

Methodological challenges in the study of stateless nationalist territorial claims

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ABSTRACT

Methodological challenges in the study of stateless nationalist territorial claims. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. The territory claimed by stateless nationalist movements can change over time. Following a review of prominent explanations, this article addresses some of the more general methodological challenges involved in studying change in the territorial claims of stateless nationalist movements. It draws attention to the analytical distinction between the origin of territorial claims and their consequent changes. Building on this distinction, it also demonstrates the advantages of using a multidimensional understanding of change in territorial claims focusing on its timing, direction, and process. Then it turns to a discussion highlighting the tradeoffs in the choice of the unit of analysis as well as common problems in case selection, i.e., unjustifiable asynchronous comparisons and anachronism. The article concludes by laying out a roadmap for future research in this area.

KEYWORDS

Nationalism; nationalist movements; territorial claims; conflict; methodology

摘要

研究无国家国族主义者的领土宣称的方法论挑战。 *Territory, Politics, Governance*。无国家国族主义运动所宣称的领土随着时间而改变。在回顾重要的解释之后，本文将应对研究无国家国族主义运动的领土宣称变迁中涉及的若干更为一般性的方法论挑战。本文关注领土宣称及其所导致的变迁之间的分析性区别。本文根据此一区别，同时证实多面向理解领土宣称的变迁，并聚焦其时间、方向与过程的优势。本文接着转向强调选择分析单位中的权衡以及案例选择中的共同问题之讨论，例如无法合理化的非同期比较与时代错误。本文于结论中，为本领域的未来研究开展了蓝图。

关键词

国族主义; 国族主义运动; 领土宣称; 冲突; 方法论

RÉSUMÉ

Problèmes méthodologiques dans l'étude de revendications territoriales nationalistes sans Etat. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. Le territoire revendiqué par des mouvements nationalistes sans État peut évoluer au fil du temps. À la suite d'un examen d'éminentes explications, le présent article se penche sur certains des problèmes méthodologiques les plus généraux que comporte l'étude de l'évolution des revendications territoriales de mouvements nationalistes. Il attire l'attention du lecteur sur la distinction analytique entre l'origine des revendications territoriales et les changements qui en découlent. En s'appuyant sur cette distinction, il

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démontre en outre les avantages de l'emploi d'une approche multidimensionnelle pour le changement dans les revendications territoriales, en ce concentrant sur le calendrier, l'orientation, et le processus. Il passe ensuite à une discussion soulignant les compromis dans le choix de l'unité d'analyse, ainsi que les problèmes communs dans le choix des cas, p.ex. comparaisons asynchrones injustifiables et anachronisme. Le présent article se termine en dressant une feuille de route pour de futures recherches dans ce domaine.

MOTS-CLÉS

nationalisme; mouvements nationalistes; revendications territoriales; conflit; méthodologie

RESUMEN

Cambios metodológicos en el estudio de las reclamaciones territoriales por parte de movimientos nacionales apátridas. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. El territorio reclamado por los movimientos nacionales apátridas puede cambiar con el tiempo. Tras una revisión de explicaciones destacadas, en este artículo abordamos algunos de los problemas metodológicos más generales que implica el estudio de los cambios en las reclamaciones territoriales por parte de movimientos nacionales apátridas. Ponemos de relieve la distinción analítica entre el origen de las reclamaciones territoriales y sus consiguientes cambios. A partir de esta distinción, también demostramos las ventajas de utilizar un concepto multidimensional del cambio en las reclamaciones territoriales centrándonos en su momento, dirección y proceso. Luego iniciamos un debate en el que se resaltan las concesiones al elegir la unidad de análisis, así como los problemas habituales en la selección de casos, es decir, comparaciones asincrónicas y anacronismos injustificables. Concluimos este artículo trazando las líneas generales de futuros estudios en este campo.

