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Everyday nation in times of rising nationalism

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Everyday Nation in Times of Rising Nationalism

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Abstract

What is everyday nation and why does it matter in times of heightened nationalism? This article offers a brief commentary around these questions. It takes as a context the rise in nationalism associated with the surge in populist politics – a rise which risks being exacerbated by the present COVID-19 pandemic. After reviewing the origins of what can be loosely labelled as ‘everyday nation’ scholarship, the article makes the case for the importance of such an analytical approach to unpack the simplistic rhetoric which conflates nation with one ethno-culturally homogenous people. The argument advanced is that everyday nation allows for a plurality of people and understandings of nation to emerge. As much as this focus is essential in times when nationalism pretends to speak for one people, a fuller understanding of nation can only be realised, though, through an integrated theory which bridges its micro and macro dimensions.

Keywords

banal nationalism, COVID-19, everyday nation, populism

The very day the United Kingdom left the European Union on 31 January 2020, the British Prime Minister hosted a reception for cabinet ministers, civic officers and people involved in the Leave campaign. On the menu were English sparkling wine, Shropshire blue cheese and roast beef accompanied by Yorkshire pudding (Syal et al., 2020).

Nationalism served on a plate is one of the many ways in which a banal rendition of the nation can be made. Originating from the witty mind of a psychologist interested in the fascination of British people for the monarchy (Dodds, 2016), banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) aims to map the numerous ways through which a nation enters in people’s daily lives in unremarkable ways. In Billig’s (1995: 7) understanding, this incessant working of the nation in the background of people’s lives is instrumental in making them

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ready to respond to the president's call to arms; that is, to fight and die in the name of the nation when the time comes. Interestingly, Billig was writing when the world as it was then known – the separation between western and eastern geopolitical blocks – had come to an end and new nation-states were emerging out of the dissolution of the eastern bloc. But this was also the time when globalisation emerged as a buzzword, with people, money and ideas becoming connected more closely than ever before and with new mantras coined to celebrate this novel connectivity: 'end of the nation-state' (Guéhenno, 1995; Ohmae, 1995), 'end of geography' (O'Brien, 1992) and 'borderless world' (Friedman, 2005). It is not surprising therefore that, at the turn of the millennium, a prominent sociologist (Beck, 2002) dismissed (banal) nationalism as a relic of the past. The brave new world was instead going to be shaped by 'banal cosmopolitanism', celebrating 'world citizens' free from the constraints of obsolete national containers.

Given this context, it sounds quite ironic that, less than a decade later, a flagship journal in sociology decides to publish a special issue on the future of nationalism; and it is certainly not the only journal to do so. *Nations and Nationalism* (Halikiopoulou, 2019) has also recently issued a themed section on 'new nationalism' and so has *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2019). This renewed academic attention simply reflects what is currently happening across the world. The growth of the Hindutva movement in India, far right parties in Europe, xenophobic attitudes in South Africa and 'patriotism' in the USA under Trump, in the Philippines under Duterte or in Brazil under Bolsonaro are just a few examples which speak of resonant nationalisms. Whether it is a matter of making their country great (again) or taking back control from whomever (often immigrants) or whatever (often foreign capital and supranational institutions) are perceived as national threats, the message is the same: nationalism is back and it seems that it is here to stay. Within this context, threats, however global in character they might be, such as for example the current COVID-19 pandemic, are perceived as nothing but national threats, entrenching nationalism even further (Rachman, 2020; Skey and Jiménez-Martínez, 2020). As recently put by the former British Prime Minister Theresa May (2016) in the aftermath of Brexit, 'if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what citizenship means.' Long gone is the time when cosmopolitanism was supposed to become a banal condition . . .

But to what extent is all this new? Over the last four decades, scholars have engaged in lengthy conversations about the origins of nationalism. A good number among them have argued that nationalism is a product of modernity (Gellner, 1983; Kedourie, 1960). From this perspective, nationalism emerged historically in conjunction with 'specifically modern processes like capitalism, industrialization, urbanization, secularism, and the emergence of the modern bureaucratic state' (Özkırımlı, 2010: 72). One of the key proponents of this modernist theory, Ernst Gellner (1983: 57), maintained that the superimposition of a homogenous national culture and language over place-specific particularities has been instrumental to the formation of mutually substitutable, atomised individuals needed by industrialised economies. Put differently, nationalism as a principle of societal organisation perfectly resonates with the imperatives of modern industrialisation (Gellner, 1983: 46). This also means that, contrary to other scholars who privilege the perennial (Hastings, 1997), primordial (Shils, 1957) or ethno-symbolic (Smith, 1986)

character of the nation, from a modernist perspective it is the modern state which has given birth to the nation and not vice versa (Hobsbawm, 1992).

