The Renaissance of Nationalism and Attitudes to Immigration in Europe

Paper to be presented at the ECPR Graduate Conference in Bremen 2012, July 4-6
1. Introduction

Contemporary European politicians often talk of a lack of social cohesion and an erosion of national identity in the same sentence. As decision making processes move either to the local or the global level, the sense of national identity is supposedly becoming hollowed-out and less important. Moreover, the increasing cultural diversity of European societies, brought about by post-war immigration, is claimed to pose a further challenge to national identities. Some politicians and political theorists argue that, because national identities were essential to the emergence of the European welfare democracies, the loss of a sense of national identity is threatening the very foundation of European states.

Furthermore, as European populations express worries about the impact of immigration, illustrated for example by the successes of various anti-immigration parties, stressing a desire to strengthen national identity has been a strategy employed by politicians to calm such worries. Simultaneously immigration has become increasingly conditioned upon its ability to conform to a national identity. For example, the British government has proposed plans of more rigorous English language requirements for foreign spouses to UK-citizens, thus as a prerequisite for immigrating rather than as part of an integration process.¹ This rationale is mirrored in the theoretical literature on nationalism, in which national identity is regarded as crucial in ensuring the necessary conditions for a welfare democracy. These political and theoretical developments suggest that a renaissance of nationalism is taking place.

In this paper, I discuss two problematic issues with this. The first issue is empirical and concerns the effect of stressing a national identity in order to curb worries about immigration. When looking at the literature on attitudes to immigration, perceived threats to one’s culture stand out as crucial in understanding these attitudes. And, rather than suggesting that stronger national identities would calm worries of the impact of immigration, the research seems to imply that increasing the salience of national identity might in fact spur such worries. The second issue is conceptual, and concerns the way in which immigration is discussed within the theoretical literature on nationalism. Immigration is often treated as an independent variable in relation to national identity. I argue that this is conceptually flawed; immigration cannot be regarded as a well-defined “threat” merely happening to passive nation states, but must be considered at the same time as produced by national identity.

The paper is structured as follows: I begin by giving an overview of the research on attitudes to immigration. I argue that, even though it is not clear yet whether it is the strength or the content of national identity that has the largest impact on attitudes, increasing the salience of national identity risks increasing negative attitudes to immigration. This is especially so when no attempt is made to redefine national identity to be more inclusive. In part two, I discuss the theoretical literature on nationalism. I give an outline of liberal nationalism, as argued by mainly David Miller, followed by a discussion of the conceptual relation between national identity and immigration.² The main point is that the relation must be seen as one of mutual dependence, rather than simply regarding national identity as the “affected” dependent variable. This observation is important for the discussion on the relation between national identity and attitudes to immigration, as it suggests that perceptions of

immigration are malleable to a much larger extent than often presumed. In the final part, I briefly discuss the implications for research and policy of the conclusions made in the previous parts.

2. Attitudes to Immigration and National Identity

A wide range of explanatory variables have been analysed in relation to people's attitudes to immigration, thanks to the availability of large quantitative data sets, such as the European Social Survey (ESS). If divided into demographic variables, on the hand, that refer to objective facts about an individual and variables that measure the perceived consequences of immigration, on the other hand, it is the latter that seems most capable of explaining attitudes to immigration. Demographic variables, such as age, gender and income levels, have generally had inconsistent results, leading researchers to instead look at the threats immigration might pose to natives. In this part, I focus mainly on these kinds of variables. Surveying the research field, perceived threats of immigration to ones culture or identity seems to be most successful in explaining attitudes to immigration. Thus, even though other variables are of great importance as well, it is worth paying extra attention to the way threats to culture and national identity are constructed.

Threat perceptions are normally divided into two main categories; threats to the individual and threats to the country or nation as a whole, i.e. the in-group. Although the results from the research literature are not conclusive, in general, threats individuals perceive as being posed to their country or nation as a whole tend to have a far greater impact on attitudes than threats individuals perceive are being posed to their personal situation. In other words, people tend to be more worried about their in-group (country/nation) than about themselves.

