

Out of Many, Many

The Role of States in Constructions of American Nationalism

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Figure 1: Display from Lane County Historical Museum Nov 2023

Introduction

“there is no knowledge – political or otherwise – outside representation.”

--Homi K. Bhabha, Locations of Culture

When I applied for a sabbatical in early 2023, my plan was to return to and refine ideas originally laid out in my dissertation, which was defended just over ten years ago. That project explored theories of nationalism and applied a case study methodology to developing a theory I called “statism” to describe the nationalist phenomena I observed in the context of individual US States. I used Wyoming—my own place of origin and the ostensible stage for much of my personal family history—as my case study. My

application detailed a research method that opened with a nostalgic stroll through key texts from my dissertation followed by a discovery period wherein I could explore more recent writings on nationalism. In order to expand my reasoning in a new site, I also planned to use Oregon as a new case study, supplementing my reading with visits to state and county museums, historical sites, and fairs, national monuments within the state of Oregon, and reviewing the Oregon State Archives online. In this report and accompanying Sabbatical Presentation, I will expand on key insights gained through this revitalization of the concept of American Statism, and I will reflect on the personal and professional value of recursivity in one's professional and scholarly life.

Purpose and Goals

"The blind, the lame, the halt, the criminally berserk [. . .] you have to stop somewhere or you don't have friends, you have a nation." --Gregory Maguire, Out of Oz

As the surly dwarf character from Gregory Maguire's dark retelling of the Wizard of Oz narrative suggests in the quote above, nationalism and nation building are about belonging, and, equally importantly, exclusion. Statism, too, is double edged, hailing some subjects to join the collective sense of identification and signaling to others their implicit unbelonging. I set to explore and reflect on the formation of statist identities in Oregon both as a way to cultivate examples of statism in action and as a way to better understand the place I live, learn, and teach by considering these three questions:

1. How has scholarship on nationalism developed/evolved in the last 10 years? In what ways can this scholarship inform/shape my conception of statist identities?
2. How can one develop a rich and deep understanding of their state as a local context? What are the benefits and applications for such knowledge for a community college faculty member?
3. What tools does an understanding of nationalism through the lens of being an Oregonian provide for understanding the ways white nationalism is gaining traction in Oregon as well as elsewhere in the region and in the United States?

Each of these questions provided ample material for study, and any one of them could have been the focus of my entire sabbatical. By the close of my sabbatical, I can say that

I found the first question much easier to address than the second, and the third, I must admit, is a question I'm afraid I may never feel I can adequately address.

Process and Methods

"The more resistant the world is to order, the stronger the desire to impose order." – James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State

Step One: Literature Review

In order to reorient myself to my dissertation and its context, I re-read several key texts from that work, including: Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Pricilla Wald's *Constituting Americans*, Lauren Berlant's *Anatomy of National Fantasy*, *Nations and Nationalism* by Ernest Gellner, and Wendall Barry's iconic classic *The Unsettling of America*. I had intended to re-read two additional texts from the early 1990s that had been cited in my dissertation, but, in the course of this retrospective, I discovered several seminal texts that I had not previously read. Since time was of the essence, I adapted my reading list to include two new to me texts from the same era, Yael Tamir's *Why Nationalism* (1994) and Liah Greenfeld's *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (1992).

While all of these texts informed and enriched my thinking, *Imagined Communities* was a particularly useful starting point, especially considering that an expanded new edition was published in 2016, which contained supplemental material that was very useful in placing this work in a larger context. In my earlier thinking about statism, I had been drawn to the symbolic and structural formations that "created" the state, in the sense described by J.L. Austin in *How to do Things with Words*, where ceremony meets rhetorically constructed reality in a context of mutual belief that can "summon" realities. For me, this mapped most neatly onto the section of Anderson's book that discusses the importance of "Census, Map, Museum" in the nationalist project.

