

Our debt to Walker Connor: reflections from political theory

Margaret Moore*

Department of Political Studies, Queens University, Windsor, Canada

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First, let me say that it is a pleasure to be asked to comment on the work of Walker Connor, who is a huge figure in the study of nationalism, and has been tremendously influential for me both personally and in my own work. Let me say something personal, first. In the spring of 2005, Walker Connor came to my home university, Queen's University in Kingston, Canada, as a Fulbright Fellow. This was our first Fulbright Fellow and we were thrilled to have an international star in nationalism join us. He was witty, humorous, smart, and very, very kind. He was also – I was struck by this – very generous with his time, with students, and with junior scholars. He talked at length to our graduate students who were working on nationalism. He told me that he enjoyed students very much, and that in his opinion the American liberal arts colleges were excellent places to work because one could see the impact of one's ideas and challenges on students.

This was the first time – though since then there have been others – when I realized that some of the most successful scholars are both generous and intellectually curious; that they are the ones who come to seminars and to talks, even when not on their own research areas; and are still able to be productive scholars, who produce world-class research. Indeed, perhaps there is an inverse relationship between being jealous of one's time – at least for scholarly things – and one's own personal research agenda. This was eye-opening for me, since, as a relatively junior scholar, with a publication agenda, I was mainly trying to carve out space to “work on my own things,” and Walker Connor exemplified the opposite strategy, which I think was driven by his own intellectual curiosity. I have since tried to adopt Walker Connor's approach to academic events, with, I hope, some success, too.

I am not a political scientist and I do not study any particular nationally divided society or area of the world: I am a political philosopher by inclination and training, and am mainly interested in the normative evaluation of institutions and practices, in justice, human rights, and so on. But I have written two books on issues related to nationalism or national understanding: the first book (Moore 2001) was concerned with the ethical merits and limits of nationalism, including the justifiable limits of both nation-building and national self-determination strategies; and a book on territory (Moore 2015), which considers normative arguments for the territory of the state and examines boundary-drawing, secession, and other territorial issues. These were normative political theory books, even though on topics relevant to nationality studies. And for both books, Walker Connor's oeuvre was

*Email: margaret.moore@queensu.ca, moorem@queensu.ca

a tremendously valuable resource, as I will explain. I also think it is a tribute to the importance and accessibility of academic work that it reaches across disciplinary divides.

So, what were the most important insights that I drew on from Walker Connor? Certainly, at the time that I was writing, and also, to some extent still, political philosophy and political science generally was captivated by the idea of rationally self-interested agents. Of course, political philosophers knew that people were not rational, mutually disinterested agents, but most arguments justifying institutions or practices assumed, along the lines of Rawls, that people were rationally self-interested individuals and that institutional structures and practices ought to be justifiable to people who we assume share those motivations. There was a related tendency in journalistic analyses of current events and in social science generally to assume that people advance their own self-interest or that most cases of ethnic or national divisions could be cashed out in economic terms – as instances of unemployment, deprivation, or something else, so that the cure is increased opportunities, inclusion, and so on. There are many examples of this: it was sometimes argued in the context of the demise of Yugoslavia that Slovenia and Croatia left Yugoslavia because they thought Serbia and the other units of the federation were economic “drags” on their economy (though it was not clear that that explanation applied to other units, such as Kosovo or Macedonia), or that the conflict in Northern Ireland could be resolved by increasing employment among Catholic males – an assumption that is debunked in *Explaining Northern Ireland* by McGarry and O’Leary, who operate in their most Connor-esque mode (Connor 2001; McGarry and O’Leary 1995).

Walker Connor, more than anyone else, raised serious questions about these assumptions. He did not argue that this collective identity was “primordial,” which relies on a very lazy and false division between “primordial” and “constructed” nationalist explanations. He did however argue that, even when identities are constructed, by social conditions of modernity, they are not easily de-constructed, and that we have to take seriously the strength and resilience of national forms of collective identities (Connor 1984b, 1993). Against those in the comparative political science field, who were inclined to theorize ethnic mobilization in terms of an “ethnic entrepreneur,” Connor’s work leads to a different and more fundamental question, which is why people can be more easily mobilized along ethno-national lines rather than class or gender lines. His work *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Connor 1984a) posed this question in the starkest form, but all his work suggests that nationalism cannot be reduced to more fundamental “economic” interests: it is a form of collective identity that has a strength and resilience of its own.

Connor’s analysis of the strength and resilience of national identities can also be applied to many current events. His analysis could have explained the fall-out over the Greek bailout, and especially Germany’s reaction to it – and, unlike those who rely on broadly economic self-interested rationale – also why the massive under-writing (bailout) of the eastern portion of Germany when the two merged proceeded with much less political opposition. It also suggests that the optimism surrounding the prospects for European Union (EU) integration once Brexit is completed – the idea associated with the new French President Emmanuel Macron that integration will be easier once the British are no longer in the EU – may be misplaced. The British, an island nation who have not been invaded since 1066, are probably less European in orientation than other EU countries, but we should not underestimate nationalism in other countries of Europe, which can take the form of hostility to further EU integration.

