

State of Nationalism (SoN): Nation-Building

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A new approach to the study of nation-building: onset, process, outcome

Nation-building refers to the policies that core group governing elites pursue toward non-core groups in their effort to manage social order within state boundaries in ways that promotes a particular national narrative over any other. Such policies may vary widely ranging from assimilationist to exclusionary ones.¹ Moreover, the content of the national narrative or constitutive story varies dramatically from case to case.² The systematic study of the process of nation-building intensified following the Second World War primarily in relation to decolonization movements and the associated establishment of postcolonial independent states around the globe.³ However, the field was initially dominated by assumptions and logics developed based on European experiences with nation-building.

We would not be that interested in nation-building were it not for its far-reaching impact on state formation and social order, self-determination movements, war onset, and public goods provision. The desired outcome of nation-building is to achieve social order and national integration.⁴ Nation-building, when successful, results in societies where individuals are primarily loyal to the nation. This process of national integration facilitates military recruitment, tax collection, law enforcement, public



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goods provision and cooperation.⁵ There are also negative aspects of this process as well including violent policies, at times chauvinistic nationalism, even cultural genocide. When nation-building is either not pursued or is unsuccessful it leads to either state collapse (through civil war and/or secessionists movements) or to weak states.⁶ In fact, many civil wars or national schisms can be understood as national integration crises.⁷

Nation-building has been conceptualized in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this review essay, I focus on an overlooked distinction in the study of nation-building: works that focus on the *onset*, those studying the *process*, and finally the ones that try to account for the *outcome*: success or failure. While there is overlap between these fields, each approach is focusing on a different question. Studies of *onset* are preoccupied with *when*, *where*, and *why* does nation-building take place to begin with. Works that focus on *process* are exploring the alternative paths to nation-building that could or have been taken. Finally, studies concentrating on the *outcome* analyze the societal consequences of the various paths to nation-building. Distinguishing between *onset*, *process* and *outcome* allows us to avoid several methodological pitfalls when testing arguments. For instance, oftentimes a theory focusing on onset is mistakenly tested on outcomes. We should not expect arguments aiming at explaining variation in nation-building policies, i.e., focusing on *process*, to also explain success or failure, i.e., *outcomes*. Similarly, once we internalize the importance of this distinction, we can be more careful in articulating our scope conditions. For example, if a place did not ever experience nation-building efforts then it probably should not make it into the universe of cases of studies that are trying to account for outcomes of nation-building policies. This theoretical move will help scholars unearth the linkages between aspects of nation-building and important effects such as military recruitment, civil war onset, or public goods provision.

Onset

For scholars like Anthony Smith, nation-building can be traced to the ethnic origins of a particular core group.⁸ Nation-states without pre-existing ethnic content face a problematic situation because without it, 'there is no place from which to start the process of nation-building,' as Smith put it.⁹ In the early 1990s, Barry Posen proposed an alternative argument for the onset of nation-building in his 'Nationalism, the Mass Army and Military Power'.¹⁰ Posen identifies imitation of advantageous military practices as the mechanism that accounts for the spread of nationalism and the adoption of nation-building policies. Given the anarchic condition of the international system, states either adopted this new model to match external threats or perished. This critical juncture accounts for the spread of nationalism through nation-building policies, initially in the army. Eric Hobsbawm locates the source of states' interest in spreading nationalism mainly in the need of new or increasingly centralized states to find new sources of internal legitimacy.¹¹ Similarly, Michael Hechter locates the origins of nation-building in the transition from indirect to direct rule identifying different types of nationalism: State-Building Nationalism, Peripheral Nationalism, Irredentist Nationalism, Unification Nationalism, and Patriotism.¹² In a more recent article, Darden and Mylonas suggest that state elites pursue nation-building policies only in parts of the world that face heightened territorial competition, particularly in the form of externally backed fifth columns.¹³

Process

Before we dive in the theoretical debates in this category, I should note that the theoretical underpinnings of the theories discussed here have been influenced by some seminal case studies.¹⁴ Three main causal

pathways lead to national integration according to scholars who focus on the process of nation-building. The central debate is between those that understand nation-building as an outgrowth of structural processes taking place in modern times – industrialization, urbanization, social mobilization, and so forth – and those that highlight the agency of governing elites that pursue intentional policies aiming at the national integration of a state along the lines of a specific constitutive story. The third causal path emphasizes how bottom-up processes can reshape, reconceptualize, and repurpose nation-building trajectories.

