



HAL
open science

**Debate: The New nationalism in America and beyond.
The deep root of ethnic nationalism in the digital age.
Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods (OUP, 2022)**

Sophie Duchesne

► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Duchesne. Debate: The New nationalism in America and beyond. The deep root of ethnic nationalism in the digital age. Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods (OUP, 2022). 2023. hal-04384645v2

HAL Id: hal-04384645

<https://hal.science/hal-04384645v2>

Preprint submitted on 17 Mar 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Debate. **The New nationalism in America and beyond. The deep root of ethnic nationalism in the digital age.** Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods (OUP, 2022)
London School of Economics (3 May 2023, Sumeet Valrani Lecture Theatre at 6pm).

Nota bene: meeting postponed to March 20, 2024 - online at 1800 London

Notes for the original debate.

Sophie Duchesne, Centre Emile Durkheim (CNRS-Sciences Po Bordeaux).

s.duchesne@sciencespobordeaux.fr

As my positions towards all forms of naturalization of nationalism are public (Duchesne et al., 2018), I suppose I will not surprise by stating my strong disagreement 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 this book. We know that our colleague Cynthia Miller-Idriss, the other discussant for this debate, is very fond of the book, which she describes in her endorsement as an "exceptional read". Knowing that my opinion is in the minority, I take the liberty of expressing it frankly.

I will start by summarising how I understood the book. I will then indicate why I think the authors do not demonstrate what they say they have proven. Then I will point out what the book produces, perhaps unintentionally, but surely, and seriously, namely to feed white nationalism, which seems to me very inappropriate in view of the climate crisis we are experiencing.

A thesis on the so-called deep roots of white nationalism

I would summarise the thesis of the book as follows: the ethnic nationalism of the majority populations of Western countries - the white populations - is deeply rooted in their history. It is an integral part of the identity of these nations, and therefore the identity aspirations of these populations must be seriously considered.

This thesis is based on a comparative analysis of the tweets produced during the election campaign by Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen and the promoters of Brexit (5517 Trump tweets were coded, 2852 for Le Pen and 7375 for Brexit). The content of these tweets is put into perspective with the authors' historical syntheses of the myths and symbols affirmed and developed over the course of the long term, which form the basis of ethnic nationalism in these three countries. 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 ethnic populations that were dominant at the time of national construction, regarding the characteristics of their people, their country, their religion and their ethos. They describe the persistence of these representations, rooted in the certainty of these white people moral and religious superiority, or even their genetic superiority; but they also show how they adapted over time. They thus underline the strong rejection of Islam and Muslims in the recent period. The analysis of the tweets shows that during the three campaigns mentioned, Trump, Le Pen and the 'leave' leaders are very much the vehicles for these representations – or, 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 identity of these white populations, and explains the mobilisation capacity of these messages and beyond, the electoral success of populist and nationalist leaders. Since this ethnic nationalism has deep roots, it is

not going to disappear any time soon and they conclude that it must be taken into serious consideration.

A questionable puzzle setting

The demonstration proposed by the authors seems to me to suffer from several weaknesses, starting with the construction of the puzzle. Their aim is to make understandable the rise of ethnic nationalism in countries that embrace civic nationalism - or even originated it. To focus on the French and even British cases, which I know a little better, the presence of Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election would have surprised observers, as would the result of the Brexit referendum, because the nationalism that these leaders defend, white nationalism, would be considered to have disappeared in these countries long ago¹. In chapter 2, where they define the central concept of the study, ethnic nationalism, the authors note, however, that most scholars of contemporary nationalism have taken a stand against the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalisms. This distinction does not allow for the observation of the profound imbrication between the different registers of national preference. In other words, it is the category of analysis that is no longer used, not the facts that are denied. Contrary to the authors' suggested puzzle, many scholars have been observing the rise of 'hot' nationalism in Europe for years and did not wait until 2016 to take notice².

This is actually the rationale behind Billig's thesis of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) - which the authors confuse with that of everyday nationalism. To understand the omnipresence of nationalism, it is necessary to look at it in all its manifestations and not just at its 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 outpourings. In other words, there is no difference in nature between Le Pen's hot nationalism and Macron's patriotism. Both, like all politicians, naturalise the division of the world into nations, a division which has been the source of legitimacy for rulers on a worldwide scale since the founding of nations. After the Second World War, the horrors of the Holocaust and the hopes raised by the reconstruction and decolonisation have for a time moderated - or "cooled, to remain in Billig's repertoire - nationalism. But it remained there, maintained by the multiplicity of flaggings, hardly visible but omnipresent. Visually and verbally, citizens are constantly reminded that they are nationals. These constant reminders construct a representation of the world that essentializes the nation, which is, though, as historians have shown, only a historical form of government that corresponded to a period in human history that is now over. This representation of the world, this ideology, has ended up becoming a universal ideology (Billig, 1996), with the formerly colonised countries not being lagging behind in terms of nationalism, even though they are the objective losers of the 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. Their book has the advantage of pointing out the horrors and lies that nationalism maintains. But I think they are deeply wrong in trying to explain its omnipotence by the depth of its roots.

