Nationalism

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Abstract: A "nation" is a socially-constructed group, based on a sense of shared language, kinship, or birthplace, while "national identity" refers to the sense of belonging of individuals who internalize an attachment to this constructed community. Nations are typically imagined to have "homelands" and most often, these are defined by the borders of a territorial state. "Nationalism" is the political doctrine that the nation and the state *should* be congruent. Nationalism does not just exist at the level of high politics, but is woven into daily life. It is fundamentally spatial because it delimits the bounds of groups and territories: it is a set of arguments and assumptions about how borders between "us" and "them" are drawn, and who legitimately "belongs" and where. In studying the nations-nationalism-national identities nexus geopolitics scholars focus on two core themes: (1) territory and the state system; and (2) identity politics and place.
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A 'nation' is a socially-constructed group, based on a sense of shared language, kinship, or birthplace. It is an 'imagined community,' in Benedict Anderson's (1983) famous description, which people often feel they are born into, but which they must learn to enact and feel part of. 'National identity' is the sense of belonging of individuals who internalize an attachment to their social community, defined as a nation. Today, the nation is most commonly imagined to be defined by the borders of a territorial state, as recognized by other sovereign states through institutions like the United Nations. Some groups claiming to be a nation do not have titular states, but some members of their community might aspire to independent statehood separate from the country where their imagined homeland is a part (e.g. Kurdish, Basque, or Scottish people). 'Nationalism' is the political doctrine that the nation and the state *should* be congruent. As a discourse, or set of material and rhetorical frames advancing this ideal, it can be used by nations with existing states or those advocating for a new state. The nations-nationalism-national identities nexus is highly complex, but two interrelated themes have informed geopolitics scholarship to date, including: (1) territory and the state system; and (2) identity politics and place.

(1) Territory and the state system: States are not preexisting units. Rather, they must be *made.* A country's political leaders – people who speak in the name of the state – are important actors in the practices of making and sustaining states as taken-for-granted political units. But so too are ordinary people, who are the political subjects of these leaders and prevailing systems of power. All work with various material forces, practices, and imaginaries to constitute the state materially and give life to the claims of 'sovereignty' that a state's leaders make. In the contemporary

geopolitical order defined by territorial states, nationalism is one of the most important tools for political actors to claim and affirm sovereignty over land and the people residing there. Nationalism became inextricably linked to state claims on territorial sovereignty as it evolved over several centuries – beginning with the 'nation-state' ideal that started to coalesce in Western Europe in the 1700s and subsequently spreading to the rest of the world through colonial and postcolonial networks (Anderson 1983; Kaplan and Hannum 2024).

In the geopolitical imaginary of a world divided into discrete, territorially-bounded states, sovereignty claims are only deemed legitimate when made *in the name of* the people. And in most cases, these people are the 'nation.' Effective nationalist projects thus work to abstract various feelings, desires, and motivations of a people to the 'nation' as a community and the 'state' as a 'natural' territorial entity. This allows people to see their actions as supporting something beyond political elites, who have captured the human and material resources within the state's territorial bounds. Such elites are not working in a vacuum: they tap into the global system of assuming a territorial order based on bounded national communities. From this point of view, nationalism is essentially a 'mode of being' within a world of nations (Billig 1995).

To achieve or maintain independent statehood, political leaders speaking in the name of the nation consistently mobilize the idea that every nation has a territorially-based 'homeland' – a native space of belonging for the group that is rightfully theirs. Stories about a nation's homeland are consistently emotional, and they promote a special bond between individuals, space, and place (Billig 1995; Dijkink and Knippenberg 2001; Herb and Kaplan 1999; Kaplan and Hannum 2024). Homelands serve as a bridge between the internal self and the external environment, making a person's place in space and in community intelligible and meaningful. Homelands also work in nationalist imaginaries as a way to distinguish 'us,' the in-group members of the nation, and 'them,' the out-group members of foreign nations. But not all territories are equal in homeland narratives, as Michael Billig (1995: 76) explains: 'nations do not necessarily hold on to territory with equal tenacity. Some territory is imagined to be "ours" and to be fought for; some can be ceded, as not really part of the homeland.' Imagining the nation's homeland is thus an exercise in spatial partitioning, whereby abstract imaginings of domestic space delineated from foreign space are materially enacted. These are bordering practices, wherein nationalism transforms abstract territories into meaningful spaces and their residents into members of spatially-defined communities.

