

Grounded Nationalisms over Time, Territory, and the State

Erin K. Jenne 

Central European University, Vienna, Austria

Email: jennee@ceu.edu

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

Grounded Nationalisms: A Sociological Analysis has become an instant classic in nationalism studies. In just over 300 pages, Siniša Malešević, one of the world's leading nationalism scholars, has constructed a rich treatise on some of the central questions of our day: How should we think about nationalism? What is the future of nationalism? And what accounts for the ubiquity of national identities and national identification long after the so-called Age of Nationalism ended?

Malešević's central thesis is that, over the past two hundred years—cultivated by state administrators and nationalist entrepreneurs—national identities have become “grounded” in the very DNA of modern societies and subjectivities, so that national identities influence the very way we navigate our lives and even how we see ourselves. Based on a thorough, lively, and original reading of the debate between ethno-symbolists and modernization theorists, Malešević strikes a thoughtful middle ground between the two. He first argues that ethno-symbolists err in asserting a fundamental continuity between pre-modern proto-nations or *ethnies*, on the one hand, and modern nations on the other. He uses data from nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Ireland and Serbia to demonstrate that, during this period, national identification extended only to small literate urban minority, and that the “new nations” were mostly composed of peasant communities – the inhabitants of which had neither any knowledge of, nor interest in, widescale social identification at the level of the nation-state.

At the same time, he argues that modernization and state theorists mistakenly view national identity as merely epiphenomenal to objective material forces such as the growing economic demands of the capitalist state for a culturally homogenous citizenry, the uneven diffusion of industrialization, and interstate war. Instead, as Malešević shows in the case of Serbia, national identities – remarkably weak and porous at the turn of the twentieth century – have become progressively “grounded” and potent over time due to the ever-expanding ideological penetration of social organizations, the coercive organizational capacity of the state, and the ability of national leaders to scale up “micro-solidarities” at the village level to the nation-state level (27–38). He buttresses his arguments with a fascinating comparison of historical and contemporary nationalisms between Ireland and the Balkans. In so doing, Malešević builds a powerful argument that nationalism is in no danger of extinction but is in fact stronger today than it ever has been before, “becoming a fully fledged ideology and a dominant form of subjectivity in the modern era” (3). This stands against the predictions of its ultimate demise by modernization theorists, who believed that nationalist sentiment would gradually diminish due to its waning usefulness to the state, and by globalization theorists, who believe that nationalism has become progressively less relevant for modern individuals, who increasingly identify both above and below the nation-state. Counterintuitively, he argues that it was largely due to the progressive individualization

brought on by the spread of modern economic, political, and cultural institutions that fully nationalist subjectivities became possible in the first place (235–236).

It is worth noting here that Malešević is a historical sociologist who studied with another historically minded sociologist, Ernest Gellner. His intellectual debt to Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Miroslav Hroch, and other classical theorists of nationalism is clear, although in breaking new theoretical ground, rather than rejecting these earlier formulations whole-cloth, he stitches parts of them together into a blended macro-historical argument of nationalism – one supported with contemporary and historical political documents, leader speeches and slogans, cultural artefacts, as well as demographic and developmental data and consumer data from Ireland, the Balkans, and elsewhere. The result is a descriptively rich *longue durée* account of the origins and trajectory of national identities that emphasizes the twists and turns and contingencies over a long period. Although the results of these nation-building projects may vary, the potency of national identities in our modern lives and subjectivities increases steadily all the time.

Over the ensuing chapters, Malešević argues on the side of ethno-symbolists that remnants of former rulers, even empires, were later salvaged, reclaimed, and built into modern national identities. In this way, he challenges the traditional dichotomization between imperial and nationalist discourses, arguing that the two are commonly articulated together – to the point that not only imperial symbolism but also imperial impulse for territorial expansion were grafted into the nations that emerged from the imperial rubble. Thus, from the Ottoman Empire to the Habsburg Empire, there is no neat division between former imperial and subsequently national societies. As seen in the interwar Balkans, nationalist discourses were used to hold together ethnically divided polities at the domestic level, while imperial discourses were used at the international level to justify irredentist forays abroad. The essential complementarity between these discourses – and conflation between imperial and national discourses in practice – demonstrates that imperialism and nationalism are not contradictory but are instead comfortable bedfellows.

He continues with a fascinating comparative study of Ireland and the Balkans, noting the puzzling phenomenon that nationalist entrepreneurs styled the Irish as a “small nation” juxtaposed against the “big” nation of England, while at the same time, nationalist activists in the Balkans portrayed the nations of Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia as “great nations.” “Smallness” and “bigness” were discursive constructs that amounted to branding choices, Malešević explains, aimed at achieving their strategic goals in different geopolitical settings.

