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“Nation” and “Nationalism”: The Misuse of Key Concepts in Political Science*

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One of the essential starting points of any branch of science is a consistent, broadly understood terminology. Generally accepted definitions of key terms within a discipline are important in order to judge claims by scholars about a given topic. Fortunately, among those who work on the topic of nationalism, there is a growing convergence of definitions of “nation” and “nationalism.” Unfortunately, both terms are often still misused, used loosely, or used inconsistently, especially among those in political science who discuss these terms in passing. Authors of introductory textbooks, who are careful in their usage of other terms, often use these two words in varying—and even contradictory—ways in different parts of the same book. Because of their importance for the discipline, however, political scientists should be very mindful of their use of the terms “nation” and “nationalism.”

In this article, definitions for “nation” and “nationalism” are proposed, with each definition followed by sections on common ways the terms are misemployed in political science. I provide examples of both misuses and “loose uses.” While the line between misuse and loose use is somewhat fuzzy (a point reinforced below in the discussion of nations vs. ethnic groups), I consider a misuse to be one in which the term is used in a way that is completely outside how the term is used by nationalism scholars. A loose use is one in which the author has captured only part of the concept or has stretched the meaning of the term to an extreme degree. Of the two, what I label misuses in this article are the more problematic, especially for political science students struggling to learn definitions of important concepts.

The definitions I propose are no more authoritative than any others in the nationalism literature, but they are consciously based on generally accepted ideas in the literature and designed to fit with circumstances that most people who study the topic would label nationalism. The examples of misuses and loose uses in this article are, of course, dependent on the definitions. If one does not accept the definitions, the criticism of misuses is unlikely to be persuasive. That said, the definitions in this article should provide a starting point for bridging disciplinary and subfield divides and help scholars begin to address the general problem of the variety of uses of these terms in political science.

The Concept of Nation

Nation: A Definition

Whether one believes that nationalism creates the idea of nations or that nations develop the ideas related to nationalism, one cannot discuss nationalism without considering what one means by a nation. Yet, even the nationalism literature contains different approaches to defining the term. One problem with definitions of “nation” in this literature is the combination of definitions and causal arguments. Smith’s definition of nation as a “named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths, and historical memories, a mass public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (Smith 1991, 14), for example, is criticized in a review article by Tamir (1995, 424) for mixing together “reasons for the emergence of a nation (a shared historic territory, a common economy, and a common legal system) with the results (sharing myths and historical memories).” But, Smith’s emphasis on cultural features is useful, and something that is common to most definitions. While critical of Smith, Tamir puts forth an even more problematic definition. For Tamir, a nation is a “community whose members share feelings of fraternity, substantial distinctiveness, and exclusivity, as well as beliefs in a common ancestry and continuous genealogy” (1995, 425). While a good definition of an ethnic group, the lack of reference to the idea of territorial self-determination and the difficulty in fitting nations based on political rather than ethnic identity into this conception of nation make this definition unusable. While an improvement over vague definitions that cannot distinguish between nations and classes, it is unclear how a nation differs from an ethnic group using this definition.

The importance of the belief in territorial self-determination for the group is a central part of most definitions of “nation” in the nationalism literature and provides an important criterion for differentiating between nations and other social categories. As Nodia puts it, “a nation is a community of people organized around the idea of self-determination” (1994, 11, italics in original). Some take this idea of self-determination to mean control of a state. In another review article, for example, Haas proposes that the nation is “a socially mobilized body of individuals, believing themselves to be united by some set of characteristics that differentiate them (in their own minds) from outsiders, striving to create or maintain their own state” (1986, 726). While others might not agree that the nation must pursue its own state, the idea of territory is crucial to understanding national identity.

Keeping in mind these ideas, what are some of the common threads of the definitions of “nation” in the nationalism literature? First and foremost, a nation is a collective of people. This is a necessary detail, but one that does not help us distinguish between nations and other groups in society. What makes na-
ations unique is that they are collectives united by shared cultural features (myths, values, etc.) and the belief in the right to territorial self-determination. Thus, nations are groups of people linked by unifying traits and the desire to control a territory that is thought of as the group’s national homeland. The belief in the right to territorial control is central to distinguishing nations from other collectives. Many groups hold common myths, values, and symbols (e.g., religious groups, ethnic groups, or even professional associations). But nations are not just unified by culture; they are unified by a sense of purpose: controlling the territory that the members of the group believe to be theirs.

