

The State of Nationalism (SoN): Revisiting the Nationalism and Social Policy Nexus

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Territory and solidarity are two central components of contemporary politics whose connection has come to be embodied in two quite different political phenomena: nationalism and the welfare-state. Nationalism is a form of politics linking territory (a homeland) to a special sense of solidarity deemed to supersede all others (i.e., non-national cleavages). The welfare state represents the tangible manifestation of social solidarity between citizens of a territorially-anchored community.

The literature on nationalism has emphasized its connection to the state, at least since the modernist turn of the 1980s. Yet, the state was typically considered theoretically-significant as a nation-building force because of its capacity for socio-cultural homogenization (the production of so-called high cultures), if not outright assimilation. The state's creation of a national community in its war-making activities was also deemed important. The empirical observations that led to these conclusions were drawn largely from a specific historical period (the 18th and 19th centuries) in Western Europe. The development of social protection in the early to mid-20th century transformed the state, providing it with new instruments for nation-building. In turn, the welfare-state shaped the discourse, action, and sometimes the objectives of nationalism. The relationship between nationalism and the welfare-state was not immediately considered in the literature (neither on nationalism, nor on the welfare-state and social policy), but in the past few decades a

growing body of scholarship has emerged that sheds light on the interactions between these two major forces of contemporary politics.

In this review essay, we take stock of the recent literature on nationalism and social policy. The literature review begins with a discussion of state nationalism before the focus of attention moves towards substate nationalism.

Exploring the Nationalism and Social Policy Nexus

Nationalism and social policy are two major topics in social science research, but the systematic and theoretically-informed analysis of their relationship is quite recent. There are ontological and disciplinary reasons for such recency. Social policy scholars are interested primarily in economic inequality and access to social rights. Hence, their world typically features cleavages linked to class, occupation, gender, or ethnicity/race. As public policy specialists, these scholars often seek to understand how government action mitigates (or not) inequality, and how societal groups pressure such action. For specialists of nationalism, the research question is often how nationalism shapes politics rather than policy. Their world involves territorialized groups (groups with a 'homeland') making claims of self-determination in the name of the nation.

Despite these different ambits, there are key connections between nationalism and social policy. First, both prominently feature the state as a force for the production of social cohesion. Second, they involve notions of political community defined partly in terms of solidarity. For nationalism scholars, the explicit basis for such solidarity is territorial, and it involves the construction of bonds often deemed to be national in nature whilst social policy scholars typically focus on solidarity between different groups, or classes, in the context of a broader whole often

assumed to be national (usually the ‘nation-state’). Third, nationalism and social policy operate at both the state and sub-state levels. Nationalism can be ‘state nationalism’ (or ‘majority nationalism’)¹ as far as it can involve the construction and promotion of a nation deemed congruent with the boundaries of the state. Alternatively, nationalism can be ‘sub-state nationalism’ when it takes the form of nationalist movements seeking autonomy or independence for a ‘minority nation’.² Social policy can be entirely legislated and administered at the central territorial level, or it can be subject to a constitutional division of powers (as is the case in federations), or simply to a delegation of responsibility from the central to regional governments (as in the case of unitary states).

Based on the above discussion, we can say that the nexus between nationalism and social policy is a two-way street. In that sense, two questions emerge: 1) how do nationalist mobilization and identities impact (social) policy outcomes? 2) how do existing (social) policies affect processes of nationalist mobilization and identity formation? These questions were central to Béland and Lecours’s book³ and served as a launchpad for subsequent research addressing either perspective or a combination thereof. Drawing on earlier contributions that hinted at different aspects of the multifaceted relationship between nationalism, territorial politics, and social policy (e.g., Banting 1999; McEwen 2000; 2006; Poirier & Vansteenkiste 2000)⁴, Béland and Lecours’s book⁵ inspired the production of works studying the same countries (Belgium, Canada, and the United Kingdom). Such works expanded the scope of analysis, updated discussions, and continued to identify new areas of inquiry that need to be explored further, including the effects of federalism on social policy with an explicit focus on the role of territorial politics.⁶ The following subsections explore how these and related issues have been approached from the state and substate nationalism perspectives.

