

## [H-Nationalism Interview with Andreas Wimmer](#)

Page published by David Prior on Tuesday, January 9, 2018

**Bill Kissane interviewed Andreas Wimmer on December 5, 2017.**

Andreas Wimmer is Lieber Professor of Sociology and Political Philosophy at Columbia University. He received his third-level education at the University of Zurich in the 1980s and early 1990s, but has been working in the United States since 2003. Although a sociologist now employed in Columbia's Sociology Department—in possession of a doctorate and habilitation in Social Anthropology—his research has long been devoted to some *political* issues central to the study of nationalism: how states and nations are formed; how individuals draw ethnic and racial boundaries between themselves and others; and what types of conflict results from such situations. His 2012 *Waves of War: Nationalism, State Formation and Ethnic Exclusion in the Modern World* argued systematically for a connection between the transition from empire to the nation-state and the proliferation of all wars, including civil wars, since the early nineteenth century. In his research he has used a variety of methods—ethno-graphic fieldwork, comparative history, quantitative cross-national research, and also policy-oriented work—and from it he has published four monographs, the last of which, *Nation-Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart*, will be published this year (2018). As we shall see, these books form part of a cumulative engagement with the topic of nationalism that goes back to his experiences as a Social Anthropologist in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s.

**BK.** You are originally from Switzerland. What was your motivation for going into *academia* in the first place?

**AW.** I don't think it was a conscious decision to go into *academia*; I was kind of dragged into *academia*. When I was a student, before I finished my Master's degree (there was no BA at the time), I was offered a chance to become an assistant professor without tenure in the same department, and since I didn't have any other plans and I was obsessed with scholarly stuff I liked the idea. I continued to be offered similar opportunities along the way, and so I was slipping into *academia* rather than actually taking an active decision. I was never tempted, for better or worse, to do something else though I sometimes played with the idea to become a journalist or diplomat.

**BK.** But you did a PhD, interestingly, in Social Anthropology? How did that come about?

**AM.** After high school, I went to work as a deckhand on a sailing ship in the Mediterranean and thought that I would spend my life as a bohemian. After a couple of months, I realized that this was a bit too romantic and Hemingwayan an idea. I decided to go back and enrol in the university as anthropology major, choosing the subject that seemed to be maximally anti-bourgeois. My perception was that anthropology was basically about going far away and study people that were considered to be primitive in the eyes of westerners and show that this was untrue, to relativise Western culture and its claim to universality. I also thought anthropology would give me lots of opportunities to travel and visit interesting places, a continuation of my journeys on the sailing ship. It wasn't an

intellectually very coherent reflection that brought me to anthropology.

**BK.** So what in fact did you do?

**AW.** I joined a group of anthropologists who worked on Latin America because I had developed a fascination with Spanish culture. But I ended up studying an indigenous highland community in Mexico. Since I held this semi-romantic ideal of going away as far as possible, I wanted to study a community that hadn't been studied that much, which was the case for the *Mixe* in the state of *Oaxaca* in Mexico. That is where I did my fieldwork. But I wasn't very good at it to be honest because it takes a certain stamina to live in a village where nobody wanted you, nobody wanted me to be there. The locals were understandably rather hostile towards foreigners, and especially toward gringos. Just walking around in their village and asking people about what they were up to wasn't exactly easy. Still, I managed to survive and make friends and stay there for about seven months. When I came back from fieldwork and started to think about my Master's thesis, I realised how much had been written about similar indigenous communities, how many monographs existed: dozens and dozens and dozens. I began to think that it would be much more interesting, rather than writing yet another monograph, to do a comparative analysis of why these different indigenous communities were organised politically and culturally in such different ways, what kind of historical processes led to this differentiation. I guess I became a sort of comparative historical scholar without knowing that something like comparative historical sociology existed. In anthropology, the work of Eric Wolf and other former students of Julian Steward came close to what I envisioned as an ideal sort of scholarship. Steward had called it "multilinear evolution." And so I moved away from fieldwork-based anthropology towards these kinds of comparative historical endeavours early in my career, which also meant that it became impossible for me to get a job in a traditional anthropology department, and so I had to reorient myself a bit professionally.

**BK.** And when did the nationalism theme, whether borders, migration or nation-building, when did that come to be a guiding interest?

