
2. The left and nationalism: from the French Revolution to the Anthropocene*

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INTRODUCTION

The left/right divide is a constitutive aspect of modern politics, shaped by the French Revolution, the ascent of the bourgeoisie as the dominant political force and the conflict-ridden advent of democratic politics. Since the Revolution, the left has remained symmetrically opposed to the right in the shaping of parliaments and other representative institutions. While those positioned on the left originally identified themselves as patriots, the cult of *la Patrie* (the Fatherland) was slowly appropriated by the right. Around 130 years after the Revolution, this appropriation culminated in the rise of the authoritarian and fascist regimes between World War I and World War II. Since then, the association has remained almost unshakable. Despite some interludes, like the rise of anti-colonialism, post-colonialism and stateless nationalism, nationalism and patriotism have remained a prerogative of the right, although it should not necessarily be so. This chapter explores the gradual evolution of the left/right dichotomy and its shifting relationship with nationalism, speculating on how new constellations of power at the edges of modernity are drastically altering notions of left and right.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LEFT–RIGHT DIVIDE

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

The practice of nationalism is rooted in concepts and ideas explored and developed before the French Revolution, particularly in seventeenth-century England (Greenfeld, 1992), but also in earlier times (Smith, 1998, 1999). It was, however, from France that the

predominant pattern of nationalist practice and ideology was exported throughout the world. Therefore, one can say that both the left/right divide and nationalism are firmly rooted in the French Revolution. In France, it was nevertheless transformed into a collectivistic principle based on the idea of ‘popular sovereignty’, which in the subsequent years became prevalent in Europe, particularly following the Franco–Prussian war (1870–71). This collectivist vision and ethos reflected an entity infused with ‘superior, elite quality and . . . perceived as essentially homogeneous’ (Greenfeld, 1992, p. 7). Given its association with nationalism, the left and the right shared a ‘fantasy of congruency’ and an obsession with uniformity, leading elites towards a constant pursuit of an impossible utopia of organic homogeneity (Mandelbaum, 2020). In view of the inherent pluralism of each territorial space, this pursuit of homogeneity through the chase for a ‘perfect’ congruence between nation, state and culture was destined to remain intrinsically incomplete, given both local resistance and the difficulties intrinsic to the homogenization ‘from above’. Failure, in turn, led to increasing frustration, all of which combined to make war a more likely diversionary strategy. The amalgamation of war and nationalism peaked 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 of nationalism until the present day (Conversi, 2015).

The Italian philosopher Norberto Bobbio (1996) argued that the continuing relevance of the left/right divide revolves around contrasting ideas of social inequality: the right considers social inequality to be inherent in human societies, condemning the left’s efforts to reduce 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). As Liah Greenfeld observes, two notions lay at the core of the left/right distinction: for classical liberals who supported free-market capitalism, equality meant ‘equality of opportunities’; for socialists and communists, who advocated state control of the economy, equality consisted in ‘equality of result’ (Greenfeld, 2017).

THE MARXIST CRITIQUE OF NATIONALISM

As Marx and Engels famously claimed in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), ‘The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got’. Whereas Marx – and many Marxists – identify nations as bourgeois constructs, the accompanying ideology, nationalism, must be identified as a tool for advancing the interests of the bourgeoisie, not the ‘proletariat’ or the ‘people’ (Marx and Engels, 1848 [2008]). When Marxism, in turn, seized the state in the Soviet Union, the rejection of nationalism 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, 2019).¹ 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) 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, p. 109). For her fierce defiance of nationalism, which she paid for with her life, she can be counted among the few intellectuals and opinion makers who did not pander to the seduction of nationalism at a time when this had threateningly morphed into intimidation, marginalization and isolation.

Trotskyism was equally, if not more vehemently, opposed to nationalism. Leon Trotsky’s (1879–1940) theory of ‘permanent revolution’ developed along with his criticism of Great Russian nationalism and state bureaucracy – which can explain why more than a few extreme neo-liberals in the 1990s had been Trotskyist militants in their youth.

AUSTRO-MARXISM AND THE END OF EMPIRE: THE NATIONAL QUESTION AND THE LEFT

Against run-of-the-mill Marxist nation bashing, a Marxist trend emerged, mostly in Vienna, with the goal of salvaging the Austro–Hungarian empire threatened by internal conflict and disintegration. Before, during and after World War I, Karl Renner (1870–1950),² Otto Bauer (1881–1938), Max Adler (1873–1937), Rudolf Hilferding (1877–1941), Friedrich Adler (1879–1960) and other members of the Austrian Social Democratic Party attempted reconciliation between the left and nationalist principles. Otto Bauer’s notion of *non-territorial cultural autonomy* (NTCA) advocated the establishment of ‘minority rights regimes in societies that are culturally diverse, but which for a variety of reasons are not wholly suited to federal solutions’ (Cordell, 2017; see also Bowring, 2002; Nimni, 2005; Smith and Cordell, 2013).

Marxism’s last-ditch efforts to embrace the nationality question, but not nationalism, thus occurred at a critical time that led to the disintegration of the Austro–Hungarian Empire. Austro-Marxism’s cultural autonomy programme recognized the importance of nations, while aspiring to avoid the embrace of nationalism on the part of national minorities. In this way, Austro-Marxists implicitly acknowledged the very centrality of nations as supreme political actors and this was shared by nationalists.