By and large, there appears to be an effect of threats to the individual on attitudes to immigration that is more or less consistent throughout the literature. Most studies find only a weak effect of threats to the individual, whereas threats to the country as a whole have stronger effects. In several studies, when respondents are asked whether they believe immigration is good or bad for the economy as a whole, a negative response is strongly and significantly correlated with negative attitudes to immigration. Moreover, in studies comparing the relative impact of threats to the individual and threats to the country as a whole, the latter consistently has a stronger effect on attitudes. For example, Paul Sniderman, Louk Hagendoorn and Markus Prior compared the impact of

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economic, cultural and security threats on both the individual and the group level in the Netherlands. At the individual level, only economic threat had somewhat consistently an effect, albeit a weak one. At the group level, both economic and cultural threat, and especially the latter, had strong and significant effects on attitudes to immigration.

In particular, perceived cultural threats appear to influence attitudes to immigration to a large extent. Sides and Citrin found that preference for cultural unity had the largest effect on attitudes in their model (using ESS 2002-03) – twice as big as being unsatisfied with the economy and four times as high as dissatisfaction with one’s own financial situation. Elisabeth Ivarsflaten compared the maximum and the mean impact of potential explanatory variables on attitudes to immigration and asylum policy, and found that preference for cultural unity had by far the greatest explanatory potential – its maximum explanatory value was three times as high as the variable that ranked second (racism). Its mean impact was more than four times as high as the variable ranking second, which was ‘being suspicious of others’.

Given this large impact of perceived cultural and in-group threats, investigating national identities appears to be a way of gaining an understanding of the sentiments underlying attitudes to immigration. Now, not all expressions of particularism (i.e. the idea that we should care more for our compatriots than for people in other countries, who nevertheless might be worse off) are expressions of nationalism. However, particularism coupled with worries about cultural decay provides reasons to believe that it is a nationalist framework that drive these sentiments. As will be discussed in the next part, national identity is often regarded as a cultural identity that defines political boundaries, and this definition seems to mirror worries about immigration. The rest of this paper will therefore be focused on the national identity variable in relation to attitudes to immigration.

The national identity variable can be measured and tested for its explanatory significance on two dimensions: quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative dimension of national identity measures the strength of someone’s identification with the nation, while the qualitative dimension measures the content of someone’s national identity. There is currently a debate as to whether strength of identification correlates with negative attitudes toward immigration regardless of content, or whether it is the content that actually matters and that the strength only can serve as a mediating factor. Most studies find that many other factors influence both the effect of content and of strength. In this section, I will provide an overview of the most prominent ways of measuring the effect on attitudes to immigration of different (in content) national identities. The most common way

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6 D. Card, C. Dustmann and I. Preston (2005), ‘Understanding attitudes to immigration: The migration and minority module of the first European Social Survey’, CReAM Discussion Paper Series No. 03/05;
9 These results are also consistent with studies in the USA. Charles Chandler and Yung-mei Tsai, for example, found that perceived cultural threats of immigration was, next to being a college graduate, the largest predictor of attitudes to legal immigration, and the largest for attitudes to illegal immigration: C. R. Chandler and Y. Tsai (2001), ‘Social factors influencing immigration attitudes: an analysis of data from the General Social Survey’, The Social Science Journal 38, p. 184.
of measuring the national identity variable qualitatively is to dichotomies it into ethnic and civic kinds and I start by presenting these, followed by a critique against such dichotomising and alternative content-measures. I conclude by comparing the results of the quantitative (strength) measures. Importantly, an overview of the literature sheds light on the fact that, even though there has been extensive progress in understanding the national identity variable vis-a-vis immigration (including the development of cross-national and temporal data sets), much is still left for further research to inquire. This is also evident in the rising number of contemporary small-N experimental studies - many of the cross-national quantitative data sets have become increasingly theoretically obsolete and researchers want to explore alternative methods.

2.1. Ethnic, Civic or Cultural?

An ethnic definition of the nation refers to ascriptive/objective criteria such as being born in X country and having parents of X nationality; criteria beyond the control of the individual. A civic national identity, in contrast, is defined by acquired/voluntarist criteria, such as agreeing with the basic principle of the constitution or being able to speak the language, thus criteria someone could possibly adopt.