PALABRAS CLAVES

nacionalismo; movimientos nacionales; reclamaciones territoriales; conflicto; metodología

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INTRODUCTION

The control of a national territory is the sine qua non of nationalist movements. Yet, despite the importance of territory for nationalists, the territorial scope of the nation–state desired by stateless nationalist movements can change over time. For example, some Tibetan nationalists initially omitted the Kham region from the state they sought in the interwar period, yet after the 1950s, they widely included it in their territorial claims (McGranahan, 2010, pp. 39–45). The main branch of the Zionist movement changed what it considered to be the ‘Land of Israel’ in the period before it achieved independence (Shelef, 2007). In joint work, we have also shown that the areas mapped by both the Palestinian Fatah and the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (MRO) likewise changed over time (Mylonas & Shelef, 2014).

This article explores some of the methodological challenges involved in the empirical study of ‘the strategic logic of territorial designs’¹ of stateless nationalist movements. Doing so helps address some of the issues involved in bridging the gap Atzili and Kadercan (2017) identify between political geographers and political scientists interested in studying the role of territory in conflict. A contemporary political geographer might conceive of the stateless nationalist movements we study as counterhegemonic movements opposing dominating hegemonic powers (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Rather than focus on the conflict between the stateless nationalist movement and the state they challenge, we pay direct and explicit attention to the politics of territorial design by the stateless nationalist movements themselves. Doing so allows us to highlight the tradeoffs involved in various research strategies employed to ascertain the impact of those politics vis-à-vis other potential factors that could shape the resulting territorial vision of, in our case, stateless nationalist movements.

It is possible to extrapolate at least six plausible explanations for how changes in the scope of the territory claimed by stateless nationalist movements come about from the literature on nationalism, state-building, and territorial conflict. These literatures have highlighted factors such as domestic political contestation (Goddard, 2010; Mylonas & Shelef, 2014; Shelef, 2010), the external imposition of a new border (Anderson, 1991, pp. 52–53; Carter & Goemans, 2011; Goemans, 2006; Roeder, 2007), adaptation to changes in the ethnic composition of territory following significant demographic shifts (see, e.g., Greenfeld, 1992; Kaufmann, 1998; Saideman & Ayers, 2008; Smith, 1987; Toft, 2005), concessions made to the demands of external patrons (Mylonas, 2012), changes in the relative capacity of a stateless nationalist movement relative to the state it is challenging, and changes in the material value of the land in response to the discovery of valuable resources (Kelle, 2016). Elsewhere we provide a detailed discussion of each of these alternatives (Mylonas & Shelef, 2014; Shelef, 2010) and the tradeoffs between them. Table 1 summarizes these alternative explanations.

Our earlier work leverages the different expectations of these arguments with respect to the expected time, the process, and the direction of changes in territorial claims in order to disentangle the relative plausibility of these mechanisms for stateless movements in Israel, Palestine, and the Balkan Peninsula (Mylonas & Shelef, 2014; Shelef, 2010). We found that explanations rooted in domestic politics consistently provided the best explanation for how and why these movements changed the scope of the area they sought as their national state.

Table 1. A multidimensional dependent variable.

Mechanism	Dimensions of the dependent variable		
	Timing	Direction	Process
1. Response to domestic political challenges	Responding to a local political problem that requires modulation of the territorial claim	The new scope of the desired nation–state will conform to the political needs of the movement	Movement solving political problem
2. Coordination on real new borders	Closely following the drawing of new international borders	The new scope of the desired nation–state will conform to new international border	All movements
3. Adapting to ethnic geography	Closely following change in the geographic distribution of coethnics	Land newly populated with coethnics will be added. Land newly depopulated of coethnics will be excluded	All movements with the same definition of national membership
4. Concession to external patron	Closely following change in a movement’s patron or a patron’s foreign policy	The new scope of the desired nation–state will conform to the patron’s policy	All clients of the international patron
5. Change in relative capacity	Closely following new information about the movement’s relative strength vis-à-vis the state that is being challenged	As relative capacity increases, the desired scope of the nation–state will increase. As relative capacity decreases, the desired scope of the nation–state will decrease	Movement whose relative capacity changed
6. New information about the land’s value	Closely following new information about the material value of land	The desired scope of the nation–state should expand to include newly valued land	All movements

Here, we draw on this work to explore not the relative purchase of different explanations, *per se*, but the wider methodological challenges involved in studying stateless nationalist territorial claims. The study of territory and governance, as well as that of nationalist movements, is frequently characterized by the presence of competing explanations for a particular phenomenon of interest because the pace of theoretical development and hypothesis generation often outstrips the ability to evaluate these hypotheses and because the complexity of human interaction rarely provides unambiguous evidence that allows for the complete elimination of alternatives.

