

STATE OF THE FIELD

Nationalism and Economy

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Abstract

This article reviews recent literature concerned with the analysis of the relationship between nationalism and economy. First, it discusses scholarship advocating a new understanding of the concept of “economic nationalism” beyond its traditional focus on protectionist state policies. Second, the article branches out to consider a more interdisciplinary body of literature addressing the nationalism-economy nexus, and it relates this literature to broader debates in nationalism studies, distinguishing between three prominent approaches in the discipline: nationalism as political movement and ideology; nationalism as political discourse; and everyday nationalism. The article concludes with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: economy; nationalist ideology; political discourse; everyday nationalism

Introduction

The significance of economic processes for the emergence of nationalism as a modern ideology and movement has been intensely debated in the field of nationalism studies. Influential interpretations, such as Gellner’s industrialization thesis or heterodox Marxist notions of uneven economic development, have become crucial points of reference and critical engagement for scholars of nationalism (Smith 1998, 47–69).

In those debates, though, the relationship between economy and nationalism is usually conceptualized in “external” cause-and-effect terms. Nationalism and economy are treated as analytically separate realms, while the economic dimension of nationalism itself—that is, how nationalism is expressed in ideas and practices of production and consumption, investment, economic regulation, and distribution—is hardly addressed.

This reflects a pattern of relative neglect. Many of the standard introductory textbooks to nationalism studies (e.g., Smith 2010; Özkirimli 2010), for example, contain few references to economic issues. Some widely distributed handbooks and encyclopedias, likewise—while containing chapters exploring the relationship between nationalism and a range of themes, such as race and gender, art, religion, music and sports—do not dedicate a single chapter to the economy (e.g., Delanty and Kumar 2006). Others “outsource” such a chapter to political economists who operate with a problematic concept of “economic nationalism,” which is equated with protectionism and anachronistically traced back to early modern mercantilism (e.g., Spechler, 2001).

In recent years, however, new approaches have emerged that take a fresh look at the analysis of the linkages between nationalism and the economy, which are part of a broader reassessment of the significance of culture for the study of political economy (e.g., Best and Paterson 2010). This article provides a survey of the literature associated with these new approaches, highlighting the main innovative traits in conceptual and empirical terms.

I proceed in two steps. In the first part, I review scholarship promoting a new understanding of the concept of “economic nationalism,” which mostly originates from the field of political economy. In the second part, I examine a more interdisciplinary body of literature addressing the nationalism-economy nexus in a wide range of contexts, and I connect this literature to broader debates in nationalism studies, distinguishing between three prominent approaches in the discipline: nationalism as political movement and ideology; nationalism as political discourse; and everyday nationalism. To substantiate these three approaches, I discuss a selection of empirical studies, and I also illustrate their usefulness through brief reflections on the specific case of the contemporary United States. The article concludes with suggestions for future research.

A New Understanding of “Economic Nationalism”

Since the emergence of the term “economic nationalism” in the interwar period (Heilperin 1960), it has mostly been understood as a set of state practices challenging liberal principles of international economic exchange, with a particular emphasis on protectionist trade and monetary regimes. To this day, this conceptualization has remained dominant in academic and policy debates alike, reflected not least in its canonization as a “school” of international political economy associated with realist international relations theory (e.g., O’Brien and Williams 2016).

Over the last two decades, however, this traditional approach has been challenged by a group of “revisionist” scholars. They have argued, first, that the traditional understanding is misleading because of its conflation of “state” and “nation,” most clearly reflected in the conceptual equation of “economic nationalism” and “mercantilism” (Crane 1998; Pickel 2003). Why, these scholars asked, should we label protectionist state policies as “nationalist” if these policies might be motivated by entirely different interests and ideas (Helleiner 2002, 309)? For revisionists, “economic nationalism” must be conceptualized in ideational terms rather than as a specific policy. Friedrich List, for example, does not qualify as an “economic nationalist” because of his support for “infant industry” protection, but because his political agenda was embedded in a broader ontological critique of liberal economics, which neglected the significance of the nation as an economic space (Levi-Faur 1997).

