

The Left(s) and Nationalism(s) in contemporary Western Europe

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Abstract

This article introduces our themed section on The Left(s) and Nationalism(s), which provides a comparative analysis of the relationship between nationalism and different left-wing parties in Western Europe. It highlights the innovative comparative perspectives offered by this themed section, which not only concerns a series of different geographical cases studies but also involves the ideological plurality of the Left. The larger research question that our contributors address is how different left-wing parties have dealt with the inherent ideological tension between the universality claimed by the Left and the particularism inherent in nationalism, as a doctrine and a principle of political legitimacy. The article stresses three main contributions of our themed section: (1) Western European left-wing parties do engage with the themes of nationalism and nationhood, but they often rely on convenient silence to solve some of the contradictions with their progressive ideology. (2) None of these parties have formulated thick versions of the respective national identities. (3) State-wide left-wing parties have used instrumental conceptions of nationhood to address the challenge of separatist parties, but only with mixed results.

KEYWORDS

ideology, nationalism, the Left, universalism, Western Europe

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Nationalist parties in several Western European countries are riding a favourable wave under the twin forms of radical right state-led nationalism and substate minority nationalism. From the French *Rassemblement National*, to the Spanish *Vox*, through the German *Alternative für Deutschland*, and the pro-Brexit movement in the United Kingdom, right-wing populist nationalist parties have registered a marked increase in their electoral success and, in some cases, become key players in their political systems.¹ On the other hand, separatist parties have gained traction in regions such as Catalonia, Scotland and Flanders, leading, in some instances, to the organisation of official and unofficial independence referenda and begetting serious tensions between central and regional governments (Dalle Mulle, 2018).

Both forms under which the current wave of nationalism as a form of politics has materialised itself (i.e. state-wide radical right parties and substate pro-independence movements) are highly relevant for parties of the Western European Left. Left-wing parties (notably those of mainstream social democracy) have lost considerable support in the last decade (Berman & Snegovaya, 2019) and, in a longer perspective, have witnessed the erosion of their working-class electoral bases across Western Europe (Gingrich & Häusermann, 2015). On the one hand, this realignment of the electoral coalition underlying left-wing support has particularly benefited the populist and radical right, because the latter has recently promoted welfare chauvinist agendas pitting natives against immigrants and globalisation in defence of the 'national welfare state' (Abts et al., 2021; Afonso & Rennwald, 2018; de Lange, 2007; Ennsner-Jedenastik, 2018; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018). On the other, in Scotland and Catalonia, where self-determination movements have challenged state authority and integrity more than anywhere else in Europe, the rising polarisation between supporters and opponents of independence has squeezed state-wide left-wing parties away from the autonomist middle-ground they had dominated for several decades (Bennett et al., 2021; Quiroga & Molina, 2020). In both cases, left-wing parties have had to confront openly nationalist parties in a climate of increasing salience of issues related, first, to the relationship between national identity and welfare and, second, to democracy, self-determination, and federalism. This set of issues draw attention to the troubled relation between the Left and nationalism.

In contemporary Western Europe, the concept of 'nationalism' is generally used, in everyday speech but also by scholars, to describe ideological peripheries, political forms not only disturbing, but condemnable and condemned, whether of the extreme right or separatist. However, since Anderson (1983) and Billig (1995), a great deal of research has shown that nationalism is an ideology to which we are all subject and that can express itself in banal and discrete ways, which does not mean that they are benign. Whereas nationalism, and its product, the modern nation, could be said to be born on the Left at the end of the 18th century (Bell, 2001; Conversi 2020: 34–35), in Western Europe the Left later came to be semantically associated with internationalism. Simultaneously, the Right, or even the extreme right, acquired a near monopoly over nationalism (Laxer, 2001)—something which did not occur as clearly in other geographical and cultural areas (Enríquez Arévalo, 2020; Gustavsson, 2010; Hajda, 1993; Hirsch, 2005; Kemp, 1999; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Perri et al., 2018; Slezkine, 1994). The Western European Left, however, has never ceased to be confronted with the national issue, whether, among others: to reaffirm state integrity in the face of centrifugal demands; to emphasise the interests of the nation-state in the face of the growing assertion of the European Union; to think about the modalities and limits of the welfare state, in particular as regards the integration of migrants; or to defend the rights of national minorities against an assertive state. Attempts by the Left to think about and act on the national question are diverse and even contradictory, ranging from 'populism', to 'republicanism' and including 'sovereignism', 'patriotism' and 'Jacobinism'. But the academic literature on nationalism in contemporary Western Europe has hardly focused on these attempts.

