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Metadata Record: [https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/17933](https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/17933)

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Wiley-Blackwell

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Nations and Nationalism

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Abstract:
Nation and nationalism are two referents which continue to play a major role in how politics and social life are organized. The present article discusses their relevance from two distinct perspectives. Traditional accounts of nation and nationalism have largely focused on the questions of ‘when’ and ‘what’ is a nation, i.e. on the historical origins and substance of the nation, including its civic/ethnic character. Starting from the early 1990s, new approaches have instead privileged the ‘how’ and ‘where’ of a nation, i.e. the ways and the sites in which the nation is reproduced and becomes a relevant resource in people’s lives. The article then focuses on one of the most pressing challenges the nation is facing today, namely the increasing ethno-cultural diversity of its population. Final remarks point to the directions where further research is needed and where political geography can offer an important contribution.

Keywords: national identity, banal nationalism, everyday nationhood, multiculturalism

1. Introduction

On a warm Saturday night of September 2013, I stand in front of Saint Peter’s Basilica, in the Vatican City. I am watching the spectacle of about 100,000 people leaving the square
at the end of the vigil for peace in Syria led by Pope Francis. As I notice a group of persons carrying a large Colombian flag, I decide to approach them so to appease my geopolitical curiosity. A woman in her fifties reply to my question about why they decided to bring the flag along: “we came here to pray for the world, but also for our country – this is our identity”. Maybe puzzled by my question, she then asks in return: “and where is your flag?” Playing the card of the host, I reply: “well, I come from this country, I don’t need to wave my flag”. Slightly annoyed, she remarks: “So you don’t care about your country!”

Catholicism is universal in scope; it knows no (national) boundaries. And yet, when Pope John Paul II died, St Peter’s Square was also inundated by flags from all over the world, proudly heralded by those Catholics who came to mourn their pope. Why did people sharing the same common identity (Catholic) and witnessing a very human (i.e., universal) event feel in need to display their national flags? To answer this question is to answer the question about the persisting power of nationalism, even in this age of globalization. Why do nations still matter? Not easy question, indeed. For Calhoun (2007), who on this very subject wrote an insightful book, nations still matter because they offer a meaningful framework to interpret social, political and economic life. Echoing Raymond Williams’s often cited idea, Calhoun (2007, 171) suggests that nations can be associated with ‘structures of feeling’ that link categories of thought to emotional engagements. Also Brubaker (2006, 15, 207) acknowledges the important role of nationhood and ethnicity in helping people making sense of their world and Bhabha (19990, 1) similarly talks of nations as systems of cultural signification. In other words, today like yesterday, the national register can offer a medium to interpret and experience reality. The thousands of people who gathered in St Peter’s Square were not there as simply Catholics, but as Colombian-Catholics, Polish-Catholics, Filipino-Catholics, etc. Their universal affiliation was articulated, performed, felt, and visually expressed in their national vernaculars. As Calhoun (2007, 171) again observes, nations can
also provide the individual with a familiar category through which they, as a group, can participate in history – and the death of John Paul II certainly was a historical event. One should also not forget the fact that sharing and experiencing an event as part of a cultural group can be enjoyable, as Bratsis (2006) suggests with his notion of the ‘libidinal value’ of (national) identities.

Although national identities have today become just one of the many forms of collective formations with which people might identify (Scholte 1996), they still remain the most basic form of social identities (Bechhofer and McCrone 2009, 1) or, in the elegant phrasing of Goswami (2002, 775), “one of the most universally legitimate articulations of group identity and one of the most enduring and pervasive forms of modern particularism”. A quick look at survey data for various forms of territorial attachment would only confirm this point (Antonsich 2009a).

