# State of Nationalism (SoN): Nationalism and Social Class

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## Introduction

Much like other works on nationalism, this article explores the 'interrelationships' between concepts that are themselves difficult to 'delimit'.[1] What kind of general claims for example can be made about the linkages between a phenomenon like nationalism, that can take on both conservative and liberal forms, and social classes, the defining attributes, origins and number of which are often matters of dispute? The barriers to any normative assessment of linkages are therefore formidable. Works dealing directly with the subject tend, accordingly, to be more often occupied with investigating matters of perception or the behaviour of certain classes (variously defined) at certain places and times. This is not to say that the problem has failed to entice scholars, and indeed theorists past and present have occasionally given thought to the idea of constructing a general sociology of nationalism capable of advancing propositions on large questions such as the elective affinities between particular classes, status groups and doctrines. Marx's identification of the leading part played by the bourgeoisie in the onset of the age of nationalism is of course critical in this connection and no doubt still exerts influence on the popular understanding of the problem.

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With these points in mind, more attention will be given first to what Anthony Smith, Max Weber and other figures have said about the general theoretical challenges which the present subject poses to researchers. As indicated above, these are in large part traceable to the elastic nature of the concepts in question. If however nationalisms can be fashioned to serve the interests of any class or group, it would be remiss to omit from consideration works from the Marxist tradition which, again, laid stress on the historical role of the bourgeoisie. Although this literature is largely based on developments within Europe, it remains a source of critical perspectives and modes of analysis of far-reaching influence. In addition to a survey of how nationalism and social class are treated in some of the formative works from this tradition, attention is given as well to the additions and modifications of authors such as Otto Bauer, Eric Hobsbawm and Tom Nairn. The final section of this review explores the particular interest shown by modern scholars in questions of micro-sociology and nationalism, as exemplified by works which investigate the diverse aims, imaginings – and corresponding social constituencies – that may be encompassed within a 'single' nation or national movement.

## General theoretical problems and observations

In turning first to the problems faced by scholars in connection with the grand questions of theory alluded to above, it is worth considering the points made by Anthony Smith in an early work describing what he took to be the 'sociological neglect of nationalism' by his predecessors.[2] Listed first among the remedies proposed to correct this deficit was a call for more studies on 'the social composition, and mobility profiles, of both the leadership and the followers of nationalist movements.' This was 'a key topic', he added, 'on which data are either lacking, or unsystematized.'[3] And yet, earlier in the same work, Smith cited several factors that appeared to obstruct such a project. 'Methodologically,' wrote Smith,

'nationalism presents great difficulties of definition, classification and explanation.' It was, above all, the 'sheer range of ideas and concepts of the nation held by the participants, (not to mention the analysts)' that proved most daunting.[4] Smith went on to quote corroborating remarks from Weber: 'In the face of these value concepts of the "idea of the nation"', wrote the latter, 'which empirically are entirely ambiguous, a sociological typology would have to analyse all sorts of community sentiments of solidarity in their genetic conditions and in their consequences for the concerted action of the participants.'[5] Any investigation of the 'social composition' of a given movement could not in summary proceed very far without a corresponding analysis of the values embedded in its particular conception of the nation and attendant claims.

Smith continued to dwell on the significance of this problem in later works, as have many others. 'Nationalism cannot be seen,' wrote for example John Breuilly in *Nationalism and the State*, 'as the politics of any particular social class.'[6] This follows again from the fact that nationalist doctrines can be fashioned to serve the ends of virtually any social or political agenda. As David Miller similarly attests, 'A moment's glance at the historical record shows that nationalist ideas have as often been associated with liberal and socialist programmes as with programmes of the right… the flexible content of national identity allows parties of different colours to present their programmes as the true continuation of the national tradition and the true reflection of national character.'[7] Liah Greenfeld drew similar conclusions in her sweeping *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Finally, when speaking more recently of a 'class route to nationhood', Stein Tønnesson alludes to the manner in which nationalisms are often figured upon concepts of the nation that privilege one class or another – as opposed to the imputed affinity of one class or another to nationalism.[8]

