

Notes on "Nationalism—What Went Wrong?" by Peter Amato

Looking up “Nationalism” my search engine brings up a plethora of choices. I can search for nationalism in Hungary, in Europe, find examples of it vs. patriotism, learn how to use it in a sentence, get an historical definition of it—and the list goes on. Our newspapers and magazines are crowded with discussions on it. Commentators and pundits flood talk radio, and TV with comments and remarks on nationalism, often their own take. How nationalism is portrayed—it’s good or it’s bad—often depends on the political, economic or social leanings of the provider. Quickly, one concludes there are no “experts” as such in this arena. Just take what you want from whomever you like or trust. With this as our starting point, how best should we proceed? What should we cover? What should be our goal? What may be achievable in our limited time frame?

The following five articles have been selected on the assumption that they capture, albeit limited, some of the major issues, scope, and complexities of our topic--“Nationalism.” Our hope is that they will advance the reflection, comment, and criticism needed for a robust luncheon discussion. Four of the selected articles are from the recent March-April Foreign Affairs Journal on “Nationalism.” The last is from a well-known political commentator.

The title chosen for today’s’ discussion, **Nationalism—What Went Wrong?** reveals this presenter’s bias; namely there is something inherently wrong with nationalism as it is broadly practiced today. This approach is vigorously challenged by one of our authors. Others take a more nuanced position defining “nationalism” as... *“identification with one’s own nation and support for its interests,”* (in extreme cases) *“...to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations.”* Under this definition, nationalism confers certain benefits to some and costs to others. Using this approach, the different benefit weights vs. costs we give fundamentally determines how we view “nationalism.”

So what do our “experts” say?

(1) Andeas Wimmer writing in Foreign Affairs, **"National Identity and Political Power, How Representation Breeds Patriotism"** begins his article... *"Among liberal elites in the West, nationalism’s bad reputation is getting worse. They associate it with white supremacy, the newly restrictive immigration policies of many Western countries, the resurgence of economic protectionism, or the illiberal populism of U.S. President Donald Trump."* Wimmer follows his negative leading declaration by offering some positive side contributions. He believes that nationalism can encourage solidarity with fellow citizens and the willingness to... *"sacrifice personal gain for the common good."* He further argues, citizens in some countries may develop stronger attachments to their country than in others—specifically pointing out Americans, Ghanaians and Tai. According to Wimmer, these citizens appear to have stronger patriotic feelings than for example Germans and Taiwanese. Why? His research suggests... *“people identify with*

their country when they see their own ethnic group represented in the national government. Political representation, in other words, breeds national identification—in diverse countries as much as in more homogeneous ones.” Over time, individuals who have forged durable alliances with one another and who belong to the same network will develop a sense of commonality and shared purpose. This in turn forms the basis of meaningful group identities, such as those defined along ethnic, religious, or professional lines. The same applies to national identities: the more encompassing the networks that connect citizens to national government, the more citizens will embrace the idea of the nation as a community of shared solidarity and political destiny. According to Wimmer ... *“Conversely, groups that are systematically excluded from these networks will develop their own separate identities, often defined in ethnic or racial terms. They will find the nation a less meaningful category and identify less with it.”*¹

Bottom line: *Political representation breeds national identification—in diverse countries as much as in more homogeneous ones* BUILT TO LAST.

Wimmer concludes that... *“Power sharing remains the most effective tool for fostering national identity, even if coalition regimes face challenges building trust. South Africa’s post-apartheid regime, for example, managed to integrate the formerly dominant whites into a coalition including all major African groups under the umbrella of the African National Congress. And indeed, despite lingering resentments and hostilities, a sense of common national purpose has spread among the citizenry.”* Symbols he argues are not enough for citizens to develop a strong sense of national community... *“International development agencies should strengthen the capacity of national governments to deliver public goods and thus forge ties of alliance and support with their citizens—rather than outsourcing these tasks to nongovernmental organizations or private companies.”*

(2) “The Nation’s Place in a Globalized World” by Yael Tamir, casts a somewhat different light on “nationalism.” The word she suggests has not only fallen out of favor and/or has been outgrown in the rich democracies of the world. For some political thinkers and elites in the developed West, it ... *“is a dangerous, divisive, illiberal impulse that should be treated with skepticism or even outright disdain.”* In places where it still thrives, it often causes more **problems** than solutions. Tamir then makes reference to ... *“A small but increasingly vocal group of American and European thinkers have begun to mount defenses of nationalism—some modest, others more full-throated. One of the most enthusiastic advocates is Yoram Hazony, an Israeli philosopher and political theorist.”* Tamir goes on to provide a well thought out critiques on Hazony's latest book,

¹ Wimmer examined the relationship between political power and national identity, **combining** hundreds of surveys conducted by different research organizations around the world. With a team of research assistants, he assembled the responses of more than 750,000 individuals from 132 countries, collected in 582 representative surveys fielded in various years from the 1980s onward. These countries account for roughly 92 percent of the world population—in his estimation---coming as close as possible to a global survey.

