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# The Nation as Propertied Community:[1] The Emergence of Nationalism in the United States and Norway

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**Abstract**

This article engages in the debate about the origins and nature of nationalism. The argument is a modernist one, but it qualifies this narrative by focusing on landed property rights as the basis for the emergence and development of nationalism. The argument complements Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism by suggesting that nationalism was at first a landed agrarian phenomenon which later became ideologically functional to industrial society due to its property assumptions. A historical-sociological comparative analysis of land rights and national development in the United States and Norway between 1770 and 1884 forms the basis of the argument. The key point is that nationalism emerged as a consequence of the emergence of the more widespread individual ownership of land, which spawned the idea of national popular sovereignty. This original connection to property rights made nationalism ideologically functional for industrial society.

## Introduction

This article locates the origins of nationalism in changes to the property structure within the agrarian societies of the United States and Norway, and points to how the principles of nationalism were at first understood in relation to, and emerged from, agrarian conditions of landed property, and how this agrarian nationalism became the foundation for industrial society. This argument challenges the dominant modernist accounts of nationalism and, in particular, it complements and adds nuance to Ernest Gellner's famous theory of nationalism. Gellner made a statement on the nature and origins of nationalism that has become definitive and influential for all subsequent studies: he held that nationalism was 'primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 2006 [1983]:1).

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Gellner believed that nationalism emerged along with industrial society in Europe. 'The age of transition to industrialism was bound, according to our model, also to be an age of nationalism', he wrote. And industrialism created nationalism because it brought to the world a 'homogeneity imposed by [an] objective, inescapable, imperative [which] eventually appears on the surface in the form of nationalism' (Gellner 2006 [1983]:38). Although Gellner, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, maintained that his argument was Euclidian in its logic (Gellner 1996:111), many have since shown that nationalism actually emerged long before industrialization. Michael Mann, for instance, has pointed to the importance of military and economic developments connected to the rise of the modern state before industrialization (Mann 1993), and Liah Greenfeld has focused on the importance of protestant Christianity, seeing nationalism as having specifically English origins, sparked by resentment and new ideas of individual worth (Greenfeld 1993). These are just a few examples of a huge body of literature that has been produced on the subject of nationalism in the past thirty years, often in response to Gellner's bold thesis.

While I agree that Gellner's account needs to be nuanced, I also think it is undeniable that nationalism and industrial society not only have an elective affinity, but that nationalism became, to use the Marxian terms, the superstructure of the industrial mode of production. My suggestion is that nationalism emerged upon the structure of modernizing agrarian societies, and that this fact made it ideologically functional to industrial society. How, then, is it that nationalism, a pre-industrial phenomenon, is so well-suited to industrial society? The answer, this article suggests, lies in an initial connection between nationalism and landed, private property rights. A historical analysis of the national development in the U.S. and Norway will be applied to demonstrate this, as these cases can be seen as representative of national development in the western world in the time period between 1770 and 1880.

## The Ernest Gellner Problem[2]

This article engages closely with Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism, and thus it places itself within debates about the origins and nature of nationalism. There exists a huge and ever expanding body of literature on nationalism. Especially from the 1980s onwards, there has been a rich flourishing of contributions to the field. Ernest Gellner's theory is far from the most recent contribution to this and certainly not the most nuanced. On the contrary, Gellner's theory is extremely bold, and it is argued with powerful intellectual force, which makes it difficult to dismiss – being 'at once brilliant and problematic' (Beissinger 1998:169). Gellner's theory continues to be read, engaged with and criticized, and his seminal work on nationalism, *Nations and Nationalism* (2006 [1983]), remains a bestseller on the subject (Conversi 2007).

Gellner's theory engages directly with the central points in the study of nationalism: the origins and nature of nationalism, and its role in modern society and in the transition to modernity. Such questions lie at the core of the literature on nationalism; the divide between modernists and ethnosymbolists/primordialists in



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this regard should be well-known to readers of this journal and need not be reiterated here.[3] I shall focus on some of the literature engaging with Gellner's theory, seeing as the argument put forth here is also to a large extent an engagement with that theory.

Gellner's argument (in brief and not in full detail) is that the coming of industrial society brought forth nationalism by objective forces demanding cultural homogeneity and creating uneven development between societies transitioning from agrarian to industrial economies. In a fairly recent article, Moran Mandelbaum has categorized the critique of Gellner's theory into three main categories: 1) critique against its functionalism; 2) critique against its ahistorical approach and the lack of actual empirical data to support its thesis; and 3) critique of Gellner's apolitical approach (Mandelbaum 2014). To the first category belongs critique from, for example, David Laitin – proposing to 'purge Gellner's theory of its excessive functionalism' (Laitin 1998:139). To the second category belongs critique from scholars such as Miroslav Hroch (Hroch 1985, 1998) and Tom Nairn (Nairn 1998), both offering rich and detailed historical accounts of the emergence of nationalism that conflict with Gellner's industrial and modernist assertions. In the third category of critique we can include scholars such as Mark Beissinger, who argues that Gellner 'identified the agents of this nationalist world of our making … but [that] he stopped short of placing these agents in motion' (Beissinger 1998:170), and Daniele Conversi, who focuses on the ideology of what he calls 'modernism' (Conversi 2012) and on other forces of homogenization, such as militarism (Conversi 2007).

The argument of this article recognizes and builds upon the critique posed for example by Hroch and Nairn, and formulated recently as an abstract problem of 'presentist fallacy' by Mandelbaum (Mandelbaum 2014). In a similar vein to many of these works, this article explores nationalism from a particular historical empirical basis, and it aims to trace the 'genealogy' (Hausheer 1996; Mandelbaum 2014) of nationalism. Furthermore, this article also adds to the critiques which claim that Gellner's argument is apolitical, by scrutinizing political actors, their actions, and their ideology. However, while acknowledging the critique made by, for instance, Laitin (1998), Brubaker (1998), and Conversi (2007, 2012, 2016) that Gellner's argument is too functionalist, this article nevertheless argues that nationalism may indeed be functional in relation to industrial society; not as an objective fact, but as an ideological imperative. In doing this, I place the origins of nationalism in agrarian society – contrary to Gellner, and contrary to dominant views on nationalism which hold that if nationalism is not necessarily linked to industrial society, it is at least linked in one form or another with the coming of the modern world, emerging after, and around, the French Revolution (Conversi 2012; Hearn 2006). However, although this article promotes the agrarian origins of nationalism, it does not dismiss the (dominant) 'modernist' view that nationalism has its origins in modernity, whatever that may mean. In fact, the focus in this article on modernizing, capitalist property in agrarian society can be said to form a bridge between the ethnosymbolist/primordialist literature and modernist views by providing a 'missing link' between pre- or proto-national forms of society (feudal, absolutist, mercantilist, etc.) and the fully modern,



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industrial form of nationalism. This link is landed property and its initial connection with popular, national sovereignty through property-based democracies. This is the central connection that this article shall seek to elaborate.