If sovereignty claims in the contemporary geopolitical order are deemed legitimate only when made in the name of the nation, then nationalism is a kind of glue that holds this order together. In cases of violent conflict and the fracturing of states, however, it can seem to do precisely the opposite. Yet because of the strength of the national sovereignty ideal worldwide, even breakaway groups who seek their own state continue to prioritize a unique national identity in their separatist claims (Dijkink and Knippenberg 2001; Kaplan and Hannum 2024). For example, scholars have stressed the vital role of nationalism in defining the new borders of the Soviet Union when it dissolved into 15 new states in 1991, or Yugoslavia when it broke up over several years in the 1990s. In nearly all cases, advocates for independence claimed that they needed

sovereign territories for sovereign nations: Croatia for Croats, Kazakhstan for Kazakhs. A similar pattern of unmixing previously mixed national communities was also seen with the British Empire's withdrawal from South Asia and the violent partition of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In all cases, the identity narratives that political leaders (and their populations) used to justify territorial sovereignty shifted, imagining the nation less in civic terms and more in ethnic terms.

(2) Identity politics and place: Nationalism studies has long been framed around a divide between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nationalist variants (Dijkink and Knippenberg 2001; Kaplan and Hannum 2024; Koch 2016, 2023). Scholars recognize that this divide, like the nation itself, is a social construction that cannot be taken for granted. However, the division between civic or ethnic scripts can be a heuristic tool that is helpful in identifying those nationalisms that are more inclusive of people from mixed ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds (civic nationalism) and those which are more exclusively organized around members with common kinship and lineage (ethnic nationalism). Most countries have a mix of civic and ethnic nationalist scripts, which are used by different actors at different moments, to promote different kinds of political agendas related to group identity and belonging (Koch 2016). And the overall saturation of such scripts may shift over a longer period of a time, as some national groups favor more ethnic identity narratives (e.g. as seen with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India) or more civic identity narratives (e.g. as seen with the increasing embrace of noncitizen foreigners in Qatar or the United Arab Emirates).

For nationalism to work politically, these different storylines must be adopted by the masses. Indeed, national identities are widely internalized by people around the world. Different actors may use these scripts at different moments and places. For example, in Germany or Qatar, certain individuals are keen to promote civic scripts that valorize a more inclusive vision of German or Qatari society, embracing the resident populations that do not belong to the titular nationality of the country. Other people in Germany or Qatar would be strongly opposed to this social vision and would instead use ethnic nationalist scripts. Here, these narratives emphasize the cultural symbols of the countries' ethnically-defined populations, advancing in a narrow 'Germany for Germans' or 'Qatar for Qataris' vision of the state. The tropes and symbols of nationalism vary in ethnic or civic storylines, but include a mix of flags, color schemes, monuments and memorials, museums, language norms, literature, education programs, histories, foods, cultural traditions, holidays, sports, and popular culture (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995; Kaplan and Hannum 2024; Koch 2016).

Nationalism is perpetuated among the masses not just through cultural channels, but also more broadly through a moral economy in which 'good' community members are valorized and rewarded. Dressing in patriotic clothes or behaving like a patriot (e.g. serving in the armed service or waving a flag on a holiday) are all part of a normative system in which people are rewarded for publicly displaying their in-group status and allegiance to the community. It might seem that some nationalisms are forced on people, but there are just as many cases where people are so seduced by the nationalist ideals and performances that they go willingly. In all cases, it can be difficult to discern what motivates people. For example, do soldiers really serve out of love for the nation, or

are they just seeking economic opportunities? Do flag-wavers on national holidays do it for love of the nation, or are they just trying to fit in with their peers? Often the people do not themselves know the answers, but their participation can be pleasurable because of the affirmation that they get from publicly performing their membership in a group (Koch 2023).

