

Why, When, and How did Nationalism Become Grounded?

Harris Mylonas 

George Washington University, Washington D.C., USA

Email: mylonas@gwu.edu

Grounded Nationalisms: A Sociological Analysis, by Siniša Malešević, Cambridge University Press, 2019, \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781108441247.

Siniša Malešević's *Grounded Nationalisms* asks: "Why has nationalism proved to be such a potent, protean, and durable force in the modern age? Why has the nation-state established itself as the central organizing mode of social and political life in the last two hundred years? Why is nationalism still the dominant form of collective subjectivity?" (8) The author draws from several disciplines to tackle these questions, including sociology, political science, history, psychology, demography, and anthropology. In a nutshell, he finds the answer rests in the historical origins and organizational, ideological, and micro-interactional dynamics of nationalist ideologies that evolve and adapt over time. This book is an instant classic of historical sociology arguing that nationalism is the dominant form of modern subjectivity and unlikely to be replaced or shaken by globalization or neoliberalism.

Malešević is a modernist, with a twist. The first three chapters of the book situate his argument in the existing debates: perennialists versus modernists; banal and everyday nationalism versus hot nationalism; civic versus ethnic nationalism. Ethno-symbolists wrongly assert a continuity between premodern proto-nations or *ethnies* and modern nations. Historically, national identification extended only to small, literate urban minority, while populations were mostly composed of peasant communities – which had no conception of, nor interest in, widescale social identification at the level of the nation-state. But modernists are also wrong in viewing national identity as epiphenomenal and neglect that nationalisms build on ideas and structures that preceded the age of nationalism. While Malešević recognizes the importance of the everyday and banal nationalism perspectives – especially their attempt to go beyond the focus on manifestations of nationalism in the form of war and violence – he suggests that grounding national identity in everyday, face-to-face relationships presupposes the existence of a strong organizational background. The civic versus ethnic distinction is also held to be suspect, as even civic understandings of nationhood have strong cultural prerequisites.

Moreover, Malešević challenges the analytical distinction between imperialism and nationalism. According to the author "empires and nation states have a great deal in common," especially when it comes to "the cumulative bureaucratization of coercion, centrifugal ideologization and the envelopment of micro-solidarity" (88–89). He points to several cases where nationalism at home coexisted with or fueled imperialism abroad. However, there is no doubt for Malešević that the legitimation of authority happens differently in empires than nation-states, which is of vital importance. And he admits that, practically, the nation-state is the only legitimate form of political organization globally today.

Nationalism, according to Malešević, is an ideology that posits the nation as the primary unit of human solidarity and political legitimacy. While distinct, nationalism is intertwined with imperialism, liberalism, and many other -isms. Theocracies, communist regimes, and liberal democracies alike are all grounded in some form of nationalism, representing a particular people. Moreover, nationalism is (or has become) compatible with all types of ideological predispositions. It is constitutive of modernity, not something that only manifests in the extreme circumstances of war, xenophobia, or political polarization. Nationalist doctrines have discernible effects. According to Malešević, “nationalism is in fact the dominant form of modern subjectivity. [...] [Nationalism] is a very rich and diverse set of ideas, principles and practices that are integral to the organisation of everyday life in modernity.” (3) Nationalists of various stripes have offered specific solutions to key social and political issues – from the distribution of resources to conflict management. Similarly, Malešević suggests that nationalist ideology does not always lead to aggressive or violent movements.

Malešević then turns to an empirical *tour de force*, unpacking how organizational power, ideological penetration, and micro-solidarity operate in cases of expansionist nationalistic imperialism, such as Serbia and Bulgaria, or “small-nation” ideological constructions, such as the Irish case. Anachronistic readings, which find nationalist motivations behind everything that happened during the nineteenth century, are exposed in several pages. Malešević reveals such practices in scholarly work ranging from Thailand and Russia to Serbia and Greece. The dominant *bellicist* argument—that war-making ultimately led to modern, centralized, national states—is not left unscathed. Through thorough process tracing of organized violence in the Balkans, Malešević finds that intensive state-building preceded the eruption of violence, while prolonged and successful war-making did not lead to the results *bellicists* had expected. Malešević argues that, ultimately, “nationhood is a contingent historical product of the long-term structural processes” (133).