## Theorizing the Rise of Nationalism and Property in the United States and Norway

There are two main historical developments that laid the foundations for the structural shift within the agrarian societies of the United States and Norway to which the emergence of nationalism as an ideology of landed property was connected. One was the ideological significance of landed property in the European agrarian societies, and the second was the emergence of capitalist property in the form of land.

### *Landownership and Sovereignty in the Western Political Tradition*

Because ownership of land has, in the western political tradition, always been associated either with power (in the form of the Roman *dominium)* or directly with juridical sovereignty (as in the feudal age) (Andrews 1986; Wood 2012), there has long been a conceptual and practical link between landownership and sovereignty.

Sovereignty, Giorgio Agamben has argued, is 'the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it' (Agamben 1995:21). In other words, sovereignty is the force which imposes laws on social life: the ultimate law which in the end decides over life and death. This kind of sovereignty is associated with the ultimate power to make laws within a territory, and thus to exercise a will, to bind the people to it. This is the classical understanding of sovereignty going back to Jean Boding in the sixteenth century and famously theorized by Carl Schmitt in *Political Theology* (Schmitt 2005 [1922]).

We must note, however, that sovereignty can have different meanings, and has had so over time. Indeed, only recently the meanings of sovereignty have undergone a process of change. Daniele Conversi has recently summarized the ways in which the concept of sovereignty has changed from 'Westphalia to Food Sovereignty' (Conversi 2016). The post-Westphalian (after the peace of Westphalia in 1648) world established an order where the territorial sovereignty of states – often governed internally by absolutist sovereigns – became a central political principle. This form of sovereignty was then amended and transferred to the nation (as a people) and to the nation-states in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789. The meaning of sovereignty changed again with the full force of globalization at the end of the twentieth century, where international companies became very powerful and sometimes challenged the sovereignty of nation-states. There can also be said to be an ongoing change in the concept of sovereignty in the present, with the introduction of 'food sovereignty'. As Conversi writes, there are still many uncertainties surrounding the concept of food sovereignty in terms of what exactly it means and to whom or what it applies (Conversi 2016). However, it nonetheless *does* have something to do with the production of food, the right to subsist, and ownership of land.



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From this, we can make a link back to the idea of national landed sovereignty as it will be identified in this article. Like the modern concept of food sovereignty, national landed sovereignty is centred around land and the ability to support oneself. Such issues were central in the agrarian societies that characterized the United States and Norway at the time of their national revolutions. A position of self-ownership over landed property meant independence, power, and freedom: independence, because it provided economic security and the means to support oneself; power, because it gave control over resources; and freedom, because there was no-one laying a bond on the individual and his use of the land or the surplus produced from it. It is also important to note, of course, that in the western agrarian societies, land was the main source of wealth (Wood 2008, 2012). These are the reasons why landownership and sovereignty became connected.

### *Agrarian Capitalist Property*

The connection between property and sovereignty is reinforced in the concept of capitalist property. This becomes especially apparent when contrasted to feudal property, since while feudal property rights were often shared and confined to a certain class by privileges, capitalist property is normally private and confined to one individual – others have no rights to anything of or on your property. Capitalist property in land represents a form of sovereignty because it is an exclusive right, which means that it gives the property holder the right to exclude others from that which the property right covers. Applied to land, an exclusive property right means that the holder of the property becomes a 'mini sovereign' over the landed property, in the same way that a national sovereign governs a specific territory over which the laws of the nation are supreme. Similar to how national sovereignty excludes the rights of other groups over the territory, private individual property rights give individuals wide rights and freedoms to do as they please with and on their property (Engerman and Metzer 2004; Macpherson 1978; Reeve 1986). And so landed, capitalist property has a resemblance with sovereignty.

Furthermore, under capitalism, property is not vested with 'extra economical powers' (Anderson 1974:162), meaning that its function is purely economic. It does not, for example, confer legal powers on the owner, nor does it entail privileges for the owner, other than economic control over the property. Because capitalist property lacks these restrictions or extra powers, it becomes theoretically universal; in theory, all members of society may acquire it as an economic right (Anderson 1974; Reeve 1986; Wood 1991, 2008, 2012). This universal or 'democratic' character of the capitalist property right makes it an important foundation for the age of nationalism: Gellner wrote that the age of nationalism was one of universal high culture, where every man is a Mamluk (Gellner 2006 [1983]:18).

I would argue that to understand nationalism properly, we must see it also as an age of universal property ownership. This is not to say that all actually have equality of property in the age of nationalism, only that this *theoretical idea* is one of the structural ideological preconditions for the emergence of nationalism. Coupled with the understanding of landed property as the basis of sovereignty, the concept of property as a universal right can become the foundation of a nation



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of free sovereign individuals. In an agrarian world where landed property is the foundation of sovereignty, the universalization of the right to property opens up the door to political power for 'the people', and not just for masters, aristocrats or kings – who, in previous historical stages of the western world, were usually the only legitimate owners of property and thus the only legitimate holders of political sovereignty or power. It can be said, paraphrasing Reinhard Bendix, that it was landed property that gave the people the 'mandate to rule' in place of the authority of the king (Bendix 1978). To put it simply: popular sovereignty emerged out of popular (widespread) ownership of landed property.

## The Transvaluation of Property

So far, I have explained the ideological and economic origins of nationalism as an ideology based on landed property, where popular landownership became a central basis for popular national sovereignty. This is the foundation for understanding the origins of nationalism in connection to changes within agrarian society. Before I move on to provide some empirical evidence for this from the United States and Norway, I shall endeavour also to explain theoretically how these agrarian origins of nationalism could become foundational to industrial society and to an industrial form of nationalism. It is in this aspect that the argument of this article finesses and supplements Gellner's theory of nationalism, by suggesting how nationalism also became ideologically functional to industrial society through its concepts of property, labour, and sovereignty.

