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## Introduction [Symposium: Affective nationalism]

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654420912445a>

PUBLISHER

Sage

VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Antonsich, Marco, and Michael Skey. 2020. "Introduction [symposium: Affective Nationalism]". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/12708569.v1>.

## **Introduction (Marco Antonich and Michael Skey, DOI: 10.1177/2399654420912445a)**

Over the last decade, affect has become an increasingly prominent concept within human geography as the discipline has sought to address critiques of representational and discursive approaches (Thrift, 2007). More recently, scholars researching nations and nationalism have also drawn on insights from studies of affect in order to foreground the significance of people's everyday practices and feelings in underpinning national forms of organisation, identification and expression (Anderson and Wilson, 2018; Closs Stephens, 2016; Closs Stephens et al., 2017; Crang and Tolia-Kelly, 2010; Merriman and Jones, 2017; Militz and Schurr, 2016; Sumartojo, 2017; Wetherell et al., 2015). The focus on affect is certainly welcome in a field often dominated by representational approaches that often struggle to go beyond the idea of nations as imagined communities (Anderson, 1983). Yet, as much as affective nationalism opens the terrain for understanding further why nations matter, it also remains an open and, at times, poorly defined field, characterised by different theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and political agendas. The present symposium looks to address some of these weaknesses by addressing three key issues. First, it reflects on questions of definition, it then explores the contribution that affective approaches to the study of nations can offer and, finally, it attends more closely to the spaces and the politics of affective nationalism.

How to define affective nationalism? Before outlining our own, extremely tentative definition of the concept, we think it is useful to recall Blumer's (1954) distinction between sensitising and definitive concepts and to locate affective nationalism in the former category. Indeed, Blumer's concerns about the wider status of social theory might easily be applied to contemporary debates around affective nationalism. Observing that concepts in social theory rest on vague sense and not on precise specification of attributes, Blumer distinguished between 'sensitizing concepts', which 'merely suggest directions along which to look' and 'definitive concepts', which 'provide prescriptions of what to see' (Blumer, 1954: 4–5). Sensitising concepts 'lack precise reference and have no bench marks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance and of its content. Instead, they rest on a general sense of what is relevant' (Blumer, 1954: 4–5). This 'sensitizing' approach is also broadly shared in the present symposium, with individual contributions avoiding any fixed benchmarks, pointing instead to the 'fluidity', the 'mobility' and the 'circulation' associated with affective nationalism. In our view, this concept matters because it asks us to attend to the feelings and emotions that pattern people's everyday lives and have the potential to drive social and political engagement and activism. Thus, for us affective nationalism is about attending to the ways in which feelings and emotions emerge through practices, objects and materially heterogeneous assemblages which are imbricated with the nation. This would include events as extra-ordinary as watching a national air-show (Closs Stephens in this symposium) or as ordinary as strolling on the high street in an English town (Wilson and Anderson).

While this definition is far from perfect, what we are trying to emphasise, along with many of the contributions to the symposium, is the importance of thinking about the ongoing significance of nations and nationalism in relation to 'their' capacity to move people. It is worth recalling that one of the earlier insights of scholarship in nationalism studies, although not particularly developed by other practitioners in the field, is that there is an important relation between emotions and national belonging (Connor, 1994; Scheff, 1994). It is not only here a matter of discussing the distinction between affect and emotions, although we have suggested elsewhere (Antonich and Skey, 2017) that it might be worth clarifying the differences, if any, between affect, emotion and feeling (see also Ahmed, 2004;

Wetherell, 2015). Likewise, we would argue that there has not been enough discussion between geographers who study affect and psychologists who study collective emotions and that collaborations between the two may have the potential to build new frameworks for analysis. However, what really matters, here, is acknowledging that nations are first and foremost *felt* by people.

Affective nationalism not only has the merit of further highlighting ordinary people's agency in their everyday reproduction of the nation, but it also reveals the very instability of this socio-spatial register. Far from grounded, stable constructs with a clear directionality, nations and nationalism are better conceptualised as in constant movement (although they may appear relatively stable to some). Affect is indeed first and foremost about movement. To this end, Merriman in this symposium, drawing from Deleuze and Guattari (1988), uses the figures of the molar and the molecular to capture the continual foregrounding and backgrounding of feelings of nation-ness. In a related argument, Wilson and Anderson invite us to explore the incoherence and inconsistencies of 'nationalist affects'. Affect in fact is not always about strong feelings (rage, fear, pride) as they emerge in 'occasions of intensification', but also about a range of more ambivalent and contradictory feelings (disillusionment, disappointment, unease) which equally exist in relation to nations and nationalisms. It is by exploring the incoherent and ambiguous oscillations between attachment and detachment, affection and disaffection as they coexist in the same individual that scholars can offer a fuller understanding of nation and nationalism.

