Interview – Andreas Wimmer

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Andreas Wimmer is a sociologist and political scientist who was trained as a social anthropologist. He is the Lieber Professor of Sociology and Political Philosophy at Columbia University. His research assumes a long term historical and globally comparative perspective. It asks how states are built and nations formed, how ethno-racial boundaries and hierarchies form or dissolve in the process, and when these inequalities will lead to armed conflict and war. Most recently, he seeks to understand how ideas and institutions travel across the world and with what long term consequences. He has published widely, including the book *Waves of War, Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge) and *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart (Princeton).*

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

I think the shift towards more rigorous ways of making arguments and substantiating them empirically is very promising. Causal inference research also has its disadvantages, however, as the questions tend to be rather narrow and most research in that tradition comes in the form of case studies. It becomes harder and harder to see the big picture and to gain a comparative, encompassing perspective that could explain why we see this effect here and that effect there. I hope that macro-comparative research, which is focused on variables and factors that we can't manipulate in experiments with individual participants or in randomized control trials, will come back. I see some signs of this actually happening.

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

I am constantly learning new research techniques and I tend to move around topics quite frequently. Substantially, my views on nationalism and the nation-state have become more positive. In my earlier work, I highlighted the exclusionary nature of both, emphasizing that either ethnic minorities (think of the United States) or migrants (as in many European states that are either homogenous or succeeded in integrating domestic minorities) were left out from the process of forming an integrated political arena. This is basically the message of*Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict*, which was directed against the standard tales of modernity as a borderless and inclusionary social formation.

After the downsides of neo-liberal global financial and economic integration became starkly visible, I have come to see nationalism and the nation-state in more positive terms as the—so far—only combination of ideologies and political institutions that can guarantee equal rights, public goods provision, protection from arbitrary violence, and a dignified standard of living to the masses. And it is certainly possible to move towards more inclusionary forms of defining the nation and to overcome established ethno-political hierarchies within a society, as I have analyzed in *Nation Building*, even though this will come at the price of social closure towards outsiders such as migrants. And even if we are currently seeing a move towards populist, exclusionary nationalism, this is not the problem of nationalism and the nation-state per se, but of certain interpretations and manifestations of it.

In any case, I never believed in the promise of a post-national age or that the European Union will become the model of a supra-national political entity for the rest of the world. The current resurgence of nationalist populism around the globe and the fraying of the global liberal order come as no surprise to me. The belief that we are moving towards a

borderless, open world based on liberal principles was always an illusion.

Would you consider classical civilizations with concepts of citizenship (e.g. Ancient Greece) to be an example of early nation-building? If not, how do they differ from more modern developments?

The Greek city states were based on slavery, the embryonic democratic regime was restricted to a very small segment of the population. Furthermore, the idea of a national community composed of Greek speakers was only very weakly developed, the horizon of identity and political solidarity was limited to the city state. The only connection that I see to the modern nation-state is that the Greeks had made some important moves away from dynasticism and towards the idea of popular sovereignty, both of which became crucial for nation-states that no longer ruled in the name of dynasty, empire, or God, but in the name of a nationally defined people. In modern nation-states, the imagined community of the nation provides the boundary to delimit the idea of the sovereign, which by itself does not offer any obvious criteria of who the people are that should be given rights of democratic participation.

What role do minority groups play in nation-building?

The boundaries of the nation are drawn differently during the early stages of the formation of nation-states. Depending on the configuration of power and the reach of the alliance networks of the dominant groups, it may comprise minorities and majorities alike (as was the case in Switzerland or India) or it may be restricted to the culturally and politically dominant ethnic group alone (as was the case in Belgium or Iraq). In more inclusionary configurations, ethnic difference tends to be less politicized than in the other route to nation-state formation, where political struggles are often defined in ethno-national terms. These struggles sometimes escalate into violence or secessionist demands (see my *Waves of War*), undermining the prospects of national political integration. The political exclusion of minorities, in other words, shows that nation building has failed.