Second, revisionist scholars have highlighted that it makes no sense to conceptualize economic nationalism in juxtaposition to economic globalization. They argued that researchers ought to be agnostic about the precise policy implications of economic nationalism. Depending on context, economic nationalism may at times go hand in hand with protectionist practices, but at other times it may manifest itself as “liberal economic nationalism,” actively promoting the deepening of international economic exchange (Helleiner and Pickel 2005).

Based on these conceptual insights, a rich empirical literature has emerged, whose principal focus is a renewed exploration of the relationship between economic nationalism and international economic integration. In macro-historical perspective, Helleiner (2002) has demonstrated the variety of nationalist views on the international economy in the nineteenth century but has particularly highlighted the frequently close connection between liberal and nationalist economic thought and practice. Likewise, drawing on contemporary cases of majority and minority nationalism, Shulman (2000) maps the complex ways in which international economic integration may boost, rather than undermine, nationalist ideals.

Case studies frequently come to similar conclusions, although the ideational content invariably reflects important peculiarities. Post-1945 German economic nationalism, with its emphasis on export competitiveness and monetary stability, for example, has been associated with the negative legacies of war and national socialism (Müller 2005), while Hungary’s recent turn towards “financial nationalism” needs to be understood in light of the country’s post-communist transition path since the 1990s (Johnson and Barnes 2015). In the case of East and Southeast Asia, revisionist scholarship primarily seeks to address the long-standing debates about the significance of “developmental states” in that region (D’Costa 2012).

Revisionists have successfully exposed the flaws of traditional understandings of economic nationalism. However, nationalism studies scholars might find it difficult to relate their work to this revisionist literature. On the one hand, there appears to be a lack of conceptual linkages, as revisionists have remained rather detached from core debates in nationalism studies (Fetzer 2019, 57–59). For example, although introductory handbooks to nationalism invariably highlight the fundamental differences between an understanding of nationalism as a political movement and ideology, or as a sentiment of belonging (e.g., Breuilly 2013), these are often mixed up in the new economic nationalism literature.

On the other hand, revisionist scholars unfortunately perpetuate the tendency to treat economic nationalism as analytically inseparable from international economic integration, most clearly reflected in their conceptualization of liberal economic nationalism as promotion of international economic openness (Fetzer 2019, 59). Nationalism studies scholars are likely to look askance at such a narrow approach.

Interdisciplinary scholarship on the nationalism-economy nexus

Renewed interest in the relationship between nationalism and the economy has not been limited to work associated with the revisionist economic nationalism literature. Indeed, there is a much broader and interdisciplinary new body of scholarship addressing the nationalism-economy nexus. However, this scholarship is scattered across disciplines, and only a few isolated sub-themes, such as the linkages between currencies and national identity (e.g., Veselkova and Horvath 2011; Penrose and Cumming 2011), have so far attracted significant attention in mainstream nationalism studies.

Building on earlier work (Berger and Fetzer 2019), this section seeks to map the different strands of this literature in a comprehensive way and to systematically relate them to broader debates in nationalism studies. In order to do so, I draw on three prominent approaches to nationalism in the discipline: nationalism as political movement and ideology; nationalism as a political discourse; and nationalism as an everyday sentiment and practice. Each approach is illustrated with selective references to empirical studies, and I use the case of the post-2008 United States to highlight the relevance of all three approaches for the analysis of one and the same country and time period.

Economy and Nationalism as Political Movement and Ideology

In the classic understanding of nationalism as a political ideology and movement, researchers focus on comprehensive political agendas informed by a nationalist doctrinal core, which may be narrowly conceived as political self-rule (e.g., Gellner 1983) or posited in broader terms that include concerns with national culture and community (e.g., Smith 2010). The analysis of nationalist ideologies and movements requires distinct methodological tools, but empirically the two are often closely tied together (Smith 2010, 8–9). To structure the literature review, it is useful to draw on Breuilly's distinction between (1) those whose activities are directed against a state they do not consider their own and (2) those intent on reforming their state in a nationalist direction (Breuilly 1993, 9–10).¹ Moreover, the analysis needs to include state-driven agendas of “nation building” (and “nation rebuilding”) that derive from assumptions about territorial sovereignty (or autonomy) as being just a first step in the creation of national communities (Wimmer 2018).

