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Book Review: Siniša Malešević (2019).
Grounded Nationalisms.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Abstract

A review of the latest book by Siniša Malešević, an established theoretician of nationalism. The review not only indicates the main theoretical innovation of this work in relation to his previous works, but also identifies Malešević's two-fold theoretical contribution to contemporary theories of nationalism.

Keywords: nationalism, state, political modernity, Siniša Malešević, Ernest Gellner.

Introduction

Siniša Malešević is a theoretician of nationalism who has accustomed us to a very good, though quite rare in social sciences, style of theorizing. Each of his regularly published books combines extraordinary intellectual rigor and precision with imaginativeness, clarity and intellectual freshness

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of argument. In his latest book, *Grounded Nationalisms* (2019)¹, Malešević firmly continues this direction, taking another step on his way to formulating an original theory of nationalism in the spirit of political sociology.

Grounded Nationalisms (2019) is a collection of closely interlinked articles built around a well-exposed main thesis which states that nationalism is the dominant form of modern subjectivity, whose ever-growing strength is provided by several types of its grounding in social reality (Malešević, 2019, pp. 5-15). This is a developed re-articulation of the thesis, the previous version of which the author presented most fully in his 2013 work (Malešević, 2013). Although most of the eleven chapters of his latest book at first glance resemble articles that the author has published in recent years in academic journals, these are all substantially revised and extended versions that undoubtedly constitute an original conceptual whole.

The Main Innovation

The main theoretical innovation this book introduces is the title concept of **grounded nationalism** that allows Malešević to integrate, under one conceptual roof, three structural socio-political processes fundamental to his theory of nationalism, which he has so far described as historically intertwined but conceptually separate.

Firstly, Malešević considers ‘**organizational grounding**’ to be a central condition for the existence of nationalism, thus keeping the primarily materialistic way of thinking that is characteristic of the entire political modernity paradigm in nationalism studies. The author understands organizational grounding as a product of the process of cumulative bureaucratization of coercion he depicts as a series of structural changes that in the 18th and 19th centuries led to the emergence of a modern state as a historically distinct form of political organization which secured global dominance in the 20th century. For Malešević, organizational grounding is an institutional backbone on which nationalism is based and grows.

Secondly, the author points to the key role of ‘**ideological grounding**’ as a product of centrifugal ideologization, i.e. the process of filling the institutional state framework with moral content justifying the rightfulness of state power over individuals and societies. Ideological grounding is a situation where a nation-centric narrative is present in all the most important channels of institutional communication, such as school subjects, media channels, political programmes, etc. This is where nationalism appears in the strict sense, i.e. as “the most potent operative ideological discourse of the

¹ The full reference: Siniša Malešević (2019). *Grounded Nationalisms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9781108441247, 320 pp., £ 22.99.

modern era” (Malešević, 2019, p. 8). By appreciating ideological grounding, the author maintains the Weberian conviction that there is no long-lasting authority without legitimacy.

Thirdly, Malešević discusses ‘**micro-interactional grounding**’ as a product of the process of enveloping micro-solidarity, i.e. increasing penetration of social networks by nationalism, from formal relations in the workplace and public space to relations in small social groups such as families or groups of friends. Micro-interactional grounding is a situation where a nation-centric narrative is routinely, automatically reproduced in millions of ordinary, non-political, everyday interactions between people close to one another. According to the author, only this deep rootedness provides nationalism with full ideological success.

Finally, the title concept is complemented by ‘**historical grounding**’, which is to a lesser extent its separate dimension, and more a meta-assumption of the fundamentally historical nature of social reality, which permeates the analysis of the other three types of grounding. Malešević thus remains a consistent representative of neo-Weberian historical sociology, which in recent years has become the main focus of his work (Malešević, 2015, 2017a, 2017b). The most widely discussed historical contexts in this book are the Balkans and the British Isles (mostly Ireland).

The Main Contribution

The book’s most important contribution to contemporary theories of nationalism is twofold. **Firstly**, Malešević develops a well-founded political modernist *longue durée* theory of nationalism (Chapters 1-4). Starting with Gellner’s canonical thesis of the modern provenance of nationalism, which, for many reasons, could not have existed in the premodern era (Gellner, 1983), Malešević rejects the well-known Gellnerian ‘Big Ditch Theory’ which proclaimed a radical break between these two epochs and interpreted nationalism as a complete historical novelty springing out of nowhere. Instead, he interprets modernity as an advanced reconfiguration of the organizational and proto-ideological resources that were present in premodern times, but in embryonic and dispersed form. In this way he reconciles the argument of continuity between the two epochs with the argument of the unique historical role of modernity.

Malešević’s theory integrates the most important output of neo-Weberian historical sociology (e.g. Collins, 1999; Mann, 1993; Tilly, 1992) into the Gellnerian intellectual framework in nationalism studies, thus posing a serious challenge to the culturalist approach embodied in Anthony D. Smith’s

ethnosymbolism (see e.g. Smith, 1998, 2009), that is considered the most significant theory in the field with such a broad time horizon (Chapter 2). Showing in detail how modern nationalism emerged from premodern organizational and (proto)ideological resources, Malešević proves the strength of the political modernist paradigm as capable of articulating a coherent story about the historical continuity of the process of creation of nations in political rather than cultural terms. In this way, Malešević demonstrates that Smith and other culturalists no longer hold a monopoly on the well-founded interpretation of the premodern roots of modern nationalisms.

