

Grounded Nationalisms in Time and Space: Response to Erin Jenne, Eleanor Knott, and Harris Mylonas

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It is a great pleasure to respond to these perceptive, inquisitive, and thought-provoking comments of Jenne, Knott, and Mylonas on my “Grounded Nationalisms: A Sociological Analysis” (2019). They all bring up many important questions, which would require elaborate explanations that I cannot provide in this short format. Hence, I will try to offer succinct answers to some of the key points they raise. My response is organized around the three grouped themes – a) theory; b) concepts and c) methodology.

Theory

Mylonas focuses on the question of causal sequencing. He asks whether organizational, ideological, and micro-interactional processes are “only *jointly* sufficient for nationalism to become grounded.” As I argue in the book, these three processes are interdependent but also autonomous. This means that the ideological diffusion of nationalist discourses is dependent on the organizational capacity. The prevalence of nationalist ideas entails presence of robust organizations capable of disseminating such ideas in the public sphere. Furthermore, nationalist grounding is also dependent on the ability of social organizations to successfully tap into the microcosm of small group solidarities. As Eugen Weber (1976) demonstrated so convincingly, the French nationalism became a mass phenomenon only when the French state utilized its organizational power to transform the national ambiguous peasants into the loyal citizens of their nation-state. This was a protracted and contested historical process that involved the state’s coercive and ideological penetration into society through the education systems, mass media, military drafts, legislative structure, and the personalized networks of kinship and friendships. However, the French case is an ideal type that most other nationalisms could not fully emulate. In fact, most other nationalisms emerged slowly and through the uneven grounding. For example, as I show in the book, late 19th-century Balkan states were characterized by asymmetrical organizational and ideological developments and the state’s prolonged inability to successfully tap into the world of micro-level solidarities. This was also the case with many postcolonial societies in Africa and Asia in the mid-20th century where the colonial legacy provided some organizational capacity for society-wide dissemination of nationalist discourses, but often these nationalisms could not penetrate local solidarities. Hence, nationalism can exist without one or two of these processes, but this grounding will be uneven and less effective.

Mylonas also focuses on the role of the structure and agency and the variability of nationalisms across time and space. In the book, I acknowledge clearly that nationalism is a product of both

structural processes such as historical, organizational, and ideological grounding but also more agency-centered action that is apparent in the micro-interactional grounding. I also recognize the role political, cultural, and economic elites can play in the development of nationalism across different places and time periods. For example, I show how the direction of the 19th-century-Serbian nationalism was shaped significantly by the elite conflict between the two competing royal houses. Mylonas is right that there are many factors that can help us explain the variation in the timing and the character of nationalism across the world. It is clear that the historical trajectory of nationalism has been characterized by contingency, irregularity, and structural unevenness. The fact that nationalism is a highly malleable phenomenon that can shift from the far right to the far left and anything in between has also provided an obstacle to tracing this enormous spatial and temporal variation. Hence, the book does not focus on explaining this obvious variability. Instead, my focus is more general: to try to understand what makes nationalism so pervasive in the modern world. It is true that scholars need to explain the variation in nationalism, but sociologists are also interested in what is common to nationalist experiences across the world. It is this near-universal pervasiveness, normalization, and naturalization of the nation-centric vision of the world that requires an explanation, just as the variation does. For example, both Mylonas and I are critical of the way Tilly, Lustick, Herbst, and others analyze the relationship between war and state formation without paying much attention to nationalist ideologies. It is precisely because they take nation-centric categories for granted that they do not study the impact of nationalism on state formation and vice versa.