Nation: Misuses

The most important and consistent misuse of “nation” in political science is to equate it with “state” or “country.” This misuse appears in a large number of political science works including many textbooks. Works in the American politics sub-field are most susceptible to this misuse, though books and articles in comparative politics and international relations are certainly not immune. International relations scholars seem to do better, possibly because of the importance they place on emphasizing the nature of states in international politics, but the use of “nation” to mean “state” or the inconsistent use of “nation” (sometimes meaning a “people,” sometimes meaning a “state”) remains an especially serious problem for scholars in comparative politics. Inconsistent usage is found, for example, in Almond and Powell’s popular introductory textbook for the study of comparative politics. At the beginning of the book, the authors write, “Just about the entire surface of the world today is covered by independent countries. We call them states or nations or nation-states.” They then continue, “When we speak of a ‘nation,’ we refer to the self-identification of a people based on the language they speak and the values, allegiances, and historical memories they share” (1996, 2, italics in original). Not only do these statements (on the same page) contradict themselves, but in the pages that follow the authors go back to using “nation” and “state” interchangeably, as tables are presented on the per capita GNP and portion of the population in agriculture of “selected nations” such as Japan, Russia, Nigeria, and India. Even in the index of the book, the entry for “Country” reads, “See Nation(s).”

As discussed above, “nation” is a term that refers to a collective of people. This is one point in which definitions of nation in the nationalism literature have been unanimous, making it all the more ironic that nation is used very differently by so many in political science. A state, on the other hand, is the principal political unit in the international political system corresponding to a territory, a relatively permanent population, and a set of ruling institutions. A country is the territorial component of the state. Nigeria is state (and a country); it is not a nation.

That nation is used interchangeably with “country” in every day English is part of the problem. Because Americans are generally thought of as a “civic nation” (one is an American by means of United States citizenship), it is easy to associate “nation” with the political unit itself. Nevertheless, its use in common language is not a justification for its misuse by political scientists. Nothing is lost by using “state” or “country” if that is what is meant. Much is lost if “nation” is used instead.

Nation: Loose Uses

The most basic loose use of “nation” is the interchanging of the term and “ethnic group” or “ethnicity.” I consider this a loose use because nations can evolve from ethnic groups, but it would not be a stretch to call it a misuse. A nation is more than an ethnic group, differing from such a group because of a nation’s belief in its right to territorial control, or what Richmond (1987) calls its “territorial referent.” Also, and more important, nations need not even be based on a certain ethnic identity. Thus, the words “shared cultural features” in the definition of nation above should not be read as “shared ethnic identity.” What are called “civic” or “political” nations in the nationalism literature have shared cultural features but are generally multiethnic in their make-up. Americans share certain cultural features (origin myths and symbols, as well as— for most people—language), but one of these features is certainly not ethnic heritage. The fact that it is necessary to discuss subgroups of the American population with the help of hyphenated prefixes (Italian-Americans, African-Americans, etc.) demonstrates that Americans as a nation are not unified in their ethnic identity.

The Concept of Nationalism

Nationalism: A Definition

One set of approaches to the definition of nationalism considers it to be an idea, belief, or principle. Ignatieff (1993), for example, sees 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. Gellner’s definition of “a principle which holds that the political and national unit should be congruent” (1983, 1) is a standard for many people who study the topic. Haas’s definition is even more basic: “a belief held by a group of people that they ought to constitute a nation, or that they already are one” (1986, 727).