State Nationalism and Social Policy

The state nationalism-social policy nexus builds upon a complex interplay between territory, solidarity, economic redistribution, and welfare state models. Recent research revolving around nationalism and social policy has explored one of these elements either in isolation or in conjunction with one another. Most notably, the literature has made great strides in unpacking the nexus between nationalism and social policy. Despite the theoretical refinements and empirical diversification made over time, some fundamental questions around that relationship persist. Even the causal relationship connecting state nationalism and social policy — which embraces key concepts such as national identity and solidarity — is not a settled matter. Miller and Ali⁷ contend that nationalism and social policy co-constitute each other in the sense that they entail ‘a benign circle whereby nationhood provides motivational support for welfare state policies, while these policies in turn help to promote a sense of common identity’. Stressing the mutual reinforcement mechanism between the two poles helps bridge otherwise fragmented accounts that argue for unidirectional causal relationships either from one perspective (e.g., nationalism as a determinant of social policy) or another (e.g., attitudes towards social policy shape nationalism).

One of the most interesting developments in the recent literature looks at how governments, especially at the central level, resort to social policy as a tool to project a national identity, respond to nationalist claims, and manage the politics of diversity in multinational contexts. Goodyear-Grant et al.⁸ show that pan-Canadian social programs are used as a tool of nation-building to transcend territorial divisions, as economic and cultural policies tend to be more regionalized and vary from province to province. Moreover, Goodyear-Grant et al.⁹ stress the role class politics plays in the welfare state and social policy. They argue that state-facilitated social policy seeks to cross-cut class and mute it as an organizing principle of political life in Canada. Outside of Europe and

North America, Roger Goodman and Ito Peng¹⁰ addressed the link between nation-building and social policy in East Asian countries. While the role of social policy in nation-building has been explored extensively,¹¹ studies delving into the reciprocity involved in the relationship between national identity and social policy are a work in progress.¹²

An important facet of the state nationalism-social policy nexus is how national identity and policy preferences influence each other. States have historically used social policy to project values and preferences linked to particular conceptions of national identities. However, preferences embodied by social policies at the state level can differ from those found at the substate level. One such example is in the debate regarding the privatization of healthcare, which is revealing of the fragility of Canada's healthcare system.¹³ In Dufresne et al.'s study¹⁴ that garnered data regarding public opinion about healthcare in Canada using the province of Quebec, it was found that Quebecers are the strongest supporters of private healthcare options in Canada. In contrast, Canadians outside of Quebec were largely found to be opposed to privatization. The surveys included questions of national attachment to the Canadian and the Québécois nations in order to discern the impact of nationalism on public perceptions. The researchers found that the impact of nationalism on perceptions of healthcare privatization was noticeable in English Canada but not in Quebec, and they concluded that the symbolic nature of universalism in health is secondary in Quebec while being central in the rest of Canada.¹⁵

As growing levels of immigration in advanced economies make societies more diversified and complex, the relationship between state nationalism and social policy is undergoing major changes that affect the welfare state. In Canada, where the central government exerts great power in governing immigration policies, 'new' politics of social policy become integrated into state nationalism. The territorial-based conception of social policy has experienced challenges due to the

increasing flow of migration.¹⁶ By the mid-2000s, scholars had begun working on the relationship between multiculturalism and social policy.¹⁷ The ‘politics of difference’ is emerging in the literature from the work on social movements and ethnocultural communities, which has triggered two fears. First is the ‘fear of crowding out’,¹⁸ positing that increased diversity will crowd out redistributive measures in Canada. Second is the ‘fear of fragmentation’,¹⁹ that is, worries of fragmented and weakened mainstream support for the welfare state due to increased diversity, changing public attitudes, and the potential breakdowns of traditional coalitions that supported the welfare state.