I also found James C. Scott's work, which I first encountered by happenstance in the summer of 2023, to be immensely informative. Indeed, Scott's deep discussion of state forms expanded my understanding of the administrative function, which had been dramatically underdeveloped in my previous writing. Similarly, Scott's historical location of the concept of the "nation" as an outgrowth of Modernism created a paradigmatic shift in my thinking. Recognizing the historical specificity of the nation has also helped me think more deeply and critically about the interplay between nationalism, administrative state

functions, and people(s). While all of these concepts are discussed in the works I reviewed from my dissertation, Scott's approach helped me recognize currents of thought among these works that helped me find greater connections among them, and more fodder for considering my own notion of statism.

Step Two: Expansion and Synthesis

Reading James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* built on my understanding of census from Anderson to help locate the Nation as 1) inherently located in the modernist project (a strand I missed in failing to read Greenfeld earlier), and, 2) a symptom of the much larger project of all administrative states according to Scott: counting and accounting for resources. In Scott's telling across his expansive body of work, the administrative state's obsession with accounting for and controlling specified resources almost inherently leads to its downfall. In example after example, Scott describes state "schemes" for improvement that are blinded by their twinned lack of understanding from an ecological perspective and obsessive focus on extractable value. As I entered the exploratory phase of my research, I was still on the lookout for the symbolic trappings of statism newly alert to the narrative and editorial "blindspots" typical of state histories and modernist schema.

Step Three: Exploratory Learning

These renewed ways of thinking about the nation drew me out of the papers and archives I had spent so much time thinking about during my dissertation. In the early 2010s, I was obsessed with state constitutional documents, negotiations about where to draw state lines, records of state flag design contests, letters and papers detailing the establishment of universities, libraries, and ladies clubs, and other ephemera from which the foundational narrative is extracted and historicized as well as the novels and (later) films that would retell those narratives again and again. I was fascinated by the ability of those documents to render the spaces they attempted to articulate as abstract and even hypothetical, but in that early research I had failed to appreciate the work of attaching the abstract narrative of the nation and ordering concept of the administrative state to the physical landscape itself.

In early fall, I began my foray into spaces I came to think of as "suture points," physical locations where narratives explicitly connect history, people, and places. These spaces—sometimes museums but often little more than humble highway signs or plaques—tell

and retell a version of history that continually reinforces the dual sense of exclusion and belongingness, that explicitly and proudly reveal the sovereign connection between a People and the Nation. The image in Figure 2 shows a fantastic example of an explicit narrative arc being progressively mapped onto the landscape and history in the context of a museum.



Figure 2: Wasco County Display at Columbia Gorge Discovery Center

Located in the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center, this display features the history of Wasco County as part of the larger narrative of the “building” of the state of Oregon. The larger map on the wall shows the familiar outline of Oregon’s coastline, with boxes drawn in for each of the modern counties. The foldout display along the lower edge of the display offers a brief narrative of the county’s development and shows the county slowly shrinking from founding era “empire” to modest modern county.

Insights and Impacts

*“you are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America. The subject speaks its own importance; comprehending in its consequences, **nothing less than the existence of the Union [and] the safety and welfare of the parts of which it is composed**” --Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 1”*

Having been unable to find a suitable founding era historical fiction to read in summer 2023, I turned reluctantly to the Federalist Papers for my “waiting room reading,” in hopes of some early sabbatical insights. This quote from Hamilton at the very outset of the text would prove to be something of a talisman as I grappled in the coming months with the “so what” of this project. Simply put, individual US States are the constituent elements without which there is no United States--the parts of which it is composed.” It follows, then, that any conceptualization of nationalism in the US must account for the states. Once I had a way of thinking through what had seemed to be the simple answer to the question of my scholarly lifetime, I began to gather additional insights.