It should, however, be noted that the Austro-Marxists replicated to some extent the nationalist world vision insofar as the constituent units of their political project were nationally based, that is, founded on ethnic ancestry rather than actual cultural distinctions. The notion of cultural autonomy was not class related: it did not contemplate the protection of specific professions, of, say, the unique culture of a group of artisans, woodcarvers, craftspersons, peasants or any age-honoured *métier*. Nor did they defend class-based or professionally rooted cultural specificities, like an actual style of carpentry, the traditional knowledge of a local village elder, the specific tales of a native storyteller with their experience accumulated through the millennia, nor any cultural baggage of age-old folklore that may appear dissonant with their modernist vision – what today is normally counted as ‘heritage’.

The notion of culture was intended entirely as an attribute of nations and nationalities.

Austro-Marxism therefore risked replicating the same conceptual grid and ideological orientation of the nationalism it was trying to challenge. Austro-Marxists fought cultural homogenization on a greater political scale, but avoided recommending specific formulas or arguments that would side-step local homogenization at the sub-state level. While reacting to the all-pervasive menace of disintegrative nationalism, Austro-Marxists were not responding to the curse of uprooting homogenization ushered in by technological change, automation and modernization.

Even though the Austro-Marxist *Kulturnation* (lit. ‘cultural nation’, whereas ‘culture’ is mostly defined on the basis of language) was based on elective principles, it also reflected the overlap between culture and ethnicity of the dominant early twentieth-century *Weltanschauung* (worldview) in Austria, Germany and elsewhere.³

WAR AND NATIONALISM

World War I brought an end to all attempts to reconcile clashing nationalist aspirations. The Austro–Hungarian, Ottoman and indeed the Romanov empires were not spared the disruptive assertion of mutually incompatible nationalisms, now ennobled by the principle of self-determination. Rival ideologies, like anarchism, collapsed in the cauldron of war (Conversi, 2016a), while many cultural communities were shattered and destroyed beyond recognition in its wake (Kushner, 2017).

Nationalism triumphed, then, as the dominant ideology. Fascism brought this triumph to extreme consequences and, even while incorporating aspects of the new socialist utopia, it placed nationalism firmly within the right. But fascism itself can be seen as a late outcome or manifestation of the supposedly ‘liberal’ Risorgimento (Italian unification), just as national socialism is barely comprehensible without reference to the preceding effort of German nation-building, cultural homogenization and militarization (Conversi, 2007, 2008).

DECOLONIZATION AND NATIONALISM

The defeat of Nazism relegated nationalism to the provisional dustbin of history, at least in the West. Many conflicts became frozen below the surface of the Cold War, buried under the titanic clash between liberal democracy and social-communism, then the hegemonic force within the international left – which meant that nationalism was alive and well in the Soviet block, but manifesting itself in more nuanced ways (Connor, 2019).

Decolonization merged nationalism with appeals to leftist themes, such as ‘social justice’. But it also built upon previous historical experiences of anti-imperialism in the colonial world: before decolonization, forms of ‘anti-imperial nationalism’ had developed during the so-called Banana Wars (1898–1934) against US interference in Latin America. In particular, they were embodied in the figure of Nicaragua’s national hero and martyr Augusto C. Sandino (1912–33). Farabundo Martí (1893–1932) also combined Salvadoran nationalism with Marxism–Leninism in his revolutionary plan that culminated in the 1932 massacre of nearly 40 000 peasants, indigenous peoples and civilians in El Salvador.

Nationalism was similarly at the core of both the Mexican and Cuban revolutions. Mexico provided a prototype. For Hart, massive US penetration in the Mexican economy, culture and society between 1880 and 1910 ignited ‘the first great Third World uprising against American economic, cultural, and political expansion’ (Hart, 1987, p. 362). Here, nationalism acted as a political cement to bridge cultural divisions between peasants and intellectuals, while armed revolutionaries carried dozens of assaults against American properties during 1910–11.

In earlier anti-colonial struggles, nationalism was also associated with the left. As Benedict Anderson (2005) unearthed, nationalism merged with global anarchism in the struggle for the Philippines’s independence against Spain in the 1890s. The Filipino national hero and intellectual José Rizal (1861–96) encountered Catalan and Italian anarchists while briefly imprisoned in Barcelona’s notorious bastille, the Castell de Montjuïc in 1896 before being executed. One year later, the Italian anarchist Michele Angiolillo (1871–97) assassinated the universally loathed prime minister of Spain, Cánovas del Castillo, seemingly also to vindicate the execution of Rizal – and was in turn executed (Anderson, 2005, pp. 189–93).