As national identities are far from disappearing, so nationalism – understood in Gellner’s (1983: 1) terms as “a political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” – continues to be the fundamental organizing principle of the inter-state order and the primary source of political legitimacy (Özkırımlı 2010, 2). It is on the basis of the nationalist principle, that the world is divided into ‘us’ and ‘them’, that ‘we’ claim a given portion of the earth as ours, and that ‘we’ look into the past to find confirmation of the existence of ourselves and our homeland. These identity, spatial, and temporal claims are, according to Özkırımlı (2010, 208-9), what distinguishes the nationalist discourse from any other similar discourse. Yet, exactly because of these claims, nationalism tends to be regarded by many social scientists as a suspicious notion or as something to be fixed, when not explicitly dismissed as an exclusionary, regressive and aggressive principle (Nussbaum 1994), intimately connected with war and militarism (Billig 1995, 7). On the opposite camp, there are those who instead observe that nationalism cannot be treated as ‘a
moral mistake’ (Calhoun 2007, 1), since it can motivate and sustain civic engagement, responsibility and solidarity, provide support for redistributive policies and foster inclusion of a diverse population (Brubaker 2004a, 121-122). And yet according to one of its old students, it might at the end be meaningless to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ nationalism, since all nationalisms are always morally and politically ambiguous (Nairn 1977, 348).

The present essay will first address the classic debate on nationalism, with its long-standing focus on the origins (‘when’) and substance (‘what’) of the nation, before discussing the new theoretical and methodological approaches which instead privilege the ‘how’ and ‘where’ of the nation, i.e. the ways in which the nation is reproduced and in which socio-spatial contexts the nation emerges as a salient category. It will then explore one of the most important challenges nationalism is facing today, namely global migration and its impact on the national idea, and conclude by highlighting those aspects which deserve further empirical investigation.

2. The classic debate: ‘when’ and ‘what’ is the nation?

Traditionally, nation and nationalism have long been the privileged subject of historians. It is thus not surprising that the question of the origins of these two notions has occupied a central place in their investigations. ‘When is a nation?’, as famously put by Connor (1990), is a question which still divides scholars today. As a way of making order among these answers, Smith (1971) has proposed a tripartite division (primordialism, modernism, and ethno-symbolism) which, although risks glossing over scholarly differences in each category, it remains the most widely recognized and used categorization in nationalism studies (Özkırımlı 2010, 201). As detailed descriptions of these three approaches
can be found in various textbooks, I will here only briefly present the key aspects of each of them, largely following the account given by Özkırımlı (2010).

Primordialism, as the name suggests, maintains that nations have always existed; they are a ‘natural’ part of human beings (Özkırımlı 2010, 49). This is often the view espoused by nationalist actors and ordinary people as well. They, for Brubaker (2004b, 83), are the real primordialists, who believe in the immemorial and perennial character of the nation (see also Fox and Jones 2013, 388). From this perspective, as Gellner (1983, 6) famously put it, “a man [sic] must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears”. From cradle to grave, we are all constituted into a sort of ‘homo nationalis’ (Balibar 1990): our national identity is part of our own being (see also Pickel 2004; Özkırımlı and Uyan-Semerci 2011).

Closely related to primordialism is perennialism, which maintains that nations are not natural, but antique (Özkırımlı 2010, 58) – a distinction, though, which does not convince Özkırımlı (2010, 60), who criticizes both approaches for their essentializing treatment of the nation as a given, fixed, static entity. Primordialism is found guilty of ‘retrospective nationalism’, i.e. “the tendency to project modern concepts and categories onto earlier social formations” (Özkırımlı 2010, 69-70). It correctly points to the deeply rooted attachment people have towards their nations, but it fails to explain the reasons of this attachment and eschews any issues of power behind the primacy and legitimacy of a certain attachment over others. As such, its analytical purchase is rather marginal (Özkırımlı 2010, 202).

In the 1960s, first with Kedourie (1960) and then with Gellner (1964), a new paradigm emerged in nationalism studies: modernism. In its essence, modernism suggests that nations and nationalism are intrinsic features of the modern world and not primordial or perennial features (Smith 1998, 3). In the words of Gellner (1983, 8), maybe the most influential representative of the modernist approach, “nations, like states, are a contingency, and not a universal necessity”. They key historical event which made the idea of nation and nationalism
possible was, for Gellner, the passage from agricultural (traditional) to industrial (modern) societies. Industrialization requires mutually substitutable, atomized individuals and the idea of a homogenous culture superimposed on the place-specific particularities of the agrarian society resonated well with nationalism (Gellner 1983, 57). In other words, nationalism was not simply the product of industrialization, but nationalism as a principle of societal organization perfectly matched the imperatives of industrialization (Gellner 1983, 46). In this sense, contrary to primordialism (and ethnosymbolism), nations did not engender nationalism, but the other way round (Gellner 1983, 8).