As land alone, the universal potential of propertied sovereignty was limited, and at first, political power was confined primarily to a landowning class. However, the capitalist concept of property became transformative of political legitimacy as nationalism developed with the coming of industrialization. This can be seen in relation to an expansion of citizenship, which in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be understand to be composed of two parts: civil rights (such as the right to property) and political rights (such as the right to suffrage). It has been noted that even though actual suffrage was limited to men of property, the early nation-state established the rest of the population as potential participants in democracy by opening up their rights to acquire and hold property (Marshall and Bottomore 1992). Nevertheless, the property qualification was still limiting, and it became more and more congruent with the reality of an increasing number of wage workers and landless labourers.

With the emergence of such groups, there took place what I call a *transvaluation of property*. This can also be stated as a shift from land to labour, and it was driven by a shift in the property structure that saw the emergence of a proletariat, larger classes of wage earners, and thus a relative decline in the ownership of landed property.[4] Propertied freedom went from being understood primarily as landed or real property to meaning property in one's labour – hence a shift from land to labour. Transvaluation adjusted the sovereignty and property concepts to include a broader stratum of people in political power: since the essential future of property was now understood to be the labour of the individual (instead of land), all that laboured (or were owners of their labour power) could now partake in political



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power. In this way popular sovereignty became disconnected from landed property and connected instead to all the labouring individuals of the nation. This made the original agrarian nationalism ideologically functional for industrial society, similar to the way that Gellner saw it. For Gellner, one of the fundamental characteristics of modern industrial society is that it is founded on perpetual growth: 'Industrial society is the only society ever to live by and rely on sustained and perpetual growth' (Gellner 2006 [1983]:22). And it is the imperative of perpetual growth – and the constant remobilization of labour – that nationalism, as described by Gellner, sustains.

This article supports this conclusion, but for different reasons. Namely, that nationalism sustains a society of perpetual growth because the property and sovereignty assumptions on which it rests legitimize industrial labour/property relations. After the *transvaluation of property,* full political citizenship is granted to the whole nation, which, as Marshall and Bottomore have pointed out, makes economic distinctions more acceptable (Marshall and Bottomore 1992). Nationalism, in its industrial form, thus propagates a vison of freedom that sees all individuals as free proprietors of their own alienable labour power, while it is no longer necessary to own real property or wealth to be a free citizen. This makes it acceptable for the people to alienate their labour power while still being, in theory, free and sovereign citizens. Nationalism is thus not only practically (as Gellner said), but also ideologically functional to industrial society.

It can be noted, finally, that the *transvaluation of property* was always inherent in the capitalist concept of property on which the original, agrarian nationalism was founded. This is because one of its founding principles is that property is based on a person's investment of labour power into something, and thus a person's ownership of his labour power, or of himself (Macpherson 1962). Hence it may be noted that, since the labour element has been present since the beginning in capitalist property, the *transvaluation of property* could, in theory, also have taken place within agrarian society. But because land was so dominant in the agrarian stage, since it was one of the main sources of wealth and power, and due to its ideological significance in western history, the transvaluation did not occur before the material base of society changed with the coming of industrialization.

## The Advent and Development of Nationalism in the United States and Norway

We are now approaching the empirical basis of this article. This part of the article will provide empirical examples from public debates in the United States and Norway to demonstrate how the widespread ownership of landed property and popular sovereignty were understood to be interdependent. There will also be some brief examples of what I call the *transvaluation of property*, and discussion of the material basis for this change within the two societies. First, however, I must discuss the rationale behind the comparison between the U.S. and Norway, and how I use these cases to generate a theory.

The analysis that follows can be said to be a combination of Charles Tilly´s concept of universalizing comparison (Tilly 1984:82–83) or Skocpol and Somers´s parallel demonstration of theory with Skocpol and Somers´s macro-



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analytical comparison (Skocpol and Somers 1980). Miroslav Hroch has summed up this method of comparison. Hroch applies the term 'synchronic historical comparison', which means establishing similar historical processes that happened over roughly the same time period in different locations:

> If we can establish that the objects of comparison went through roughly the same stages of development, we can compare these analogous events, even if from the standpoint of absolute chronology they occurred at different times. (Hroch 1985:20)

Comparing the historical trajectories of the United States and Norway from their different revolutionary moments (1776 in the U.S. and 1814 in Norway) through to the latter half of the nineteenth century might seem an odd comparison at first. The two countries display many great differences, which does not make it obvious why one should be able to use them as a parallel demonstration of theory. One country was situated in the new world, the other in the old world: there was a giant ocean between them. Events in the United States marked the start of the age of revolution, while in Norway they were close to its end. In the U.S. there existed four million chattel slaves at the time of the revolution; in Norway nothing of the kind had existed for almost one thousand years. In America huge areas of land were taken from the native populations by force or expulsion by the settlers, thus providing the settlers with new land. In Norway there were few possibilities to acquire new land. The United States became a republic, whereas Norway remained a constitutional monarchy.

These are certainly significant differences in economy and society between these two nations. However, one can argue – invoking the Marxist terminology[5] – that these differences are different expressions in the superstructure caused by specific historical contexts. What really matters is that the 'base' or the 'mode of production' – the property structure – was similar in each country. It is true that the unique and 'peculiar institution'[6] of slavery, for instance, was an important economic driver in the accumulation of capital and property in America, and that the country's economic and social development therefore became uniquely marked by this institution. One could also argue, however, that precisely because slaves were a form of private property, connected very much to landed property, that the institution of slavery formed a part of the economic and ideological reality of the agrarian capitalist mode of production (or the base). Slaves, said one American commentator in the American revolutionary era, 'are not free agents, have no personal liberty, no faculty of acquiring property, and like other property, [are] entirely at the will of the Master' (Finkelman 2012:217). Because slavery was integrated into the agrarian property system in the U.S., it can form part of a comparison with another agrarian capitalist society (Norway). A distinct social and economic basis for both societies was the relatively large class of self-owning farmers. In one case some of them owned slaves which were used on their land in the same way as cattle – 'our slaves being our property why should they be taxed more than the land, sheep, cattle, horses, etc.?' (Finkelman 2012:116) – while in the other they did not. Both were nevertheless marked by a landed class of property owners that came to be seen as central to national sovereignty.