Knott raises an important question: What is the relationship between nationalism and political systems? Is nationalism in authoritarian states different from those in liberal democracies? I have addressed this issue more extensively in my previous books where I argue that nationalism is the dominant operative ideology of modernity. This means that regardless of the political system all governments in the contemporary world have to legitimize their rule in the nation-centric terms. For instance, I have compared the process of political legitimation in Islamic Iran, state socialist Yugoslavia, and liberal democratic UK and have found that, despite sharp ideological differences on the normative level in all three cases, nationalism features prominently on the operative level (Malešević 2006, 83–108; 2002, 123–171). Nevertheless, this is not to say that authoritarian and democratic nationalisms are the same. On the contrary, as I argue when contrasting the organizational and ideological structures of nationalisms in Denmark and North Korea, the Danish liberal environment and its strong civil society contribute toward much more grounded forms of nationalism (Malešević 2013, 143–152). This point applies equally to Mylonas's comment about polarity of the international system and the example of Chinese rulers possibly deciding to promote a different ideological doctrine. In a world where the nation-state model is hegemonic, there is little room for such a possibility. Even the political movements that are openly hostile to nationalism, once in power, have to embrace the nation-centric policies as the institutions through which they rule and the populations they govern are imbued with nationalist understanding of the world.

Jenne notices that “Grounded Nationalisms” does not focus much on the question of territory.¹ She is absolutely right that one of the defining features of nation-states is their territoriality. Weber's well-known definition of the state emphasizes their monopoly on the legitimate use of violence over specific territory. Nevertheless, his definition can only apply to the nation-states as other forms of polity usually have not fully controlled their territories, had multiple claims over the same patch of land, or were imperial projects that had no fixed borders but unlimited frontiers of expansion. I share Jenne's view and recognize the central role that territory plays in differentiating nation-states from other forms of polity. Even the idea of popular sovereignty, a key principle of nationhood, is conceptualized in territorial terms as people's sovereignty ends at the borders of their respective states. The territorial monopoly of nation-state is a precondition of effective organizational grounding, and this monopoly also allows states to penetrate the networks of micro-solidarities. I discuss this more extensively in my previous work (Malešević 2013, 29–50).

Concepts

Both Jenne and Mylonas raise the issue of the relationship between the state and the nation. Jenne asks for more semantic clarity and better explanation on the causal primacy of the two, while Mylonas focuses on the stateless nationalist movements and zooms in on the conditions that make these movements possible. I use the concept of “nation-state” precisely to emphasize the ambiguous, contested, and tense relationship between the nation and the state in the modern world. As Jenne rightly notes, my intention is not to conflate states and nations as I recognize that no contemporary state is culturally uniform. However, unlike states that have clear empirical referents (i.e., delineated borders, administrative structure, capital cities, and so on), it is more difficult to identify the objective parameters of what constitutes a nation. That is why some scholars perceive “nation” as a folk concept that lacks clearly recognizable empirical referents (Collins 1999). Furthermore, unlike the premodern empires that were defined by ethnic heterogeneity, the contemporary states foster directly or indirectly a degree of cultural homogeneity. Hence, using the term “nation-state” aims to highlight this ambiguity at the hearth of the modern state project – these entities legitimize their very existence by invoking the notion of popular sovereignty, but it is never clear who are the people that constitute the nation. That is why the state part of the nation-state retains causal primacy. It is the state’s bureaucratic structure that generates the organizational power that can do things and transform anonymous individuals into active agents representing a nation.

Mylonas is right that the state is not the only social organization involved in nationalist projects, and, as I show in the book, nationalist ideas and practices were initially propagated by non-state actors such as secret revolutionary societies, political parties, trade unions, cultural associations, and social movements, among others. Although the states have become the dominant form of organizational power in modernity, a variety of social organizations continue to pursue nationalist ambitions. This is most visible with the stateless nationalist movements from the Rohingya, Hmong, Karen, Kurds, Catalan, to Basque, and many others. There are a variety of historical conditions and specific political conditions that make these national movements active. Since my book is aimed at identifying some general patterns of nationalist grounding, it does not focus on the specific factors that make each of these movements possible. However, what it aims to do is to provide theoretical tools to understand why, how, and when the majority of political and economic grievances in modernity are (often) framed in nationalist terms.