After World War II, decolonization, itself a consequence of Allied victory in the war, was often framed as national ‘emancipation’. But decolonization was not a smooth process. While the example of Mahatma Gandhi proved indispensable in devising peaceful strategies of liberation around the world, other forces emerged through the cracks of a withdrawing colonialism. Anti-colonial intellectuals such as the psychiatrist Franz Fanon (1925–61) turned to nationalism as they witnessed the atrocities perpetuated by French troops in Algeria, a brutal state repression ending with French withdrawal before international outrage. The idea of violence as a ‘redemptive’ force, or as means necessary to an end, had previously been used within French revolutionary Jacobinism (Duong, 2017) and early American nationalism (Davis, 1966), in key sectors of the Italian anarchist movement (Conversi, 2016a) and of anarcho-syndicalism (Botz-Bornstein, 2018). Yet, Fanon’s theory of violence derived intimately from his personal encounter with war traumas and post-traumatic disorders he directly observed during his clinical experiences: he conceived violent action as a redeeming practice, therapeutic and curative in itself for the oppressed (Youssef and Fadl, 1996). Yet, in her rejection of Fanon’s approach, Hannah Arendt considered violence as so profoundly ‘anti-political’ that it could potentially lead to complete unpredictability, freezing reason and the very understanding of events (Frazer and Hutchings, 2008). Fanon’s theory of violence as an instrument of nation-building was adopted by various movements worldwide and is still influential today among some nationalists and radical Islamists (Botz-Bornstein, 2018, p. 42). The Algerian experience was so relevant to the times that a whole generation grew up in its shadow.

In the developing world, victorious nationalist movements led by revolutionary elites were restoring independence for their countries after years of rebellion. Cuba, Vietnam and Maoist China were the acclaimed champions of national emancipation. Amongst Basque radicals fighting against Franco’s dictatorship in Spain, the appraisal of ‘Third World’ liberation movements was incongruous, so that initially the leaders were unable to discern the historical differences developing between movements such as the Algerian FLN and Israel’s Irgun Z’vai Leumi. Founded in the 1940s by Menachem Begin, the Irgun army played a key role in expelling British rule. Begin’s commonly quoted dictum, ‘We fight, therefore we are’, became a motto for militants of various ideological extractions

(Conversi, 1993, 1997). In Israel, the Irish War of Independence was seen as a model among Irgun militants, while in Ireland, Begin's memoir also became one of the IRA's guerrilla manuals (Bell, 1974).⁴

A particularly important manifestation of the alliance between nationalism and the Left has emerged in the developing world among radical pro-independence movements: for instance, both the Kurdish movement in Turkey and Syria and the movement for Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka had clearly Marxist-Leninist and secular, sometime anti-religious, foundations. Similar examples abound throughout the world and many appeal to the cosmopolitan dimension of the global Left.

The key geopolitical guideline of decolonization was, however, the *uti possidetis* principle granting the permanence of previous administrative boundaries established by the colonial powers. This discouraged the actual politicization of ethnicity. Within the left, communist and, most often, socialist parties followed the Western and Soviet canons about the 'inviolability of state boundaries', while nearly all sovereign states agreed on such inviolability. This steady geopolitical principle guaranteed a rare and unprecedented international stability, insofar as political leaders were convinced that state boundaries would stay forever intact and unchangeable – with the iconoclastic allowance for Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Throughout the Cold War, the right and the left usually found themselves in agreement over adhering to this fixed principle of international diplomacy.

AFTER THE COLD WAR: THE ECLIPSE OF SOCIALIST MYTHOLOGY

A crucial transition was the radical demise of state socialism at the end of the Cold War. This was accompanied by a broader discrediting of Marxism, including Marxist analysis, now deprived of its deterministic power and predictive capacity. Without the narrative canvas provided by Marxism and its socialist utopia, the left became bereft of the emotional underpinning, symbolic support and mythological background necessary to advance in the global battle of ideas.

After World War II and the heyday of extreme nation-statism under national socialism, the West entered a prolonged period of peace that shaped the relationship between nationalism and the left. Despite the ultimate threat of a nuclear Armageddon, the Cold War began and ended without a single nuclear warhead being detonated. However, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated the process of Americanization that had begun earlier in Western Europe after the war. This encompassed nearly every area of society, from business and economic management (Kipping and Bjarnar, 2002), to movies and entertainment (De Grazia, 2005). It irradiated from North to South, from West to East: for instance, the 'routinization and habituation' of American habits and fashions in the 1990s permeated 'the most ordinary and intimate aspects of Muscovites daily lives . . . taking aspects of McDonald's into their homes, . . . taking their home lives into McDonald's' (Caldwell, 2009, p. 17).

Privatization and deregulation campaigns were accompanied by the neo-liberal routing of sovereign state institutions, which sometimes included welfare provisions. Following these wide-ranging changes in the relationship between place and power, new sovereign

actors emerged beyond the reach of the nation-state. The *welfare* state system and the enshrinement of social rights instituted after the war were slowly eroded once the free-market ideology of neo-liberal globalization triumphed in the 1980s, accompanied by a relentless drive towards privatization and delocalization. Unrestrained capital accumulation led to a widening gap between rich and poor within all countries that had adopted this model, but, most significantly, it was predicated on barely sustainable policies of economic growth adopted globally (Gillespie, 2014).

Through radical deregulation, particularly in finance, culture and the economy, capitalism assumed ever more aggressive forms. Susan George (2014) has identified the new ‘sovereign’ actors that seized the power of nation-states as mighty neo-feudal lords, each with their own brand (firm) and army (consumers): Exxon, Microsoft, McDonald’s, Monsanto, Shell, and so on. Decisions are taken outside any form of democratic consultation, thus undermining representative democracy (Crouch, 2005).