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Another major difference is between the United States as a republic and Norway as a constitutional monarchy. This difference may not be as great as it may seem: in both cases a legislative branch was established with powers directly derived from the people in the form of representative democracy. And in both cases this representative democracy was restricted, to a large degree, to those owning landed or real property. Furthermore, the fact that the executive branch was, in Norway, reserved for the monarch, whereas it was more directly derived from the people in the U.S. in the form of a president, actually represents two sides of the same principle: the balance of power. There were rigorous debates in both nations about how to achieve a balance of power, and practically nobody thought that all power should be in the hands of all the people. The republican and the monarchical principles were different ways of balancing power that were based on the sovereignty of the people through legislation. Furthermore, both were based on popular sovereignty through a property-based democracy in which national sovereignty was understood to be derived from the property of the members of the community.

The political systems of republic and monarchy, as well as the institution of slavery, although different in form, can all be viewed as superstructural expressions of the same agrarian capitalist base, but in different contexts. They were all institutions originating from, regulating, and maintaining a property structure of wide ownership of land. It is the similarity in property structure that is the basis for the comparison, and although it produced some different political and economic forms, these can nonetheless be seen as structurally similar, as representing the political economy of the landed agrarian, capitalist base.

## *'A Commonality in Their Spirit'*

The Norwegian historian Sigmund Skard has written, 'The historical situation has been felt as parallel: two small nations arose heroically up against great powers. There was a commonality in their spirit which went deeper than their differences'[7] (Skard 1976:56). Part of this idea of smallness, of establishing a free nation in opposition to tyrannical rule, was created by the fact of widespread ownership. As another Norwegian historian, Francis Sejersted, has pointed out, the U.S. and Norway were societies that were understood at the time as being unusually close to what he calls a Lockean ideal of a free society ruled popularly by a large class of small landowners (Sejersted 2001). The point is that the property relations of these cases were similar, both being marked by a relatively high degree of independent smallholders and by the lack of feudal institutions such as manors and a large aristocratic class.

America and Norway were also part of a common intellectual milieu. The developments in these countries were not isolated, and although these cases were peculiar in certain ways, they were part of something broader. Nationalism here did not emerge in a vacuum. In fact, the national revolutions of the United States and Norway mark the beginning and the end of a series of nationalist revolutions in the western hemisphere. The U.S. and Norway were part of what Jonathan Hearn has called 'the North Atlantic Interaction Sphere' (Hearn 2009). Starting with the



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American Revolution, expressions of nationalism in the form of liberation movements promoting liberal constitutions emerged in a spatial sphere covering North America and Western Europe, as well as large parts of Latin America in the years between 1776 and 1814. The French Revolution of 1789 is perhaps the most commonly used example of this. In addition, we might include the Haitian revolution of 1791 (and its constitution of 1801), the Venezuelan constitution of 1811, the Mexican rising of 1810, and the Spanish constitution of 1812. One might also mention the Napoleonic Code (1804), with its strong emphasis on the right to property. And in the German states especially, nationalism emerged as a reaction to the rule of Napoleon.

All these occurrences and many more may be seen to constitute the age of revolution or the age of nationalism, of which the emergence of nationalism in my two examples was a part (Hobsbawm 1962; Palmer 1959). The geographical position and general characteristics of their ideologies place my cases in this context, within the tradition of what Hans Kohn called western nationalism – an individualistic, liberal, democratic and essentially capitalist world view (Kohn 2005 [1944]). After Kohn, others have developed similar typologies, without the historical and geographical specificities of his distinction between western and eastern nationalism, but which nevertheless are extensions and modifications of these categories. We might thus also label the nationalism of the cases here civic nationalism as opposed to ethnic, or individualistic as opposed to authoritarian/collectivistic. What is important to recognize is that the nationalism which emerged in America and Norway was one specific breed, as it were, of the larger category of nationalism, which was nevertheless brought about by specific historical and social conditions; specifically, the widespread ownership of land. Because of the similar preconditions and developments in these two places, they may serve to demonstrate a theory of the development of a certain kind of nationalism. And although these cases were special, they were so only because they very clearly, and early on, demonstrated features (the advent of the more widespread individual ownership of land) that later became dominant in larger parts of the western world.

## The Propertied Preconditions for the Emergence of Nationalism in the U.S. and Norway

### *The Role of Property Rights in National Development in the U.S. and Norway*

The role of private property rights in establishing the American and Norwegian nation-states has been noted by historians and sociologists in both countries. There is, for example, a large body of literature which discusses the importance of the republican ideas of independence and property in revolutionary America (Bailyn 1992 [1967]; Hartz 1955; Pocock 1975; Wood 1993). This scholarship has established the importance of landed property in political and social discourse during this time period. Some accounts, going all the way back to Charles Beard´s famous study (Beard 1941 [1913]), have suggested that there were clear capitalistic and bourgeois self-interested underpinnings to these ideas, while others have stressed the more traditional (pre-capitalist) values embodied in them (Kramnick 1988). However, the fact that this discourse was first and foremost national



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(Greenfeld 1993; Steel 2012) is perhaps more important, at least for the purpose of this article. In addition, a common trait of this thought is that ownership of land gave individuals freedom and power.

The same goes for Norway. It has been established that property rights were an important subject in the discourse around the Norwegian national revolution, although here too there have been disagreements over whether this was an instrumentally bourgeois ideology (Sejersted 2001), or whether it was more in tune with the values of the traditional elite (Seip 1965 [1945]). In any case, landownership was understood to make individuals free. Recently Håkon Evju (2015) has pointed to a potential conflict between republican and commercial ideals in Norway, while Marthe Hommerstad (2010) and Nils Langeland (2014), for example, have pointed to the specifically nationalist characteristic of this discourse. The basis for discussions about property in both the U.S. and Norway at their revolutionary moments is the relatively widespread distribution of land in these societies. Below I provide an overview of this, since this fact forms the basis of the argument put forth in this article.