**AW.** Relatively early on, because when I did field work in Mexico there was a political movement, in its early stages, among these indigenous groups. It developed under the intellectual leadership, you could say, of critical anthropologists: they redefined the indigenous situation in ethno-nationalist terms. They were seeing these communities as proto-nations that had been robbed of their historical continuity and political autonomy by the Spanish conquest and now reclaimed the mantle of self-determination. I was in touch with these movements and the Mexican anthropologists who worked on and supported them, and this sort of sparked my interest in studying nationalism. Later on this interest was transformed and I became more of a global comparativist, trying to understand nationalism as a major world historical force that reshaped the state system, as the driving force for wars between states as well as domestic conflict.

**BK.** Do you see nationalism as something that is fundamentally different in different parts of the world, or do you think it is one thing? Because the way you describe the indigenous response to Spanish colonialism would be very familiar to any scholar of anti-colonialism, whether it is in Europe or in Africa.

**AW.** I see nationalism as a uniform principle that appears, of course, in different variations. Early

nineteenth century East European nationalism, let's say among the Polish nobility, is certainly of a different kind than Rohingya ethno-nationalism or Catalan nationalism today. There is lots of variation and nationalism can combine with different political projects. It often combined with conservatives ones, but it also had a long-standing alliance with communist movements in the colonies, and so on. It is a political ideology that is really versatile, perhaps because of its own intellectual poverty—highlighted by Gellner—in combining with right wing, left wing, fascist, libertarian movements and so on. The unifying theme is the idea of self-rule in the name of a nationally defined people, a political vision that unites all these nationalists across political ideologies, across continents and across centuries. In my work, I have been more emphasizing this unifying logic than focussing on the differences between the various brands of nationalisms and their ideological inclinations. It would be worthwhile to do that, if nobody has already done it.

**BK.** In the LSE we have had this ongoing conversation about nationalism: Anthony Smith, Ernest Gellner, more recently John Breuilly and others. In terms of those scholars, who is the person that is closest to your understanding of what makes nationalism not just versatile but also powerful, because you are also interested in its capacity to create war, right, so it is something very powerful. Who do you look to in that debate for insight?

**AW.** Well I think all of these scholars agreed that nationalism is a powerful world historical force, so in the larger scheme of things they all agree on the political power and consequentiality of nationalism—while many other social scientists, from Marx to contemporary international relations (such as Mearsheimer), and many comparative political scientists (such as Laitin) see it as an epiphenomenon. The British historical sociologists do disagree, however, on the reasons, on the historical dynamics that gave nationalism its current power. I kind of like Ellie Kedourie, against whom Ernest Gellner was writing. I liked that he saw nationalism as a political ideology that transforms Empires and leads to new forms of political inequality and violence—writing from the point of view, I guess, of Baghdad's Jewish community... to new possibilities of scandalising inequality as well, as existing forms of inequality inherited from empire become seen as illegitimate. This is why nationalism brings conflict, war and violence, a very Kedouriean point of view. I disagree with the details of his analysis, where nationalism comes from, that it is basically a deplorable, romantic aberration of western history and so on. I don't agree with that or with his conservative philosophical outlook that Gellner hated so much. But I liked how he defined nationalism as a political ideology, how he situated nationalism in the political sociology of Empires, and how he analysed the transformative power that nationalism had in the modern world without falling into the teleological or functionalist traps of Smith and Gellner.

**BK.** If you like the stress on Empire and decolonisation, but you don't like the idea that it is an aberration, a product of romantic intellectuals who are frustrated with various things, what is driving it then, from your point of view? If it is not bad ideas and bad leaders, what is actually driving it?

**AW.** Well nationalist ideologies, in its various manifestations, are based on the idea of self-rule, they combine in various ways with the idea that citizens should be governed by people who are of the same origin, and they should be governed in a responsible way, in a way that is receptive to the interests and the perceptions of the population at large. So nationalism is always combined with, at least in the view of nationalists, of better government and a better deal as it were, for citizens in the exchange relationships between governors and governed. And this promise—ok, let me make a

historical bracket here, and look at the first nations states, France, the US, Great Britain. Well, I can't really talk about Britain because it is too complicated. I tend to see it as more of a special case rather than a paradigmatic case. The point I want to make is that these early nation states became the most powerful states in the world, militarily, politically, and also culturally, because they brought the masses into the political arena and because they offered citizens a better exchange relationship than previous regimes had done. This gained these states the military support of the masses—in the form of universal conscription—and reduced resistance to taxation, both of which greatly enhanced their military and economic might. They thus became the model states that ambitious political leaders around the world tried to imitate. In other words, nationalism is powerful because it is historically associated with political revolutions that offered citizens much better terms of engagement with governments that had been the case before; this made it an attractive model for the masses elsewhere in the world. Because these states subsequently became cultural, political, and military hegemony, nationalism became an attractive model to imitate for political elites around the world as well. This imitation theory in my view explains the global appeal of nationalism much better than a Kedourian emphasis on its romantic origins or the Smithean notion of a national *telos* built into each ethnic community, or Gellner's idea that the modern economy needs culturally homogenous nations.