In what follows, we build on our earlier work and discuss solutions to the methodological problems scholars face when tackling such questions. In particular, we discuss the importance of parsing the dependent variable in order to maintain the advantages of using a multidimensional dependent variable while still facilitating empirical research. We also address the choices of unit of analysis and case selection.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Parsing the dependent variable: origins versus change

Any study of territorial claims has to cope with the legacy of the past, especially, as in the cases used by Mylonas and Shelef (2014), where imperial legacies play an important role in structuring the actors involved and their politics (Hajdarpašić, 2008; Hartmuth, 2008; Inalcik, 1996; Todorova, 1996; Yilmaz & Yosmaoglu, 2008). A variety of hypotheses related to territorial claims can be drawn from this literature. For example, it might be that nationalist movements base the extent of their territorial claims on prior imperial territorial divisions (Carter & Goemans, 2011). Roeder's (2007) segment state argument holds that subnational administrative borders often become interstate borders because these institutionally and politically semi-autonomous administrative units significantly lower the start-up costs for the nationalist elites that aspire to independence. In a complementary argument, Goemans (2006) shows that pre-existing borders, because they are widely known, can serve as focal points for the definition of the homeland. A similar argument about the role of prior administrative boundaries has also been made specifically in the Ottoman region (Jelavich & Jelavich, 1977). Indeed, most national rebellions in the Ottoman Empire sought control of specific Ottoman administrative centers. It may also be that the plans of imperial powers, such as Britain in Palestine and Russia or Austria-Hungary in the Balkans, shape the claims of stateless nationalist movements if these ideas are used in the constitution of the scope of their claims. However, such explanations are often challenged by the existence of multiple and competing imperial plans.

Another version of the legacy argument refers to territorial claims based on real or imagined borders of the nation's territory in the past and holds that future definitions of the homeland will be shaped by those past claims. Usually, this refers to a period back in time when the 'revived nation' had a specific set of borders that they are simply re-claiming. Clearly, such a hypothesis would be relevant only for national movements that have – or can devise – such a heritage.

While there is a lot of additional work to be done exploring the impact of historical legacies on territorial claims, Mylonas and Shelef (2014) opt for sidestepping the issue entirely. We distinguished between the *origins* of a territorial claim and consequent *changes* in the desired borders of the state articulated by stateless nationalist movements. This allowed us to focus on a smaller set of explanations since many of the time-invariant hypotheses that are clearly important for understanding the original scope of a movement's desired national state, such as legacies of prior administrative boundaries and real or imagined historical autonomy, could be bracketed. The empirical challenge, of course, is daunting since shifts in territorial claims are often masked because nationalist movements fear that revealing such information could undermine the movement's legitimacy. We discuss this issue in our conclusion.

A multidimensional understanding

Scholars often collapse multiple dimensions of their dependent variable into a dichotomous one. In other words, even when the conceptualization of a variable is rich it often gets reduced into a narrow proxy at the operationalization stage. Although there may be good reasons for choosing to do so, collapsing a multidimensional concept into a dichotomous choice comes at the cost of losing potentially valuable information and variation (Collier & Adcock, 1999). Similar choices plague explorations of change, both in general and in the particular context of change in the territorial claims of stateless nationalist movements.

Building on the pragmatic approach advocated by Collier and Adcock, we opt for maintaining the multidimensional character of change. We do so because the variation along the different dimensions provides analytical leverage for explaining why change takes place. Coding change in dichotomous terms (as either having taken place or not) might be useful in ascertaining whether or not change has taken place (especially in large-N contexts), but it is less helpful for explaining *why* it occurred.

