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STATE OF THE FIELD

# Democratic and Autocratic Nation Building

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**Abstract**

There are two main trends in the field of nation-building studies. One subset of the field focuses on democratic nation building, seeking to answer questions of how people can live together in divided societies and presenting institutional recommendations. The other subset examines autocratic nation building, or how those in power utilize nation building to maintain their position of dominance. Scholars examine both types of nation building from above, examining government policies and elite action, and from below, analyzing the practices and emotions of non-elites. While there has been much progress in the field of nation-building studies, I suggest that we focus more on the conceptual differences between democratic and autocratic nation building, address the interactions of elites and non-elites in nation-building practices, and disaggregate analyses to take into account in-country variation in nation building.

**Keywords:** nation building; autocracy; democracy; symbolic politics; national identity

The terms *nation* and *state* are often used interchangeably in the media, everyday discourse, and academic writing. Yet it takes repeated, persistent action to build a nation, to make nation and state congruent.[1] Even with such action, the degree of alignment between the boundaries of the nation and of the state is continuously negotiated, contested, and altered by those living within or on the boundaries as well as by external actors. This contestation over defining and building the nation can lead to state boundary changes (Russia's annexation of Crimea), internal violence (the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar), and oppression (the treatment of black and brown people in the USA). Scholars from political science, sociology, political geography, and other disciplines attempt to explain nation building, how actors and institutions create nations within states. Interdisciplinary approaches are common and necessary in this field as nation-building processes involve policy, culture, practice, and interaction between state and society and within the private sphere. Nation building can have a profound impact on political and human rights, so understanding how it operates is an important undertaking.

Two dominant trends in scholarship have emerged in analyses of nation building. The first trend examines nation building as a democratic process, asking questions such as "How can people live together in divided societies?" or "How can we create peace after ethnic conflict and civil war?" (Lijphart 2004; Roeder and Rothchild 2005). This segment of the literature advises what types of nation building can lead to peace and emancipation, and it warns against those that are more likely to lead to violence and repression. This strand of research often generates specific recommendations for constitutional orders and institutions for states dealing with such issues.

The second and more recent trend examines nation building as a tool for those with nondemocratic aims, as a way for leaders and parties to consolidate and maintain power. Questions asked under this approach are "Why do autocrats engage in nation building?" and "What are the effects

of nation building on regime durability?" (Blakkisrud and Kolstø 2016; Stewart 2017). There is increasing recognition that legitimacy matters for autocracies too (Burnell 2006; Gerschewski 2013, 2018; Zhu 2011). Scholars are therefore taking nation building and symbolic politics within autocracies more seriously as strategies for staying in power (Adams 2010; Wedeen 1999). If an autocratic regime can build a sense of national unity and pride among a subset of the population, it can put less effort into coercing their obedience.

Scholars tend to take one of two approaches to understanding both types of nation building; they examine it from above or from below. The starting point shapes researchers' choice of methodologies and their conclusions. The first group treats nation building as a top-down process, analyzing government policies, rhetoric, and symbols engaged with shaping the limits of the nation and activating feelings of pride and belonging among those included. The second group analyzes nation building from below, utilizing surveys and ethnography to understand the attitudes and practices of the people and how they work to strengthen or contest the nation.

While much progress has been made in the field of nation-building studies, we still need to address conceptual and theoretical issues of using "nation building" to describe actions and policies in both democratic and nondemocratic contexts. Clarifying these issues also requires greater attention to the multiple fields of nation building, integrating top-down and bottom-up approaches to studying this phenomenon. This expansion of the fields of analysis should also include disaggregating nation building, treating it as a variable and uneven process across different regions of a state. I will address these avenues for research after further exploring the prominent trends and approaches to the study of nation building.

## Democratic Nation Building

According to Rustow (1970), a prerequisite of successful democratization is agreement over the boundaries of the political community. Tilly (1975) views a homogenous population as necessary for state survival. Without unity or a sense of fit within the dominant group, marginalized segments of the population may consider the state and its government to be illegitimate and engage in separatist or revolutionary activity. Furthermore, those in dominant positions can more easily utilize divisions and animosity to produce winning coalitions based on fear and hatred of the Other, leading to further oppression of those presented as threats to the nation. Therefore, to ensure everyone has an equal stake and equal capacity to participate in the democratic project, democrats try building a sense of belonging to the nation among all citizens.

