



# The tempest within: the origins and outcomes of intense national emotions in times of national division

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## Abstract

Theories of intense national emotions have focused on affection for the home nation and antagonism for national others but overlooked antagonism for fellow nationals. The article introduces a comprehensive theory of intense national emotions. It first discusses the sources of the potential energy stored in national identities, pointing to a combination of two factors: the nation is at once potent due to its capacity to shield against existential threats and precarious due to its dependence on the reproduction of contested narratives. The article then explains that events that—through a construction process elaborated in the text—seem to threaten or promise to alter perceived core elements of the nation (i.e., “nation-disrupting events”) evoke intense emotions. Next, the article explains why some periods of “hot” nationalism increase national division rather than unity. The conclusion proposes a promising direction for future research on intense national emotions as a mechanism of eventfulness.

**Keywords** National emotions · Nationalism · Narratives · Polarization · Eventfulness

## An attack on the nation

On January 6, 2021, a large crowd of people amassed on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, with the goal of stopping the certification of the results of the recent presidential election. The event followed a months-long “stop the steal” campaign led by the defeated President Donald Trump and his allies, who falsely claimed that the election had been tainted by massive fraud and demanded that the results be overturned. Thousands of those who came to Washington, DC, on January 6 expressed rage and outrage, and some of them put their lives on the line in a violent confrontation with the Capitol Police. Interestingly, much of the rhetoric and many of the symbols employed by the protesters were not partisan but rather centered on the

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entire American nation. Supporting organizations had named the event the “March to Save America,” and when protesters broke into the U.S. Capitol they chanted, “USA! USA!” Many were waving the U.S. flag, while others were holding the Confederate flag or other symbols of White Nationalism (Simon & Sidner, 2021). On Pennsylvania Avenue, a CNN interviewer asked one of the protesters if he thought the rally was an appropriate reaction to the loss of the election. “Absolutely,” the protester replied, “as *American patriots*, we have to do what we can to take back our country!”<sup>1</sup> (emphasis added).

Notably, the rally that ended with an attack on the U.S. Capitol did not aim to rescue the United States from the hands of national enemies such as international adversaries or even ethnic or religious minorities within the country. Instead, the core belief that fueled the protesters’ outrage was that the United States was being held captive by *fellow Americans* who had colluded with national enemies to tamper with the election results against the people’s true will. The protesters directed their rage toward an allegedly treacherous political elite, which included not only the leaders of the rival Democratic Party but also Vice President Mike Pence, who rejected Trump’s call to overturn the election during the certification ceremony in the Senate.

Scholarly discussions of national emotions have neglected extreme feelings of rage and hatred directed at fellow nationals, like those that erupted before and during the January 6 rally. Instead, prior discussions have focused on affection for the home nation and hostility toward national “others,” especially immigrants, ethnic/racial minorities, and external enemies. Crucially, the problem is not merely the limited scope of the existing literature on national emotions, which scholars could address via theoretical modification and extension. Instead, existing arguments about intense national emotions suffer from a more fundamental problem, namely a misspecification problem (to borrow from the jargon of quantitative data analysis). Prominent approaches to national emotions highlight the *position* of the individual (“me”) in relation to the national group (“us”) and the position of national group in relation to other groups (“them”); these approaches overlook or downplay aspects of national *meaning-making* that trigger intense emotions and that are not reducible to positioning.<sup>2</sup>

Misspecification in the current approaches to understanding national emotions leads to two problematic outcomes. First, these approaches reproduce a significant scope limitation (mentioned above) in that negative emotions directed at fellow nationals remain untheorized. Second, the current approaches do not adequately explain the types of hot national emotions that *do* take center stage in nationalism research (typically, intense feelings of national pride and solidarity or rage and

<sup>1</sup> Two years later, a lawyer for one of the leaders of the march to the Capitol used the same reasoning to downplay the severity of his client’s actions, proclaiming “My client is no terrorist, my client is a misguided patriot...This is not some foreign national waging war against the United States – he thought he was saving this country, saving this republic.” (Rabinowitz 2023).

<sup>2</sup> More broadly, in the sociology of emotions literature, this tendency to center on positionality is evident in the theoretical focus on social interactions and their implications for an individual’s sense of personhood and self-worth (Illouz 2009:382; Burke 1991; Kemper 2013:chap.13).

hatred of national enemies). This paper aims to amend and extend the theoretical understanding of intense national emotion by addressing this misspecification. The discussion proceeds in five steps: (1) I classify the extant research and theory on national emotions, and highlight a significant blind spot that calls for theoretical innovation, and (2) I discuss the theoretical premises that create this blind spot and suggest a way to overcome this limitation. I then develop a theoretical framework by (3) discussing the sources of intense national emotions and (4) the circumstances that trigger them. In the conclusion, (5) I propose a promising direction for future research on intense national emotions as a mechanism of eventfulness (i.e., as a driver of profound long-lasting socio-cultural and political transformations).

## The shortfall in the emotional turn in nationalism research

Beginning the last decades of the twentieth century, the research pendulum in the field of nationalism studies has swung from the post-war interest in the eruptive, emotional, and sometimes “dark” side of nationalism that exposes itself most clearly in wartime, in the activity of national liberation movements, and in the actions of the ultranationalist far-right in established nation-states, to an interest in a widely diffused national sentiment (Billig, 1995; Malešević, 2019; Merriman & Jones, 2017; Skey, 2011) and the transient (mostly benign) modes of national identification that emerge in various social contexts (Antonsich, 2016; Brubaker, 1996; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Within this dominant research line, most of the writing on nationalism has displayed a cognitivist bias—it conceptualized national identity as a cognitive template individuals use to sort themselves and others into groups, a lens through which people *interpret* some events and social interactions—while ignoring emotions or offering only a perfunctory treatment (Heaney, 2013: 248).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, there has been a slow but noticeable emotional turn in nationalism research (Feinstein, 2024), paralleled by similar turns in research on political attitudes and voting (Marcus, 2000; Demertzis, 2013; Neuman et al., 2007), ethnic violence (Kaufman, 2001; Petersen, 2002; Tambiah, 1996; Horowitz, 1985: 140), and social movements (Jasper, 1998; Goodwin et al., 2000, 2001; Flam & King, 2007; Flam, 1990). All these shifts were part of a broader emotional turn in the social and cognitive sciences (Heaney, 2013: 244–245) aimed at correcting the Cartesian error (Barbalet, 1998; Damasio, 1994) of separating of mind from body, and reason from emotion. Several significant political developments fueled the growing scholarly interest in national emotions: the rise of secessionist nationalism in several established nation-states such as Spain, Canada, and the United Kingdom; the re-emergence of xenophobic militant nationalism, especially in countries in the global North and West that receive many immigrants; instances of brutal ethnic or ethno-nationalist violence, for example, in the Balkans, Rwanda, and India; and the empowerment of neo-nationalist politicians even in countries with long democratic-liberal traditions, such as the United States, France, and the Netherlands. These political developments prompted researchers to pay more attention to emotions, because each involved capturing not only the minds of large populations but, crucially, people’s *hearts*.

Notably, however, the emotional turn in nationalism research has centered on studies of the everyday reproduction of nationhood. Following Billig's (1995) *Banal Nationalism*, many studies have examined how physical objects—national flags in public spaces, monuments, street names, coins—and elements of the public discourse reproduce an *image* of a national community and a national territory (see Militz & Schurr, 2016: 55 for a review). In addition, in the past decade and a half, studies in the emerging field of affective nationalism, pioneered by political geographers, have examined how people develop affection for their national group, institutions, and territory through quotidian encounters with other people, objects, and spaces (Jones & Merriman, 2009; Antonsich et al., 2020); while, for relatively fewer people, these encounters nurture adverse feelings such as disappointment, shame, or resentment (Jones & Merriman, 2009; Antonsich et al., 2020; Edensor, 2002).