A common criticism against the civic/ethnic dichotomy is that it does not appear to be a dichotomy. Rather, studies on perceptions of nationhood show that they are complementary – that all indicators on each side correlate positively. Moreover, some have suggested that there is a third, cultural, dimension as well (language and religion). I limit the discussion here to these classifications’ empirical, rather than conceptual, validity. However, the empirical finding that it is difficult to draw a sharp distinction between the indicators of different types of national identities, suggests a need to re-work the distinctions conceptually as well.

Furthermore, many recognise that the indicators have different meanings cross-nationally. For example, being able to speak the language might be thought of as an indicator of an ethnic national identity in a country where the language is regarded as an important part of the nation’s ancestry, whereas it might be considered a means to integrating into a civic community in other countries. However, whilst most find widespread cross-national differences in the emphasis on different criteria of the civic/ethnic dichotomy, it seems to be the case that the theoretical division still hold, albeit its explanatory force on attitudes is far weaker than originally suggested. Tim Reeskens and Marc Hooghe draw two important conclusion from analysing the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) data: firstly, the ethnic/civic distinction only becomes cross-nationally stable if the indicator ‘respect political institutions and laws’ is included in the ethnic identity too and secondly, since the cross-national variation in the emphasis on the indicators within the categories is large, “countries

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13 Jones and Smith, ‘Diversity and Commonality’.
should not be ranked based on their ‘scores’ on these two dimensions, contrary to what has become practice in current comparative research.”

Thus more refined theoretical dimensions of the national identity variable are called for in order to conduct cross-national comparisons. However, the ethnic and civic dimensions still play some role in explaining anti-immigration sentiments. Most research suggests that identifying with an ethnic national identity correlates positively with negative attitudes to immigration. The civic identity shows more complex results. Compared to an ethnic identity it always has a smaller effect on hostility to immigration, but what effect it has on its own is more unclear. Jan German Janmaat found, using cross-national Eurobarometer data from 2002, that it does have an effect on its own and that this is positively correlated with negative attitudes to immigration. Moreover, Juan Diez Medrano found on Spanish ISSP data that people who were indifferent toward their national identity were the most positive to immigration, suggesting that having a civic national identity is more likely to lead to negative attitudes to immigration than having none at all. A study by Anthony Heath and James Tilly, however, showed more mixed results, where the civic identity correlated with less negative attitudes to legal immigration compared to having no national identity at all, but with more negative attitudes on illegal immigration.

2.2. Content or Strength?

A comparative study conducted on ISSP data from 2003, finds that stronger national identification is associated with more negative attitudes to immigration in all countries studied apart from two. Studies conducted on smaller samples, however, seem to suggest that whether it is the content or the strength of someone’s national identity that elicit certain attitudes to immigration depends, to some extent, on national context. Canada, which in general is exceptional in the research field of attitudes to immigration, emerges as a country where a stronger national identification leads to less hostility towards immigration, though these results are not consistent throughout the literature. Studies also show that embracing multiculturalism has become to be seen as part of being a ‘good Canadian’. Moreover, a study on attitudes to immigration on students in Germany and Canada showed that manipulating a feeling of a common national identity with immigrants made Canadian

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16 Janmaat, ‘Popular conceptions’.
respondents less negative to immigrants, whereas it had no or the opposite effect on German respondents. These results lend support to the hypothesis that it is foremost the content of the national identity that matters in terms of eliciting different attitudes to immigration.

Most research suggests that it at least is the case that the effect on attitudes of the intensity with which one identifies with a nation is mediated by the content of the identity. In Heath and Tilly’s aforementioned study, for example, the effect of the intensity of identification became insignificant when the ethnic and civic conceptions where included in the analysis. This would suggest that identifying, perhaps even strongly, with a nation is not by necessity correlated with being negative to immigration. Another study, conducted on German and British students, investigated the relationships between in-group evaluation, in-group identification and out-group derogation, where the in-group in question was the nation and the out-group was asylum seekers. Firstly, the study showed that people who had a positive in-group evaluation showed a higher degree of in-group identification. Secondly, the study also explored the effect of how, e.g. the process of, the in-group (i.e. the nation) is defined. It tested three different processes of evaluating one’s own nation; against other nations (intergroup), against the nation’s past or future (temporal) or against some abstract principle or ideal. While the inter-group evaluations always resulted in derogation of the out-group, the two latter processes of identification did not necessarily have this effect.