The modernist account stresses the role of the modern, centralized, bureaucratic state (Tilly 1990; Mann 1993), also in relation to its communication and transportation networks (Deutsch 1953; Seton Watson 1977) and its homogenizing practices associated with mass education and public ceremonies and iconographies (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Accordingly, political elites figure centrally in modernist accounts, which highlight indeed the instrumental nature of ethnicity and national identities as tools in the political struggles among competing actors (Brass 1991). It is indeed when elites feel disempowered by the uneven economic development of a given territory that they might decide to resort to nationalism as a way to respond to this perceived injustice (Hechter 1975; Nairn 1977 – see also Greenfeld 1992). Regarding nations as the product of political engineering, modernist authors have also observed the artificial character of any national tradition, which are indeed ‘invented’ in order to create continuity with the past so to give present legitimacy and glory to the nation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

Like primordialism, modernism has also been criticized under different aspects. These are well summarized in Özkırımlı (2010, 123 ff), who observes that nationalism is too complex a phenomenon to be explained by a single factor (modernity) and by the exclusive role of elites and their manipulative strategies. In so doing, modernists end up heralding the
It was exactly by building on this latter critique that Anthony Smith, a former student of Gellner, developed an alternative view: ethnosymbolism. While Smith (1986) acknowledges that nationalism is a modern doctrine, nations are not. Their roots are in pre-modern ethnic communities (ethnies), whose myths, symbols, values, and traditions have remained relatively unchanged since the 15th-16th centuries – and in some cases (Armenians, Egyptians, and Jews) even earlier (Smith 2008a). Nationalist elites, therefore, do not invent, but merely rediscover or reconstruct traditions of a pre-existing ethnic past (Smith 1991a, 358). This belief in the persistence and durability of the nation makes ethnosymbolism rather similar to perennialism (Özkırımlı 2010, 202-203) and exposes it to the same critique formulated for the latter. According to Connor (2004), nations are a mass phenomenon and it would not make sense to trace their origin back in a past when only a small aristocracy shared a national consciousness. Malešević (2006, 129) accuses ethnosymbolism of determinism, fatalism, and finalism, as ethnies are indeed predestined to become nations.

The question of ‘when is a nation?’ finds a natural complement in ‘what is a nation?’ In its French version, the question was famously asked by Ernest Renan (1997 [1882]), whose answer clearly speaks a subjectivist language: the nation is “a soul, a spiritual principle”. Scholars espousing the modernist approach have instead put forward more objectivist interpretations (Goswami 2002). In an attempt to reach an ideal-typical definition, applicable across all geographical and historical contexts (Özkırımlı 2010, 19), Smith (2005, 98) tried to combine both subjectivist and objectivist elements:

“[a nation is] a named and self-defined community whose members cultivate common myths, memories, symbols and values, possess and disseminate a distinctive public
culture, reside in and identify with a historic homeland, and create and disseminate common laws and shared customs”.

One of the most debated issues regarding the question of ‘what is a nation?’ is its civic or ethnic character. While a civic nation can be defined as a political-legal community of citizens sharing a common civic culture, an ethnic nation stands for a community of common descent (Smith 1991b, 11). Although ‘ethnic’ is often associated with ‘cultural’ – ethnocultural is indeed a term frequently used in nationalism studies – some scholars, echoing Meinecke’s (1919) distinction between Staatsnation and Kulturnation, prefer instead to keep them separated (Peters 2002), arguing that there is also empirical evidence in people’s views supporting this case (Janmaat 2006). Originally, the civic-ethnic distinction was introduced by Hans Kohn (1958 [1944]), who saw the emergence of civic nationalism in the West as a liberal achievement produced by the state and ethnic nationalism as the typical trait of the non-Western world (frequently identified with the East), trapped in pre-political ethnic divisions (Calhoun 2007, 128). Thus, while civic nationalism has come to represent a form of liberal, voluntarist, universalist, and inclusive nationalism, its ethnic variant has been downplayed as illiberal, ascriptive, particularist, and exclusive (Brubaker 1999, 56). To be true, though, almost all nationalisms combine civic and ethnic elements (Calhoun 2007, 42, 145; Özkırımlı 2010, 37; Xenos 1996; Yack 1996), thus Kohn’s distinction might not prove very useful analytically (Brubaker 1999, 58). The United States, for instance, like most Western states have only recently become civic, at least in rhetorical terms (Kuzio 2002; Kaufmann 2000). But even so, they still embody, in their institutional settings, the cultural values and practices of the majoritarian group (Kymlicka 2001; Bader, 2005). When operationalized in quantitative studies, the civic/ethnic distinction also returns contradictory results. According to Hjerm (1998) there is in fact a significant relationship between the
likelihood of xenophobia and ethno-national feelings, whereas Janmaat (2006) argues that it is the intensity of national identification rather than its civic/ethnic character which correlates positively with xenophobia. Other authors have instead found either small or no differences in the association between West-civic and East-ethnic nationalisms (Shulman 2002; Jones and Smith, 2001).