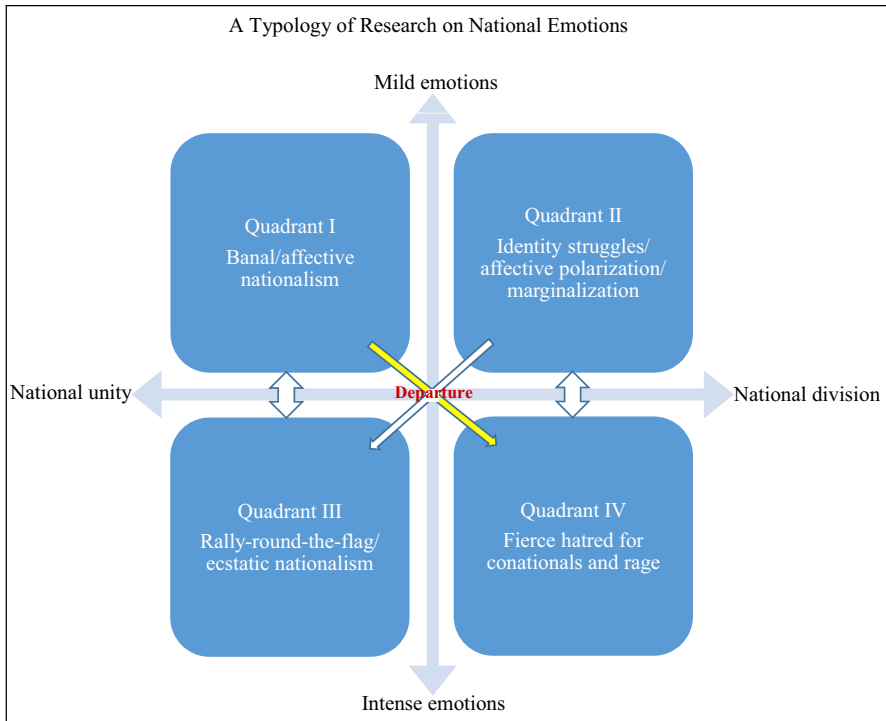
While the growing interest in “everyday” nationalism has contributed tremendously to the scholarly understanding of the endurance of diffused national identities (Bonikowski, 2016:431–435), the other side of nationalism's Janus face—that is, the capacity of nationalism to evoke intense emotions that motivate unusual attitudes and behavior—is now often taken-for-granted and thus remains undertheorized. The rest of this section maps recent research and writing on national emotions, including the relatively few studies of intense national emotions, to illustrate the need to lay the foundation for a revision of the theory of intense national emotions.

Figure 1 presents a typology of the extant research on national emotions in sociology and adjacent disciplines. The figure categorizes the focal topics of prior studies along two axes. The vertical axis distinguishes intense emotions in response to crises or other unusual circumstances from weaker emotions in more settled times. The horizontal axis distinguishes between periods of increased national unity and periods of increased national (internal) division.

### Mild national emotions in settled times

Quadrants I and II, in the top half of Fig. 1, contain research on the mild national emotions that dominate during settled times in a nation's life. Quadrant I (Fig. 1, top left) represents the dominant line of nationalism research, which focuses on how attachment to a national group and homeland is reproduced in everyday life (see Feinstein, 2024 for a review). As explained above, studies conducted in the past decade and a half have expanded the research on banal nationalism by showing how individuals develop an affective commitment to a national group, institutions, and territory.

Quadrant II (Fig. 1, top right) represents a line of research that maintains the focus on the everyday reproduction of nationhood but shifts attention from times of cohesion to times of division. These studies highlight the conflicted nature of national communities whose members hold competing views of core aspects of collective identity based on different “memories” and interpretations of the national past (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; Zembylas, 2013; Lomsky-Feder, 2011). The emergence of intra-national “affective polarization” (i.e., mutual feelings of distrust and loathing between people in rival ideological-political camps Druckman et al., 2021;



**Fig. 1** A typology of research on national emotions

Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2012) is likely a direct consequence of deep intra-national identity divisions (Bonikowski et al., 2021); however, more research on the link between these two phenomena is needed. Quadrant II also includes research on the ways that emotions reproduce marginalization and alienation via minorities' experience of being overlooked or demeaned in interactions with members and symbols of dominant groups and with state institutions (Essed, 1991; Antonsich & Skey, 2020: 582; Tolia-Kelly, 2020; Militz, 2017; Flam & Beauzamy, 2008).

### **“Hot” national emotions**

Quadrants III and IV include research on the intense national emotions that emerge in times of crisis or unusual events. Quadrant III (Fig. 1, bottom left) represents scholarship on intense national emotions in periods of increased national unity. So-called rally-round-the-flag periods provide the main context for this type of emotions, which may include both positive feelings about the home nation (especially pride and affection) and negative feelings about national enemies (especially hatred and rage) (Collins, 2004; Feinstein, 2020, 2022; Kam & Ramos, 2008; Schildkraut, 2002). Feelings of “ecstatic nationalism” (Skey, 2006, 2011) that emerge during national rituals such as independence day parades or coronation ceremonies

also belong to this category (however, these feelings are less intense and less durable than the emotions this article attributes specifically to what I later describe as nation-disrupting events).

Finally, Quadrant IV (Fig. 1, bottom right) represents research on intense national emotions in times of division (particularly hatred of fellow nationals and rage), such as during and after the 2020 U.S. election. Thus far, this topic has been a significant blind spot in research on national emotions, even though periods of passionate internal struggles over collective national identities or the character and behavior of the national state are not uncommon and often evoke social and political unrest (as happened, for example, in the United States during the Vietnam War), even resulting, at times, in civil war. The theoretical framework developed herein focuses on this set of national emotions.

### The link between banal and hot nationalism

Scholarly writing on nationalism has strongly echoed Billig's (1995) proposition that the emergence of hot nationalism (in the context of national unity, i.e., the focus of the research in Quadrant III) hinges on the presence of banal nationalism in the form of individuals and institutions reproducing an imagined national community through numerous "unwaved flags" and "forgotten reminders" (see Miltitz & Schurr, 2016:55 for review). However, as Skey argued (2006, 2011), the banal reproduction of nationalism is also dependent on people's occasional experiences of hot nationalism. Emotional experiences allow people to imagine, that is, to "make present that which is absent" (Illouz, 2009: 399). Therefore, following Lukes (1975), Skey asserted that ritualistic ecstatic nationalism prompts the realization of the nation "as a concrete community that can be seen, heard and idealized" (Skey, 2006:148). Further, participating in public rituals that celebrate the nation has a long-lasting and cumulative impact on people's sense of national belonging. As Berezin (2018: 250) explained,

The repeated experience of ritual participation produces a feeling of solidarity—"we *are* here together, we *must* share something"...[and] it produces collective memory—"we *were* all there together." (Emphases in original)

Repeated moments of hot nationalism solidify the nation as a cognitive construct through what Pagis (2009) dubbed "embodied self-reflexivity," namely, the bodily sensations people experience become objects of reflection that impact their self-understanding. Notably, at a profound level, "knowing" who one is as an individual or group member does not depend on verbal articulation. For example, while some people express in words the "we-feeling" (Kaplan, 2018: 210) they experience in the national rituals Berezin referenced in the quote above, these rituals leave a strong impression on participants whether or not they reflect upon them verbally. As Katz (1999: 7) explained, "Self-reflection in emotions is corporeal rather than a matter of discursive reasoning." Therefore, the sense of belonging to a group—whether a relatively small family or an imagined nation—develops through interactions that inscribe membership in bodies via the visceral experience of emotion, and Katz's

claim (ibid: 93) that the coordination of emotional expressions constructs a family as a “spiritually vivid entity” applies to the development of national sentiment. Further, experiences of intense emotions during national rituals reinforce people’s primary loyalty to the national group. Ismer (2011: 500) stressed that “it is emotion that certifies one imagined community to be a more pristine and natural source of identity and claimant of loyalty than the other.” He continued, noting, “In order to be socially effective, the imagined community of the nation needs to be accepted as a natural part of identity, which can only be done by the emotional experience of membership [in rituals].”

Importantly, people’s affective experience during national rituals may not simply reproduce a static set of affective dispositions and beliefs that jointly constitute what Wetherell et al. (2015) called an affective-discursive canon (i.e., scripted ways of feeling and interpreting events and relationships). Instead, emotionally charged collective rituals may contribute to the production of new or modified affective-discursive canons. For example, in a comparative study of media coverage in Germany during two victorious campaigns in Soccer World Cup tournaments—in 1974 and 2006—Ismer (2011) showed that only the latter event provoked public rituals that included expressions of collective euphoria, a distinction he attributed to the latter tournament occurring amid the redevelopment of positive national self-image and pride in Germany.

Intense national emotions that emerge in times of national division have a similar mutual relationship with the weaker national emotions that reflect the internal divisions that characterize many societies in settled times: specifically, intra-national antagonism is kept on a low flame most of the time but intensifies during periods of passionate conflict, which in turn reinforces division and affective polarization. Zubrzycki’s (2006) book on the struggle between ethnoreligious and civic-secular versions of Polish nationalism during the “war of the crosses” in the 1980s and 1990s offers an excellent illustration of this mutual relationship. Further, as Jones and Merriman (2009) demonstrated in their study of Welsh nationalists’ campaign to replace monolingual (English) road signs with bilingual signs in Wales in the 1960s and 1970s, the so-called “forgotten reminders” (Billig, 1995) of the nation may become targets of intense emotions if agents of nationalism—who feel upset, irritated, or even disgusted or furious—successfully stress the implications of these reminders for inclusion and exclusion and for the symbolic hierarchy of groups within the nation (and in the case of Welsh nationalism, for the existence of a distinct Welsh identity).

