

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Malešević, Siniša**, *Nation-States and Nationalisms: Organization, Ideology and Solidarity*. London: Polity, 2013. 239 pp., \$24.95 paper (9780745653396).

**I**n *Nation-States and Nationalisms*, Siniša Malešević offers a novel heuristic for understanding how the nation-state and nationalist ideologies have come to constitute the definitive frames through which societies are organized today. At the root of the nation-state's development are two inexorable processes, which Malešević refers to as the bureaucratization of coercion and centrifugal ideologization. These processes operate together to constitute a kind of Weberian legitimate authority whereby power is somehow both enforced (coercive) and unforced (tacitly legitimate): "although nation-states are coercive bureaucratic organizations, they are also considered by their own citizens as the most legitimate form of rule" (197). These organizational and legitimating operations of the state work in tandem to unify what Malešević calls zones of micro-solidarity – those close-knit family- or community-level bonds that differ from the abstract and depersonalized character of the nation-state.

Before staging a series of debates around nationalism, Malešević charts the historical genesis of the nation-state by recourse to humanity's primordial moments. He offers the sociobiological argument that "humans are emotionally, cognitively, biologically and socially 'wired' for life in the much smaller entities" (24). The explanatory value of sociobiology is at once upheld in the second chapter, and then dispelled for understanding the "gradual and cumulative increase in organizational power" (10) across time. The nation-state, as the by-product of these processes of the bureaucratization of coercion and centrifugal ideologization, is thereby framed as something of an historical anomaly. It is unmatched, Malešević explains, in both its organizational prowess and its capacity for ideological penetration. Neither those much smaller bodies (bands, clans, tribes, etc.) nor larger political formations (empires) can boast such a high degree of organizational sophistication.

In the debates that unfold across the following chapters, Malešević offers accounts of nationalism that are at times contrary to commonplace understanding, though they are consistent with the framework he has elucidated. Nationalism in general, for Malešević, has an everyday and

banal quality to it. Indeed, its hegemonic character is a testament to the nation-state's ideological strength. It is for this reason, we find in another chapter, that nationalism as an ideology bears a rather diffuse connection to collective violence, which Malešević argues is more attributable to organizational breakdown and micro-level tensions. Nationalism is not generally the font of effervescence but rather the tether between an impersonal state and intimate micro-solidarities. Malešević further situates his political sociology against a less empirically robust cultural studies, devoting a chapter to argue against the "theoretically vapid" (155) concept of national identity, and to give preference to the more measurable terms of solidarity, ideology and social organization. The final chapter places the nation on the horizon of globalization, whereby even those evolving externalities appear subsumed to the bureaucratization of coercion and centrifugal ideologization. The threats of internationalism are framed here primarily as opportunities for states to shore up their national borders rather than as depreciating the strength or integrity of state institutions. Hence, we find the nation-state owes its coherence and staying-power to this pair of ineluctable and integrated historical processes.

Overall *Nation-States and Nationalisms* is written with a clearly articulated conceptual framework, submitting world history and the formation of nation-states to a set of universalized processes. Malešević's rhetorical strategy is also compelling, at least on the surface, as he sets up a series of contrary positions within debates around nationalism and proceeds to dismiss them. However, the discerning reader will wonder whether Malešević does justice to a sufficiently broad range of alternative perspectives. For there is no place in this book given to debate the likes of Foucault or Hardt and Negri over the utility of thinking about power and norms as emanating from a central point. Whatever explanations of social organization may come from a Marxist or World Systems analysis appear to be off of this author's radar. That some nation-states may succeed while others falter is not a point of real interrogation. Hence, this is not a text in which one will encounter the post-colonial canon. Globalization is treated without extensive discussion of the ways in which free trade, intergovernmental bodies like the IMF, and large global corporations undermine the effective sovereignty of nation-states. A book on the nation-state today that does not consider these positions in greater depth reads as rather limited.

Additionally absent is a discussion of the fraught character of nation-building processes. The role of the state in managing populations is a key thread to this work, but the *unevenness* in how the state deploys its organizational mechanisms does not appear to warrant analysis. Indeed, critical scholarship that sees the nation-state as a site of deep divisions

along hierarchies of belonging (e.g., between insider and outsider, citizen, immigrant, refugee, and so forth) is refuted outright when Malešević writes: “In contrast to [male chauvinism, racism and homophobia], nationalism is a doctrine that generally does not polarize the citizens of one state in terms of gender, sexuality or physiognomy” (86-7). At minimum this statement is highly debatable (does nationalism not always involve deeply embedded hierarchies of difference?). But the resoluteness of this claim also speaks to how much the imaginary dimensions of the nation and the real effects of its internal polarizations are outside the purview of Malešević’s framework. Benedict Anderson is addressed fleetingly, but this is not a text with much room for imagined communities. While inhabitants of the nation-state may all be subject to “hegemonic ideological processes” (142), we are all positioned differently in relation to them. Indeed, many people live in the nation-state without seeing themselves mirrored back in its image. Those who are marginalized by racist or ethnocentric ideas about the nation surely cannot be seen as simply capitulating to nationalism’s somehow overwhelming logic. Thinking through the imaginative dimensions of nationalism – those identifications and dis-identifications – rather than the determinism of ideological processes, would allow for a more nuanced approach to understanding subject-formation. Further, readers from countries like Canada or the United States will not find their range of struggles acknowledged here. There is no mention of approaches to cultural pluralism such as multiculturalism – fraught as it may be – nor the problem of many nations in one state (e.g., the First Nations and the Québécois nation in Canada).

Nation-states and nationalisms are sprawling sociological topics and it is difficult to do them justice in a book of this length. Malešević undertakes a formidable effort to refine his two key terms. But in formalizing them as ideal types, and emphasizing their enduring conceptual utility, the story appears far too clean. The reader cannot help but find the author could do with more tentative conclusions about the coherence of his objects of study.

*York University*

Michael Follert

**Michael Follert** is a PhD candidate in sociology at York University.

**Email:** [mike.follert@gmail.com](mailto:mike.follert@gmail.com)

