

***The Left and Nationalism:
Introducing the debate***

Published in H-Net & H-Nationalism as introduction to the “The Left and Nationalism Monthly Series” (ed. Emmanuel Dalle Mulle), 10-20-2017.

URL: <https://networks.h-net.org/node/3911/discussions/588345/left-and-nationalism-monthly-series-left-and-nationalism>

The *Left–Right* divide as we know it today originated during the French Revolution. When the National Assembly first met in 1789, supporters of the King sat on the Right while supporters of the Revolution sat on the Left – although the distinction did not yet have the ideological connotations it has today. The association between the Left and nationalism also dates back to this time; in fact, the Left also described itself variously as the party of the people, the party of the nation or the National Party.

The term has varied with the vicissitudes of history, but maintained its original oppositional meaning until the present day (Laponce 1981). Such fluctuations are perhaps more significant than its semantic continuity: the Left has always been conceived in opposition to the Right, and vice versa. It therefore remains a relative, even elusive, concept continually contingent on circumstance. In other words, the very notion of Left is dependent on who and what is on the Right. What has remained unchanged is the contrast, the opposition, so that the term has become ‘the grand dichotomy of the twentieth century’ (Lukes 2003).

Nationalism is also deeply rooted in the French Revolution. In its most aggressive forms, it was first sanctified on the battlefield at Valmy (1792) and the ensuing crescendo of human sacrifices on the altar of *La Patrie* (Bell 2008). It is not mere coincidence that the combination of war and nationalism spiked just as radical Jacobins were calling on Parisian mobs to crush ‘the enemy within’, justifying violence against civilians as part of the war effort. The combination of external and internal securitization has remained a common bellicist theme until the present day (Conversi 2015).

Since the beginning of the Left–Right distinction, the Left shared the Right’s ‘fantasy of congruency’ with its exclusivist notions of forging a forever ‘incomplete society’ (Mandelbaum 2013; 2016). Let’s remember that in 1789 the emerging Left shaped itself as the ‘National Party’.

Many scholars have long conceded that the old *Left–Right* dichotomy is no longer relevant and have thus questioned its contemporary validity (Lukes 2003). In anticipation of these critiques, the Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio affirmed the continuing significance of the Left–Right distinction as revolving around contrasting ideas of social inequality (Bobbio 1996). Historically, the Right has considered social inequality to be inherent in human societies, condemning the Left’s efforts to eradicate it as an invitation to authoritarianism. However, the Right also relies on its own arguably ‘egalitarian’ narrative based on an archetypal community of ‘equals’, beyond class, gender, locality and other divisions of the ‘body politic’ (Conversi 2008). This is manifested in the idea of the nation as an inter-class community of mutual obligations, duties and rights, ritually tested by international conflict and war through blood sacrifice, flag-waving and ‘totem rituals’ (Marvin and Ingle 1999). In other words, the Right has traditionally attempted to overcome this dilemma by creating a nationalist ‘egalitarian’ super-synthesis.

A century after the Bolshevik revolution: From internationalism to nationalism

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels famously consider: ‘The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality. The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.’ There is an immanent truth in this prescription: if nations are identified as bourgeois constructs, then their ideology – nationalism – can only be a tool for advancing the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Such a recommendation, however, had to be compromised by realpolitik. After the triumph of the post-1918 Wilsonian–Leninist world order based on national self-determination, national identity remained the hidden face behind Soviet institutional

internationalism (Connor 1984).¹ As we know, the Bolshevik revolution couched itself in internationalist terms, but never renounced nationalism in its daily practices. Indeed, the very term self-determination was emblazoned in the Soviet constitutional make-up. In contrast to Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) frontally attacked the ‘bourgeois principle of self-determination’ since it ‘gives no practical guidelines for the day to day politics of the proletariat, nor any practical solution of nationality problems’ (Luxemburg 1908: 109).

The duty to resist all forms of national oppression does not include any explanation of what conditions and political forms the class-conscious proletariat in Russia at the present time should recommend as a solution for the nationality problems of Poland, Latvia, the Jews, etc., or what program it should present to match the various programs of the bourgeois, nationalist, and pseudosocialist parties in the present class struggle. In a word, the formula, ‘the right of nations to self-determination’, is essentially not a political and problematic guideline in the nationality question, but only a means of *avoiding that question* (Luxemburg 1908: 110).