Motyl takes perhaps the strongest stand in defending nationalism as an idea, or, as he puts it, an “ideal.” He argues that because nationalism is based on ideas—such as the nation-state, self-determination, national identity, and national superiority—actions based on these ideas cannot be the basis for a definition of nationalism, “unless we make the absurd assumption that beliefs invariably translate automatically into behavior” (1992, 311). Yet, many “isms” (capitalism, socialism, terrorism, etc.) are based on ideas, and the definitions of these “isms” focus not on the necessary ideas but on the activities that stem from them. While the idea of the market is cen-
Features

tral to capitalism, the existence of such an idea alone is not what makes an economic system capitalistic; rather, that market principles are practiced is the crucial ingredient. Thus, one does not have to make an “absurd assumption” to include activities in the definition of a concept that also has important ideas at its core. The idea of national rights should not be thought of as nationalism without at least the open articulation of this idea to the general population.

A second, more useful approach to defining “nationalism” takes it to be a process. It is thought of as the creation of the unifying features of the nation, or the actions that result from the beliefs of the group.11 Nationalism defined as an organized endeavor to control the national homeland, for example, is common in the nationalism literature.12 Some stress that this struggle must turn the homeland into an independent state; others would stop short of the requirement that the group even seek its own state, accepting struggles for territorial autonomy within an existing state as nationalism. Nearly all would agree, however, that the control over one’s own nation-state is a goal for most nationalists. Less idealistic nationalists may realize that an independent state is not practical and seek something less than complete territorial sovereignty, but they would nearly always prefer to have their own state. Mellor’s definition of nationalism—“the political expression of the nation’s aspirations,” including control over territory that members of the nation “perceive as their homeland by right” (1989, 4–5, my italics)—is therefore an improvement over the labeling of nationalism as simply an idea. It combines the ideas and the activities of nationalists.

While concern with territory is a necessary component of nationalism, many nations lay claim to a territory even when the members of the nation are not a majority in that area. Gellner’s “Potato Principle” (roughly that groups will look back historically to periods when they were mainly farmers to justify the control of land in an urban and industrial age) shows how territory itself is imagined (see Gellner 1992). Just as there are no predetermined nations, there are no predetermined homelands. An interesting possible exception to this statement is federal systems where territorial units are named for ethnic minorities. As the break-ups of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia along the internal lines created by the Communists make clear, the federal nature of these Communist systems was more than an illusion. The residents of these territories often believed that the areas were homelands within the larger state (see Kaiser 1994).

Bringing these visions of nationalism together, “nationalism” is defined here as the pursuit—through argument or other activity—of a set of rights for the self-defined members of the nation, including, at a minimum, territorial autonomy or sovereignty. All nationalisms, therefore, share two features: (1) they define, at least roughly, the territorial boundaries that the nation has a right to control and (2) they define the membership boundaries of the population that makes up the nation—the group that deserves this territorial control and that is entitled to the supreme loyalty of other members of the collective.13 These membership boundaries are set by members of the nation themselves, generally by an intellectual or political elite, though they may be based on ideas of surrounding groups as well. They establish the the that possesses the right to control the homeland (and as a result the they that does not share this right). This does not mean, however, that the boundaries are set easily. The development of successful claims over boundaries may involve struggles with another group, serious struggles within the nation over competing definitions of the territorial and membership boundaries, and difficulty in transmitting the ideas of national membership boundaries to the masses.

Nationalism: Loose Uses

A common loose use of “nationalism” is to miss one of its two sides. Either it is thought of only as the attempt to get territory or it is thought of only as the emphasis on a unified national identity. Textbooks in comparative politics and even international relations are especially fond of the latter. Roskin and Berry, for example, discuss nationalism as “an exaggerated sense of the greatness and unity of one’s people” (1997, 121). Unity is important, and a sense of greatness may be part of a particular national identity. But it is not a necessary feature of nationalism. Again, every nationalism involves the setting of membership and territorial boundaries.

A second loose use of the term “nationalism” is to equate it with “ethnic politics.” Rutland, for example, defines nationalism as a “statement of claims on behalf of an ethnic group” (1994, 4). Like the discussion of “nation” and “ethnic group” above, ethnic politics (the political mobilization of people based on ethnicity) can be a starting point for something that becomes nationalism, but it alone is not nationalism. Richmond makes clear the difference between nationalism and the political mobilization of ethnic groups:

An ethnic group when politically mobilized can have different goals. These

Nationalism: Misuses

The most basic misuse of “nationalism” is to equate it with “patriotism.” Just as a nation is a group of people and not a state, nationalism is first and foremost about the nation, not the state. Because nationalism includes the pursuit of territorial control, and because the idea of the “nation-state” still dominates the international state-system, it is easy to fall into the trap of associating nationalism with loyalty to an existing state. The glossary in Shively, for example, says that nations “often but not always coincide with the political boundaries of states.” Yet nationalism is defined in this same glossary as “passionate identification with a state on the part of its citizens” (1993, 357). While pride in one’s state is not a bad definition of patriotism, it is a bad definition of nationalism. Likewise, pride in one’s nation is not patriotism, and for that matter is, at best, only a part of nationalism.