3. **New approaches: ‘how’ and ‘where’ is the nation?**

In the 1990s, the debate on nationalism entered a new stage (Smith 2008b, 564; Özkırımlı 2010, 169-170). Influenced by the ‘cultural turn’ in social sciences, scholars – now sociologists, psychologists and geographers more than historians – started challenging the static, given, coherent notion of culture which had characterized nationalism studies until then. Rather than asking ‘when’ and ‘what’ is a nation – questions which, according to Brubaker (1994), lead necessarily to substantialist and essentialist accounts of nation – the new approaches focus on ‘how’ and, to a more limited extent, ‘where’ is a nation. How is nationhood as a political and cultural form institutionalized within and among states? And once established, how does it work as practical category, as classificatory scheme, as cognitive frame? How do ordinary people reproduce the nation in their discourses and practices (Brubaker 1994, 6; Skey 2009, 333). For Balibar (1990), the central question should not be that of a beginning or an end of the nation, but that of its reproduction. Similarly, Connor dismisses the theoretical relevance of ‘when is a nation’, since in people’s views nations are timeless and what matters are not facts, but perceptions of facts, as these are those which shape attitudes and behavior (Connor 2004). For Brubaker (2004; 2006), scholars should avoid treating ethnicity and nationness (a term which, together with nationhood, he uses in place of ‘nation’) as categories of analysis, since this approach would only reify them.
as substantial entities. Ethnicity and nationhood should instead be viewed as categories of practice, as ways of talking, seeing, and acting: cognitive, discursive or pragmatic frames for understanding and interpreting experience (Brubaker 2006, 207). Nationhood should be the object of analysis not the tool of analysis (Brubaker 2004a, 116). Far from being an entity, nationhood should be conceptualized as an event; it is not a continuous, but an intermittent and contingent phenomenon. Thus, it demands not a developmentalist (like in traditional, substantialist accounts of nationalism), but an eventful analysis, capable of mapping the situational context of its mobilization (Brubaker 2006, 208, 361; Brubaker 1994, 8).

Accordingly – pace Anthony Smith – no general theory of nationalism is possible (Özkırımlı 2010, 195).

The new approaches bring forward the importance of human agency. With the only exception of Hobsbawm, who was the first to call attention to the views of ordinary people, classic accounts have treated nationalism as an exclusive matter of elites. When present, masses have entered the picture only as passive receptacles of nationalist messages or mere choreographies in public ceremonies. By building on Hobsbawm’s ‘view from below’, the new approaches argue instead that individuals are key actors in the re-production of the nation. Although there is a general consensus that nations are produced in a ‘top down’ fashion, they are continuously re-produced by ordinary people. According to Thompson (2001, 20), despite their abstract, objectified look, nations do not exist above and beyond the agency of the individuals. Nations and national identities are not given categories which exist ‘out there’, they are not conferred to individuals like a certificate of birth, but they are acquired by them, they are ‘made real’ by the individuals in the course of their daily social interactions (Thompson 2001, 24). Each of us is implicated in organizing, categorizing, and invoking ideas of nation and national identities (Thompson 2001, 29), through discursive acts which are per se constitutive of those very categories (Edwards and Stokoe 2004). This is
what Thompson (2001) calls the ‘local’ production of national identity and that Cohen (1996), adopting a more anthropological perspective, calls ‘personal nationalism’. Drawing on Herzfeld (1992) seminal work on the ways in which ordinary people recast national official narratives in the more familiar terms of their own daily experiences, Cohen shows how these personalized versions of nationalism enter the constitution of a sense of selfhood (see also Hearn 2007).

