



Provided by the author(s) and NUI Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	Queering the ground: A performative reading of Siniša Maleševi's Grounded Nationalisms
Author(s)	Ryan, Kevin
Publication Date	2019-07-16
Publication Information	Ryan, K. (2019). Queering the ground: A performative reading of Siniša Maleševi's Grounded Nationalisms. <i>Irish Journal of Sociology</i> , 27(3), 309–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603519863298
Publisher	SAGE Publications
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1177/0791603519863298
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/15634
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0791603519863298

Downloaded 2020-12-06T02:05:30Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



This is a pre-print. The version of record is published in the debates section of the *Irish Journal of Sociology* and is available here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0791603519863298>

Queering the ground: a performative reading of Siniša Malešević's *Grounded*

Nationalisms

Kevin Ryan

Abstract

This comment uses Judith Butler's theory of performativity to engage critically with Siniša Malešević's claim that nationalism is so deeply grounded in everyday social life that it has become 'omnipotent'. The gist of the intervention is to drill deeper into the contingency of nationalism by looking at how authoritarian, racialized, mono-cultural, patriarchal and heteronormative nationalisms are vulnerable to subversive acts of improvisation that blur the boundary between aesthetics and politics.

Key words: Nationalism, Performativity, Political Imagination, Santarcangelo Dei Teatri

The brief for this round-table debate on Siniša Malešević's *Grounded Nationalisms* is succinct: to write a comment that invites a response. I interpret this as requiring some type of objection or complaint on my part. Before lodging my objection, I wish to confess that I do so cautiously, because I don't want to lose sight of why this book matters, particularly if read in conjunction with Malešević's previous work, such as *The Rise of Organised Brutality* (2017). Though the explicit focus of the earlier book is war, nationalism is also a crucial part of its core story, and the word 'brutality' suggests a tactical choice on the author's part, intended to animate the more familiar 'violence' which – precisely because it is so familiar – may not register with the reader beyond the theoretical/analytical work it is doing within the text. 'Brutality' shocks, driving home what is at stake when we take the time to think critically about the ways in which macro-political processes are imbricated in the relational fabric of everyday social life. Herein lies the originality of Malešević's latest book, which

examines how nationalism is grounded – historically, organisationally, ideologically, and within the ‘micro-interactional’ texture of social relations (2019: 8-14, 27-39, 55-68, 76-88).

Grounded Nationalisms is impressively erudite, both in terms of assembling its theoretical arc and in anchoring the theory in detailed historical/empirical analysis, which leads me to my complaint: the book makes a compelling case for its core argument, *but* I wonder whether Malešević is overly emphatic in describing nationalism as ‘omnipotent’, and in claiming that ‘whether we like it or not, nationalism is here to stay’ (2019: 20, 275). Where does this conclusion leave the contingency of nationalism? I’m not referring to contingency merely as this relates to nationalism’s historical grounding, which is a question of origins and conditions of existence. In the context of Malešević’s exposition, the contingency of nationalism is a qualified version of the transition that Gellner characterised in his *Plough, Sword and Book* (1988) as the passage from ‘Agraria’ to ‘Industria’. Once we crossed the threshold of modernity, or what Gellner described as a ‘Big Ditch’, there was no going back. If Malešević is correct, neither is there much hope of alternative futures. And yet to return to my earlier remark about why this matters, what matters right now is the resurgence of authoritarian, racialized, mono-cultural, patriarchal and heteronormative nationalisms. For Malešević, this type of ‘noisy, barking’ nationalism matters less than its more deeply grounded ‘tranquil’ forms (2019: 279). I disagree, and in what follows I am going to present a performative reading of Malešević’s new book as a way of figuring the contingent grounding of nationalism. As a first step, I want to re-consider Gellner’s (1996) question: ‘Do nations have navels?’