### **The departure from banal to hot nationalism**

The intense unifying emotions that emerge during rally-round-the-flag periods and ecstatic national rituals deviate from the more common state of political-ideological division (Feinstein, 2020, 2022) and affective polarization (Levendusky, 2018); the white arrow in Fig. 1 represents this departure. Thus far, scholarly writing on intense national emotions has focused on identifying the conditions and mechanisms that spark this departure by evoking national unity, pride, and confidence in national

institutions (the emotions in Quadrant III). The yellow diagonal arrow represents another intriguing type of discontinuity, one that nationalism research has largely overlooked. In this case, despite the ongoing banal reproduction of the nation as a salient mental contrast, extreme antagonistic emotions emerge *within* a national group. This emergence of internally antagonistic hot nationalism cannot be attributed (at least not directly) to the antecedents highlighted in research on rally-round-the-flag periods and ecstatic nationalism, namely a confrontation with a common enemy or “rituals of solidarity” that celebrate the nation (Collins, 2004).

Crucially, while this paper theorizes about the rise of certain intense national emotions that have been overlooked in previous research (particularly hostility toward fellow nationals), *the main goal is to develop a theoretical framework that applies to both periods of relative national unity and periods of intense internal conflicts*. The following section initiates the theorization by identifying the root problem of scholarly writing on intense national emotions as the tendency to focus on national *positioning* and neglect or downplay national *meaning-making*.

### Changing theoretical course: from position to meaning

The dominant approaches to emotions in nationalism research focus on *position*. These frameworks highlight two aspects of positioning. The first aspect is the perceived position of the home nation relative to other groups, such as other nations and ethnic minorities. Both affection for the home nation and antagonism toward other groups are attributed to people’s general tendency to be biased in favor of their social “ingroups” and against social “outgroups,” a tendency that also includes cognitive and behavioral biases, and which increases in response to perceived competition or threat. Such biases have been addressed by two distinct (but not necessarily competing) theoretical traditions: evolutionary theory in psychology, which highlights the utility of biases for both individual and group survival (Warnecke et al., 1992), and social identity theory in social psychology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which proposes that pro-ingroup/anti-outgroup biases stem from people’s desire to maintain a positive sense of self by ranking their social ingroups higher than other groups in an imagined hierarchy of worth.

Most studies of the first type of positioning (the perceived position of the home nation relative to other groups) have examined the experience of fairly weak national emotions in relatively settled times. However, this approach to national emotion also applies to intense national emotions. For example, studies have shown that in rally-round-the-flag periods during security crises or wars, intense emotions stem from people’s concerns about the nation’s symbolic value (i.e., national honor and international prestige) relative to other groups and the belief that the national leadership is taking the right actions to claim collective worth (Feinstein, 2020, 2022: chap.9; Kemper, 2002).

The second aspect of positioning in the literature on intense national emotions is the position of individuals relative to other members of their nation and, through



them, to the imagined national group.<sup>3</sup> Collins (2012) coined the term “time-bubbles of nationalism” to describe periods in which frequent and intense ritualistic activities generate a special intersubjectivity—a “collective consciousness” in Durkheim’s terminology—that centers on the nation and its symbols. According to Collins, intense affection for the nation and solidarity among its members emerge in rituals when participants focus on one another, the joint movement of their bodies, and chanting and flag-waving.

Collins focused on the “rituals of solidarity” that occurred in the United States after the September 11 attacks as his primary example (Collins, 2004); however, a rituals-focused approach to intense emotions can also apply to negative feelings about national others (individuals or groups who are not “part of” the home nation). The type of intersubjectivity that collective activities such as protests, rallies, memorial services, and religious rituals evoke can transform a rival group (e.g., undocumented immigrants, domestic ethnic or religious minorities, or the opponent in a diplomatic or military conflict) into an enemy of a mythical scale, propelling what Tambiah (1996: 284) called “a spiral of rage and panic.” Therefore, the approach advanced by Collins may help explain not only the extreme levels of national pride and solidarity Americans felt in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks but also the extreme levels of fear and rage that most Americans felt toward the al-Qaeda terrorists who committed the September 11 atrocity—and maybe the increase in hatred of Muslims in the United States in that period as well.<sup>4</sup>

To recapitulate, position-focused arguments about intense national emotions highlight two sets of emotions—affection for the national group and representative institutions and symbols, and antagonism toward national Others—which some scholars consider two sides of the same coin. For example, in a widely cited article, Connor (1993: 386) noted, “The sense of kinship which lies at the heart of national consciousness helps to account for the ugly manifestations of inhumanity that often erupt in the relations among national groups.” Connor’s discussion links the two types of positioning discussed above. Specifically, he attributes sympathy for conationals to individuals’ self-positioning in the national group and attributes antagonism toward others to positioning the national group in relation to other groups. Further, he proposes that both types of emotions intensify during a nation’s struggles with other groups.

Theories that focus on positioning may offer a reasonable explanation for relative emotional synchronization, including widespread feelings of national unity, solidarity, and pride, and occasionally negative feelings about other groups, in response to certain significant events. However, these theories are less helpful in explaining the emergence of intense hatred and rage directed not toward foreigners but rather toward fellow nationals, who—even when considered a national threat—are still

<sup>3</sup> As Surak (2012: 198) explained, the two aspects of positioning are intertwined: distinguishing the home nation from other nations relies to a significant degree on characterizing an ideal member of the nation, while such characterization hinges upon cultivating the distinction between the home nation and other nations (i.e., boundary work).

<sup>4</sup> For further discussion of post-9/11 anti-Muslim attitudes in the United States, see Bail (2014).

part of the imagined national group. In addition, this approach falls short of explaining instances in which affective reactions to conflicts with others vary within the nation (Americans' feelings about the 2003 invasion of Iraq is a case in point [Feinstein, 2022: chap.9, 2020]).

Intrigued by this lacuna in explanatory power, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding a wider range of intense national emotions that centers on *internal struggles over core elements of a collective national identity*. Shifting the focus to internal contention over the *meaning* of the nation not only extends the empirical reach of the theory to include intense antagonism toward fellow nationals but also offers a better understanding of periods of increased affection for fellow nationals.

Importantly, the proposed theoretical framework does not discredit position-focused arguments about intense national emotions. Instead, this new approach highlights the deeper roots of intense emotions. It suggests that the focal mechanisms highlighted in previous arguments are not required for the emergence of intense emotions and that these mechanisms operate relatively late in the processes that evoke intense national emotions.

Intense national emotions may emerge even without confrontation with external actors if the public sees focal events as reassessing and potentially amending tenets of the collective national identity and narrative. Examples that fit this pattern include the reactions in Australia to the 2008 apology speech by PM Rudd, the public controversy in Spain following the 2019 government's decision to exhume and relocate the remains of General Franco, and the "March to Save America" in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021. Moreover, even violent confrontations with other groups do not automatically evoke intense emotion in the public. Instead, their transformation into passionate struggles for the home nation's position and value relative to other nations involves the application of materials from the national cultural repertoire to frame the situation in a particular way, which may include analogizing current events to shameful or glorious events in the history of the nation (Feinstein, 2022).

Similarly, participation in rituals is not required for the emergence of intense emotions. Instead, emotions are often the cause of ritual participation. For example, the people who attended the "March to Save America" rally in Washington, DC, were charged with rage and outrage before the gathering. Indeed, these emotions provided the motivation for them to drive to the capital. The same was true for participation in memorial services and rallies after the September 11 attacks—individuals who experienced strong emotions were motivated to take part. In both cases, ritual participation did not generate the initial emotions but rather amplified, directed, and coordinated pre-existing emotional intensity.

In the following sections, theory-building proceeds in two steps. First, I explore the sources of the intense emotional energy stored in national identities, with a focus on why most people are predisposed to experience intense national emotions. Second, given that this affective disposition toward the nation remains obscure in settled times, "like a soldier's courage in the absence of war" (Bourdieu, 2000: 149), I identify the circumstances under which it becomes explicit. Specifically, this step entails pinpointing the conditions that lead to a widespread release of the emotional energy stored in people's national identities and determining why some periods of

hot nationalism are characterized by internal cohesion while others are characterized by internal conflict.

## The potential emotional energy of national identities

### The nation as an object of identification: potent but precarious

This section explores the sources of the emotional energy that people experience in response to events, particularly the type of events the following section labels “nation-disrupting events.” I argue that the intense emotional energy stored in national identities is rooted in a combination of two seemingly contradictory aspects of the way nations are constructed as objects of identification: potency and precariousness.

**Potency** In the introduction to *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991[1983]) concluded that nationalism gained potency in eighteenth century Western Europe when it replaced religion as the ideology that transforms “fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning” (11). Membership in an imagined national community helps individuals overcome their profound anxieties because nations “always loom out of an immemorial past, and, still more important, glide into a limitless future” (11–12). Other prominent students of nationalism have also maintained that nationalism functions as a secular replacement for religion in modernity (Greenfeld, 1992; Hayes, 1926; Hutchinson, 2017: 9,51; A.D. Smith, 2003) and is so successful in winning the hearts and minds of large populations because it provides a sense of continuity, order, and purpose to otherwise meaningless, short, and arbitrary lives in increasingly secular societies.