Seen from this lens, it is clear that nationalism is structurally embedded in modern societies (Greenfeld, 2009). If so, the current nationalist roar should not come as a surprise; it is part of the ebb and flow of nationalism as an organising and b/ordering force of modernity. Nationalism is omnipresent and its 'hot' or 'banal' manifestations are just historical conjunctures. In this sense, there is nothing new about the current wave of 'hot' or 'new nationalism'. It is only the tone, not the substance which is different (although see Fox and Miller-Idriss (2019) for a counter argument).

The notion of nationalism as omnipresent in modern societies is a key point of Billig's (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. The publication of this book marked a watershed in the study of the nation and nationalism. It shifted the debate from the question about the formation of the nation to one about its reproduction. Once the nation has come into existence, how is it reproduced? While the question of nation formation looks at the past and requires a historical investigation into the role of political elites, the question of national reproduction interrogates the present and requires a more sociological and geographical approach, with a focus on people's lives. For Billig, the key in the reproduction of the nation is its banal, mundane or unremarkable presence in the ordinary landscape. It is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building which we pass every day on our way to work; it is the coins we use to buy our morning coffee; the stamps we put onto our envelopes; the weather map we watch to decide whether to take or not an umbrella on our way out; the little deictic words ('the', 'here', 'we', etc.) which populate the news we read. This assemblage of non-consciously registered material and immaterial elements, which imbue both the landscape and the semiosphere of a given territory, works as a daily reminder of peoples' national place in a world of nations (Billig, 1995: 8). Banal nationalism thus not only reproduces, but also unwittingly naturalises the nation so that, as Gellner (1983: 6) famously put it, it becomes common sense to believe that 'a man [sic] must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears'.

As insightful as Billig's analysis has been to highlight the process through which nations are reproduced, it is also remarkable that there is nothing or very little in *Banal Nationalism* which speaks of the active role people have in this process of national reproduction – though these considerations do emerge in Billig's other work (see for instance Billig, 1991). People just appear as passive end consumers of subliminal messages dropped from above. But what do people do with the nation? How do they understand it and how do they mobilise it in their daily lives? Answers to these questions have been the focus of the scholarship which goes under the name of 'everyday nationhood' or 'everyday nation'. The label stands for a loose constellation of authors who, irrespective of whether they embrace this label or not, have explored how the nation is made present in and through people's social interactions. According to Thompson (2001: 24, emphasis in original), one of the first sociologists to examine how individuals actively organise and account for ideas of nation and national identity, 'nations do not just *exist*, they are made real to the individual by the individual in the course of her/his interactions'. For Thompson (2001: 20), 'the ongoing perpetuation of the reality of the nation' – what Billig (1995: 6) would call 'the world of nation [as] the everyday world' – is partly a product of the ways people invoke ideas of nation and national identity to position

themselves in relation to ‘others’. Interestingly, Thompson never used the term everyday in his work, but his focus on the daily work people do with and about the nation is at the core of studies on everyday nation.

A more explicit engagement with this notion appears instead in the ethnographic study on nation and ethnicity by Brubaker et al. (2006). In this exploration of daily interactions among an ethnically diverse population in Cluj, Romania, the authors offer what I believe is one of the first and most insightful analyses on how ordinary people mobilise the national register as a cognitive, discursive and pragmatic frame in order to understand and interpret their everyday life. One of the key contributions of this study is that, contrary to Billig’s banal nationalism, the nation is not an omnipresent, but an intermittent, contingent and contextual phenomenon, which unfolds through people’s social interactions.

This insight was to be further articulated in an article published by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), which gave ‘everyday nationhood’ an official seal. The article explicitly put forward a research agenda for the studying of the ‘practices through which ordinary people engage and enact (and ignore and deflect) nationhood and nationalism in the varied contexts of their everyday lives’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008: 537). The aim was to map all those instances in which people ‘talk’ about and with the nation, ‘choose’ the nation, ‘perform’ it or ‘consume’ it (like in the case of Boris Johnson and his guests above).

The same understanding of nationhood as mundane ways of doing and talking also appears in an earlier contribution by Edensor (2002), where the banality of national repertoires, both material (e.g. traffic lights, street furniture, housing style) and immaterial (e.g., church bells, ambulance sirens, food smells), is accompanied by ordinary people’s reflective and unreflective practices. Particularly illuminating here is the idea that the nation operates in the everyday as a socio-spatial matrix which draws people and places together, producing mundane spatio-temporal choreographies, as for instance in the ways people queue for a bus, sit in front of the TV for the national favourite show or congregate for traditional leisure times.

