

Book Review: Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy by André Lecours

In Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy, André Lecours explores how autonomy is crucial to understanding why some nationalist movements become secessionist. By examining the institutional interactions behind secessionism, the book opens a new window of thought on the emergence of separatist movements, writes [Onur Isci](#).

***Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy.* André Lecours. Oxford University Press. 2021.**

Nationalist and secessionist movements have maintained their influence in the twenty-first century and, in some cases, have gradually increased their power. This situation relates to both countries with weak democracies and underdeveloped human rights and countries where liberal democracy exists. In some cases, nationalist movements that have developed against central governments stop at a particular point, while in others, they become secessionist, which essentially means that another nation or region within a state separates from that country and establishes its own state. [Nationalism, Secessionism and Autonomy](#) is a work that deals with some current nationalist movements and their transformation into separatist ones. Author André Lecours examines why some nationalist movements are turning towards secessionism and the fundamentals of this transformation.

Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy consists of nine chapters, including an Introduction and Conclusion. Six nationalist movements are mentioned throughout the book: four (Catalonia, Scotland, Flanders and South Tyrol) are used by the author to support his theory, while the other two (Quebec and Puerto Rico) do not fit. The author puts forward an argument to explain why these latter cases do not jeopardise the book's theoretical claims.

Throughout the book, the author seeks to answer the question of why some nationalist movements take a secessionist form while others do not. The answer he gives lies not in the character or content of the nationalist movement in question, but in the autonomy of the region in which the movement emerged within a sovereign state.



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Nationalism, Secessionism, and Autonomy begins with the concept of autonomy and then divides this into static autonomy and dynamic autonomy. This distinction constitutes the two important pillars of the theory put forward by the book.

In the case of static autonomy, there is an institutional structure that is not thought likely to be further transformed by the central government. Lecours argues that in situations where static autonomy exists, the transformation of the nationalist movement into a secessionist one is much easier and more likely. Examples he uses to support this are Scotland and Catalonia in Chapters Three and Four. These are used to demonstrate that the transformation towards becoming a secessionist movement, which was previously seen as marginal, begins when the autonomous region thinks that its autonomy from the central government has reached a point where it will no longer evolve or change. The issues related to the transformation of institutions therefore also affect and transform the essence of the nationalist movement.

The book uses the examples of Flanders and South Tyrol in Chapters Five and Six to explain the form the nationalist movement would take if the autonomous region had dynamic autonomy. Dynamic autonomy states that the relationship between the central government and the autonomous region is more flexible and the institutional structure of this autonomy can be changed if necessary, if the autonomous region demands it.

The examples of Flanders and South Tyrol do not have a secessionist attitude, unlike Scotland and Catalonia. South Tyrol was a secessionist region until 1972. This is the date on which an agreement signed between Austria and Italy guaranteed that the International Court of Justice in The Hague would be applied to for the settlement of disputes in South Tyrol and that more autonomy would be provided to the region. Thanks to the rights granted to the region by the central government of Italy, South Tyrol has abandoned its secessionist position. According to Lecours, regions with dynamic autonomy open to continuous transformation avoid turning their nationalist movements into secessionist ones. This is because they are aware that their language, culture and autonomy will not be restricted, and they do not seek to establish a new state as long as they have this freedom.

These four examples are perhaps the most talked about and studied in the literature today. The author uses these cases to prove the static versus dynamic autonomy distinction and its consequences. However, it should also be noted that the static or dynamic status of the exemplary autonomies discussed in the book is not absolute. Lecours states that in some cases, there may be a transition between these two situations. For example, he states that the static position of the autonomy of Catalonia was perceived after the decision of the Spanish Constitutional Court in 2010. The new Statute of Autonomy, adopted by a referendum on 18 June 2006, made Catalonia more independent from Spain, especially in financial and linguistic matters; there was even a clause in the Statute defining Catalonia as a separate nation. However, the Spanish High Court of Justice found fourteen articles of this Statute unconstitutional in its 2010 decision. [This was a key turning point.](#)

However, Lecours also adds two different examples that do not fit this distinction, explaining why they do not fit and why this inconsistency does not undermine his theory. These examples are Puerto Rico and Quebec. The author argues that although there is static autonomy in some cases, the people living in these regions are aware that they can leave whenever they want, and institutional changes can be made to their autonomy. This creates goodwill between the central state and the autonomous region. Here, the author emphasises the importance of dialogue and assurance between the sovereign state and nations that have the potential to be separatist.

Nationalism, Secessionism and Autonomy takes a different perspective on one of today's most controversial social science problems. Rather than examining the formation and histories of separatist and nationalist movements, the book examines the essence of separatist movements and the institutional interactions that give rise to them. The book therefore opens a new window of thought for those interested in separatist movements.

- *This review first appeared at [LSE Review of Books](#).*

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