Although nationalism certainly provides answers to existential questions, calling it a “surrogate religion” (Hutchinson, 2017:9; see also A. D. Smith, 1986:176) is too simplistic, most obviously because nationalism and religion are co-present in most societies and in many cases reinforce each other (Brubaker, 2012; Zubrzycki, 2006), but more critically because it downplays the degree to which the potency of nationalism stems from the modern conditions of life (rather than the supposed decline of religion). Scholars in the Frankfurt school have been the most forceful proponents of the idea that the living conditions in modern societies are responsible for the popularity and power of nationalism (Finlayson, 1998). In *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm (1994[1941]) argued that by breaking communal bonds, modernization provided people with more freedoms, but at the same time increased the threat of becoming isolated and powerless (Burston, 1991: chap.4; for a review, see McLaughlin, 1996). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972[1944]) stressed that the enlightenment, rather than the extension of individuals’ freedom, increased domination and repression, mainly due to a capitalist social

organization and industrial mode of production.<sup>5</sup> Nationalism provides a powerful remedy for the troubles brought about by modernization. According to Fromm (1994[1941]), to cope with existential anxiety in modern societies, individuals find comfort in large communities organized around authority centers, such as nations and religious groups, because these communities satisfy the need for integration and empower their members.<sup>6</sup> Finlayson (1998:152–3) concluded that membership in a nation empowers individuals for two complementary reasons. First, national identification brings meaning and purpose. In Finlayson's words, "Nationalism fulfills a utopian function both retroactively in terms of a past golden age, and for the future that awaits the people who seize their 'natural' inheritance and bring their own heaven to this earth." Second, nationalism is empowering because it makes "self-determination coterminous with subordination to the collective," and thus, "through identification with the image of the nation the modern subject can find a self-aggrandizing sense of closure and stability" (152).<sup>7</sup>

Given these psychological benefits, emotional commitment to a nation proves to be a worthwhile investment. The imagined association with co-nationals creates a "protective cocoon" (a term borrowed from Giddens (1991)) for individuals that shields them against the ever-lurking existential threats of isolation and meaninglessness in modern life.<sup>8</sup> As Smith (1986: 182–183) concluded: "[i]dentification with an idealized past helps us to transcend a disfigured and unworthy present, and endow our individual lives with a wider significance in a union that will outlive death and dispel futility."

<sup>5</sup> These claims echo similar concerns about shifts in modernity voiced by some of the founding fathers of sociology: Ferdinand Tönnies's described a transition from community (*Gemeinschaft*), in which individuals are bounded to their family in "weal and woe," to society (*Gesellschaft*), to which individuals go "as one goes into a strange country" (Tönnies 1955[1887]: 38). Emil Durkheim argued that anomie permeates modern societies because the organic division of labor is not matched by a moral framework for regulating social life (Durkheim 1985[1893]: 46). George Simmel described modern life as "overburdened with objective content and material demands" (Simmel 1949: 257). Max Weber claimed that in modernity, individuals are alienated and disenchanting because magic and mystique have been replaced by science and reason (Weber 1946[1917]: 155).

<sup>6</sup> However, according to Greenfeld (2020:12), the emergence and spread of nationalism in modernity has also led many people to live in "constant doubt, uncertainty, and insecurity of identity," because of the freedom nationalism has given people to choose their identities and destinies.

<sup>7</sup> This tendency toward self-aggrandizing identification with the nation (see also Greenfeld 2006; Lebow 2008) can generate (and indeed has generated) two destructive outcomes. Under certain conditions, national identification drives individuals to embrace fascist ideologies, as forcefully argued by the Frankfurt school scholars. In addition, a belief in the uniqueness of the nation often transforms into a belief in its superiority to other nations and even a sense of "mission" in the world (for examples of such transformations in the aftermath of World War I and during World War II, see Hayes [1926] and Kohn [1944], respectively). Further, the "chauvinist mythmaking" of nationalist agents (Van Evera 1994: 27), including certain schools and journalists, and some members of the political elite, seeks to establish precisely this link between national identification and chauvinism. Once individuals begin to believe in national superiority, this belief becomes emotionally loaded because it satisfies (as Fromm argued, see McLaughlin 1996:256) a fundamental human need for recognition and respect from others, and thus, as Norbert Elias (1956) stressed, produces immense narcissistic gratification.

<sup>8</sup> More fundamentally, national identification may reduce individuals' "subjective uncertainty" (Mullin and Hogg 1999:92) because viewing reality through a collective prism makes the present seem more certain and the future seem more predictable.

Indeed, in Western Europe, during the “long nineteenth century,” leaders nurtured nationalistic ideologies in the masses (while also expanding civil rights and building welfare institutions) to cope with two new threats: the risk of social disintegration due to the class conflicts that industrialization evoked (Stråth, 2017) and the security threats posed by the modernization of militaries and warfare (see Feinstein & Wimmer, 2023 for a review). In turn, one of the greatest successes of nation-states had been, as Malešević (2018: 8) noted, the linking of the deep emotions people had previously experienced in interpersonal interactions (e.g., with family, friends, and neighbors) to national narratives about a collective past, through which people’s affection was extended to large and imagined national communities. As Nairn (1977) observed, for human society, nationalism stands over the passage to modernity, like the Roman god Janus, with one face looking backward and one face looking forward: “As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of ‘development.’” (349).

**Precariousness** Importantly, while the nation as an object of identification is potent, it is also precarious. Anderson’s (1991[1983]) notion of “imagined community” hints at the reasons for this precariousness. Anderson uses the term “imagined” to reflect the fact that “members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). A fundamental characteristic of nations, therefore, is that they do not exist ontologically (Brubaker, 2009). Instead, their “existence” depends on individuals who do not know each other embracing the belief that they are part of one nation (Gellner, 1983; Seton-Watson, 1977). Indeed, as with any object of imagination, the nation is produced as a mental representation of “the absent as present” (Feagin & Maynard, 1997: 41).

While the nation’s existence depends on the imagination work of its members (and outsiders), the development of national subjectivity in individuals depends on a pre-existing ideal of a nation. The relationship between the subject and the idealized nation is reciprocal. The nation, which is represented by institutions, beliefs, and symbols, is simultaneously constitutive of the individual self (for most people, their personal narratives and sense of place in the world are closely tied to their belief in national narratives and culture (Glover, 1997: 18; Papadakis, 1998: 160; Tamir, 1997: 232)) and constituted by (or within) individuals’ sense of self via their identification (Finlayson, 1998:158). The first part of the last statement is clear: the development of national identities in individuals depends on the pre-existence of national narratives and culture. However, the second part raises two essential questions: To what extent does the nation’s existence depend on the beliefs of individuals? How exactly do individuals’ imaginations produce the nation?

Seton-Watson’s (1977:5) claim that “a nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one” (a description Anderson echoes in the term “imagined

communities”) implies that the consideration of actual, specific individual subjectivities is unnecessary because the nation is conceptualized as some sort of collective artifact—“an intersubjective awareness of an imagined community,” as Mylonas and Tudor (2023: 9) recently put it—that does not depend on the cognition of any particular individual. How can scholars conceptualize the nation as an external object of identification and, simultaneously, the outcome of subjective imagination? What is the bond between individuals that makes them a nation but is nonetheless a product of their imagination? Following Žižek (1993: 201), the answer is a shared *fantasy* about the nation’s existence that is not reducible to the nation’s symbolic representations. In Žižek’s words,

The bond linking together [a community’s] members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing... This relationship toward the Thing, structured by means of fantasies, is what is at stake when we speak of the menace to our “way of life” presented by the Other: it is what is threatened when, for example, a white Englishman is panicked because of the growing presence of “aliens”. What he wants to defend is not reducible to the so-called set of values that offer support to national identity. National identification is by definition sustained by a relationship toward the Nation qua Thing.

The “Thing” that Žižek points to is, as Finlayson (1998:155) clarified, “a ‘fantasy’ of consistency and order, a fantasy that behind the numerous rituals and cultural patterns of life there is some structuring agent, in this case the essential nation.”

The nation’s precariousness follows from the radical state of being a phantasmal object (see also Beisel, 1980), because behind any fantasy is a narrative. As Rose (1996: 5) explained, fantasy “always contains a historical reference in so far as it involves, alongside the attempt to arrest the present, a journey through the past.” As a phantasmal object of identification, the nation depends on the reproduction of a mythical narrative about its past, which is constructed by selectively remembering certain events and periods while forgetting others (Renan 1996[1882]), and by reinterpreting the commemorated events in light of current ideological and practical aspirations (Coakley, 2004; Zerubavel, 1995: chap.1). As historian Thomas Bender (2002:2) explained, “Nations are, among other things, a collective agreement, partly coerced, to affirm a common history as the basis for a shared future.”

National narratives are constructed, reproduced, and presented via various types of media and artifacts (Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003:11) including history books, archaeological sites, holiday rituals, memorial sites and ceremonies, statues and paintings in museums and open public spaces, the rhetoric of public figures, novels, and the ritualistic practice of “traditions” that seem to link the present directly to the past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). These mediums jointly generate and reproduce mythical thinking about a nation’s origin and its golden age, as well as both major triumphs and defeats that serve as lessons for the present (Glover, 1997).

