Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity

Andreas Wimmer

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Andreas Wimmer's *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* is an ambitious, dense, complex and thought-provoking addition to the ever-expanding literature on nationalism. He makes a bold contribution to the understanding of the relationship between nationalism and modernity: his central thesis is that nationalist and ethnic politics are not merely an effect of modern state-formation, but that 'modernity *itself* rests on a basis of ethnic and nationalist principles' (p. 1). Access to the fruits of political modernity (clustering around the ideals of democracy, citizenship and popular sovereignty, and including political participation, equality within the law, etc.) is mediated by membership of the nation-state, itself defined through a process of cultural closure. Thus, 'modern forms of inclusion are intimately tied to ethnic and national forms of exclusion.' (p. 1) The paradox between the rationalist and universalistic bases of political modernity on the one hand, and on the other, modernity's 'shadow side' of ethnic and nationalist exclusion, is a theme running throughout the book.

The first section of the book comprises a theoretical exploration of this thesis, while the second and third sections substantiate and contextualize the main argument through extended case-studies of Mexico, Iraq and Switzerland. Wimmer begins by utilizing an anthropological approach to the question of modern state formation and the politicisation of ethnicity. He understands the production of culture as a varying and contested 'process of negotiating meaning', which tends to lead to 'social closure and corresponding cultural boundary-marking' (p. 34). The dominant nationalism in the state is therefore understood as an act of cultural compromise, the outcome of a successful compromise of interests between different social groups (p. 32), which results in a process of 'social closure' and boundary-marking.

The case-studies chosen embody two routes to modernity. The first, typified by Mexico and Iraq, is the ethnicization of the modern state, when lines of closure occur within the state itself so that some ethnic groups are excluded from 'the national "we"'. Wimmer argues that the presence of two conditions tends to lead to a widespread and potentially conflictive politicization of ethnicity: when the central state is comparatively weak and lacking in political and economic resources, so that it cannot guarantee inclusion to all, and when

the state formation occurs before the development of strong networks of civil society. Ethnic clientelism provides a means for the selective distribution of goods by the new state elite, in turn creating 'a new power basis and transforming ethnic categories into groups of political solidarity' (p. 173) so that the political arena becomes an arena for ethno-nationalist competition.

Switzerland demonstrates the second route to modernity — the complete nationalization of the modern state. In contrast to Iraq and Mexico, the existence of a strong, trans-ethnic civil society before the development of the modern state helped explain the inclusive trajectory of nation-building, as the 'networks of civil society organization are dense enough to allow the new political elite controlling the modern nation-state to legitimise their rule and to mobilize political support without having to resort to an ethnic constituency and the practice of ethnic favouritism and clientelism.' (p. 241) However, even here, where the politicization of ethnicity within the state population was avoided, Wimmer argues that social closure and exclusion occur along national lines, manifested in racism and xenophobia, understood as extreme forms of nationalism. Integration within the state population and closure towards those outside it are mutually reinforcing (p. 200). Racism results not from competition for scarce jobs, but from 'basing collective identities, participatory rights and state institutions on the idea of a national community. In other words, xenophobia and racism are an integral part of the institutional rider of the nation-state' (p. 217) and therefore have an inherent relationship with political modernity.

This argument is compelling and well set out, but there are a couple of points I would like to raise. The first concerns Wimmer's culturally centred understanding of nationalism, partly shaped by his starting-point in anthropological theory. Earlier liberal republican views of the nation (such as he describes in the early stages of Swiss nation-building) are, by implication, viewed as transitory stages along the road to full nation-statehood. In the chapter on Switzerland, he argues that the end of the process of integration is reached (he refers to the 'fully developed model of the nation-state') when the post-war 'nationalist compromise' centres around 'a culturally thick, ethnicized concept of the nation' (pp. 259–260). His understanding of nationalism is heavily to the ethno-cultural end of the civic/ethnic spectrum. One of the solutions he suggests for transcending racism and xenophobia is the re-ordering of the state so that its population are united by Habermas' 'constitutional patriotism' (p. 220) — allegiance and shared identity based on common political and civil culture — i.e. a 'civic' nationalism. But this implicit equation of ethno-cultural nationalism as exclusionary and civic-constitutional as inclusive tends to conceal the point that even a 'constitutional patriotism' will have some cultural bases (e.g. official language(s), state provision for religious education, immigration policy) which will be potentially

exclusive to someone: the point is not that these cultural bases exist, but how they are conceptualized and modified within the state. Secondly, and related to this, is the point about racism. While Wimmer is right to point out the exclusionary/'closure' aspect of the modern nation-state, racism and citizenship do not exactly map on to each other, as the existence of racism between citizens of multi-ethnic states demonstrates. Nor are political or institutional instances of racism and xenophobia modern phenomena, although they may indeed now be more frequent and more legitimated at state level, as Wimmer argues. To my mind the question to explore is not *whether* nation-states institute closure (as they evidently do), but how access to state membership is constituted, how the lines of closure are renegotiated, and how state-formed lines of closure interact with dominant discourses of identity and culture.

The questions I have raised here are however testament to the sheer scope and ambition of the book. Wimmer's insistence that nationalist exclusion and cultural closure is part and parcel of modernity is a powerful new contribution to the debate on nationalism and is sure to stimulate further debate. Similarly, many of the sub-arguments raised in the case-studies within the book (in particular regarding the role played by civil society in inhibiting the politicization of ethnicity, and the relationship between racism and the modern nation-state) are thought-provoking contributions to the ongoing study of nations and nationalism.

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