

What can the study of nationalism contribute to our understanding of international...

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The notion that the study of nationalism can contribute to our understanding of international relations would be dismissed out of hand by conventional international relations thinkers, despite the role which nationalism played in reshaping the political map of contemporary world. Its role can also easily be seen in the proliferation of sovereign states, particularly during the twentieth century, and the emergence of many conflicts where nationalism was one of the decisive factors. Lapid and Kratochwil (1996, p. 105) point out that "it is indeed strange but hardly overstated that, in an age of nationalism, international relations and most other social disciplines seem to have converged on little else but the sustained exclusion of the national problematic from their respected research agendas, relegating it to a fringe phenomenon". Studies on national identity and nationalism have of course a long tradition in IR, but before 1989 these were largely marginalized, in a discipline dominated by rationalist and systemic approaches. Traditionally, those occupying the mainstream of international relations theory have failed to take nationalism and national identity seriously.

Nationalism has been regarded as a "convenient black box into which whatever cannot be explained in any other way... can be filed away without further consideration" (Mayall 1990, p. 5). The widespread "interutilisation" (Connor 1994 cited in Zerkimli 2000, p.

58) of the words "state" and "nation" lead to confusion and misuse of these terms by many scholars of IR. The origins of this confusion go back to Jeremy Bentham, who in the 1780s invented the term "international" for what we would now define as "interstate" relations (Halliday 2001). In the nationalism literature the central part of most definitions of "nation" is the importance of <https://assignbuster.com/what-can-the-study-of-nationalism-contribute-to-our-understanding-of-international-relations/>

the belief in unity by some set of characteristics on the one hand, and in territorial self-determination on the other. Defining “nationalism” is no more promising. For the purposes of this essay, it would be logical to focus on nationalism as an idea, which determines certain actions based on it.

Ignatieff (1993), for example, defines nationalism as a notion that combines the political idea of territorial self-determination, the cultural idea of the nation as one's primary identity, and a moral idea of justification of action to protect the rights of the nation against the other. The study of nationalism which covers issues of identity, culture and legitimacy can contribute to our understanding of international relations in three different ways. First, it can provide us with understanding of how the modern system of sovereign states emerged and the mechanisms which allow a nation to claim exclusive rights and distinctive characteristics for itself. Second, it can contribute to our understanding of the interplay between domestic and international in the process of national identity formation. Finally, it lays the emphasis on the importance of psychological factors in foreign policy making.

Although nation as a form of collective organization which claims political rights originated in Europe and is not the only type of community (if not the rarest nowadays), the impact of nationalist ideas on our understanding of international relations cannot be underestimated. In the following pages I shall briefly outline the role that the study nationalism has in highlighting the problem of identity in international relations. Further, I will present the importance of nationalism for establishing the principle of popular sovereignty. The final section will give some conclusions. Nationalism has,

more than any other social force, highlighted the importance of national identity in international politics, though the notion of 'national identity' is often used undistinguished from 'nationalism', which is a related but different term. Identity has been firmly established within IR with the 'cultural turn' and the ascendance of social constructivist IR theory.

There were a few efforts within neorealism to broaden the agenda by including "the national" into security studies (See Weaver et al. 1993), but as Lapid and Kratochwil demonstrate (1996, pp. 116-120), these attempts were not very successful. Social constructivism, in contrast, relies on identity as a central notion - all social constructivist approaches share, to a greater or lesser extent, the basic premise that identity, not instrumental rationality, constitutes interests and thus determines the behaviour of agents in the international system (See Price and Reus-Smith 1998, p. 267). Prizel (1998, p.

14) claims that "this emotional, albeit irrational, sense of nation and national identity plays a vital role in forming a society's perception of its environment and is an extremely important, if not driving, force behind the formation of its foreign policy because national identity helps to define the parameters of what a polity considers its national interests at home and abroad". The study of nationalism highlights therefore the importance of the 'identity-interest' link in international relations. Interaction between foreign policy and identity in newly emerging and re-emerging states can serve to illustrate this point, since nationalism is often the main force binding these societies together. The very vivid public debate amongst the political elite

and the intelligenzia about Russia's identity that developed soon after the creation of the Russian Federation very much revolved around Russia's foreign policy principles and its relationship with the external world, both the 'near abroad' and the West. The basic arguments of the discourse - how Russia should relate to the 'near abroad' and the world at large and whether or not it should seek to re-establish an empire - were shaped by nationalist ideology. They were related to positions in a centuries-old debate about national identity, between 'Slavophiles' (advocating Russian 'uniqueness') and 'Westernizers' (claiming that Russia was part of Europe) that had determined Russia's domestic development and its external orientation since the time of Peter the Great (Neumann 1996).