2 | STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE

There have long been theoretical discussions on Marxism-Leninism and nationalism, but these have essentially analysed intellectual debates (Kasprzak, 2012; Ryan & Worth, 2010; Ware, 2019). Connor (1984) provided the first

thorough comparative analysis of theory and practice of nationalism and socialism in the USSR, China, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Vietnam. He caustically concluded that, despite Marxism–Leninism's prescriptions whereby communist parties had to harness nationalism for their own revolutionary purposes, 'nationalism has proved to be a much more powerful force than Marxism' (Connor 1984: 584). Other studies have followed, but the majority has focused on the Marxist Left, often, although not exclusively, in the Soviet space (Ducange, 2021; Forman, 1998; Haupt et al., 1997; Martin, 2001; Nimni, 1991; Pasture & Verberckmoes, 1998; Schwartzmantel, 1991) or, alternatively, in the colonial and postcolonial world during the process of decolonisation (see among others Byrne, 2016; Conversi, 2020, pp. 37–39; Goebel, 2017; Kalter, 2016).

Since the early 1990s, scholars working on the relationship between the Western European Left and nationalism have privileged case studies on left-wing ethno-regionalist movements (Beramendi & Nuñez Seixas, 1996; Elias, 2009; Kernalegenn & Pasquier, 2014) or on the Left and centre–periphery conflicts in specific regions (Jones, 2017; Keating & Bleiman, 1979). Some works on the Left and state-led nationalism in Western European countries—such as France (Martigny, 2016; Stuart, 2006) or Spain (Custodi, 2021; de Blas Guerrero, 1989)—exist, but they are few and far between. Furthermore, comparative perspectives enabling researchers to draw more general conclusions on the basis of consistent theoretical frameworks are almost inexistent. The few exceptions zero in on some specific left-wing traditions, mostly on the extreme Left (Laxer, 2001; March, 2011), on trade-unionism (Kernalegenn, 2010; Pasture & Verberckmoes, 1998), or on the impact of 1968 (Kernalegenn et al., 2020).

Through a focus on Western Europe, this themed section aims to contribute to a global understanding of how movements and parties of the Left have handled such problems and used (or not) nationhood to mobilise support. The existing literature shows that Marxist expectations of the disappearance of nationalist conflicts have not been borne out. Hence, both the Marxist and non-Marxist Left have had to come to terms with the persistence of nationalism and the reality of a world divided into nation-states. In this context, existing studies suggest that many left-wing parties have tended to adopt an instrumental approach to nationalism, openly embracing it only when it could be combined with processes perceived as emancipatory—for instance, minority nationalism or decolonisation. More recently, several authors have examined how some left-wing actors, notably, but not exclusively, populist ones have fully engaged with the nation in their discourses, or even developed a full-fledged left-wing nationalism (Chazel & Dain, 2021; Custodi, 2021). Others have shown that when carried out by state-wide political actors, this operation tends to combine an anti-European stance (on the outside) and a centralising perspective (on the inside). When carried out by substate political actors, this tends, in contrast, to combine a pro-European and an anticentralising stance (Kernalegenn et al., 2020).

Despite these recent advances, the literature still suffers from several shortcomings: it continues to focus excessively on Marxists, thus neglecting the diversity of the Left as a political family; it has overlooked the study of state-wide social-democratic parties in Western Europe and their banal nationalism; it has not examined in detail left-wing understandings of the nation, be they civic or ethnic, thin or thick. As many studies are case studies and most focus on only one left-wing current (chiefly Marxism, and to a lesser extent populism) and one form of nationalism (either state-nationalism or substate nationalism), we still lack a more comprehensive and systematic study explaining the specificities of left-wing nationalism, as well as assessing how left-wing actors deal (in real life) with nationalism or express their banal nationalism: what is the importance of national culture and traditions (and why should they be important)? How do left-wing nationalist parties deal with multiculturalism and diversity? How instrumental or essentialist is left-wing nationalism?

