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Book review

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Can we Treat Nationalism as Simply a Civic Religion?

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Abstract

The article analyzes the legitimacy of classifying nationalism as a civil religion. It offers a unique perspective on the study of nationalism and religion by integrating selected sociological concepts into the analysis. Based on a thematic analysis of scholarly literature, it demonstrates that nationalism can structure individuals' hierarchy of values similarly to religion, becoming a supreme point of reference in making social and political decisions. This article argues that nationalism can serve a quasi-religious function both at the level of individual identity and collective identity.

Keywords
nationalism, religion, nation, civic religion

Introduction

This article will argue that nationalism can be classified as a civic religion from the perspective of both individual and collective identity. The article synthesizes a number of works discussing nationalism and religion and shows how broad sociological processes and issues can be analyzed in the context of this concept. The research question aimed to be answered in this essay is the following: "To what extent can nationalism be treated as a civic religion?" To support such a view, the paper will present similarities between religious experiences and practices and those of nationalism, as well as show the nature of nationalism as quasi-religious both in essence and function. The work of scholars such as Benedict Anderson,[1] Michael Billig,[2] Nira Yuval-Davis,[3] and Robert N. Bellah,[4] among many others, will be used to provide an academic backbone for the argument. The term "nationalist" will be used to refer to those whose national identity plays an important, if not central role within their lives as I believe nationalism cannot be argued to be a civic religion, when a nation is not regarded as an important aspect of one's identity in the first place. This view will be explained throughout the essay. The article presented below adds a unique perspective to the study of nationalism and religion by implementing more broad sociological concepts from unrelated branches of the discipline, such as social axiology, to apply them in this still, as I believe, underdeveloped context.

Methodology

The following article has utilized the method of thematic analysis of secondary data in the form of multiple academic texts relating to nationalism and religion. A distinct focus has been placed on the search for the relationship between those two concepts in the context of identity and their functional processes in society. As Jane Ritchie et al. explain, thematic analysis as a qualitative research tool involves analyzing texts in the search for recurring themes presenting a similar aspect.[5] Although I have used this method to analyze articles strictly related to nationalism and religion; I have also applied the same framework to papers seemingly unrelated to the discussed phenomenon at first glance. The resulting analysis has allowed me to come up with a synthesis of multiple perspectives across the discipline of sociology.

1. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, Verso 2006.

2. M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, Sage 1995.

3. N. Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, Sage 2011.

4. R.N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, "Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences", from the issue entitled, "Religion in America", 1967, Vol. 96, No. 1, pp. 1–21.

5. J. Ritchie, et al., *Qualitative research practice: a guide for social science students and researchers*, Sage 2013.

Literature Review

Throughout the last decades, nationalism has been studied in depth from multiple perspectives, including psychology[6] and political sciences.[7] This article, however, tackles the issue from a sociological point of view and simultaneously analyses the concept of identity from the same angle. The first significant sociological works on the topic of nationalism emerged in the second half of the 20th century, with a distinct view of nationalism as emerging naturally and organically in society, dubbed the primordial perspective. Some of its proponents, like Clifford Geertz, have argued that nationalities have developed in an organic, almost biological manner, being a natural and innate extension of kinship ties.[8] Moreover, others such as Edward Shils have claimed that nations are made of "primordial attachments" which have developed from the need of humans to form closely organized groups, which nations are a consequence of.[9] In contrast to the primordial view of nationalism, however, a new wave of understanding of the phenomenon has emerged, labelled "the modernist perspective." An influential figure in this view has been Ernest Gellner, the author of "Nations and Nationalism."[10] In his book, he points to the history of nationalism as heavily influenced in its formation by the processes in Europe during the industrial revolution. Moreover, for him, nationalism was and still is an ideological tool, which allows nationalists to create a culturally homogenous entity. Significantly, Gellner claims that nations are not ancient and primordial but rather constructed and created. Such a view has sparked a longstanding debate, in which notably Benedict Anderson in his influential book "Imagined Communities"[11] has presented a view similar to Gellner, pointing out the exact processes forming nations going as far back as the protestant reformation and print capitalism, causing unification and popularization of the national languages. Importantly, however, Anderson primarily argues that nations are not real entities, objective realities, but rather "imagined communities," in which every member creates their own vision of what their nation is, through contact with a limited number of his or her compatriots. Yet another perspective on nationalism, presented within the grand debate on the topic, has been the works of Anthony D. Smith, notably his book "The Ethnic Origins of Nations,"[12] critiquing the modernist perspective and arguing that nations, although changing over the course of centuries, are in fact deeply rooted in pre-industrial realities. In addition, Smith points to the importance of myths, symbols, and traditions in shaping and sustaining nations, in a sense bridging the concepts presented by modernist theories with those of the primordialists. When analyzing works focusing more on religion, more recent articles, specifically relating to nationalism and religion, which is the topic of this essay, focused on the comparisons of both ideas. Barbara-Ann J. Rieffer, as one of the first, has steered the debate about nationalism in the direction of religion. In her article, Rieffer points to the importance of religious beliefs in shaping nationalist movements across