Beyond everyday performances, nationalism is woven into core state institutions. Arguably the most important of these is citizenship. As a legal category decided by states, citizenship accords rights and obligations to those people defined as citizens. Not all residents of a country are citizens, and noncitizens likewise have certain rights and obligations to the state. In most cases, noncitizens are not imagined to be part of the 'nation' and nationalist discourse therefore does not usually reference them. There are exceptions, such as in the Arab Gulf countries with 80%-90% of their populations consisting of noncitizens (Koch 2016), but the idea of citizenship remains one of the most important ways that the nationalist principle of congruency between the nation and the state is articulated.

The congruency principle is also defined and mapped onto the civic/ethnic nationalism divide through the legal framework that citizenship is granted in particular countries. Most countries have mixed regimes, but *jus sanguinis* citizenship regimes are a hallmark of ethnic nationalism, since they are based on genealogy and parental identity. *Jus soli* regimes, by contrast, are based on birthplace and are typically associated with countries that privilege civic nationalist identity narratives. But even where individuals are accorded the formal rights of citizenship, they may not be treated as in-group members of the nation, as in cases of socially-marginalized minorities like Black Americans in the United States, ethnic Turks in Germany, Muslims in India, or Uighurs in China. For many observers today, nationalism is an irrational or retrogressive form of identity – especially in contexts where it manifests in forms of exclusion, xenophobia, or violence. But nationalism is a discourse that can also manifests in forms of love, joy, community, and celebration (Koch 2023). Whichever expression it takes, nationalism's overarching effect is to naturalize political imaginaries about place and identity: who does and does not belong, and where.

Geopolitics scholars also stress the importance of nationalism because each country's mix of narratives about the nation, place, and identity form the base of its geopolitical cultures and storylines. Nationalist discourse is a powerful force in shaping elite and popular attitudes about foreign policy. It is especially influential in how intellectuals of statecraft imagine their state's identity, position, and role in the world, can ossify into national 'schools of geopolitical thought' (Ó Tuathail 2003). For example, 'isolationist' and 'interventionist' camps reflect two broad schools of thinking about the United States' role in foreign policy. In Russia, 'Westernizers,' 'Slavophiles,' and 'Eurasianists' are the three dominant schools of geopolitical thought. Whatever the school, though, the overarching goals of foreign policy elites are typically framed in terms of the national interest (Kuus 2007). And in narrating their nation's 'authentic' identity in the world, these individuals not only naturalize the territorial place of the nation, but also the reinforce the hegemony of the state system.

Nationalism is essential to understand geopolitics, since the territorial state system is the dominant way of ordering global space. Today, the place-based aspects of nationalism are dominated by the idea that a national community belongs within state-defined territorial space. This is not a predetermined outcome of nationalism, but part and parcel of the geopolitical architecture of the modern world. Since geopolitical orders must constantly be performed to continue, nationalism is essential for the persistence of the state system. This is because it does not just exist at the level of high politics, but is also woven into daily life and enacted in myriad ways – so much so that many people will move through life never questioning their national identity. Nationalism is social but it is also fundamentally spatial. It delimits the bounds of groups and territories, as a set of arguments and assumptions about how borders between 'us' and 'them' are drawn, and who legitimately 'belongs' and where. And just as nationalist discourse can include self-affirming celebrations of the culture and identity of a nation, so too can it involve exclusionary or vitriolic attacks on foreign others. Nationalisms are, in short, incredibly diverse and dynamic. But they are not natural.

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