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The use of binaries in nationalism studies

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The character of nationalism and its associated politics is one of the most pressing issues across the globe.¹ The rise of populist nationalism in its varying guises across Europe and beyond has made this so (Brubaker 2017, 2019). But the populist moment has now been joined by the Coronavirus pandemic and the invocations of nationalisms as governments appeal to their national communities, develop national strategies and respond to those of other nations. But just who is included in these appeals to social solidarity? Just how is the nation conceived, and which nations does it follow and which does it not? The character of nationalism is implicated in each of these questions. Our attention, therefore, is immediately drawn to familiar binary conceptions of nationalism.

The argument here is modest: nationalisms exhibit different colours and moods, the reflection of a particular ideological coalescence. While particular ideologies may dominate, they are rarely pristine and often entwine with others. Binaries, however, constrain; they do not sufficiently allow for a variegated understanding of nationalisms and the ideologies that underpin them. This introduction to the themed section critically reviews the use of binaries in nationalism studies. It identifies a lack of precision in the use of ideal types as a key failing, and points to new conceptions and types, not least among the contributions in this special issue in which the acknowledgement of the ideological is an important feature.

Binaries

Hans Kohn (1944) famously drew a distinction between western and eastern nationalism. This binary has since been joined by distinctions between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalism, liberal and organic nationalism and 'liberal' and 'illiberal' nationalism. In their practice they may be active ('hot') or passive ('banal') (Billig 1995). At the heart of each of these dichotomies are distinctions between 'open' or 'closed', 'inclusive' or 'exclusive' nationalism, though importantly there are limits, and these dichotomies are not absolute.

Kohn's depiction of western and eastern nationalism has often been understood and critiqued as embodying a certain western-centrism, even Orientalism (Said 1978), for its depiction of an essentialist east. For a writer and political activist who suggested

¹ This special issue was prepared at the workshop 'Moving beyond the binaries of Nationalism Studies', organized on 25-26 May 2018 at the University of Edinburgh, in cooperation with ASEN Edinburgh and the POHIS-Centre for political history of Antwerp University, funded by the FWO-Flemish Research Foundation's program for international Scientific Research Communities, grant W0.017.14N. A word of thanks is due to all the participants for their valuable input.

degree and nuance between the two nationalisms this stark binary is odd. There may well be a degree of overstatement in the 1940s incarnation of this binary, most especially since it was written at a time in which the liberal United States, Kohn's academic home, was at war with a totalitarian state drawing inspiration from German Romanticism (Pianko 2010). Moreover, Kohn was himself from an east central European Jewish background, and favoured multinational states as the best way to secure diversity; their failure in the interwar years and his growing pessimism may well be reflected in his hope for western civic states and his fear of eastern ethnic states (Riga and Hall 2016: 382).

Indeed, as Benedict Anderson (2001) cautions, the character of nationalism is, above all subject to time rather than geography. The types of nationalism that he identified in *Imagined Communities* - creole nationalism, official nationalism and linguistic nationalism - were found in east and west alike. Moreover, in many instances rather than Asian states coming late to the European party and exhibiting the supposed traits of eastern nationalism, they were in fact responding contemporaneously to the same political and economic pressures as European states, on how best to achieve security and prosperity. In this regard, state-led nation-building strategies were undertaken in Third Republic France and Meiji Japan at broadly the same time. A very contemporary version of this binary contrasts the chaotic Anglo-American response to the Coronavirus pandemic with that of the orderly East, specifically that of South East Asian nations (Murphy 2020).

John Plamenatz (1973) has a particular distinction in developing this binary in offering a reading that influenced both Ernest Gellner and Anthony Smith's subsequent theories, which have dominated nationalism studies. Respectively, providing the classic statement of the modernity of nations and nationalisms, and the ethnosymbolist critique, in which the 'ethnic origins of nations' was asserted. Plamenatz' contrast constituted in Gellner's view, the 'sad reflections of a Montenegrin in Oxford' (Hall 2010: 317). Gellner built on it, and offered a typology of nationalism in which 'Western liberal nationalism' and 'ethnic nationalism' were engendered by a particular combination of power holders, access to education, and the degree to which culture is shared (Gellner 1983: 94). Smith followed a similar binary, in his distinction between lateral/aristocratic and vertical/demotic *ethnies* from which modern nations developed (Smith 1986).

However, 'civic' and 'ethnic' has become the most widely used binary. Rogers Brubaker (1992) in his now classic *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* examined why immigrant-origin populations in France and Germany had markedly different patterns in acquiring citizenship. He distinguished between France in which citizenship was state-centred and assimilationist, based on *jus soli* (law of soil), and a reflection on the degree to which nation had been constructed within the institutional and territorial frame of the state, and Germany, in which citizenship was *volk*-centred and differentialist, based on *jus sanguinis* (law of blood), and in which 'nation' was understood as an organic, cultural and racial community of descent. In other words, a certain path-dependency is suggested in

relation to the emergence of states and nations: in France state preceded nation, while a German nation was in place prior to political unification.

