

Interview – Karlo Basta

Written by E-International Relations

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Karlo Basta is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh, and Co-director of the Centre on Constitutional Change. He works on the comparative politics of nationalism with a focus on multinational states, and has written on institutional formation and change in multinational systems, the consequence of that change for political stability, and the politics of nationalist conflict and secession. He is the author of *The Symbolic State: Minority Recognition, Majority Backlash, and Secession in Multinational Countries*. His current project explores the tension between the logic of capitalism and nationalism in self-determination struggles.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I have my fingers in several pots, with interesting things bubbling in all of them. In the study of secession there is now much more attention to the role of institutional change in explaining why and when secessionist crises flare up. This contrasts with the older debate that revolved around the question about whether territorial autonomy as such – its mere presence – made multinational societies more or less stable. There's more work to be done there, especially on the way in which 'objective' institutional change – if there is such a thing at all – is collectively interpreted, but the current direction is encouraging.

I am also glad that there is now more effort to bring together social movement studies and studies of nationalist mobilization. One reason this is good is because it broadens the range of actors we are considering. Most of the work on self-determination does not look much beyond political elites and voters. But what about social movements, religious organizations, the media, labour unions, bond rating agencies, corporations? We need more work along those lines.

Given that I'm also poking around the nexus of capitalism, democracy, and nationalism in my current project, I am happy to see a renewed interest in the study of economic nationalism. Recent work has provided some much-needed analytical depth to that concept. People used to incorrectly conflate economic nationalism with protectionism. Economic nationalism has many concrete policy incarnations, from protectionist and statist to laissez-faire. The key element is the nationalist purpose.

But here's a little secret: when I'm looking for inspiration and new ideas, I go to the past more often than I do to contemporary work – with exceptions, of course. So much of current political science and sociology is interested in hammering tiny theoretical nails with huge amounts of data. So when I'm stuck, I end up looking for more theoretically fruitful work which often tends to be buried in old books and journal issues. And at times they are not only stimulating and informative but hilarious too.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The most important change in the way I see the world was realizing just how much of politics is expressive rather than instrumental. A good part of what I read through my university years, from undergrad to graduate school, taught that key conflicts in politics are about material things, and that political institutions are important because of how they channel the flow of those material things. Because of that, I came to understand institutions as instruments with

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which people pursue their goals, rather than being goals themselves.

This extended to nationalism. My early understanding of nationalist conflict was that it was in good part about resources. Institutions – autonomy, power sharing, what have you – were important to the extent to which they facilitated or hindered the pursuit of those resources. I was even more entrenched in that position because of its echoes in the popular ‘wisdom’ about nationalist politicians stoking division in order to advance their pecuniary interests. That is certainly part of the story, but it is far too limiting to be of much use if you want to understand the world.

I eventually abandoned that way of understanding politics and started paying more attention to the way in which stories, narratives, shape political reality. I see institutions as an important expression, or condensation, of political narratives. The shift came in part as a result of many encounters with ‘uncomfortable’ evidence that contradicted the instrumental view of politics. It also came through reading things that were not part of the grad school canon, at least not in comparative politics: J. P. Nettl’s “The State as a Conceptual Variable”, Timothy Mitchell and Philip Abrams’ work on the state, Lisa Wedeen, Berger and Luckmann, Meyer and Rowan’s work on formal institutions, Akhil Gupta’s influential article on the practice and discourse of the state in rural India, etc. These authors helped me make sense of what seemed to be anomalies I kept on seeing.

Your book *The Symbolic State* has a clear scholarly agenda: ‘it carves out and names a new subfield – the comparative study of multinational states’ (p.14). Why do multinational states deserve a field of their own, separate from nationalism studies and comparative politics?

There are a few things here. First, the multinational state doesn’t really get recognized, I mean explicitly, as a discrete subject worth studying by the political science mainstream. There’s no Handbook of the Multinational State. There is no article in *Annual Review of Political Science* covering the multinational polity. State formation literature is almost entirely dedicated to the emergence and development of the ‘national’ state, with empirical work normally based on relatively nationally homogeneous countries.