Liberated from its predominant institutional, historical heritage and reconceptualized as a category of practice activated in daily contexts, the nation thus becomes an object of analysis in discursive terms. Anderson’s (1991) famous book *Imagined Communities* opened the way to this discursive, subjectivist approach (Goswami 2002, 773), which Bhabha (1990) and Calhoun (1997) have most proficiently theorized and which Brubaker (2006) has most skilfully operationalized for empirical research. Discursive psychologists (Condor 2000) have also extensively contributed knowledge to the field, by carefully tracing the ways ordinary people resort to nationally-framed utterances in their daily conversations (Skey 2011). Social interactions have accordingly become the primary focus of any discursive analysis of nation, as for instance in the series of publications by the so-called Edinburgh National Identity Group, which have highlighted the importance of ‘identity markers’ and ‘identity rules’ in verbal identity claims made by ordinary people (Bechhofer and McCrone 2009).

With social interaction has also come a focus on the everyday. The new approaches indeed show an interest in the micro (little, daily things) more than the macro (historical grand narratives) of nationhood. As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, 554) observe, “the nation is not simply the product of macro-structural forces; it is simultaneously the practical accomplishment of ordinary people engaging in routine activities”. Billig’s (1995) *Banal Nationalism* is maybe the most known and celebrated contribution to the study of the everyday salience of nationalism. For him, the nation is continuously ‘flagged’ or reminded
to its citizens in very banal and subliminal ways. Although many followers of this approach have later investigated the material aspects (coins, bank notes, stamps, etc.) of the banality of the nation, Billig’s focus is not so much on the material, but on the discursive flagging of the nation. It is not about the weather map published in a newspaper, but the weather: the little words (‘the’, ‘here’, ‘now’, ‘we’, etc. – what he call deixis) which often go unnoticed, but which are more powerful than grand memorable phrases in making the nation a daily, unconscious presence in people’s lives (see also Thrift 2000, for a more geopolitical account of the same perspective).

A maybe less known, but equally important contribution to this form of banal nationalism is Edensor’s (2002, 2004, 2006). Here the focus is not on official symbols which permeate daily life in unconscious ways, but on the a-symbolic material aspects of nationhood which, through their pervasiveness in time and space, make the national landscape a familiar, homely space. House style, traffic lights, street furniture, fencing style, leisure facilities, parks, and petrol stations are only a few of numerous, unremarkable material aspects (to which one can also add referents of ‘soundscape’ – e.g., ambulance’s sirens – and ‘smellscape’ – e.g., food) which do not belong to the official national iconography, but which also contribute making the nation a visible, tangible presence in people’s routine experience of space (Edensor 2002, 51-54 – see also Jones and Merriman 2012). It is exactly this familiar landscape which generates “a cognitive, sensual, habitual and affective sense of national identity, providing a common-sense spatial matrix which draws people and places together” (Edensor 2002, 37).

Like Brubaker (2006), Edensor also focuses on nationness as everyday ways of doing and talking. Mundane habits, routines, and social interactions are here explored not in terms of their content, but their performativity. As observed by Lofgren (1989, 15), a national culture is not about ‘what’ but ‘how’ their members talk about it: “the styles in which a
problem is addressed, an argument is carried on or a conflict resolved (or suppressed)”. Although gender, class, age and other socio-demographic features might influence ways of doing and talking, these are also specific to a given national culture. For instance, ways of queuing, interacting with strangers, behaving in public spaces might be ordered and organized according to certain national traits. In an insightful study on the nationalization of trivialities, Linde-Laursen (1993) observes how also dish-washing might become an identity marker between Swedes and Danes. Contrary to Butler (1993), who distinguishes performance (self-conscious and deliberate) from performativity (unreflective), Edensor argues for the impossibility of drawing a clear boundary, as the two dimensions are always imbricated one with another. “Reflexivity and unreflexivity are not properties that are associated with particular kinds of enaction, but depend upon contexts and the conditions which shape the frequency of performance” (Edensor 2002, 89).