Significantly, Luxemburg was jailed for having opposed World War I, and then executed. She remained among a few within the Left who did not pander to the seduction of nationalism.

As demonstrated by the post-Soviet nationalities literature, the Left tends to lose out to nationalism in the event of a competition between the two. Attempts to explain this change of tack often links it to the Janus-faced character of nationalism as the dominant ideology of the modern age, consistently associated with the broader ideological framework of political modernism (Conversi 2012).

Since the end of the Cold War, a political earthquake has shaken the previous Left–Right distinction to the core. After a brief interlude in the 1980s and early 1990s in which part of the European Left, notably the French Socialist Party, contributed a rich debate in

¹ As well understood by Walker Connor, nationalism never abandoned the SU either in the form of Great Russian chauvinism or in the form of the separate nationalist aspiration of its constituent republics (Connor 1984).

search of a new pluralist vision of national identity (Martigny 2016), the mainstream Left capitulated to the seductions of neoliberal globalization.

The ‘Third Way’ adopted by Europe’s leading Left parties allegedly aimed to reconcile capitalism with socialism. In the process, incumbent labour, socialist, and social-democratic governments adopted both laissez faire capitalism and forms of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 1995) grounded in ‘practices of everyday life’ (Certeau 1984) and perceptions of ‘everyday nationhood’ (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008) – which, in the case of Britain’s ‘New Labour’, moved into new and not-so-subtle forms of imperialism.

These trends have served to reassert the importance of nationalism and nationhood in the global arena. However, they also posed a crucial question: How can these governments and parties still be perceived as pertaining to the Left, with – and despite – their nationalism, imperialism and pandering to the obscure forces of global capital? The distinction between Left and Right has, it seems, tended to evaporate both theoretically and in popular perception. Traditional Left-wing supporters have thus felt defrauded and have increasingly turned to the nationalist Right. Such a legitimacy crisis has ushered in what I have called ‘*demo-skepticism*’, a general discontent and grand disillusion with the very notion of liberal democracy (Conversi 2006). The Clinton–Blair embrace of extreme neoliberalism left the door open for the Right to fill the subsequent legitimacy vacuum and the loss of state representativeness, often stemming from the negative impact of neoliberal policies.

Neoliberal globalisation

After the heyday of extreme nation-statism under fascism, the world has entered into a prolonged period of expanded peace. Despite the ultimate threat of a nuclear Armageddon, the Cold War began and ended without a single nuclear warhead being fired. However, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated a process of cultural Americanization and neoliberal crushing of sovereign state institutions, including welfare provisions. Following these wide-ranging changes in the relationship between place and power, new sovereign actors have emerged beyond the

reach of the nation-state.

According to Susan George, while acting on a global scale, the new ‘sovereigns’ are akin to powerful feudal lords and they have a name, a face and an identity: Exxon, Microsoft, McDonalds, Monsanto, Shell, and so on (George 2014). Their sovereign decisions are taken outside any form of democratic consultation, thus precluding the consolidation of representative democracy (Crouch 2005). These obscure decision-making practices contribute to strengthening the popular perception of remote or hidden forces that dominate each nation and every individual – thereby undermining the essential separation between ‘bogus conspiracy theories’ and ‘genuine conspiratorial politics’ (Bale 2007).

According to the economic historian Thomas Piketty, the accumulation of capital into fewer and fewer hands has only one modern historical precedent: the period of expanding capitalism and imperial liberalism preceding World War I. Yet, even this unprecedented accumulation of injustices, escorted by nationalism and culminating in the most destructive war the world had ever seen, pales in comparison to the level of expanding inequalities we are witnessing today under the regime of neoliberal globalization (Piketty 2014). The unrestrained choices and actions of the new global elites have had an unprecedented impact not only on political economy, but also on social attitudes, individual liberties, popular behaviour, culture, society and the wider environment – converging towards *de-sovereignisation*, that is, the implosion of the very notion of popular sovereignty (Conversi 2016). The concentration of power into the hands of a minuscule global elite has been recently identified and quantified as an economic ‘super-entity’ made of a ‘small tightly-knit core of financial institutions’ (Vitali et al. 2011)