**BK.** That would imply that all the wars that follow, particularly civil war—to use the colloquial language of 'greed versus grievance'—you are more in line with the grievance view.

**AW.** Yes definitely. In my view political legitimacy is crucial for understanding wars. States that violate the like-over-like principle of nationalism are seen as illegitimate. More precisely, this principle is violated if states are ruled by elites that exclude the leaders of other ethnic communities from any kind of access or representation in government. I have shown empirically, with co-authors Cederman and Min, that such exclusionary regimes—in the extreme an ethnocracy—where an ethnic minority and their representatives basically control all arms of government, are much more war-prone than more inclusionary regimes, where ethnic groups small and large are represented in central government. That is definitely a grievance argument. However, I think that the greed versus grievance debate is rather sterile and is pursued mostly because of the attractive alliteration. There are of course greed or 'opportunity' elements that need to be taken into account. Recently I completed a new analysis—it is published in *The Journal of Peace Research*—where we show that grievance that originates from a lack of political representation needs to combine with "opportunities" for a civil war to emerge, with a context where the leaders of aggrieved groups can actually politically and militarily organise an armed rebellion. This only happens where the state is not able to repress any opposition through control of the entire territory, allowing leaders of such groups to organise in an internal sanctuary. Or there can be an external sanctuary, a neighbouring state that allows such groups to do the same. So you need to have both, the grievance and opportunity elements for a rebellion and civil war to actually develop. To advance our understanding of civil war we need to combine both perspectives and this recent work is just one example of how to do that.

**BK.** This process of transition, from Empire to Nation-State model, is it ongoing and will just continue? You mention legitimacy, and Gellner, his famous question was what if all 6000 linguistic groups in the world were to get their own state, what would this actually mean for the world. Do you see this process as something that is still continuing, with no let-up in terms of the fundamental process that your work is devoted to analysing?

**AW.** I differ from Gellner in that I don't think that linguistic homogeneity is a necessary corollary of the nation-state. And it shouldn't surprise you. I come from Switzerland, a famously multi-lingual country that actually works quite well, if I may say, as a nation-state despite its linguistic heterogeneity. And there are many other examples: India, China is actually a multi-lingual country, Tanzania and so on. In my new, forthcoming book, I show that political integration within nation-states, or nation building, is indeed easier in linguistically homogenous countries. But it is not a necessary condition for nation-states to be established. The establishment of a nation-state and nation building within such states need to be distinguished from each other. Most nation-states are linguistically heterogenous. The process of the formation of nation-states is driven by the break-down of Empires, under the dual assault of international war and nationalist pressures, where usually it is provinces, whether multi-lingual or not, that will then become nation-states, not linguistic communities, hence the linguistic heterogeneity of most states. In any case, this process—the transition from Empire or dynastically ruled states to nation-states ruled in the name of a nationally-defined people—has almost come to its end. We might see some more transitions from dynastically-ruled countries to more nation-state types, in Saudi Arabia perhaps, in Kuwait, the other Gulf States, Bhutan, and so on. We might see some new break-away nation states in other parts of the world. Catalan nationalists might succeed maybe in a generation, maybe not, Scottish nationalism. Some other possible break-aways from existing nation-states come to mind, but overall there is no large land-based Empire left to be transformed into a series of smaller nation-states. China I don't think will fall apart along its linguistic divides, it will remain a multi-lingual nation-state similar to Switzerland or India. Whatever happens in the future, it is unlikely that the Han core will dissolve into a series of smaller states, each linguistically homogenous. If we leave the Tibetan situation aside—there might be a Tibetan nation-state in the future or a Uighur state in the North-West—the core of China's population will remain united in a single state.

**BK.** Ok so the classical empires are gone, but let's say I was Steven Pinker, the Harvard psychologist, and I was reading Andreas Wimmer, and I wanted to know whether your analysis backs up my view that in the long run the world is getting more peaceful, and that we are now at a point where it is way more peaceful than it ever was. Would he find in your work on Nationalism and War a source of optimism or the opposite?

