

## Review – Nationalisms in International Politics

Written by Jaakko Heiskanen

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# Review – Nationalisms in International Politics

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JAAKKO HEISKANEN, OCT 23 2022

### ***Nationalisms in International Politics***

**By Kathleen E. Powers**

**Princeton University Press, 2022**

Following the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2016, nationalism has once again become a hot topic. By and large, scholars of International Relations (IR) have followed the established practice of conceptualising nationalism as a political pathology that frustrates international cooperation and enflames geopolitical competition. Thus, the rising tide of nationalism and the decline of the liberal international order are frequently seen as two sides of the same coin. While containing a grain of truth, the equation of nationalism with violence and xenophobia offers a narrow and incomplete conception of the phenomenon that elides the diversity of nationalisms in the modern world.

Kathleen E. Powers's *Nationalism and International Politics* is a timely intervention that challenges the persistent mischaracterisation of nationalism as a political pathology. Rejecting the 'one-dimensional' understanding that dominates the literature, Powers reminds us that 'nationalisms vary' (p.2). Significantly, this variation is qualitative as well as quantitative: what matters is not only the intensity of nationalist attachment, but also the norms that define what it means to be a nationalist. While some nationalists privilege the unity and homogeneity of the in-group, others place a premium on equality and reciprocity. Armed with this simple yet all-too-readily-overlooked insight, Powers sets out to rectify the prevailing common sense: nationalists do not always support conflict-escalation, and equality-oriented nationalisms can actually foster international cooperation. On the flip side, supranational identities do not invariably facilitate harmonious relations, but can also generate animosity toward subgroups when they place too much emphasis on unity and homogeneity.

The book's argument unfolds over six chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 present the central research puzzle, survey the limitations of the existing IR literature on nationalism, and outline the author's theoretical framework. Drawing on Relational Models Theory, Powers introduces two basic models of human interaction that frame her understanding of nationalisms as social identities. The first is centred on the principle of communal sharing and provides the basis for what Powers calls 'unity' nationalisms: individuals 'view themselves as a unified whole comprised of homogeneous compatriots' (p.45). The second model is grounded on the principle of equality matching and gives rise to what the author calls 'equality' nationalisms: individuals 'see each other as peers or equals' (p.45). Powers hypothesises that unity-based identities tend toward militarism, while equality-based identities tend toward cooperation. The three substantive chapters that follow test the theory through a multi-method approach: Chapters 3 and 4 conduct original survey experiments on samples of the American public, which Chapter 5 complements with large-scale survey-data from European Union members states. In the concluding chapter, Powers outlines some avenues for future research and offers a thoughtful consideration of the limitations of her argument.

While the book's underlying claim that social identities can be illuminated by theories of social cognition sounds intuitive enough, it introduces a number of analytical and normative issues. To begin with, the proposed binary contrast between unity-based and equality-based identities raises the question of whether these are the only models available. As Powers recognises in a footnote, Relational Models Theory actually proposes two further models for human interaction: authority ranking and market pricing. Yet Powers has chosen to focus on communal sharing and

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equality matching only. Market pricing is dismissed out of hand as having little to contribute to nationalism studies, while hierarchy-based nationalisms get a brief discussion in the book's conclusion. Curiously, the author seems to think that the authority ranking model would be more relevant for East Asia than to 'Western-style democracy' (p.212). This is a surprising and problematic claim, especially in light of recent work on the manifold hierarchies that stratify the international system (e.g. Lake 2009; Towns 2010; Zarakol 2017; Barder 2021). All in all, one gets the impression that the author's decision to focus on only two of the four available models – unity and equality – had more to do with the intuitive appeal of the binary framework than any serious analytical justification.

This brings me to my second and more fundamental concern about the book's theoretical framework: despite the author's claim that she is moving beyond (or at least improving upon) the dichotomies that have structured nationalism studies for decades, the argument feels very much like 'old wine in new bottles'. Thus, the contrast that Powers proposes between conflict-prone unity nationalisms and cooperation-enhancing equality nationalisms bears a striking family resemblance to longstanding distinctions such as Western versus non-Western nationalisms (Kohn 1944), civic versus ethnic nationalisms (Ignatieff 1994), and nationalism versus patriotism (Viroli 1995) – distinctions that have been widely debated and criticised (e.g. Xenos 1996; Yack 1996; Brubaker 1999; Shulman 2002; Tinsley 2019). Powers's main claim to originality here seems to be that she avoids 'muddy top-down approaches' (p.46) by building her concepts 'on psychological foundations' (p.79). However, this psychologising move arguably makes her theoretical framework *more* rather than less problematic than the older binaries. Although Powers wisely avoids any references to human nature, linking varieties of nationalism to psychological models comes perilously close to naturalising them and thus closing off inquiries into their sociological underpinnings.

Finally, despite Powers's claim to be interested in the 'content' of nationalist identities, the theory she presents is incredibly parsimonious. Channelled through Relational Models Theory, the 'content' under consideration is reduced to a binary psychological model of human interaction. The richness of the historical, social, cultural, political, and economic context that has shaped the content of particular national or supranational identities is bracketed away as something that 'precedes the book's core questions' (p.220). Powers, to her credit, is fully cognisant and upfront about these limitations, even admitting that 'a discussion about historical and social context brings us full circle – back to scholarship from political scientists, sociologists, and historians who divide the world into "civic" and "ethnic" nationalisms with richly detailed case studies' (p.221). Yet if taking 'content' seriously ultimately leads us back to historical and sociological analyses of nationalism, one is left wondering why the author opted to ground her argument on Relational Models Theory in the first place.

In sum, *Nationalisms in International Politics* is a skilful piece of scholarship that marshals a wealth of empirical data through a rigorous mixed-methods approach. Above all, Powers is to be commended for tackling head-on the persistent mischaracterisation of nationalism as an inherently violent and war-prone phenomenon that undercuts prospects for international cooperation. Yet in dismantling one problematic body of common sense, the book ultimately ends up reinforcing another: the view that there are two types of nationalism, one tending toward political equality and cooperation, the other toward cultural unity and competition. Although normatively infused dichotomies are difficult to avoid when analysing such a contested phenomenon as nationalism, it seems counterproductive to root these dichotomies in psychological models that elide the richness of historical experience.

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