3 | THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND AIMS OF THE THEMED SECTION

This themed section intends to overcome some of these shortcomings through a comparative analysis of the relationship between nationalism (as defined below) and different left-wing movements and parties in a sample of Western European countries. The comparative perspective constitutes our first innovative feature. This comparative

dimension does not only stem from the volume as a whole but also informs specific articles that examine similar party families and features across borders. Likewise, the themed section's comparative approach does not limit itself to the juxtaposition of different geographical actors and contexts, but it extends to the ideological plurality of the Left. The current literature tends either to consider the Left as a monolithic entity or to focus on a single tradition within it (almost exclusively Marxism, which is not anymore the dominant ideological force within the Left). One of the cornerstones of this collection of articles is the acknowledgment that the Left is a plural phenomenon characterised by a common concern for reducing inequality, which distinguishes it from other political traditions (notably those of the Right) (Bobbio, 1996 [1994]). Yet, apart from this ideological core, the Left is a broad church gathering groups as far apart as the most radical left-wing fringe movements and the utmost third-way centrist social-liberal forces. This themed section thus intends to deconstruct the Left and explores the multiple ways in which left-wing parties and organisations deal with the phenomenon of nationalism in both discursive and practical forms. In methodological terms, therefore, the emphasis is on political discourse and content analysis, as well as on everyday practices at the level of activists and representatives.

The larger research question that our contributors address is how different left-wing parties and organisations have dealt with the inherent ideological tension between the universality claimed by different left-wing traditions, intellectuals and parties and the particularism inherent in nationalism, as a doctrine and a principle of political legitimacy. In more concrete terms, the contributors to this section explore such a tension along two main dimensions (as well as their potential overlaps): the democratic management of diversity and territorial issues in culturally plural societies and the connection between identity and the legitimacy of access to the welfare state. Some articles look at countries in which the dominant national cleavages are internal to the state (notably countries characterised by centre-periphery conflicts), while others at countries in which the salience of the national boundary mostly relates to the issue of foreign immigration.

All this requires a clarification on the concept of nationalism. Nationalism is most often defined as a principle of political legitimacy postulating that 'the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner, 1983, p. 1). In concrete terms, the political science and political sociology literature has tended to focus on nationalism as a form of politics. Brubaker (1996, p. 79), for instance, has defined nationalism as a 'remedial political action' based on a discourse expressing variations of the single core lament 'that the identity and interests of a putative nation are not properly expressed or realized in political institutions, practices, or policies'. Breuilly (1982, pp. 1–16) has probably expressed the most extreme embrace for such an approach based on politics, notably opposition politics, when he asserted that nationalism loses any specificity once a nationalist movement reaches its objectives and obtains a state. Such an approach certainly has the advantage of clearly distinguishing the phenomenon and circumscribing it to actors that prioritise nationalist aims and ways of 'seeing the world' (Brubaker et al., 2004, p. 47) over anything else. Yet nationalism is a much larger, protean and pervasive phenomenon; an unconscious script in our daily life in modern societies that legitimises political power in more banal ways than those usually emphasised in a literature often too focused on instances of 'hot' nationalism (Billig, 1995; Brubaker et al., 2004; Fox, 2017; Greenfeld, 1992). Even in democratic societies, the definition of the legitimate political community is provided by nationalist arguments about the contours and meaning of citizenship (Brubaker, 1989; Yack 2012, pp. 136–160), while in plurinational societies, state and substate conceptions of the legitimate sovereign community often clash with each other (De Winter & Tursan, 2003). In both cases, forms of inclusion and exclusion unfold that no political actor can afford to ignore (Wimmer, 2002).