We focus on three critical dimensions of change: its timing, direction, and process. Each potential explanation of change contains discrete, observable predictions for the timing, process, and direction of change in the territorial claims of stateless nationalist movements that were compared with the historical record (see Table 1). Any explanation that could account for all three components would be preferable to explanations that could explain either just the presence of change or fewer components because it sets a higher threshold for hypotheses testing. Moreover, this approach opens up the possibility that some hypotheses may be better at explaining certain parts of the variation of a multidimensional dependent variable than others.

For us, timing refers to when each explanation expects the process of change to begin and its completion (the point where the new view of the territory desired is dominant). Scholars in recent years have noted the importance of paying attention to issues of temporality in causal analyses. Grzymala-Busse (2011) usefully unpacks temporality into duration, tempo, acceleration, and timing. Indeed, nearly all the (usually implicit) explanations for how change in the territory desired by stateless nationalist movements takes place contain expectations about each of these aspects of temporality, especially the duration, tempo, and timing of change. Building on Grzymala-Busse's (2011) suggestions, disentangling the relative plausibility of alternative explanations of change requires making these (again, often implicit) expectations explicit and testing them against the historical record. As Grzymala-Busse's (2011, p. 1272) notes, 'specific causal mechanisms are more likely given certain temporal configurations, making some hypothesized causal mechanisms more plausible than others.'

Making the temporal expectations of alternative explanations explicit also has two implications for the kinds of research design and approach that we use to assess whether and how change in territorial aspirations takes place. First, as Grzymala-Busse (2011) exhorts us, the temporal dynamics of causal mechanisms need to be made explicit and measured in order to be analytically useful. Second, the analysis needs to encompass a sufficiently long historical *durée* in order to capture a potentially slow moving process that may govern the pattern of the variation under study. In other words, the period of observation used in the disaggregation of alternative mechanisms has to allow sufficient time to pass if we want to rule out, or rule in, particular explanations of change (see also, Mylonas, 2015, pp. 752–755; Pierson, 2000, pp. 150–151).

Beyond temporality as an important dimension of our dependent variable, we highlight direction and process. Our use of 'direction' refers to whether the territorial claim made by the stateless nationalist movement expands or contracts, and to what particular borderline. By 'process' we mean the expectation of an explanation about *who* undergoes change and whether the change is carried through consistently.

The utility of maintaining a multidimensional dependent variable for the process of hypothesis testing can be illustrated in the case of the transformation of Fatah's desired scope for its coveted

nation–state and its acceptance of the partition of Mandatory Palestine. This change is commonly attributed to the results of the 1967 and 1973 wars. According to this explanation, these wars provided new information about the relative weakness of the Palestinians' Arab allies. Which, in turn, led to a re-evaluation of their relative capacity and a reluctant acceptance of Israel's existence (see, e.g., Al-Shuaibi, 1980; Ashrawi, 1995; Iyad, 1980).

This explanation reasonably accounts for the direction of the change in Fatah's claims, but does not fare as well in accounting for the timing and process. In terms of the timing of change, this explanation cannot account for why the change took place only after the 1973 war and not after the 1967 war, since the latter was a much more decisive victory for Israel, and a correspondingly less ambiguous source of information about Israeli strength. However, Fatah did not shift its territorial goals in response to the information provided by the 1967 war. Rather, in its wake, it doubled down on the claim of Palestine in its entirety and, in 1968, rebuffed a proposal to create a Palestinian state in part of the territory even as an intermediate step. This was not just a bureaucratic rejection; the prospect of shrinking their territorial goals was castigated as a betrayal of the nation and its legitimate aspirations. The rejection of the idea that they might shift their territorial goals even slid to violence when Fatah attempted to blow up the home of an advocate of this change (Sayigh, 1997, pp. 51, 82–83, 173, 223, 341).