Structural accounts understand **nation-building as a by-product** of broad socioeconomic or geopolitical changes. Karl Deutsch's classic argument that modernization opens up people for new forms of socialization constitutes the core of this approach.¹⁵ For Deutsch the process of social mobilization led to acculturation in a new urban environment, facilitated social communication, and ultimately *caused* assimilation and political integration into a new community. Works by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner could be categorized as being part of this modernization paradigm.¹⁶ Posner's empirical work tracing linguistic homogenization in Zambia serves as an illustration of such structural arguments.¹⁷ But there are several other types of arguments that highlight the importance of other structural aspects of modernity. Adria Lawrence suggests that disillusionment with the French empire – in places where the French administration failed to extend equal rights to its colonial subjects – led to the abandonment of mobilization solely for equal rights.¹⁸ Disruptions/triggering factors (in the form invasion, occupation, or France's decision to decolonize) then offered opportunities for mobilization that account for the variation in the patterns of *nationalist* mobilization across the empire and within particular colonies. Dominika Koter suggests that in the Sub-Saharan African context citizens developed national identities through

impersonal comparisons with neighbors during the post-colonial period despite the information-poor setting.¹⁹

Other scholars see **nation-building as a top-down process**. Clearly, these accounts that emphasize the top-down aspects of nation-building are developed and tested in cases where nationalism has already been introduced and dominated the political imagination of at least the ruling elites. Moreover, some of the processes discussed by modernization theorists are prerequisites for most of the top-down nation-building arguments to unfold. One of the first scholars to criticize modernist accounts for leaving elites' agency out of their accounts was Anthony Smith.²⁰ According to Rogers Smith, we should try to explain the social mechanisms of nation-building and identify political goals that motivate elites initiating and directing these mechanisms.²¹ Soviet policies of ethnofederalism and affirmative action were particularly consequential instances of state-planned nation-building policies in the twentieth century.²²

Andreas Wimmer builds on the work of Fredrick Barth and describes the means of ethnic boundary making such as discourse and symbols, discrimination, political mobilization, coercion and violence.²³ McGarry and O'Leary have offered an accessible overview of different strategies available to state elites in this pursuit,²⁴ yet scholars have also sought to explain why policy choices vary across states,²⁵ across non-core groups within the same state,²⁶ across different parts of the same country,²⁷ and across historical periods.²⁸ Some authors have argued that state strategies are strongly shaped by historical legacies.²⁹ Nation-building strategies have also taken violent forms.³⁰ In fact, a few authors have noted that in ethnically diverse states, the introduction of democratic mass politics can actually lead to violent national homogenization.³¹

Han and Mylonas try to account for variation in state-ethnic group relations in multiethnic states, focusing on China.³² They argue that

interstate relations and ethnic group perceptions about the relative strength of competing states are important – yet neglected – factors in accounting for the variation in state-ethnic group relations. In particular, whether an ethnic group is perceived as having an external patron matters a great deal for the host state's treatment of the group. If the external patron of the ethnic group is an enemy of the host state, then repression is likely. If it is an ally, then accommodation ensues. Given the existence of an external patron, an ethnic group's response to a host state's policies depends on the perceptions about the relative strength of the external patron vis-à-vis the host state and whether the support is originating from an enemy or an ally of the host state. They test their theoretical framework on the eighteen largest ethnic groups in China from 1949 to 1965, tracing the Chinese government's nation-building policies toward these groups and examining how each group responded to these various policies. All in all, these top-down accounts are better calibrated to account for the *form* that nation-building practices take compared to the modernization scholars that see nation-building as a by-product of other processes.

Another approach to nation-building refocuses our attention on situations in which nationhood emerges as an active force in political life through various forms of **bottom-up actions by ordinary people**. These bottom-up processes of identification are treated as independent causes, but they are also structured, and are themselves restructuring a particular historical and institutional context that gives meaning to social action.³³ Lisa Wedeen is interested in how seemingly quotidian social practices create and reproduce a sense of national belonging even in the absence of a strong state, applying her argument to Yemen.³⁴ Michael Billig's work on banal nationalism – referring to the everyday representations of the nation aiming at reproducing a shared sense of national belonging – is also pertinent here, since pride in victory in sports or prominence in cultural affairs could be the source of a bottom-

up nation-building process.³⁵ In the African context Crawford Young suggested that the arbitrary territorial borders have been internalized over time, thus becoming a primary component of national identity.³⁶ Authors of this strand implore us to think about the nation not as a thing with fixed relevance and meanings but as one of the possible outcomes of partially contingent social processes of identification.³⁷ Dominika Koter argues that electoral outcomes have consequences for national identification.³⁸ She finds that the election of one's co-ethnic increases the sense of belonging to the nation.