Substate Nationalism and Social Policy

The connections between nationalism and social policy have led scholars to examine their interactions in multinational contexts, that is, where a sizeable portion of citizens identify with a nation other than the one promoted by the central state. For instance, Keith Banting²⁰ published extensively about the interface between nation-building and federal social policy in the context of Canada’s multinational polity. Focusing on substate nationalism, Nicola McEwen²¹ wrote about what she called ‘state welfare nationalism’ in Scotland and in Quebec. Further, Johanne Poirier and Steven Vansteenkiste’s research²² on Belgium explored the impact of Flemish nationalism on the debate over the future of social policy in Belgium.

Substate nationalism is key to understanding the nexus between national identity, solidarity, and social policy in multinational states. Since social policy is rooted at least partially in national identity and solidarity, sub-state governments featuring a nationalist movement often seek to control social services such as health and education to reinforce their territorial distinctiveness. This intricate relationship is explored and theorized in *Nationalism and Social Policy*, where Béland

and Lecours²³ mesh historical institutionalism, nationalism studies, and social policy analysis to develop a framework to study this nexus from a historical and comparative perspective.

From their comparative study, Béland and Lecours²⁴ draw six conclusions on the nationalism and social policy nexus that are particularly useful to the study of substate nationalism. The first is that both the central and minority nation governments use social policy to build their own national community, identity, and solidarity. The second is that social policy tends to become part of nationalist mobilization efforts and a priority for nationalist movements as they consider what they want to be decentralized. Simply put, nationalist movements recognize the nation-building potential of social policy and want to control it. The third is that the drive to decentralize social policy by nationalist movement is not simply the result of a cost-benefit analysis. Even when the decentralization of social policies potentially entails additional financial burdens, nationalist movements still seek such decentralization. The fourth is that nationalism typically attempts to make the national community and the community of solidarity congruent as far as redistribution to people(s) considered to not be members of the nation is difficult to accept. The fifth is that by connecting 'national values' with 'social policy preferences,' nationalist movements provide particular legitimacy to specific policy options; in doing so, they can set the policy agenda not only within the minority community but also in the country as a whole. The sixth is that nationalist movements need not lead to an erosion of the welfare-state, as decentralization in social policy, when it occurs, can actually mean added social protection when national identity is embedded in egalitarian and progressive values.

Nationalist movements at the subnational level can pressure central governments for enhanced autonomy over policymaking in order to realize their policy preferences. Indeed, substate nationalism can be an important catalyst to build up momentum for autonomy by linking such

claims to the legitimate exercise of self-government. Mulvey²⁵ argues that, since Scottish devolution in 1999, the interaction between social policy change and demands for further devolution demonstrate the role sub-state nationalism plays as a mobilizer of policy in relation to national identity. Specifically, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has governed Scotland since 2007, and its electoral success represents a 'symbolic breakthrough for nationalist politics in Scotland'.²⁶ The mobilization of Scottish nationalist discourse within the policy-nationalist nexus is demonstrated by the SNP's underscoring distinctive 'Scottish' values of fairness and social justice through social policy. The SNP emphasizes and '*national-izes*'²⁷ its approach to policy as one that embodies a progressive and egalitarian society financed through the growth of Scottish jobs and skills.

The active role of substate nationalist movements in pushing for more power and autonomy over several social issues makes them an important driver of policy change. In recent years, processes of change and reform of social policy systems can be observed on national and regional scales which has attracted the attention of researchers looking to examine the place of nationalism in such dynamics.²⁸ Often, the role of ideas in shaping such processes of change constituted the angle of analysis adopted to make sense of the relationship between nationalism and transformations in social policy.²⁹ Moreover, institutional legacies are crucial elements in such processes, especially because path dependency limits actors' ability to promote substantive policy changes. Frequently resorting to historical institutionalism,³⁰ these analyses account for the feedback and self-reinforcing mechanisms that make policy change far from trivial. It is no coincidence that case studies inscribed in this stream undertake a historical reconstruction of events shaping the contours of the nationalism-social policy nexus.