Crucially, however, a nation is not a homogenous cultural unit based on a single, unified narrative. In contrast to earlier scholars of nationalism who focused on essential elements of each country’s national identity (e.g., Kohn, 1944; Lipset, 1990), current-day scholars, particularly cultural sociologists, acknowledge that nations are sites of symbolic struggles between competing beliefs about the nation’s meaning

(Bonikowski, 2016). This contestation highlights matters such as who is a legitimate member of the nation, what are the nation's core values, and what is the nation's role in the world (Bonikowski, 2016). Even more profoundly, nations are sites of struggles between competing historical narratives (Smith, 1986:26; Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016).<sup>9</sup> Intra-national contestation is not only about which events in the national history are important enough to be commemorated but, crucially, it is also about the correct interpretation of historical events and their moral implications (Olick & Robbins, 1998; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; Zembylas, 2013; Lomsky-Feder, 2011).

Participation in struggles over events commemoration is not limited to the intellectual and political elites who write history books and shape school curricula; it also includes actions by “memory activists” and civil society associations informed by stories passed within families and communities, which often contain painful memories that the official national canon obscures. Two useful examples are the grassroots activism in Israel to counter the official Zionist narrative about the 1948 war and include the narrative and trauma of the Arab-Palestinian minority (Gutman, 2017) and activism in Spain that has aimed first to break the silence about the civil war and the crimes of the fascist government and then to extract a moral lesson for the nation, focused on a commitment to democracy and republicanism (Ferrándiz, 2022: 213; Goldberger, 2022: 235). In both cases, memory activism has not been limited to actions calling for the nations to come to terms with their past sins. Instead, these calls triggered counter-activities by neo-nationalists advocating unapologetic (for some even nostalgic) understanding of the historical events and periods. Memory activism and counter-activism often emerge in the context of the struggles of marginalized groups (ethnic, racial, religious, or gender) for inclusion, recognition, and equality—that is the case, for example, with memory activism in Israel (as mentioned above), Australia (Rule & Rice, 2015), and New Zealand (McCreanor et al., 2017), and it was also the case with the recent public controversies in the United States over the New York Times’ 1619 Project, which aims to reframe U.S. history by focusing on the contribution of slavery and Black figures to the national development, and the removal of confederate statues from public spaces in many parts of the country.

Borrowing from Ignatieff (1998:56), nationhood “is not a skin, but a mask, constantly repainted.” Similarly, Bhabha (1990a) described nationhood as a narrative that is constantly written. Therefore, the fundamental source of concern for national subjects is that the answer to the question “Who are we?” (or “What is profoundly common to us?”) might shift, thus causing a loss of the consistency, order, and meaning provided by the mythical and fantasized nation. Such a shift can be brought about by a change in the political balance of power between subsets of a national community that have competing narratives about the nation or can result from the nation’s engagement with significant “others,” particularly minority groups or foreign allies

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<sup>9</sup> Why specific formulations of collective national identities are embraced is outside the scope of the current discussion, but it is worth quoting Edensor’s (2002: 29) suggestion that “there are a multitude of social and political investments in the nation, across political spectra, ethnicity and class, for as a process, identity may weave cultural resources into its constitution according to contingency.”

or adversaries. An anticipatory fear of change can also bring about this type of shift: people sometimes interpret social, political, or economic changes as harbingers of identity changes.

### **Summary: the national fantasy of consistency and order**

National identities store an immense amount of potential energy that, when released, motivates individuals to express views or take actions, such as participating in rallies or riots or going to war, that they might be reluctant to embrace at other times. The emotional potential of national identities stems from their embodiment of two fundamental properties: first, the potency of the nation's ability to protect people's psychological well-being in the face of the existential threats that have intensified in modernity, and second, the precariousness of the nation as an object of identification whose existence (as member of the nation conceive it) hangs by a thin thread of phantasmal belief rooted in a contested historical narrative. Internal disagreement about the answers to core questions about the nation—What makes our nation unique? What is our role in the world? What is our national legacy? How does this legacy define our collective problems and goals?—can transform even a confrontation with an external “them” into a passionate struggle about the meaning of “us.” The following section introduces the term “nation-disrupting events” to describe events loaded with this type of meaning, and explains how the emergence of such events is related to contested national narratives.

### **Nation-disrupting events that trigger intense emotions**

In the terminology proposed here, an event (or a series of events) becomes “nation-disrupting” when it creates a widespread sense among members of the public that core tenets of the national collective identity are at stake. Such an event is perceived as an evaluation of the nation's current state vis-à-vis its idealized mythical image, and the possibility of identifying a significant gap between the actual and the mythical makes space for modifying the idealized image of the nation. In Bonikowski's (2016:431–2) terms, these events punctuate nationhood-as-usual. Brubaker asserted that “what defines us as a nation at any given moment is no more than a temporary equilibrium in an ongoing argument about what defines us as a nation” (Brubaker, 2004:123). I understand nationhood-as-usual differently than Brubaker in that I do not assume that stability is achieved through equilibrium but rather through repressing the notion that controversy over the definition of a collective national identity even exists. As Spasić (2017: 41) concluded,

What looks banal is only provisionally so, and results from a tacit agreement of all concerned not to press the issue at hand—for the moment. And underneath the thin crust of banality there usually lurks a kind of nationalism which, if not outright hot, at any rate is impassioned, resentful, and oversensitive.



The nation, Bhabha (1990b: 1) explained, is “an idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the *impossible unity* of the nation as a symbolic force” (emphasis added). Elsewhere, Bhabha (1990a: 297) noted that the nation is (re)produced in a “double-time,” composed of the homogenous historical time imposed by the “nationalist pedagogy” and the present-time performative representation of the nation in many quotidian actions and fewer national spectacles (see also Malešević, 2010: chap.6). The synchronization of these two times creates an illusion of a collective trajectory in which the present links the imagined collective past to an anticipated collective future. Crucially, however, Tavory and Eliasoph’s (2013: 924) assertion (originally referring to interpersonal interaction) that “multiple trajectories can coexist in interaction as long as both actors can productively (mis) understand each other’s projects” also applies to the coproduction of a national common-sense by actors with competing views of the national history and destiny. Therefore, a nationhood-as-usual does not involve a consensus about the collective past and future aspirations but rather an *illusion* of a coherent, indisputable national trajectory.

As part of this convenient illusion, even the most heated discussions about the present and immediate future are not usually understood as struggles to (re)constitute the nation, but rather are discursively rebranded as merely “ideological” or “political” disagreements between compatriots (maybe even “healthy” disagreements). For example, in many countries, heated public debates about immigration between “Left” and “Right” or “Liberal” and “Conservative” are the first derivative of more profound, but only occasionally voiced, disagreements about the meaning and moral implications of constitutive national narratives, such as accounts of a nation’s imperial legacy or history of migration (Feinstein & Bonikowski, 2021).

Nation-disrupting events produce a deep sense of insecurity in the public because they break the illusion of a coherent collective national identity. These events open the door for a discussion of the nation, which can introduce novel and creative ways of envisioning the nation (see also Sewell, 1996: 867) or alter the relative prevalence of existing visions.<sup>10</sup> People may attribute this kind of “eventfulness” (Sewell, 2005) to an event or policy either because they believe the situation reinforces a troubling ongoing process of change (e.g., the nation gradually moving away from its traditional values or losing its unique position in the international community) or because they believe it poses a new challenge to the nation (van Dooremalen, 2021). Further, as Skey (2011: 106–108) argued, some nations have experienced extended periods of collective identity disruption, in which people frequently engaged in activities to reaffirm collective identity and worth. Skey’s primary example is Britain’s period of stepping down from its role as an omnipresent global force after World War II and especially since the 1960s (see also Nairn, 1977), but there are many other examples

<sup>10</sup> My understanding of nation disruptions has an affinity to Endensor’s (2002: 21) view of reflective awareness of national identity, which “can result from disruption—either by forms of common sense being interrogated by strangers or migrants, by familiar spaces, things and practices coming under threat from social and economic change, and most graphically by the habituated, embodied national subject being displaced or situated in an unfamiliar context.” We both highlight the temporary departure from a taken-for-granted nationhood. However, I use the term “nation disruption” to refer specifically to events and periods that evoke widespread beliefs that core aspects of a collective national identity are being challenged (by external actors or by certain members of the home nation).

of prolonged, passionate public discussions of national identities (for example, consider the heated public debate in Serbia, following the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, about the desired character of the Serbian state (Spasić, 2017), or the public contention in Spain since the early 2000s over the legacy of the Spanish Civil War (Fernández, 2022; Goldberger, 2022; Wildeboer Schut and Dujisin, 2023).