In viewing nations as a movement or process and national practices as messy and inconsistent, it is also important that we focus on two other key issues, the spaces where such feelings emerge and the varying meaningfulness of the nation to different social groups, what might be labelled as the politics of affective nationalism.

In the first case, the nation is often defined and mobilised in relation to the spaces of everyday life as particular national signs, symbols, people, practices and places inspire, anger, revolt and engage people, orienting them in specific ways towards others and the world at large (Merriman and Jones, 2017). Over the last decade or so, there has been a growing literature studying 'everyday nationhood' (Antonsich, 2016; Edensor, 2002; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008; Skey, 2011), which has focused on the ways nations are reproduced through both mundane materialities and practices. A focus on affect has the merit of enriching this understanding, by attending not only to what people do, but also how they feel, so that a nation comes into existence not only as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) or a 'community of practice' (i.e. ways of doing), but also as a 'community of feelings', i.e. a community moved by national affects. For instance, think of the feelings of shame and anger that some groups experience as a result of not being recognised as a member of the nation in a given situation (Ahmed, 2004). Conversely, we can point to the range of everyday markers, institutional frameworks and relationships that make a place feel homely to certain groups within a given national space (Duyvendak, 2011).

Beyond the everyday, there are other liminal 'spaces' where more intense feelings and emotions are expressed and memorialised. Here we are thinking of those mass social rituals (holidays, sporting events and ceremonial occasions) that are framed by national symbols and designed to celebrate or commemorate the nation (Closs Stephens, 2016; de Regt, 2018). These examples of 'ecstatic nationalism' (Skey, 2009) are usually saturated with more extreme feelings, whether they involve celebrating a sporting victory or commemorating a deceased national leader or high-profile disaster. They are also very much tied to specific locales (e.g., stadia, public squares, government or religious buildings) that often become part of the established socio-emotional landscape and hence meaningful to significant numbers of people.

This last point – the idea that some will be moved, while others may feel excluded or even just plain bored by a particular event or happening – encourages us to pay attention to the politics of affective nationalism. In fact, as much as affect might support feelings of a shared national space, which could bring diverse bodies together under one national banner, the intervention by Closs Stephens alerts about the risk intrinsic in this move. Affective nationalism has in fact the power to obliterate the forms of repression, coercion and domination which comes with the nation-state. In this sense, also an enjoyable event like an air show on the shores of Swansea Bay is not politically innocent, but it is entangled with the functioning of state power. More than an analytical lens, then, affective nationalism is something that has to be unpacked so to not only disclose how power and affect are closely imbricated, but also to resist and subvert the affective appeal associated with objects and manifestations of state violence.

Equally problematic is also the assumption that affect works evenly across the national space. In her intervention, Tolia-Kelly reminds us that nation and nationalisms are not and cannot be felt in the singular, as this would ignore how bodies are differentially positioned within discursive and affective registers. Thus, she makes the case for a pluralised account of both nation and nationalism and the feelings and sensations that they become associated with. Rebuffing nationalist narratives of blood and soil that have come to the fore in contemporary times, she invites us to attend to the differentials of affective nationalism in order to capture, beyond any rhetoric of authenticity and tradition, the continuous making and remaking of nation.

Altogether, the symposium shows how, at least in the European context, where the majority of the present interventions are located, a focus on affect contributes to the research agenda of everyday nationhood, defies essentialised understandings of nations as accomplished, closed and bounded constructs and illuminates the contradictory politics of nations and nationalisms as they operate in the spaces of everyday, as well as in more heightened spatial encounters.

### **National potential: Affect, possibility and the nation-in-progress (Shanti Sumartojo, DOI: 10.1177/2399654420912445b)**

This contribution is anchored in a sense of possibility, of potential. It rests on my own and others empirical research that has invited participants to nominate their own terms for understanding and engaging with the nation, terms that are often affective. It attends to how the national *feels* to people (Closs Stephens, 2016), and the excessive and ongoingly changing qualities of these feelings. Branching out from this sense of possibility, I will argue that affect offers a frame for understanding the nation that locates it in the everyday, foregrounds its complexity and dynamism and shows how it is animated by this contingency. This in turn orients us towards the future and a sense of the nation-in-progress. In what follows, ‘affective nationalism’ is understood as a mode of configuring one’s relationship to the nation – and to other people understood as co-national, or not – in terms of feelings. It also means how things come to be understood as national, and how these understandings course along and are energised by affect; in other words, how an object, symbol, event or story becomes affecting *because* it is understood in a national frame. Moreover, and as Closs Stephens points out in her insightful contribution below, things that are differentially understood as ‘national’ also connote varying affective associations; so, the term ‘affective nationalism’ carries a sense of instability, unpredictability and possibility.