1. Scholarship about nationalism does not offer a clear, consistent, and distinct definition of the term. That said, nationalism is generally understood to be an expressed sense of affinity among individuals who are constituted within a self-conscious, usually place-based community. Nationalisms can be imposed (as in colonialism) or organically occurring within a group, sometimes in opposition to an imposed identity (as in Scottish Nationalism, for example).
2. The administrative function of states¹ is distinct from nationalism, though most scholars seem to understand self-governance as an essential goal of nationalists. Suffice to say, the nation and the state are distinct, if typically related, entities.
3. There is very little question as to the role of individual US states as the primary contact for citizens as an embodiment of the Administrative State (driver’s licenses, food stamps, education...), but, for some reason, it is not intuitive that states are identity constructs with emotional elements, too. This despite the proliferation of symbolic iconography, both official (e.g. flags, maps, decorative license plates) and unofficial (e.g. bumper stickers that evoke feature the state

¹ Here I mean states in the general sense of a governing body, not specific US states, per se.

map with the word “home” or a heart superimposed on them or others that declare the driver an “Oregonian”).

4. Oregon’s role in the construction of the American national imaginary is hard to overstate--manifest destiny played a huge role in the national imaginary and was a primary shaping force in the politics of the early/mid 1800s.
5. Unlike Wyoming, Oregon was a destination (actually THE destination for plenty of people who wound up in Wyoming and other states along the Oregon Trail). This period in history is a central element of virtually all of the celebrations, displays, and artifacts I gathered during my sabbatical.
6. Oregon is a paradox: the Constitution outlaws slavery but also excludes non-whites. Museums today both celebrate first peoples and uncritically represent the “Indian Wars” as a part of the “natural progress” of the history of the state. On these and a wide variety of other issues/topics, cognitive dissonance abounds in cultural and political representations of both modern and historical Oregon.

As 2023 drew to a close, I turned my mind to the consideration of the impacts of this work on my personal and professional life as well as on my discipline and my colleagues at the college. First, and most critically, this work served as an important reminder that we all exist within a context that is almost certainly more complex than we consider or acknowledge on a day-to-day basis. This awareness is critical to developing culturally responsive and socially just pedagogies.

During the 2023-2024 academic year, I began developing approaches to teaching writing couched in principles of co-design, which I think provides a useful opening to integrate students lived experiences, voices, and values into the curriculum. I have also been inspired to re/explore place-based pedagogies of writing, which were flourishing at the start of the last decade and seem to have suffered somewhat in our current era of standardization. I was also usefully reminded of the power of administrative processes and decisions in the lived experiences of people. While serving on a HECC committee or taking the time to read the notes from each legislative session might not sound like a great way to spend one’s off time, the handful of people in these mundane spaces often have undue power and also bear undue responsibility for shaping the future of life in our states.



Figure 3: Grant's Pass City Hall

As I turned my attention to preparing this report in the summer of 2024, I was surprised to see Grants Pass, Oregon, making national headlines. In June a Supreme Court decision came down in favor of a city ordinance that made it illegal to sleep outside. In the weeks that followed, cities large and small across the country began taking legal action against residents on the basis of their unhoused status; prior to the Grants Pass case, laws that had the effect of criminalizing a specific status (e.g. the state of being homeless) were understood to violate the United States Constitution. I tried to imagine the scene in Grant's Pass City Hall on the day the ordinance was passed; do you think the small-town denizens gathered to discuss their community's issues expected the national implications of that decision? Do you suppose they imagined their discourse would invite national scrutiny and inspire similar actions that would impact thousands? This research helped remind me of the importance of civic engagement at every level and inspired me to consider revisiting/revising/reviving pedagogical approaches grounded in-service learning. While so much of our political discourse centers national figures and focuses on the proverbial "handful of swing states," the rapidly changing American legal landscape

in recent years is a reminder that the states are the laboratories of American democracy, the constituent parts that enable the very existence of the nation as a whole.