This debate concerned both the political relationship of Russia with the West and its identification with European norms and values. Arguably, this discourse on national identity determined Russia's relationship with the outside world, especially with the West. Within this framework, it set the foundations for the political identity of the new Russian state, in both its international and domestic representations. Another good example is the process of nation-building in the Baltic States after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this case, nationalism provided the framework for debates about new foreign policy course, namely the shift toward NATO and EU. Here nationalism was the source to justify discrimination against the Russian minority and depriving it of citizenship.

The tensions in relations between Russia and the Baltic States, caused by border disputes, minority issues and mutual prejudices, cannot be

understood without including into the research agenda the study of nationalism and its role in shaping the state identity of the Baltic States and Russia. However, the picture would be incomplete if we would only stress the importance of the unified national identity in understanding international relations through the lens of nationalism. Textbooks of international relations are very fond of identity, often overemphasising its role and forgetting about other components of nationalism which are not less important. Every nationalism involves the setting of membership and territorial boundaries. Nationalism clearly legitimizes the exclusivity of distribution of rights and justice within a certain community called a nation and reaffirms the importance of territory.

Nationalism challenged domestic and international order, which was first codified at Westphalia in 1648, in the name of the ideas of national self-determination and popular sovereignty (Mayall 1990). It became an underlying principle of contemporary political legitimacy. Buzan (1991) claims categorically that “ the two main sources for the idea of the state are to be found in the nation and in organizing ideologies”. After all, the link with the nation appears naturally in formulations such as “ the national interest” and “ national security” (Campell 1992). This focus on the national is in part explained by the equating the modern state with the nation-state, which is indeed its predominant model (See Tilli et al. 1996).

In fact, not only the development of the modern state, but also the rise of democracy, is intimately connected with the rise of nationalism and a shift towards the nation as the main source of legitimacy for the modern state -

with the reflexive link of the state being the main agent for conscious attempts at nation-building. As Brown (2002, p. 49) correctly formulates, “the importance of nationalism is that it provided (and, for that matter, still provides) a justification for the existence of sovereign states which is not simply based on the property of kings and princes”. Nationalism provided the elites with legitimacy to establish the one that possesses the right to control the territory and as a result the others that do not share this right. Once subjects were converted into citizens, and dynasties into popular sovereignty, their territory became, in a conceptual sense, inalienable (See Mayall 1990, p.

50-54). Territory is both objective and subjective; it is separate from the territories of other states not only physically but ideologically, too. Just as nations are shaped and moulded over time, so too is territory: “territory is not; it becomes, for territory is passive and it is human beliefs and actions that give territory meaning” (Knight 1982, p. 517). While territory is a social construct, it also exists in the real sense in that it can be seen, felt and walked upon.

The act of social construction means that, to the citizens of a nation, the ground that they can see, feel and walk on is worthy of considerable sacrifice. Since territory “is the basis on which national existence rests, true citizens will be prepared to give their lives” in defence of “the ‘sacred soil’” (Gottmann 1973, p. 15). In Central Asia, for example, territorial disputes are closely related to the rise of nationalism. The division of territory into the five parts within the borders of the current republics was arbitrary and artificial.

The process of post-Soviet national self-determination has taken hold in not only the so-called “titular nations” within each of the Central Asian countries, but also among the so-called national minorities, most of which are the diasporas of neighboring nations. Border issues not only gave rise to natural questions of historical justice, but also provided scope for tendentious mobilization by nationalists, particularly when it came (and still comes) to calling for changes in existing borders. It results in the search for “primordial” territory that causes the increase in the potential for conflict in the relations between Central Asian states. Given these arguments, it becomes clear that the contribution of studying nationalism to understanding of international relations should not be underestimated. First, it provides an account of interlinkage between national identity and interests, and between the domestic and the external sphere, which makes a differentiation into `external` and `domestic` identities of the state pointless. And after the breakup of the Soviet Union, it is hard to avoid the study of nationalism in analyses of new states, where nation-building policies and confusions over new identities underlie conflicts and foreign policy behaviour.

Second, without studying nationalism, it is not possible to understand why the contemporary division of the world into sovereign states became legitimate. The very idea of the modern state relies on the nationalist principle that “the political and national unit should be congruent” (Gellner 1983, pp. 6-7). Finally, nationalism has been an important driving force in establishing the boundaries of modern states, the social construction of territory, and it still remains an ideological background for many border disputes between states. All these taken into account confirms the necessity

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of extended empirical research on the impact of nationalism and identity on international relations, which still remains very limited in scope.