This is a rich and suggestive book which asks key questions about nationalism, both in theory and in practice, adding to this several high-powered analyses of particular turning points in European history. With this as background, the author turns to the relations between partitions and democracy in contemporary Europe. The cost of such range is an occasional inability to truly nail down some arguments, but the book nonetheless deserves a warm welcome. ‘Liquidity’ makes conceptual sense both because nationalism has not always had the same character and because multiple border changes have most certainly marked twentieth century Europe. The book is clearly the result of long-standing intellectual and policy engagement in the great shatter zones of Europe, those of central Europe and the Balkans, and it derives quite as much from the worries of someone committed to the ideals of the European Union. Let me highlight the achievements before turning to some critical points.

The book opens with an introduction describing the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century. It is not the case that we possess any general theory of this crucial emergence that convinces, not least given the critical assault on the most celebrated such theory, that of Ernest Gellner. Bianchini makes a brilliant contribution here by bringing out the different elements that must form part of any future general account. He is particularly good when dealing with the ideas of intellectuals, noting the drift between pure Enlightenment ideals and those with nativist and romantic hues. He is very well informed about paradoxes of all sorts. The liberalism of Mazzini was combined with determination to effectively destroy a whole series of small and ‘unviable’ nations, whilst many thinkers produced plans for federations that had no chance whatsoever of being realised. Then he is well aware of competing options.

He writes interestingly about the differences within the Baltic area, especially when contrasting the plans of Rosa Luxembourg and Piłsudski – which is to say that he has real understanding of the position of Jews, many of whom became left-wing empire savers in the face of nationalisms that would have excluded or killed them. He is just as good on the Balkans, describing attempts of both Croats and Serbs to claim hegemony over the other. Bianchini adds to this understanding of intellectual actors a firm appreciation of geopolitical realities, taking 1878 as the key year in which established states sought to use nationalism as cement for their regimes. This is not quite right. For one thing, the desire to give territories to particular nations – often before national formation had taken place – predated 1878, as was certainly true of both Greeks and Serbs. For another, he tends to see the interference of the great
states in terms of the search for profit, neglecting the fact that the desire to balance power was as important. But he is entirely correct to stress that the desire of great states to homogenise their own territories did a great deal to politicise minorities as to turn them towards secession. Furthermore, he notes the ways in which the great states sought to create and intensify nationalist feelings inside the territories of their rivals – an extremely important cause of the outbreak of war in 1914. Finally, he notes that the Balkan states had escaped the control of their mentors and sponsors by the turn of the century, becoming mini-empires seeking to expand in a world of great geopolitical insecurity. All of this is to say that the author catches all the key factors, doing more in this regard than other authors. But this is not to say that he is able to so prioritise the factors so as to produce a new general theory. Perhaps such a theory is not possible, although some moves in that direction certainly can be made.

The first part of the book then offers a very detailed atlas of nation-state metamorphosis across the whole of the twentieth century. A series of chapters consider the effects of the First World War, the territorial changes that followed immediately after the collapse of the Tsarist Empire (including here a fine analysis of the differences between Lenin and Trotsky), the confrontation between Lenin and Wilson, Hitler’s imperial plans, and the changes that resulted from the collapse of the socialist bloc. The intelligent use of maps makes it possible to see what was involved on many of these occasions, making this an excellent place to turn for anyone trying to understand the dizzying changes involved. But the author is just as good at explaining causal mechanisms, and he does so with a nice sense of irony. Nationalism in the Baltics for instance began by being directed against the German elite, thereby showing loyalty to the empire; but this changed once Russification policies were put in place. This is of course a further example of the liquidity on which the book focuses.

The second part of the book is different, very much the result of political concern. It looks at the relations between border changes and democracy in Europe, principally since 1945 (the exception being consideration of the Baltic states over a longer period). The principal theoretical claim is made in a long chapter on the break-up of Yugoslavia. Bianchini argues that economic crisis combined with poor government to cause and enable nationalist mobilisation. These categories are then used to explain the parlous state of the European Union. Bianchini suggests here that the advanced world is now torn between two democratic options. On the one hand stands the traditional desire for each state to have its own nation, and each nation to have its own state. But globalisation and Europeanisation suggest the possibility of ‘interculturalism’, that is, the creation of new identities as the result of encounters and engagement with others, including the immigrants made necessary for the European economy given low fertility rates and refugees escaping horrors in the near East and elsewhere. Bianchini is pessimistic, not surprisingly given the policies of Orbán in Hungary.

Perhaps the most relevant phrase from social theory for our world is Polanyi’s insistence that ‘society will seek to protect itself’. For there is now a mass of evidence that the less educated, older, male and rural elements within the advanced world feel left out in a globalised world whose constant change makes it hard for them to compete – and so prone to hope that they can ‘take back control’. Bianchini blames elites in various ways, as is certainly justified in the British case where Brexit resulted in part from the legacy of imperial delusions of grandeur. But he
makes a very particular point here. Elites brought to discussions over the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina the first mind set just noted, in which homogeneity is seen as the default position for any state. This has led in his view to multiple failures – which he contrasts to the superior outcome in Macedonia where attempts were made to ensure that different ethnicities could live under the same political roof. This is very interesting, but it is an occasion where greater space is needed to substantiate these claims, not least as the situation in Macedonia does not look so stable at the time of writing. But he is certainly right to concentrate on the change in elite behavior. Might it be that the end of the Cold War has removed the measure of discipline that once existed within the West as a whole? Everything he says about the weakness of the institutions of the European Union is surely justified, to which must be added the appalling behavior of the United States. And one can add to this the huge importance of modern social media, ever more prone to cage different groups within intellectual silos that allow different opinions to be discarded without the benefit of empirical inquiry. ‘History is on the move again’, as Arnold Toynbee put it, for we surely live in a new and uncomfortable world.

A first critical comment forcefully comes to mind because of the short chapter in the second part of the book dealing with the Czechoslovak partition. There is a real conceptual problem here, and one that applies to the book as a whole. Social scientists and policy analysts really must take (my friend) Brendan O’Leary’s ‘Analysing partitions: Definition, classification and explanation’, seriously. The claim of that important paper is that there is a world of difference between partition properly understood as a fresh cut dividing a national community and the very different phenomena of secession, de-colonisation and disengagement. The Velvet Divorce was not a partition in the fullest sense, and its legacy has not been terrible – despite the suffering that was occasioned. Partitions designed by the British in India, Ireland and the Near East have been far more malign. The matter is important because some of the border changes that Bianchini discusses were certainly genuine partitions, and much could have been learned from distinguishing them from other border adjustments so as to see their long-term impact – and the rather different ways in which they were managed.

A second critical comment concerns the lessons to be learnt from the break-up of Yugoslavia. There is a great deal to be said for Bianchini’s stress on the revival of nationalism in the OECDs as the result of economic failure in tandem with weak and ineffective political institutions. But one must not forget more obvious political realities as well. I remember years ago a Slovenian saying that he would have been prepared to stay within a reformed and liberal Yugoslavia, but not within a Serb autocracy. Quebec is unlikely to secede but Catalonia might yet do so if it is not allowed to vote on its own future. Allowing the option of leaving remains the best way of establishing loyalty.

1 Political Geography, volume 26, 2007, pp. 886-908