Nation-building studies developed normative and empirical justifications for various forms of democratic nation building. From the normative perspective, Kymlicka (2001) argues that multicultural policies are essential for ensuring that nation building does not oppress minorities. Lijphart (2004) proposes a broader package of policies, collectively termed *consociationalism*, that can help increase representation, voice, and peace in societies with entrenched divisions. Such policies include power sharing in the government and executive branch, as well as providing some degree of autonomy to minority groups. This type of nation building recognizes salient divisions in society and attempts to eliminate cycles of dominance and conflict based on them by equalizing access to power and status in the political community.

Postconflict countries, such as Iraq (Bogaards 2019) and Lebanon (Nagle 2016), attempt to implement these recommendations for generating peaceful coexistence within a common political community with mixed effects. Canada is often described as a successful example of utilizing multicultural and inclusive institutions and practices, such as inclusive Canada Day celebrations (Hayday 2010) and federalism, to incorporate French-speakers, English-speakers, and First Nations into the Canadian nation. To align with these proposals, efforts to shape and strengthen the boundaries of the nation in these states must be accommodative of differences, if not inclusive, to

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acknowledge and support diversity within the political community. These scholars primarily focus upon case studies to develop their proposals for just nation building in democracies.

With reference to these normative principles, other scholars have tested the effects of different institutions and policies on generating national unity and pride in democracies and democratizing states. As scholars have employed different methodologies across different cases, there is not yet agreement on the effects of federalism and power sharing on national attachment. While some propose that these structures enhance national attachment by decreasing grievances and considering minority voices (Hechter 2000), others find that they have more of a centrifugal effect, increasing desire and capacity for separation and harming the nation-building project (Lustick, Miodownik, and Eidelson 2004). Yet others find mixed and conditional effects of federalism, proportional representation, and other institutional choices on national attachment (Elkins and Sides 2007; Saideman et al. 2002; Siroky and Cuffe 2015). These mixed results indicate that the same nation-building policy may have different effects in varied contexts and might only partially address the task of strengthening the political community. Despite the lack of agreement, these scholars all seek to address the issue of building a nation in diverse democracies in a way that both holds the state together and protects the rights of all.

While nation building can be democratic and inclusionary in intent, scholars have recognized that even this type of nation building can have negative consequences. A nation may be built around civic terms, yet it is inevitable that some ethnic content remains (Kuzio 2001; Yack 2012), potentially leading to exclusion. It is impossible to include every identity and voice, so nation building inherently involves some degree of "nation destroying" (Connor 1972) and mix of ethnic and civic components (Brown 1999). Therefore, instead of focusing on the perennial ethnic versus civic and East versus West conversations, it is more productive to acknowledge that all forms of nation building draw upon both bases of identity, though with different ends in mind.

The difference between democratic and autocratic nation building is whether the policies and actions enhance the democratic project by including voices and strengthening unity, or solidify exclusive control by strategically magnifying some voices while excluding others. Being a democracy does not ensure that nation building will be democratic. The democratic rules of the game can even encourage violence during periods of transition as factions with different views of the nation vie for votes and influence (Snyder 2000; Mann 2005). Even established democracies such as the United States and Poland are currently experiencing a rise in autocratic nation building that seeks to solidify a particular party's hold on power. Therefore, like autocratic practices (Glasius 2018), autocratic nation building is not restricted to autocracies.

## Autocratic Nation Building

Not all who engage in nation building have such democratic, peace-building aims. Just as nation building can create an inclusive political community and expand democratic interactions, it can also create a limited community designed to keep the powerful in power. Autocratic regimes cannot maintain their power indefinitely through repression and coercion alone. It is too costly in terms of funding, maintaining the loyalty of the agents of coercion, and in its potential for generating backlash and revolt of the people. To supplement coercive power and substitute for deficiencies in the supply of services and economic well-being, autocratic regimes turn to symbolic power to generate legitimacy (Gerschewski 2013). This strategy is low cost (Smyth, Sobolev, and Soboleva 2013), but it requires careful calibration to ensure that leaders are not too constrained by the national narrative they construct.

Autocratic nation building involves the strategic selection of particular segments of the population to draw upon for identity construction. To raise the chances of successful reception, leaders will write national narratives, and tap into existing ones, that they can most authentically speak (Alexander 2011, 83). To build regime legitimacy, leaders build the nation around a narrative that places themselves as the head or father of the nation, drawing upon patriarchal norms to ensure

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support for the nation's strong protector (Sperling 2015). Vladimir Putin (Wood 2011), Hugo Chávez (Frajman 2014), Nursultan Nazarbayev (Koch 2013), and many other personalistic leaders play the role of "father of the nation" to generate loyalty and obedience and ward off criticism. If those constructing the nation can write themselves into the narrative as the nation's protector and promoter, it becomes more difficult to mount an opposition. Leaders can frame challenges to their power as threatening the nation itself, limiting opposition figures' ability to attract supporters. Additionally, they will construct narratives that provide useful means of excluding groups that are potential threats to their power by depicting them as historically and currently threatening to the nation. For example, the long-standing identification of Kurds as dangerous for Turkey's national unity (Çelik, Bilali, and Iqbal 2017) provides justification for the discriminatory treatment of Kurds and prevents Kurdish politicians and parties from challenging Erdogan's hold on power.