As the next section will explore, regions became a prominent off-shoot of the nationalism-social policy scholarship. In fact, works dealing with regional social policy and welfare have burgeoned.³¹ Several comparative analyses have been produced,³² and most works in this

stream address either the case of Québec (Marier's³³ piece on Saskatchewan is an exception to Québec's predominance in the literature) or Scotland, with more limited attention to Belgium³⁴ and less so to other countries and regions.³⁵ For Québec, analyses tend to revolve around its exceptionalism and distinctive social policy model, as well as the interaction between provincial and federal policies.³⁶ For Scotland, by contrast, most of the literature leans towards the regionalization of social policy in the aftermath of the 1999 devolution and the 2014 independence referendum.³⁷

A Broader Nexus: Territory, Identity, and Public Policy

Different manifestations of nationalism create ample room for diversified analyses of their intersections with different forms of territorial politics and public policy. In the context of the Canadian multinational state, some work sheds light on Québec nationalism and linguistic policies.³⁸ Also, more attention is being paid to the role of 'integration' policy, particularly as it pertains to the issue of secularism.³⁹

Territory is a key category to make sense of the nationalism-social policy nexus since it is both the basis for nationalist mobilization and the circumscription within which solidarity takes place. While autonomy and identity remain centre and front in this body of research, recent works tend to present a more nuanced view of these issues, incorporating, for example, symbolic dimensions and their effects on actors' attitudes towards territorial organization and policy preferences.⁴⁰ Likewise, current studies on identity consider how territory shapes social solidarity when cultural, linguistic, and other typical identity markers are increasingly complex in multicultural societies.⁴¹

Over the last decade or so, the re-scaling of policy and politics towards the subnational level has brought new inputs to the study of regionalization. This trend is taking place against a background of increasing prominence of substate units in producing wealth, promoting economic development, and providing public goods and services — all elements that interact with social policy. While many works seem to imply the rise of regions can be largely explained by changing economic dynamics, this focus is not the only case of analysis. Keating⁴² underscores the limitations of these functional approaches to regions that end up reifying what a conceptual category is. The author contends that regionalism can be captured by six conceptual frames (including welfare and identity) that result from the contestation of and relations with a territory and its meaning(s).

The interplay between territory and party politics is consequential for social policy. The importance of territory and nationalist parties is emphasized in the literature. Scholarship shows that party competition, both nationally and regionally, affects how territorial political mobilization voices autonomy claims and engages with social policy issues.⁴³ The Belgian case illustrates the territorial dimension of party politics. Deschouwer⁴⁴ argues that party competition (pushed mainly by Flemish regionalist parties), not voters' demands, is the main factor accounting for the salience of territorial reform in the political agenda. It is interesting to note that social security was one of the main points of contention of Francophone parties to Flemish demands for enhanced decentralization towards Regions and Communities, as, in their view, '[a]n increased financial and fiscal autonomy and responsibility [was] seen as an attempt to break up the federal solidarity and to allow the richer Flanders to become even richer',⁴⁵

In multilevel arrangements such as federations, (social) policies result from decision-making and governance dynamics that go well beyond party politics. The constitutional division of powers and responsibilities between the central government and constituent units hinges on a

balance between self-rule and shared rule. While responsibility for social policies varies from federation to federation, in many cases, subnational governments depend on fiscal transfers from the central government to fund social programs in areas within their jurisdiction, like health care and education. When there is a mismatch between spending power, autonomy, and constitutional responsibilities, vertical and horizontal conflicts are bound to emerge. These tensions can be amplified in multinational federations, where nationalist movements often weave social policy into their rhetoric of self-determination.⁴⁶ In these contexts, intergovernmental relations institutions play an essential role in consensus-building, conflict resolution, and negotiations over the distribution of resources.⁴⁷

The pressures created by the patterns of migration, refuge, and asylum-seeking that touched notably Europe (and other advanced industrialized economies) inspired research addressing the links between such patterns, nationalist movements, politics, and identity.⁴⁸ The effects of this relationship are quite heterogeneous. At times, it leads to policy outcomes that seek to diminish the level of welfare support for migrant populations. Perhaps that relationship's most obvious manifestation is the establishment of social benefits' eligibility criteria in a way that excludes certain segments of the population (such as immigrants and national minorities), which is something that the literature has called 'welfare chauvinism'.⁴⁹

