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Commentary

Return of the Nation-State? De-Europeanisation and the Limits of Neo-Nationalism

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Abstract

This commentary analyses the view that the resurgence of nationalism will lead to the return of the nation-state and an accentuated de-Europeanisation. I argue against this position. While neo-nationalism has become a major force in Europe and elsewhere, I claim it does not have a capacity to restore the nation-state. I discuss what I take to be the key features of neo-nationalism, central to which is authoritarianism, and outline four arguments why this kind of nationalism ultimately lacks a real capacity to bring about major structural change. These are: (1) it is a form of nationalism without the nation; (2) it is unable to solve the basic problem of societal polarisation; (3) it avails of divisions within the left and the centre ground rather than having any strength of its own; and (4) the global movement of which it is an expression lacks a global imaginary. Neo-nationalism has brought about a significant shift in political discourse but stops short of a major systemic transformation of European integration.

Keywords

Alt-right; Brexit; European Union; Nationalism; Nation-states; Post-nationalism; Populism; Radical Right; Trump

This commentary asks whether the resurgent forces of neo-nationalism brought about a swing of the pendulum back to the nation-state in Europe and as a consequence we can speak of de-Europeanisation of Europe? My position is that while there are signs of de-Europeanisation, it is not due to neo-nationalism, which is as much a product as a cause of the concatenation of forces that have re-shaped the political landscape. Since 2016, as marked by the Brexit referendum and the Trump presidency, neo-nationalism has made a significant impact world-wide and is no longer a marginal force. European integration and the established political parties in almost all European countries have been to varying degrees reshaped by radical-right wing political parties and organisations supporting them.¹ There has been a pronounced assertion of the national interest. How should be these developments be assessed? Does the assertion of the national interest signal a return to the nation-state? Have the resurgent forces of neo-nationalism gained the upper hand in contemporary politics? This commentary attempts to answer these questions with the focus on Europe and the European integration project.

By neo-nationalism I mean in part what is more commonly referred to as 'populism' (Müller 2016; Mudde 2010; Brubaker 2017). Both intersect and are difficult to disentangle (for example Joppke 2021). However, populism is strictly speaking a different phenomenon while encompassing in part neo-nationalism, it has right- and left-wing orientations, as well as hybrid forms. Neo-nationalism is almost entirely right-wing and much of it is radical in that it seeks a major transformation of state and society. If populism is in essence defined by the invocation of 'the people', it does not capture the most virulent aspects of many radical nationalist movements today, which while invoking a nativist definition of the people have other features that are more specifically nationalist. Indeed, many radical right-wing movements, such as the Alt-right, are not necessarily populist. Rather they are radical revolutionary movements that do not speak in the name of the people but a specific notion of the national community, which is generally defined in opposition to migrants and to cultural pluralism. The term neo-nationalism includes radical right-wing populism, the wider context of the Alt-right, anti-migration parties and xenophobic movements, as well as the extreme or far right (see Bergmann 2020). An underlying feature of all these movements is cultural authoritarianism as well as degrees of political authoritarianism. Their self-understanding is nationalist, but a nationalism that entails an exclusionary conception of the national community, as opposed to an inclusive one. An additional feature is that they are strongly anti-European Union (EU). For this reason, I am excluding traditional nationalist movements seeking self-determination, as in Scotland and Catalonia, as these are not driven by the same forces and entail to a larger degree an inclusive conception of the nation.

Neo-nationalism is not an entirely new, but has novel features. Perhaps most striking is that it has become a significant force since the 1980s and more recently has entered the mainstream, as opposed to being a marginal or protest movement. Examples range include Orban's Fidesz in Hungary, the DPP in Denmark, Vox in Spain, AfD in Germany. Outside the parliamentary context, there are far-right nationalist organisations, such as the medley of forces that led to the storming of the Capitol building in Washington on 6 January 2021. The rise of identity politics in the 1980s, first around progressive and left-oriented movements such as gender and ethnicity, produced a cultural and political backlash that led to the re-assertion of reactionary white and national identities which were defined in opposition to post-national trends. These movements produced a new self-interpretation of the national community that was different from the older traditional nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century. What is new about neo-nationalism is that it is a form of nationalism that is defined by its opposition to migration, cultural pluralism, internationalism, and its assertion of the national interest against globalisation.

Second, there is the question of de-Europeanisation and whether it has taken root for reasons other than the rise of neo-nationalism. A survey conducted in 2019 showed that a majority of Europeans believed that the EU will come to an end in ten years (Boffey 2019). The spectre of collapse has a certain allure, and there is a now a wide and

interesting critical literature on the topic of the collapse of complex systems (McAnany and Yoffee 2009). Although this cannot be dismissed, my question is rather will the pendulum swing back towards the nation-state. In this sense, de-Europeanisation is more a question of a major historical reversal and reorientation, rather than of collapse. A few general remarks are necessary concerning 'de-Europeanisation', which I argue is not quite the same as the collapse of the EU or the end of European integration.

