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► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Duchesne. A further involuntary contribution to naturalising nationalism. Nations and Nationalism, 2024, 30 (3), pp.410-413. <10.1111/nana.13036>. <halshs-04997185>

HAL Id: halshs-04997185

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04997185v1>

Submitted on 19 Mar 2025

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A further involuntary contribution to naturalising nationalism

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Abstract

Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods' book analyses tweets posted by Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and Brexit supporters in 2017 from a historical perspective in order to reveal the deep roots of white ethnic nationalism. This commentary questions the explanatory nature of the analysis, and highlights how the book inadvertently contributes to the ongoing naturalisation of nationalism, particularly in Western countries.

KEYWORDS

banal nationalism, identity, ideology

1 | INTRODUCTION

As my positions towards all forms of naturalisation of nationalism are public (Duchesne et al., 2018), I suppose it will not come as a surprise that I strongly disagree with the central thesis of Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods' book. I even assume that this is the reason why I was invited to discuss it.

I will start by summarising my understanding of the book, before moving on to a demonstration of why, in my opinion, the authors do not actually prove what they claim to. Then I will point out the potential impact of the book, which although undoubtedly unintentional, is nonetheless sure and serious, and that is to provide fuel for white nationalism. This effect, however accidental, seems to me particularly problematic in the current political and environmental climate.

Contribution to the online book debate on *The New nationalism in America and beyond. The deep roots of ethnic nationalism in the digital age* (Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods. OUP, 2022).

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2 | DISCOVERING THE SO-CALLED DEEP ROOTS OF WHITE NATIONALISM

The main argument of the book is based on a comparative analysis of the Twitter posts produced during the respective election campaigns of Donald Trump (5517 posts coded), Marine Le Pen (2854) and the pro-Brexit campaigners (7375) between 2015 and 2017.

The content of these Twitter posts is analysed in the context of the historical syntheses of the myths and symbols that have developed over the long term in these three countries, and are at the core of their ethnic nationalism. These syntheses are constructed with the help of an analytical grid nourished by the work of ethnosymbolist historians, to whom the authors frequently refer, first and foremost Anthony Smith and John Hutchinson (to whom the book is dedicated). The authors highlight the representations of the populations that were dominant at the time of national construction, and the way these groups were conceived as the legitimate people—and thus rightful owners—of their countries. They describe the persistence of these representations, rooted in these white people's belief in their moral and religious superiority, and even their genetic superiority. They also show how these groups characteristics adapted over time. In this respect, Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods underline the strong rejection of Islam and Muslims in the recent period, as well as the way liberalism has been included in the so-called ethnic characteristics of these white majorities of the West. The analysis of the tweets shows that during the three campaigns mentioned, Trump, Le Pen and the Brexit 'leave' campaigners are very much the vehicles for these representations. As the authors put it: 'they tapped into longstanding myths and symbols'.

Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods indeed argue that the proximity of the content of these tweets to the longstanding myths and symbols they have analysed is the sign of the deep-rooted identity of these white populations. They suggest that this is an explanation for the capacity of these messages to mobilise people, and beyond that, also explains the electoral success of populist and nationalist leaders. We are to understand that since this ethnic nationalism has 'deep roots', it is not going to disappear any time soon, and consequently the identity aspirations of these populations must be taken seriously.

As I see it, the demonstration the authors provide for this thesis suffers from two main weaknesses: the construction of the key puzzle and the nature of the explanation.

3 | A QUESTIONABLE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PUZZLE

The authors' objective is to help us understand the rise of ethnic nationalism in countries that embrace civic nationalism, as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France all do. They postulate that in such countries, observers were under the false impression that ethnic nationalism had disappeared; they then go on to show that it has been around for centuries and it is still here in the digital age. Most importantly, they present this longevity as proof not only that this nationalism has deep roots, meaning that it is not 'invented'; but also, that it is ultimately a matter of identity, which they seem to see as something authentic, that cannot be argued with.

As the authors recall, many observers and scholars interested in nationalism have taken a stand against the opposition between civic and ethnic nationalisms, because they consider that this distinction does not allow for the observation of the profound interconnectedness between the different registers of national preference. But this does not mean that they do not acknowledge the persistence of what Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods call ethnic nationalism. To focus on the French case that I am most familiar with, I do not think that the presence of Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election really came as a surprise to many scholars. Indeed, scholars have been observing the rise of 'hot' nationalism in France and Europe for years and did not suddenly wake up to it in 2017.¹

According to Billig's banal nationalism 1995, in order to understand the omnipresence of nationalism, it is necessary to look at all its manifestations and not just at its most vehement forms. For the soft or 'cold' forms that we maintain and value are only the other side of the coin, and prepare the ground for new, more visible outpourings. In other words, there is no difference in nature between Le Pen's hot nationalism and Macron's patriotism, only a difference of

'temperature'. Like all politicians, they both naturalise the division of the world into nations, a division that has been the source of legitimacy for rulers on a worldwide scale since the founding of nations. After the Second World War, the atrocities of the Holocaust and the hopes raised by post-war reconstruction and decolonisation for a time moderated—or 'cooled'—nationalism. But it nevertheless remained present, sustained by the multiplicity of flaggings, inconspicuous but omnipresent, and by the perpetuation of the distinction between nationalism, now politically incorrect, and a highly valued attachment to one's nation, in the form of 'national identity'. Visually and verbally, citizens are constantly reminded that they are nationals. These constant reminders construct a representation of the world that essentialises the nation and makes it look natural, even though, as historians have shown, it is only one historical form of government that emerged at a particular period in human history—a period in which good as well as bad things have happened.