The global predominance of multinational corporations has led to public debt and state liability spinning out of control. In the process, the ‘fossil capitalism’ (Angus, 2016; Malm, 2014) rooted in industrialization morphed into ‘disaster capitalism’ (Loewenstein, 2017) embedded in financial deregulation and environmental catastrophe.

While the left has been incapable of mobilizing in response to these hazards, populist and far-right parties and leaders gained the upper hand by making defence of national identity their primary mission.

THE RIGHT AND NATIONALISM

Yet, at the same time, the right has often put national sovereignty up for sale to the best bidder, further dispersing society’s cultural capital by diverting the electorate towards more ‘affordable’ targets – like immigrants and minorities. In such a *mêlée*, the emphasis on emotions and belonging, at a time of increasing social alienation, anomie and atomization, has slowly prevailed.

If, within the term ‘right’, we include those parts of the political spectrum that range from neo-liberal centrism to neo-conservatism and the extreme right, we need to ask: what is their common denominator? A shared defining feature is *escapism* from hard-to-solve, life-threatening problems such as the climate crisis. 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 to retrench into a narrow position of denial, just when sweeping changes in ideology, policies, attitudes and political praxis are vitally necessary and cannot be avoided. Whenever the right has incorporated elements of anti-globalization discourses once shared with the mainstream left – as in France during the 1980s (Martigny, 2016), it has done so largely on a rhetorical level, creating deliberate confusion regarding the causal relationships: ethnic ‘others’ are stereotypically chosen as a manifestation of the negative aspects of globalization and as the main catalysts of discontent (Milačić and Vuković, 2018). Seldom are large corporations and big business acknowledged as responsible for present-day problems, from economic recession to the environmental crisis. Cultural and ethnic homogeneity are raised as supreme values to be defended against internal and external perils, thus subverting political priorities. Insofar as nationalism can be defined as a political practice

founded on ‘boundary building’ (Conversi, 1995), the right becomes the absolute master, the left a mere apprentice.

A second common trend within the right is the obsessive *securitization* of the national space. This space is perceived as being jeopardized by fellow human beings, rather than fully identifiable threats like the climate crisis, financial deregulation, corporate tax evasion, social injustice, environmental degradation or capital concentration – so the targets are not assessable entities such as the fossil-fuel industry or weapons manufacturers.

‘Internal’ and ‘external’ securitizations tend to go in tandem. The internal threat is seen as an inside assault on the nation as a moral community, in the form of ‘rising’ criminality, immigrants, terrorists and other negative heroes of recurring ‘moral panics’ (Cohen, 2011, p. xlii). It is worth noting that the legal pressure of ‘*penal populism*’ (Pratt, 2007) preceded the post-2016 rise of xenophobic populisms and nationalisms, since the ‘threatened’ national space needed to be safeguarded or defended with the full force of law.⁵ And, before the rise of online nationalism (Conversi, 2012a), media-induced outbursts – chiefly from the tabloid press – encouraged the protection of national ‘integrity’ by raising penalties and increasing punitive sentencing, with the consequent expansion of security. Examples of surveillance include subjects involved with indigenous self-determination (Dafnos, Thompson and French, 2016) or the politics of natural resource extraction through ecocide and megaprojects (Dunlap 2020). This brings us to the non-rational and ultimately illogical essence of nationalism.

RATIONALITY AND EMOTIONS

The late political scientist Walker Connor (1991, 1993) underlined that nationalism’s non-rationality should not be confused with irrationality – or not, at least, with stupidity. Nationalist emotions can be accompanied by a powerful rationalization apparatus: much ink has been spilled upholding the most unreasonable or groundless arguments in defence of one or the other nationalist pretences. Nevertheless, the trend is both self-assertive and self-destructive, because elites or proto-elites can easily exploit nationalism as a tool to defend their political and economic interests while simulating popular sacrifice in the name of guarding the homeland against a host of potential foes.

Other authors emphasize a deeply irrational aspect of nationalism. Karl Popper famously identified nationalism with ‘tribal instinct’ as a revolt against reason and the open society. Nationalism appeals to ‘our desire to be relieved from the strain of individual responsibility, which it attempts to replace by a collective or group responsibility’ (Popper, 1945). While Popper’s identification of national ‘tribalism’ may look simplistic, the lens of opposition between closed and open societies may still be beneficial when observing ongoing socio-political changes. But Popper did not associate nationalism with *cultural and social practices* incessantly inculcated through education, media and compulsory military service, which have the power to transform even apparently open societies into closed communities of destiny (Conversi, 2012b). Most of these practices rely on visions of an organic community seen as needing to be made uniform and thoroughly homogenized. Homogenization, particularly cultural homogenization, became a hallmark of pre-World War I and pre-World War II nationalist discourses and practices (Conversi,

2007, 2008). Together with technological advances and economic welfare, these trends prepared Europe for entry into World War I (Conversi, 2016a).