So far, mainstream nationalism studies have paid little attention to the insights generated by scholarship concerned with the economic dimensions of nationalist political agendas. Historical studies of separatist movements in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, have highlighted the importance of economy-related campaigns for nationalist mobilization, institutionally anchored in the cooperative movement with its ideals of mutuality and “self-help” (Schultz and Kubu 2006; Lorenz 2006). Likewise, anti-colonialist mobilization in India drew strongly on the impulse to contain the imports of British goods and capital, and campaigns for economic “self-reliance” (*swadeshi*) became closely connected to demands for home rule (Goswami 1998). Such campaigns

could achieve a significant mobilization effect, not least because they gave nationalist demands a tangible everyday meaning and thus helped to reach out to broader segments of the population (Trivedi 2003).

Economic autonomy agendas have also been demonstrated to be of crucial importance for many historical cases of post-independence “nation building.” In particular, scholars have highlighted how economic development policies of newly independent states were tied to notions of economic sovereignty, most significantly expressed in programs of land reform and the “nostrification” of foreign property, which were implemented at a significant scale in countries across Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia (Burnell 1986; Szlajfer 2012).

Today, economic autonomy agendas appear to have less salience in certain respects, such as, for example, currency management (Helleiner 2005). Yet, such agendas still help to inspire separatist movements and “nation-building” programs—witness the prominent emphasis on fiscal policy autonomy in Scotland, Catalonia, and elsewhere (Boylan 2015; Beland and Lecours 2008; Herrera 2004). Moreover, such agendas are now frequently associated with broader identity concerns at the heart of nationalist mobilization. Movements like those in Scotland and Quebec, for example, seek to justify separatist aspirations in part in terms of their communities’ alleged greater propensity for economic redistribution (Beland and Lecours 2008). At the same time, questions related to a country’s adherence to regional and international economic frameworks have also become part of separatist “nation-building” agendas. Abdelal (2001), for example, highlights the urge of governments in several post-Soviet republics to secure membership in European trade arrangements to economically move away from what they considered to be the “imperial” space they had overcome.

Compared to the literature on separatism, scholarship concerned with nationalist reform movements is less extensive, though it equally points to the significance of economic agendas. Gerth (2003), for example, highlights the importance of consumer mobilization for early 20th century reform movements in China. Others, drawing on the conceptualization of interwar fascism as palingenetic nationalism (Griffin 1991), have examined the extent to which German and Italian fascism espoused a distinct “third way” economics between capitalism and socialism (Baker 2006). Historical research on populist national renewal movements in Latin America points to the significance of an anti-imperialist agenda to struggle against economic dependence on the United States (Germani 1978), which has recently been revitalized by “Bolivarianism” (de la Torre 2017). Studies of contemporary right-wing populist movements in Europe identify supranational economic integration as one of the core contentious issues for these movements (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 32–37).

The case of the United States most dramatically highlights the political salience of economically-driven, right-wing populism today. Crucially, to comprehend this salience, it is insufficient to follow the traditional approach of economic nationalism research, such as examining “America First” policies related to trade protectionism, the rejuvenation of manufacturing in the United States, and the associated international consequences of these policies, especially new trade wars with China (Noland 2018).

Instead, these policies are best conceptualized as themselves derived from a much wider agenda based on notions of “producerism,” which have a political lineage going back to the late nineteenth century and whose contemporary revival started with the Tea Party movement in the late 2000s (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019). “Producerism” essentially posits a dichotomy between the national core of the hard-working “people” whose needs and interests have been betrayed by a corrupt and parasitic political and economic elite working alongside hostile foreign powers, and whose productive resources have been additionally “squeezed” by what many populist nationalists consider an ‘undeserving’ underclass (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2019). In other words, the US case demonstrates that economic agendas of populist movements, rather than an issue-specific policy program, directly speak to the cultural and political core of the populist cause.