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may include the right to franchise, the use of the ethnic vote to swing results in marginal constituencies. The achievement of special status for particular languages or religions (especially in education), the removal of injustices and the enforcement of human rights codes, affirmative action programmes, compensation for past deprivation, the restitution of property, or the recognition of special treatment such as exemption from military service. “Nationalist” movements may also establish such claims but go further in seeking to achieve self-government within a given geographic area... The politicization of ethnicity is not the same thing as ethnic nationalism although it may lead to it where a historical claim to a particular territory can be established (1987, 4–5).

One can extend this point to cover the outbreak of conflict. Violent ethnic conflicts may emerge over many things (affirmative action policies, language laws, etc.). National conflicts, on the other hand, must involve disputes over territory to be truly “national.”

Another important loose use of “nationalism”—because of its role in further confusing students and the casual observer of the nationalism literature—is the seemingly infinite number of what I call “something” nationalisms.” Were one to count the number of different words attached to “nationalism” in scholarly works (imperial nationalism, integral nationalism, etc.), it would be a truly impressive list.14 Again, keeping in mind that nationalism is about two things—defining the nation and defining its territory—helps us make sense of the myriad “something” nationalisms” and also gives us a tool to decide whether or not a certain movement actually is nationalism.

It is true that one of these two features may be emphasized more than the other. “Ethnic nationalism,” for example, is a legitimate term when the nationalist movement is mainly emphasizing the definition of the membership boundaries of the nation and is basing this definition on an existing ethnic identity.15 Likewise, “separatist nationalism” would make sense if the nationalists are concerned most of all with justifying the separation of a territory that is part of an existing state and the creation of a new state. The problem comes when one tries to fit a circumstance that is not nationalism into the category by amending the term with an antecedent label. Thus, it is acceptable to attach a tag to nationalism if one has thought through how this modifier fits with the basic idea of nationalism. But especially when both parts of the nationalism equation (defining the membership boundaries of the nation and pursuing control of the territorial boundaries of the homeland) are emphasized roughly equally, it is better simply to refer to the argument or activity as “nationalism” and avoid the use of the “something” labels.

Conclusion

Given the importance of nationalism as a topic in comparative politics, international relations, and the discipline as a whole, this article has presented definitions for “nation” and “nationalism” in the hope of prompting more thoughtful and consistent usage of the terms in political science works. The definitions incorporate areas of general agreement in the nationalism literature and help highlight faulty or incompatible usage of the terms in articles and textbooks.

It is not expected that readers will automatically accept the definitions provided above. And there is certainly no expectation that such understandings will make an impact on the use of the terms in non-academic settings such as newspapers. Uniformity in the definitions of key concepts is difficult if not impossible in less formal settings, where people have learned and developed their own ideas over time. But political scientists must still concern themselves with how those who specialize in the study of a topic like nationalism are using these key terms. Political scientists must also look at whether they themselves are using such terms consistently.16

At a minimum, scholars should make clear how they define key terms such as these and then use them in ways consistent with their definitions. Failure to do this in introductory textbooks is inexcusable. Even political scientists referring in passing to “nation” and “nationalism” in their scholarly works should provide their own definitions. With all of the different (and often contradictory) ways that these two terms are used, perhaps the biggest loose use of “nation” and “nationalism” is to discuss them without giving definitions, assuming instead that others think about them in a similar way.

Notes

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1. It is outside the scope of this article, and the area of expertise of the author, to propose definitions of other terms, but there is a definite need to address the problem of competing (and sometimes contradictory) definitions for a variety of basic concepts in political science.

