

1

The New Nationalism

It has been a long time since streets were crowded with people waving national flags; now people are marching all over the globe: in Barcelona, Britain, Austria, and France, in the main streets of Kurdistan, in the United States, and in the public squares of Istanbul. Flag waving for and against political causes is back in fashion. Nationalism is everywhere.

The reemergence of nationalism has taken the world by surprise. This was supposed to be a liberal and democratic century; history was about to end and the flat world promised to bring the inhabitants of the globe closer together. Liberals believed that their century (starting from 1945) would see the end of wars, the spread of reason, and the beginning of a new enlightenment. This vision captivated the imagination, promising endless economic growth, expanding opportunities, and an ongoing increase in well-being. Each generation was to be better off than its predecessors.

Disappointingly, the twenty-first century opened with a series of social and economic crises. Many of the achievements of the previous decades have come under threat; the young generations fear the return of the crisis of capitalism and worry about the well-being of their parents and their children. No wonder that liberal optimism has lost its popularity and that those who several years ago chanted “Yes, We Can!” now suspect “we” cannot.

Trump's election alongside Brexit, the growing support for separatist movements, the rise of the new right in many European countries, and the phenomena of national and religious awakenings around the world leave liberals perplexed. They were convinced they were doing the right thing. Michael Moore proudly summarized their achievements:

Things are better. The left has won the cultural wars. Gays and lesbians can get married. A majority of Americans now take the liberal position on just about every polling question posed to them: Equal pay for women—check. Abortion should be legal—check. Stronger environmental laws—check. More gun control—check. Legalize marijuana—check.¹

One day, on his way home, Moore was stopped by a man who said: “Mike . . . we have to vote for Trump. We HAVE to shake things up.” Why did he say that? The man's words made Moore stop and think. This is the virtue of many of the recent political events; they force us to stop and reflect on the way we have interpreted the basic social and economic developments of the last half of a century.

Historical turning points are difficult to detect—usually they are acknowledged in retrospect; the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo, the self-immolation of an unknown Tunisian street merchant, and the first inflatable boat loaded with refugees crossing the Mediterranean changed the world, yet it took some time before the massive scope of the change was acknowledged. We tend to analyze events in hindsight. Why did the people revolt? Why did the refugees start to flee across the Mediterranean at a certain point in time? Why didn't the man share Moore's view that things are so much better? Much of this book is an answer to these questions, yet unlike many commentators who put the blame on those who

acted against their expectations, I ask a different question: why were the accumulating warning signs that the social and political crisis is deepening transparent to those in power? The blindness I am interested in is that of the elites.

The present political upheaval is a necessary wake-up call, an invitation to admit that the liberal-progressive camp has made its mistakes and must look back on the last forty years with a sense of self-criticism. Many would like to think that the present state of affairs is no more than a sad coincidence; that things could easily have gone the other way, and soon they would go back to normal. They are wrong. Among Trump's tweets, Le Pen's slogans, and the demonstrations of the extreme right, some real concerns are hidden. It is dangerous to comfort oneself with the fact that actually Hillary won the popular vote, Le Pen wasn't elected, and Brexit supporters did not know what the European Union was all about and now regret their vote. Whether winning or losing, new powers entered the political game, and they cannot be ignored.

In liberalism's victorious years the Western world assumed it had outgrown nationalism; now that it is back it lacks the tools to accommodate its challenge. Why nationalism now? What provoked national feelings and national ideology and made them more relevant than ever? Is nationalism a dormant evil force waiting to pop out whenever there is a crisis, a force that must be repressed at all costs, or is it a constructive power, a worthwhile ideology that could and should be harnessed to make the world a better place? This book presents a case for nationalism, highlighting the ways it shaped public policy and made the years between the end of the world wars and the eruption of neoliberal globalism the best years for the least well-off members of the developed world.² Some may say that these years were good ones because nationalism was repressed, allowing liberal democracy

to flourish. I, however, wish to argue the opposite—namely, that many of the achievements of that period were dependent on an alliance between the nation and the state.

True, neither liberals nor nationalists are eager to expose their interdependencies—as with many odd couples, they wish to distance themselves, avoiding the embarrassment associated with admitting they cannot do without each other. But they have been partners for years. The vigor and anger with which liberals are rejecting nationalism are not a sign of estrangement but a cover-up of a too-intimate reliance.