Can a citizenry lose a sense of national belonging/identity?

Once a national consciousness is rooted in the population and reproduced via state institutions, it is very rare that it disappears completely (I don't know of a single case, actually). But national consciousness and nationalism more broadly of course waxes and wanes over time. Sometimes it recedes to the background, making way for other forms of political identification and other alliances (such as cross-national class solidarity), only to be resuscitated and re-awakened later. As long as the modern world is institutionally rooted in nationalist principles—as long as states are legitimized by the idea of national sovereignty—we will continue to see this cyclical coming and going of nationalism.

How does the evolution of nation-states inform us when considering the potential development of supranational governments (such as a federalized EU)?

The European Union continues to be an alliance of states and its autonomy is rather weakly developed. The core functions of modern statehood: collective defense and security, social solidarity, public goods provision, and democratic citizenship continue to be organized at the level of states, not the European Union. As long as this is the case, European identity and solidarity will remain secondary. Only when citizens exchange their taxes and political support against public goods, security, and social solidarity directly provided by the European Union will this dynamic change and Europe approach something like a mega-nation-state. A possibility, for sure, but perhaps rather unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future.

How does globalization affect nationalism and nation-building?

Nationalism and the nation-state emerged in the interconnected world of the 18th and 19th century. In the 19th and 20th centuries, nationalism then diffused across the world in a way that we could describe as an aspect of "globalization". While born out of these interconnections, nationalism aimed at narrowing the boundaries of political belonging, it undermined empire after empire. When nation-states were erected on their ruins, they restricted the flow of people, ideas, and goods across the new borders for a couple of generations, emphasizing domestic cultures, peoples, and economies instead. From the seventies onward, this national closure gave way to a new wave of intensified global

exchanges in the domains of culture, politics, and the economy, which again lasted for two generations or so. Today, we again see a (relative) retreat from the networks of international exchange, with a new emphasis on domestic industrial policy and the onshoring of manufacturing, stricter migration control, renewed nationalist discourses, and a return to raw national power politics in the international arena. It is hard to know whether there are systemic reasons for these back-and-forth oscillations, as a Polanyi reading of them might suggest, and whether they will repeat in the future.

In your article, "Why Nationalism Works", you mention that foreign assistance should help expand state capacity rather than replace or undermine it through direct aid. What sorts of policies can governments and international institutions take to accomplish this?

There is a trade-off between channeling resources through national governments in the Global South, which might be less efficient and often hampered by clientelism and corruption, and providing public goods by more efficient international organizations and NGOs, which, however, undermine the legitimacy of the national government. After all, the exchange between the citizens' loyalty and taxes against public goods and security provided by the state is a key aspect of modern nation building. The neo-liberal idea to have those organizations provide public goods that are the most efficient and the most professional, wherever they come from, obviously stands at odds with the idea of nation-building. But there are compromise strategies that sacrifice neither legitimacy nor efficiency. International donors can channel resources through national (and regional) governments all the while helping them to build capacity to do this efficiently and in ways that undermine political clientelism and private corruption. Many examples from around the developing world, such as Rwanda or Botswana, show that this is indeed possible.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Acquire as many technical skills as possible, read broadly and deeply, including older works and books, and follow your own curiosities, wherever they lead to and even if they will force you to cross the disciplinary boundaries that contemporary academia has erected. To be more precise, it is crucial to get solid training in a variety of techniques of social research, from causal inference to statistics, from natural language processing and other big data analysis to interview techniques, from the critical reading of historical documents to fieldwork. Regarding reading, it is important to remember that there are books in libraries that contain valuable insights, that the most highly cited papers might not be the ones most relevant for your research or the most insightful, that some crucial texts might be written in languages other than English, that some research might address the same question as yours but use a different theoretical language (which is often obscured by using simple keyword searches in google scholar). However, the hardest and most crucial skill, which is hard to teach, is to identify a good puzzle: a question that has not yet been answered so far in the ever increasing research literature, that is not trivial, and that actually can be answered with high quality data.