Personal Reflection

“The world rarely shrieks its meaning at you. It whispers in private languages and obscure modalities, in arcane and quixotic imagery through symbol systems in which every element has multiple meanings determined by juxtaposition” –Gregory Maguire, Out of Oz

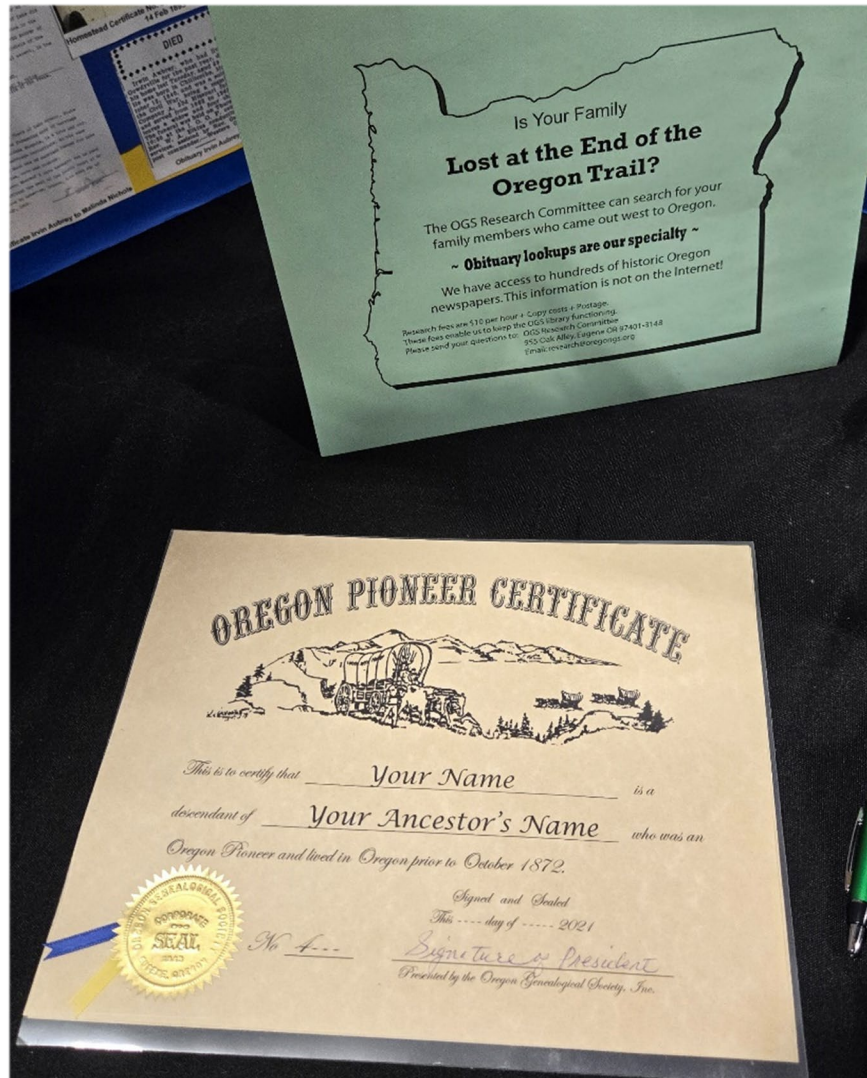


Figure 4: Oregon Pioneer History Display at Lane County Fair

As noted in the prior sections, spending fall of 2023 revising scholarship on nationalism and thinking about Oregon as a construct of the United States proved to be illuminating

in ways I did not expect. Perhaps the lesson I needed to learn most was the lesson I came to last. Reading about nationalism inevitably leads to learning about history, and as I have taken detour upon detour through regional, state, and national historical narratives, it is hard to ignore the impending feeling that we have done all of this before. Whether it's the frustrating circularity of institutional decision making or the unnerving familiarity of disturbing cultural narratives, it seems there is no end to conversations about the implacability of the problems we face today. For the past several years, I have struggled to have a sense of clarity or certainty in the face of such implacable uncertainty. As I looked back across history and searched for a sense of certainty to share in these pages, I was struck again by the hubris of humanity. Of course we have not yet achieved our storied status as the "shining city on the hill;" developing good public policy, building a just society, and creating a shared sense of purpose toward the common good are goals, not tasks. I look forward to working with newfound vigor toward helping my students and community progress and improve.

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