Furthermore, Malešević's *longue durée* theory of nationalism corrects and develops the above-mentioned achievements of historical sociology. These corrections consist primarily in showing several research limitations resulting from the presentist perception of the premodern era. For example, the author warns against overestimating the role of the state at that time and encourages us to look for sources of modern state power in other organizational vehicles, such as city-states, religious institutions or social layers. Most importantly, however, Malešević challenges the prevalent traditional view that there is a fundamental difference between empires and nation-states as two types of polities with radically different characteristics. He chooses examples of old imperial states (e.g. France, Britain, Russia) and new nation-states (e.g. Serbia, Bulgaria) from the 19th and early 20th centuries, to show that often within a single political order both imperial and national elements were present at the same time, both in organizational (Chapter 3) and ideological (Chapter 4) dimensions.

Secondly, the author challenges (Chapters 5-6 and 8) the very influential theory of "small-nation formation" of Czech historian Miroslav Hroch (1985, 2015), which is very rarely criticized primarily because of the very high, hardly questionable, empirical quality of Hroch's comparative historical analysis. Although Malešević does not offer an extensive and systematic overall critique of the theoretical model developed by Hroch, he accurately attacks its two key aspects: the central concept of 'small nation' and the main theoretical implication stemming from this model.

In the former case, Malešević denaturalizes the concept of 'small nation' (Chapter 5) by showing that this label does not describe an objective state of affairs, i.e. the actual 'smallness' of a nation *in terms of territory or population* (Malešević, 2019, p. 133), but rather refers to a kind of rhetorical strategy used for nationalist political purposes, depending not on the nation's size in itself but on the geopolitical context. Focusing on the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Malešević on the one hand shows how Irish nationalists positioned Ireland as a 'small nation – contrary to its real size and global role – in order to gain international support for the country's independence from

imperial rule. On the other hand, the author shows how Balkan nationalists, who led objectively small nations, strongly distanced themselves from this label and kept glorifying their quasi-imperial medieval past in front of an international audience for exactly the same purpose. In short, revealing the ideological underpinning of what was supposed to be a purely descriptive category is Malešević's serious accusation against the core of Hroch's theory.

The other object of Malešević's critique is the theoretical implication that there are fundamental differences between 'large' and 'small' nations resulting from the different ways in which they were historically formed. Malešević seems to prove the opposite thesis on the example of 19th-century Serbia (Chapter 8), because he interprets Serbian nationalism as a by-product of power struggles for instrumental goals between two royal families, the Karađorđevićs and the Obrenovićs: control of the state and the legitimization of one's own (invented) aristocratic status. Such a perspective shows that in the Balkans, like in Western Europe, nationalism was not a cause or motivation for building independent state structures, but the other way round, i.e. it only appeared when these structures were already in place. Another example of historical convergence between 'small' and 'large' nation-forming processes given by the author is 20th-century Ireland (Chapter 6). Although a full critique of Hroch's perspective would require a larger comparative historical analysis, Malešević's book definitely breaks the path for such a study.

Shortcomings

No book is free of shortcomings, although in this case they are minor. In addition to excessive repetition of some theoretical content, which is a problem typical of collections of essays that were not written as a coherent whole from beginning to end, two of them are worth pointing out.

The first one is the author's insufficient exposure of the 'multi-tracked' nature of the historical process, which sometimes blunts the critical potential of his theory. This is particularly true of (proto-)ideological continuity, where apart from pointing to well-known premodern symbolic reservoirs (such as the culture of the Polish nobility or the Orthodox religion in the Balkans) as the main reference points for modern "national cultures", it would be worth showing how they managed, or not, to marginalize competitive symbolic sets (e.g. bourgeois culture in Poland, secular concepts of nations in the Balkans). Placing greater emphasis on how symbolic continuity emerged in the course of political battles between certain political actors to establish and maintain it would have allowed the author to better show the unevenness of the historical process.

The second shortcoming is the too narrow critique of globalization theorists regarding the relationship between nationalism and capitalism (Chapter 11). Although Malešević rightly points out that these two phenomena mutually reinforce rather than weaken each other, he uses an overly reductionist definition of neoliberal capitalism (as a process of privatization of the state) that offers little opportunity for comprehensive analysis of this nexus. If the author had incorporated into his deliberations a broader understanding of capitalism as a whole social system, be it in the Marxist perspective (Harvey, 2011; Milios 2018) or that of researchers of global political economy (Ravenhill, 2005), his book could have inspired a search for the intertwining of both phenomena in some unobvious corners of social spaces.

Conclusion

The latest book by Malešević confirms the author's strong position among the most important contemporary theoreticians of nationalism. The book makes a very important contribution to several key problems in nationalism studies, and the few shortcomings do not reduce its great intellectual quality. Finally, its intellectual freshness combined with a very good style of theorizing make *Grounded Nationalisms* a pleasure to read.

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Recenzja najnowszej pracy Sinišy Maleševicia, uznanego teoretyka nacjonalizmu. Recenzja nie tylko wskazuje główną innowację teoretyczną tej pracy w stosunku do prac poprzednich, ale także identyfikuje dwojaki teoretyczny wkład Maleševicia we współczesne teorie nacjonalizmu.

Słowa kluczowe: nacjonalizm, państwo, nowoczesność polityczna, Siniša Malešević, Ernest Gellner.

Note

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