6. L. Huddy, N. Khatib, *American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement*, "American Journal of Political Science", 2007, Vol. 51, Issue 1, pp. 63–77, DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00237.x; K. Stenner, *The authoritarian dynamic*, Cambridge University Press 2005; S. Feldman, M.R. Steenbergen, *The Humanitarian Foundation of Public Support for Social Welfare*, "American Journal of Political Science", 2001, Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 658–677, DOI: 10.2307/2669244.

7. A. Wimmer, *Waves of war: nationalism, state formation, and ethnic exclusion in the modern world*, Cambridge University Press 2013; C. Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States: AD 990-1992*, Blackwell 1992; E.J. Hobsbawm, N*ations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press 1990.

8. C. Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, Basic Books 1973.

9. E. Shils, *Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties: Some Particular Observations on the Relationships of Sociological Research and Theory*, "The British Journal of Sociology", 1957, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 130–145, DOI: 10.2307/587365.

10. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Blackwell Publishing 1983.

11. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities...*, op. cit.

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time and space as well as argues that including religion in the analysis of nationalism's influence on society can allow us to better explain the historical and present processes, often entirely attributed to just nationalism. In addition, Rieffer presents three distinct analytical frameworks: "religious nationalism," where both as intertwined and political and national claims are by nature religious; "instrumental pious nationalism," where religion is used by nationalist movements to legitimize its claims and gather support – here religion is used quite instrumentally; "secular nationalism," where national movements intentionally distance themselves from religions, often even becoming anti-religious.[13] Lastly, in another influential piece of work, Rogers Brubaker presents four ways in which nationalism and religion can be analyzed.[14] Firstly, both are argued to be analogical phenomena with strong sources of collective identity and more or less established patterns of actions. Importantly, a key role is played by symbols and signs, as – similarly to the view presented previously – they uphold and shape collective beliefs and emotions. Secondly, Brubaker points to the possibility of viewing nationalism as based on religion. Here, he shows that many religions were instrumental in the formation of nationalism, for example by being the first foundation of collective identity, which then became a national identity. Thirdly, the author shows how religion and nationalism can be mutually transformative. Nationalist movements have often adopted the language and symbols of religious movements to legitimize their aims and means to achieve them. On the other hand, religious movements have historically used nationalism to convince the larger populations about the truth of their message. Lastly, Brubaker shows how religion and nationalism can stand in opposition to each other by having conflicting claims about morals or the ultimate purpose of a human being. Here, a conflict of identity might occur, where one's religious and national ego struggle for the primacy within the self.

12. A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Blackwell 1986.

13. B.-A.J. Rieffer, *Religion and Nationalism*, "Ethnicities", 2003, Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp. 215–242, DOI: 10.1177/1468796803003002003.