The point that I took from Connor’s astute analysis of nationalism was the pointlessness of wringing one’s hands about the identities and commitments that people have, wishing

that they were different people (which many relatively cosmopolitan intellectual elites are inclined to do). The question is what, normatively, people are entitled to do on behalf of the identities that they have. A similar issue arises with respect to families and friends. I can feel partiality towards my son or my sister. But that does not mean that, if I was on a hiring committee at a university and my son or sister applied, that I am entitled to advance their interests in that context. The important question was what normatively people (of broadly liberal-democratic persuasion) should be permitted to do to advance their collective identities, and projects based on it. This was the fundamental question of my 2001 book *Ethics of Nationalism*. It was premised on an initial acceptance of Walker Connor's framing of these identities, not necessarily always as ethno-national ones particularly, although often they were, but as collective identities and attachments, in need of normative analysis. I believe that Walker Connor's work still represents a welcome antidote to the tendency to assume that people are rationally self-interested actors and that nationalism can be theorized as displaced economic reasoning.

What else is important in Walker Connor's work? In Moore (2001), and perhaps even more in Moore (2015), I took up Walker Connor's theme of distinguishing between internal and external self-determination. It is pretty common to associate democracy with internal self-determination, and it is extremely easy to see how a democratic people can be depicted as self-determining because they have the institutional mechanisms to shape their collective lives together, through democratic self-government. It is harder to see how non-democratic societies can be described as self-determining, or what is wrong with democracy in cases where the group in question is not in charge of its own life. At the root of this myopia about self-determination is a fundamentally individualist methodology. To some extent of course, an individual methodology about value makes sense: after all, individual human beings are the ones who live lives, are happy, have interests that ought to be protected, and so on. When an individual is able to vote, it is easy – or at any rate easier – to see that act as an expression of self-determination, premised on the vertical mechanisms of input and accountability.

But it is harder – if we adopt a purely individualist lens – to see group identification as an important element of self-determination. Walker Connor was one of the first, and certainly one of the most persuasive, voices questioning this assumption that democracy and self-determination are the same thing, or should be assimilated in important ways. He saw that popular sovereignty was not so much about democracy but about group self-government, and had a very important nationalist direction. He outlined how “the people” become identified with “the nation” and how national self-determination was equated with “popular sovereignty” (Connor 2002, 31).

Interestingly, Connor's discussion of legitimacy and the importance of collective identities and popular sovereignty has recently been vindicated empirically, in relation to cases that Connor did not discuss, and without any awareness of the Connor-esque aspects of the analysis. One recent book, by van Middelaar (2013) on the formation of the EU, argues that political entities rely on three kinds of legitimacy: justice, democracy, and what Connor identified as nationalism or anyway collective identities that are associated with being collectively self-determining. In van Middelaar's analysis, the EU, he argues, has three basic legitimation strategies: the Roman strategy, by which he means justice, the rule of law, rights and obligations; what he calls the Greek strategy, by which he means democratic governance; and then what is called the German strategy, which refers to the development of important forms of collective identities, and expressing them with flags, symbols, and so on. And van Middelaar suggests that the EU has been very good at the first but less good at either democracy or self-determination, as Connor would understand it.

Middlelaar's account of the sources of legitimacy was prefigured by Walker Connor, who, more than anyone else writing at the time, was cognizant of people's group-based identities and affiliations and the way that they could be used to legitimize existing institutional structures, or undermine others; and in a way the insufficiency of focusing just on law or justice or even democracy understood as requiring equal voice. People care also in what government, and in what place they get that voice.

Finally, let me turn to the third way in which Walker Connor was importantly different from other people's writing, which has been enormously influential for my work. This is that, although states are territorial entities, there is very little attention given to the territorial dimension of statehood. Consider, for example, John Rawls's work, which is typical of much Anglo-American political theory in its focus on the appropriate relations between citizen and the state, the limits of state power, and principles of distributive justice, but which fails to address the territorial or geographical domain of "sovereignty" or the "state." In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls begins with the convenient simplifying assumption that the just society is closed: that it is a "self-sufficient association of persons," thereby abstracting from the issue of the territory to which the "just society" is entitled and the relationship of that territory to other territories.

Rawls's conception that justice is concerned with the principles that ought to govern the basic institutional structure of the society sparked a considerable debate among theorists of global justice. Cosmopolitan theorists disagreed with Rawls about limiting the scope of justice to the state, but they too failed to notice that justice is conceptualized as applying with a territorially delimited political community without asking the question of what the basis is for that. Walker Connor was the first person I read who focused on the fact that the state is territorial, and the collective sentiments, collective imaginaries, involve land in important ways. Current political theories of distributive justice had nothing to say about land, or where boundaries should be drawn, or how territorial disputes should be resolved. And yet this seems inadequate, not only because there are such disputes, but also because it seems that ordinary people and ordinary political discourse appealed to something like the idea of a homeland, a land that is infused with meaning for a particular group; so it seemed important to analyze the basis of this, and whether or to what extent we should assume that this is of normative significance.

Walker Connor was not only an original thinker, who suggested fresh ways of looking at our world, but also saw, more clearly than most of us, the ways in which our presuppositions and assumptions blinker us and prevent us from seeing the obvious appeals to nations, to groups that we identify with, and places that we regard as our homeland, as important sources of belonging and loyalty, and asking hard questions about this. On all three topics (on the rejection of individualistic and economic reasoning to issues of nationalism and mobilization; on the theorization of self-determination in a way that is not reducible to democracy but involves group mobilization and group loyalty; and on his work on homelands), Walker Connor has been enormously influential, and his work on nationalism and legitimacy and self-determination will have lasting resonance.

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