As indicated above, Weber's comments on the diverse 'value concepts' embedded in ideas of the nation and their implications for a 'social

typology' are therefore consonant with the thoughts of many contemporary researchers. The one general rule (with some caveats) that Weber found worthy of note in this connection concerned the tendency of intellectuals to serve as the most consistent advocates of the 'national idea'.[9] Similar observations are found in works by Smith and Breuilly, to name only a few.[10] The '"leading classes" may vary between and even within movements at different times', wrote for example Smith, however, 'the pivotal role of professionals and intellectuals must remain constant or the movement risks disintegration.'[11] That said, it was questionable whether much significance could be attached to this fact, as intellectuals are always the leading cohort in the fashioning of any political or social ideology.[12] Although Weber would have likely concurred with this assessment, the connection served nevertheless to highlight the significance of 'prestige interests' in any explanation of the sources of individual or collective action.[13] Intellectuals are accordingly drawn to the 'national idea' just as those 'who hold the power to steer common conduct within a polity' are especially joined to the 'state', as he argued in one telling passage:

> The significance of the "nation" is usually anchored in the superiority, or at least the irreplaceability, of the culture values that are to be preserved and developed only through the continuation of the peculiarity of the group. It therefore goes without saying that the intellectuals… are to a specific degree predestined to propagate the "national idea", just as those who wield power in the polity provoke the idea of the state.[14]

It might nevertheless be objected that 'intellectuals' do not represent a 'class', or even further, that like nationalism, class too is often discussed in an 'unsystematic' or at least indiscrete manner. There is no room to pursue the problem in detail here, however, in general, many of the works studied throughout refer to class in a way that perhaps evokes the 'basic three-class system' in capitalist societies (itself a product of the relation

between individual 'market capacities' and rates of 'mobility closure') described by Giddens.[15] A glance at the specialist literature finds of course suggestions for a far more variegated picture, with some arguing that Britain, to cite one example, may contain as many as seven distinct classes and any number of 'status groups'.[16] Others propose that scholars take a still more flexible stance, as Bergman observes of one contemporary exchange: 'When Runciman asked "How many classes are there in contemporary British society?" he received this response: "As many as it proves empirically useful to distinguish for the analytical purposes in hand".'[17] Looking ahead, one finds the position articulated here by Erikson and Goldthorpe employed in some of the more recent works cited below, such as in the case of the latent class analysis performed by Bonikowski and DiMaggio on contemporary 'varieties of American popular nationalism'.[18]

These micro-sociological interests are not of course entirely novel. Marx himself saw the 'divisions of society' as 'infinitely complex' and that 'within each class there are groups whose interests may conflict.'[19] Weber arrived at a similar conclusion when appraising the popular bases of nationalism during his own day. He believed for example that 'certain leading strata of the class movement of the modern proletariat' displayed a marked 'indifference' to nationalist doctrines. However, their efforts to promote a similar attitude among their peers met 'with varying success, depending upon political and linguistic affiliations and also upon different strata of the proletariat.'[20] These latter remarks concerning the national sentiments and political inclinations of various segments of the working class may merit comparison with what Hobsbawm and others discussed below have written on the concept of the 'labor aristocracy' (although Weber's 'labor aristocrats', if they may be called such, behaved very differently than Hobsbawm's). In sum, Weber felt that 'an unbroken scale of quite varied and highly changeable attitudes toward the idea of the "nation" is to be found among social strata' and that even 'strata of

"intellectuals" do not have homogeneous or historically constant attitudes towards the idea.'[21]

## On the social bases of nationalism during the Age of Revolution: Marx and after

If contemporary thinkers often display a similar reluctance to make general claims about the natural affinity or disposition of one class or another to nationalism, or at least to press them very far, assumptions of this kind may nevertheless persist. This may in turn reflect the power of earlier traditions of analysis, dating to the nineteenth century, or 'classical age' of European nationalism, that boldly advanced claims of this kind – with specific attention given to the role of the bourgeoisie. In the words of Miroslav Hroch, who experienced certain difficulties when applying this thesis to his own studies, 'the idea that the modern bourgeoisie is linked to the formation of the modern nation is deeply rooted in Marxist historiography – possibly as far back as the early years of Karl Kautsky's theoretical activity.' [22] Of particular importance are the famous declarations in this vein found within the 1848 *Manifesto*:

> The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralised the means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands… Independent, or but loosely connected provinces, with separate interests, laws, governments, and systems of taxation, became lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class-interest, one frontier, and one customs-tariff.[23]

According to the authors, the nation is to be read as a highly-articulated social, economic and political construct that cohered, not incidentally, with bourgeois interests and aspirations.[24] The 'nationalism' espoused by the middle classes was thus 'a false representation of the real',[25] which, upon closer examination could be exposed as a quest for political power cast in the terms of the day – as illustrated by Sieyes's claim that the Third Estate was the nation, and, according at least to his understanding (e.g., power accrued from the nation), was the rightful bearer of sovereignty. This same connection informed the ideological claims of the many 'liberal nationalisms' of the era, but provoked in turn, as indicated below, a healthy response from other sectors of society which devised nationalisms congruent with their own interests.[26]

It should nevertheless be added that not all Marxists viewed nations as largely artificial constructs or even incompatible with the eventual triumph of socialism. Some indeed, notably Otto Bauer (1881-1938) of the Austro-Marxist school, made quite elaborate claims regarding the formation and future relevance of nations, the historicity of which was grounded on the existence of 'physical and intellectual characters' that plainly served to separate one group of people from another. 'A systematic approach to the question of the nation' must in fact 'begin with a conception of *national character*.'[27] These had been fashioned by the conditions under which the ancestors of a given nation 'struggled for their existence, the forces of production they mastered, [and] the relations of production into which they entered.'[28] The 'unifying tendencies' of capitalism served to advance the transmission of this character throughout the entire body of the nation by providing the peasantry as well as the 'laboring masses' (who had remained largely indistinguishable from one another until modern times) with access to education. One might expect that this process would only be abetted by the turn to socialism and indeed 'it is only a socialist society that will see this tendency triumph.'[29] 'Contrary to the received Marxist opinion,' wrote Kolakowski, Bauer held

that 'socialism not only does not obliterate national differences but reinforces and develops them by bringing culture to the masses and making the national idea the property of everyone.'[30]

These considerations aside, many important works have followed that hew closer to 'classical' Marxist conventions. Among these, Tom Nairn's *The Break-up of Britain* (first published 1977) has been particularly influential. For Nairn, the spread of capitalism remains the critical starting point in any historical reconstruction of the rise of nations and nationalism; however, his portrait of bourgeois mobilization departs from the account in the *Manifesto* by emphasizing how these developments produced a state of 'uneven development' that was especially insufferable for elites of the periphery: Feeling themselves excluded from the opportunities commensurate with the age and even faced with the prospect of extinction, they championed the cause of political sovereignty as a means to obtain mastery over their fates and affairs. The only 'resource' or weapon at their disposal was the masses who were recruited into their program on the basis of claims to an imperiled identity and traditions. In Nairn's famous wording: 'The new middle-class intelligentsia of nationalism had to invite the masses into history' in order to accomplish their aims.[31] It was furthermore an appeal that was congenial to the interests of these same elites, in the sense that the masses were urged to take part in the struggle on the basis of a shared threat to cultural traditions as opposed to any promise of material or political rewards.