This collection of papers looks precisely at how different left-wing actors navigate these forms of inclusion and exclusion and, more broadly, how they address the boundary-setting and boundary-maintenance functions of nationalism (Barth, 1969; Eriksen, 1995). More broadly, the aim of the themed section is also to understand more precisely the frame-bridging processes that different left-wing groups set in place (consciously or not) in order to combine and link a left-wing agenda and a (banal or not) nationalist discourse (Conversi & Friis Hau, 2021; Máiz, 2003).

More specifically, the articles gathered here examine the relationship between different types of Lefts (radical, populist, green, social-democratic and regionalist) and of nationalisms in contemporary Western Europe. Apart from

the paucity of comparative studies on the Left and nationalism in this geographical area, a focus on Western Europe is also warranted for reasons of comparability. Western European countries share, to a large extent, common historical trajectories and political traditions which make that the concepts of the Left and nationalism are easily comparable across different societies and political systems.

4 | OUTLINE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE THEMED SECTION

In the first article, Custodi and Padoan (2022) inquire into the role that national identity plays in the strategies of *Podemos* and the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) and on the type of nation that they discursively construct. Their analysis reveals an apparent paradox. Although the appropriation of national referents and symbols is much more frequent in the discourse of *Podemos* than in the one of M5S, only the electorate of M5S displays certain nativist attitudes. Even more interesting for the purpose of this themed section, the analysis of *Podemos*' propaganda shows how a left-wing populist party can intentionally use identity-loaded concepts and signifiers, as well as construct an idea of the nation that fits the party's leftist values.

In the second piece, Kernaleggenn (2022) focuses on a neglected political family, at least as far as the study of nationalism is concerned, that is, the Greens. Despite their distrust of big and centralised political units, their stance in favour of minorities and diversity, Greens do not skip the national issue, but reimagine it with a bottom-up and plural perspective under the form of regionalism. Focusing on Europe Ecology–The Greens Brittany and the Scottish Green Party, the paper underlines that the green stance on the nation is not 'identitarian' or 'patriotic' but 'cognitive': it is devoid of nostalgia but rather a tool for a decentralised, multicultural and democratic Europe.

In the third article, Dalle Mulle and Serrano (2022) innovate in two ways: they examine how left-wing parties have dealt with issues of welfare nationalism; and they compare minority and majority nationalism within the same state. Examining the position of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the Catalan left-wing separatist party Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC) on three important political debates that pertain to the link between welfare and identity in Spain, Dalle Mulle and Serrano conclude that both parties take identity for granted as a prepolitical factor that 'naturally' (i.e., without needing to be explained) justifies differential treatment, according to ERC, or equalising federalism, in the case of the PSOE.

In the last contribution, Brown Swan (2023) illustrates how, since 2012, the Labour Party has struggled to formulate a coherent British identity bridging national cleavages in the United Kingdom. Squeezed between rising substate nationalism in Edinburgh and Cardiff, on the one hand, and 'hyper-unionism' in London, on the other hand, the party has relied on three main discursive strategies to reverse its electoral decline and avoid the fragmentation of Great Britain: redefining Britishness, emphasising social solidarity over national ties and promoting an instrumental understanding of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, this has led to mixed results and one cannot help observing that the party has consistently proved ill at ease in successfully engaging with themes of nationalism and nationhood.

Apart from the idiosyncratic differences of the specific contexts that they analyse, the contributions to this themed section highlight three major dynamics that travel across the ideological, organisational and geographical borders separating our parties.

First, the Western European Left examined in this themed section openly engages with nationalism and nationhood. Either actively mobilising a national-popular vocabulary under the more benign semantic field of 'patriotism', as in the case of *Podemos* (Custodi and Padoan in this themed section) or half-heartedly promoting an instrumental view of the United Kingdom, as Labour has recently done (Brown Swan in this section), the parties in this themed section have not skirted discussions over national identity, constitutional change and self-determination, the legitimate community of redistribution or immigration. Green parties have probably gone farthest than all others in emphasising the potential of recognition and decentralisation to promote local democracy. As in a game of nested administrative units that would ensure both representation and large-scale solidarity, their ideological programme creatively attempts to promote diversity without sliding into narrow particularism. Yet they, the Scottish Greens in