There are two issues with this. The first is that many modern states are simply *not* nation-states. The second is that multinational states operate according to a completely different political logic from nation-states. A nation-state is – to its people – something like a natural fact – its legitimacy among those who live in its borders is beyond question. The idea that someone might seek a different territorial-political configuration in the name of some regional sub-set of population is not dangerous; it is laughable. As a side-note, of course, I do not wish to suggest an ahistorical understanding of what is a moving conceptual target. Today’s consolidated nation-states were not always so integrated. Look at Bavaria and Sicily in the context of Germany and Italy for instance.

Multinational states are a completely different story. Here, there is at least one segment of the population that sees the state as *conditionally* legitimate at best. ‘We’re happy to play ball, as long as our interests are protected and our identity appropriately recognized’ is a decent summary of that political position. That doesn’t mean that all multinational states are constantly on the verge of falling apart, but it does mean that the possibility is thinkable. Talk of their break-up isn’t absurd, it is taken seriously. Which means that they are in no way naturalized in the way in which nation-states come to be – and I do wish to emphasize again that this is a process.

So the idea that you could use theories – of, say, federalism, or party politics, or whatever – developed with reference to nation-states to try to understand multinational states strikes me as odd. That is why we need a separate subfield dedicated to the study of the multinational state. Mind, I’m not saying that nobody has studied multinational polities. That is clearly not the case. But those studies are either too sparse, or are on the margins of the mainstream, or are too dependent on other sub-fields to properly engage with the fundamental features of multinationalism.

You tell two ‘stories’ about the political processes of multinational states: one is about political economy, the other about symbolic politics. Could you tell us the gist is of these two stories, and how they complement each other?

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The two 'stories' parallel the transformation in my understanding of politics, along the lines I described earlier. The political economy 'story' captures the instrumentalist thinking that characterizes a lot of political science. It explains why some central governments in multinational states go farther than others in conceding more fiscal resources to minority regions. The story revolves around the purpose of greater fiscal autonomy: Is it a transformative and statist-expansionist project, or is it a market-oriented and fiscally conservative one? If the purpose of autonomy is at odds with the prevailing orientation of the central state, the centre is less likely to yield, and vice-versa. Frankly, I think it's a neat argument, but it is also limited. For one thing, it assumes that both the minority claims and central responses to those claims are about the instrumental aspects of institutions.

The symbolic politics 'story' shows that there is a whole other side of institutions: they matter not only for what they *do*, but for what they *mean*, for the kind of symbolic order they express. So, when the political representatives of minority nations ask for broader self-government, they are asking for more powers and resources, of course, but they are also seeking institutional recognition of what they see as the state's multinational character. By extension, they are also seeking formal recognition of the national status of their own community. But here's the kicker: in making that claim, they threaten to undermine the far more monistic vision many members of majority nations have of their state and the political community that it encompasses. This is the notion that for all its diversity, the country's population is at the end of the day a *single political community*. Majorities often do not comprehend minority nationalist demands and find them either annoying or dangerous or both.

So, the causal bit of the story is that as long as the centre does not yield on the symbolic side of things, it does not trigger a secessionist sequence. Once the central government moves to reorganize the state's symbolic order, it creates the conditions for majority backlash. When that backlash translates into open political mobilization against the concessions made to the minority view, it facilitates much greater support for independence among the minority population. I show how this played out in three of the four cases I cover – Canada, Spain, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia.

When you bring those two stories together, it turns out that people get far less upset about the transfer of 'real' power or resources – indeed, quite important, far reaching ones – and far more about the appearance of what is happening, about the intangible changes that seem to signal the story that makes sense of their lives is being violated. And that goes for minorities and majorities alike.

This calls for another caveat – I am using the terms 'minority' and 'majority' nations for the sake of simplicity in exposition. Obviously, in some instances the claimant community is not a demographic minority. As importantly, there is good reason to treat the notion of 'majority' nationhood with suspicion, as Daniel Cetrà and Coree Brown Swan rightly point out. A national vision that treats all citizens of the state as members of an undifferentiated nation may be shared by members of putative minority nations, and may sit more or less uneasily with a parallel majority identity (the way Britishness sits with Englishness, for instance).

