an external force that threatens the sovereignty of the state and disrupts the habitual practice of international relations qua interstate relations.

To sum up, the theorisation of nations and nationalism by IR scholars is characterised by two contradictory framings. On the one hand, the nation is deemed equivalent to the state, while nationalism is seen as the principal source of the state’s legitimacy and coherence. In this framing, nations and nationalism are located at the centre of IR’s subject matter. At the same time, however, this framing denies nations and nationalism a truly autonomous role in international relations by subordinating them to the sovereign state: the nation and the state are treated as congruent, while international relations become synonymous with interstate relations. On the other hand, the nation can be depicted as something that is different from, or even directly opposed to, the sovereign state, while nationalism is cast as a destabilising force that engages irredentist and secessionist claims. Instead of being the centripetal force that holds the state together, nationalism is cast as a centrifugal force that threatens to pull states apart. If the first framing entails nationalism silently melting into the background of modern international relations, then the second framing depicts nationalism as something external to, or in excess of, international relations proper. In both cases, however, the end result is the same: international relations are transformed into interstate relations. Nations and nationalism are thereby relegated to a spectral existence, haunting the states-system in banal phrases such as ‘national security’ or ‘national interests’ and materialising only in moments of state breakdown and crisis (see Heiskanen, 2019).

**Beyond the nation-state?**

If nations and nationalism are historically contingent phenomena, this means that they are neither inevitable nor eternal. To take the world of nation-states as given, as IR usually does, is to succumb to methodological nationalism. Yet the attempt to move beyond the nation-state is
fraught with peril. The literature criticising methodological nationalism is vast and diverse, but two main approaches may be identified. The first and more common approach is to locate nations and nationalism in the past, specifically in the modern era, thereby opening up the possibility of a postnational and postnationalist future. As the twentieth century was coming to a close, many commentators believed that the social, economic, cultural, and political developments associated with ‘globalisation’ were bringing about the end of the nation-state’s hegemony – a ‘borderless world’ seemed to beckon (Ohmae, 1990). An especially powerful statement along these lines can be found in the work of Ulrich Beck. In Beck’s estimation, globalisation represents a fundamental challenge to the basic categories of modern social and political science, which has taken the nation-state as its pregiven starting point. The old world of nationally organised industrial societies is being replaced by a new cosmopolitan world characterised by catastrophic global risks such as nuclear conflict and climate change. Taking a stand against the methodological nationalism of modern social and political science, Beck has advocated for a ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ that seeks to move beyond the frame of the nation-state (Beck, 2000, 2007).

The main issue with the first approach is that it unwittingly ends up reproducing the very methodological nationalism that it seeks to overcome (Chernilo, 2006: 13; Closs Stephens, 2013: 29). Indeed, Beck’s critique of methodological nationalism has echoes of the linear modernisation narratives that characterised the work of modern social theorists such as Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim. According to these scholars, nationalism belonged to an earlier stage of social evolution and would be superseded by new forms of supranational attachment in the future (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002: 303). A similar attitude to nationalism characterises much of the discussion on globalisation, or at least the earlier and less sophisticated literature on the topic. Implicitly or explicitly, Jürgen Osterhammel (2013: 694) notes, the overriding assumption has been that ‘nationalism and nation-state came first and then globalization came second’. By setting up a stark conceptual and/or historical dichotomy between the modern world of nation-states and the postmodern world of globalisation, these approaches reify the nationalistic interpretation of the modern world that they seek to escape (see Guillaume, 2021 in this volume).

The second critique of methodological nationalism is both more and less radical. It is more radical because it rejects not only the historical permanency of the nation-state, but also the view that the nation-state has been the natural organising principle of society in the modern era (Chernilo, 2006: 13-16). At the same time, it is less radical insofar as it accepts the persistence of nationalism in the present (Closs Stephens, 2013). In a nutshell, the overarching claim is that the nation-state has never possessed a monopoly on the organisation of the social world and has always coexisted with other forces. The focus of critique thus shifts away from denouncing a monolithic conception of modern nationalism and towards exploring the ambivalence and opacity of nationalism in both the past and the present. Rather than approaching ‘the history of nationalism in black-and-white, before-and-after terms’, the aim is to ‘capture the variety and history of nationalism in its many hues of gray’ (Gorski, 2000: 1461). Consequently, this line of critique also refuses to identify another master concept – such as ‘globalisation’ or ‘cosmopolitanism’ – as the privileged organising principle of contemporary social and political science. Instead, the issue of methodological nationalism becomes relativised and located alongside other potentially pathological methodological tendencies that include ‘methodological imperialism’, ‘methodological globalism’, and ‘methodological cosmopolitanism’ (Chernilo, 2006: 15; see also Çapan et al., 2021 in this volume).

The critique of methodological nationalism and the decentring of the nation-state have important implications for IR as a discipline. After all, as this chapter has shown, the worldview traditionally espoused by IR scholars is thoroughly parasitic on nationalism. The debates over the future of the nation-state are thus also, at least in part, debates over the future of the discipline. The
decentring of the nation-state is reflected, for example, in the tentative displacement of the term ‘international relations’ by broader notions such as ‘world politics’ and ‘global politics’ that also encompass a multiplicity of non-state actors alongside nation-states (e.g. Mansbach and Rafferty, 2008; Baylis et al., 2014). A related trend is the cumulating critique of the concept of anarchy, which has traditionally served as the theoretical keystone of the discipline by distinguishing the ‘anarchical’ international realm from the ‘sovereign’ national society (e.g. Milner, 1991; Hobson, 2014; Bially Mattern and Zarakol, 2016). As Ayşe Zarakol (2017: 266) underscores, the concept of anarchy ‘derives from and reproduces the political project of the nation-state’. The historicisation and decentring of the nation-state thus entail a historicisation and decentring of IR’s theoretical toolkit more generally. Irrespective of whether or not the nation-state is in terminal decline, foregrounding the nationalistic underpinnings of IR’s conceptual apparatus is an important step towards a more reflexive scholarly practice that might also allow IR theories to better ‘travel’ to other times and places beyond modernity (see Çapan and Zarakol, 2018).

Suggestions for further reading


References


Connor, W. (1978). A nation is a nation, is a state, is an ethnic group, is a…. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 1 (4), 377–400.


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