

EDITORIAL: EXCAVATING NATIONALISM: THEORY, SPACE AND CRITIQUE

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This issue of *Hagar/Hajer* is devoted to new perspectives on nationalism. Why nationalism? During the last two decades or so, nationalism has become one of the major areas of study in the social sciences and the humanities. The seminal studies of the likes of Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith, have paved the way to a wave of studies exploring, unpacking and dissecting this enormously powerful phenomenon which has mobilized people and caused collective violence like no other.

In popular discourse, 'the nation' is rarely a focus of debate. Its existence is perceived as ontological, pre-existing politics and state. The nation, as represented in common-sense conversations, media and politics, "has always been there". This myth, indeed, has important roots in the ancient story of Hagar/Hajer, to whose son, Ismael, God repeatedly promises: "I shall make him into a great people".²

Given the historical and theological weight of this myth, the very study of nationalism, which invariably deconstructs its social construction, and its recent historical appearance as a mass phenomenon, is already a critical practice. As such, it is a highly suitable topic for *Hagar/Hajer*, which is a journal representing an intellectual community constantly exploring critical scholarly frontiers.

Beyond its critical edge, the early literature on nationalism was breathtaking in its sweeping scope and ambition. It attempted to explain the entire transformation of the world's political, social, cultural and economic order during the last two centuries, and connect disparate events in time and space.

But despite their valuable insights, most nationalism theories display clear deficiencies, emanating from their global scope and all-encompassing, universalizing explanatory ambition. These include, among others: a chronic confusion between nations and states, the overlooking of religion and gender as key factors in the making of nations, a bypassing of relevant geographic scholarship, and – subsequently – the privileging of the dynamics of time over

¹ Euan Hague and Oren Yiftachel have co-edited this volume.

² *Genesis*, 17:21.

space. Clearly, in this short editorial, there is no space to elaborate on these topics beyond a few short comments as a foundation for the papers in this issue.

Most critically, many theories of nationalism too readily collapse, confuse or ignore the critical gap between nation and state. Hence, they tend to erroneously equate the processes of *state-building* with *nation-building*. This is clear from the various definitions of nationalism offered by leading theories, which emphasize a joint political institution, common economy and shared territory. Hence, the dominant analytical perspective often assumes *a-priori* the (contentious) existence of the 'nation-state'. The research activity of an entire generation of scholars has been based on state statistics, textbooks, public discourses and maps, and on a state-based image of 'society'.³ As such, it has legitimized the nation-state construct, in an approach termed by John Agnew "methodological nationalism".⁴ But clearly, the 'nation-state' rarely exists as such, and, in effect, is always 'in the making'.

Further, the lack of analytical distinction between nation and state has made most theories of nationalism overlook the common abuse of the nation-state model, in 'ethnocratic' cases where one ethnos appropriates 'its' state apparatus and uses this to expand its political, territorial and economic resources, while legitimizing the oppression of minorities in the name of the 'national interest'.⁵

The nation-state mismatch leads to a second critique, focusing on the *spatial blindness* of leading accounts of nationalism. This is expressed by both a lack of analysis on the links between space on nationalism, and a conspicuous paucity of reference to a rich tradition of geography and geographers. Commonly, theories of nationalism 'flatten' the state's human space, thereby overlooking the dynamic contours of ethnicities, religions, classes, genders, borders and development, so critical for shaping the nature of political communities.

These dynamic 'spatialities' often run across, 'below' or 'above' the putative, flat and stable 'national homeland'. Therefore, analysis of national movements must hinge on the understanding of 'active space', which is not merely a backdrop or a container of social change, but exerts a *vital influence* on group identities and relations. The links between space, development, collective identities and group relations are thus *reciprocal*. That is, while political processes create spatial outcomes, these outcomes, in turn, create new political dynamics.