Isaacs and Polese have put together a special issue published in *Nationalities Papers* on nation-building in Central Asia focusing both on the efforts of 'the political elites to create, develop, and spread/popularize the idea of the nation and the national community' and 'the agency of nonstate actors such as the people, civil society, companies, and even civil servants when not acting on behalf of state institutions.'³⁹ Thus, they suggest a more dynamic understanding of the nation-building process, with elites proposing and implementing policies which are, in turn, accepted, renegotiated, or rejected by those targeted by them.

Finally, Darden and Mylonas offer a conceptually and theoretically reflective discussion of the challenges and limitations of **externally promoted** nation-building.⁴⁰ They argue that effective third-party state-building requires nation-building through education with national content. Nation-building, however, is an uncertain and long process with a long list of prerequisites, making third-party state-building a risky proposition.

A conceptual clarification is in order here. Journalists, policy commentators, as well as several scholars have recently used the term 'nation-building' in place of what the U.S. Department of Defense calls 'stability operations.' In other words, they often use the term 'nation-

building' to signify 'third party state-building,' efforts to build roads and railways, enforce the rule of law, and improve the infrastructure of a state. This literature grew following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the US attempts at state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁴¹ But, state-building and nation-building, although related, are analytically distinct concepts. Nation-building refers to the development of a cultural identity through constitutive stories, symbols, shared histories, and meanings. To be sure, state-building can and often does influence the national integration process over the long term, just as the existing patterns of national loyalties may facilitate or hinder state-building projects.

Outcome

Important works also exist that try to account for the success or failure of nation-building projects. For instance, Keith Darden's stand-alone forthcoming work points to mass schooling as a mechanism that explains both the initial fluidity and the consequent fixity of national identities.⁴² Darden's argument is that in countries where mass schooling with national content is introduced to a largely illiterate population for the first time and it is implemented on more than 50% of the population, then the national identity propagated in this round of schooling will become dominant. He proposes a few mechanisms for this effect, including western style formal schooling, status reversal within the family, and consequent gatekeeping to keep their children aligned with their initial national identity. Darden and Grzymala-Busse have shown that mass schooling with national content is a particularly effective strategy of inculcating the population with national loyalties that can endure long periods of foreign-sponsored authoritarian rule.⁴³ Balcells finds supports for Darden's argument in the Catalan case.⁴⁴ Despite similar initial conditions, Catalan national identity is not salient in

French Catalonia today because the first round of mass schooling with national content took place under French rule. In contrast, mass schooling in Spain was introduced in Spanish Catalonia during a period of Catalan nationalist upheaval.

Sambanis et al. argue that favorable outcomes in interstate wars significantly increase a state's international status and induce individuals to identify nationally, thereby reducing internal conflict.⁴⁵ Thus, leaders have incentives to invest in state capacity in order to solve their internal nation-building problems. The key assumption here is that strength depends to a great extent on nationalist sentiment. An important implication of their model is that the 'higher anticipated payoffs to national unification makes leaders fight international wars that they would otherwise choose not to fight.' The authors illustrate their argument and test its plausibility through a thorough case study of German unification after the Franco Prussian war.

Vasiliki Fouka has recently argued that discrimination against German immigrants in the US led these immigrants to pursue assimilation efforts, i.e. change their names and seek naturalization.⁴⁶ However, in another article she finds that forced assimilation policies, such as language restrictions in elementary schools, had counterproductive effects.⁴⁷ In particular, those individuals that were not allowed to study German in several U.S. states following WWI, were less likely to volunteer in World War II, more likely to practice endogamy, and to give German names to their children. These articles are part of a broader project where Fouka tries to identify the types of initiatives that contribute to or hinder immigrant incorporation.⁴⁸ She tests her intuitions studying the integration programs during the Americanization movement. Overall, she finds that nation-building policies that increase the benefits of integration are successful in promoting citizenship acquisition, linguistic homogeneity, and mixed marriages with the native-born. Conversely, prescription-based policies – where a reward is tied to a specific level of

effort – are either ineffective or counterproductive. However, this is an approach that may not travel in contexts where assimilation cannot be assumed as the government's intended outcome for all non-core groups in a country.⁴⁹