The existence of such proposals does suggest that the information provided by the 1967 war may have played a role in the development of the 'strategy of phases' with which to gain their national territory by individuals in Fatah's leadership, at the time. But this did not imply a shift in their conception of the appropriate territorial borders of the nation–state that they sought (Jiryis, 1977, p. 5; Sayigh, 1997, p. 335). The proponents of the 'phased approach' openly portrayed it as a tactical, short-term modulation of their position for instrumental reasons and not a transformation of their ultimate goals (Sayigh, 1997, p. 155). In other words, even if the experience of fighting with a more powerful state provided meaningful information to the leaders of this particular stateless nationalist movement, this information, on its own, cannot account for the years between 1974 and 1988 when Fatah changed its strategy for Palestinian liberation but not the scope of the territory it sought to liberate.

The variation that existed within Fatah's leadership about accepting even the phased approach is also inconsistent with explanations of change that point to a single exogenous shock. Fatah's leadership was deeply divided on this question despite experiencing the same reality. The same is true of the Palestinian national movement more broadly. Even if Fatah eventually endorsed the 'phased approach' significant segments of the Palestinian political spectrum continued to reject even this tactical step as a betrayal of core principles. The variation in the way different nationalist movements of the same stateless nation reacted to new information suggests that such information, in and of itself, is not sufficient to bring about a change in the territorial claims of stateless nationalist movements.

The multidimensionality of the dependent variable also allows us to evaluate the plausibility of arguments that would envision a coordination on the actual borders drawn in the region. Although the eventual acceptance of the scope of the national territory as comprising the West Bank and Gaza Strip is consistent with the process of coordination on the actual border between Israel and Palestine, the timing of the transformation is less consistent with the expectations of this explanation. This is the case if only because Fatah did not coordinate on the border when it was a real international border between 1949 and 1967, but only in the 1967–1988 period, when the border between the West Bank and Israel was increasingly emptied of tangible meaning.

Unit of analysis

At what level of analysis should an exploration of changes in nationalist claims take place? Traditionally, scholarship on nationalism is pitched at the level of the state. Such an analysis would

lead us to explore changes in the territorial claims by French, German, Russian, etc. nationalisms. Unfortunately, this level of analysis too easily falls into the trap of methodological nationalism and assumes either that there is no variation in territorial claims within a nation or that any variation that does exist does not contribute to how territorial claims change.

Alternatively, it would be reasonable to pitch an analysis of territorial claims at the level of the individual. Such an analysis might ask individuals about the area that they claim for the nation and, using repeated surveys over time, or perhaps survey experiments, could explore the purchase of different mechanisms of change. Unfortunately, to the best of our knowledge such data are unavailable. Indeed, questions about the scope of territorial claims are almost never asked in major national surveys. This could be because the importance of answering this question has been systematically overlooked, because it is politically sensitive and therefore difficult to ask in many contexts, or because a too-easy acceptance of methodological nationalism fostered the assumption that the answer is obvious.

As a result, we opted for selecting an intermediate level of analysis: the nationalist movement. This level of analysis has a couple of clear advantages. First, it is nationalist movements that draw desired national borders and act politically to realize these territorial claims. As a result, they generate materials that can be used as data in a study of how these claims change. Second, pitching the analysis at the level of the nationalist movement allows for the possibility that different nationalist movements claiming to speak for the same nation could differ in the scope of their territorial claims and that the competition among domestic political movements could shape how those claims change. In so doing, this level of analysis builds on the recent attention paid to endogenous processes of institutional transformation more broadly (see, e.g., Lustick, 1993; Mahoney & Thelen, 2010; Shelef, 2010).

Using the 'state' or the 'nation' as a unit of analysis would have obscured the political dynamics we identified in our work because these are impossible to observe at these higher levels of analysis. The link between the level of analysis and the political mechanism we identified imposes important scope conditions on the mechanism itself. Where there is no domestic competition other mechanisms are more likely to operate.

Selecting nationalist movements as the unit of analysis still requires a decision about what counts as a nationalist movement. The answer to this question is key in order to decide which movements ought to be included in our universe of cases. This decision is obviously connected with common methodological problems such as selection bias. We based our approach on an operationalization put forward by Andreas Wimmer and Yuval Feinstein, which limits nationalist movements to those organizations with formally defined memberships (thus excluding clientelist networks and informal factions), institutionalized leadership roles (as opposed to personal followings), and a claim to represent the national community as a whole (Wimmer & Feinstein, 2010).