While welfare chauvinism embodies the institutionalization of exclusionary social policies based on identity features, the nexus between nationalism and social policy also manifests itself in the behaviours and attitudes of some groups (usually the national majority) towards minorities' access to welfare policies. In Austria, the racialization of welfare (which mainly affects migrant communities) was captured in a public opinion analysis developed by Schadauer.⁵⁰ The author showed that racialized demarcations and attitudes toward social policy are deeply entangled. Moreover, the soaring number of far-right,

populist, and ultranationalist movements call into question how these divisive groups mobilize nationalism and social solidarity in their views about social policy.⁵¹

On the other side, different forms of nationalism, civic nationalism, for instance, can be associated with a larger sense of social solidarity. In these cases, solidarity extends to a broad community irrespective of identity features like ethnicity and nationality. Drawing on a comparison between Catalonia and the Basque Country, Jeram⁵² shows that instead of generating conflicts, immigrant integration was embraced by nationalist parties in both communities despite a turn towards assimilationism in Catalonia against a volatile electoral background. As Jeram⁵³ demonstrated in a previous study focusing on the Basque Country, the diversity agenda was espoused by nationalist parties as a new marker of identity,⁵⁴ in a direct challenge to the claim that immigration triggers backlash and opposition from nationalist movements. In this context, the enlarged sense of solidarity translated into more generous integration policies is rooted in the idea of inclusive citizenship, whereby the gap between policies for nationals and non-nationals is narrowed. These differences between exclusionary and inclusive approaches to solidarity feed important inquiries into nationalism and social policy.

Future Research

As new nationalist movements break out and existing ones are renewed or strengthened, new social policy configurations stemming from their mobilization might emerge. In fact, the relevance of the research agenda centred on the nexus between nationalism and social policy is not poised to wane anytime soon. For example, the possibility of a second Scottish referendum continues to loom on the political horizon. For the first time since devolution was established, Westminster vetoed a Scottish bill in

January 2023, whose effects on territorial politics and mobilization remain to be seen.

Other recent developments across countries and within social policy subfields can feed further research on nationalism and social policy. For example, it is important to continue analyzing how the upsurge of populist and extremist movements is reshaping solidarity and social policy. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic deeply impacted social policy in several ways, either through the creation of new benefits (e.g., the Canada Emergency Response Benefit), the expansion of existing ones, or the injection of more funds into health care. At the same time, health systems around the world, including the much-praised UK's National Health Service and the Canadian universal health care system, are under great strain for which no immediate solution seems to be available. On a different note, the current pace of aging populations in advanced economies yields long-term effects on public finances and social policy, putting governments under pressure to pass reforms (e.g., pension reforms) that are often met with great societal resistance. How nationalism, solidarity, and territorial mobilization forces will play out in this context is something that researchers interested in the subject will have to follow closely.

Relatedly, the dynamics of expansion and retrenchment of social policies deserve more attention moving forward. Economic crises constitute ongoing threats to material conditions of living for large swaths of society. These contexts create a tricky situation in which citizens require more state support (due to widespread layoffs, for instance), while governments' capacity to accommodate this heightened need through more generous social programs is constrained by the same unfavourable economic conditions that drove benefit requests up in the first place. The experiences with the 2008 global financial crisis and the sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone show that the negative effects of economic downturns can activate nationalist claims amid (re)distributional tensions that, to a great extent, intertwine with social and welfare

policies. As the world economy is bracing for another potential downward economic spiral, it is crucial to gain a better understanding of nationalism and social policy in times of economic crisis.

Even though the nexus between nationalism and social policy has been approached from different angles and perspectives that contribute to the rich production of knowledge on the subject, an important gap persists when it comes to the Global South. As noted in this review, most works in the field covers developed liberal democracies, notably Belgium, Canada, Spain, and the United Kingdom. It is, therefore, time to build on the vast literature produced to date and expand this research agenda towards the Global South, where interesting dynamics involving not only nationalist movements but also transnational actors and policy diffusion — a fertile ground for investigations focusing on agency and ideas in policymaking.

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*This review is part of
The State of Nationalism (SoN), a comprehensive guide
to the study of nationalism.
As such it is also published on the [SoN website](#), where it
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