### *Widespread Ownership and Non-aristocratic Property in the U.S. and Norway*

In the United States, by the end of the seventeenth century, almost all householders owned land. In Salem, Massachusetts, only four of the 238 first inhabitants were landless. Half of the men in New England owned land by the age of 30, and 95% of men owned land by the age of 36. In 1690, sixth sevenths of all farmers in Connecticut owned land, in 1704 two thirds of the households in Surry County, Virginia, owned land, and in Pennsylvania landownership was almost universal during the 1690s. Individual landownership remained high during the eighteenth century. Nearly two thirds of farmers in eastern New England, Long Island and Tidewater, Virginia, owned land, and only one sixth of farm workers remained tenants all their lives. In Essex County, Massachusetts, 84% of men between the age of thirty-seven and sixty owned land. Two thirds of the taxpayers in Deadham owned land both in 1735 and in 1771, and seven tenths of the taxpayers in Concord owned land in 1749, while the number had risen to four fifths in 1771. Tenancy remained low, and seven tenths of small village and town householders in Massachusetts owned land in 1771. Connecticut, New Hampshire and East New Jersey also had a high degree of self-ownership. In revolutionary-era New Jersey, for example, two thirds of taxed men owned land, but four fifths of the men over twenty-seven – which constituted almost all the households – owned land (Kulikoff, 2000:106–118, 127–131).

A similar situation of relatively widespread landownership had also gradually developed in Norway, although under quite different circumstances. By 1800, the percentage of self-ownership was as high as 80% in some areas in the eastern parts of Norway, while the percentage had risen to about 60% in the southwest, and to 50% in Trøndelag. For the country as a whole, almost 60% of the farmers owned their own land in 1801 (Moseng *et al*. 2003:207–211, 221–222 and 265–270). Landownership was of great social and economic importance in Norway at this time; 90% of the population lived in rural areas in 1800, and 80% of the



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working population were employed in farming, fishing or forestry. Only 6% of the population were engaged in manufacture or industry, whereas 15% were employed in commerce or transport.

Farming and work related to the farm dominated the relations of ownership and appropriation: about 260,000 people were employed in farm-related work in 1801. It is important to note, however, that this number reflects heads of households. The actual number of people employed in agriculture was thus actually higher. There were 78,000 independent or semi-independent farmers at his time, and out of this, 60% were self-owners. The remaining 40% were tenants called '*leiglendinger*'. They were given land that they farmed as their own, and had a free status with no obligations. There was also a group of crofters ('*husmenn*') that can be divided into two main groups: 39,000 who had been granted some land of their own on a main farm and who had labour obligations on the main farm, and about 40,000 who were landless. In addition to these, there was also a large group of household servants which counted more than 100,000 people (Pryser 1999:30–36, 59–74, 164–168). What is relevant about these numbers in this context is that although there were large groups of servants, tenants and crofters, there was practically no landed/feudal aristocracy in Norway, and a relatively high percentage of self-ownership. There were literally only two units in the whole country that came close to resembling a manor.[8]

For the argument put forth here there are two important points about property rights in the U.S. and Norway that must stressed:

1) Landownership was relatively widespread;
2) Most people who owned land had acquired it as an economic right and not as a privilege.

The first point is the widespread nature of landownership. The level of self-ownership amongst farmers in Norway at the time of its national revolution was 60%, and it was 70% in America at the time of the revolution there. This is important because, on the one hand, widespread ownership made it more plausible to conceive of a large number of the people as free and independent individuals, and on the other hand, this idea of a large part of the people as free and independent owners of land was congruent with – necessary for even – popular sovereignty.

The second point is that land was primarily an economic right. By this I mean that it was not an aristocratic feudal right that carried with it extra economic powers; and the bulk of the population was not excluded from the right to own land *vis-à-vis* a privileged aristocracy. It is true that in Norway there existed a hereditary land right (the *odelsrett*), but in the scheme of this article, this right can be interpreted as more akin to a modern economic property right than a feudal/aristocratic one. I shall discuss this briefly below. The significance of the *odelsrett* in the formation of a Norwegian national identity has also been pointed out (Glenthøj 2012; Hommerstad 2010; Lunden 1992; Sørensen 2001). Because of the above developments (widespread ownership of land and property as an economic right), nationalism emerged in these two countries as a landed property-based ideology in which the propertied sovereignty of many small landowners constituted the national sovereignty.



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*Developments in the British American Colonies*

By the eve of the American Revolution the United States (or the thirteen North American British Colonies, as it was constituted at the time) was part of an empire whose general political and economic development, at least since the signing of Magna Carta, had had a peculiar trajectory, going in a very different direction to that of most western states. By the seventeenth century, Britain's unique trajectory is particularly striking. Where the monarchs of many European states had by the late seventeenth century centralized and increased their power, resulting in the creation of absolutist states, the British Crown had by the same time lost many of its powers, becoming in practice subject to the parliament – or rather, to the power of the landed aristocracy. One essential point is that amongst the elite there was a common definition and agreement over property. The shared property assumptions were capitalist, with property being understood as a private, individual and exclusive right. It was common in British law by the early eighteenth century to define property as an absolute exclusive right. It was said about the proprietor that: 'An absolute proprietor hath an absolute Power to dispose of his Estate as he pleases, subject only to the Laws of the Land' (Aylmer 1980:95). By 1729, Giles Jacob's law dictionary says about property that:

> Every Man (if he hath not forfeited it) hath a Property and Right allowed him by the Law, to defend his Life, Liberty, and Estate; and if either be violated, it gives an Action to redress the Injury, and punish the Wrongdoer. (Aylmer 1980:95)

Americans inherited such definitions of property. A private property regime became practically uncontested in revolutionary America. In the words of John R. Nelson:

> A private property system and its political, economic, and social implications pervaded the thought and actions of the early national leaders (in America). Their concepts of freedom and independence were inextricably bound up with individual ownership of productive property. (Nelson 1987:164)

Based on such literature, there emerged an extensive body of writing in colonial America that emphasized the liberties and property of the American colonists (Bailyn 1992). Very often these liberties became theorized as historically conditioned by what was understood as a unique American colonial history where land rights had always been widely distributed and exclusive to the owners. It was this thinking that became the ideological foundation for the American nation-state when the colonists declared independence from Britain (1776) and created a national constitution (1787). But this thinking was also very much influenced by the reality of the relatively widespread ownership of land in America.