Even in autocratic regimes, no one ruling coalition, agency, or organization has a monopoly on nation building. Nation building requires enough state capacity to put policies and symbolic politics into practice across the state while also attending to other priorities, presenting challenges for consistent, effective nation building from above. Since the national narrative must resonate with people, leaders engaged in nation building will often turn to existing stocks of symbols that are already proven important to the people. Therefore, this form of nation building does include some outside voices in the process but molds them into a form that serves the end of solidifying power. Also, nation building activities, such as education or monument construction, may be dictated or encouraged by the center, but regional authorities and civil servants are typically the ones to put them into practice. The central government must therefore rely on its agents in regional governments to implement nation-building policies and promote certain symbols at the local level, opening the door for regional actors to incorporate their own identity-building agenda. Depending upon the extent of the center's dominance and capacity, and the amount of leverage regions hold vis-à-vis the center, autocratic nation building can accommodate minimal deviations from the promoted nation-building efforts.

Those in government have the advantage of institutional resources for promoting their vision of the nation, such as control over education and official holidays, yet civil society can join the action as well. Cultural organizations can promote particular languages, customs, and readings of history that may or may not align with those promoted by the government. However, the extent of civil society's impact on the process varies depending upon the degree to which a regime permits independent action and deviations from its messaging. In autocratic nation building, those in power restrict or co-opt alternative builders. For example, the Putin regime integrated itself into the practice of the Immortal Regiment on Russia's Victory Day after civil society actors developed it as an alternative, nongovernmental way to commemorate the sacrifices of loved ones in World War II (Gabowitsch 2018). While democratic nation building allows for greater independence of civil society actors in how they enact their national identity, autocratic nation building necessitates control at the top. A multitude of nation builders weakens the capacity of nation building to serve as a means of consolidating power and control over the nation.

### Nation Building from Above and Below

Both democratic and autocratic nation building involve actors, actions, and structures at multiple levels of analysis. The national boundary formation processes can take many forms, including symbols and discourse, discrimination, political mobilization, and coercion or violence (Wimmer 2013, 74–75). Therefore, scholars have approached the study of nation building from above, focusing on government and elite action, and from below, analyzing group or individual attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Since nation building necessitates both the proposition of a particular identity and its reception and acceptance by the national community, a variety of actors are involved in the process.

With control over citizenship, education, language, and cultural policy, governments are in the strongest position to engage in nation building. Policies and laws set the boundaries for permissible

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action and signal what those in the government view as the important components of the nation, be it a particular language, religion, or historical narrative. Scholars often focus on nation-building policies to determine the character of nation building in a particular country, ranging from exclusive, eliminating certain groups from the community, to inclusive, bringing all groups into the national community. Policy studies typically focus either on why a particular type of nation-building policy is adopted or changed (Aktürk 2011; Mylonas 2012; Shevel 2009) or what the effects of such policies are (Smith 2008). Nation-building policy studies rely upon a combination of archival and interview data; and content analysis of the laws themselves and debates over their adoption.

Nation building from above also comes in the form of symbolic construction and action, including monuments (Cummings 2013; Forest and Johnson 2011), state museums (Mitchell 2016), and public holidays (Mpofu 2016; Petrone 2000). Through these avenues, elites articulate who are the nation's important figures and events, provide guidance on how people should remember them, and link their example to how people should act and feel about their nation in the present. Scholars engaged in analysis of these symbolic spaces often focus on one mode of nation building rather than integrating them as elements serving the same nation building aim.

Looking beyond government and elite action, there is increasing focus on "everyday nationalism," on the ways in which ordinary people engage in practices that shape and reproduce the national community (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Goode and Stroup 2015; Knott 2015). From this perspective, the enactment of particular identities on a daily basis can solidify those identities. While these practices may reinforce state-directed nation building, they can also challenge it or occur in the absence of clear, concerted efforts from above to shape national identity. These practices are particularly important in the nation-building process because they are constant, rather than occurring at punctuated moments of celebration, elections, or official proclamations. They also illustrate the extent to which the nation-building activities, such as those mentioned above, influence people's perceptions and emotions. To analyze individual agency and participation in nation building, ethnographic methods are common. With these methodologies, we can observe the extent to which people practice and identify with a particular national identity. In addition to ethnography, scholars utilize large-N surveys to measure national identification to explain who feels a sense of belonging to and pride in their nation and why (Kunovich 2009; Staerklé et al. 2010). With both methodologies, scholars fill gaps in understanding what influences feelings of national belonging and pride, as well as how non-elites influence the nation-building process.