This representation of the world, this ideology, has ended up becoming a universal one (Billig, 1996), with formerly colonised countries not lagging behind in terms of nationalism, even though most of them are the objective losers of a deeply, ontologically unequal and violent international system. Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods are right to consider that the pervasiveness of nationalism today is probably not analysed seriously enough and that 'the path forward for the liberal democracies of the West starts by properly diagnosing the causes and consequences of the new nationalism' (p. 191). Indeed, their book has the advantage of pointing out the atrocities and lies that nationalism maintains. But I believe they are deeply wrong in explaining its omnipotence by the depth of its roots.

4 | AN 'EXPLANATION' LACKING IN EVIDENCE

It may well be my mistake, but I fail to see how showing that the Twitter posts of our leaders carry nationalist and racist representations—which have been part of ideological repertoires for centuries—proves that ethnic nationalism is a matter of identity (but maybe our understandings of identity differ). I leave it to the historians who defend an ethnosymbolist conception of the genesis of nations to comment on the historical syntheses proposed by the authors, who bring together ideas expressed centuries apart, arguing that they are indeed ancient myths and symbols as if this proved that that they could neither evolve nor be denied.

It should be noted that the analysis of these tweets is very interesting.² I regret that the pages devoted to it are so brief and that no tables or figures are provided to systematically highlight the results of an obviously very substantial coding, which clearly involved a lot of work. In the end, this coding is only used to provide the authors with the examples they draw on to illustrate their thesis. The three chapters devoted to the way in which these tweets vehicle the ideological repertoires of white nationalism are reminiscent of the standardised nature of the ideological repertoire that accompanied the birth of nations—which Anne-Marie Thiesse has called 'the identity checklist' (Thiesse, 2005)—and which contrasts with the claim to uniqueness and authenticity. For my part, I do not see identities at work here, but ideology.

Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods are right in one respect. It is not enough to want people to stop being nationalists for them to refrain from it. But it seems to me that our job, as social scientists, is to analyse the forces and practices that continue to feed nationalism, and to do our best to avoid naturalising it further. The authors indicate several times that they do not question the modernity of nations, and therefore the historicity of nationalism. But the demonstration they propose does have the effect, on me at least, be it voluntary or not, of essentializing nationalism anew. All the more so because the book is nicely written and easy to read. From my point of view, it will contribute directly to the reinforcement of nationalism and its naturalisation, rather than to a better understanding of it, which the authors claim is their goal.

5 | AN INVOLUNTARY BUT DAMAGING CAUSE

Helping to sustain nationalism today in any way, especially in its most aggressive, unjust form—white ethnic nationalism—seems to me particularly problematic in the context of the current proliferation of wars and the climate

crisis. The nation is a historically situated system of world government. In the past, it has fostered the development of capitalism, democracy and a form of national wealth-sharing through public services and the welfare state. Today that is less and less the case. Dominant economic forces are now largely playing out on a supranational level. Inequalities and wars, along with the increasing number of climate related disasters are forcing millions of people to seek refuge elsewhere, where they are labelled as outsiders and badly, if not awfully, treated as such. And nationalism, in all its forms, ethnic and civic, hot and banal—whether spouting America first, *les Français d'abord*, or 'Take Back Control'—makes it impossible to find ways out of these catastrophes because it legitimates national preference. If further proof were needed, the certainty that the national model is outdated can be found in the urgency of the climate transition and the impossibility of addressing its implications from a national perspective. White nationalism does need to be given more scientific consideration as it is not likely to go away anytime soon. But I'm afraid that Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods' book will, in spite of their intentions, be considered new proof of the legitimacy of white identity claims and contribute to the re-naturalisation of nationalism. Their conclusion that 'The new nationalism is not new. It is not going away' (p. 192), does not explain why and how the myths and symbols of white (male) superiority continue to be so powerful. Using the legitimacy of the social sciences today to 'prove' the 'deep roots of ethnic white identity' seems to me to lend support to a (very) damaging cause.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is very grateful to Katharine Throssell, for both her scientific support and linguistic help, and to Florence Delmotte thanks to whom the [ETPAF](#) adventure goes on.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I am thinking, for example, of the work (in alphabetical order) of Gil Delannoi, Xavier Crettiez, Guy Hermet, Vincent Martigny, Nonna Mayer, Pierre-André Taguieff, Anne-Marie Thiesse and Michel Winock, not to mention the many specialists of the *Front/Rassemblement National*. Some of them also analyse this nationalism over time. They do not sum up their analysis by observing the concomitant increase in inequalities, as Schertzer and Woods suggest, but most are careful to take into account the contemporary political situation and the state of the political scene.
- ² The book links to the Harvard Dataverse, where the authors have deposited the corpus and codebooks, which they make available free of charge to colleagues who request them. But when I accessed it in April 2023, when the discussion was originally scheduled, the documents I downloaded gave no information about the frequency of the various codes and possible cross-references.

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How to cite this article: Duchesne, S. (2024). A further involuntary contribution to naturalising nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 30(3), 410–413. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.13036>