Nairn's *Break-up* failed nevertheless to persuade all its readers, notably among them Hobsbawm, who dismissed the author's thesis as 'a rather improvised theory of nationalism.'[32] Still earlier works in Hobsbawm's oeuvre cast doubt on the historical veracity of Nairn's assumptions regarding the ability, or even interest, on the part of nationalists to mobilize the masses.[33] However, the same cannot be said for Benedict

Anderson, who clearly admired the work and referred to its arguments frequently, and at length, in *Imagined Communities*.[34] Ernest Gellner, to cite another leader of the modern theoretical canon, also spoke favourably of the *Break-up*, if he found its author a difficult figure to categorize: On one hand, Nairn sought to 'salvage Marxism', but seemed also to place considerable importance on factors, notably ethnicity, that did not rank high in the doctrines commonly associated with that tradition. Gellner nevertheless welcomed this view and indeed gave ethnic divisions a significant role to play in his own historical reconstruction of the formation of nations and nationalism. True, pride of place went to the functional imperatives of the industrial revolution, which (contra Marx), Gellner deemed capable of mediating the social 'chasms' and grievances it generated. However, these too failed in instances where the boundaries separating rich and poor aligned with 'cultural' divisions. In such cases, the rupture was much more difficult to treat. Nationalism, in other words, is what happens when 'a nation' (e.g., an ethno-linguistic group) becomes 'a class'.[35]

As indicated above, interventions from both within and without the Marxist tradition have conditioned the classical portrait of nationalism as bourgeois revolution conveyed in the 1848 *Manifesto*. This is not to say that the middle classes (or more precisely the 'industrial bourgeoisie') have been withdrawn from the picture, but they have been forced to share the stage: In some cases, per Hroch and Gellner, they do not appear as leading actors.[36] In others, as in Hobsbawm's essays from the *Invention of Tradition*, it was the reaction of the dominant classes to 'the widespread progress of electoral democracy' and related threats that was perhaps of even greater significance in establishing the nation on the political and cultural landscape.[37] For Hobsbawm, the proliferating 'national' traditions of the era should in fact be seen as a 'rearguard action' intended to acclimate the masses to a view of the nation and its ways that was congenial to upper class interests.[38] From a historiographical standpoint,

developments and dynamics of this kind were furthermore crucial to explaining how the national idea could appear to triumph in so many places without becoming, in his view, the object of mass interest. Another possibility was offered in the form of the 'labor aristocracy' thesis, or, the idea that an upper strata of the proletariat came to hold political views on matters such as imperialism that were more in line with the ruling classes (a form of 'false consciousness') and, via their leading positions in trade unions and political parties, drew their peers into the fold.[39]

## Contemporary investigations of perception and meaning

In addition to weighing in on the contributions of various classes to the emergence of the national idea, Hobsbawm also argued for the coeval nature of national and class sentiment. Specifically, Hobsbawm claimed that both arose simultaneously and are reflections of a modern revolution in consciousness. They are furthermore complimentary, in the sense that the awakening of class consciousness may even have *abetted* the susceptibility of the masses to national consciousness; indeed, the onset of class consciousness is often described in terms that evoke narratives of national awakening.[40]

As indicated by Fine and Chernilo, Hobsbawm's conception of the mutually-constituting nature of these developments recurs often in contemporary works of historical sociology while also serving as a starting point for investigations of the plurality of national ideas that may exist within a given society or movement.[41] The 'one thing', Fine and Chernilo point out, citing also the works of Poulantzas and Mann, 'that is modern about the modern nation is the class character of national identification, and vice versa.'[42] However, this outcome inevitably leads to the balkanization of the national idea: 'We find,' they continue, 'in historical sociology many arguments which acknowledge that every class in society,

and not just the ruling class, produces its own discourse about what it is to be a member of the nation – about what national identity means – and that class movements have used the idea of the nation as the form in which they have sought to put forward their own notions of collective identity.' The mobilizing potential of the 'national idea' lies therefore 'precisely in its ambiguity – in the fact that one can give it a plurality of meanings that only minimally converge.'[43]

This idea is well illustrated in a work from the era of decolonization by Tom Mboya (1930-1969), a pan-Africanist and leading figure in the founding of Kenya. According to Mboya, 'a nationalist movement should mean the mobilization of all available groups of people in the country for the single struggle.'[44] But this necessarily involves, from a rhetorical standpoint, framing the aims of the movement in a way that accommodates the interests of all the potential actors. In the case of East Africa, this 'simplification' was achieved via appeals to the concept *Uhuru*:

> In this way one word summarizes for everyone the meaning of the struggle, and within this broad meaning everyone has his own interpretation of what *Uhuru* will bring for him. The simple peasant may think of *Uhuru* in terms of farm credits, more food, schools for his children. The office clerk may see it as meaning promotion to an executive job. The apprentice may interpret it as a chance to qualify as a technician, the schoolboy as a chance for a scholarship overseas, the sick person as the provision of better hospital facilities, the aged worker as the hope of pensions and security in old age…[45]

Mboya implies that a degree of dissonance is inevitable within any national movement – a condition which its leaders must try at least to obscure by reducing the struggle to 'one distinct idea, which everyone can understand without arguing about the details of policy or of governmental program after Independence.'[46] In framing the tasks at hand in such a way, Mboya further provides a lucid appraisal of the challenges of both popular

mobilization and post-independence nation-building – and indeed those posed by the former to the latter.

Finally, much of what has been said above refers to scholarly works of historical sociology that deal with the first wave of national movements from the nineteenth century and their twentieth century successors. In doing so, scholars must contend with shifting, often revolutionary situations. This may even hold true for Hroch's important work, which aimed to show how the social base of a given movement might evolve as it passed through several 'phases', e.g., from 'scholarly interest' to 'mass' mobilization.[47] Still, this involves a setting which Bart Bonikowski, to cite one contemporary critic, believes has been too much of a 'preoccupation' of researchers.[48] Specifically, what, he asks, are the sociological problems that arise in the case of nationalism in 'settled times'? Bonikowski's enumeration of the factors that might distinguish such a project recalls the by-now familiar attitude toward issues of social composition and perception cited above. In his words, 'such research should explicitly consider the heterogeneity of vernacular conceptions of the nation within any given polity.'[49]

Bonikowski proceeds to articulate a research program founded on the assumption that national identity is prone to a range of socially-contingent inflections: A well-grounded investigation of any particular case would embrace such a premise, and indeed wrestle fully with the problem of identifying the several conceptions of the nation that were likely present and the anxieties or aims to which they correspond. As noted above, this might be pursued through the use of latent class analysis models that employ variables such as age, ethnicity, location, creed, gender, education and income.[50] Examples of how such carefully configured studies may be used to investigate important problems of identity in ostensibly 'settled times' include Mikael Hjerm's analyses of national sentiment, xenophobia and education.[51]

To conclude, as Thompson and Fevre observe, researchers have shown particular interest of late in 'deconstructing' the manner in which nationalist discourse depicts the nation as a 'homogeneous community', and 'unraveling' the range of sentiments and corresponding social components that might be encompassed within a single movement.[52] These preferences may reflect in part the effects of the cultural turn and its emphasis on matters of perception and meaning. However, a glance at older literature also demonstrates a rather consistent tendency of this kind given the problem of establishing any general or normative connections between concepts liable to such conceptual mutability and case-specific characteristics. These difficulties do not nevertheless preclude reference to important analytical traditions, namely those associated with Marx, which, if sited on the conditions prevailing in a particular region and time, continue to inform the critical perspectives and lexicons of modern-day researchers.

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## Endnotes

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[35] E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), 121.

[36] See for example Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival*, 133-134.

[37] E. Hobsbawm & T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge MA, 1983), 267.

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[47] Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival*, 23.

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[49] Ibid., 429.

[50] See Bonikowski & Dimaggio, 'Varieties of American Popular Nationalism', 949-980.

[51] M. Hjerm, 'Education, Xenophobia, and Nationalism: A Comparative Analysis', in: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27/1 (2001), 37-60. See also Q. Li & M. Brewer, 'What does it mean to be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism and American Identity after 9/11', in: *Political Psychology* 25/5 (2004), 727-739.

[52] Thompson & Fevre, 'The National Question', 307. See also C. Calhoun, *Nationalism* (Minneapolis, 1997); R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge MA, 1996); Bonikowski & Dimaggio, 'Varieties of American Popular Nationalism', 949-980.