In between official government and everyday action lies the media and civil society organizations that also shape the construction of national identities. Anderson (2006) identifies the printing press and print media as key forces behind the development of national communities as they disseminate information that the community collectively consumes. Therefore, scholars analyze how media language and framing of events can shape the boundaries of the community. For instance, examining the multilingual press in South Africa, Holmes (2015) finds that print media can detract from nation building when the community reads incongruent descriptions and evaluations of key events in different languages. Government elites can also enter this discursive space to enhance their nation building efforts, particularly in contexts with greater state control of the media and limited civil society action. In this case, studies of media and civil society face the task of untangling the directionality of action.

## *Blueprint for Nation-Building Studies*

All states may be "nationalizing states" (Brubaker 1996), yet they do not nationalize in the same way, or to the same extent. While some engage in nation building to enhance democratic processes and norms, others do so to strengthen autocratic power. Moving forward, it is important to interrogate whether we can use the same theories to explain nation building and nationalism when their end goals are different. The benchmark for successful nation building will be different for

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democratic and autocratic nation building. While one aims to foster emancipation and cooperation within an overarching political community, the other strives for quiescence and cooptation of a limited political community. Different theories for what drives nation-building success or national attachment under these conditions could elucidate how nation building works and its effects on society and governance.

Another important theoretical and methodological issue is how to better integrate the top-down and bottom-up approaches to nation building. Nation building requires both the promulgation of a national identity and its acceptance by members of the proposed national community (Isaacs and Polese 2015). Depending on the context, this promulgation may come more from the state or from society. The difficult task is to not only understand the way these segments of the population engage in nation building, but also how they interact and effect one another. Iterative interactions among nation builders present the challenge of identifying causality. There are attempts to understand the effectiveness of specific nation-building activities (Blouin and Mukand 2019; Koch 2013), but generally analyses do not present direct links between nation building and national attachment. One way to test these links is to focus on particular nation-building activities, such as monument construction, and then examine people's response to it through interviews, focus groups, surveys, or ethnography. The complicating factor then becomes the scalability and comparability of such studies in multiple countries and contexts.

A final direction for growth is spatially disaggregating the study of nation building. Since the goal of nation building is to align the boundaries of nation and state, scholars often treat it as a uniform process that occurs across the territory of the state. However, in practice, it is an uneven process that can take different forms and have different effects as it interacts with regional environments and attitudes. Just as we can identify varied processes and outcomes of democratization or economic development across countries (e.g., O'Donnell 1993; Gel'man and Ross 2010; Gervasoni 2010), we can explore regional variation in nation building. Scholars acknowledge that autonomous regions may decrease the likelihood of those living within them to feel a high sense of national attachment, yet little attention is paid to variation among both autonomous regions and nonautonomous regions in the nation-building strategies employed and their effectiveness. Instead, the presence of autonomous regions is often treated as a dummy variable in cross-national analyses.

Substate comparative analysis is ideally suited to deal with such "spatially uneven" processes and the tendency of aggregation to conceal variation to the detriment of theory (Snyder 2001). Aggregating sentiments of national attachment and focusing on nation-building efforts only in capitals misses the actions and reactions that take place across a country, the nation building experienced by people in their local communities. Important factors to consider in approaching a substate analysis of nation building include varying levels of penetration and incorporation of central state institutions (Harty 2001), capacity of local governments, strength and independence of civil society organizations, and diversity and compatibility of national narratives.

Nation-building studies have developed productively beyond its initial focus on Europe and the proposed East versus West and ethnic versus civic divide. Further incorporation of different regional experiences, while taking into account the complexities of democratic versus autocratic end goals, interactions of multiple nation builders, and uneven nation-building activities, will continue to expand our understanding of the sources, forms, and consequences of nation building.

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## Notes

1 Drawing upon Anderson (2006), Gellner (2006), and Renan (1994), a nation is a political community of people with a shared culture and historical memory who self-identify as members of the community. A state is a "set of organizations invested with the authority to make binding decisions for people and organizations juridically located in a particular territory and to implement these decisions using, if necessary, force" (Rueschemeyer and Evans 1985, 46–47).

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