

Inquiring Minds topic – 9 February 2018

Roger Palms, Moderator

Whither nationalism?

Nationalism is not fading away. But it is not clear where it is heading

The Economist, Dec 19th 2017 (edited)

Thought starters:

1. What do you think the worldwide trend toward nationalism means for the UN and other international connections?
2. How do you think altruism vs. narcissism will influence our 2018 elections?
3. Is it true that nationalism “plays to the paranoid”?
4. What does it mean that “one person’s patriotism is another’s prejudice”?
5. What do you see in the statement, “If each country defines its own values, what holds the alliance together”?
6. Is it true that “nationalism gets in the way of clear thinking”?

Wherever you look, nationalism is rising. Sometimes it takes the form of self-declared nations demanding the right to determine their future: Catalonia in Spain and Kurdistan in Iraq, Scotland in Britain and Biafra in Nigeria. More often it is a lurch to the populist and reactionary right. The Alternative for Germany has won 94 seats in the Bundestag. Marine Le Pen of the National Front won a third of the vote in France’s presidential election. In Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic nationalists have taken power. In post-referendum Britain they have “taken back control”, or at least pretended to. Turkey is militant, Japan is shedding its pacifism, India is toying with Hindu supremacy, China dreams of glory and Russia is belligerent.

Most remarkable is the nationalist turn in the United States. America was the first nation to declare itself independent of all sovereigns save its people and constitution. It has always seen itself as a place apart. But for most of its history this exceptionalism has been a form of self-regarding universalism; in time, the rest of the world would catch up. Now it has an angry, nativist president who sees America not leading, but being left behind—and vows to make it great again.

People who cross borders and cultures easily, and who prosper as they do so, find this new nationalism disturbing. They see it hindering peaceful countries from trading, mingling and cooperating on the world's problems. But they tend to think that it will pass

That is to brush aside what is happening far too lightly. Nationalism is an abiding legacy of the Enlightenment. It has embedded itself in global politics more completely and more successfully than any of the Enlightenment's more celebrated legacies, including Marxism, classical liberalism and even industrial capitalism. It is not an aberration. It is here to stay.

Sadly, the new nationalism plays to the paranoid, intolerant side of this legacy. It sees every "citizen of the world" as a "citizen of nowhere," in the mocking phrase of Theresa May, Britain's prime minister. When the citizens of the world call them bigots, the nationalists retort that the citizens of nowhere are traitors. That turns politics into a test of loyalty.

[When] the divine rule of kings was coming to an end, the order that replaced it was built on three philosophical claims:

- 1) Legitimacy surges up from the people. Individual citizens have the right to join freely in a nation that will protect and benefit them.
- 2) Government is not just an agreement between individuals, but also a statement of the nation's general will.
- 3) Each nation is different. Each nation is shaped by its own unique past and that its true essence emerges from history, culture and, ultimately, race.

Nationalism slips and slides between these three divergent claims. Some seek to have the good parts of this *mélange* without the bad. Thinkers like George Orwell and Elie Kedourie have argued that patriotism—tolerant, welcoming and reasonable—really has nothing to do with nationalism. It is a comforting thought; it separates decent people from the bigots who cling blindly to their own nation's superiority. But one person's patriotism is another's prejudice.

The late Benedict Anderson, an Irish political scientist, called modern nations "imagined communities"—imagined because people are drawn together within them who have not met and never will. It is the power of such imagination that allows an essentially modern doctrine like nationalism to feel so deeply rooted in the past.

Today's nations are, in a sense, products of nationalism, rather than, as nationalists might claim, it is of them. A lot of movements—most notably Marxism—have aimed to surpass the nation. The most ambitious attempt to lay nationalism to rest is the European Union. It has succeeded in that war between EU members is unthinkable. But the European nation state has not withered away as some of the pioneers hoped.

Instead, as empires have fallen apart, [the] principle of national self-determination has spread around the world. Indeed, nationalism has become so much a part of the backdrop that you hardly notice it—except, as today, when there is a crisis.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist, famously wrote that humanity had reached the end of history, because the only system of beliefs

left standing was liberal, democratic capitalism. But when Communism fell, liberalism was not the Enlightenment's only remaining legacy. Mr. Fukuyama reckoned without nationalism, which he expected to fade away. Just as 19th-century Germans thought Revolutionary cries of liberty, fraternity and equality were camouflage for French conquest, so the leaders of Russia, China, India, Turkey and others have seen the West's promotion of universal values as a cynical ploy to subvert their rule and their ambitions.