Michael Billig (1995) focuses on the all-pervasive subconscious impulses mobilized by daily rituals that inform our nationalized environments and patriotic attitudes. These are often emotional transcendences that the subject may not be aware of.

SOVEREIGNTY DEFLATED, OR DE-SOVEREIGNIZATION

Since the end of the Cold War, 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-sovereignization*, that is, the ‘implosion’ of the very notion of popular sovereignty (Conversi, 2016b). One well-known study has quantified the concentration of power into the hands of a minuscule global elite: although this study did not provide an indication of the physical locations where transnational corporations act, it identified a ‘small tightly-knit core of financial institutions’ as a ‘super-entity’, thus revealing ‘the architecture of the international ownership network’ (Vitali, Glattfelder and Battiston, 2011) that forms a non-localized ‘giant bow-tie structure’ through which the vast majority of global economic transactions flow.

George Monbiot (2000) charted the slow encroachment of big business into every sphere of public life at the local and the national level: the hubris of mega-corporations affects many government levels as well as universities, ranging from the privatization of hospitals to the takeover of schools by supermarket chains and fast food companies. In the UK, transnational corporations have obliterated thousands of jobs, channelling money away from local communities, while receiving privileged access to building permits irrespective of local needs and demands. These critical observations can probably be applied to the rest of Europe, Latin America and parts of Asia.

By the 1990s, the left was blinded to this erosion of popular sovereignty and democratic accountability by embracing the dogma of neo-liberalism – as was the right. Within academia, Susan Strange (1997) identifies this as *casino capitalism* – the weaknesses of the international financial system since the early 1980s. ‘Betting in the dark’ had become the basic rule of the expanding capitalist economy.

Since these early critiques, a host of studies have been published charting the damage inflicted upon notions of democracy and sovereignty by neo-liberal globalization (Crouch, 2005). These have been incorporated within leftist and social democratic political discourse. However, they only occasionally appear within the right, which reformulate the new challenges in terms of the threats of mass migration, European regulation, Islam, multiculturalism and other feigned or perceived threats. Neo-liberal certainties that the private sector is more efficient than the public sphere have legitimized these moves away from local communities to intangible faraway interests and delocalized entities.

THE ECONOMY TRAP: ECONOMIC GROWTH AS A SOURCE OF NATIONALISM AND CONFLICT

One of the major historical failures of the left has been the staunch belief in an automatic relationship between mere economic factors and the domestication of nationalism. On both the left and the right, the belief has long prevailed that economic growth would automatically deliver social peace and diminish conflict. But the opposite has occurred throughout modern history: James C. Davies's (1962) famous 'J curve' identified revolutionary events as occurring just after momentary lulls following phases of economic expansion. He sought to explain this by taking into account falling levels of perceived well-being in contrast to rising individual expectations following previous economic growth.

Moreover, emboldened new elites and parvenus sought to protect their insecure gains and newly acquired richness by all possible means, including the promotion of nationalism, as occurred before World War I. The control and mobilization of economic resources were often channelled through patriotism. Equally, the 'blocked mobility' thesis (Cormier, 2003) identifies diminishing opportunities for social advancement and economic welfare in both stable and growing economies as catalysts for the rise of nationalism.

World War I exploded after a long period of unprecedented economic expansion known as the Belle Époque (1871–1914), which had affected all major economies later involved in the war. The period of expanding capitalism and imperial liberalism preceding World War I, as Thomas Piketty (2014) recognizes, is the only modern precedent of the current accumulation of capital into fewer and fewer hands – even the current level of expanding inequalities pales in comparison to the period culminating in the most destructive war the world has seen (World War I, bolshevism, fascism, national socialism and World War II can be seen as a continuum).

Until recently, it was widely argued that the stock market crash of October 1929, and the following crisis, had been crucial in propping up national socialism. Yet, fascism was born in the 1920s, not exactly a decade of economic contraction: the Roaring Twenties in North America and the 'Golden Age Twenties' in Europe were an age of economic expansion – usually referenced in French as *les années folles* ('the crazy years'), characterized by the expansion of consumption (Lévêque, 1992). Nazism seized power years after the post-war crisis had wrecked the German economy, while the Third Reich became an engine of economic growth (Conversi, 2012b). Today, the like-minded Hindutva movement in India has emerged from the empowerment of new elites through globalization and the upward economic advancement of various classes: 'As India's economy has opened and grown robustly, so has Hindu pride' (Frayer, 2019).

The rise of nationalism is rarely the consequence of economic dire straits, but rather the result of the empowering of new classes and their upward mobility. The dogmatic belief to the contrary has percolated into the mainstream, informing the policy of neo-liberal economists, as it did that of Marxists before them.

By appealing to emotions, therefore, the right has gained privileged access to the non-rational sphere and the impulses of its constituencies. After a brief interlude in the 1980s and early 1990s when part of the European left, notably the French Socialist Party (PS), contributed to a prolific debate in the search for a new pluralist vision of national identity (Martigny, 2016), the mainstream Western European left capitulated to the seductions of neo-liberal globalization.

