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Affective nationalism – issues of agency, power and method

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The article by Merriman and Jones (2016) is the latest contribution to a growing literature on the affective dimension of nations (Closs Stephens, 2016; Militz & Schurr, 2015; Wetherell et al. 2015). According to Merriman and Jones, affective nationalism should be regarded as a move beyond Billig's (1995) idea of 'banal nationalism'. Their stress on the intermittent, emergent and relational character of nation is indeed persuasive and posits a challenge to Billig's 'unwaved flag', hanging limply on a building – a synecdoche for the omnipresence of the nation in the background of our daily lives. The intermittent character clearly invites us to map when, where, how and why the nation is called into existence (see also Brubaker, 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Skey, 2011; Antonsich, 2015). This in turn stresses the importance of the notion of emergence (Dittmer, 2013): nations should not be regarded as possessing intrinsic qualities, but emerge out of the interactions between people, material objects and the environment. This is why a special attention should be paid to the relational processes which generate national identities, emotions and affects.

While this approach to the study of nation is certainly welcome, since it opens up a new terrain of investigation, we also think that it is in need of further specification. We would like in particular to highlight three key issues that might be used to sharpen our thinking around this topic: power, agency, and method.

Power. On the one hand, a shared emotional experience has the potential to bring together – at least momentarily – a variety of social groups beyond the differences which inhabit any nation. Everybody, irrespective of their background, can feel united by an affective atmosphere, as for instance during a national sporting event (Closs Stephens, 2016). In this sense, affective nationalism might resonate with the progressive idea of a plural, inclusive nation (Modood, 2007; Antonsich & Matejskova, 2015). Yet, on the other hand, such examples of collective effervescence or 'ecstatic nationalism' (Skey, 2006) need to be studied empirically in order to see who participates and to what end. Lumping affected and affecting human bodies together into a single mass, undifferentiated in terms of race, gender, sexuality, age, class, dis-ability, and personal stories, generates an abstract body, impermeable to any issues of power and exclusion. As Tollia-Kelly (2006) has demonstrated, human bodies are differently positioned within the social world. Merriman and

Jones (2016: 5) do hint at “situational configurations, circulating moods, [and] relatively immutable historic relations” as sources of affect, but they do not fully theorise the importance of power and its uneven relations, which obviously mediate the capacities of human bodies to affect and be affected.

Agency. The great irony of the focus on affecting and affected bodies is that people are absent. This is a point already made by Wetherell (2015) in relation to Thrift’s non-representational theory.

Within much of the writing around affect and nationalism, the human body becomes the same as any other non-human body, unconsciously reacting to emerging atmospheres. Yet, once again, this is analytically problematic. People in fact actively respond, engage with, make sense of (affective) situations rather than their bodies merely being ‘caught up’ in them (Cohen, 1996). To attend to people’s agency would also allow to better capture the conscious/unconscious, foregrounding/backgrounding, and hot/banal dimensions of (affective) nationalism, as suggested by the authors in their article (Merriman and Jones, 2016: 1).

Method. The latter point brings forward a methodological issue, namely the importance of locating affective nationalism within people’s meaning-making practices. This suggests the need to look at the non-representational in relation to, rather than in opposition to or beyond, the representational and the symbolic. The example of crossing the Severn Bridge referred to by Merriman and Jones (2016: 9) can *only* be understood in relation to the existing discourses, representations and symbols of the Welsh nation. This point obviously brings forward the question of how we can then study national affect? What data can be collected to capture the forces and feelings of this affect? How can we show the ways in which national affective ties “take hold of and constitute bodies” (Merriman and Jones, 2016: 12)? Despite fully espousing non-representational thinking, Merriman and Jones, in fact, resort to talk and text, i.e. to very representational tools, in order to grasp national feelings, emotions and affects. A possible way forward here might be the one suggested by Wetherell (2015), who focuses on ‘affective practices’ as a way to offer a more solid ground to empirical research on and around affect.

Yet, there is also a broader question which can be asked with regard to method and affective nationalism. It is the question of not just *how*, but also *what* to study. In other words, by focusing on affect are we after the right thing? Are we not focusing on a rather vaguely defined medium through which national identities and feelings are apparently expressed rather than on the people – and their activities, feelings and interactions – that underpin national forms of organisation, practice and imagination? By complicitly immersing ourselves in affective atmospheres as a way to understand and make them present, are we not unwittingly escaping the hard realities which structure and b-order national societies?

Work on affective nationalism has been provocatively encouraging us to think in new ways about the meaningfulness and significance of nations and moving beyond much of the standard work on discourse and representations. However, it also needs to foreground questions of power and difference (not least by placing people firmly in the picture) and critically evaluate how key concepts are defined and operationalised, otherwise it risks obfuscating rather than illuminating the very object of its investigation.

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