This example highlights that scholarship concerned with the nexus between the economy and nationalist movements and ideologies does not just provide rich empirical detail but addresses broader themes of the nationalism studies field. Thus, economically-focused studies also relate to

the long-standing debate about nationalist boundary drawing and exclusion, as economic agendas of nationalist movements and state-driven nation-building have frequently included campaigns against “internal outsiders,” such as ethnic and national minorities (Chua 2003; Lorenz 2006). From a different perspective, the emphasis on the theme of “completing nationhood” through economic means speaks to the broader literature concerned with the process of nation formation (Smith 2002). Moreover, while there are few attempts to relate economic analyses to comparative typologies of nationalism (Maxwell, 2010), Greenfeld’s (2001) work highlights the potential to develop such a research agenda in the future.

Economy and Nationalism as Political Discourse

Compared to an understanding of nationalism as political movement and ideology, a political discourse approach relies on very different conceptual assumptions. Nationalism is here not conceived as a political doctrine carried forward by specific, ideologically committed groups, movements, or parties, but rather it is conceived as a discursive repertoire available to any political actor (Brubaker 1996; Wodak 2017). Researchers in this tradition seek to understand the ways in which nationalism helps political actors—beyond ideologically committed nationalists—to frame their agendas and strategies. They are particularly interested in how different actors appropriate national categories and compete with each other by invoking national frames to legitimize contrasting political strategies (Verdery 1993).

Recent research from a variety of disciplines has highlighted the significance of nationalist political discourse in many economic policy debates. This ranges from studies about mundane contexts, such as the debates about foreign takeovers of domestic firms (Callaghan and Hees 2013), to scholarship concerned with the most exceptional circumstances, such as the deployment of national rhetoric of solidarity and sacrifice to justify wartime tax policies (Mehrotra 2010).

National framing dynamics are perhaps most obvious when policy agendas frequently display references to alleged national values or narratives about the national past, such as debates about the management of major economic crises or transformations (e.g., Eichler 2005; Sheppard 2011). Moreover, national framing related to economic crisis management is regularly employed to discredit political opponents. This is especially relevant when foreign countries or international economic institutions are actively involved in the management of economic crises or transformations. In such cases, national framing becomes associated with arguments about the loss of national dignity and independence as well as denunciations of domestic opponents as “traitors” of the national cause (Michailidou 2017).

Beyond its relevance for economic crisis narratives, nation-centered discursive framing has also been identified in a number of other contexts, such as in debates about regulatory reforms. Studies concerned with the significance of debates about the Confucian heritage for the regulation of capitalism in 20th century Japan (Conrad 2010) or the controversy about the decline of national industrial culture at the heart of regulatory debates in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s (Tomlinson 2000) provide good illustrations in this respect. Here, national framing is driven by the question of whether regulatory patterns should be considered part of a distinct national tradition and whether such a national “heritage” ought to be protected (Bond, McCrone, and Brown 2003).

Although less frequently researched, discourses of national solidarity have also been demonstrated as relevant for a range of economic policy debates. At the broadest level, this applies to discourses associated with policy agendas to foster economic ties between homeland and diaspora communities (e.g., Nyiri 2001). Domestically, the significance of national solidarity discourses is highlighted in studies concerned with welfare policies as well as labor relations (Fetzer 2012, 51–105).

For further empirical illustration of the fruitfulness of a political discourse approach, it is instructive to again briefly look at the case of the contemporary United States and the recurrent debates about “economic patriotism.” These debates have involved a range of political actors far beyond ideological nationalists, and their political salience is easily understood by considering that

they have accompanied major electoral campaigns throughout the 2010s—from the Obama-Romney clash in 2012 to the recent controversies about Bernie Sanders’ “corporate patriotism” campaign and Elizabeth Warren’s pledge for a new patriotically inspired industrial policy (Obama 2012; Warren 2019).