## Events

Some types of events are natural candidates for inducing nation disruption. In particular, struggles with external enemies prompt nation disruption when people believe that some of the core elements of their collective national identity—such as solidarity among compatriots and their bravery and determination to stand behind core collective values—are being tested by the enemy (Feinstein, 2022: 44). For example, the January 2015 terrorist attack against the Paris headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine evoked a rally-round-the-flag reaction in France (Georgarakis, 2017) because, as Calhoun explained, “[the violence] provoked not just a defense of free speech but a ‘hot’ mobilization of discourse about *Frenchness*, no less powerful for being bundled with other values like reason, civil peace, and secularism” (Calhoun, 2017-emphasis added).

Periods of conflict between states and separatist movements also tend to produce nation disruption. In these periods, nation disruption occurs both within the group separatists claim to represent because members differ in how much they embrace the nationalist-separatist agenda (see Beissinger’s (2002) study of nationalist mobilization in the Soviet Union during glasnost), and in the larger state population as people’s fundamental beliefs about the nation’s collective boundaries and loyalties are shaken. For example, in India, separatist agitations in Kashmir and Punjab in the 1980s sparked an intense contention between secular and Hindu religious nationalism that evoked widespread anxiety about the future of the Indian nation (Varshney, 1993). These agitations also provoked communal violence between Muslims and Hindus in the early 1990s, which emboldened Hindu nationalism by propagating fear and rage (Van der Veer, 1994). Further, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, widespread anxiety about societies’ political, economic, and cultural futures evoked, among ethno-nationalists, nostalgia for their nations’ glorious pre-Communism eras, while others became nostalgic about the days of the mighty Soviet Union (Boym, 2008).

National elections provide a third context for nation disruption. In the United States, the certification of presidential election results and the presidential inauguration ceremony are rituals that, by design, are meant to celebrate and reinforce the unity of the U.S. republic and its democratic institutions (Skey, 2006: 147). However, following Lukes, Skey clarified that election certification and other events that supposedly celebrate and reinforce a group’s unity are better viewed as “modes of exercising or seeking to exercise power” (Lukes, 1975: 301 cited in Skey, 2006: 156); thus, social integration does not necessarily follow from these events’ logic of design. Researchers can assess the extent to which specific rituals integrate (or disintegrate) the national group by “focusing on the tensions between the logic(s) of design and practice (or what people are supposed to do and what they actually

do!)” (Skey, 2006: 156), and crucially, on the meaning individuals attribute to their participation in rituals.

As a primary example, Skey noted that for the English, a growing feeling of loss of their special place in the United Kingdom and the world due to internal changes (an increased presence of ethnic minorities and the strengthening of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish anti-unionist voices) and the declining geopolitical influence of the United Kingdom has led many to embrace British symbolism and participate in activities that celebrate Britishness. When asked about their motivation to participate, Skey’s interviewees highlighted the need to reassert their presence, indeed their special place, in the nation and the world (2006: 111–114). As elaborated later, the January 6 “March to Save America” rally in Washington, DC, (and more generally, the closing ranks of large parts of the political right behind Donald Trump’s leadership) represented a similar motivation to restore a particular version of American nationalism that many Americans who were feeling a loss of power and status were nostalgic for.

### Leaders’ appropriation of the past during crisis formation

The previous section discussed three types of events that can lead to national disruption, but other circumstances—for example, large immigration waves or global pandemics—are also likely candidates. Crucially, however, nation disruption does not follow directly from the objective characteristics of events. For example, most wars and security crises in the history of the United States did not have notable impacts on the public mood and attitudinal patterns because they were not charged with the kind of profound meaning I attribute to nation-disrupting events (Feinstein, 2016, 2022). The transformation of events into nation disruptions involves an interpretative “upshifting” (Tavory & Timmermans, 2022), or making a specific policy “more abstract and lawlike than it was” (ibid:177), which means that the home nation’s actions and interactions (often exhibited via its official representatives) are understood not in terms of the particularities of the focal event or policy but rather as the embodiment of a critical reevaluation of the nation’s adherence to one or several principal components of an assumed national character or “soul.” Therefore, in periods of nation disruption, the public conversation centers on crisis claimsmaking, which Sendroiu (2023: 2) described as “a performative judgment or demand for a different future” that will result from “our” reactions to the present events. This type of “struggle to elaborate events as crises” (ibid) conveys and seeks to evoke in others a fearful expectation or eager anticipation of a profound structural shift (but as Sendroiu [2022] showed, such meaning-making, even if it becomes widespread, does not guarantee that events will become eventful).

In most instances, a crisis discourse does not emerge spontaneously among the public. Instead, it is produced by the symbolic actions and rhetoric of political leaders who frame the circumstances as pertaining to the “true” essence or virtue of the nation, which should be celebrated or requires protection (Bonikowski, 2016:438)—a type of rhetoric Hutcheson and coauthors (2004: 28) labeled “nation-affirming rhetoric.” Indeed, Wagner-Pacifici’s (2010: 1345; 2019) forceful claim that

no particular meaning follows from any happening, but rather events take shape via semiotic mechanisms that actors employ in struggles to “bind and map” and interpret events is particularly applicable to nation-disrupting events.<sup>11</sup> The meaning-making that helps produce nation disruptions frequently draws temporal comparisons (Mummendey et al., 2001; Nigbur & Cinnirella, 2007) between the present state of the nation and its actions and either the perceived national past or what the public perceives as the original or ideal moral essence of the nation based on the national mythology. Such discourse often becomes nostalgic, contrasting an inadequate present with an idealized past (Hutcheon & Valdés, 1998; Kinnvall, 2013; Mayne, 2018), thus making the mythical memories about what the nation used to be or how it used to behave the “blueprints for the future” (Smith, 1986:177). This type of “future-oriented nostalgia” (Cashman, 2006:148) has characterized many national movements that have inspired a desire for the restoration of a glorious past of national liberty, self-determination, and a unique way of life (Garvin, 1986; Muro, 2005). Similarly, collective memories have been a well of inspiration for revolutionary movements (Del Porta & Tufaro, 2022: 21). As Marx (1977[1852]: 301) described in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,

The awakening of the dead in those revolutions served the purpose of glorifying the new struggles, not of parodying the old; of magnifying the given task in imagination, not of fleeing from its solution in reality; of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not making its ghost walk about again.

The reappropriation of the national past (Hutchinson, 2017:10) in order to assess present events, develop expectations for the future, and set goals for collective actions may include reviving nostalgic memories of a golden age and great deeds of the nation that should be mimicked, as well as traumatic memories of humiliating defeats that should not be repeated and moral sins that require collective atonement or moral redemption (Wang, 2008; Hodgkin & Radstone, 2003; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002). Reappropriation of the past is especially effective if current events are perceived as similar to historical events, because this “convert[s] situations to scenarios” (Smith, 2005: 14)—the narrative of the nation’s history becomes a guide for how to respond to current events.

Political leaders often do not wait for the public to make such comparisons spontaneously but rather publicly analogize the present to the past, proposing that the

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<sup>11</sup> Media outlets (both traditional and “new”) play a critical role in transforming events into nation disruptions. This role is beyond the scope of the current paper (but see Feinstein 2022: 51–55). For the current discussion, it is sufficient to note that the media is not only the medium through which leaders’ messages and cues spread in an effort to win the hearts and minds of laypeople. Crucially, in addition to escalating the intensity of their broadcasts and gaining extremely high levels of attention from the public, the media incorporates an emotional tone and expressive content into their broadcasts. This shift transforms news reports into a type of “reality theater” and creates an impression of a “live broadcast of history” (Dayan and Katz 1992).

solutions to current problems can be found in the lessons that “we” learned from “our” past successes and mistakes, and portraying the current situation as an opportunity to restore the nation to a glorious, mythical past.<sup>12</sup> Adolf Hitler’s rhetoric is a primary example of this strategy: He analogized the Germans under his rule to the Teutonic Knights, who were caught in a Crusade-like war against the Jews that would determine who would govern the world for the next thousand years (Blain, 1988). Following Germany’s defeat in World War II, Hitler himself became a valuable analogy for leaders of other countries who sought to mobilize public support for later wars: They described the leaders of opposing nations as a new version of Hitler and compared the current military action to the struggle to defeat Nazi Germany. British political leaders employed this analogy during the 1956 Suez Crisis (Smith, 2005:79) and U.S. politicians used it during the 1990–1991 crisis in the Persian Gulf (Kellner, 1992) and the 2003 Iraq War (Feinstein, 2022).

The WWII analogy has been a powerful rhetorical device in the United States because the war is one of the most salient components of collective memory and the U.S. ethos of cultural exceptionalism and international leadership (Schwartz & Kim, 2002). Indeed, every national memory canon includes a set of events that most members of the nation perceive as the most devastating national humiliations or the hallmarks of national glory (“chosen traumas” and “chosen glories,” as Volkan [1997] put it), which agents of national socialization nurture (Wang, 2008) and leaders can employ as powerful analogies to mobilize the public.

In some instances, political leaders extend analogies by implying that current events could potentially lead to a replication of past successes or mistakes. For example, during the Gulf War, political leaders in the United States who drew an analogy between Saddam Hussein and Adolph Hitler implied that postponing the intervention would have consequences similar to those resulting from the delay of the US intervention in World War II (Winkler, 2006: 114). In another example, during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, Serbian nationalist propaganda elicited traumatic memories of the massacres against Serbs committed by the Croat Ustaše during World War II and thus provoked Serbs’ fear of a reoccurrence of such atrocities (Denich, 1994; Oberschall, 2000).