Knott and Mylonas also explore the relationship between nationalism and other key concepts such as citizenship, civic/ethnic dichotomy, irredentism, and cosmopolitanism. I share Knott’s view that the recent hardening of citizenship regulations is linked with the transformation of nationalism. One can draw some interesting parallels between the historical and contemporary relationships of citizenship and nationalism. As Mann (1993) observed, citizenship rights have historically been a potent mechanism used by the political and economic elites to contain different social groups within their societies. Hence, over the last three centuries, civil, political, and social rights were gradually extended to different social strata in Europe. This process simultaneously extended the concept of nation: while in the early 19th-century women, peasantry, and urban poor were not full members of their respective nations, by the mid-20th-century all these groups have attained full citizenship rights and have started identifying strongly with their nation-states. These rights were achieved after prolonged struggle by different social movements. Today, many immigrant populations face similar experiences as the ever more restrictive citizenship rules make full membership in the host nation-states more difficult. In this sense, the organizational, ideological, and micro-interactional grounding of nationalisms reduces the scope for social integration of immigrants. These same processes thwart the proliferation of cosmopolitan ideas. As cosmopolitan projects lack strong organizational structures that could compete with the massive apparatuses of nation-states, their ability to ideologically penetrate the

grassroots is very limited. Irredentism too is dependent on the robust organizational capacity and can expand much more if there is a support from neighboring states. As Mylonas shows so well in his book on the Balkans, irredentism becomes an important subcategory of imperialism in the period of nation-state formation (Mylonas 2012).

Mylonas agrees with my view that nation-states can successfully adopt kinship rhetoric to tap into the micro-universe of everyday life. However, he differentiates between the civic and ethno-culturally defined nation-states and argues that the later rather than former are more likely to rely on such idioms to police boundaries of belonging. It is true that some nationalist narratives are more susceptible to specific kinship tropes than others, but I would argue that all nationalisms deploy some kinship, friendship, or comradeship metaphors. For example, a recent analysis of national anthems from 204 countries shows that the majority utilize kinship and friendship-related concepts such as fatherland, motherland, sons, daughters, brothers, progeny, and so on (Lauenstein et al. 2015). The nation-states traditionally associated with the civic nationalism such as the US or France have also relied extensively on many kinship metaphors such as “the founding fathers of USA” or Joan of Arc as “the daughter of France” (Cohen 2014).

Methodology

Knott makes an interesting and relevant methodological point about the study of everyday nationalisms. She argues that the present-centric focus of this research paradigm sacrifices historical breath in order to gain greater thickness of data. I can see the merits of this approach, and the abundance of excellent scholarship on everyday nationalism indicates clearly that this research strategy pays off. However, I think that one can still historicize everyday nationalism and explore the long-term dynamics of its transformation. For example, Maxwell (2019) has recently published an important study on everyday nationalism in the late 18th and early 19th-century Hungary. This type of analysis aims to explore the everyday social practices when nationalism was a marginal ideology associated with a very small number of active proponents. Hence, by historicizing nationalism and linking it with the wider structural processes of grounding, one can trace the long-term trajectories of everyday nationalist practices. By exploring how habitual experiences have gradually been shaped by the broader structural contexts, one can avoid overly presentist explanations that might ignore the long-term effects of social change. This point links well with Jenne’s argument about the impact of nationalism before it becomes fully grounded across wider social strata. She is right that a small section of society imbued with radical nationalist ideas can have enormous impact on historical change. This was the case with the various campaigns of genocide and population transfers: from the Committee of Union and Progress in Turkey to Hutu’s Coalition for the Defense of the Republic. This grim historical reality indicates clearly why it is important to embrace a *longue durée* paradigm of analysis and trace the process of nationalist grounding over several centuries.

Mylonas also raises a similar methodological point by distinguishing between the two phases – before and after nationalism becomes grounded. However, I do not see grounding as a phenomenon that has a zero point. Instead, by analyzing similarities between the empires and the nation-states, I emphasize elements of organizational and ideological continuity between these forms of polity. This is done to show that grounding is an ongoing and never complete process prone to historical ups and downs. Some elements of grounding can be present early, and others can develop later. Grounding can also be undone through variety of processes including wars, revolutions, genocides, or natural disasters (Malešević 2017). The main point is that grounding is not some teleological phenomenon with fixed stages but a highly dynamic, malleable, contingent, and an open-ended process.

Disclosures. None.

Note

- 1 Although after running the keyword search of “Grounded Nationalisms,” I found out that there are 74 references to “territory” in the book.

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