14. R. Brubaker, *Religion and nationalism: Four Approaches*, "Nations and Nationalism", 2012, 18 (1), pp. 2–20.

Nationalism as a Civic Religion

Having shown the historical context of the development of the debate regarding firstly, just nationalism, and secondly, its connection with religion, we can proceed to the analysis of ways in which nationalism and religion interact to achieve the same functional goals in the context of one's identity. Firstly, nationalism can be treated as a civic religion, especially in relation to one's identity, as it mimics religion in its value hierarchy structure. To explain this phenomenon, it is useful to use the theoretical framework of Florian Znaniecki,[15] who argued that humans navigate their social realities and make decisions according to an axio-normative structure. Such a structure orders all values in an interconnected system, placing one value as the ultimate one, forcing all other values to be subordinated to it. In the case of nationalism, the nation, understood as an imagined collective, becomes that absolute value. What follows among the individuals committed to the idea of nationalism is for-

15. F. Znaniecki, *Cultural Sciences: Their Origin and Development*, University of Illinois Press 1952. See also: E. Hałas, *Classical Cultural Sociology: Florian Znaniecki Impact in a New Light*, "Journal of Classical Sociology", 2006, Vol. 6, pp. 257–282.

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mation of identity which places every major action or value in accordance with the interest of the nation. Examples of such decisions might include the political party one votes for, placing importance on national foods, or following specific customs and traditions, as well as belonging to a pro-social organization. In regard to the latter, empirical research has shown that the ideology of nationalism is a mediator effecting one's social engagement and volunteering for their community.[16] In addition, such a practice clearly presents the argument of Christopher Hewer and Evanthia Lyons, who claim that what mostly motivates an individual's action, especially when it requires inconvenience or struggle, is their identity and the beliefs that flow from it.[17] Thus, nationalism creates an identity based on a strict value structure and motivates individuals to act in accordance to that intangible value.

To further support this point, we can use the work of Anderson, who claims that national identity is one of, if not the most fundamental aspects of individual and, more importantly, collective identity, in many cases so strong that it can override other fundamental political ideologies such as Marxism or even religion.[18] Examples showing such occurrences include the Cambodian–Vietnamese War between two communist states or the current war between Ukraine and Russia, where Orthodox Christianity is the prevailing religion in both states. We can further link the presented idea of the nation being the highest attainable good to the work of Billig, who argues that nationalism provides somewhat of a morality, where the "national order" of the world must be protected at all cost, even at the expense of human lives.[19] To illustrate such "morality", we can use the words of US presidents, who, in trying to justify international military interventions, claim that a nation's right to self-preservation cannot at any cost be violated (context of the Gulf War described in Billig's "Banal Nationalism"). Such a "national order" again provides evidence for nationalism functioning in a similar way to religion, justifying its aims in the eyes of nationalists and providing them with a fixed foundation for morality.

Furthermore, the presented view of nationalism as equated to religion in the context of identity can be supported by showing how both religion and identity perform similar functions in society. This can be shown in the context of building trust, cohesion, and social capital as characterized by Robert Putnam which, as the relevant literature presents, can be achieved by high levels of religiosity as well as nationalist tendencies.[20] However, both religion and nationalism have also been theorized and empirically shown to cause conflict and contention. Firstly, examining the link between social capital and religiosity, we can go as far back as the classical work of sociology, the writings of Émile Durkheim. In his book titled "The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life," Durkheim claims that religion is an expression of social order and thus, the perceived supernatural is in fact the feeling

16. M.H.C. Lai, et al., *Motivation as Mediator Between National Identity and Intention to Volunteer*, "Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology", 2012, Vol. 23, Issue 2, pp. 128–142, DOI: 10.1002/casp.2108.

17. C. Hewer, E. Lyons, *Identity*, in: *Political psychology: A Social Psychological Approach*, eds. C. Hewer, E. Lyons, Wiley-Blackwell 2018, pp. 93–113.

18. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities...*, op. cit., pp. 1–8.

19. M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, op. cit., pp. 60–92.

20. R.D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster 2000.

of participating in something beyond the individual, namely society. Its norms and values build the "collective consciousness," of which religion is just an expression, and thus reinforces it through its rituals and beliefs.[21] In contrast, the work of Robert Putnam and David Campbell presents a different picture of religion; although they agree that religion can be a force for unification within society, they show that Durkheimian understanding of religion can only be applied within societies where a single faith is adhered to.[22] In the analyzed highly pluralistic American society, differing religious beliefs or lack thereof have caused conflict by promoting in-group biases as well as political polarization. The causes of such processes can be argued to be a consequence of the inability of different social groups to agree upon a single "sacred canopy" as characterized by Peter Berger.[23] Lastly, the discussion culminated in the article of Seth Kimani, who conducted a secondary data analysis on the topic of religion and social capital, showing that shared religious practices such as festivals and prayer create a feeling of unity, which in effect spills into other aspects of human life such as greater engagement in volunteering or mutual support, all cultivating social capital.[24] However, in the same article Kimani also points out that the dividing force of religion causing in-group favoritism as well as out-group discrimination should not be overlooked and is still a persistent issue in many societies. When religious beliefs become the overriding, defining factor in social relations, even those with slight deviations to the faith norm can be excluded, promoting fragmentation within society. Moving on to nationalism, despite being exclusionary by nature, nationalism connects individuals from all social groups in a single understanding of society instilling a unified social schema, thus allowing them to work in a unified manner to achieve a given goal. As argued by Nils Holtug, a single identity and thus a feeling of unity greatly impacts the trust between individuals, even allowing for a more egalitarian society to be built.[25] Nationalism can thus be classified as a civic religion as it unifies society around a central idea, ordering the axio-normative system, and instilling a shared identity among citizens, despite the national community being in fact "imagined."[26] To further support this point, it is useful to examine the work of Tim Reeskens and Matthew Wright; in their analysis of 27 European societies and their forms of nationalism they have presented that civic nationalism, focusing on uniting goals and solidarity between citizens, is linked with higher levels of social capital, cohesion, and thus positive functioning of society.[27] On the other hand however, when analyzed historically by Gellner, nationalism has developed from the need to create a homogeneous national culture, imposing a single understanding of the nation.[28] It is thus the case that nationalism by its nature stands in opposition to diversity, especially within a single-nation state ultimately causing divisions.

21. É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Oxford University Press 1912.

22. R.D. Putnam, D.E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Simon & Schuster 2012, pp. 493–515.

23. P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy : Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion*, Doubleday 1967.

24. S. Kimani, *The Influence of Religious Beliefs on Social Behavior and Community Cohesion*, "International Journal of Humanity and Social Sciences", 2024, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 60–73, DOI: 10.47941/ijhss.2085.

25. N. Holtug, *The Politics of Social Cohesion: Immigration, Community, and Justice*, Oxford University Press 2021.

26. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities...*, op. cit.

27. T. Reeskens, M. Wright, *Nationalism and the Cohesive Society*, "Comparative Political Studies", 2012, Vol. 46, Issue 2, pp. 153–181, DOI: 10.1177/0010414012453033.

28. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, op. cit.

Moreover, nationalism can further be proven to be a civic religion as, on an individual identity level, it can induce strong emotions and feelings of reverence, admiration, belonging, or veneration. To explain such a phenomenon, we can use the theoretical framework provided by Bellah.[29] He argued that nationalism, when applied to a practical level of actions, precisely becomes what he describes it a "civil religion," with ceremonies such as patriotic funerals, singing the national anthem as a means to express the collective identity, or invoking founding myths and legends as means of showing a collective past. Other examples can include celebrating national heroes such as veterans, similar to saints in religions, or implying that nations are worthy of sacrificing lives for, similarly to becoming a religious martyr. In such an argumentation, it can be argued that Bellah alludes to the proposition of Durkheim, who, as explained earlier, claimed that in religious ceremonies, the masses symbolically worship the societal values, norms, meaning, and structures they adhere to. In the case of Bellah's argument, nationalism in the form of a "civil religion," through its "ceremonies" and expressions, makes society truly worship itself and its nation.