While different in focus—compare Sanders’ emphasis on tax morale as a patriotic duty with Warren’s broader economic development agenda—these debates highlight the importance of conflict in the study of nationalism as a political discourse, as republicans and libertarians have continuously contested notions of a state-driven “economic patriotism,” drawing on traditional tropes of American identity, such as skepticism of “big government” (Campbell 1998, 395–398). Overall, this entailed a situation where a wide range of actors were engaged in either seeking to capture the legitimating power of nationalist discourse or to deny these legitimating effects to their political opponents.

To date, much of the economy-related research on nationalist discourse has a rather strong descriptive focus. In the future, more efforts are needed to relate case study findings to the more general questions of nationalism studies scholars as to when, how, under what conditions, and with what results nationalist discursive frames acquire political salience. For example, as for the “when,” recent work on UK parliamentary debates about foreign takeovers of domestic firms highlights the change in the relative salience of “nation” to frame policy positions since the 1950s (Callaghan and Hees 2013). Likewise, regarding results, the impact of national framing on audiences and on policy outcomes requires more sustained and systematic inquiry, including particular attention to cases where national framing fails to achieve its intended effects (e.g., Callaghan and Lagneau-Ymonet 2012).

Economy and Everyday Nationalism

The “everyday nationalism” approach moves beyond elite politics, exploring quotidian notions of national identity and belonging among the population at large (Deloye 2013). For the purpose of review, it is useful to draw a distinction between two different approaches. One of them is based on Billig’s *Banal Nationalism* (1995). It is concerned with the analysis of a variety of routinized and institutionally entrenched discourses and practices, which recurrently “flag” nationhood in structured patterns on an everyday basis. The other takes a bottom-up approach to examine the variety of ways in which ordinary people use “nation talk” in their everyday lives (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

Starting with the former approach, there is already a rich body of scholarship demonstrating that notions of national belonging can be powerfully nurtured by representations of the national economy as a distinct space (Mitchell 1998). Economic statistics, for example, continuously reproduce the idea of a measurable national economic space (Tooze 1998) while currencies can help individuals to situate themselves as part of a bounded community of everyday experience (Helleiner 1998, 1414–1323). Importantly, economic globalization appears to reinforce, rather than weaken, these notions—witness the ubiquitous presence of “nation branding” to attract foreign investors and tourists in the contemporary global economy (Aronczyk 2013).

Beyond providing continuous reminders of the existence of a distinct national space, economic life also reproduces banal notions of uniqueness. For example, economic events or processes may shape memory narratives of the “national” past. As references to the “economic miracles” in post-1945 Germany and Japan indicate, rapid and unexpected economic success may even be remembered in quasi-religious terms of salvation and redemption (Müller 2005, 144–146).

Imagined national economic “cultures” provide another interesting field of analysis. At the macro level, this relates to the ways in which notions of banal national uniqueness can be constructed through pride in specific economic practices and institutions, as illustrated, for example, in discourses about the uniqueness of “national work” and the patriotic elevation of “Made in” labels (Conrad 2006). At the micro level, specific firms and products may become national icons associated with imagined national economic cultures (e.g., Rieger 2013).

Consumption is the realm in which notions of national culture routinely acquire an economic dimension. Numerous authors have investigated the discourses and practices through which specific consumer goods become “nationalized”—from food and drink (Wilson, 2006) to various industrial goods, such as furniture, clothes, household design, and automobiles (Edensor 2002; Kühschelm, Eder, and Siegrist 2012). Emphasis has been placed on the crucial role played by corporate marketing in the reproduction of such banal notions of national uniqueness, highlighting how advertising frequently seeks to create or conserve images of products as national brands (e.g., Prideaux 2009).

Research is much less extensive if we shift from top-down to bottom-up approaches to everyday nationalism. Still, some sociologists and anthropologists have examined how ordinary people use national framing to articulate everyday concerns, such as in workplaces (Nyiri 2001; Fox 2007). Other work has adopted a bottom-up approach to the study of consumption practices, highlighting the various ways through which people “nationalize” products on an everyday basis (Castello and Mihelj 2018).