Toward the end of the book, Malešević returns to a global perspective. In the last two chapters, he debunks the idea that we are faced with some type of a “new nationalism,” manifested in such events as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. In the author’s view, nationalism has been a grounded and potent ideology since its emergence. Moreover, ideologies that are seen as alternatives, such as individualism, consumerism, cosmopolitanism, and even religious fundamentalism, are often “grounded” in a highly nationalized environment. In the final chapter, Malešević argues that even private military and security contractors (PMSCs) are intertwined with nationalism, despite being portrayed as indicators of its demise.

Revisiting *Grounded Nationalisms*

The Causal Story

Malešević suggests that once nationalism developed, it expanded both vertically and horizontally. This process started from the top and gradually incorporated different strata of societies. But nationalism also diffused horizontally, even through colonialism, in the form of anti-colonial movements (e.g., Lawrence 2013). But the success of nationalism has been contingent on the organizational structure that operated as a vessel for its development. These sometimes took the form of secret societies, civil society organizations, and states with “centrifugal ideologization,” or what I have called a “homogenizing imperative” (Mylonas 2012: 24). State coercive processes, in particular, embedded and grounded nationalism. Ideological penetration was another crucial component giving meaning to the actions of the organizational structures, thus reinforcing the perceived omnipresence of nationalist ideology. Finally, face-to-face interactions, rituals, and consumption grounded nationalism through micro-interactional dynamics. The emotional attachments present at the micro level shape meaning, but remain dependent on the existence of ideologically embedded organizational vessels.

Is there a sequential logic in this causal story or not? Are these organizational, ideological, and micro-interactional processes only *jointly* sufficient for nationalism to become grounded? Can nations or the ideology of nationalism exist independently from an organizational vessel? Under what conditions?

The emphasis on long-term structural processes is a welcome corrective to the a-historical turn in the social sciences, but one is left wondering whether Malešević finds any of the existing arguments for the spread of nationalism convincing. In the theory section, there is an emphasis on the role of large-scale structural processes in making nationalism a dominant ideology in modernity. Thus, it appears that Malešević, like many modernists, understands nationalism as an ideology that, once it emerged, became pandemic, largely independent of the agency of local or regional actors. But what accounts for this initial success? And why did alternative -isms fail to displace it?

Relatedly, what accounts for the different varieties of nationalism that we get in different places and time periods? Moreover, what explains nationalism becoming more grounded at different points in time in different parts of the world? There is a plethora of arguments that try to account for the initial motivations for the adoption of nationalism or the variation in the incentives that elites had to adopt or pursue the agenda of nationalism – from Barry Posen’s (1993) argument focusing on the necessity to imitate military innovations such as the *levée en masse* (mass national conscription) to survive in an anarchic world to Darden and Mylonas’s (2016) argument emphasizing the role of challenges to territorial integrity through fifth-column dynamics. In other words, some of the explanations for the initial adoption or spread of nationalism involve more contingency and agency than the original cases of emergence that Gellner and Anderson focused on.

Turning to the discussion of the *bellicist* argument, I would argue that while it may be appropriate for explaining patterns of state-building, but it is a rather weak argument when it comes to accounting for nationalism as a dominant political principle. Lustick’s (1997) work on the Middle East, Centeno’s on Latin America (2002), and Herbst’s on Africa (2000) all speak to the relationship between war and state capacity but have rather little to say about the emergence or spread of nationalism as an ideology. Even studies criticizing Tilly’s thesis – that war made the state, and the state made war – are primarily focused on the territorial integrity norm as the cause for the proliferation of internal wars relatively to interstate ones, at least in the post-World War II era. Appropriately, Malešević mounts an attack on the relative neglect of ideology – and national ideology, in particular – in *bellicist* accounts. This is a warranted critique, but I think it would be nicely complemented by accounts that attempt to explain why nationalism caught on, so to speak, in some cases and not in others. There is a degree of contingency in all of this, but political scientists have offered some explanations that we could entertain. For instance, Malešević discusses Hall’s argument that the global struggle for territory, resources, and state prestige abroad, together with rising nationalist movements at home, forced imperial rulers to nationalize their empires (109). It would be interesting to put Hall’s argument in dialogue with the accounts by Barry Posen (1993) and Darden and Mylonas (2016) mentioned above. Moreover, the shape and size of nation-states have been theorized in ways that bring these literatures together.