**AW.** I don't think that history ever comes to the end. There will appear new principles of political legitimacy beyond the nation-state. It might very well be that advocates of these principles enter a prolonged struggle with the established nation-state order. I believe that this will be a conflictual, maybe even a war-prone process. Every major political transformation in the past—the global rise of empires, their breaking apart into a series of nation-states—was a war-torn process, as I have shown in *Waves of War*. I don't see why this would not be the case for future transformations as well. So what will these new political principles be? Mega-states of continental dimensions, the European Union and Russia combined, the whole Eurasian continent becoming one single entity; or perhaps the opposite: political devolution to the level of city states—loosely aligned with each other. Or will we see the emergence of non-territorial forms of statehood based on internet and network connectivity, no longer territorially defined? I have no idea how we can even start to answer these questions. It is hard enough to understand the past and we are notoriously bad at predicting the future.

**BK.** You mentioned at the start how governance was an important factor in shaping nationalist aspirations, positively or negatively. Now you are working on the topic of *Nation-Building*. When you



choose cases, sometimes you choose cases outside the developed West, but sometimes not. You have written articles solely on Switzerland as a particular form of nation; so if your work is on nation-building, do you feel we can take ideas and models from countries that have kind of ‘made it,’ and make meaningful applications to ‘the developing world’ where state failure or state collapse are very real possibilities? Is that what you are trying to do?

**AW.** Well, in the tradition of old fashioned comparative scholarship, I don’t think that the developed world and the developing world, North and South and so on, that these groups of societies follow completely different historical logics. I think they face similar challenges, whether in Spain or in Burma. There are similar political processes at work. In the new book I am comparing three pairs of countries. One is Switzerland again and Belgium. Belgium is not such a successful case of nation-building, I think most people would agree on that, while Switzerland certainly is. I also compare Somalia and Botswana and then China and Russia. The comparative horizon thus includes Western countries that have been independent for quite a long time: Switzerland and Belgium, as well as two former African colonies. The challenges of nation-building are different in these ex-colonial countries, and, of course, again different in vast, massive countries that inherit entire imperial domains such as Russia and China. So you have different challenges and different historical configurations within which these nation-building processes are situated. But I think the overall logic, the conditions under which political integration across ethnic divides can succeed, are actually quite similar and can be compared. At least that is what the book tries to argue.

**BK.** So what is the secret of success, if there is one thing without which a newly-created state cannot survive? We are told all the time that the world produced by decolonisation has produced mainly weak or fragile or non-existent states. So what is the antidote?

**AW.** Yes, some ex-colonial states are weak, but one tends to overlook that most of the new states are actually not weak, but quite successful. One always looks at the negative cases. One looks at Somalia as if it is paradigmatic for the whole of Africa. Well it isn’t. Colombia is also not paradigmatic for Latin America. So one overlooks the well-governed, the quiet states, like Botswana or Costa Rica that are never in the news because nothing happens because the state is organised reasonably well and politically functioning. I am not of the opinion that the colonial legacy is an impediment to state-building and political integration. I show empirically in the new book that it is not. One tends to greatly overstate the influence of colonial legacies in this whole literature on nation-building. So the secret—or perhaps rather, favourable conditions—is three factors that I highlight in the book. They all make it easier for political alliances to stretch across ethnic divides, thus enhancing national political integration. One is the early development of a network of voluntary organisations, which have an inbuilt tendency (‘tendency’ not a ‘law’) to link up across ethnic divides. Second, the capacity of states to deliver public goods across the territory of a country makes governments more attractive as alliance partners for the population at large, which again tends to create cross-ethnic political alliance systems. And the third, perhaps surprisingly, is communicative integration—a kind of Karl Deutsch argument—in which linguistic homogeneity or a strong established *lingua franca* is crucial. It reduces transaction costs for the formation of political alliances and also tends to produce more integrated political arenas. These are the three slowly developing factors that I am highlighting in the book, and I show empirically that other factors emphasized by other authors, such as democratization, colonial legacies, or globalisation processes don’t really play such a crucial role.

**BK.** You are a sociologist. What is your attitude to scholars who say that even when you have a social context which is not really ideal, it is institutions and institutional design; it is at that level that you make or break nations. Do you go along with that or do you think that institutions are kind of epiphenomena?