The focus on performance also brings forward the importance of body in the reproduction of the nation. Habits are indeed embodied practices. Ways of walking, sitting, standing, and moving are inflected by the same socio-demographics mentioned above as much as by national traits (Edensor 2002, 72). The repetition of embodied routines (how and when to eat, wash, play, work, etc.) generates synchronic, mundane choreographies which in turn feed a sense of collective ‘we’ grounded not in common ethnocultural features, but in “the sharing of spatial and temporal co-presence” (Edensor 2004, 110 – see also Antonsich 2009b for a similar point). Already anticipated by Anderson (1983, 26), the importance of synchronized practices is further illustrated by Edensor (2006) in terms of working hours, school holidays, TV schedules, etc. – a banal, routinized, synchronized everyday life which also contribute to generate a sense of security and functional predictability (see also Lofgren 2001).
As mentioned above, although the new approaches are mainly concerned with the ‘how’ of the nation, a few scholars have also approached its ‘where’. Geographers in particular have a long tradition of investigating the geography of the nation, with a particular emphasis on its territory (Williams and Smith 1983; Herb and Kaplan 1999; White 2000; Penrose 2002; Murphy 2013). More recently, though, there has been a new interest in the scalar ‘happening’ of the nation. Jones and Fowler (2007, 333), for instance, echoing Appleton’s (2002) argument about the plurality of scales implicated in the representation of the nation, have contested “the implicit and unproblematised emphasis placed upon the national scale as the only appropriate scale at which to study nations”. Accordingly, they have focused on the locale, showing how the particularities of place actively shape the formation and inflection of nationalist ideologies. Similarly, Confino and Skaria (2002) have challenged traditional renditions of the local as either a pre-existing repository of sub-national sentiments awaiting to be awaken or an anti-national entity in need to be nationalized, and have instead mapped vernacular translations of the nation (see also Edensor 2002, 186).

Finally, the new approaches have also rectified the gender-blind and Eurocentric perspective of classic accounts, by providing a feminist-informed understanding of nations and nationalism (Yuval Davis and Anthias 1989; Yuval Davis 1997) and by opening up these categories to the postcolonial notion of hybridity, which challenges any national unitary claim (Bhabha 1990; Chatterjee 1993). This points to the important question of ‘who’ is the nation, as various authors (McClintock 1995; Sharp 1996; Dowler, 2001) have observed that nationalism is essentially a masculine product, which often denies women any direct relation to national agency.
4. The re-making of the nation in the age of globalization

It is commonplace to say that one of the transformations associated with globalization is the decline of fixed, territorial identities and the rise of fluid, mobile forms of identification (Appadurai, 1996; Urry 2007). Transnationalism and cosmopolitanism have become the new flags of this mobile world and they are often heralded in opposition to nationalism. The convergence between the nation-state and the idea of society in scholarly accounts has also been questioned under the critique of ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Chernilo 2007) or ‘territorial trap’ (Agnew 1994). And yet, both nation and nationalism seem far from disappearing. In a world perceived as uncertain and constantly changing, national identities might offer people a comforting anchorage, a sort of ontological security (Skey 2011; Kinnvall 2004). ‘Entitativity’ is what psychologists call the reification of a social category, which in turn makes people feel secure and protected from external threats (Sacchi, Castano and Brauer 2009). And even more so today people perceive the nation as such an entity, also imbued with a clear ethno-cultural jargon which defies the ‘civic turn’ of many Western governments (Jones and Smith 2001; Joppke 2010). Expressions of ‘paranoid nationalism’ (Hage 2003), or white backlash against migrants, are rather widespread (Triandafyllidou 2001); and they also populate the web which, contrary to some expectations, appears to have strengthened rather than weakened national sentiments (Eriksen 2007), also in form of new diasporic forms of nationalism (Mavroudi 2007; Nieswand 2012).