Malešević identifies a couple of patterns in his research in the Balkans. Ruling elites of the states emerging from the Ottoman Empire glorified past rulers who presided over the state at the peak of its territorial extent. Moreover, he suggests that in some cases, such as Serbia, rulers propagated expansionary nationalism in order to increase their power and popularity in an outbidding dynamic (201). Some of these observations corroborate existing work (Mylonas and Shelef 2014; Alesina and Spolaore 2005), but others may lead to fruitful new research programs.

Finally, when does nationalism have a direct and independent effect? At times, the author discusses nationalism as epiphenomenal or window dressing. While discussing Balkan elites and their plans for expanding their territories in the early twentieth century, Malešević writes, “Now nationalist propaganda was devised by these states to justify conquests” (201), thus dismissing that these were truly irredentist types of expansion. But later, we read that the clandestine network

“Unity or Death” had an “ideologically more articulated, purpose: to unite all Serbs into one state” (203). Now, at this part, this reads as a more genuine motivation. Maybe the answer lies in periodization? I discuss this in the next section.

Periodization: Before and after Nationalism Becomes Grounded

We now turn to the important point that nationalism became grounded more recently than we think. Should the argument include a distinction between two phases: before and after nationalism becomes grounded? Relatedly, while nationalism does not become grounded until all three of Malešević’s conditions are met, it has effects prior to that point. But what remains unclear is what the differences are in those two phases. For instance, Serbian nationalism may have been confined to the urban state-employed elites until the early twentieth century, but that does not mean that it was not driving decisions and actions of the state both internally and externally. Is there a discernible difference between nationalism’s effects before and after it becomes grounded? It does appear that the author has thought about this. For instance, before nationalism becomes grounded, we are told that the concept of national unity and the expansion of state power are mainly preoccupying “political, military and cultural establishments” while they “largely remain unimportant to those who have not been fully integrated into the state’s coercive-organizational, ideological and micro-interactional structures” (211). Several implications follow from this statement that could be unpacked further.

The Role of the State

Malešević emphasizes the role of the “organizational shells” within which nationalisms change and evolve (15) and makes it clear that he mainly has *nation-states* in mind. In fact, he suggests that, more often than not, states make nations. As he puts it, “rather than being a motivational source of state building, nationalist ideology was a consequence of state formation” (187). To be sure, the author does recognize the possibility that other types of organizations may play an analogous role but does end up privileging the state – though this is not ever fully articulated or justified directly. But clearly, most of the book reifies the importance of the state as *the* organization that can ground nationalism. While this may be historically accurate in most of the original cases of emergence of nationalism, this argument needs calibration when it comes to peripheral nationalism or successful stateless nationalist movements. What are the conditions that make these possible?

The resilience of nations without a state is even more impressive when one considers that many such stateless nationalist movements have persevered in contexts of powerful nation-states that aim at the “obliteration of cultural diversities.” (15) Moreover, what is the implication of this emphasis on organizational prerequisites for “national minorities” or what I call non-core groups? Is an implication of Malešević’s argument that we will see fewer stateless nationalist movements in the future?

Content and Durability of Constitutive Stories

What accounts for the initial content that crystalizes in each country as its unique understanding of nationhood? Malešević touches upon this when he discusses “centrifugal ideologisation.” The process “entails a great deal of popular consent” and “constantly reinforces already held beliefs and practices” (31). But this may vary based on the stage of development. Resonance may be more relevant at T_0 or until a “core group” crystalizes, but it is unlikely to be present or required by state elites when it is imposed on “non-core groups” (Mylonas 2012: 26–28). Moreover, as ethnosymbolists have argued, an overwhelming majority of national narratives are based on selective and romanticized readings of actual past events, but at T_0 it remains unclear what is selected as worthy for inclusion in the narrative and what is left out.