particular, have also remained fairly vague about how subsidiarity and devolution would work in an independent Scotland and often neglected to question their own implicit nationalism (Kernalegenn in this themed section). This unmindful nationalist reproduction of the legitimacy of the tacitly assumed national community is a hallmark of the Spanish PSOE. In the debate over federalisation and fiscal devolution in Spain, the party has consistently prioritised the symmetrical equality of all Spanish regions despite simultaneously accepting the existence of different nationalities in Spain—and without noticing any contradiction in the process (Dalle Mulle and Serrano in this themed section). Hence, our left-wing parties do engage with nationalism and nationhood, but they also rely on convenient silence and ambiguity to address different features of the dilemma between the proclaimed universalism of their progressive ideals and the particularism of the nationalist framework in which they have acted (on this tension see Ducange, 2021, p. 8).

Second, left-wing parties in Western Europe have been reluctant to propose any thick understanding of national identity. Even a substate nationalist party like *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, which openly embraces a minority nationalist identity mobilising along linguistic lines and which directly challenges the Spanish status quo, has carefully avoided resorting to identity considerations in order to call for the end of solidarity with the rest of the Spain—although this does not mean that identity considerations do not play a role in the background (Dalle Mulle and Serrano in this themed section). Similarly, the more straightforward attempts at squaring progressive ideology with identity redefinition efforts analysed in this themed section, that is, Ed Miliband's One Nation discourse in the United Kingdom and *Podemos'* consistent reference to the concept of patriotism, have been devoid of any thick cultural or historical elements. They have rather privileged references to values such as openness and solidarity, as well as recognised the plurinational nature of the state (Brown Swan and Custodi and Padoan in this themed section).

Third, all of the state-wide left-wing parties in this themed section (Labour, *Podemos* and the PSOE) have addressed substate nationalist challenges. Although to different extents, and at different points in time, all have come to accept the plural nature of their country and have even branded it as a defining aspect of the British/Spanish national identity. Yet they have also remained fairly vague about the practical consequences of the acceptance of the co-existence of different nationalities within the borders of the state. In the case of the PSOE, such recognition of diversity has clearly been sacrificed to the ideal of the symmetric equality of all Spaniards (Dalle Mulle and Serrano in this section). Labour, on the other hand, has consistently struggled to advance a credible narrative of Britishness which sits comfortably alongside plurinational and multicultural identities (Brown Swan in this themed section). All three parties have celebrated the welfare state and common solidarity as achievements legitimising identification with the British/Spanish nation. However, this has frequently clashed with substate nationalist criticism (see, for instance, the Scottish Green's and ERC's claims) of the distributional policies taken in London and Madrid. Overall, our case study parties seem to confirm that left-wing parties confronting substate nationalism may well find it convenient to use instrumental arguments in favour of plurinational union, but that can take them only so far.

In short, this themed section makes three main contributions to the literature on the Left and nationalism: It explores and compares a diverse range of Western European non-Marxist left-wing parties, both at the substate and state-wide level, that have been neglected in previous studies; it shows not only how the Left tends to avoid thick definitions of the nation but also how different left-wing parties frequently ignore (consciously or unconsciously) their own banal nationalism; and it suggests that left-wing attempts to manage minority nationalism have mostly relied on instrumental strategies that, however, have produced mixed results.

This themed section constitutes only a first step towards a more comprehensive, detailed and global understanding of the relationship between the Left and nationalism. Future studies would have to embrace other geographical areas, make a theoretical effort to propose a working definition of 'left nationalism' and focus on implicit and explicit forms of othering peculiar to left-wing actors. Yet this is a programme for a broader research agenda.

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ENDNOTE

¹ This does not mean that populist radical right parties did not experience considerable success earlier. Kriesi et al. (2006) already showed the emergence in some Western European countries of a radical right populist pole in party systems across Western Europe in the mid-2000s. Yet, in the last 10–15 years, this radical right populist pole has spread further and consolidated (Oesch & Rennwald, 2018).

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