Based on very different methodological assumptions, there is also a body of scholarship by economists, which can be related to what Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008, 542–545) call everyday “national choices.” The key question here is how to explain the so-called “home bias” (i.e., the fact that there is statistically significant evidence that individual consumers prefer to buy products they think were made in their own countries [Lewis 1999]). Much of the “home bias” is usually explained by transaction costs and barriers, but, to some extent, everyday national loyalty appears to matter too. Similarly, investment decisions may reflect “patriotism in the portfolio” (Morse and Shive 2011).

As with the previous sections on nationalism as ideology and political discourse, the contemporary United States further illustrates the usefulness of an economic focus in relation to everyday nationalism. On the one hand, the economy can be considered a crucial realm to highlight the salience of institutionally rooted, everyday “nation talk” in the USA since the 2008 crisis. This is particularly expressed in “Buy American” and “Made in America” discourses in the media and in corporate advertising, which, while having a long historical tradition (Frank 1999), have recently experienced a major upsurge (Elliott 2012).

On the other hand, the post-2008 USA case also points to interesting “bottom-up” dynamics of everyday nationalism. For example, in the field of housing policy, the sub-prime crisis witnessed popular mobilization drawing on notions of American identity to fight against evictions and defend the access to mortgage credit for low-income groups (Seabrooke 2012).

While scattered across disciplines and often driven by divergent research agendas, the literature reviewed in this section has the potential to further enrich everyday nationalism scholarship. Indeed, it could make useful contributions to some of the core debates in the field. For example, a focus on workplace contexts provides insights on the widely debated question about the saliency and consistency of national reference frames and how they interact with other discursive repertoires (Knott 2015, 8–9). From a different perspective, exploring the links between everyday consumer patriotism and more overt political “buy national” campaigns can shed new light on the relationship between everyday and “hot” nationalism (Knott 2015, 3–4). And, perhaps most importantly, there is reason to believe that a stronger focus on the economy could also help develop the comparative dimension of everyday nationalism scholarship (Bonikowski 2017).

Conclusions

This article has provided a survey of literature concerned with the nexus between nationalism and economy, aligning itself with a growing chorus of scholars who highlight the central importance of the economic realm for the articulation of nationalism in the contemporary world (Castello and Mihelj 2018; Dumitrica 2019). In terms of analytical approach, while acknowledging the legitimate case to be made for a further revision of the traditional concept of economic nationalism (Castello and Mihelj 2018), this article has adopted a preference for a more generic stance, which relates the analysis of nationalism in the economic realm to other, well-established approaches in the discipline.

Accordingly, my concluding reflections on further research follow the same threefold distinction introduced earlier, starting with studies concerned with nationalism as a political ideology and movement. Here, I see particular potential to connect economic analysis to the debates about comparative typologies of nationalism. Drawing on recent work related to the symbiotic capacity of nationalist doctrines (Vincent 2012), researchers could examine how nationalism “inhabits” other ideologies in the economic realm. They could explore, for example, how the nationalist self-determination principle feeds into (neo)liberal doctrines (Harmes 2012) or how a confluence of nationalist and socialist ideologies can underpin property nationalization programs.

As for nationalism as a political discourse, more systematic work is needed as to when, how, under what conditions, and with what results nationalism helps to frame economic policy agendas. Under what conditions, for example, does nation-framing become part of debates about a crisis of socio-economic institutions? Why do some nation-centered framings acquire dominance over others? Beyond “classic” political economy themes, links could also be made to security studies. Building on securitization studies (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998), researchers could examine how national categories are invoked by actors to back up a broader framing of specific economic policies as security issues, such as with energy policy.

Finally, in relation to everyday nationalism, analytical efforts are needed to explore how everyday nationalism influences economic policy. Drawing on insights from the “everyday international political economy” approach (Hobson and Seabrooke 2007), scholars should investigate to what extent new economic policy agendas can rely on legitimacy resources provided by everyday nationalism or, from a more bottom-up perspective, how everyday nationalism may place constraints on the range of legitimate options economic policy actors can pursue.

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Note

1 Breuilly (1993, 9) lists “unification” movements as a separate third type. These are not considered here.

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