Thus, evidence seems to suggest that there can be variation in the construction of national identity that has a large, effect on attitudes to immigrants and immigration; “What seems crucial here is that the very nature of intergroup comparisons implies a negative interdependence between positive evaluation of own group and devaluation of the other group. In contrast, temporal comparisons (or the control condition) do not explicitly imply such a negative interdependence: thus, own group’s positive evaluation can be achieved independently of out-group derogation.” The evidence is, however, far from conclusive and the political mechanisms that drive the variations are largely unknown. What seems to be of central importance is that successful ways of manipulating the national identity variable (those that decrease hostility towards immigration or immigrants) in most cases rely on portraying immigrants as sharing the national identity, rather than downplaying their

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23 Heath and Tilley, ‘British National Identity’, p. 128. I interpret their ‘patriotism’ variable as a variable of strength or intensity of identification on the basis of the measures they are using (ibid. p. 126).
26 Mikael Hjerm claims, in accordance with Jansmaat, that it is national identification as such that elicits negative attitudes to immigration (Hjerm, 2003). On the aggregate level, Samuel Pehrson and Eva Green found that countries with higher levels of national identification had lower levels of anti-immigration prejudice: Pehrson and Green, ‘Who We Are’, pp. 702-3.
potential threat to it. Hence, it appears not the be the perception that the out-group (immigrants) might in some way or another undermine the national identity that elicit negative attitudes to immigration, but rather the fact that they are regarded as the out-group at all.

In the next part, I discuss how nationalism is theoretically conceptualised in relation to immigration, and how nationalism is normatively defended. I do this against the backdrop of the discussion of the research on attitudes to immigration, as I wish to highlight how nationalist theories are affected by these results. As a disclaimer, however, this paper works with the assumption that widespread negative attitudes to immigration in any country is bad, and that we should try to increase our understanding on how they come about in order to be able better address them. Those who do not share this presumption might not be convinced by the arguments made in this paper.

3. Liberal Nationalism and Immigration

In this part, I give and account of normative, liberal, nationalism. I argue that in the way it has been defended by liberal theorists, it fails to properly recognise the malleable nature of national identities. Moreover, liberal nationalist has seen immigration as an independent variable, able to “threat” national identities. It is more conceptually coherent to suggest that national identity and immigration are not mutually exclusive concepts, but does to some extent construct each other. When considering these conceptual points in relation to the empirical research on attitudes to immigration, as discussed above, the picture of the relation between these attitudes and of national identity become much more complex. Because if attitudes to immigration are influence by a certain national identity, and this national identity is malleable to an extent that it can even impact the meaning of immigration – national identities emerge as a tool in affecting attitudes to immigration. I begin this section by discussing liberal nationalism and its concept of national identity. I then move on to discuss its relation to the concept of immigration.

The reasons liberals have for advocating nationalism can be divided into two broad categories: pre-political and political. The pre-political ones hold that national identities are necessary for individuals’ capacity for autonomy, and they should therefore be protected and nurtured by the state. The political accounts (though these are often part of the same nationalist theory) argue that, perhaps national identities do not exist independently of the state and the political sphere, but they nevertheless have instrumental value as they serve important liberal aims, such as democracy and social justice. Both pre-political and political nationalist argue for adjusting immigration policies on the basis of its effect on national identity. Here, due to the limited scope of this paper, I only discuss political nationalism and its conceptualisation of national identity and immigration.