The question of which nationalist movements are relevant in a particular context is both analytically difficult and politically fraught, especially in such quintessentially contested cases. In our prior work, we limited our inquiry to movements that make claims to a piece of land *as a homeland* and are residing in that territory. Under this definition, for example, movements that claimed part or whole of the region of Macedonia as part of the Greek or Bulgarian or Albanian homeland, or that claim Palestine as part of Israel or Southern Syria were excluded. In the analytical framework we proposed, the main difference between a Greek-Macedonian nationalist and a Slav-Macedonian nationalist was that the former claimed the land as part of the Greek homeland, while the latter claimed it as *the* homeland. This distinction, however, does not imply any normative claim about the relative legitimacy of the movements making any of these claims.

We recognize that this distinction is not watertight. For example, in the case of the struggle for Macedonia, claims for 'Macedonia to the Macedonians' were often made by elites that at different points in time had self-identified as Bulgarians or Serbs. It is likely that there is a great deal of variation among nationalist movements in this regard. Such differences would matter if, for

example, the mechanism of change in the definition of the homeland varied systematically among movements that differed on this dimension. We cannot rule this possibility out in this context. Future research could examine whether or not this is the case empirically.

But change is a relative quality. Thus, we differentiate between change in the territorial claims of a nationalist movement and changes in its organizational structure. It is not uncommon for nationalist movements to pose as continuations of older ones, sometimes even using the same name. In our work we do not perceive these separate movements as one. Instead, we understand this situation as organizational discontinuity. For instance, when a nationalist movement is fully captured by another organization or state then we no longer consider the group as a continuation since it has no independent agency. Thus, the movement that has been captured is seen as distinct from the movement prior to the capture. For example, in our study of the changes in the territorial claims made by the MRO, we stop coding these changes when the MRO began acting as Bulgaria's proxy.²

CASE SELECTION

Asynchronous comparisons

The tendency to test hypotheses on cases that are contemporaneous is justifiable for a variety of reasons (including the ability to control for world time effects such as international norms, technological innovations, and so forth, and their impact). However, asynchronous comparisons can also be illuminating. To begin with, different cases may go through the same experience at different points in time. These differences can be meaningful. As Grzymala-Busse (2011, p. 1288) also noted in her discussion of timing as an important aspect of temporality, *when* events take place might influence the ways in which causal processes operate. For instance, if we are studying 'national revivals' one movement may have experienced what Hroch (1985) calls the national agitation stage in the nineteenth-century, while another in the twentieth. Thus, asynchronous comparisons are justified if the research question and the research design require certain initial conditions to pertain before a causal effect can materialize. On top of this, showing that an argument operates in a similar fashion in two distinct periods in different contexts comes with many of the virtues of a most different systems design that John Stuart Mill – and his followers – would applaud (Gerring, 2007, p. 139).

Both these applied to our study of Fatah and the MRO. In an important sense, the decision to examine stateless nationalist movements makes asynchronous comparison likely. Both our cases are in the same 'stage' of nationalist development (without implying a linear or necessary development), in that both are nationalist movements that, in the period under observation, had not achieved their main goals. Moreover, the asynchronous comparison allows us to leverage the differences between the cases: the fact that the two movements unfolded in different historical moments – one prior to World War I and the other following World War II – increases our confidence that the relationship we identified between short-term rhetorical modulations and substantive change in territorial aspirations transcends geographic contexts and geopolitical circumstances.

Cross-regional comparisons

Comparing nationalist movements from different geopolitical contexts is challenging but theoretically rewarding. To begin with, discussing Fatah – a movement operating in the Middle East – and the MRO – a movement which emerged in the Ottoman Balkans – forced us to develop concepts that could travel between the two contexts and thus could also travel beyond these two movements. In other words, our concepts had to be truly comparative.