The impression given is that French nationally framed citizenship is inclusive while Germany's is not, a problematic conclusion to sustain today. This, of course, is an overly simplistic takeaway from rigorous research and it was certainly not Brubaker's intention, as he makes clear in a later contribution (Brubaker 2001). Indeed, Brubaker's intellectual project since has, in large part, been to question the very utility of terms such as 'nation' and 'nationalism,' arguing that they should be restricted to 'categories of practice' rather than 'categories of analysis' (Brubaker 2006). The contribution here similarly understands nation as constructed, that it is best placed within the ideological realm, by which we intend, it embodies a set of value commitments and normative claims. However, it is perhaps a methodological critique rather than a theoretical critique that is most required. Civic and ethnic nationalisms are, after all, ideal types. To what extent do they retain explanatory power? The task, therefore, is to assess the degree to which they offer precision in understanding the character of nationalisms.

Of ideal types

It is worth reflecting for a moment on how the founding sociologist, Max Weber, understood the use of ideal types. Weber (1949: 90, emphasis in original) offers this: '[I]t [the ideal type] is not a *description* of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description.' Therefore, as descriptions of historical reality ideal types have a limited use, they enjoy 'only a very relative and problematic validity when they are intended to be regarded as the historical portrayal of empirically existing facts' (Weber 1949: 97). However, as a means of making more general claims their utility is increased: 'such presentations are of great value for research and of high systematic value for expository purposes when they are used as conceptual instruments for *comparison* with and the *measurement* of reality' (Weber 1949: 97). Ideal types are, in other words, heuristic tools to aid comparative research and the development of generalisations. Yet they only capture the essence of particular phenomena in particular places and at particular times. The implication is clear: they cannot be fixed and require constant reflection and updating to ensure precision in their use.

Indeed, reflection on the recent history of citizenship in Germany and France since Brubaker first wrote suggests a more complicated picture when it comes to questions of inclusion and exclusion, and further muddies the water on how well ethnic and civic, in their current guise, capture contemporary reality. The history of citizenship in Germany in this regard is especially instructive. The 1913 Citizenship Law granted citizenship to ethnic Germans, and non-German naturalization was restricted. This became salient when West Germany embarked on a policy of recruiting immigrant workers from 1955, tellingly designated as *Gastarbeiter* in line with the official position that recruited workers would return to their countries of origin once their employment contracts had been fulfilled. Indeed, in 1977 a Government commission confirmed that 'Germany is not a country of immigration.'

And yet Germany had become precisely that. This was the backdrop to the historic 2000 Citizenship Law, which relaxed criteria on how citizenship could be acquired. This was in part the result of immigrant mobilization, politically voiced by the Greens and the SPD (Aktürk 2012; chapters 2-3). And perhaps the most notable of all was the German chancellor, Angela Merkel's decision to admit a million Syrian refugees during the 2015 Refugee Crisis. This represented a transformation not only in citizenship but also in nationalism, implying that it was possible to assimilate into the German nation and that an arguably ethnic conception of nationalism could be inclusive. That is, through the provision of German language and culture classes there was a determined effort to acculturate and perhaps even assimilate.²

During the same period, nationally framed citizenship in France appeared to go in precisely the opposite direction. In accordance with a sense of republican *égalité*, the French state practices 'ethnic blindness,' and does not collect data on the religious or ethnic composition of its population. It took the riots in the *banlieues* of Paris in 2005 to draw attention to the inequalities experienced by French citizens, many of them Muslim, of African and Arab descent. While the French state responded with reforms that sought to improve economic opportunities, at the same time citizenship was effectively held to be incompatible with the wearing of religious dress in the public sphere through a series of controversial national and local bans on the hijab (2003), the burka (2011) and the burkini (2016). That is, in recent years *laïcité* (secularism) has become the defining feature of contemporary France, given popular expression in rallies asserting 'Je suis Charlie,' following the brutal murders of editors and artists of the satirical and secularist magazine, *Charlie Hebdo*. (Adida et al 2016: Appendix). In other words, policies aimed at asserting the French republic's secular character have placed a cultural cost on citizenship. Civic nationalism remains open, but it places conditions on membership, which have as much the potential to exclude as to include.³

This recent history questions the usefulness of the existing conceptualisations of ethnic and civic nationalism. Conceptually, ethnic nationalism is often conceived in negative terms, as exclusionary and incapable of embracing new members. But how does this relate to conceptions of ethnicity in nationalism studies? Anthony Smith places particular importance on historical ethnicity as a building block for modern nations. However, in Smith's (1986) conception of *ethnie*, a certain historical rigidity is discernible, that is, *ethnies* exhibit a discrete set of myths and symbols that, if not unchanging, are recognisable across *la longue durée*. This approach is distinct from the more anthropological understanding of ethnicity. Thomas Eriksen (2010: 5), for example, understands ethnicity as 'aspects of relationships between groups which

² There is debate on the precise motivation behind this dramatic humanitarian gesture. Yet Germany, in common with many Northern states, requires an increase in its working age population to support its aging population. An exclusionary ethno-nationalism was still mobilized in response.