The Virtue of Nationalism,² that has made him the darling in some American conservative political circles by his spirited defense of nationalism and the nation-state. Although Hazony does not ignore nationalism's flaws, he believes that Western intellectuals have been too quick to dismiss it and that the topic deserves a more balanced and nuanced analysis than that being currently provided.

Hazony, however, goes beyond merely defending nationalism. He also launches a fierce attack on contemporary liberalism and its political manifestations, particularly the EU and the American-led "globalist" [world order](#) that emerged in the wake of the Cold War, both of which Hazony derides as "imperialist projects." Nationalism, he complains, has been unfairly blamed for encouraging hatred and bigotry, even though... "*liberal-imperialist political ideals have become among the most powerful agents fomenting intolerance and hate in the Western world today.*" Juxtaposing nationalism and liberal imperialism, Hazony accuses liberals of trying to impose a uniform set of values on nation-states, aiming to displace the authentic, "particular" views and beliefs held in those places.

Yael Tamir argues that few liberals endeavor to establish global governance or oppress illiberal communities and cultures. Rather she states.. "*they seek a world order of [international institutions](#), multilateral cooperation, free markets, free trade, and the free movement of people. Hazony's insistence that this agenda represents an imperialist assault on nations ignores the fact that liberal and nationalist values often interact.*" *The struggle that Hazony describes between noble nationalists and hate-filled imperialists is largely a fantasy.*

Tamir's arguments in her Foreign Affairs article are based in large part upon her recently published book, **Why Nationalism**, a title without a question mark used as a bold declarative statement. In her book as in her article, "Yuli" as she likes to be referred to, states that modern liberalism arose from national political frameworks and is a product of the marriage of liberal democratic and nationalist values. And here she focuses back to Hazony who she believes relies to heavily upon Jewish thinking and history and on Israel and Zionism as the primary example of nationalism under assault by imperialist liberals. And she states that it is... "*telling, and regrettable, that a book extolling nationalism barely mentions the group that today clamors most loudly for a nation-state of its own: [the Palestinians](#).*" Further, Tamir argues that although few liberals seem ready to embrace the term "nationalist" she asks..."Are there any alternatives? ..." *The French President Emmanuel Macron [tried to offer one](#), drawing a sharp distinction between*

² *Yoram Hazony, [The Virtue of Nationalism](#)*, Having read Hazony's book, I believe Tamir's critique is well balanced raising the concern that Hazony too favorably tips the scales in favor of a type of nationalism better fit to the Israel national condition that may have little relevance for other nations, particularly modern western nations.

nationalism and patriotism. 'Patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism,' he argued, saying, 'Our interests first. Who cares about the others?' We erase what a nation holds dearest, what gives it life, what makes it great, and what is essential: its moral values.' Macron argued that French patriotism stems from a "vision of France as a generous nation, of France as a project, of France as the bearer of universal values." Tamir goes on to say... *"Far from demonstrating an unequivocal contrast between nationalism and patriotism, Macron managed only to demonstrate that there is no clear, useful distinction between the two concepts."*

According to Tamir... *"Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel endorse a pro-EU position as they identify their countries' national interests with membership in the union and with a measured degree of regional and global collaboration. The government of British Prime Minister Theresa May holds the opposite view and therefore supports Brexit."* Tamir concludes... *"One need not embrace Trump's crude, zero-sum worldview to believe that the wealth of nations should be produced and distributed as part of a relatively narrow social contract among particular individuals. Liberals should not promote national egoism but support policies that will help make their fellow citizens feel connected and committed to a worthy and meaningful community. Liberalism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive; they can and should go hand in hand."*