When Gellner (1996) posed this question, he used the creation myth of Adam to defend his ‘modernist’ theory of nations and nationalism against those he described as ‘primordialists’. Adam of course was not born but created in adult form, and thus it is plausible to imagine his smooth belly as being void of the scar that otherwise remains from

the umbilical connection to a mother. This might also serve to remind us – contra Gellner – that the question of navels is much more than a matter of origins. As noted by Cavarero (2016: 119), ‘Before Eve was created, as one of the versions of the Genesis says, Adam was alone, without any company or relation with his fellow man’. The appearance of Eve, who is omitted from Gellner’s version of the myth, inaugurates the Fall of Man, but in the more fundamental sense, Eve’s arrival on the scene prefigures what Arendt (1958) called ‘the human condition’. This has nothing to do with a human essence, and everything to do with how inter-subjective relations are conditioned by power/knowledge. More pointedly, to move from the mythical to the actual is to encounter the ways in which navels are entangled in histories of rule, bloodline, patriarchy, dominion, patrimony, and of course nationalism. What I am proposing then by way of a performative reading of *Grounded Nationalisms*, is to follow through on Gellner’s question, thereby confronting the political implications of the navel as a way of symbolising the embodied, relational, and performative features of nationalism.

By performativity I am suggesting that nationalism shares something with gender as theorised by Butler (1990). In other words, my contention is that the sexed and gendered body is analogous to the nation as a body of people. While there is no denying our corporeal existence, there is also nothing in our ‘nature’ that determines gender or indeed national identity. ‘Sexed’ characteristics of the body are often evoked as definitive evidence of a male/female binary, which in turn serves as a stable substrate upon which gender is inscribed. Racialized and ethnicized characteristics of the body politic often do the same kind of reifying work in distinguishing those perceived to belong to a given nation from others coded as foreigners, interlopers, or intruders. For gender-essentialists and ardent nationalists, beards, breasts, skin-tone and ethnic markers merely carve the world at its joints, as though the world has naturally occurring joints. But to flip this around, the counter argument is that this way of apprehending and classifying similarities and differences is grounded in how

embodied relations are contextually configured. To take this insight one step further is to recognise that most of us, most of the time, are passing as men and women, as well as passing as members of a particular nation.

What I want to draw attention to – and I will focus on gender for ease of explication – are situations where a person *fails* to pass, is *not permitted* to pass, or *refuses* to conform to the scripting of gender. A girl might be labelled a tom-boy or butch, while a boy might be called effeminate or sissy, which is simultaneously a way of constituting otherness while also subjecting the others so constituted to a normalising judgement. However, this is a performative game and a reversible power relation that also opens out possibilities to subvert the instituted gender order, and many of the labels used to other and exclude have been appropriated as affirmations of gay, trans-, and queer identities.

In short, with gender as with nationalism, we have a performative process of iteration which is policed and enforced in a whole variety of ways, and which can be mapped onto the historical, organisational, ideational (ideological), and micro-social co-ordinates of Malešević's theory of grounded nationalisms. What performativity adds to the argument concerning the omnipotence of nationalism is this: it is vulnerable to subversive acts of improvisation. Which brings me back to Arendt, or to be more specific, the ways in which Butler's theory of performativity intersects with Arendt's figuring of the human condition. Whether we are talking about gender or nationalism, or indeed the ways in which both are contextually intertwined (which they very often are), Arendt would remind us that 'the conditions of human existence...never condition us absolutely' (Arendt, 1998: 11). Otherwise put, we have the ability to edit the script and to activate possibilities that have been excluded or foreclosed upon. This is how contingency enters the frame in the form of actions and practices that queer the grounding of nationalism.

An example: earlier this year (March 2019) an estimated 20,000 people assembled in Verona to protest against the city hosting the World Congress of Families (WCF). Speakers at the conference included WCF president Brian Brown, who campaigns against same-sex marriage in the US. With one exception (Tiziana Grago), the Five Star Movement kept its distance, but deputy prime minister and leader of the far-right League – Matteo Salvini – was on hand ‘to support a festive day with a smile’, declaring that ‘Italians need to start bringing children into the world. A country that doesn’t make babies is a country that dies’ (see Giuffrida 2019). There was no need to enunciate what was left unsaid – it was sufficient to know that when Salvini says ‘Italians’, he is articulating a version of the WCF agenda to ‘restore the natural order’ which, to shift focus to the League’s playbook, means a white, patriarchal and heterosexual *national* order. The protestors who converged on the streets of Verona were staging what Butler (2011) calls a performative mode of assembly. Among the conditions of possibility for this type of resistance *en masse* are other, less overtly political practices that operate on the terrain of aesthetics, such as the Santarcangelo Dei Teatri, an annual festival held in a small town in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. In 2017 the festival drew the ire of municipal councillor Matteo Montevicchi, who posted a comment on social media that reportedly went ‘viral’: ‘we cannot make ideological propaganda with the money of citizens... We must put an end to this cultural totalitarianism’ (Rimini2.0 2017). The Santarcangelo festival is no stranger to controversy, but in the context of the current coalition government, what unfolded in 2017 must be viewed in the context of the struggle that was playing out on the streets of Verona two years later. Directed by Eva Neklyeva, the 2017 festival programme included the theme of ‘the body as a political subject’, and the artists and works engaging with this theme included Club Ecosex, Blix the Merman, and the Museum of Nonhumanity – all ways of questioning heteronormativity and anthropocentrism. After Montevicchi’s denunciation went live, his message was reiterated at the Emilia-