**AW.** I don't think they are epiphenomena, but I would not put political institutions at the very core of it. It is an illusion to think that if you engineer these institutions right: if you have the perfect election system—first past the post, or alternative list system or proportional representation, all these kinds of things—that you will then get an integrated political arena. I think, and I show this empirically in the book, that some of these institutions, presidential or parliamentary, majoritarian versus proportional electoral systems, simply don't matter that much for nation building. I also show that the role of democracy in fostering ethnopolitical integration is vastly overrated. So I think alliance structures, networks of political alliances are crucial, but they form outside of these institutional domains; they are only at the margin influenced by the precise nature of electoral institutions. To think of nation-building as a task of constitutional and electoral engineering was part of the optimist credo of the “international community” of the late 1990s and the early 2000s. I think that most of the institutional engineers that helped design elections across the world have come to similar conclusions as well. That is my impression anyway.

**BK.** And what do you say when you see relatively advanced democracies—Spain, Belgium, Northern Ireland in the UK—in such a state of constitutional and governance crisis. Is this a sign that nationalism is just always there: that at whatever level of development you reach economically, once those ideas have legitimacy for people, they also have the power to disrupt places even where there had been a constitutional settlement. There are institutions, as fair as they can be, and yet these three cases are in deep constitutional crisis.

**AW.** I think it is a little more specific. Where can we expect these developments to happen? They don't happen in Switzerland; there is no Francophone movement there. It didn't happen in France. They don't happen in other more heterogeneous European states either. So it is actually quite specific. It has to do with what we talked about before, structures of power and of representation. In Spain you have—I am not an expert—a situation where the Catalan-speaking population is not really represented at the national level of government. The ministers from the Catalan region who are in government are clearly not representing the ethno-nationalist segments of the Catalan population; quite the opposite. They are representing the point of view of the central government and its centralist and uniformist traditions. And of course in Northern Ireland you have the long legacy of an ethnocratic regime, where the Protestant minority was dominating the entire local government—the police force and everything. These specific legacies of ethno-political inequality drive these nationalist conflicts, as you said, independent of levels of economic development. So you find it in very rich countries and in very poor countries. The counterfactual therefore would be that if there were a rearrangement of the central Spanish government, giving some meaningful representation of the Catalan minority in the heart of the national government, the centre of power, you would see a de-escalation of the situation and, across the generations, Catalan nationalism might slowly evaporate.

**BK.** In our conversation we have not dwelt on Switzerland, even though every now and then you come back to it. From your C.V. one of the interesting things is that all scholars originate in some

specific place, but very often these places are regarded as being exceptional in some ways. At the same time as a scholar, when you focus on your own case you want to say something general. So they cannot be exceptional. In your case there is quite considerable continuity between how you started off—working for example on migration—and what you are doing now. You have developed and expanded, but there is an underlying continuity in terms of your career. Maybe that is one final thing we could ask: what do you think this continuity consists of and where it comes from?

**AW.** You are coming back to my Swiss background, certainly rather exotic from an Anglophone point of view. Swiss exceptionalism has influenced my views, to be sure, as I continued to wonder why most of the world is dealing with ethnic difference in such a strange way, rather than just doing it à la Suisse, quite obviously the normal and rational way. Jokes aside and beyond this original impetus and the Swiss case, a central preoccupation has been to understand the principle of the state system in which we live, how it originated and the kind of conflict it entails, why it has produced such different political arrangements around the world, the relationship of these arrangements to processes of migration and their relative openness/closedness to migration. All these have been central preoccupations. I have written four books now about these types of topics. They kind of followed upon each other, but this stream of work has come to an end. I don't think I have much more to say about this. I am now interested in working on cultural processes, into how ideas travel around the world, in global diffusion processes. I have a range of different not-very-well advanced ideas about how one could study these things. Of course, I have always been interested in the global spread of nationalism as an ideology. I am interested now in other kinds of ideas, not necessarily political ideologies, also cultural interests such as Lady Gaga, Salsa dancing, or the ideas of artists. How they are locally adapted and transformed and so on. What are the sources of these diffusion processes? These are the kinds of questions I would like to answer.

**BK.** You started off by saying you went into anthropological research in order to avoid being a bourgeois and middle class student. Is this another sign of the same ambition?

**AW.** I am afraid that in the meantime the process of *embourgeoisement* has reached me so I cannot claim many credentials on that ground anymore.

**BK.** You are not the only one.

**AW.** *Academia* and age do it to people.

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