(3) Although Tamir presents a strong argument that liberalism and nationalism should not be considered mutually exclusive, Robert Sapolsky's article **This Is Your Brain on Nationalism, The Biology of Us and Them** argues that the "us" vs. "them" is deeply rooted in the biology of our brains. Using the example of chimpanzees in a national park in Uganda, Sapolsky says chimps, who share more than 98 percent of their DNA with us, also divide the world into "us" and "them" and go to war over these categories. Sapolsky points out ... *"To understand the dynamics of human group identity, including the resurgence of nationalism—that potentially most destructive form of in-group bias—requires grasping the biological and cognitive underpinnings that shape them."* Following this train of thought, it becomes clear, if not alarming, that in the wrong hands, people, groups, even nations can be "manipulated" as we already know, into forms of "populists nationalism" the "us" that breeds distrust, and aversion for whomever and however the "them." is described. Spolosky ends his article on a very somber note. Neurobiology, endocrinology, and developmental psychology all paint a grim picture of our lives as social beings. *"When it comes to group belonging, humans don't seem too far from the families of chimps killing each other in the forests of Uganda: people's most fundamental allegiance is to the familiar."* And although he argues humans ... *"can second-guess and tame their aggressive tendencies toward the other, yet doing so is usually a secondary, corrective step."* Unfortunately, this may be too much to expect in those countries and societies where manipulation of the population is rampant.

(4) Jill Lepore, in her article **"A New Americanism, Why a Nation Needs a National Story"** provides a different argument. True nationalism must be based upon knowing a

national history. Lepore argues one must not abandon the study of the nation. America began its story, as the historian John Hingham argued... *“From the middle of the nineteenth century until the 1960s, the nation was the grand subject of American history.”* Over that same stretch of time, the United States experienced a civil war, emancipation, reconstruction, segregation, two world wars, and unprecedented immigration—making the task even more essential. Lepore further argues... *“A history in common is fundamental to sustaining the affiliation that constitutes national subjects,”*... the historian Thomas Bender once observed... *“Nations are, among other things, a collective agreement, partly coerced, to affirm a common history as the basis for a shared future.”*

Lepore then advances the position that... *“in the 1970s, studying the nation fell out of favor in the American historical profession. Most historians started looking at either smaller or bigger things, investigating the experiences and cultures of social groups or taking the broad vantage promised by global history. This turn produced excellent scholarship. But meanwhile, who was doing the work of providing a legible past and a plausible future—a nation—to the people who lived in the United States?”* Lepore answers her question by stating it was the “blackguards” the charlatans, stooges, and tyrants who stepped in all too willing to... *“prop up people’s sense of themselves and their destiny with a tissue of myths and prophecies, prejudices and hatreds, or to empty out old rubbish bags full of festering resentments and calls to violence. When historians abandon the study of the nation, when scholars stop trying to write a common history for a people, nationalism doesn’t die. Instead, it eats liberalism.”*

Lepore then asks... *“is it too late to restore a common history, too late for historians to make a difference? too late to try to craft a new American history—one that could foster a new Americanism?”* Lepore then briefly summarizes a series of National Histories on what she describes under the headings of nationalism and liberalism. The role of the American Historical Association, founded in 1884—the illiberalism in Germany, beginning with the “blood and iron” of Bismarck. The rise of the U.S. Jim Crow laws, and with a regime of immigration restriction, starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882. Wong Chin Foo, who founded the Chinese Equal Rights League in 1892, insisting, *“We claim a common manhood with all other nationalities.”* But she argues that the uglier and more illiberal nationalism got in the 1910s and especially in the 1930s ... *“the more liberals became convinced of the impossibility of liberal nationalism. In the United States, nationalism largely took the form of economic protectionism and isolationism.”* According to Lepore ... *“In the years before the United States entered World War II, a fringe even supported Hitler; Charles Coughlin—a priest, near presidential candidate, and wildly popular broadcaster—took to the radio to preach anti-Semitism and admiration for Hitler and the Nazi Party and called on his audience to form a new political party, the Christian Front. In 1939, about 20,000 Americans, some dressed in Nazi uniforms, gathered in Madison Square Garden, decorated with swastikas and American flags, with posters declaring a [Mass Demonstration for True Americanism.](#)”*

Lepore raises the need for the writing of a "New American History" arguing that although writing one would create plenty of problems, not writing one would be far worse. And writing one might be a composite nationalism as that imagined by Douglass and the clear-eyed histories written by Du Bois. She suggests a starting point could be the description of the American experiment and its challenges offered by Douglass in 1869, who she quotes: *"A Government founded upon justice, and recognizing the equal rights of all men; claiming no higher authority for existence, or sanction for its laws, than nature, reason, and the regularly ascertained will of the people; steadily refusing to put its sword and purse in the service of any religious creed or family, is a standing offense to most of the Governments of the world, and to some narrow and bigoted people among ourselves."*