The attempt to repel Western universalism has been stunningly successful. The ethnic cleansing of Rohingya from Rakhine state in Myanmar this year has elicited a lot of noise, but very little action. As famine and disease pick over the carcass of Yemen, torn apart by a pointless war, the world is busy looking the other way.

President Donald Trump could not have been clearer when he addressed the UN's General Assembly last September: "We do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. But we do expect all nations to uphold these two core sovereign duties: to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every other sovereign nation."

To grasp how much ground Mr. Trump has surrendered, consider that two world wars led America's leaders to conclude they needed to make the world safe for their country. That meant forging a broad-shouldered alliance based on democracy, the rule of law and an open economy. It was the most powerful alliance in history, based on an intense civic nationalism that promoted Western values. Mr. Trump has tossed aside that common cause. If each country defines its own values, what holds the alliance together?

Men and women look to nationalism to assure them that, in their own way they are as good as everyone else—better, even. It is just that the world does not give them the respect they deserve. Politics is a kind of civil war. Everything boils down to loyalty.

Here is how altruists contrast with narcissists:

Look to the future—Rake over the past

Positive-sum—Zero-sum

Share—Exclude

Work together—Gang up

Improvement—Struggle

Opponents complement—Opponents are traitors

Immigrants add variety—They threaten our way of life

United by values—United by race and culture.

Altruists acknowledge a chequered past, give thanks for today's blessings and look forward to a better future—a straight line sloping up across time. Narcissists exalt in a glorious past, denigrate a miserable present and promise a magnificent future.

British historian Tony Judt issued a warning: "We have entered an age of economic insecurity, physical insecurity, political insecurity." Populist politicians—almost always nationalist—exploit those insecurities. Claiming a special connection to "the people," they tell and retell their narratives of corrupt elites, crooked immigrants, misleading media and sinister conspiracies.

Often the populists are from the hard right. Liberals (in the British sense) try to deal with change through tolerance, education, material improvement and ensuring that no set interest ever dominates. Conservatives, however, look to tradition, hierarchy, deference, protectionism and orthodoxy to keep the chaos at bay. Some have never abandoned their belief that only a strong, ethnic culture and a powerful government can keep them safe. Such people are the backbone of the new nationalism.

Nationalism gets in the way of clear thinking, because it turns politics into [a] contest between friends and enemies, rather than the creation of common projects arrived at from diverse outlooks. Nationalist leaders are highly sensitive to their own injured pride. They are less sensitive to the fact that other countries have pride, too.

In its negotiations with the remainder of the EU and the rest of the world, Britain will have to surrender sovereignty once again while at the same time coming to terms with its lost influence—evaporated when it decided to relinquish its membership of the EU. Britain never faced up to the hard-nosed calculations about whether Brexit is likely to leave it better off. Anyone who expressed doubts in the campaign was accused of insufficient patriotism.

Bigger still is what Mr. Trump's nationalism means for the United States. In that speech to the UN General Assembly he described a world in which each country looks out for itself, a "world of proud, independent nations that embrace their duties, seek friendship, respect others, and make common cause in the greatest shared interest of all: a future of dignity and peace for the people of this wonderful Earth."

A "pluralism of national bigotries," as one thinker once called such a system, may indeed lead to a stable world. But is it sufficient? The institutions that shape the world and keep it running smoothly have required an order guaranteed by America, as well as the self-determination of others. Mr. Trump's readiness to walk away from the system could do it permanent harm.

Take, for example, his decision to quit the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) right at the start of his presidency. Throughout the campaign, Mr. Trump rubbished the 12-member trade pact as a bad deal for America—partly because he thinks America has more negotiating clout in bilateral deals, partly because he wants to down his predecessor, who had championed it.

Ditching the TPP was not only bad for America's economy. It also hurt Asian security. The deal would have created a conduit to channel China's expansion, aligning it with today's institutions and removing its incentive to overturn them. Mr. Trump said he was acting to make America great again. Instead, he let down its allies and handed China an invitation to shape the world.

Mr. Trump's foreign policy has its episodes of engagement, but it is dominated by structural withdrawals, as from the TPP and the Paris climate-change agreement. Eventually this could leave the world without a leading power for the first time since 1945. Insecurity—instability—would go global.