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Walker Connor (1926–2017), pioneer in the study of nationalism

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The death of Professor Walker Connor (1926–2017), a prominent figure in political science with a vast intellectual legacy, has left a huge vacuum among scholars of nationalism.

I would first like to celebrate Walker, the man. Besides being a world-recognised authority, Walker was a generous man, always ready to help friends in difficulties, often involved in charitable activities, such as *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), and with a subtle and nuanced understanding of human relationships. He was a lover of fine art and creative beauty. When we spent time in Tuscany for a summer school in 2000, he demonstrated a passionate knowledge for arts that surprised everyone. He was utterly shattered after an earthquake struck the town of Assisi in 1997 and irreparably damaged magnificent thirteenth-century frescoes and architectural masterpieces (some of which have fortunately since been restored). He loved music, particularly jazz, and really enjoyed living in his Vermont home, immersed in a wild natural place, where he kept physically in good shape – true to his name, as a good walker in such a unique natural setting. He travelled extensively in many countries and we met, among other places, in Budapest, Belgium, Tuscany, Santiago de Compostela, Fleinsburg, Germany, the USA and, several times, in London, as well as at his house in Vermont.

Connor was a ground-breaking scholar in the study of nationalism. While nationalism studies began to emerge in the 1980s as a distinct field of research, Connor had already begun to write trend-setting articles by the late 1960s. These contributed to establishing the conceptual grounding that is still currently used and they are seen as landmarks for their accuracy and precision (Connor 1978, 1994; Conversi 2004). Although he largely published within political science, the roots of Connor's approach reach deeply into human and political geography.

Connor's pioneering work methodically and thoroughly identified some of the most significant issues and hurdles in the field, diagnosing its principal fault lines. Besides his efforts at conceptual clarification, beginning by scrutinising

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multifaceted concepts like 'self-determination' (Connor 1967), his core contributions include identification of the '*economic fallacy*' approach that dominates the field – that is, the notion that economic factors are central to explaining the origin and cause of ethnic conflict (Connor 1984a) – the virtues of *autonomy vs. separation* (Connor 2012), an emphasis on political and *emotional* factors as an indirect attack on rational choice (Connor 1993), and a powerful explanation linking the rise of nationalism to the decline of political legitimacy (Connor 2004a) – some of these articles were included in his *Ethnonationalism: The quest for understanding* (Connor 1994).

Most of all, Connor argued that national consciousness as a mass phenomenon was hardly conceivable before the modern age. To this extent, it is surprising to see him sometimes designated as a 'primordialist' author: while he did not pander to trite forms of constructivism or instrumentalism, he should be firmly placed in the 'modernist' field – at least according to Anthony D. Smith's acceptation of the term 'modernist' (Smith 1998). For this purpose, readers of this journal may find it useful to follow Connor's debate with Smith on the 'timelessness of nations' (Connor 2004b).

One of Connor's most pioneering works was *The National Question in Marxist – Leninist Theory and Strategy* (1984), where he demonstrated an unparalleled grasp of the intrinsic, below-the-surface, socio-political reality of real Socialism – an absolutely uncommon achievement in an era dominated by the now discredited discipline of Sovietology or Kremlinology that churned up a flow of mainstream clichés for decades. He had visited a few Communist countries and found himself confronted with the unofficial, overlooked and unspoken reality of pervasive nationalism, well concealed below the sanctioned façade of proletarian internationalism. In a rare anticipation of things to come, the book identified the contours of coming conflicts and the underlying potency of nationalism behind the supranational pretence of the Soviet Union, as well as Yugoslavia, China and other communist states. Through a wealth of primary and archival sources, he cogently argued that nationalism was alive and kicking under those very Communist regimes that had prematurely announced its evaporation (Connor 1984b).

