The 'Erasure of Nationalism' and International Relations

The general approach to the theme of nationalism in International Relations is ambiguous. On the one hand, the discipline assumes and reiterates nationalism as a fundamental variable in the composition of its empirical field – from the consolidation of Nation-States to the two World Wars, this ideology is considered a driving force in contemporary international relations (Barkin Cronin 1994; Bukovansky 1999; Gellner 2008; Hobsbawm 1996; Hobsbawm 2001; Malkki 1995; Mayall 1990; Mayall 1999; Mayall 2013; Mayall 2015; Posen 1990). On the other hand, however, it is not only the hegemonic theories of International Relations but also the efforts of theoretical development and empirical investigation in the field that have essentially: (a) neglected this topic (Cederman 2013; Griffiths and Sullivan 1997; Heiskanen 2019; Mayall 1994), (b) relegated it to historical analyzes (Hobsbawm 1992; Greenfeld 2019; Smith 1991; Kedourie 1961, Calhoun 1993, 1997), (c) to the arena of domestic politics, or (d) the field of Comparative Politics (Anderson 2016; Gellner 2008; Snyder 2000; Solt 2011).

There are, of course, some exceptions. Mansfield and Snyder (2005) analyze how nationalist discourses in favor of domestic unity during processes of democratization can lead to careless foreign policy and the instigation of international conflict. Van Evera (1994) conducts a deductive exercise to explore the effects of nationalism on the risk of war. Posen (1993) concludes that nationalism increases the intensity of war, mainly by increasing the capacity of States to mobilize creative energies and a spirit of self-sacrifice. Schrock-Jacobson (2012: 829-831) identifies five possible effects of nationalism on international relations: (1) nationalism entails the identification and defamation of 'others,' which can provoke violent reactions; (2) nationalism promotes the use of biased strategic assumptions; (3) certain domestic interest groups can benefit from belligerent nationalist foreign policies and lobby for their continuation and eventual escalation; (4) elites can more easily marginalize opposition groups by describing them as national threats; (5) nationalism provides a favorable environment for 'bidding nationalist wars' between elites and between elites and the masses. When these processes are at work, nationalism should increase the likelihood of initiating interstate conflict. It is not a coincidence that these studies focus primarily on the relationship between nationalism and the occurrence of international conflicts.

Due to the recent history of International Relations, explorations into the effects of nationalism on the international arena have focused mostly on the field of International Security. A notable deviation from this trend is the work of James Mayall (1990, 1999, 2013, 2015). When analyzing the intersection between the notions of sovereignty, self-determination, and nationalism, Mayall postulates the centrality of this last variable to the construction of the architecture sustaining the contemporary international system or Society of States.

This ambiguity on how the discipline of International Relations deals with the theme of nationalism creates a paradox in how we think and act on the international level. While International Relations scholars recognize the importance of nationalism as a constituting phenomenon of the field, they seldomly engage in research that investigates its effects both on the structure and dynamics of international relations. To a large extent, this is due to theoretical and methodological barriers that continue to haunt the discipline of International Relations. In aspiring to a high level of abstraction, researchers in the field choose to qualify their actors as "units" and "states". This generalizing vocabulary, which seeks to describe international phenomena broadly and comprehensively, often results in an analysis that is profoundly ahistorical and displaced from specific social contexts (Cederman 2013). For Hossay (2001), a desire for simple synchronous causal assertions and the methodological choices accompanying this desire, such as excessive methodological individualism (Goode and Stroup 2015), made social scientists less able to

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account for the emotional appeal of nationalism, discarding and disregarding its strength and authenticity.

One of the main challenges pointed out in studies of nationalism relates to conceptual issues. This adversity has become a cliché, i.e., the idea of nationalism as a chimerical concept (Anderson 2016; Cederman 2013). Whenever we speak of nationalism, we re-enact Walter Bagehot's (2007: 20) assertion that "we know what it is when you do not ask us, but we cannot explain or define it very quickly."

The concept of nationalism presents a challenge for social scientists because it is an 'essentially contested concept'(Gallie 1956). It carries a polysemy that often presents itself as a source of difficulties and confusion in political analysis (Collier, Hidalgo, and Maciuceanu 2006). A cursory examination of the debates on this topic shows the multiplicity of meanings that seem inherent in nationalism – the literature commonly defines it as a feeling, an attitude, a belief, and a movement. Although this diversity bears witness to the importance and relevance of the topic, whether in the political arena or the academic space, it can also constitute an obstacle to research by causing imprecision and diffusion of theoretical discussions and undermining the advancement of research on the subject (Vargas Maia 2019).

Nationalism is understood as the ideology that prescribes the necessary coincidence between political units and national units (Nieguth 1999), i.e., the notion that each Nation should hold its own sovereign, self-determinate statehood. Additionally, Nationalism postulates the centrality of the national idea to the understanding of the world. This ideology assumes that: (1) humanity is naturally divided into organic nations, (2) that the nation is the only legitimate source of political power, (3) that loyalty to the nation overrides all other modalities of loyalty, and that (4) affirms three equally important goals: the unity, identity, and autonomy of the nation (Smith 1991; Calhoun, 1993). This understanding of nationalism seems helpful because it helps us grasp the fundamental structure and organization of the contemporary international system – the idea of national states, which translates and realizes the main objective of nationalist ideology.

Stating that the nation must be singular and autonomous, nationalism emphasizes that the nation is the natural and ideal basis for political organization and that it must govern itself free from external interference – self-determination – and that it constitutes the only legitimate ultimate source of political and legal power – sovereignty (Mayall 1990). To a large extent, these premises are accepted and universalized in our understanding of the contemporary international system and, consequently, our theoretical claims about that system.