Lepore ends her article referring back to the Stanford Historian, Carl Degler's talk before the American Historical Association meeting in 1986 quoting him.... *"The history of the United States at the present time does not seek to answer any significant questions,"* Degler told his audience some three decades ago. *"If American historians don't start asking and answering those sorts of questions, other people will, he warned. They'll echo Calhoun and Douglas and Father Coughlin. They'll lament 'American carnage.' They'll call immigrants 'animals' and other states 'shithole countries.' They'll adopt the slogan 'America first.' They'll say they can 'make America great again.' They'll call themselves 'nationalists.' Their history will be a fiction. They will say that they alone love this country. They will be wrong."*

(5) Fareed Zakaria's Washington Post article of April 12th, **"Democrats need an antidote to nationalism"** argues that Benjamin Netanyahu's [victory](#) in early April's election had much to do with Israel's economic boom, stable security climate and the prime minister's political talent. Fareed suggests it was also part of a much larger phenomenon: *"the continued strength of populist nationalism around the world — and the continued inability of left-of-center parties to respond to it."* Fareed argues that populist nationalism preaches... *"It's a nasty world out there. People are trying to take our jobs, undermine our security, move into our country. The cosmopolitan urban elites don't care; they benefit from these forces. So we need a tough guy who will stand up for the nation and against the liberals in our midst."* A similar argument in one form or another made by... *"Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Narendra Modi, Viktor Orban, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Jair Bolsonaro, the Brexiteers — and, of course, President Trump."* In these sentiments, according to Fareed, lies — a kind of victim mentality — one that... *"can be found in almost all modern variations, even among rich and powerful nations."*

According to Fareed, Trump claims... *"there is nothing wrong with being called a nationalist and that it indicates I love our country."* Further, using this reasoning... *"our country has taken second fiddle. . . . We're giving all of our wealth, all of our money, to other countries."* Fareed believes that despite the pose of victimhood adopted by most of these populists, "nationalism" is probably the most widely held ideology in

the world today. If other values such as liberty and equality conflict, Fareed asks...*"which one should be preferred? That's why the most ardent capitalists — from Friedrich Hayek to Milton Friedman — have always been in favor of globalization and economic freedom above nationalist protections and controls."*

The danger for liberals is that they underestimate the power of these raw, emotional appeals. For centuries, liberals have assumed that nationalism was a kind of irrational attachment that would grow weaker as people became more rational, connected and worldly. Nationalism is the party's core; the economics is simply about efficiency and growth. Meanwhile, liberals in the United States still don't seem to get it. The Democratic Party continues to think the solution to its woes is to keep moving leftward economically. This week, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) revealed his new Medicare-for-all plan, which was immediately cosponsored by four other presidential candidates. The plan will probably require an additional \$2 trillion to \$3 trillion in annual tax revenue. At the same time, Trump tweets about the Democrats' love of "open borders" and insists he will protect the country and enforce its laws. What if Trump understands the mood of our times better than Sanders?

A few closing thoughts

As mentioned in our introduction, the articles chosen for "**Nationalism, What Went Wrong?**" provide an array of thinking on a topic now receiving a great deal of attention and debate. On the one hand, it can be associated with some of humanity's worst attributes with the rise of illiberal strongmen --present-day demagogues in the U.S. in Europe and other parts of the world fanning the flames of nativism, xenophobia and religious bigotry. On the other hand, "nationalism" in the right hands can help form a positive alliance between the nation and the state forming what today is termed "liberal democracy." And thru a combination of free and fair elections, the rule of law, and widespread respect for democratic institutions "nationalism" may promote the spread of economic opportunity, education and political opportunity. Much depends on by whom and for what purpose "nationalism" is being used.

Our discussion on nationalism will no doubt raise many questions and concerns. Will right-wing populism take greater hold in Europe? From Hungary and Austria to France and Italy, populist movements have stunned European governments and establishment parties. No longer do they have an unchallenged grip on power. And against this background we need to ask, can a fruitful marriage be developed between "globalism" and "nationalism" capable of dealing with many of the current issues that divide us as a country, a nation and a world power--immigration, global warming, trade policy, international institution preservation/development? These are questions and issues that deserve deeper analysis and discussion and may be worthy of future luncheon session topics.

May 2019