Political nationalism refers to the idea that a desired political ideal is best realised within a nation state. The state is justified in promoting one national culture because it enables it to achieve other political goals, such as a well-functioning deliberative democracy or a redistributive welfare state. Though this version of political nationalism has been argued for from a wide range of ideological perspectives, in some way or another, political nationalism holds that national identity is a prerequisite for the kind of social trust and solidarity a democratic welfare state requires. In a deliberative democracy, citizens must be able to understand each other’s way of communicating. If they identify with the political culture, this can be achieved. “Democratic politics”, argues Kymlicka,
“is politics in the vernacular.”27 Sharing a national identity should also make citizens more likely to share the same outlook.28 Furthermore, national identity increases not only understanding but also trust.29 For a democracy to function, those who find themselves endorsing an extreme position must be willing to adopt more moderate arguments in support of their claims. In order for them to do so, they must trust that others will reciprocate in future deliberations. This way compromises and decisions can be reached. On this view citizens are thus seen as more likely to trust each other if they feel bound not only as fellow citizens but also as co-nationals.

Mutual trust is beneficial for social redistribution as well, it is argued. “A shared identity carries with it a shared loyalty, and this increases confidence that others will reciprocate one’s co-operative behaviour.”30 The kind of social solidarity that is necessary for large-scale redistribution to take place, can develop within a nation state because people who otherwise would have little in common feel connected and will therefore be more willing to make the kind of sacrifices social solidarity involves.

National identity, according to Miller, that is capable of fulfilling the political roles as described above comes about when people identify with a nation defined as a community that (1) is constituted by shared belief and mutual commitment, (2) is extended in history, (3) has an active character, (4) is connected to a particular territory, and (5) has a distinct public culture.31 Generally, ways of conceptualising national identity are often divided into essentialist and constructivist approaches. Essentialism refers to the idea that each national identity has got an essence that one can define and that without which it would cease to exist. Constructivism, in contrast, entails that national identities are socially and politically constructed and therefore in a mode of constant change. While Miller does believe that some aspects of nations are real and not purely imaginative or constructed, he nevertheless denies the objectivity and rigidity of essentialism. Regarding the third element (3), Miller suggests that what sets nations apart from other sorts of communities is that nations take decisions and are therefore active. Churches, for example, are inactive in this sense as they only interpret the message from God, Miller argues. As Miller himself seems to suggest, a nation is not active in a literal sense, but what is important is that when one identifies with a nation, one perceives it as being part of an active community capable of shaping its future collectively.32 National identity is in this sense a subjective experience of being part of a historical (element two) community with a common political destiny (element one).

In order for national identity to function as pillar for a democratic welfare state, co-nationals must feel that their common belonging is not entirely ad hoc, and they must be able to recognise some common features that characterises the nation with which they identify (element one and five). Together this suggests that national identities, as they are imagined, cannot be perceived as being in a state of constant unrest and that co-nationals have an interest in being at least a bit conservative. However, this is not an essentialist conception of national identities. For example, Miller claims that it would be self-defeating for a nation to have just one characteristic as its defining feature, as this is

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29 Miller, On Nationality, p. 97.
30 Ibid. p. 92; Barry, ‘Self-Government’, p. 263
31 Miller, On Nationality, p. 27.
likely to exclude those who are in minority with regards to that specific feature, such as religious minorities. Hence in the case of religious pluralism, it would be better for the nation to “de-emphasize” this particular part of national identity and instead find other mutual characteristics around which to base a collective identity. This non-essentialist view of national identities suggests that they are indeed flexible and can be altered in order to fulfil their political, instrumental, purposes. To what extent though, is not entirely clear.

Miller argues that a nation state can legitimately decide to restrict immigration in order to protect its national identity, because citizens have an interest in preserving it for political reasons. The worry is that open borders would “flood” some countries with immigrants, changing their culture with such speed that national identity fails to catch up and thus no longer can provide the collective identity democracy and the welfare state require (given that they do). By the same token, Miller argues that the nation state can restrict immigrants’ access to social rights before they have made a contractual commitment to the national public culture.

While this form of nationalism understands national identity as a political construct, at the same time it quite oddly treats it as a passive receiver of external influences. This is especially evident in the way many advocates of nationalism theorise about immigration. They often portray immigration as a neutral empirical fact that is merely happening to passive nation-states, who find their national identity seriously challenged. As the attitudinal literature teaches us, national identity is not passive at all, but has a large impact on how people think about immigration. Not only does it influence to what extent people are positive or negative to immigration in general, but also what kind of immigration people find problematic or beneficial, and how they think immigrants should be treated when in the country. This second observation points to the political nature of the concept of immigration as well. Immigration and national identity are thus in a way both active political concepts and phenomena that shape the meaning of each other.