Nation-states can utilize the rhetoric of kinship and, according to Malešević, this is why they are more successful in “emulating the affective bonds of the micro world” (38). But how is this playing out in civically defined nations? Is it easier for ethnoculturally defined nations to emulate the affective bonds of the micro world? Malešević suggests that the distinction between civic and ethnic types of nationhood is negligible, but I would argue that it is quite consequential when it comes to defining and policing boundaries of belonging. Alternatively, maybe ethnocultural understandings were essential before nationalism became grounded, while more civic understandings of nationhood became available once it was grounded.

Turning to durability, Malešević suggests that “centrifugal ideologisation” has continued to increase over the past three centuries, forming the context that brought about and helped maintain the idea of national identity as something stable and durable. While this rings true, the question is whether the mechanism operates directly through education, indirectly through banal or everyday practices, or if it is mediated through the family (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006; Darden and Mylonas 2016).

Irredentism

The discussion on Serbian and Bulgarian reliance on both imperialist and nationalist discourses raises an issue with the term “irredentism.” Scholars of nationalism, such as Michael Hechter, have suggested that this is a form of nationalism rather than just a type of imperialism. Malešević concludes in Chapter 4 that, “Despite the different means and strategies deployed, [Serbia and Bulgaria] embraced imperialism for similar reasons that compelled the Great Powers to adopt nationalism: to increase their power [...] While nationalist arguments were regularly deployed to legitimize inclusion of fellow ethnic brethren living outside the boundaries of the homeland, imperialist doctrine was often invoked to validate the right to expand one’s territory” (110). Does this mean that we should not take seriously the claims made about redeeming co-ethnics and that this was just another form of increasing power? This is where the distinction between irredentism and imperialism lies. Malešević suggests that the “1918–40 Kingdom of Romania was *in fact* a realization of ‘Greater Romania’ ideal” (121, my emphasis). Here it looks like the author accepts the ideological power of nationalism to delimit the extent of territorial claims. Thus, wouldn’t it be analytically useful to distinguish between irredentism and imperialism?

Policy Implications

Grounded Nationalisms rightly debunks the idea that Brexit or the election of Donald Trump constitute some type of “new nationalism”; however, there is no doubt that there is something distinctive about “Make X country great again” type of politics. Most of these cases involve a return to more exclusionary constitutive stories that had been considered outdated, at least by progressive elites of these societies (Mylonas and Tudor 2021). In this sense, there is nothing new about this phenomenon, but there is worrying movement along the axis of inclusion-exclusion that commentators appear to be picking up.

I concur with Malešević that theorists of globalization have wrongly presented the relationship between globalization and nationalism as a novel phenomenon or a zero-sum game. I wonder, however, what he thinks about the unprecedented levels of information flows or the fragmentation of the public sphere of existing nation-states through social media or transnational internet communities. Following his argument, these processes do affect the micro world of solidarity and at times may not be grounding nationalism – at least not the local variety. In other words, what happens when nationalist discourses are not “continuously reinforced in everyday activities and in a variety of banal practices” (248)? Can nation-centered ideologization remain synchronized in such conditions?

As Malešević readily admits, “the complexity of social relations in late modernity cannot be properly explained without paying attention to the transformation of human subjectivity”(237). Is this subjectivity being altered through new understandings about “virtual space” or “multiple identities”? And with what implications for nationalisms?

Malešević also argues that nationalism spreads through globalization, it has not eroded. Why is that? Is this process endogenous to his argument about the initial success and *groundedness* of nationalism, or is this “new” spread better explained through imitation necessitated by the nature of modern capitalism or the so-called liberal international order? Relatedly, does the polarity of the international system impact this process? For instance, if China decides to promote a different type of ideology, would that have an impact on the *groundedness* of nationalism?

Finally, Malešević argues that nationalism is built into the structure of the modern territorial state. The corollary of this argument is that regional integration or attempts at global governance are potent ways to erode the *groundedness* of nationalism rather than economic nationalism or neoliberalism. Under what conditions can or would cosmopolitanism become grounded? What about supra-national identities? Could supra-nationalism become dominant? What would it take?

Every scholar interested in the origins and success of nationalism as an ideology must read and engage with Malešević’s *Grounded Nationalisms*. He has managed to provide a fresh look to a well-trodden territory, which is quite a remarkable feat.

Disclosures. None.

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