Developing the ideas of Bellah further, we can again use the work of Billig, who presents us with the notion of "banal nationalism."[30] He, on the other hand, argues that what forms national identity and later preserves it are repeated instances when an individual is reminded of their national heritage and roots. Such reminders happen through frequent, seemingly unimportant every-day use of symbols and actions such as using the words "our country," seeing flags on government buildings, or even receiving the news covering a topic from a national point of view. Despite his idea being quite similar to Bellah's,[31] Billig differs in the magnitude of instances of identity formation and preservation. What is important according to Billig is the subtle nature of such "reminders," which later become subconscious, slowly but deeply impacting one's axio-normative order, causing nationalism to be a taken for granted ideology and everyday way of thinking.[32] Subsequently, an individual impacted by such a long term formation of identity later enacts the internalized ideas, "performing" their identity, replicating the already acquired norms and everyday practices. Although the idea of "performativity" has previously been mostly applied to gender,[33] I, using the argument of Karen Armstrong,[34] believe it can be used as a theoretical framework for other aspects of identity. The performed activities often create a positive feedback loop of identity creation through one's actions which permeate through everyday activities described previously. It is this subtle, yet all-encompassing nature of nationalism, which points towards its grand influence on an individual and collective identity, which mimics the influence of religion. The similarity becomes even more visible when we analyze the work of Grace Davie, who claims that religion, especially in its institutionalized form, e.g., Catholicism or

29. R.N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in...*, op. cit., pp. 1–21.

30. M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, op. cit.

31. R.N. Bellah, *Civil Religion in...*, op. cit., pp. 1–21.

32. M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, op. cit.

33. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge 1990.

34. K. Armstrong, *The case for God*, Anchor Books 2010.

Islam, has effects beyond a simple belief – it affects all aspects of human life from foods consumed to sexual relations.[35] Despite nationalism perhaps not having such a deep effect, it certainly orients many spheres of life, by fundamentally impacting one's identity as a national of a given country. It can be thus concluded that nationalism can be treated as a civic religion as it slowly forms the minds, schemas, and, importantly, identities of those who believe in it, and even others who do not, as according to Billig,[36] it is a somewhat subconscious process.

Moreover, another reason why nationalism can be treated as a civic religion in the context of identity is the way in which an individual perceives a nation. Coming back to the work of Anderson, he argues that nations are imagined communities, as nationalists even from the smallest nations are incapable of getting to know every individual within it.[37] Thus, a nation can be described as both subjective and objective. Subjective – as the perception of what a nation is to a large extent constructed through interpersonal interactions with some of its members. In addition, the influence of a given place and experiences related to it, as Davis et. al. add, can also impact how the community and nation is viewed.[38] However, it is also objective due to its past, traditions passed down from generation to generation, its myths and legends, and, most importantly, as Anderson strongly points out, objective due to the unifying aspect of language, especially in its formal form.[39] It can be thus concluded that individuals connected to the idea of nationalism feel as a part of something much greater than themselves, visible and palpable, through symbols, language, or people, but simultaneously incomprehensible (hence imagined) and all-encompassing. Such a perception of a nation reinforces the foundational aspect nationhood plays in the formation of identity among nationalists, as although each participates in the nation, each simultaneously experiences and views it differently.