Highlighting the fundamental role of nationalism in the composition of contemporary international relations helps us to ascertain why the erasure of this doctrine, as a relevant variable in our theoretical and methodological frameworks, represents a problem for the academic field of International Relations. If we accept that nationalist ideology is one of the most potent political forces of contemporaneity and that it has been one of the crucial motivators of political action in the last two centuries, excluding it so definitively from our analytical schemes means giving up a crucial variable in the composition of the world we seek to understand and explain. For Barry (1991: 352):

If an ideology is a general way of thinking about the world that has prescriptive implications for politics, then nationalism is an ideology – and by far the most potent ideology in the world.

Smith (1963: 140) argues that "nationality and nationalism are the basic premises of political life" in the modern world. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that (a) nationalism, as an ideology, has not only played a tremendous role in the constitution and configuration of the current international system – composed mainly of nation-states, i.e., political units based and founded on supposedly homogeneous communities – but (b) that it still shapes many of the interactions established between actors on the international plane.

According to Calhoun (1997: 2-3), nationalism is,

significant not only in crises and open conflicts. It is basic to collective identity in the modern era and to the specific form of state that has prevailed for the last 200 years. Indeed, nationalism is not just a matter of politics, but of culture and national identity.

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Furthermore, following in the footsteps of the famed Marxist Historian Eric Hobsbawm (1992), nationalism may be understood primarily as a political program, and as such promotes precise guidelines for political action – both for minority groups and for established states. Therefore, the nation is defined in terms of who constitutes its members and what that group's values are, alongside its relations with other countries and peoples (Citrin et al. 1994), attesting to its effect beyond domestic borders.

Considering the centrality of nationalism as a fundamental element of modern and contemporary politics, we can speculate about its relevance to various theories of International Relations. After all, if nationalism occupies such an important place in the constitution of contemporary political dynamics, it would be expected that theories seeking to analyze international relations take it into account as part of their analytical schemes.

One of the more frequent mistakes we make when talking about international relations is to accept the naturalization, and thus the subsequent erasure, of the concept of the nation and the role of nationalism in the constitution of the contemporary international system. This naturalization concludes that the nation is the natural subdivision of humanity. Malkki (1995: 512) calls such naturalization of the "national order of things", – the nation, and its organizing ideology, nationalism, are so efficient in their historical process of construction and confirmation that, in the end, they disappear from the narrative of this development. For Bartelson (1995), nationalism is repeatedly portrayed as a fundamental characteristic of international politics, as an immutable result of an irreversible process, and is, therefore, marginalized.

Despite having this structuring role for contemporary international relations, nationalism is neglected in most descriptions and explanations of this reality. For Heiskanen (2019), most approaches to nationalism in international relations reduce this phenomenon to a peripheral threat, and it only seems relevant when the international order is in crisis. This tendency reflects typical state-centrism in the hegemonic field of International Relations (Griffiths and Sullivan 1997). As early as 1996, Lapid and Kratochwil (1996) underlined that International Relations converged on little more than the persistent exclusion of the national problem, relegating it to a marginal phenomenon.

Griffiths and Sullivan (1997) explain this marginalization through the search for disciplinary autonomy characteristic of the field of International Relations during the second half of the 20th century, which led us to a clinical focus on politics outside borders (Walker 1992) – that is, almost exclusive attention to the relations established between nation-states, assumed then as autonomous and homogeneous, stable and consolidated political units (Devetak 1995). This reasoning is grounded on an analytical stagism and compartmentalization: we consider that the nation-state "enters" the international system only after going through a series of complex historical, political, and social processes in which it consolidates itself as a political actor. It is only after this process of the domestic constitution (in which nationalism participates) that the State becomes involved in the analysis of international politics (Griffiths and Sullivan 1997). This insularity is addressed in Mayall's (1994) conclusion that, in the literature concerning nationalism, very few books are written by International Relations scholars. In the International Relations literature, the topic of nationalism receives limited attention.

However, in addition to concerns about disciplinary boundaries, the erasure of nationalism in the international relations debate is also motivated by the very success and efficiency of this ideology: the field of International Relations seems to be affected by a 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995) of epistemological type (Heiskanen, 2019). Billig articulated the concept of 'banal nationalism' to explore the variety of ways in which nationalism is sedimented in everyday life, appearing as a cognitive structure that organizes individuals' political and social experiences in a practically invisible way. To speak of a banal nationalism of an epistemological type means, on the one hand, to point out an unconscious bias on the part of most analyzes (theoretical and empirical) conducted on international relations that recognize in advance a supposed relevance of nationalist ideology to the history of relations international institutions, but leaves this variable for contemporary studies and analyses. On the other hand, it is also reflected in the problem of methodological nationalism, which uncritically reiterates the Nation-State as the protagonist of international relations without, however, considering the role of nationalist ideology in this process.

To a large extent, the argument forwarded here is in line with the criticisms produced by Desch (2019) and Fischer (2010) regarding the loss of the contemporary relevance that Political Science has caused via excessive theoretical

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and methodological insularity. Nationalism has not only been fundamental in structuring the contemporary international system, but it continues to change and transform it contemporaneously. Unless we include this variable in a profound and complex way as part of our various theoretical approaches and methodological strategies, we run the risk of producing unimportant studies, which can lead to the advancement of defective conclusions and stillborn frameworks.

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