

**Introduction to Nations and Nationalism 2018 Book Debate: Andreas Wimmer (2018) *Nation building: Why some countries come together while others fall apart*. Princeton University Press.**

*Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart* is Andreas Wimmer's fourth monograph on the topic of nationalism from a comparative-historical perspective. It is an ambitious, cross-continental and mixed methods book about which there is much to debate, as we will see later in the two contributions from Vera Tolz and Elliott Green.

*Nation Building* begins with a central puzzle: why do some countries fall apart along ethnic lines while others hold together over centuries despite a diverse population? Why does nation building succeed sometimes succeed and sometimes fail?

Using Wimmer's metaphor, it often appears the success or failure of nation building occurs almost randomly, as if nations were laboratory rats being shuffled through different doors at random. However, Wimmer argues that there is a deterministic explanation: some rats start out fatter than others and, thus, are more likely to succeed as nations, such as China with a history of two thousand years of centralization. Other rats start out less fat and are less likely to succeed as nations, such as Somalia which remained stateless until the nineteenth century.

Wimmer's answer to the nation building puzzle is far from simple. Instead, Wimmer provides a complex and multi-stage causal argument. Firstly, Wimmer argues that the deepening of national political integration occurs when the general populace will come to identify with the nation and its symbols, which can arise when political alliances crosscut ethnic divides and when most ethnic communities are represented at the highest levels of government.

What might lead to such cross-cutting political alliances? Wimmer proposes three mechanisms. These three mechanisms relate back to the role of state centralisation in the nineteenth century that makes these three mechanisms possible.

The first mechanism concerns the density of voluntary and civil society organisations which help to "knit together different regions into a quilt of political networks" (Wimmer 2018: 1). The second mechanism concerns states' capacity to provide public goods. Such capacity, Wimmer argues, leads to nation-building by encouraging citizens to develop loyalty and political support for the state. The third mechanism is linguistic homogeneity which helps to bridge ties by reducing the salience of ethnicity in politics, undermining the support for separatism, making violence less likely and encouraging citizens to identify with the nation via communities of solidarity.

Wimmer does not consider these mechanisms necessarily to be occurring simultaneously. Instead, he uses three paired comparisons to show the validity of each of the three mechanisms separately. Choosing extreme pairs of cases of the mechanism of interest, Wimmer uses a most similar case design to show, first, the varying density of voluntary society organisations in fostering nation-building in

Switzerland, where these organisations were dense, but not in Belgium where these organisations were sparse. Second, Wimmer uses the cases of Botswana and Somalia to show the relevance of state capacity to provide public goods to explain why Botswana, where the state was capable, but not Somalia, where the state was less capable, could be considered a more successful case of nation-building. Finally, Wimmer uses the cases of China and Russia to show the role of linguistic homogeneity in explaining why China persisted as a nation while Russia (at least in its guise as the Soviet Union) did not persist. As Tolz argues, perhaps this is not the right framing to consider Russia, with the Soviet Union more of an imperial configuration than a nation-state, as China is.

Wimmer does not stop with the three paired comparisons. Rather, he goes on to ask which of these mechanisms matters more using several large-N cross-national data to examine these mechanisms side-by-side in explaining political inclusion and individuals' loyalty to their state and nation.

Overall, *Nation Building* will be an important contribution to the debate what makes nations successful or not. Wimmer joins a growing group of scholars, alongside Harris Mylonas and Nicholas Sambanis, who seek to wrest the topic of nation-building from the questionable foreign policy choices of the US and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nation building is not about foreigners providing using war to build nations or providing public goods. It is, for Wimmer, about whether and how states foster their own relationship with their citizens.

Wimmer is neither rose-tinted about nations, accepting they are exclusionary entities, nor normative in the kinds of nations that Wimmer sees as preferable or successful. Successful nations might be large or small, heterogeneous or homogenous. The point is that what leads to successful cases of nation building is an intriguing, important and varied scholarly endeavour.

What is the scope of Wimmer's argument? For example, could we see the EU as a failed project of nation building because the EU lacks networks of voluntary organisations, linguistic homogeneity and ability to provide public goods? Perhaps. However, those applying Wimmer's argument more broadly might want to ask if we can conceive of the EU as a nation building project, or a project of building a nation, in the first place. In other words, Wimmer does not necessarily provide the tools to answer all questions. Yet, he provides stimulation and determination to push these questions, and the potential answers to these questions, further in this ambitious work.

This article proceeds as follows in debating Wimmer's *Nation Building*. First, Vera Tolz discusses Wimmer's comparison of China and Russia and the mechanism of linguistic homogeneity. Second, Elliott Green discusses the mechanism of public goods provision as regards Sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, Andreas Wimmer responds to his critics to show why his arguments in these cases and beyond still hold. I hope readers will enjoy this lively exchange and consider how this might take our understanding of nation-building, and the contribution of Wimmer to this field, further.

## **Bibliography**

Wimmer, A. (2018). *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.