But let us briefly analyse the fleeting moment in which left and cultural nationalism joined forces in Europe. In the 1980s, debates in the French left had already pondered the ways markets crush cultural identities, generating cultural homogenization (Martigny, 2016). After the May 1968 student uprising, culture was envisaged as a means of social transformation. Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's (1891–1937) notion of 'cultural hegemony' rose high within the French left, which was persuaded that only the development of an independent intellectual class could challenge the foundations of cultural hegemony and thus reverse the power relations of the capitalist mode of production. The ground-breaking work of Herbert Marcuse (1964) and other members of the Frankfurt School guided the public debate across Europe and beyond by assigning a new centrality to culture in shaping social relations.

For the Gramscian left, the structure of capitalism was based on cultural domination – it is only through the prior creation of a *national*, and possibly international, counter-culture that capitalism can be challenged, or at least deeply remodelled. Culture lies at the core of an ideological battle whose goal is radical social transformation. Nonetheless, the cultural debate in France was progressively dodged as a fierce Republican reaction took shape. By the early 1990s, the right and the centre-right lacked a cultural project of their own (Martigny, 2016).

The 'Third Way' adopted by Europe's leading left parties during the 1990s allegedly aimed to reconcile capitalism with socialism. In the process, incumbent labour, socialist and social-democratic governments implemented both *laissez faire* capitalism and forms of 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995). Once UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's Third Way had deflated the left's thinking and vision of a national 'moral community', the left/right divide began to vanish. The divide has thus become tenuous since the 1990s and populism and nationalism began to expand in the 2010s by working in the interstices of this ideological void. In the meantime, casino capitalism (Strange, 1997) had mutated into disaster capitalism (Loewenstein, 2017).

CATASTROPHISM: LEFT AND RIGHT

One way of looking at the relationship between left and right in the context of nationalism is to consider their differing approaches to the tendency towards catastrophic thinking that often prevails across the political and social spectrum (Lilley et al., 2012). We live at a time of far-reaching, unprecedented uncertainties, in which the modern age's optimism has abdicated, leaving citizens forlorn, disoriented and apparently defenceless.

The nationalism of the new radical right emerging from the ashes of neo-liberalism leverages on fear-mongering and the diffusion of mass anxiety about external 'foes' and/or internal minorities (Davis, 2012). The subjects of these fears, however, are not rational problems that can be addressed with practical means – except superficial measures such as closing interstate borders, raising tariffs, and so on. Quite the contrary, the collective fear is embodied in an undefined and malleable perception of 'otherness' as a generalized threat – its continuously moving targets may vary across time and include immigrants, gypsies/Romas, Muslims, Jews, Christians, homosexuals, indigenous peoples and various kinds of minorities according to geography, history and context.

In a mirror image, the same perception is reflected back to the West in newly revived

paranoias about the ghosts of colonialism or neo-colonialism. Here, instead of an undefined other, we have an anti-Western rhetoric and conspiratorial thinking that sees anything coming from the West, particularly ideas, as colonial legacy or imperialist expansion. In reality, the contrast is mutual and no amount of Americanization or McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1996) can deceive non-Western nationalist elites into accepting substantial demands for sacrifice, or even improvement, if they apparently emanate from the West.

Catastrophism, the idea that we are inevitably bound towards a sudden cataclysm, has been pointed to as a cause of failure among environmentalists (Yuen, 2012). Yet, as Ulrich Beck (2015) and others have pointed out, there is an ‘emancipatory’ form of catastrophism that places us in front of our inescapable burden and responsibility. As we know, the emergence of far-right nationalism has been accelerated by the Internet and the widespread diffusion of lies and misinformation (Conversi, 2012b). The discovery by MIT scholars that ‘fake news’ travels much further and faster than real news on social media (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018) can partially explain the appeal of ultra-nationalism and its capacity to tap into collective resentment through deliberately spread misinformation. The study by Vosoughi et al. found that, ‘Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories’, while on Twitter ‘false news was 70% more likely to be re-tweeted than the truth’ (Vosoughi et al., 2018, p. 1146).⁶

Moreover, both the left and the right have overlooked colossal problems like the interaction between overpopulation and automatization. Diana Coole (2018) argues that further increases in human population imply the building of large infrastructure, from schools to roads and health systems, while at the same time the population is continually increasing. Overpopulation becomes highly problematic if it occurs in tandem with robotization and AI development, making billions of people jobless, particularly in metropolitan areas. States may collapse under the combined weight of the climate crisis, public debt, financial deregulation and other crises. If institutions are unable to support expanding populations, nationalism and ethnic conflict may become more widespread than in previous historical periods. The global population has trebled to 7.5 billion since 1950, during a time when governments have lacked the will, incentives and capacity to act in an area that both left and right, the liberal and the religious, regard as impinging on individuals’ reproductive freedom and human rights (Coole, 2018).

END OF THE ROAD: THE LEFT AND NATIONALISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

In his recent book, Bruno Latour (2018) argues that the left/right divide has collapsed along with the modernist vector, propelling humanity towards the self-fulfilling promise of a relatively assured emancipatory future. A new opposition has emerged between climate change knowledge/adaptation/mitigation and denial of the climate crisis, even though the latter would be unthinkable without the former. This distinction is rapidly becoming the key articulation point around which all narratives of change, mitigation, adaptation and denial are framed and developed. While denial proceeds along its unrealistic escape from reality, climate science proceeds by accumulation of empirically based data typical of the modern scientific approach – yet the latter, in its most pessimistic scenario, points towards

the eclipse and termination of the modern age as we know it. For Latour, the current liminal situation constitutes the springboard for new political configurations, while simultaneously revealing the limits of the modernist project. Some scientific research, including Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports, have in fact revealed the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of surviving the climate crisis without deeply altering the patterns of development and consumption that have, until now, prevailed in the West as well as the East.