³ Interestingly, contemporary quantitative research suggests that 'civic principles ... have taken on a culturally exclusionary character in Northwestern Europe [including France] – at least when it comes to Muslims' (Simonsen and Bonikowski 2020: 128).

consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive.’ However, ethnicity is not static and culture is malleable; and inclusion, while not unproblematic, is possible through, for example, linguistic acquisition, religious conversion, or intermarriage. Moreover, ethnicity is subject to political practice. Sener Aktürk’s (2012) comparative examination of Kohn’s exemplars of eastern nationalism of Germany, Turkey, and Russia points to the ways in which states frame ethnicity differently; and that framing is itself subject to change. In each of the cases examined different political strategies, including assimilation, segregation and consociation have been utilised.

Normative theorists Will Kymlicka (1995) and Bernard Yack (1996) have done much to expose the ‘myths of the civic nation.’ In contrast to ethnic nations, civic nations are often portrayed as individualist, though this misses the degree to which collectivities (community, nation) are part of civic discourse. Civic nations are conceived in political rather than cultural terms, yet this confuses ‘culture’ with ‘ethnicity’ and misses the degree to which all states possess a distinct political culture. Civic nations are held to be pacific, in contrast with their atavistic cousins, though the historical record – for example, the ‘Great Terror’ that followed the French Revolution or the expulsion of British loyalists from revolutionary America – suggests otherwise. And finally, if choice is held to mark membership of civic nations in contrast to birth, which marks ethnic nations, in practice civic citizenship is overwhelmingly acquired through birth.⁴ That is, it is precisely the same attributes that are held to characterise ethnic nations that characterise civic nations: they can be collective in their characterisation, they possess distinct political cultures, membership is overwhelmingly acquired through birth, and they can be the aggressors in conflicts. In other words, too much, and too much of it normatively driven, has been loaded under the rubric of ‘civic nationalism.’ It is effectively the victim of ‘concept stretching’ (Sartori 1970).

New Conceptualisations, New Types

John Hall⁵ argues that ‘nationalism is a labile force that can take different forms’ (Hall 2013: 7). Labile invokes Freud’s understanding of the libido as ‘promiscuous and perverse, sticky and mobile, prone to gain character from the elements to which it attaches itself’ (Hall 2003: 15). In a similar vein, nationalism can cleave to a panoply of ideologies from which it derives its colour and character. The whole pallet of political philosophies is available: conservatism, socialism, liberalism, republicanism, and feminism. It is this that explains the somewhat contradictory character of civic nationalism: two distinct philosophical currents, collectivist republicanism and individualist liberalism, have been folded into a single ideal type.

⁴ These inconsistencies are held to characterise the approaches of Michael Ignatieff, Jürgen Habermas and William Pfaff.

⁵ John Hall was a keynote speaker and participant at the workshop from which this special issue derives. We are especially grateful to him for his presentation, now published as, ‘Our current sense of anxiety or after Gellner’ *Nations and Nationalism* (2019) 25(1): 45-57, and his contributions throughout.

Republicanism and liberalism make strange bedfellows, not least since republicanism has a clear vision of the good life and is intolerant of competing views, while liberalism, which places the individual at the centre of its worldview, makes no claim to universal truth, and is thereby tolerant of diverse opinions (Appleby 1992).

To remedy this, Hall distinguishes 'civic' from what he terms 'civil' nationalism. Civil nationalism is liberal and is entirely compatible with a particular form of multiculturalism. Hall explains: 'Multiculturalism properly understood 'is' civil nationalism, the recognition of diversity ... Difference is acceptable only so long as group identities are voluntary; that is, insofar as identities can be changed according to individual desire' (Hall 2013: 90). That is, civil nationalism makes possible 'cultural diversity within a shared commitment to minimal liberal political norms' (Hall 2003: 30). Canada is perhaps the paradigmatic instance of civil nationalism. While its multinationalism, its approaches to its sub-state nations, the indigenous First Nations and French-speaking Québec,⁶ has been problematic, Canada's multiculturalism has been celebrated. It was the first country to adopt multiculturalism in 1971, and since then it has shifted from being a rather symbolic celebration of multicultural communities to becoming a policy-oriented means of ensuring employment equity. In the process it has become effectively a form of nationalism in English-speaking Canada, one that differentiates it from the United States, and is captured in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 'post-national' slogan 'diversity is our strength.' That is, Canadian multiculturalism also serves a political function in distinguishing Canada from its southern neighbour and its 'melting pot,' and providing a political discourse within which political elites compete (Kymlicka, 2021).