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- 3 J. Hakli (2001) In the territory of knowledge: state-centred discourses and the construction of society. *Progress in Human Geography* 25:3:403-422.
 - 4 J. Agnew (1991) Mapping political power beyond state boundaries: territory, identity and movement in world politics. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28:3:499-521.
 - 5 See O. Yiftachel (2000) Ethnocracy and its discontents. *Critical Inquiry* 26:725-756.

The papers in this volume address these very topics. They present a different, more critical, and more diverse look at nationalism. Their point of departure does not assume a flattening process of fusing nation and state, but constant struggles over meaning, positions and power, revolving around the definition of 'the nation' and its spaces. Further, the collection demonstrates the work, both intellectual and physical, that is involved in building nations. From scholars arguing for an ethno-national past or drawing national maps, to people constructing border fences and patrolling national boundaries, considerable effort goes into making, demarcating and maintaining national space. These processes reveal, even on the local scale, the many different ways in which nations are built, both literally and figuratively, and challenge universalizing theories of nationalism.

Of the various lacunas in the leading theories of nationalism noted above, this issue focuses mainly on two: religion and space. Ian Lustick opens the issue with a thought-provoking piece, which challenges one of the central tenets of modernist nationalism theories, namely that nationalism denotes a clear break: from a meta-narrative of divine order onto a new, secularizing, political order. Lustick's piece 'brings religion back' into the study of nations and states, demonstrating its omnipotent ability to restructure mass mobilisation, both generally, and most potently in Israel/Palestine.

Other papers in the volume also 'unpack' very skillfully the putative homogenizing process of nation-building. Euan Hague traces the rise of 'regional', potentially secessionist, Celtic neo-Confederate nationalism in Southern USA. He outlines the rise of a separatist discourse, and the incessant attempts to find intellectual and 'scientific' evidence to reify a history invented 'backwards', subverting and challenging the mainstream narrative of American unity. The issue of space is central here to understanding the ways in which a regional identity is delineated by local intellectuals *vis-à-vis* powerful competing national spatialities.

The other papers take the link between space and identity to other directions. Christine Drennon explores the practice of map-making with the political construction of national authority and sovereignty, showing their reciprocal relations. She demonstrates, through the case of drawing ethnic maps for the Balkans in the early 20th century, how maps do not only 'reflect' the geography of a nation, but also create and mystify its existence.

Another angle on the connection of place and national identity is explored by Henk van Houtum and Frank van Dam who examine the role of spectacular sporting events, such as football derby matches, in the ongoing making of national affiliations within what they define as 'spatially competitive identities'. These are represented and reproduced in the dramatic and dense football settings to create a knife-edge atmosphere of 'us vs. them' and 'all-or-nothing',

leaving little option for the fans (in the stadium, but also watching at home) but to mobilize in the name of the nation.

Susan Mains explores another crucial link between nationalism and space, by looking at the role of borders in sharpening, separating and racializing the collectivities in question. Her focus on the US-Mexico border brings into the discussion not just space, but also cultural and economic hierarchy, and the omnipresence of steep physical and political barriers, juxtaposed against putatively 'liberating' discourses of globalisation, mobility and postmodernity.

Finally, Tim Edensor focuses on the ceaseless reproduction of national identities and cultures by employing the metaphor of 'performance'. He shows that mundane as well as dramatized events all include components that are 'performed' as part of the ceaseless making of the nation. These surface in formal and popular rituals, touristic stagings and everyday living practices. Edensor illustrates how the framings of these performative arenas often produce and reify unreflexive acceptance of nation and state, but also highlights the possibility of rebellious performances, which upset the stability and hierarchy of the socio-political order. The issue closes with film, exhibition and literature reviews.

Clearly, this issue is but a small addition to the growing diverse, critical and challenging 'excavation' of nationalism. There are virtually unlimited frontiers into which the new studies of nationalism can expand, including the most notable omission from this volume – gender studies. But this font of critical knowledge is not left untouched. The *Hagar/Hajer* community is planning a special issue on gender, identities and power in the very near future.