Beyond the benefits related to conceptualization, cross-regional comparisons enhance our ability to conduct hypothesis testing as well. For instance, variables that matter a great deal in one

context, such as religion-based national identity in the Balkans, may be less relevant in other contexts where national identity is more based on racial or linguistic differences. This type of variation could allow us to evaluate whether (and how) such distinctions matter for the process we are interested in understanding. Similarly, by conducting cross-regional comparisons we can also indirectly test several arguments that emphasize the importance of regional orders or neighbourhood effects. In the sense that if we can identify an argument that can account for the variation in two completely different geopolitical contexts, then we could argue that these other variables, although relevant in other ways, do not account for the observed variation we are interested in.

Finally, cross-regional comparisons force us to think about world time and diffusion processes. For instance, Herbst (2014) has argued that Sub-Saharan African populations did not have the same understanding about the relationship between identity and territory as in the European cases described by Tilly (1975, 1992). Studying a topic in such a fashion allows one to avoid euro-centric or western-centric explanations and thus build more solid accounts.

Anachronism

Naturally, asynchronous comparisons do not come without caveats. Anachronism, i.e., the practice of attributing certain actions to concepts and/or phenomena that were not politically salient or even understood by the actors under study, leads to mischaracterizations and to functionalist arguments (Mylonas, 2015). As Lawrence (2013, p. 7) argued, 'Hindsight can thus produce biased explanations. Knowledge of the outcome can lead one to erroneously believe that preferences for the outcome caused it to happen, even when the existence of such preferences has to be assumed.' Anyone who has studied the origins of one or more nationalist movements (stateless or not) has experienced the practice of anachronism. Often, actions are assumed to be the product of national feelings and loyalty to the nation even before a coherent definition was in place. For example, we might assume that the territorial claims of nationalist movements date back centuries or even millennia. However, as scholars of political geography have pointed out (Winichakul, 1994; Branch, 2014), Cartesian conceptualizations of territory in which sovereignty is sought and in which there are sharp borders between polities, are the products of technological and cartographical developments that took place at a particular historical period. The meaning of territorial claims before and after these developments may be so different that any comparison between them would be misleading.³

Tradeoffs of small-N and large-N research

There are clear tradeoffs between addressing the question of how stateless nationalist movements change their territorial claims using case studies or large-N analyses. The principal advantage of the small-N approach is that it allows a deep dive into the mechanisms at play. Tracing the process of change with sufficient resolution to compare the observable expectations of different mechanisms about the timing, direction, and process of change to the empirical record requires a significant investment of the kind that is difficult to replicate for any scholar (or even team of scholars) across the entire universe of cases.

This level of historical specificity, however, comes at the cost both testing the generalizability of any conclusions drawn and in limits on the ability to draw inferences about the conditions under which particular mechanisms of change operate empirically. For example, while the patterns of similarity and differences between the MRO and Fatah are sufficient to make us confident that political dynamics are likely to play an important role in changes in the territorial claims of stateless nationalist movements more broadly (see Mylonas & Shelef, 2014), there is no way to know whether or not this is the case without examining the wider universe of cases. Similarly, while maintaining the multidimensionality of the change insulates that argument from many of the problems associated with selecting on the dependent variable (Collier & Mahoney, 1996), it does so

imperfectly. Ideally, a large-N analysis of the mechanisms of change would include the many cases in which ‘domestic’ political competition exists, but in which no change takes place.

Finally, it may also be the case that there is something unobserved about the particular cases that are examined in any small-N context that makes the conclusion that a particular mechanism operates more likely. We have no way of knowing, in other words, whether we would have found support for other mechanisms had we examined other cases. Large-N research is better suited, therefore, to answer questions about the relative distribution of mechanisms across cases and for exploring the broader conditions under which some mechanisms are more or less likely to drive change in the claims of stateless nationalist movements.

Steps in this direction have already been taken. Shelef (2016), for example, systematically codes for the presence of homeland claims across all new international borders since 1945. Such data could be leveraged in order to replicate the multidimensional dependent variable that, we believe, is needed to adequately assess mechanisms of change. At the same time, good proxies for the alternative explanations also need to be developed.