Andreas Wimmer's latest book asks: Why does nation-building succeed in some cases but not in others? For Wimmer successful nation-building manifests itself in having forged 'political ties between citizens and the state that reach across ethnic divides and integrate ethnic majorities and minorities into an inclusive power arrangement.'⁵⁰ He operationalizes successful nation-building through the degree of ethnopolitical inclusion in a country's power structures and citizens' identification with their nation-state. The crux of the argument is that state centralization in the nineteenth century – in turn a product of warfighting, in Europe, topography facilitating state control 'where peasants could not escape',⁵¹ elsewhere, combined with population density high enough to sustain a nonproductive political elite at the end of the Middle Ages – facilitated the conditions for the linguistic homogenization of populations and the construction of central governments able to provide public goods. These two factors, along with the presence of civic society that spans ancestral/ethnic divisions, both lead to successful nation-building. The most exogenous part of Wimmer's argument is that variation in topography and population density explain the success of initial state building efforts. But could there be an alternative argument that accounts for variation in initial state- or nation-building efforts? Darden and Mylonas argue that a threatening international environment leads to state capacity and public goods provision in the form of nation-building policies (in particular public mass schooling) that in turn, when successful, account for variation in linguistic homogeneity *and* national cohesion.⁵² Comparing cases with similar levels of initial linguistic heterogeneity, state capacity, and development, but in different international environments, they find that states that did not face

external threats to their territorial integrity were more likely to outsource education and other tools for constructing identity to missionaries or other groups, or to not invest in assimilation at all, leading to higher ethnic heterogeneity. Conversely, states developing in higher threat environments were more likely to invest in nation-building strategies to homogenize their populations.

Amanda Robinson focuses on Africa and attempts to evaluate the impact of modernization and colonial legacies on group identification utilizing survey data from sixteen African countries.⁵³ She is focusing in particular on national vs. ethnic group identification. Robinson's findings are consistent with the classic modernization theory. Living in urban areas, having more education, and being formally employed in the modern sector are all positively correlated with identifying with the nation above one's ethnic group. Further, greater economic development at the state level is also associated with greater national identification, once Tanzania is excluded as an outlier.

Depetris-Chauvin, Durante, and Campante focus on sub-Saharan Africa and find that national football teams' victories in sub-Saharan Africa make national identification more likely, they boost trust for other ethnicities in the country, and also reduce violence.⁵⁴ Blouin and Mukand examine the impact of propaganda broadcast over radio on interethnic attitudes in postgenocide Rwanda.⁵⁵ They exploit the variation in government's radio propaganda reception due to Rwanda's mountainous terrain. They find that individuals exposed to government propaganda decreases the salience of ethnicity, increases interethnic trust, and willingness to interact face-to-face with non-co-ethnics.

Dominika Koter puzzles over the existence of national identification in the absence of traditional nation-building projects and asks: what is driving national attachment in Africa?⁵⁶ For Koter 'the process that results in individuals identifying with their nation is nation-building.'

Which places her squarely in the 'outcome' group of scholars. However, Koter points out that Robinson's finding that wealthier countries report higher levels of national identification worked on the third round of the Afrobarometer survey data but the correlation vanishes in subsequent four rounds of the surveys (rounds 4 through 7). In fact, the relationship appears to be skewing in the opposite direction as more countries were surveyed. Koter zooms in on Ghana and proposes an alternative pathway to understanding national identification, suggesting that national integration is an accidental by-product of shared experiences and distinct country-level trajectories which allow contrast with other national communities. In particular, Ghanaian national identity is most consistent with the role of socio-political developments in the country, rather than cultural factors or state-led nation-building.

Conclusion

The field of nation-building has developed tremendously in the past two decades, but more empirical interdisciplinary work, involving economists, anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists, remains to be done. In particular, work that involves cross-regional comparisons and perspectives will push our theories in a direction that can account for global patterns rather than rehashing the European experience and assumptions. Moreover, a more conscious effort thinking of onset, process, and outcomes as distinct stages when theorizing nation-building will move the field forward by improving our causal identification strategies.

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Endnotes

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