Decision making on vital matters, like trade agreements, has notoriously involved a plethora of opaque processes, rarely accompanied by transparency and carried out even less publicly. The ongoing loss of personal freedom as well as local, national and continental sovereignty has been revealed through leaks of previously hidden agendas – most recently, the semi-secret Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the US and the European Union (Kampmark 2016). Such leaks have exposed the

potential wide-ranging impacts of these semi-secret agreements on most aspects of everyday life and society, revealing the undemocratic dark face of extreme neoliberalism with its de-sovereignising agenda in the form of a ‘direct assault on workers’ rights, health and safety standards and public services’ as well as on the environment, despite ‘unprecedented levels of protest’ and public debate (De Ville and Siles-Brugge 2015). Opposition to these agreements has come from a blend of social movements gravitating around the Left – which does not preclude their likely appeal to elements of the *étatiste* Right. Social movements have long questioned these illegitimate practices in which many governments have become assiduously involved.

How did the Right in general react to such assaults on ‘national sovereignty’? Neoliberals and neoconservatives tend to define national sovereignty as if it’s in a vacuum, as if nothing has changed since the French and American revolutions, and without taking into account the new challenges posed by neoliberal globalization, nor proposing viable alternatives to the free market dogmas. Therefore, the Right’s rhetoric of defence of a residual sovereignty falls short of feasible prescriptions and tends to stay at a rather superficial and vicarious level, unwilling or unable to identify the key actors and responsibilities in the process.

Is the Right intrinsically nationalist?

As a consequence of Blairism and the Third Way, the Left–Right distinction has tended to evaporate. In this context, the term *Right* should also be used in a flexible way spanning neoliberal centrism to neo-conservatism, the New Right, the *etatiste* Right and the far Right. Defining characteristics shared by all these currents include escapism, international securitization and internal control through the embracing of ‘penal populism’.

Escapism refers to the incapacity to resolve emerging human, social and environmental problems as they arise. Through a nationalist ‘super-synthesis’, the escapist Right tends therefore to retrench into a narrow position of denial, just when sweeping and vital changes in ideology, policies, attitudes and political praxis are urgently required.

Although sections of the Right have incorporated elements of the anti-globalization discourse taken from the Left, they have done so largely on a rhetorical and superficial level, creating deliberate confusion on the causal linkages: ethnic ‘others’ are typically chosen as a manifestation of the negative aspects of globalization and therefore as the main catalysts of discontent (Milačić and Vuković 2017). Rarely are the large corporations and big business at the root of most contemporary problems – from economic recession to the environmental catastrophe – clearly identified as responsible. Priorities are altered by pandering to a vision of cultural and ethnic homogeneity as values to be defended against internal and external perils. Nationalism prevails over all other ideologies bar neoliberalism, remaining at the core a process of boundary maintenance or boundary building. In this respect, the Right is the absolute master, hard to be equalled, and the Left a mere apprentice. This brings us to another feature of the nationalist Right, consistent with its vision of a congruent, homogeneous society that incessantly requires to be defended, walled, shielded, fortified and protected, often through extreme sacrifice.

Another common aspect in the Right’s narrative is thus the obsession with *securitization* of the national space by, for instance, creating boundaries against migrants or waging ‘wars on terror’, and a periodical obsession with *pariah* regimes – which can then become legitimate targets of international aggression. The national space is regarded as imperilled not by relatively measurable and quantifiable threats like climate change, financial deregulation, corporate tax evasion, social injustice, environmental degradation, or capital concentration, but by fellow human beings. Securitization as a discourse is shared by most sections of the Right, so that the idea of a threatened national space brings us back to nationalism.

Lastly, ‘internal’ and ‘external’ securitizations typically occur in tandem. As mentioned earlier, for the Right, threats usually emanate from other human beings, rather than fully identifiable entities like the fossil fuel industry or weapons manufacturers. The internal threat takes the form of an inside attack on the nation as a moral community, in the form of ‘rising’ criminality, immigrants, terrorists and other protagonists of recurrent ‘moral

panics' (Cohen 2011: xlii). Since such a threat is to be met with the full force of law, 'penal populism' (Pratt 2007) rears its head in the wake of media-induced incitement to defend the 'integrity' of the nation by raising penalties and increasing punitive sentencing – with the consequent expansion of the security apparatus and policies of surveillance.