2. As Haas (1986, 714) points out, even scholars who write a great deal about nationalism often “fail to make any serious effort to acknowledge or use, leave alone integrate, the plethora of existing works on the subject.” Yet, the problem is greater for political scientists who use these terms without being aware of the definitions and arguments in the major works on nationalism.

3. Gellner (1983, 55), for example, states that “nationalism engenders nations,” while Mellor (1989, 5) argues that “every nation has its nationalism.”

4. The emphasis on things such as a common economy in this definition also excludes members of a diaspora community from being considered part of the nation. Given that émigrés usually consider themselves part of the larger nation and that they are often the most “nationalistic” members of this nation, the idea that a nation must share an economy is problematic. Interestingly, Smith’s definition is very close to that of Stalin, who defined the nation as “a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up” (1994, 20).

5. Gellner (1983, 7), for example, states that two people belong to the same nation “if and only if they share the same culture.”

6. Likewise, Connor’s (1978) ideas about the nation would be better suited as a definition of ethnic group. In fact, he has little problem using the terms almost interchangeably, stating that the main difference is that a nation must be self-defined while an ethnic group can be “other defined.”

7. Two points need clarification. First, “culture” here includes a broad range of traits and beliefs, and the particular ones stressed by one nation may differ from those stressed by another. Second, not all members of the...
nation need live in the perceived homeland, and the group does not need to have actual control of its own state to be a nation.

8. Another introductory textbook—Mayer, Burnett, and Ogden—discusses "nations other than the United States" and uses France, rather than the French, to make the point that nations are unique. But the authors then define "nation" three pages later as "a large group of people sharing a common sense of belonging, a common peoplehood" (1996, 1, 7–8).

9. The idea of political versus ethnic nations is not accepted by all nationalism scholars. Clearly, these are ideal types, with most nations failing to meet either ideal. But as ideal types they are useful ways to distinguish how one nation sees itself and how its nationalism differs from another nation's. A classic work in this regard is Brubaker (1992), where the author points out the effects of different ideas of nationhood on the citizenship policies of Germany and France.

10. An explanation of how nationalism spreads to the masses is one area where much work on nationalism still needs to be done. For some interesting ideas about the spread of nationalism, see Beissinger (1996) and Connor (1990).

11. The creation of national identity can take place in different ways. Brass points out two possible routes: "Nations may be created by the transformation of an ethnic group in a multiethnic state into a self-conscious political entity or by the amalgamation of diverse groups and the formation of an inter-ethnic, composite or homogeneous national culture through the agency of the modern state. Although the two processes of nation-formation have different starting points and raise quite different kinds of analytical and theoretical questions, the end result historically has been sometimes the same, and the two processes have much in common" (1991, 20).

12. See, for example, Brass (1991, 48), who says that nationalism is "a political movement by definition." There are a few examples of people who either do not see the territorial component as a necessary part of nationalism or who are loose in their discussion of the role of territory, Suny's labeling of Armenian nationalism in the early 1900's as "non-territorial nationalism" stands as an example of the latter. By this term, he does not mean that Armenian nationalism had no sense of the right to a homeland, but rather that in reality the Armenian nation had "lost its hold on its historic homeland" (Suny, 1980, 14).

13. One might be concerned about the similarity between the proposed definitions of "nation" and "nationalism." They are closely related (as we would expect them to be), but they are not the same thing. The fact that a nation has a sense of homeland is not the same thing as its pursuit of control over that territory. In addition, by setting the membership boundaries, nationalism lays out the characteristics of the people considered a nation. It also sets the territorial boundaries of the homeland that, as a nation, the group should control. But unless the people themselves accept these ideas—unless they believe they are a nation—nationalism is doomed to fail. Thus, I would argue that nationalism (or, better, nationalists) try to produce nations, but they are in no way guaranteed success.

14. I gave up after finding nearly thirty. I am sure there are many more.

15. A term such as "linguistic nationalism" may also be acceptable if language is used to define membership in the nation and nationalists are preoccupied with the membership boundaries more than the territorial boundaries.

16. As Motyl puts it, "Internal consistency is the goal" (1992, 508).

References


About the Author

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