On the other hand, as Gellner points out, nations are by nature imagined, as only local communities can be described as "real."[40] This point can be argued to provide further evidence for the almost spiritual aspect of nationalism as an ideology, which manages to instill a belief of reality of nations into those who believe in it. To illustrate this point, we can use Anderson's example, which refers to a nationalist worker who no matter how much he is exploited by the capitalist bourgeoisie, will still believe in an intrinsic connection he has with those who exploit him, simply based on the trivial similarities such as same nation of birth.[41] To further develop the case, adopting the Marxist perspective, we can use the work of Antonio Gramsci, who claims that nationalism, similarly to the "opium of the masses" described by Marx,[42] manages to create a "false consciousness" and thus, a false understanding of the world, pointing inwardly into nations, uniting classes despite their conflict, instead

35. G. Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*, SAGE 2013, pp. 137–160.

36. M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, op. cit.

37. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities...*, op. cit.

38. K. Davis, H. Ghorashi, P. Smets, *Introduction*, in: *Contested Belonging: Spaces, Practices, Biographies*, eds. K. Davis, H. Ghorashi, P. Smets, Emerald Publishing Limited 2018, pp. 1–15.

39. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities...*, op. cit.

40. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, op. cit.

41. B. Anderson, *Imagined communities...*, op. cit.

42. K. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of right'*, University Press 1970.

of showing the outward, international interests of unity among the oppressed.[43] Thus, nationalism in this sense can again be claimed to be a civil religion, as it tackles the core identity of the oppressed, making them, similarly to religion in the Marxist sense, not see the suffering they experience. In an additional sense, it can also be argued, similarly to theistic religions, to be a tool for the ruling elites, as Marx claimed.[44]

Lastly, it can further be argued that by analyzing the current socio-political situation, especially in Europe, nationalism can be treated as a civic religion, considering the effect it has on individuals in light of the rise of right-wing reactionary movements. As it has been presented by John Schwarzmantel, the importance of nations and the ideology of nationalism has lost its influence in the realm of global politics.[45] However, this process has not occurred without consequences, as a resurgence of nationalist movements such as the National Front in France, the AFD in Germany, or the Confederation in Poland has taken place. This process provides evidence for the argument of Zhongyuan Wang, who claims that globalization, when looked at from the perspective of its consequences on the individual level, impacts the core identity of nationalists not only by disordering the "national order" or "morality" discussed above,[46] but also by causing "disembeddedness" among individuals, as Anthony Giddens claims.[47] The mentioned process refers to the gradual loss of importance placed on traditional sources of identity, notably the nation. Such a revival of populism in the political sphere is thus a reaction to the effects of late modernity and globalization, as well as an attempt to reinvent the national identity. Interestingly, as Yuval-Davis has shown, a similar process can be observed among religious communities experiencing the effects of secularization.[48] In addition, to further explain the presented argument, we can use the work of Davis et al., who argue that national identity does not only become the foundation for thinking about oneself, but also about others, which can, as in the case of right-populist movements, lead to racist or xenophobic views.[49]

Conclusion

In conclusion, answering the posed question, the author believes that nationalism as an ideology can certainly be seen as a civic religion, as it not only mimics religion in its conceptual form, perceiving the nation as the highest possible good which further impacts all other values and actions, but it also has unifying qualities, similarly to religion. Moreover, it upholds the national identity through rituals such as marches or demonstrations and through smaller day-to-day practices such as a specific use of language or symbols – similarly to religion, where individuals participate in established religious festivals as well as uphold their faith through daily prayer and regular rituals.

43. A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, International Publishers 1971.

44. K. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's...*, op. cit.

45. J. Schwarzmantel, *Nationalism: Its Role and Significance in a Globalized World*, in: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology*, eds. E. Amenta, K. Nash, A. Scott, Wiley Blackwell 2016, pp. 325–335.

46. Z. Wang, *From Crisis to Nationalism?*, "Chinese Political Science Review", 2021, Vol. 6 (1), pp. 20–39, DOI: 10.1007/s41111-020-00169-8.

47. A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Polity Press 1991.

48. N. Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of...*, op. cit.

49. K. Davis, H. Ghorashi, P. Smets, *Introduction*, op. cit., pp. 1–15.

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