Further, as part of the public discourse about nation-disrupting events, political leaders may call forth national memories—both nostalgic and traumatic—not only to influence the public’s attitudes about current events but also to take advantage of the moment to mobilize popular support for a grand national agenda (Özyürek, 2006: 154; Cashman, 2006: 153; Hutchinson, 2017: 17). Pursuing this broader goal transforms the public discourse from a narrowly focused debate on how to interpret and respond to current events to a more profound struggle over the meaning of the

<sup>12</sup> Historical and sociological-historical studies provide ample evidence that economic or political uncertainty makes people highly susceptible to being moved by nationalist rhetoric and thus feeling that the essence of the nation might be at risk. Therefore, the likelihood that events will produce individual-level shifts in political attitudes via national identification may also depend on individuals’ assignment to social categories such as class and cohort that differ in their level of exposure to uncertainty (Bonikowski 2017; 2016: 433–434; Boym 2008; McLaughlin 1996; Ignatieff 1998; Pešić 1993; Kuzio 2006; Tismaneanu 2009).

nation and the content of national ideologies (Boym, 2008: 25; Kuzio, 2006; Tismaneanu, 2009: 15; Yu, 2009: 23–25). Even wars—arguably the most likely of all types of events to produce a rally-round-the-flag effect of closing ranks behind the national leadership and its policies (Feinstein, 2016, 2022)—can evoke or intensify a confrontation between rival national ideologies (Papadakis, 1998; Feinstein, 2022: chap.9; 2020).

While reappropriation of the past is especially pronounced in struggles against external enemies in wars of liberation and interstate wars, it also frequently takes center stage in intra-national struggles. Internal contention over the meaning of the nation intensifies during the campaigns leading up to national elections, when candidates sometimes employ a romantic discourse highlighting the nation's cultural traditions and unique way of life, which must be protected or restored (Godreau, 2002; Polletta & Callahan, 2019). National elections are, therefore, often less a debate about policy per se than a competition between different visions of the essence of the nation, its unique way of life and values, and the desired character of the national state (Bonikowski et al., 2021). Consequently, both the euphoria in the winning camp, whose members feel that “our way” has prevailed, and the depression and, in some instances, outrage among those in the losing camp, who fear that the nation's downfall is imminent, are reflections of fantasies about the future that are rooted in mythical beliefs about the national past.

### Unity or division through the meaning of events

Given this context, the transformation of an event into a nation disruption that evokes intense emotions does not always result in the blurring of intra-national ideological divisions (as in rally-round-the-flag periods [Feinstein, 2022]); rather, nation-disrupting events sometimes strengthen such divisions. Events produce opposing reactions among the public if subsets of society assign different *meanings* to events and policies because they have different beliefs about the essence of the nation and its history and thus respond differently to the political elite's competing interpretations of events. For example, the arrival of many undocumented immigrants in West and North Europe and the growing presence of Muslims in these regions has sparked intense public conversations about the boundaries, core values, and historical legacies of European nations (for reviews, see Feinstein & Bonikowski, 2021: 755; Skey, 2009: 341). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the heated public conversation about ending EU membership did not focus solely on policy utility (e.g., economic consequences) but also highlighted notions of Britishness and reinforced the tensions between a British national identity and English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh national identities. It is worth reiterating that meaning-making in public is informed, to a significant degree, by messages and cues from political leaders and other public speakers who engage in a struggle over the interpretation (Reed, 2016) of high-profile events. Indeed, Wagner-Pacifici's (2010: 1366–1367) assertion that “struggles over the accumulation of power take the form of struggles over the event signification that emerge and circulate” highlights a pivotal mechanism for the emergence of intense antagonistic emotions within nations.

In the United States, as in many other countries, national elections have recently become, to a significant extent, nation-disrupting events because the partisan competition for votes has turned into a fiercer struggle between competing sets of beliefs about the collective national identity (Bonikowski et al., 2021, 2022; Braunstein, 2018). Identarian rhetoric has become most prominent in the campaigns of candidates from the political right (Perry, 2023; Braunstein, 2019; Sides et al., 2022: 5–6). The messages and cues of these candidates aim to incite fear and rage in publics whose collective identities center on a nation-ethnicity/race-religion nexus. Their campaigns highlight a narrative of a national and even civilizational decline (Bonikowski et al., 2022; Brubaker, 2017) and propagate nostalgia for a lost glorious past (Bonikowski & Stuhler, 2022; Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022; Kešić et al., 2022; Kotwas & Kubik, 2022) and the belief that domestic and foreign national, ethnic/racial, and religious “others”—particularly, Muslims (Hughes, 2020) and in some cases Jews or other minorities such as the Roma people (Štefančík & Stradiotová, 2022)—threaten the nation’s unique culture or the safety of its (true) members. In addition, these campaigns put forth populist anti-elite messages accusing the progressive left, academia, and international organizations of co-conspiring with national enemies (Bonikowski et al., 2022).

The January 6 “March to Save America” rally was the climax of such a process. For MAGA supporters, the struggle began in the 2016 presidential election campaign.<sup>13</sup> Since the beginning of his bid for the presidency and throughout his term in office, Donald Trump and his loyalists had constantly employed what Richards (2013: 12) called the rhetoric of “cultural survivalism,” which is typical of right-wing nationalism. Specifically, their messages to the public sought to induce a nostalgic yearning for what they perceived as an archetypical “great” version of the American nation that they alleged was under attack by unwanted immigrants, the progressive ideals of the left (Mayne, 2018:82), and the supposed erasure of European Americans’ legacy (hence, according to this view, the true grand history of the nation) through acts such as the removal of confederate statues and the espousal of revisionist history (Bratta, 2018; Sides et al., 2018: 214). This rhetoric incited feelings of collective humiliation, fear, rage, and hatred of ethnic/racial minorities and Trump’s political rivals (Homolar & Löffmann, 2021; Miller, 2018; Onge, 2018) because it reinforced many Americans’ pre-existing beliefs about “real” Americans’ loss of power and their unique place in the world (Bratta, 2018). Similar concerns motivated Brexiteers (Skey & Antonsich, 2017: 323), and neo-nationalist and neo-conservative leaders have been attempting to propel these concerns in many other countries for several years with varying degrees of success (Richards, 2013; Kinvall, 2013; Wettergren & Jansson, 2013; Sides et al., 2018: 217).

Notably, following the 2020 U.S. elections, MAGA activists’ sense of humiliation, fear, hatred, and rage were coupled with expressions of fierce love of the nation (in particular, intensely waving the U.S. flag, and covering their bodies and painting their faces with images of the flag). As Ahmed (2013: 12) explained, “the nation

<sup>13</sup> MAGA is the acronym for “Make America Great Again,” a slogan popularized by Donald Trump.

becomes an object of love by associating the proximity with others with loss, injury, and theft” or even the nation’s death. This combination of love of the nation and fear, hatred, and rage directed at some of its members was boosted by MAGA activists’ acceptance of the invitation circulated by right-wing media and social media to protect the nation against those who threatened to undo it.

## **Conclusion: theoretical highlights and proposed implications for research on eventfulness**

### **Theoretical highlights**

The theoretical framework outlined in this paper suggests that the combination of two factors—the potent emotional commitment of individuals to their nation, which helps them cope with existential anxieties, and the precariousness of the nation as a phantasmal belief that depends on the reproduction of contested historical narratives—makes national identification a source of intense potential energy. National narratives and the idioms and symbols that represent them constitute a cultural toolbox that most people rarely reflect upon in settled times, even though they often employ elements from this toolbox to explain their attitudes, feelings, and behavior and to justify or discredit the attitudes and actions of other individuals, groups, and institutions. However, as Swidler (1986) noted, while a cultural toolbox remains obscure in settled times, cultural meanings become more articulated and explicit in unsettled times (ibid: 284). In line with Swidler’s distinction, I proposed that events become nation-disrupting when they seem to challenge taken-for-granted core national beliefs. The transformation of an event into nation disruption, which threatens (or, for some, promises) to alter what individuals believe to be the core elements of their nation, evokes intense emotions.

Emotional experiences in periods of nation disruption include feelings that reaffirm the bond between members of the nation—e.g., shared grief and increased affection for and solidarity with fellow nationals—and feelings that reaffirm the putative commitment of members of the nation to a shared national idealization—e.g., feeling collectively ashamed by our misdeeds or humiliated by the actions of others, hatred and rage toward individuals or groups held responsible for our humiliation, fear of being humiliated again, shame or pride about how “we” (i.e., the nation or a group within the nation) have been dealing with challenges, and sometimes also high levels of confidence or optimism about overcoming collective challenges (see also Feinstein, 2020, 2022). Further, as nation-disrupting events unfold, people’s emotions may shift—e.g., from initial grief, humiliation, and fear to pride, confidence, and even elation—reflecting changes in their assessment of the meaning of events and collective reactions for the nation (Feinstein, 2022).