Over the last two decades or so, a great deal of studies have explored all these instances, with a particular attention to how the nation is mobilised facing ethno-racial and religious diversity (Clarke, 2020; Erdal, 2019; Erdal and Strømsø, 2018; Skey, 2011), including how minoritised national citizens enact or deflect the nation (Antonsich, 2018a, 2018b). More recently, as part of this endeavour, an attention to affective nationalism (Antonsich and Skey, 2016; Antonsich et al., 2020; Closs Stephens, 2016; Merriman and Jones, 2016; Militz and Schurr, 2016; Sumartojo, 2016) has also emerged as an additional way to capture how people move and are moved by national feelings in their everyday life. In all these instances the attention is to the micro, the ‘little things’ (Thrift, 2000) which would rarely occupy the central stage of a nationalist narrative, but which are essential to understand when and how the nation informs people’s lives.

But why does a focus on ‘everyday nation’ matter in times of populist nationalism, that is, when the nation becomes less a banal and unreflexive presence in people’s daily lives and more a ‘hot’ topic of their conversations? I believe that such an analytical focus allows us to go beyond the fantasy of ‘one nation’ reproduced by the rhetoric of populist nationalists. Especially in its right-wing version, populist nationalism presents in fact the

nation as a singular, monocultural and mono-ethnic entity. Such a discursive rendition purposely obliterates the ‘messiness’ of the nation, that is, the fact that any nation is a multivocal construct, as people engage in a variety of ways with its content and symbols (Kaufmann, 2017). If reducing the nation *ad unum* might be rhetorically desirable, analytically it is obviously flawed. A focus on the everyday permits to map the tensions, contradictions and short-circuits (Antonsich, 2018a) of this nationalist rhetoric, as well as the instances in which people might simply be indifferent to it (Anderson and Wilson, 2018). Attending closely to these everyday instances permits to uncover the ways in which people make the nation present to themselves and to others and for what purpose (Fox, 2017; Fox and Van Ginderachter, 2018).

But there is something more. Whereas populist nationalism treats ‘the people’ as one, everyday nation unpacks this other fantasy and explores how the nation resonates in different ways among a diverse population (Antonsich, 2016; Erdal and Strømsø, 2018; Skey, 2009). What is interesting here is that, particularly in the West, the present nationalist clamour (Valluvan, 2019) can be regarded as a sort of ‘defensive nationalism’, with one ethnic group fearing the demographic change of ‘their’ nation and with it the erosion of their national entitlement (Hage, 2000). Demographic projections point indeed to a clear transformation of all major western countries into ethno-racially diverse societies (Kaufmann, 2018). Brexit and Trump, just to mention the two usual suspects, mainly speak of and to white ethnic groups which are increasingly uncomfortable with the ethno-cultural (and economic) transformation of ‘their’ nations (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). If populist nationalism gives voice to them, everyday nation makes space and listens to those racialised ‘others’ who equally make up the nation, but whose national belonging might often be questioned (Skey, 2011).

When it comes to ethno-cultural, racial and religious diversity, the point is not to go necessarily beyond the nation, towards alternative socio-spatial registers, often the transnational and the urban, as if these were intrinsically progressive, inclusive and plural (Rossetto, 2015). Such a stance reifies the nation as an inescapable locus of discrimination, oppression and homogenisation, when in fact historically the nation has continuously been remade, adjusting to mutating socio-political and economic circumstances (Biswas, 2002). Everyday nation allows to capture this ongoing transition and fluidity through the plurality of discourses and practices on the ground, questioning any conflation with one ethnic group and their claims of exclusive national entitlement (Hage, 2000).

As much as the everyday nation approach might be analytically insightful, it also comes with a major limitation. Contrary to (banal) nationalism, it is not an ‘ism’; it does not come with any (alternative) normative project. In this sense, Malešević (2019b) has a point when he observes that students of everyday nation usually have no interest in linking the wider historical, structural and institutional (macro) aspects of the nation with its habitual everyday practices (micro). This is instead needed if we want to reach a fuller understanding of how the national register operates in society (although see Bonikowski (2016), Hearn and Antonsich (2018) and Malešević (2019a) for a discussion on the links between the ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ of the nation). Everyday nation does not and cannot challenge or offer an alternative view to the world of nations which nationalism has constructed (Duchesne, 2018). It is a mere analytical lens. Yet, a powerful one, which brings

in the complexity of nation to disrupt the facile nationalist narrative which in populist times can be aired by a Twitter-maniac president or served on plates to celebrate Brexit. In a (post-)pandemic world, where nationalisms are expected to become even more entrenched (Allen et al., 2020; Rachman, 2020), we need more studies which could analyse how the nation, as a discursive and affective register, is differently mobilised by different people in different contexts and for different purposes.

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