Charles Pinkney (1757–1824) of South Carolina, a delegate to the American constitutional convention of 1787, pointed to the connection between widespread landownership and popular sovereignty in America. He referred to what he saw as



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a unique American situation of widespread ownership and the rights of its 'freemen' – that is, a person that enjoys civil and political rights (or citizenship):

> Every freeman has a right to the same protection & security; and a very moderate share of property entitles them to the possession of all the honors and privileges the public can bestow: hence arises a greater equality, than is to be found among the people of any other country, and an equality which is more likely to continue — I say this equality is likely to continue, because in a new Country, possessing immense tracts of uncultivated lands, where every temptation is offered to emigration & where industry must be rewarded with competency, there will be few poor, and few dependent … the whole community will enjoy in the fullest sense that kind of political liberty which consists in the power the members of the State reserve to themselves, of arriving at the public offices. (Farrand 1911:339)

In a commentary to the federal constitution, writer Noah Webster (1758–1843) similarly pointed to the importance of widespread landownership for the existence of a free nation. He asked rhetorically: 'in what … does real power consist?' And answered thus: 'the answer is short and plain – in property.' At the same time, Webster held that sovereignty in America lay with the people: 'the source of power is in the people of this country, and cannot for ages, and probably never will be, removed' (Sheehan and McDowell 1998:398). This was possible, according to Webster, because land was widely distributed in the U.S., and it was of the utmost importance that it continued to be so if the people were to continue to be sovereign:

> an equality of property, with necessity of alienation, constantly operating to destroy combinations of powerful families, is the very soul of a republic – while this continues, the people will inevitably possess both power and freedom. (Sheehan and McDowell 1998:402)

These quotes indicate how the sovereignty of the people was derived from their ownership of land. The French immigrant to America, J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1812) stated directly how the land of the individual was the basis of national sovereignty:

> The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence exalt my mind. … What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil? … This formerly rude soil has been converted by my father into a pleasant farm, and in return it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens. (Crèvecoeur 1971 [1782]:24)

Again we see the importance of the widespread ownership of land, and how it might have cemented a universalistic understanding of the right to property. Crèvecoeur, after all, spoke about Americans in the plural in the above quote, assuming that 'we Americans' all have the right to land. This universalism is perhaps best expressed in the American *Declaration of Independence*, which proclaims that all men have the right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'.



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Property was a right of 'all men' and it was from the widespread distribution of landed property that popular sovereignty was derived. In a letter that Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826; principal author of *The Declaration of Independence* and two times President) wrote to a friend thirty years after the American Revolution, he expressed the principles of the universality of property clearly:

> a right to property is founded on our natural wants, in the means in which we are endowed to satisfy those wants, and the right to what we require by these means without violating the similar rights of other sensible beings. (Kantz 1976:475)

In another letter, Jefferson discusses the same subject and points directly to how it is the widespread ownership of property that is the basis for national sovereignty (here, lawmaking):

> Everyone, by his property, or his satisfactory situation, is interested in the support of law and order. And such men may safely and advantageously reserve to themselves a wholesome control over their public affairs. (Looney 2009:566)

We can say, in other words, that America was a propertied community where landed property was the basis of popular sovereignty, and where all citizens enjoyed the right to hold property.

### *The Advent and Development of Nationalism in Norway*

The political situation in Norway during the decades leading up to the Norwegian national revolution in 1814 might seem different to that of America on the surface. At the time of the Norwegian revolution, the country was part of a state where sovereignty was theoretically vested solely in the absolutist Dano-Oldenborg monarch, making landed property in theory disconnected from political rights. But in fact, even though the Norwegian kingdom was subject to the Oldenborg empire – of which it was a province[9] – it was still in many ways seen as a separate kingdom. The monarch often stressed his right to the kingdoms of Norway and Denmark, and Norwegian medieval law was retained to some degree (Ersland and Sandvik 1999:162–163). During the eighteenth century the king was more and more seen to have duties on behalf of his subjects, amongst other things to secure justice and liberties for the bourgeoisie (Glenthøj 2013).

There was also a pervasive intellectual environment inspired by the Enlightenment that focused on the freedoms and rights of the citizens. Authors in both the Norwegian and the Danish parts of the empire had, since the early eighteenth century, developed and investigated theories of natural rights (Bregnsbo 2013; Jacobsen 2013), and by the late eighteenth century this was a major intellectual trend at the University of the empire, situated in Copenhagen. As in the British colonies, these ideas became adapted to local circumstances and applied to a specific Norwegian tradition of rights related to the property structure. The Norwegian medieval state and the way in which the farmers participated in government through the '*Ting*' [governing assembly] based on their *odelsrett* was a pervasive element in this strand of thought.



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The *odelsrett* was a familial right of preemption in regards to landed property. It kept the landed property in the hands of the family that was farming it and secured the owner exclusive rights of use (Gjerdåker 2001; Skeie 1950). In this latter sense, the *odelsrett* was what is called an allodial right to land, which can be contrasted to feudal land where rights of use are not exclusive, and where the person using the property pays allegiance to a landlord and has limited rights in regards to disposition of the property. The *Ting* was connected to this allodial right, being an early medieval form of government where the men with *odelsrett* met every year to form the laws of the country. This right to form laws through property rights which was implied in the *odelsrett* was, in the late eighteenth century, seen by many as the foundation of Nordic freedom: the *odelsrett* made men free because it was an exclusive right to land which made the individual sovereign as a lawmaker. This vision of freedom tended to project upon the Norwegian self-owning farmer (the *odelsbonde* of today), the idealized image of the free Norwegian medieval farmer. The *odelsrett* may in some ways (due to its hereditary and familial nature) be seen to be more similar to feudal property than to modern property, and many people at the time of the Norwegian revolution also thought so (Evju 2015). However, the actual role and ideological significance of the *odelsrett* gives it the function of a modern exclusive property right which (at least to its supporters) seemed to keep land widely distributed.