To account for the contemporary ubiquity and potency of modern national identities, he turns to the famous Weberian definition of nations as “prestige communities.” His argument, drawing on the findings of the social identity theory (SIT) and “everyday nationalism” research programs, is that individuals are prestige-seeking creatures, and identifying with a successful nation is a potent means of gaining status, prestige, and recognition by even the humblest members of the group in today’s world. By aligning themselves with a prestigious national community, the intellectual, sporting, literary, and scientific successes of the nation are also their citizens’ personal successes. This gives members of the nation both a positive identity as well as a “grounded” place in the world. It is thus only in the contemporary period that national identities could be “fully grounded,” meaning that they are embedded not only in the institutions of the state and society but also in the everyday lives and even individual psyches of humans everywhere. Moreover, this is unlikely to change any time in the future, for there are no ideologies that can possibly take the place of nationalist ideologies; “it is the dominant cognitive framework for understanding wider social relations” (7).

Malešević does not shy away from the big questions in the field but takes them on confidently with forceful and compelling arguments, backing his thesis with a mountain of scholarly evidence drawn from the disciplines of sociology, history, social psychology, demography and political science. This book is a *tour de force* as well as a genuine page-turner. Nevertheless, in the spirit of scholarly debate, I outline three issues that this book raised for me related to territory, the potency of nationalism, and the state. First, although Malešević writes extensively about the groundedness

of nationalism, there is scant attention paid to *territory* and territorial borders in the book. Both Gellner and Anderson conceptualize the nation as a territorially bounded community, beyond the borders of which (in Anderson's words) lie other nations, so that the entire world resembles a geographical patchwork quilt of nations. Indeed, the nationalist claim to self-rule over a territory and the spatialized nature of the nation as well as our emotional attachments to territory may be what sets national identities apart from other identities – the territorialized homeland is what gives national identities their emotional force; it governs what societies value and how they move in the space around them (Shelef 2020; Penrose 2002). Although there are copious references to territory throughout the book, we do not really see how the nation is grounded into territories in practice, for example, by transforming and scaling up micro-solidarities around national borders (Sahlins 1989).

Second, it is clear from his argument that Malešević believes that modern national identities are more powerful than their nineteenth and early twentieth-century counterparts – mainly because the latter were limited to small segments of society, whereas contemporary national identities are so pervasive that they saturate entire societies and deeply inform our lifestyles and modern subjectivities. He writes, “habitual nationalism is *more potent* precisely because it is firmly grounded in everyday habitus where it becomes a second-nature unreflected daily practice” (245; italics mine). However, national identities held by a small segment of society may still be potent, depending on the virulence of that identity as well as the capacity of that group for political expression. After all, it was in the first half of the twentieth century that nationalist leaders engaged in unparalleled campaigns of ethnic cleansing and population transfers to create homogenous national states in Central and Southeastern Europe, demonstrating that nationalism was already a potent political force – justifying the displacement of millions – even before it was fully grounded in the modern psyche.

The third issue is to do with the relationship between the state and the nation. Malešević engages thoughtfully with the classical theories of both the nation and the state, but the precise relationship between the two is not really sorted out analytically. The state mostly stands separately from nations in his account, but sometimes we see the two concepts conjoined in “nation-states.” This is not a problem in itself, as Malešević himself notes that the nation-state is more a model than a reality (there are no examples of perfect one-to-one nation-states in the world today), hence “nation-states” function as discursive fields, much like Brubaker's “nationalizing states.” However, one also gets the sense in this account that nation-states are actually *doing* things, including propelling the national identity forward by further institutionalizing it in public and private realms. Interestingly, a parallel body of work on the *state* can be found in the constructivist international relations (IR) literature, where states not only have “interests” and “spheres of influence” but also “state identities,” “state fears,” and “ontological insecurities,” to which they respond, among other things, through “state branding” (Mitzen 2006; Mercer 2014; Subotić 2016). It may be asked whether the two fields have simply theorized the same phenomena using different semantic frameworks or whether these are instead separate phenomena. The question about the relationship between the nation and the state is important, for it speaks not only to the chicken-and-egg causality but also to agency: *who* is doing what? The answer appears to be the nationalizing state (authorities), rulers, social organizations and/or movement leaders – the folks on top – are making the strategic choices regarding the construction of national identities, nation-building, and nation branding, but how much of the grounding process is the outgrowth of impersonal forces, and how much of it is agential?

In my view, a truly great book is not one that is perfect, but one that is stimulating, influences our thinking, and promises to generate heated debates over key questions for years, if not decades, to come. By these and any other standards, Sinisa Malešević has succeeded in producing a pioneering book in *Grounded Nationalisms* that is sure to make a lasting mark on the field.

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