The problem with this argument is that it is only concerned with one side of the national identity/immigration relationship, namely the way immigration impacts national identity. The result is a poor understanding of both national identity and immigration. National identity is reduced to a passive receiver of the “immigration threat”, despite it being the case that national identity itself has a large impact on how people come to think about immigration as posing a threat at all. Immigration, on the other hand, becomes a neutral well-defined concept, in spite of it being defined much by

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33 Miller, *On Nationality*, p. 92. Although, internal movement, generation shifts, the global economy and a free market system, technology and science seems perhaps equally important in shaping national identities – all wholly or partly beyond the power of the co-nationals to influence.


35 Whether they do is a contested issue. Since Putnam argued that diversity undermines social capital, a literature on multiculturalism and various forms of social capital has emerged. On the whole, the nationalist thesis has not been proven wrong, but it has not been sufficiently verified either. The literature so far is still divided on whether national identity is required for the welfare state to function, or whether diversity is or is not a threat to social trust and solidarity. See e.g. R. Johnston, K. Banting, W. Kymlicka and S. Soroka (2010), ‘National Identity and Support for the Welfare State’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 43 (2), pp. 349-377; R. D. Putnam (2006), ‘E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century. The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture’, *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30 (2).

political agendas and national interests, both linked to national identity. Examples are when immigrants are referred to in terms of “bogus asylum-seekers” or immigration as “mass immigration” without any of the terms being defined or justified. The former gives the impression that people who seek asylum are not really in need to protection, whereas the latter implies that immigration levels are exceptionally high – though it is not clear compared to what (other countries, number of migrants in the world, etc). In short, the two concepts (immigration and national identity) are not mutually exclusive but strongly interrelated.

Importantly, it is the perception of immigration, i.e. attitudes, as undermining national identity that matters. This must be so, because national identity itself is a form of perception, and it can only fulfil its political role if it is perceived according to the nationalist thesis. “Why should immigrants pose a threat to national identity once it is recognized that that identity is always in flux, and is moulded by the various sub-cultures that exist within the national society?” asks Miller.\(^37\) His answer is that immigration is acceptable as long as it does not undermine the possibility of a shared national identity. It is the current members’ subjective experience of undermining, on this view, which should be guiding. When a community feels threatened and group conflict emerges, further immigration has to be limited. The rate of immigration should be limited “according to the absorptive capacities of the society in question.”\(^38\)

The strong relation between the concepts of immigration and national identity becomes clear once this argument is disentangled. For as the literature on attitudes to immigration suggests, the type and strength of national identity heavily impacts on how people perceive immigration and the potential threats immigrants might pose.\(^39\) Immigration can be divided into many categories, such as economic/political, temporary/permanent, legal/illegal or regular/irregular, family reunion, EU/third nationals, skilled/low skilled, Commonwealth, etc. None of these are mutually exclusive. What is more, none of these are obvious categorisations, but correspond to perceptions of national interests and are shaped by moral and political convictions.

These categories vary between countries, and they have varied largely throughout history. The immigration literature has highlighted the role modern states have in creating the idea of international migration as a distinct phenomenon.\(^40\) Contemporary border controls are often taken for granted as a necessary condition for a nation state to exist. But the kind of immigration that is restricted or perceived as problematic is largely dependent on the self-image of the receiving state,

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\(^37\) Miller, *On Nationality*, p. 128. In addition, this blatantly not true, as countries with a medium and high score on the human development index (HDI) have the highest rates of emigration and countries from rich Western countries are overall subject to fewer visa and immigration regulations (at least within the European Union). UNDP (2009), ‘Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development’, Human Development Report 2009. The ease with which citizens of affluent countries can move around the world compared to the hardships of the world’s poor has even lead Phillippe Legrain to talk about apartheid: P. Legrain (2006), *Immigrants – your country needs them*, Little, Brown: London.

\(^38\) Miller, *On Nationality*, p. 129.