Christian Magnus Falsen (1782–1830), often dubbed the Father of the Norwegian constitution, wrote about the importance of widespread landownership for the creation of national sovereignty:

> that several small landholdings is a safe way and necessary precondition for the securing of the liberty of the people, and a constitutional monarchy's longevity, is a truth on which the politicians and philosophers of recent times all agree. (Falsen 1815:33)

This assessment was put forth in a pamphlet in which Falsen argued for the existence of the *odelsrett*. According to Falsen, it was because of this right that landownership was, and had always been, widespread in Norway, and the *odelsrett* had prevented the formation of an aristocratic class: 'all our ancient history proves that no hereditary aristocracy existed in our north' (Falsen 1815:24). Falsen believed that the existence of aristocracy was a disaster for any nation wanting to be free. Aristocracy had:

> dismantled all equality between the citizens of Europe. What then do we see in these states? Nothing but aristocracy and slaves, great landowners and unfree peasants, bound to the soil that they were obliged to plough for their masters. (Falsen 1815:40)

Willhelm Frimann Koren Christie (1778–1849), a lawyer and member of the constitutional assembly, had similar thoughts at the constitutional convention in 1814. He said that without the *odelsrett*:

> all the land will be in the hands of a few rich men – and behold! Our now noble farmers will sink into the slavery of Europe's past peoples or that



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> of the Russian slaves of today and inherit their Slavic spirit – I would then look in tears upon my fatherland! (Olafsen 1914:160)

As in America, in Norway too there was a link between widespread landownership and a distaste for privilege; property was to be a universal right. Only in a country where the bulk of the people were landowners – not ruled by aristocrats – could a nation be free, and only then could sovereignty be popular, because: 'The right to represent the nation … and to take part in the legislation, was, as our history and as the old laws demonstrate, not personal; it was attached to the land' (Falsen 1815:32). Sovereignty was thus popular if landownership was widespread:

> As long as the farms are small, divided between many, we can see that the customs are being respected, that the laws are being respected, in short, that the states remain, perhaps not powerful, but at least they remain happy. (Falsen 1815:33)

The point was not so much to create a 'powerful' nation, but one that was 'happy'. And again, we see that this was grounded in the widespread ownership of land. Falsen wrote that if one allowed land to be accumulated by aristocrats, then they 'would become hard and unjust; and what could be more natural? They have no right, and this they must surely know for themselves' (Falsen 1815:34). As he put it in his constitutional draft, echoing the American *Declaration of Independence*: 'All men are born free and equal: they have certain natural, essential and unchangeable rights. These are freedom, security and property' (Jæger 1916:9). In Norway as in America we can say – again, metaphorically – that the nation was a propertied community.

### *The Transvaluation of Property in the U.S. and Norway*

The central role given to landownership in the United States and Norway naturally had consequences for the power structure of these nations. For one, it meant that landless labourers were excluded from political power. And in America it also meant that the chattel slaves remained precisely that: slaves. This was largely because, as Winthrop D. Jordan has pointed out, a revolution carried out in the name of the right to own property was a serious obstacle to the abolition of slavery in a society in which the slave was seen as the property of his or her owner (Jordan 1968:350–351). However, as the U.S. and Norway became increasingly more industrialized by the middle of the nineteenth century, property in land became relatively less important as other forms of labour and wealth emerged. With these changing conditions there came about a shift in the understanding of property and sovereignty which changed the position of landless labourers and chattel slaves, but which still kept the link between property and sovereignty. This is the *transvaluation of property,* or the shift from land to labour. I will now provide some brief examples from the suffrage debates in Norway (ca. 1870) and from debates about slavery in America (ca. 1860) to indicate how the property–sovereignty connection changed with the advent of industrial society.



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Most important in relation to the *transvaluation*, or the shift from land to labour, was the abandoning of the idea that it was only real, landed property that could be the basis of sovereignty. The right to property was more and more understood dually, to mean also the right to the fruits of one's labour. In this way, the sovereignty of the nation could be derived from, and belong to, all labouring individuals, and because of this, full political citizenship could be expanded to the whole nation. The thoughts of Norwegian Member of Parliament and later Prime Minister Johan Sverdrup (1816–1892) are telling here. Sverdrup suggested that 'the greatest capital a country can have is its people; with this no amount of landed property can compete' (Havstad 1882:354). And later he asked rhetorically:

> is it reasonable that a house worth 150 spd[10] is compared to the capital which is found in the skill and labour of a man? Show me he who can honestly say; no, a laboring man is not worth 150 spd. (Havstad 1882:349)

Within such a vision it did not make sense to confine sovereignty only to the men of landed property. Similarly, the right to property understood in this way also demanded the abolition of chattel slavery in America, so that the slaves too could have the right to the fruits of their labour or self-ownership, and thus become full citizens. In a speech in 1854 American President Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) stated:

> My faith in the proposition that each man should do precisely as he pleases with all that which is exclusively his own, lies at the foundation of the sense of justice there is in me. I extend the principle to communities of men as well as to individuals. … the doctrine of self government is right – absolutely and internally right. (Basler 1953a:265)

Lincoln here connects self-ownership with self-government, and thus he connects it to popular sovereignty. Self-ownership is the same as saying that people who have property in their labour power have the right to the fruits of their labour. Four years later in 1858 Lincoln said:

> I believe each individual is naturally entitled to do as he pleases with himself and the fruit of his labor, so far as it in no wise interferes with any other man`s rights and only by giving every man the right to the fruits of his labor. (Roe 1907:409)

Slavery was wrong because it denied individuals this right. The pro-slavery man, held Lincoln: 'Says that, upon the principle of equality, slaves should be allowed to go into a new territory like other property' (Basler 1953b:315). But under the new understanding of property as being the right to benefit from the fruits of one's labour, the slave was also naturally free because he owned himself or his labour power and could no longer be understood as a form of property that others could own. And popular sovereignty was now understood to be derived from all individuals' self-ownership, rather than from their landed property.



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*The Background of Transvaluation: Industrialization*

An important factor that contributed to the shift from land to labour as the basis for sovereignty in America was the decline in importance of smallholder farming in the north, although it did remain a relatively prominent feature of life in the north as well. Smallholder farming nevertheless gradually fell under the shadow of the emerging industry and artisan work in the mushrooming cities and towns of the north. This meant that the total proportion of people who lived off the land decreased, and that an increasing number of people acquired their livelihood through wage work. In 1800, 70% of people in the north had been agricultural labourers, many of them on farms that were only partly immersed in market relations; by 1860 the number of agricultural labourers had fallen to 40%. Urban dwellers had risen from 6% in 1810 to 21% in 1860, while the percentage of people engaged in non-agricultural labour rose from 21% to 45% in the same period (Macpherson 1982:5–32).