Thus, the wave of rapidly expanding post-2016 xenophobic nationalism cannot be explained outside the current 'climate regime'. Because scientists had begun to warn about this existential threat as early as the 1980s, elites, including fossil-fuel elites, have been fully aware of it, as has been recently uncovered (Rich, 2019). Yet, the ominous reality has deliberately been withheld from public view. Corporate elites have instinctively withdrawn behind high walls, while rapidly accumulating huge quantities of wealth and power in the name of 'free market' ideology and deregulation. Panic buying has led to resource concentration and financial grabbing by extracting the maximum amount of fossil fuels.

Saskia Sassen (2013, 2014) has identified the patterns of land grabbing, expulsions and exclusion as characteristics of globalization. In this respect, 'globalization' can be described as an empty signifier, as a rhetorical fraud, or, at best, a transitional phase between two historical periods: the age of progress and modernity and the ultimate challenge of the climate emergency. As Mark Levene has perceptively indicated, if the twentieth century was the century of genocide, the twenty-first century is hell bent on becoming the century of 'omnicide', the extinction of all forms of life due to human action – and political inaction (Levene and Conversi, 2014).

The egalitarian ethos of modernity brings with it the promise of generalized personal advancement within a horizon of constant progress and emancipation. Nationalism can be seen as an expression of this egalitarian ethos. However, its promise clashes with the natural limits of the geographical space in which humanity is physically bound, the Earth. The clash between this urge for egalitarian self-realization and the reality of the limits to economic growth has escorted the collective entrance into the Anthropocene, as geologists, stratigraphers and most other scientists redefine the new age in which the human footprint on the Earth's surface has become everlastingly indelible. Since virtually all cross-disciplinary scientists agree on the 'anthropogenic' or human-made causation of the climate crisis (Cook et al., 2013), the new geologic epoch has, appropriately, been called the Anthropocene (Conversi, 2020).

The geo-historical passage into a new epoch promises to be much more rapid, radical and all-pervasive than the shift from pre-modern to modern society, or from agricultural to industrial society. The passage, however, is too complex and dramatic to be fully grasped from the worn-out lenses of modernity (Conversi, 2020).

In the relationship between the left and nationalism, the fork on the road also appears during the ongoing passage from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, an epochal shift not yet sufficiently recognized within the political and social sciences. The changes currently experienced by many societies are so breathtakingly quick and potentially devastating that the search for a globally shared narrative becomes vital to the interrelated destinies of humankind. Hence, a new 'survival cosmopolitanism' or an international vision of the place of each nation in the rapidly approaching transition (an unavoidable prelude to

either a wholly new world or obliteration) becomes a required *sine qua non* for continued human existence. Without a renewed capacity and recognized authority to address substantial life-or-death problems, the modernist gridlock risks simultaneously preaching the dysfunctions of status quo immobilism while propagating suicidal, indeed ‘omnicidal’, nationalism.

So far, the left has been excluded from reaping the benefits of economic and political turmoil, unable to exploit the need for positive change demanded by vast sectors of Western and non-Western populations. At the same time, sections of the left have become aware of the need, in some countries, to use populism as emotional leverage for gaining power. In their highly influential work, Ernesto Laclau (2018) and Chantal Mouffe (2019) argue that populism should not be a prerogative of the right; the left could appropriate it to its own advantage. In practical terms, this has been reflected in the creation of new political movements and parties, as in Argentina, Spain and Greece, with left-wing populists in power in Latin America, and the rise of Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. The same analysis might apply to nationalism – considering that most students of populism see it as a distinct phenomenon that does not overlap with nationalism (Freedon, 2017; Körösenyi and Patkós, 2017; Ruzza, 2010; Stone and Christodoulaki, 2018).⁷

Given the right’s tendency towards denial and its refusal to address the highly complex and difficult problem of the climate crisis (Dunlap and Jacques, 2013; Hess and Renner, 2019; Krangle, Kaltenborn and Hultman, 2019; McCright and Dunlap, 2011), the left now seems better equipped to address this. The contemporary left nevertheless has not often conceived the struggle for human survival as a challenge to the hidebound national narrative. If any such exploration is transposed into the political arena, the national rooting needs to be clearly visible in the foreground, while cosmopolitan goals can remain in the background.