\(^39\) Another variable that has been shown to have a large effect on attitudes to immigration is information. Most people are misinformed about facts about immigration and tend to become less negative ones provided with the correct information: J. Sides and J. Citrin (2007), ‘European Opinion About Immigration: The Role of Identities, Interests and Information’, *British Journal of Political Science* 37, p. 487.

as for example Christian Joppke has showed by examining nationhood and immigration in Germany, Great Britain and the USA.\textsuperscript{41} I use the word “restricted” rather than “allowed” to mark that there is no a priori reason to favour border controls to open borders.\textsuperscript{42} During a couple of decades in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Sweden in fact had a more or less open border policy – something almost inconceivable in the modern area of high technological border controls. Moreover, this applies to membership regulation too.

To make the point a bit clearer, consider a brief example of the Swedish welfare system. The Swedish welfare state famously goes under the name “the People’s home”, a phrase coined by Per Albin Hansson, Swedish Prime Minister 1932-46. The People’s home clearly plays on associations with nationalist sentiments, suggesting that the welfare state is a form of extended family built on care for each other. This connotation to family sentiments and the fact that the notion of the People’s home has had such prominent role in the Swedish national consciousness might explain why Sweden, while having a universalist welfare system, has been one of the most restrictive countries in terms of granting welfare rights to irregular immigrants and why it came to close its border for labour immigration in the 70s. Whereas in countries like the USA, where immigration has been perceived as necessary for prosperity, captured in the idea of “the American dream”, immigration in Sweden has been seen as a threat to the universal welfare state. There is no “Swedish dream”, so to speak, that can incorporate an idea of individual hardship and success, which seems to have resulted in an understanding of immigration as more of a moral duty and immigrants as economic burdens. These brief examples are meant to show that immigration cannot be regarded as a well-defined “threat” merely happening to passive nation states, but must be considered at the same time as \textit{produced} by national identity.

We shall now return to Miller’s argument that the right to immigrate should be qualified with the ability of the receiving society to remain cohesive in the nationalist sense of mutual trust. The argument entails that people’s subjective perceptions of the impact of immigration, i.e. their attitudes, should to some extent determine immigration policy. Now, granted that one agrees with this normatively, the discussion above suggest that immigration politics becomes an empirical question, dependent on the relationship between national identity and attitudes to immigration. For, if one believes national identities to be politically constructed, as well as constructing perceptions of immigration, one must also believe that they can be politically altered in order to change perceptions of immigration. Consequently, rather than changing immigration policy in order to protect a national identity, the content of the national identity could be reconstructed in order to change its perception of immigration as a threat to it. How this can come about must be informed by knowledge of the (political) relationship between people’s attitudes to immigration, their national identity and nationalism.

4. The Renaissance of Nationalism in Europe

Taking the empirical and theoretical considerations, as discussed above, together, one might suggest that increasing the salience of national identity, without seriously attempting to change its content,
will most likely lead to an increase in hostility to immigration. Therefore, if one wishes to use national
identity in order to curb worries about immigration, the primary concern should be to change the
nature of that national identity, as well as possibly decrease its salience in politics altogether.
However, the current development in European politics seems to be going in the opposite direction.

In Sweden, for example, several moves have been made recently that point to an increased
importance of national identity in public discourse. The most obvious one is when the national day
was made bank holiday in 2005. It was introduced with the intention of increasing the symbolic value
of Swedish national identity, which was claimed to lead to an increase of a sense of community and
togetherness. Discussions about “Swedishness” are to some extent still taboo in Sweden and are
mostly associated with the extreme-right. One of the defining features of Swedish nationalism has
been the denial of its existence, along with the denial of the existence of something distinguishably
Swedish. Since the election 2002, however, the discourse has been opened up and attempts have
been made to increase the importance of national identity in Sweden.