In the same way that the first emergence of nationalism was strongly connected with the emergent smallholding property structure during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so too was the shift from land to labour strongly connected with the demise of this kind of property structure and the emergence of industrial forms of property capital. This was also true in Norway, although Norway – even more so than the United States – remained very much an agricultural economy during the latter decades of the nineteenth century. However, Norway saw growth in the cities and industries as well, and experienced huge population growth during the course of the nineteenth century. It was impossible for the majority of these people to be smallholder farmers, due to the scarcity of suitable land. Thus the proportion of tenants increased, as did employment in artisan professions, as well as employment in occupations such as clerks and teachers. As in America, an increasing number of people became dependent on wages for their living. In 1850 there were still no more than 12,000 industrial workers in Norway, but by 1875 the number had risen to 44,000, while the number of skilled artisans and functionaries had reached 35,000. There was an especially intense period of industrialization from 1860–1875 in which the number of industrial workers quadrupled (Nerbøvik, 1999:79–85). By 1870 there were also 53,000 crofters, who can be classified along with wage workers in opposition to the self-owning farmers (Pryser 1999:166–170).

## Concluding Remarks: The Agrarian Origins and Industrial Future of Nationalism

Ernest Gellner elaborated a series of what he considered to be necessary connections between industrial society and nationalism. This assumption has since been criticized from a variety of positions. Nevertheless, the majority of scholars agree with Gellner that nationalism is modern, placing its emergence after the French Revolution, and connecting it with various aspects of modern society.

This article has argued that the origins of nationalism can be found in the property assumptions and property regimes of agrarian societies. This is not to say that I place nationalism outside of the modern, and the article should not be seen as



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belonging primarily to the ethnosymbolist or primordialist stand on nationalism. It is rather that nationalism should be seen as a result of modernizing, capitalist (particularly in the forms of property) agrarian societies, and that the landed, agrarian form of nationalism provides a 'missing link' between the pre- or proto-national forms of society (feudal, absolutist, mercantilist, etc.) and the fully modern industrial form identified most clearly by Gellner. Therefore, to understand nationalism in the later form (i.e. industrial), it is important to grasp it in its first form (i.e. agrarian). Nationalism emerged and formed within agrarian societies; that is, in societies where the main source of wealth was land, and where a large majority of the people lived off the land. The cases of the United States and Norway can demonstrate this, as this article has identified.

Nationalism in its agrarian form, this article has argued, may be understood as a propertied community in which national sovereignty is seen to be constituted by the landed property of its members, and where property is held as a right of all the members of the nation. Landed property thus confers on the individual political citizenship because ownership of landed property is understood as the source of individual sovereignty. The rest of the population has civil citizenship, meaning that they have civil rights, such as the right to hold and acquire property. Thus they too might, in theory, also acquire political citizenship by acquiring landed property. In both the United States and Norway, landed property was already relatively widespread when nationalism first emerged. National, popular sovereignty was theorized because of this fact: the idea of popular sovereignty formed alongside the reality of widespread ownership of land because it was felt that a large portion of the people were sovereign since they owned land. The key point here is that nationalism emerged as an ideology with a strong basis in landed, agrarian property. This situation changed with the coming of industrial society.

As society in America and Norway gradually became industrialized, the ownership of land lost its significance, and the property element of the propertied community became understood as the right to own one's labour. Thus all members of the nation could obtain political citizenship because they are all understood to be sovereign individuals on account of having ownership of their person or their labour power. This is the result of what I have called a *transvaluation of property.* With this change, nationalism becomes functional for industrial society similar to the way that Gellner held. The difference is that this is an ideological functionality: the national ideals of property and sovereignty legitimize capitalist labour relations in which the bulk of the population is forced to alienate their labour to the few who own the means of production.

In the *transvalued* or industrial form of national ideology, those who alienate their labour are seen as free and sovereign individuals, contrary to the agrarian form, where only those who owned the land were seen as free and sovereign. The alienation of labour power is thus understood to lie at the basis of national freedom. The reason for this is because nationalism was in the first instance founded on agrarian landed principles, and these were then transformed. Therefore, it is through the landed agrarian origins of nationalism that we must understand its industrial future. I have used the cases of the United States and Norway to exemplify this, but I believe that it is likely that these cases are representative of



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something that happened gradually in most of the western world during the nineteenth century. There is not enough space to explore this here. One can only point to the general demise of feudalism and the simultaneous emergence of capitalist property with the coming of nationalism in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution.

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## Notes

[1] The title of this paper is inspired by Benedict Anderson's famous and excellent study on nationalism (Anderson 2006 [1983]).
[2] This heading is borrowed from Jonathan Hearn (Hearn 2006:99).
[3] The question here is whether nationalism and nations have long-term cultural roots (the ethnosymbolist view), or whether they are purely modern (the modernist view). Jonathan Hearn provides a good overview of these debates (Hearn 2006). The most influential ethnosymbolist views have been formulated by Anthony Smith (Smith 1991), while influential modernist views besides Gellner include Michael Mann (Mann 1993) and Umut Ozkirimli (Ozkirimli 2005).
[4] The term 'transvaluation' was used by Liah Greenfeld in her study of nationalism, and she in turn took the term from Nietzsche. A transvaluation basically means a radical reevaluation of values: to turn them on their head (Greenfeld 1993:16; Nietzsche 2006 [1885]:8).
[5] Descriptions of the idea of base and superstructure can be found scattered around in Marx's works, for instance in *The German Ideology,* in *the 18th Brumaire,* in *A Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, and in *Capital* Volume 3. A good summary can be found in Bottomore *et al*. (1991:45–47).
[6] The term 'peculiar institution' became a common euphemism for slavery amongst proslavery men in the lead-up to the Civil War (1861–1865).
[7] All translations from works originally published in Norwegian are by the author.
[8] These were the Barony of Rosendal (established in 1678) in the southwest of Norway, and the County of Jarlsberg (established in 1684).
[9] When the two kingdoms merged it was declared that Norway was to be 'a province of Denmark till the end of time'.
[10] Spd is short for Spesidaler or Speciedaler, a Norwegian currency at the time.

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