Your theory of accommodation in multinational states is bound to a small set of comparable cases, and indeed you write that crafting a general theory applicable to any context is a futile endeavour (p.11, pp.173-179). Why?

The reason is that the argument I develop is premised on a very specific view of the state as in some sense totemic and at least potentially expressive of some relevant identity. I have no good reason to believe that the same applies everywhere and at all times over the past, say, two hundred years. This is why I emphasize in the book that the *specific causal sequence* that I identify is highly contingent to the kinds of polities where that understanding of the state prevails.

This doesn't mean, though, that the more general point about state meaning doesn't 'travel' elsewhere. But to the extent to which the state or its institutions assume a very different meaning at other times and in other places, the specific political implications of institutional change might be very different. If a population views the state primarily through an instrumental prism, institutional engineering should presumably be easier.

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In addition to the internal dimensions of meaning-making, external contexts can vary widely too. How would a theory of claim-making for territorial autonomy or secession look *different* in geopolitically fraught contexts, such as Eastern Ukraine or Northern Iraq?

Very good point. That is one of the reasons that I emphasize the limits of the specific argument I develop in the book. For all their differences, the four countries I explore shared some key features in their external environment where I was comfortable enough to say that they are fundamentally comparable. Ukraine has been far more porous to external influence than any of the cases I cover. So yes, certainly, there was a different political dynamic at play there, though I would suggest that here too one could observe differences in views about the most appropriate way to organize the state, indeed well before the 2014.

But I do think that international context matters more in understanding the ultimate fate of secessionist movements than their rise and development, which I think has much more to do with internal politics. So countries that are more central to the political, strategic, and economic networks of key global powers – and I mean here the US in particular – are far more likely to withstand secessionist challenges than those that are not.

Reading your book it is difficult not to be reminded of the intractable debate on whether territorial autonomy facilitates or prevents conflict in multinational societies. Where do you position yourself in this debate?

I see disagreement about how to organize the state as the defining feature of the multinational condition. Unless there is a way to do away with multinationality – and I do not know anyone who has convincingly shown that integrationist measures actually *can* do this, even if we bracket the ethics of those measures – conflict in such states can only be managed.

Territorial autonomy as one method of conflict management is not inherently stabilizing or destabilizing. I show where to look for clues about which way it ends up going: what happens to autonomy *over time* matters; how that change is interpreted by elites and the general population also matters. But I also show that the apparently inherent content of territorial autonomy – for instance, how ‘inclusive’ or ‘protective’ it is – is not as important as the process by which it develops. So I think my work belongs to that line of scholarship that shows how to move beyond the dichotomy.

Normatively, I do not think it is either ethical or politically prudent to deny a population territorial self-government if that population has mobilized for it. But it is good to understand the potential perils of accommodating those demands.

Can you tell us a bit about your new book project on the relation between secession and capitalism?

It is about the clash of capitalism and nationalism in the run-up to independence referenda, in which capitalism stages a tactical retreat but ultimately wins out by stemming the secessionist tide. I’m looking at the way in which private big business inserts itself in debates during referendum campaigns, and how it shapes the outcomes of those votes. I contrast Scotland, Catalonia, and Quebec, where private big business was an important part of the political landscape, with Slovenia, where big business was not private, and Western Australia, where private business was not large-scale. The book is about nationalism, to be sure, but it is very much also about the nature of democracy in mature capitalism.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of comparative and international politics?

I’m of two minds on how to respond to this. There’s a part of me that wants to say ‘do what interests you’. Indeed, that is sort of what I did and I am a fairly happy human being because of it and I think I produced better work than I would have otherwise. But if I was more strategic about what I researched and how I did it, I am pretty sure that I would have saved myself *a lot* of time and frustration.

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So, while there is a grain of truth to 'do what interests you', I see it as a dangerous platitude. It works for those with the luxury of being able to compromise on time or family life or a decent salary or other important things in order to dedicate themselves to making ideas. For many who can't afford that trade-off, it's not a great proposition.

But just so we wouldn't end on such a depressing note, here's a heavily caveated quasi-advice: work on several things at the same time, and watch your brain make really cool connections. That feeling when a bunch of thoughts come together in a truly new insight is to me the best thing this profession affords – *when* it does.