In the election 2002, the liberal party (Folkpartiet, FP) proposed the introduction of a language test
for citizenship. The proposal was highly controversial (despite having been favoured by the
Moderates for a while already), but helped the party getting a large upswing in the election. Since
then, discussions about Swedish national identity has continued to pop up, especially since the anti-
immigration party the Swedish Democrats gained enough votes to enter the parliament in the 2010
election (resulting in a hung parliament). Discussions of national identity are almost exclusively taking
place in relation to the integration of immigrants. The most widespread argument for increasing the
importance of national identity is that such need has been created by the increase of immigration
(rather than globalisation).43

Similarly, in France and Britain, assertions of national identity have been put forward as responses to
increasingly multicultural societies. In France, former president Nicolas Sarkozy infamously set up a
governmental department for immigration and national identity, though he was forced to remove it
amid stark criticism. In Britain, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown made a similar move in
suggesting that a national day of Britishness be introduced. In Britain and Sweden, and to a more
limited extent France, these attempts to strengthen national identity are not only posited in relation
to increased immigration, but also used as a response to anti-immigrant parties. Thus Brown
suggested that “instead of the BNP using [the flag] as a symbol of racial division, [it] should be a
symbol of unity and part of a modern expression of patriotism too.”44

The main aim of this brief discussion of the renaissance of nationalism in Europe, with the examples
of Sweden, Britain and France, is simply to set out the debate against the background of the
empirical and conceptual discussions above. The aim is to suggest that attempts to strengthen
national identity should be coupled with a serious reconstruction of the content of national identity,
as well as its construction of immigration. Thus I am not suggesting that national identity per se is
always going to increase hostility to immigration. However, many ways of talking about national
identity seems undoubtedly to have such affect.

44 Gordon Brown (2006), Speech to the Fabian New Year Conference, available at
Those are, one the one hand, discourses that simply strengthen current national identities without changing their content – or when the content is defined in opposition to a perceived outsider (i.e. immigrants). An example of the latter was David Cameron’s speech on terrorism and multiculturalism held at the Munich Security Conference in 2011. He claimed that extremism boils down to issues of identity and called for stronger national identities. In taking about the segregation allegedly caused by multiculturalism, Cameron said that “We’ve even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values.” Thus the behaviour of certain immigrants is portrayed in opposition to “our” values – not to liberal, or humanist or conservative values, but to British values. This way of defining national identity by contrasting it to the other will probably strengthen a national identity that has the potential of eliciting more hostility towards immigration.

On the other hand, discourses that underline the nationalist rationale of prioritising co-nationals and enhancing a sense of national entitlement also belong to those that might increase negative attitudes to immigration. These are, for example, claims of “British job for British workers”, as argued by Gordon Brown. Such claims seem to strengthen a sense of belonging to a nation with clear demarcations and which endows those who share the same identity with certain privileges. This thus increases the salience of national identity, bestows it with a political nationalist rationale, but does little to change its content. It is therefore likely to increase negative attitudes to immigration. In addition, such rhetoric reinforces the conceptualisation of immigration as always standing in conflict with the national interest. It suggests that the phenomenon of people moving across borders is more problematic than people moving within them – an assumption that is far from obvious, especially from an economic perspective.

To sum up, discourses that strengthen national identity without also attempting to change its content seem likely to increase negative attitudes to immigration, given the results of the research field so far.

5. Conclusion

Post-war immigration and globalisation are two phenomena often alleged of hollowing-out the national identities many believe European democratic welfare states rely upon. Now, even though levels of immigration actually correlate with worries about immigration in few respects, the current European discourse seems to link the two and propose as one solution the strengthening of national identity. In this sense we are witnessing a renaissance of nationalism.

In this paper, I have tried to develop the debate on national identity and attitudes to immigration by bridging the fields of empirical cross-national research (mostly quantitative) and normative theories of nationalism. In so doing, I pointed out that national identity seem to have a large impact, and mostly negative, on attitudes to immigration. I also stressed the constructivist nature not only of national identity, but of immigration as well.

Having discussed the findings of the two research fields, I ended with a discussion of the implications for current European discourses on national identity and immigration. This should only be seen as a

preliminary discussion of where research as well as policy should be looking and how the framework should be set out. Nonetheless, I suggested that attempt to reinforce the salience of national identity must be done with care, at least as far as one is concerned with people’s attitudes to immigration. Especially, if national identity is to be strengthened, it must be done in ways that does not simply reinforce its current content or further strengthen its perceived opposition to immigrants and immigration, but that aims at being more open and inclusive.
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