Although Connor's articles should be required reading in nationalism and ethnic studies, his approach genuinely spans disciplinary areas while providing fundamental analytical tools for the study of an inherently interdisciplinary and international field. Connor's prescience in forecasting current international developments is now widely accredited. He began writing in the late 1960s, when the international scene was frozen by the Cold War and nationalism was considered a phenomenon of the past. In the 1970s and early 1980s, when few dared to contemplate the underlying strength of nationalism and secession, he noted how nationalism remained the underlying political force and legitimating principle in the international system. Connor's oeuvre contrasted with that of his contemporaries, such as Elie Kedourie and Alfred Cobban, who downplayed the importance of nationalism.

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Connor's approach was influenced by the eminent British historian Carlton Hayes (1882–1964). Before the Second World War, Hayes' *Essays on Nationalism* (1926) had already articulated an insightful and unblemished view of nationalism, whose prognosis endured the test of time, demonstrating a cunning understanding of modern historic trends (Hayes 1926). The social historian Eugen Weber (1925–2007), a contemporary of Connor, also came to lend historical support to Connor's long-term approach: his *Peasants into Frenchmen* offered new evidence to support the view that broad-scale national consciousness among the French masses emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Weber 1976). Weber's breakthroughs were consonant with advances elsewhere on nationalism's timeline, eventually situating the diffusion of French consciousness even later than Connor had hitherto assumed: while Connor and coeval authors had over-rated the impact of the Napoleonic wars on nationalist feelings, Weber found that French nationalism only permeated the entire body of *l'Hexagone* during and after WW1.

For Connor, nations were largely inconceivable before the modern age: one can speak of 'a nation' from a purely subjective angle only when a majority, or a sizable number, of its members faithfully identify themselves as such. And this was impossible before modern social change, including urbanisation, the spread of literacy, political centralisation, militarisation and war compelled people to think in terms of an organic, homogeneous socio-political community.

Connor was a sharp critic of the use of loose terminology in academia, particularly dedicating many of his writings to disentangling the widespread confusion between 'nation' and 'state', epitomised by the ascent of the modern 'nation-state'. Because modernisation theorists such as Karl Deutsch (1912–1992) and several others tended to mix these up, the concept of *nation-building* was intended to define a top-down project of 'national' construction almost totally detached from socio-anthropological reality – at least until the 1970s. Connor exposed this unjustified conceptual annexation of its ambiguous meaning (Connor 1972, 1978), revealing that the term nation-building often provided an ideological masquerade for state-building, often in its most authoritarian forms. That is, 'nation-building' in pluri-national states necessarily implies a parallel dose of 'nation-destroying' among minority or non-dominant groups.

Since nationalism remains *ethnic* at its core, the notion of 'civic nationalism' is largely a nonstarter. Thus, Connor preferred the combined term '*ethnonationalism*', which has since been widely incorporated in the nationalism literature. Although a portmanteau term, it denotes *loyalty to a nation*, either when embodied in a specific 'nation-state' or deprived of its own state. In contrast, he identified *loyalty to a state* as 'patriotism'. Conceived in a broad sense, ethnonationalism may thus be used interchangeably with nationalism, to refer simultaneously to state and non-state nationalism. The distinction between the two forms of nationalism is blurred, and the unifying

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factor is the political expression of an emotional attachment to lineage, ancestry and continuity. This is shared both by those who wield political power and by those who are deprived of it.

All the phenomena described above share a deep emotional thrust, and their outcome is to privilege co-ethnics versus outsiders. The resulting upshot of intense favouritism, expanded nepotism and potentially exclusionary practice derive from the non-rational belief that all those who descend from common ancestors form part of a sort of 'extended family'. Ethnicity thus remains the core element in the development of nationalism and the latter is in itself exclusive.

I hope the above has made it clear to readers how important the work of Walker Connor has been in the foundation and establishment of nationalism studies as a distinctive field of research. Besides this, all those who met Connor, or established academic contact with him, remember him as a uniquely warm person with a distinctive human touch and a vibrant cultural consciousness – these are uncommon in academia. He remained, after all, a *rara avis*.

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