CONCLUSION

The study of stateless nationalist movements in relation to territorial design faces a number of methodological challenges. In this article, we focused on some of the research strategies and choices involved in studying precisely how the ‘delineation of territory’ aspect of territorial design (Atzili & Kardecan, forthcoming) takes place. In particular, we highlighted the importance of conceptualizing the dependent variable in ways that facilitate empirical research and testing. Our work contributes to building a shared vocabulary between political geography and political science that can advance our common effort to unpack the relationship between politics and space. We also addressed the critical role of choosing the appropriate unit of analysis and selecting cases from a clearly delineated universe of cases.

The empirical challenges faced by scholars interested in these questions, however, do not end there. For instance, among the most daunting problems a researcher faces is finding the necessarily empirical evidence. In our previous work, we focused primarily on the public articulation of territorial claims by the movement and its leaders. This source of data, while it has a long tradition in the study of nationalism (Billig, 1995; Greenfeld, 1992; Lustick, 1993; Shelef, 2010), does have important limitations, especially if we consider movements as strategic actors in conflict. In the case of territorial claims in particular, the actors involved often have an incentive to obscure their political decisions out of the fear that revealing such information would undermine their movement’s legitimacy or to deploy changes in territorial claims as cheap talk. While future work would ideally also deploy sources of data about the territorial claims of nationalist movements that are less sensitive to these limitations, including internal correspondence, pedagogical materials, and the like, in many historical contexts, such data are often difficult to come by or simply no longer exist.

As the title of our article makes clear, we focus on territorial claims made by *stateless* nationalist movements. By definition, such movements (especially in the contemporary era) fight against the territorial integrity norm. The tension between self-determination and territorial integrity thus provides another example of the tension between micro-designs and global orders identified by Atzili and Kadercan. But the historical record is full of cases of nationalist movements that continue to press territorial claims after gaining independence. We often call these irredentist, revisionist, or expansionist states.

More importantly, it is important to note that the territorial claims of irredentist states also change. For example, in 1877 the Italian nationalist Matteo Renato Imbriani coined the term ‘terra irredenta’ (unredeemed land) to refer to those parts of the Italian homeland that were not included in the Italian state. The Duke of Litta-Visconti-Arese (1917) explained that this area

included ‘Trentino, Eastern Friuli, Trieste with Istria, Fiume and Dalmatia’. Italy today includes Trentino and the city of Trieste, but not these other areas of the Italian homeland. While claims to the remainder of ‘unredeemed Italy’ persist at the margins of Italian politics, few Italian nationalists currently argue that Italy ought to extend its sovereignty over the parts of Croatia and Slovenia that were once seen as inherently Italian. Such changes in the understanding of the territory that ought to be ‘ours’ are crucial for understanding how deeply contested territories – in the Italian-Yugoslav case there were widespread fears that the conflict over Trieste and Istria would lead to World War III – become peaceful (Gross, 1978).

Our focus on *stateless* nationalist movements is due to our theoretical expectation that the mechanisms of change that shape the territorial claims of nationalist movements after they achieve independence may differ from those that shape those claims while they are stateless. For instance, once a nationalist movement achieves statehood it gains greater access to certain types of resources and additional tools that could be used to effect territorial change, thus rendering relative capacity arguments potentially more plausible. On the other hand, international norms with regard to territorial integrity bind states more than stateless nationalist movements. In light of this, coordination on existing boundaries may become a more potent explanation for changes in the scope of territorial claims by nationalist movements that have achieved statehood. Pursuing these questions in a wider range of contexts constitutes another fruitful extension of this research agenda.

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NOTES

1. We employ a term Atzili and Kadercan proposed in this issue.
2. For more on the MRO, see Perry (1988). There are, of course, other potential reasons for organizational discontinuity, see, for example, Taylor (1989).
3. For a discussion of the problem of anachronism manifested in the realm of understandings of nationhood, see Mylonas (2015).

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