However, if one goes beyond the above commonplace, s/he could see how globalization and nationalism are actually complementary (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2011; Chernilo 2007). Similarly, transnational processes are integral to the dynamics of national belonging (Dragojlovic 2008) and some authors (Delanty 2006; Calhoun 2008; Beck and Levy 2013) suggest that cosmopolitanism can also be written into nationalism. Moreover,
heralding transnationalism and cosmopolitanism for their potentially liberating effects risks overlooking the continuing importance of nationalism for subaltern groups in the Global South (Yeğenoğlu 2005). One should also not forget that contrasting a new post-modern cosmopolitan present with a modern national past implicitly contributes reifying the myth of a historically stable, coherent nation-state which has never been (Chernilo 2007). Historically, the nation-state has always re-invented itself (Baumann 2004). Thus, the point is not to discuss whether today the nation-state is in crisis, but how is being reworked to remain salient among new socio-spatial formations; and how national identities are renegotiated and reconfigured in the age of globalization (Biswas 2002).

In this respect, how to reconcile unity and diversity is the big challenge nationalism is facing today. Theoretically, this question has been addressed through various lenses, from (neo)assimilation (Alba and Nee 1997; Brubaker 2001; Nagel 2009) to multiculturality (for a review, see Antonsich forthcoming). Here I would like to focus on two normative perspectives which I believe are most relevant to the present study: liberal nationalism and multicultural nationalism. While both emphasize the importance of nationhood as the founding principle around which to bring diverse people together, they show a rather different approach to cultural diversity, which in turn influences their conceptualization of national identity. From a liberal nationalist perspective, cultural diversity is something to be ‘fixed’, either by providing minorities with special rights so to enhance their public participation (Kymlicka 2001) or, in a more civic nationalist tone, by treating ethnicity as a private cultural phenomenon (Miller 2000, 122, 137). As a consequence, the type of national identity envisioned to maintain social unity in a pluralistic state is rather ‘thin’, based on sharing liberal values (Miller 1995), common language and shared history (Kymlicka 2001, 312-315).
On the contrary, multicultural authors acknowledge the inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity (Parekh 2000, 340). Accordingly, the challenge is to build a plural and inclusive national identity, based on a composite culture constituted through intercultural dialogue (Parekh 2000, 235-236). Contra national liberalism, this project does not ‘take off’, but ‘add’ ethno-cultural diversity to national identity (Modood and Meer 2012, 52), which should then be understood as an overarching shared identity built upon diversity (Uboeri 2008; Modood 2011). All citizens should be involved in re-writing this new collective ‘we’ (Papademetriou 2012), giving shape to forms of ‘intercultural nationalism’ (Blad and Couton 2009) or ‘cosmopolitan nationalism’ (Brett and Moran 2011; Beck and Levy 2013), which incorporate notions of tolerance, openness, and alterity within national identity (Mavroudi 2010).

5. Conclusion

Nations and nationalism are not relics of the past. Wishing them away and calling for new post-national configurations (Closs Stephens 2013) risks diverting attention from the ways the nation(al) is continuously re-signified to adjust to mutating socio-political conditions (Antonsich et al. 2014). While classic accounts have greatly contributed to study the historical and institutional development of the nation, they have overlooked its resonance among people’s daily lives. A more sustained dialogue between these two perspectives would therefore be welcomed. For instance, banal and everyday nationalisms would benefit from a closer look at political and economic forces which have produced in the first instance the phenomenon of nationalism. These forces are indeed associated with structured inequalities, which in turn shape the ways people talk, feel and experience the nation (Skey 2011, 168). As observed by Smith (2008b), the new approaches also seem to operate with an undifferentiated ‘ordinary people’, which fails to specify how forms of banal and everyday nationalisms might
resonate differently among people who differ in terms of class, gender, age, race, etc. (Skey 2009). A more fruitful dialogue between classic and new approaches could also contribute to better understand the persistence of nationalism. Recent work which, building on some classic accounts (Connor 1994), has explored the emotional dimension of the nation is certainly a good start (Wood 2012; Caluya 2011) and it can be further supported by psychological investigations (Baldacchino 2011). Responses to ‘why is a nation’ should also be accompanied by additional studies on ‘where is a nation’, which could map more extensively the sites where the nation(al) ‘happens’. Finally, we know too little about the impact of an increasing ethno-culturally diverse population on the meanings, materiality, and performance of the nation. Empirical studies in this direction would nicely complement existing normative accounts and help exploring further the ‘who’ of the nation.

There is still quite a lot of work to be done before we can get a better sense of why in a night of September 2013 thousands of Catholics gathered in St Peter’s Square, weaving their national flags.
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