Political ideologies would like to be self-sufficient; they tremble at the thought of their shortcomings being exposed. I wish to do exactly that—expose the ideological interdependencies that shape our world, arguing that the modern democratic state cannot have survived without the supportive hand of both liberal and national ideologies. My argument highlights areas where liberal democratic theory draws on national criteria to counter the pressures of globalism, and where nationalism relies on liberal-democratic principles to strengthen its claims for self-determination.

The nation-state has been an ideal meeting point between the two, and hence it is here to stay. Democratic regimes require a pre-political partnership that turns citizens into a collective entity that has a common past and a common future. In the absence of a political *we*, states disintegrate, and the political structure that allows them to turn into democratic and decent entities dissolves.

A political *we* had never been a natural phenomenon; it must be created, and then constantly nurtured, supported, and re-invented. This is an old truth that is easily forgotten. States are manmade entities that need to be cherished and maintained. Enchanted with what seemed to be their conclusive victory,

liberal democracies felt secure and ignored the ongoing work of state building. Confident that they would last forever, they neglected the need for ideological and political maintenance. They withdrew from the public sphere, became reluctant to nurture a unifying cultural and political narrative that acculturates citizens to confront the evolving social and economic conditions. Invisible hands were expected to solve social problems and merge the different identities gathered under the wings of the Rainbow Coalition into a new social identity strong enough to carry the burden of the state. No wonder states are now facing an existential crisis.

While liberal democrats were paralyzed by their assumed victory, nationalists felt defeated and obsolete. In most of the developed world they were taken to be outdated, carrying the voice of political immaturity, raising the kind of ideas civilized people don't mention around a dinner table. They have therefore lost the ability to offer the state a supportive hand.

With no one working to preserve its unique structure, the modern nation-state started crumbling down. Should we lament its disintegration? Many argue that nowadays it is more of a burden than an asset; that it fitted the needs of modernization but that it cannot meet the needs of a postindustrial world, that we should let it be torn apart by global and local forces and opt for a better alternative—yet none has so far emerged.

The present social and political chaos exposes the damaging outcomes of the theoretical and political void caused by the demise of the nation-state. When states step aside they leave behind a social, political, economic, and cultural vacuum. The public sphere is emptied of ideological and motivational forces that could promote social solidarity and encourage the erection of mechanisms necessary to combat growing social alienation.

Even when state intervention is indispensable, the language used to justify it has been delegalized; national planning is assumed to be breeding inefficiency and corruption, undermining the productive spirit kindled by personal freedom. In time, resentment of the state crossed party lines, joining liberals and conservatives in a struggle for personal freedom. This led to the shrinking of the state and the erosion of its regulatory powers. Checks and balances were removed, allowing markets to shape public life. The weakness of the state alongside the prominence of the markets opened unprecedented opportunities for a new kind globalism that is individualistic rather than state governed. Each person was encouraged to compete on his/her own. In an age marked by competitiveness, people are ready to do “whatever it takes” to have the upper hand. They compete internally and internationally without ever thinking of the larger social effects of their actions. As a result, social and economic gaps grow, and the social contract held by a combination of democratic and national beliefs loses its power. With the spreading of social disarray, some political players try to capture the opportunity and draft a new contract that would serve their interests. Seeking to justify their claims they turn to nationalism—which in modern times was, and still is, the greatest legitimizing political power.

Present-day nationalism appears in two different forms, both grounded in the weakness of the state: the first, the more classic one, is to be found in Catalonia, Lombardy, and Veneto as well as in Flanders, Transylvania, Scotland, Kurdistan, and lately Brazil. It represents the desire of national groups, concentrated in distinct territories, to capture the opportunity and demand self-rule. As this claim is voiced in the name of the people, such national movements try to recruit as many fellow nationals as possible. Consequently, they are inwardly inclusive, bringing on board each and every member of the nation regardless of age,

gender, or class, nurturing a partnership among the elites, the middle classes, and the working classes to back the national agenda.

Separatist national movements challenge the boundaries of existing states for both national and economic reasons. Often they represent the desire of the more affluent regions to be freed from the obligation to share their wealth with members of poorer regions they now take to be outsiders. The affluent attempt to rewrite the political contract in ways that will secure them better life chances, offering new political and cultural opportunities to their elites and a larger share of the national wealth to the people.