The release of intense national emotions may result in relative unity. This outcome has been most common during struggles with despised national enemies when a national leadership’s actions and rhetoric promised to protect the nation’s honor and prestige and overcome or avoid national humiliation (Feinstein, 2022), however, it has occurred in other scenarios. For example, in Australia, a significant



rally-round-the-flag period followed Prime Minister Rudd's 2008 apology to the Aboriginal People because most Australians saw this act as an atonement for the nation's disgraceful past sins (ibid: chap. 10). In contrast, as discussed extensively above, periods of intense national emotions may take the form of growing internal division if the political leadership frames either a struggle with national others or internal political competition as a conflict *within* the nation about the questions "Who we are?" and "What makes us great?"

Crucially, both unifying and divisionary intense national emotions—for example, both the emotions of members of Congress and Senators from both political parties who, shortly after the September 11 attacks stood on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, holding hands and singing "God Bless America," and the emotions of the protesters who, almost two decades later, stormed the Hill via those same steps—are rooted in the nation's dualism, which nation-disrupting events expose. The nation is at once omnipotent and fragile due to its reliance on controversial narratives and a fantasy of order, consistency, and purpose. Indeed, Malešević's (2019: 279) assertion that "Loud battle cries, verbal aggressiveness and hostile outbursts are often good indicators of anxiousness, insecurity, self-doubt and diffidence, not strength" is as relevant to nations' internal struggles as it is to nations' struggles with bitter foreign enemies.

### **Moving forward: the theory in the service of research on eventfulness**

The theory proposed in this article suggests that a promising topic for future research is the role of intense national emotions as a critical mechanism through which nation-disrupting events bring about structural changes in societies. *How* events become culturally transformative remains a puzzle despite two decades of historians' and historical sociologists' interest in eventfulness (van Dooremalen, 2021: 726). While this article does not pretend to offer a comprehensive answer to this question, the theorization developed herein points to intense emotions as a possible mechanism underlying eventfulness.

Prior studies have shown that experiencing intense national emotions leads people to deviate from their normal range of attitudes (Feinstein, 2020; Rahn et al., 1996). When this deviation occurs on a large scale, it produces a public mood that allows the political leaders to apply policies they would otherwise be reluctant to pursue and encourages ordinary citizens to act in ways that deviate from their normal behavior. Specifically, leaders or ordinary people (who may be answering leaders' calls for action) might take action to realign what they believe to be a distorted relationship within the nation or between the home nation and other nations. However, rather than fixing this perceived misalignment, their efforts might unintentionally cause or deepen (immediately or through additional development stages) a rupture in the public's tacit agreement to avoid debating foundational national beliefs. Adopting Tavory and Fine's (2020) terminology, this development can be called a transition from *disruption for* the nation to *disruption of* the nation, which, in turn, propels the type of profound socio-cultural transformations researchers later identify as "eventful."

For example, both George W. Bush following the September 11 attacks and Donald Trump after the 2020 election claimed that the dramatic actions that they took in the aftermath of these events manifested the true soul of America and protected the nation from the forces who sought to humiliate it. When Bush spoke to a terrorized and grieving nation, he declared, “Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America” (Bumiller & Sanger, 2001). In contrast, Trump directed his invitation to participate in the “stop the steal” campaign specifically at his “base,” exploiting their concerns and grievances. While repeating his claims about a stolen election and attacking the mainstream media, he said “Don’t worry, we will not take the name off the Washington Monument. We will not cancel culture. You know they wanted to get rid of the Jefferson Memorial...They’ll knock out Lincoln too...” (Naylor, 2021). Through this type of nation-affirming claim-making (Hutcheson et al., 2004: 28), both presidents captured the minds and, crucially, the hearts of numerous people whose passionate support provided a tailwind for presidential actions that changed the course of history for the United States (and the entire world).

After the September 11 attacks, President Bush implemented the “war on terror” policy—including the invasion of Afghanistan and the Patriot Act, which infringed upon the civil rights of Americans (Feinstein, 2022: 16; Cainkar, 2009: 119)—with strong support from the public. However, Bush’s policies became increasingly controversial during the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, and continued to divide the US public after the invasion (Jacobson, 2007). The period left a deep mark on American society. The roots of the current polarization in the United States—which is characterized by deep resentment between the two major political camps, whose members disagree on core elements of US nationalism; resistance to seeking political compromise; and an increased threat to US democracy from ethno-nationalist politics—can be traced back to the policy and emotionally intense public discourse that evolved in response to the September 11 attacks (Bonikowski et al., 2021). More recently, Trump’s adoption of right-wing populism as a candidate and later as president, and most critically, the attack on Capitol Hill by hundreds of enraged MAGA adherents who responded to Trump’s call for action, left an even deeper mark on US society and led many to believe that Americans no longer share foundational beliefs and symbols. This type of assessment was expressed, for example, by Republican Senator Mitt Romney, who publicly lamented that a large portion of his own political party does not even believe in the constitution (Nicholas, 2023).

When events incite a passionate conflict between different views within a nation, the struggle can have a broad, long-term effect on national identities and ideologies. I briefly mention three possible outcomes. The first is *identity polarization*, which occurred among Greek Cypriots when the 1974 Turkish invasion deepened the cleavage between Hellenic nationalism and pan-Cyprian nationalism (Papadakis, 1998). As discussed above, increased polarization has also characterized the post-9/11 era in the United States and has been intensified by Trump’s actions and rhetoric since becoming a presidential candidate. A second possible outcome is a *shift in the balance of political power between competing national belief systems*. Such a shift occurred among Jewish Israelis in the aftermath of the failed Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the subsequent al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–2005), leading to the

current political dominance of xenophobic and militant ultranationalism (Del Sarto 2017; Feinstein & Ben-Eliezer, 2019; Feinstein, 2023). A third possible outcome is the emergence of *new national identities and ideologies* via either dialectical processes—as occurred in post-Soviet and Yugoslav countries (Brubaker, 1996:20)—or the amalgamation of existing national ideologies. For example, in response to France’s difficult experiences in World War II and the nation’s subsequent futile combat against the insurgencies in Indochina and Algeria, Charles de Gaulle integrated principles from the Republican and Bonapartist traditions in a new national ideology that sought to use France’s presidential democracy to restore the nation’s great power and status in Europe (Hutchinson, 2017: 46).

The present era provides ample opportunity to examine the emergence of intense national emotions and their short- and long-term effects on societies. The global transformations of the past several decades have decreased neither the potency nor the precariousness of national identities. Indeed, rather than hollowing out nationalism’s integrative and assuring promise, the deep currents of so-called late-modernity—the increasing fluidity of populations, cultural materials, commodities and markets, and modes of communication—have led many people to experience a renewed desire for the ontological security provided by narratives of shared trajectories (see Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013 for a review), particularly those preached unapologetically by nationalist leaders. As Calhoun (2017: 26) concluded, “Nations are not merely valued goods people defend against global challenges; they are resources people mobilize and augment to cope with global challenges” (see also Skey, 2013; Kinnvall, 2004, 2013; Haugaard 2002).

In the two decades since the September 11 terrorist attacks, public discussions about the core aspects of national identities and the character of nation-states have become even more passionate and prevalent (Kinnvall, 2013). This trend is observable not only in the United States, where the attacks occurred (Bonikowski et al., 2021), but also in many other Western countries, whose own experiences of terrorist attacks or witnessing attacks in other countries as well as economic crises and the growing presence of immigrants from the global South and East have empowered neo-nationalist discourses that highlight the threats posed by minorities to collective national identity and the social order. Neo-nationalist politicians have further provoked feelings of hate and fear through rhetoric highlighting the supposed decline of Western nations and Western civilization and the need to restore their glorious pasts (Brubaker, 2017). At the same time, parts of the global East seem to be experiencing similar processes (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021), which are most evident in the contexts of Russia’s invasions of Ukraine (Amarasinghe, 2021) and the ongoing tensions between China and Japan and Taiwan (Duggan, 2020; Zhang, 2020).

The passionate re-evaluation of national identities and beliefs has led not only to the increasing power of neo-nationalistic radical parties and politicians but also, more generally, to a shift in mainstream attitudes, which in many countries have moved away from the relatively inclusive or multicultural variants of nationalism that bloomed (alongside Europeanism and cosmopolitanism) in the 1990s (Feinstein & Ben-Eliezer, 2019; Karim & Lukk, 2023; Kinnvall, 2013; Richards, 2013). However, the dialectical progress of history has not ended. In some countries where the nationalistic radical right had previously risen to power, large resistance movements

are passionately making claims about the true meaning of their nations while reappropriating the national flag and other symbols (Israel and Poland are two recent examples of this development). In a politically turbulent era, a scholarly understanding of socio-cultural and political changes requires paying particular attention to how intense national emotions are triggered and how they are channeled into policy-making or collective actions.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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