¹ Moreover, the authors consider that the explanations proposed to account for these explosions of ethnic nationalism would be summed up by observing the concomitant increase in inequalities. This is also debatable.

² 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, Michel Winock, not to mention the many specialists of the *Front/Rassemblement National*. Some of them also analyse this nationalism over time, but most are careful to take into account the contemporary political situation and the state of the political scene.

An 'explanation' lacking in evidence

In fact, it is difficult to consider that showing how the tweets of our leaders carry nationalist and racist representations, which have been part of ideological repertoires for centuries, is enough to prove that ethnic nationalism is a matter of identity and thus cannot be ignored. 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, as if this proved that they were indeed longstanding myths, symbols and hence identity. This transfer of ideas to identity is hardly explained, except by recourse to a definition of nationalism proposed by Anthony Smith. To pose a definition does not prove anything.

It should be noted that the analysis of these tweets is very interesting. I regret that the pages devoted to it are so brief, and that no table or figure systematically highlights the results of an obviously very substantial coding, which represented a lot of work³. In the end, this coding is only used to provide the authors with the examples they use to illustrate their thesis. The three chapters devoted to the way in which these tweets draw on 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 happily called "the identity checklist" (Thiesse, 2005) - and which contrasts with the claim to uniqueness and, in this case, to the superiority of the "people".

Of course, R. Schertzer and E. T. Woods are right: it is not enough to want people to stop being nationalists for them to refrain from it. But the job of social science, it seems to me, is to show what continues to build nationalism, rather than to help naturalise it further. The authors indicate several times that they do not question the modernity of nations, and therefore the historicity of nationalism, a thesis that is now considered historically valid. But the demonstration they propose does have the effect - voluntary or not, I do not want to assume their intentions - 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, not to a better understanding, as the authors claim they want to do.

*Don't look ahead!*⁴

Helping to sustain nationalism today - especially in its most aggressive, unjust form: white ethnic nationalism - seems to me particularly serious in the context of the climate crisis. Robert Schertzer and Eric Taylor Woods explain in the book how Western ethnic nationalism is being revived by recurring crises that challenge white identity in Western countries. Surprisingly, when talking about the crises we have been experiencing since the beginning of the century, they make very little mention of globalisation, which has caused governments to lose control of the economy to a large extent, and thus deeply alters the legitimacy of the (inter)nationalist model. White nationalist leaders can always tell their constituents that they want to regain control of their nation's fate: The (real) organisation of the world today no longer gives them the capacity to do so.

The nation is a historically situated system of world government. It has fostered the development of capitalism, democracy and a form of national wealth-sharing through public services and the welfare

³The book links to the Havard dataverse where the authors have deposited the corpus and the codebooks, which they make available graciously to colleagues who request them. But the documents transmitted do not provide any further information on the frequency of the various codes and the possible cross-referencing.

⁴This is (obviously) a reference to Adam McKay's "Don't look up!", released in 2021 on Netflix.

state; but that is no longer the case. The economic forces are largely playing out in a supranational mode. More seriously, the climate crisis urgently requires that human leaders be able to go beyond national preferences and consider the future of the planet in solidarity. It is quite astonishing to see a political science book published today by a major academic publisher that deals with the electoral consultations of the major powers, and in which the climate is never mentioned. If proof were needed, the certainty that the national model is outdated can be found in the urgency of the climate transition. Anything that slows down the awareness of the people, and particularly those of the dominant white populations who contribute in the first place to the degradation of a planet that belongs to all, is regrettable. Using the authority of the social sciences today to 'prove' the deep roots of white identity and thus contribute to the re-essentialisation of nationalism seems to me, at best, a rearguard struggle.

References

BILLIG M., 1995, *Banal nationalism*, London ; Thousand Oaks, Calif, Sage, 200 p.

BILLIG M., 1996, "Nationalism as an International Ideology: Imagining the Nation, Others and the World of Nations," dans *Changing European Identities: Social Psychological Analyses of Social Change*, Breakwell, Glynnis M. and Lyons, Evanthia, Butterworth and Heinemann (International series in social psychology), pp. 181–194.

DUCHESNE S., ICHIJO A., SKEY M., FOX J.E., 2018, "Who's afraid of Banal Nationalism? A symposium," *Nations and Nationalism*, 24, 4, pp. 838–870.

THIESSE A.-M., 2005, "National Identities," dans DIECKHOFF A., JAFFRELOT C. (eds.), *Revisiting Nationalism*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan US, pp. 122–143.