Romagna Regional Council by Tommaso Foti, from the Brothers of Italy party, and carried into the national parliament (Chamber of Deputies) by the League's Massimiliano Fedriga. Despite these calls to discontinue public funding, the Santarcangelo festival endures, and neither have its organiser's capitulated to political pressure to bring its programming into alignment with conservative values. The point I am trying to make here concerns the relation between the exceptional (Verona) and the recurrent (Santarcangelo Dei Teatri), with each supporting and sustaining the other, and together calling the excesses of far-right nationalism into question.

Space alone prevents me from discussing other such acts of resistance, of which there are many. But perhaps 'resistance' is not the only way of apprehending what might also be framed as 'applied experiments in political imagination' (Wilson, 2018), or alternatively as acts of 'reverse imagineering' (Holmes, 2008). Whatever name is attributed to actions, projects and practices that queer the grounding of authoritarian, racialized, mono-cultural, patriarchal and heteronormative nationalisms, what they share is hope. I don't mean hope in the sentimental sense of a vague yearning, but in the practical sense that Wendy Brown speaks of when she enjoins us to 'ask ourselves what we can do to *produce* more prospects for hope' (Brown and Littler, 2018: 20-21). Malešević's conclusion concerning the omnipotence of nationalism straddles realism and fatalism, but let us not forget that hope, as argued by Mick Wilson (2018: 38), often takes the form of 'practical techniques' and 'acts of political imagination', or that hope so practised underpins 'the long slow history of struggles for labour, civic, social, economic, legal, racial, sexual and political justice against imagined impossibilities'. *Grounded Nationalisms* presents a compelling case to support the claim that 'like it or not, nationalism is here to stay', yet perhaps there is scope to drill deeper into what is implied by the book's title. At stake are the specific relational formations through which *nationalisms* (plural) are configured, and to grasp the contingency of such formations is also

to encounter the radical possibilities of *politics*. A variety of nationalisms have indeed conditioned contemporary human existence, and yet, as Arendt noted in the midst of events that bear more than a passing similarity to the present, that in itself does not condition us absolutely.

References

Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Brown W and Littler J (2018) Where the fires are: Wendy Brown talks to Jo Littler. *Soundings*, Spring, 14-25.

Butler J (1990) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

Butler J (2011) Bodies in alliance and the politics of the street. Available at: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en> (Accessed 3 March 2016).

Cavarero A (2016) *Inclinations*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Gellner E (1988) *Plough, Sword and Book*. London: Collins Harvill.

Gellner E (1996) Do nations have navels?' *Nations and Nationalism*, 2(2): 366-370.

Giuffrida A (2019) Christian right summit in Verona draws massive protest. *The Guardian* 30 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/30/christian-right-summit-in-verona-draws-massive-protest> (Accessed 30 March 2019).

Holmes B (2008) *Unleashing the Collective Phantoms*. New York: Autonomedia.

Malešević S (2017) *The Rise of Organised Brutality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Malešević S (2019) *Grounded Nationalisms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rimini2.0 (2017) Montevercchi “virale”: 200 mila visualizzazioni per il video contro il Santarcangelo Festival. Available at: <http://www.riminiduepuntozero.it/montevercchi->

[virale-200-mila-visualizzazioni-per-il-video-contro-il-santarcangelo-festival/](#)

(Accessed 20 April 2019).

Wilson M (2018) Applied experiments in political imagination. In: *Learning in Public: TransEuropean Collaborations in Socially-Engaged Art*, ed. Turney, E. Dublin: Create and the Live Art Development Agency, 28-39.