This is unabashedly normative, since what is being described, and indeed argued for, is a form of nationalism compatible with diversity. It is rare and the challenges before civil nationalism are not straightforward, as the French philosopher Denis Lacorne (2019) makes clear in his examination of the 'limits of tolerance.' However, it is instructive to remember that it was through a toleration of religious diversity that liberalism and civil society historically arose, indeed the histories of religious (and political) fanaticism and civil society are conjoined (Colas 1997). Moreover, Hall (2013: 88-104) builds a certain dynamism into his typology that allows for shifts as and when nationalisms change, and become more inclusive or exclusive, in degree or in kind.

It is curious then that nationalism has been understood in binary terms. Recent developments in gender studies are critical of the use of binaries in relation to sex and gender, calling instead for fluidity. Indeed 'nonbinary' has itself become something of a hybrid category that allows for the inclusion of previously gendered traits. There have been exciting and important developments in the conceptualisation of nationalism in relation to gender and sexuality, pointing to the ways in which queer politics and feminism have been ideologically co-opted within

⁶ Interestingly, Québec has abandoned its version of civil nationalism ('interculturalism') for the laïcité of civic nationalism (cf. Zubrzycki 2016).

dominant discourses of nationalism. Puar (2017) identifies ‘homo-nationalism’ in which some queer communities are included within the nation but at the expense of the Orientalizing of other populations, while Farris (2017) offers ‘femonationalism’ to capture the ways in which feminist rhetoric on gender equality is used to effectively justify divisive policies aimed at immigrant populations across European states.

This themed section continues this intellectual agenda by taking to task familiar binary tropes in nationalism studies. It opens with a contribution by Peter Bugge that frames the broader discussion by tracing the historical genealogy of the East-West opposition. Bugge highlights the dichotomy’s definitional imprecision, its empirical inaccuracy, and its “baggage of double standards, prejudice, and stigmatisation”.

Raul Cârstocea’s article ‘Synchronous nationalisms – Reading the history of nationalism in South-Eastern Europe between and beyond the binaries’ posits the relative synchronicity of the development of nationalism in eastern and western Europe during the nineteenth century. In Cârstocea’s analysis nationalism is not so much a binary phenomenon, nor even one that can be placed on a continuum, but rather a palimpsest that continuously receives new layers of meaning that supersede or foreground older scripts.

Matthew Blackburn’s ‘The persistence of the civic-ethnic binary. Divergent visions of the civic nation in the West and Russia’s “state-civilization” project’ draws attention to the imbrication of civic, ethnic, imperial, civilizational and statist themes in Vladimir Putin’s propaganda that belies an easy categorization of ethnic vs. civic.

Szabolcs Pogonyi argues in his article ‘The Right of Blood: ‘Ethnically’ Selective Citizenship Policies in Europe’ that EU legal norms allow ethnonationalist governments to preferentially naturalize non-resident ethnic kin populations. Paradoxically these policies result in an easier pathway to citizenship for people who can hardly be considered ‘co-ethnics’ in a conventional ethno-nationalist sense. Pogonyi concludes that the terms ethnic and civic cannot be meaningfully and independently distinguished from each other.

Finally, Joana Duyster Borreda’s contribution on ‘Between civic and ethnic nationalism: International models and influences on Catalan nationalism, 1880-1920’ emphasizes the transnational contacts and models in the self-definition of Catalan nationalists, a phenomenon she terms ‘inter-nationalism’. Her analysis demonstrates that the construction of national identities relied on fusing organic, civic and ethnic components as well as other group loyalties.

Taken together, the contributions to this themed section further the discussion on the use of binaries in nationalism studies in two broad ways. They question the reification of binaries, most especially western/eastern and civic/ethnic and their attendant biases, and instead emphasize a certain ideological fluidity in the character of nationalism. In doing so, it also speaks to a core concern for modernists and constructivists alike that ‘Nationalism has ... existences rather than any single

essence' (Hall 2003: 16). But perhaps more importantly, they place an emphasis on empirical robustness. While the contributors continue to emphasize the utility of ideal types, they offer greater precision in their use and in the development of new types of nationalism. That is, there is a recognition that nationalism is labile and that it 'absorbs the flavors of the historical forces with which it interacts' (Hall 2003: 15). It is this that explains its shifting moods and colors. An understanding of these ideological moves is a matter of contemporary urgency.

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