The second kind of nationalism is the nationalism of the less well-off, those left defenseless by the process of hyperglobalization.³ The vulnerable revoke national feelings in order to convince the elites to come back home from their global voyage and put their nation first. Because the vulnerable do not inhabit a defined territory or have a distinct identity, they define themselves in opposition to others. From here, the distance to an aggressive, xenophobic type of nationalism is short. Yet, despite their brutal language and their association with hateful right-wing movements, many of the claims the vulnerable make are not without moral value. The demand to rewrite the social contract in ways that will answer their needs is a legitimate one. Their request to be included and fairly treated is as justified as their xenophobia is morally unwarranted.

The nationalism of the vulnerable is a revolt against the betrayal of the global elites. The vulnerable rightly feel it is unjust that those who exploit cheap labor and natural resources overseas are allowed to portray themselves as moral universalists, while those trying to defend their jobs and their future back home are labeled as narrow-minded bigots. They would like

their claims to be taken seriously rather than rejected offhand, dismissed as populists or reactionaries.

Liberals would like us to believe that nationalists are morally inferior to globalists. They conveniently ignore the strong correlation between social class and political preferences. Some suggest that this correlation attests to the fact that moral and political competence varies among members of the different social classes, or to put it bluntly, that the more educated and affluent exercise better judgment than the rest. My theory travels between the two types of nationalism, making it harder to pin nationalism on the hillbillies, the rednecks, or European right-wing extremists. The savvy people of Catalan and northern Italy force us to think harder about the origins of nationalism and its role in the contemporary political reality.

It is easier to be a globalist if you are likely to enjoy the benefits of an open market, or to support free immigration if you feel secure in your social status and do not fear that newcomers are going to take your job, or reduce the value of your property by renting the next-door apartment, forcing your neighborhood schools to face new challenges. Likewise, it is logical to be against separatism if you think you might be on the losing side and support it if you expect to enjoy its benefits. This means that moral and social luck plays an important role in determining the scope of values and behaviors individuals are likely to consider and are able to endorse.⁴ If one's position in the national-global debate strongly correlates to one's actual interests and expectations, there is no reason to describe one side as being more rational, moral, or open-minded than the other. Exposing the rational aspects hidden in national choices, and contrary to most commentators, I suggest that the reemergence of national feelings is a sensible response to the present social, political, and

economic circumstances rather than an uncontrolled outburst of destructive human qualities.

Nationalism has always been part of the modern political world, at times occupying the back seat, at others the front row. The persistence of nationalism attests to its inherent value. This book aims to enumerate the assets that nationalism brings to the political discourse and examine a variety of national claims without falling into the ad hominem trap of rebutting ideas by attacking the people making the argument or those associated with them. The present political discourse deals far too often with the (problematic) personalities of the deliverers rather than with the issues themselves. It is therefore important to emphasize that what follows is not an argument in support of any particular leader or political movement but an examination of the accuracy of theoretical claims judged on their own merit.

The text tries to keep a calm tone, avoiding the hysteria or melancholia characteristic of present-day political exchanges; it takes a step back in order to get some perspective and encourage intellectual modesty so desperately needed these days. In this spirit it shuns inflated declarations and false promises and tries to adjust expectations to the social and political conditions of our time. Much of the present-day sense of disappointment is grounded in the inability of both theorists and political leaders to break away from the illusion that all problems can be solved, that progress is eternal and there will be more for everyone.

It's not without hesitation that I set out to write this text. Taking a pro-nationalist view one faces a risk that some arguments will be used to support unworthy policies. But the fear of being used should not stop one from drawing attention to some valid arguments.

Things are likely to get tougher in years to come, and without human empathy and national solidarity there is no way forward. What is desperately needed is a Churchill who will not promise greatness or togetherness but “blood, toil, tears, and sweat,” or a Roosevelt who will urge people not to fear but to support “a leadership of frankness and of vigor” that will encourage nations to build a bearable future.

Intellectual history resembles an archaeological mound built from remnants of great ideas. In order to move to a new era one needs to dig in, brush off the dust, examine the way ideas were used in order to build a theory that is, at the same time, new and familiar. Liberalism with its faults and virtues, democracy with its promise of self-rule, national ideology with its transgenerational communal aspirations, and class-related theories with their sensitivity to the way social status dictates one’s life options must be included. From the theoretical fragments of the last century a new theory should be built that fits the needs of the twenty-first century.⁵