A solution for the left could be to seize and redefine nationalism, while depriving it of its anti-plural intolerance, and transform it into an inclusive ideology. The left might be able to do so by accepting that nations are plural entities rather than the monolithic leviathans envisaged by the far right. This may in turn require the abandonment of some political dogmas. The left may need to rebalance upholding national values while defending the ancestral ‘soil’ without renouncing its alleged cosmopolitan vocation. Ultimately, it must always be recognized that nationalism is intrinsically exclusive, despite ‘liberal nationalist’ claims that it can be inclusive. This recognition should not, however, prevent the left from incorporating national cultural elements and territorial aspects, while remaining fully aware that no contemporary problem can be solved without untrammelled multilateralism and smooth cross-boundary cooperation – which does not mean that boundaries will imminently be discarded. As we enter into a new geological epoch (the Anthropocene) and begin to suffer the horrific consequences of the climate crisis, the notion of ‘national interests’ is cast into doubt even though its long shadow projects a sinister reflection on its remaining chimeric aspirations.

Sometimes, the extent of a problem like the climate crisis is recognized only insofar as political elites apply shallow technological solutions through, for example, geo-engineering, a trend identified as ‘technofix’, that is, an ultimate modernist effort to control, modify or alter nature in order to avert anthropogenic climate change (Huesemann and Huesemann, 2011; Rosner, 2004). Yet, an excessive reliance on technology to solve problems that basically stem from destructive human action can only enhance the wealth

of an ever-smaller business elite and amplify the control of politicians who harness such technologies. Any technological attempt to stop the climate crisis without changing lifestyles will create a new technocratic super-class, in turn supported by powerful political leaders and global-spanning bureaucracies capable of coercing the whole of humanity. Even though mitigating the effects of the climate crisis remains the top priority, scholars and readers should be aware of the consequences of reaching for technological fixes while continuing ‘business as usual’.

CONCLUSION

While nationalism shows no sign of declining in the near future, the left has maintained an ambiguous relationship with it, made difficult by a focus on social justice that is incompatible with its basic acceptance of capitalist society at a time of widening gaps between rich and poor. Nationalism’s prevaricating prominence has indeed been reinforced in the age of globalization (Nairn and James, 2005). Taken together, the decline in public discourse and in political legitimacy in many Western democracies points to the advent of a new age where conflicts are alimeted by the cumulative effects of concurrent crises (Ghosh, 2016; Gray, 2008; Mishra, 2017).

The clearest evidence of a radical, profound, perhaps irreversible, crisis of capitalism comes from the hard sciences. The social sciences are struggling to catch up with the sweeping tide of data, measurements, reports and analyses from scientific disciplines, which all point to a planet on the brink of rapid collapse. Divided into micro-specialisms, personalized factions and academic coteries, the social sciences are unlikely to catch up with such a gargantuan challenge.

The question is whether, under such historical conditions, there can be a consistent form of nationalism within the left – as is developing among several ‘nations without a state’ and indigenous peoples across the world. This would not 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. On the other hand, to renounce nationalism in the name of cosmopolitan principles, although a morally higher position, would mean offering the right a monopoly on the most potent contemporary ideology of mass mobilization.

However, the relations of power are not the same today as they were at the time of the end of absolutism. As Piketty (2014) has shown with a wealth of data, the contemporary predicament is more like that of the Belle Époque preceding World War I. Hence, a nationalism of the left would be at least as equally a gamble today as it was 100 years ago – without considering the range of formidable new threats that confront humankind. This is one of the major dilemmas political elites face today.

NOTES

* This chapter includes random excerpts from a blog published on the H-Nationalism website as ‘The Left and Nationalism: Introducing the Debate’ (edited by Emmanuel Dalle Mulle), 20 October 2017. Accessed 10 June 2020 at <https://networks.h-net.org/node/3911/discussions/588345/left-and-nationalism-monthly-series-left-and-nationalism>.

1. As well understood by Walker Connor (1984, 2019), nationalism never abandoned the Soviet Union either in the form of Great Russian chauvinism or in the form of the separate nationalist aspirations of its constituent republics.
2. Karl Renner became the president of Austria after 1945.
3. One should note that Renner was also a German nationalist who voted in favour of the *Anschluss* [i.e., the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in 1938 – author’s note] (von Busekist, 2019). Similarly, Bauer himself was a pan-Germanist, a contradiction between words and deeds, which might have had a bearing on his personal life (Otto’s sister, Ida Bauer, was Freud’s famous patient Dora, so we have a glimpse of the intimate history of the Bauer family by the pen of Sigmund Freud).
4. For the original, see Begin (1951).
5. Initially born within the English-speaking world (Roberts et al., 2003), media-driven ‘penal populism’ can be seen as part of a broader Americanization wave (Wacquant, 2006): across the world, New York Governor Mario Cuomo’s zero-tolerance policies have been heralded as the right’s paradigm (Pratt, 2007, pp. 32–3). Only in recent years has the dismal failure of the US ‘tough on crime’ politics of mass incarceration begun to be reviewed among Republicans and conservatives, mostly on the grounds of their vehement anti-statism and dread of fiscal burdens (Dagan and Teles, 2016).
6. The researchers analysed each piece of ‘news’ distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017, checking whether they were based on true or false news stories, using six independent fact-checking organizations with an average 95 per cent to 98 per cent agreement on the definition of what is false and what is true.
7. ‘Unlike populism, nationalism is predominantly defined *vis-à-vis* external political entities. Populisms seek the enemies in their midst or those who, they believe, are about to be in their midst’ (Freeden, 2017, p. 3).

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