Typically, *penitentiary fixation* prevails within the American Anglo-Saxon legal system, where jails are notoriously crammed to capacity and citizens are condemned to long prison terms for minor crimes (with 2,145,100 prisoners in 2015, the US ranks first, by far and for a long time, with the highest incarceration rate in the world, both in raw numbers and per capita). Initially born within the English-speaking world (Roberts *et al.* 2003), media-induced 'penal populism' is part of a broader Americanization wave (Wacquant 2004; 2006; 2010) epitomized by Mario Cuomo's zero-tolerance policies as Governor of New York – heralded constantly as the reference point amongst Rightists across the world (Pratt 2007: 32-33). Only in recent years has the dismal failure of the US 'tough on crime' politics of mass incarceration begun to be discussed among Republicans and conservatives – yet mostly on the grounds of the latter's vehement anti-statism and dread of fiscal burdens (Dagan and Teles 2016).

Conclusion: Can there be a left nationalism?

Scholars of *nationalism* have long argued about whether nationalism still makes sense in the contemporary world or whether we live in a 'post-ethnic' (Martiniello 2001) or 'post-national' era (Delanty 2006; both cited in Edwards 2009: 177; Hobsbawn 2006). As the late Anthony D. Smith has taught us, these visions did not take into account the way ethnic myths, narratives, beliefs and symbols often predate the modern advent of nationalism and therefore can hardly disappear overnight (Smith 1996; 1998; 1999). In fact, nationalism shows no sign of declining in the near future and its prevaricating prominence has indeed been reinforced in the age of globalization (Conversi 2009; Nairn and James 2005).

At the same time, an ominous decline in public discourse and political legitimacy points

to the possible advent of a new age of conflict in which, in a re-run of 100 years ago, history risks spinning out of control (Ghosh 2016; Gray 2008; Mishra 2017): According to Harry Leslie Smith, neoliberalism has brought us into an illusory *cul-de-sac* in which international war is more likely now than in 1914 or 1939 (Smith 2017). And, of course, it may be a nuclear or biological war, therefore incalculably more destructive – while neoliberal pundits never grow tired of arguing to the contrary.²

However, even if war and terrorism do not spin out of control, the clearest evidence of a radical, profound, perhaps irreversible, crisis of capitalism comes from the hard sciences – the social sciences still being ill-equipped for such a gigantic task. When over 97 per cent of cross-disciplinary scientific research agrees about the ‘anthropogenic causation’ of climate change (Cook *et al.* 2013), one should be astute enough to read between the lines and grasp a radical indictment of the viability of the capitalist system as we know it.

Has the Left renounced nationalism forever after the two world wars? Has it thus consigned the most powerful ideology of the modern age to the Right? There has been no shortage of attempts to combine the Left with nationalism. Most prominently, in France the Left attempted not just to reinvent itself but also French national identity. It did so by responding to the challenges and vagaries brought about by incipient globalization and, along the way, rediscovered and reconceptualised the identit(ies) of France (Martigny 2016). However, the pervasiveness of globalization froze these discussions and blocked their implementation in widely agreed public policies.

Globalization has led to wide-ranging changes in the relationship between place and power and, over the years, both nationalism/patriotism and the Left–Right dichotomy have been profoundly altered. The ensuing unprecedented, abrupt socioeconomic changes point towards a new and unforeseeable ‘liquid’ scenario (Bauman 2007) in an age that has the potential to be the terminal age for humankind.

² For a recent example, replete with statistically-grounded data glorifying the neoliberal age as an age of peace, see Pinker (2011). After little over a lustre, the book begins to appear slightly out-dated.

The question is whether, under such historical conditions, there can be a consistent form of Leftist nationalism – as is developing among several ‘nations without a state’ and indigenous peoples across the world. This wouldn’t be anything exceedingly new: since the heyday of anti-colonialism, nationalism has reacquired a leftist image – and, as we have seen, nationalism was originally associated with liberalism and democracy. However, the relations of power are not the same today as they were at the time of the end of absolutism. As Piketty has shown with a wealth of data, the contemporary predicament is much more similar to that of the *Belle Époque* preceding World War I. Hence, a nationalism of the Left would be at least as equally suicidal today as it was 100 years ago – without considering the range of formidable new threats confronting humankind. On the other hand, to renounce nationalism in the name of cosmopolitan principles, although placing oneself on morally higher ground, would mean offering the Right a monopoly of the most potent contemporary ideology of mass mobilization – and one without which neoliberalism would probably be doomed. This is one of the major dilemmas political elites face today.

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