Arguably the European project has stalled for reasons that have nothing to do with the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptical currents, which are as much the consequence as the cause of wider societal change. The current crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed a fundamental weakness of the EU, which has failed in a collective response. The banking crisis of 2007/8 and the related problems with the single currency reveal a fundamental flaw at the core of the EU (see Offe 2015). Brexit is also one of the indications of a crisis of European integration, but does not presage its demise. The fact that something stops does not mean it will end.

However, despite these and other examples that could be said to be signs of de-Europeanisation, there are alternative readings of the situation. If Europeanisation is seen as inexorably leading towards the demise of the nation-state, then anything could be a sign of de-Europeanisation. From a more pragmatic perspective, the European project has from the beginning been a multi-tiered and perhaps also a multi-speed project that does not require the abolition of the nation-state but its structural transformation. I am assuming the latter and that therefore, as with any process of integration, there will be degrees of re-balancing and re-structuring (see Fabbrini 2019). However, de-Europeanisation does not necessarily entail a return of the nation-state in the sense of a return to something that once existed. European nation-states have been irreversibly and systemically transformed by Europeanisation and by wider processes of globalisation (Delanty and Rumford 2005). Nationalism and globalisation are not necessarily contrary forces (Halikiopoulous and Vasilopoulous 2011). The crises of the present do not necessarily mean a return to the past. Nation-states continuously adjust to external forces and European integration is in part a product of such readjustment in the nature of statehood. The nation-state was the dominant political form in Europe since the beginning of the nineteenth century and has undergone several major transformations during the twentieth century. There is no one single form to the nation-state or the state (see Sørensen 2003). The EU may one day collapse for any number of reasons, but de-Europeanisation is more complicated.

Zielonka (2014) has identified three scenarios of de-Europeanisation: while the EU could collapse spectacularly, more likely is that either it could break down as an unintended consequence of misguided attempts to remedy its flaws or it could suffer from sustained benign neglect under the guise of 'muddling through'. In his view, the result would not be the end of European integration but a major transformation that might lead to other forms of Europeanisation emerging. In this vein, Patberg (2020) has argued for a notion of disintegration as an alternative to integration but does not necessarily entail a notion of collapse or dissolution but partial reversals and reorientations, as in the for example opt-outs and various exceptions or negotiations by various member states as well as by non-member states (see also Jones 2018). In this view, de-Europeanisation as a form of disintegration is not a matter of dissolution but a way of changing the constitutional order of the EU, which may not be going forward to ever greater union but is also not going backwards. Posing de-Europeanisation in this way, the question of disintegration can be viewed in more nuanced terms. The EU indeed may one day collapse for any number of reasons. But will it collapse or enter terminal decline as a result of the rise of neo-nationalism and its declared aim to reassert the nation-state over the transnational?

Based on these considerations, I offer an analysis of the capacity of neo-nationalism to bring about a return to the nation-state. My argument is that despite its considerable destructive power, the resurgent forces of neo-nationalism lack capacity to bring about

systemic change to an extent that European integration may collapse. There are four reasons why I think this to be the case: the separation between the nation and nationalism; the growth of societal polarisation; the absence of a shared national imaginary in neo-nationalist movements; and the inability of the alt-right to construct a truly transnational movement.

NATIONALISM WITHOUT THE NATION

The main point that needs to be made is that, unlike in the past, nationalism and the nation have parted company. While invoking the idea of the nation, neo-nationalism has in fact left the nation behind. There is therefore a fundamental contradiction at the core of neo-nationalism in appealing to nationalist sentiment, in that it has abandoned the idea of the nation as a collective endeavour. Without some sense of the nation as a shared space, it is difficult to see how the nation-state can be resurrected.

A trend that neo-nationalisms of all shades share is their disregard for the idea of the nation as a shared realm. In the formative period of nation-state building from middle of the nineteenth century to the post-1918 period, nation-states were forged in many cases out of thin, if not non-existent, common bonds through the appeal to a common purpose and shared history, of rebellion against an oppressor. Nationalism, whether the patriotism of the established state or the republican liberation movements seeking self-determination, succeeded only by creating the idea of a common public culture based on citizenship. Without this aspiration, the nation-state project would have floundered. This is not to neglect the fact that in many cases such programmes entailed forced integration, they were often based on concocted histories and despite the slow movement to democracy, nation-state building was, in reality, deeply undemocratic and often embroiled in overseas colonialism. It is of course also the case that such nation-building projects involved processes of othering, as has been widely discussed in the literature on nationalism. Nonetheless, the myth of the nation as a shared political community prevailed, at least as an aspiration. The result, at least in western Europe, was the constitutional welfare state that consolidated in the post-1945 period (Kriesi, Grande, Lachat, Doleza et al. 2008; Kriesi, Grande, Dolezal, Helbling et al. 2012). This was predicated on the idea of a national people, which could be extended to include newcomers, so long as the numbers remained relatively low. Many projects of nation-building were based on immigration and compatible with nationalism. While nationalism has always had to make a distinction between 'us' and 'them', the 'other' was for the greater part other nations. The strong sense of a 'we' feeling, that gave rise to the comfortable illusion of a single people, was thus predicated on the Other as outside the national territory.

Western European societies today are very different from the formative period of nation-state building when inclusion effectively meant membership of the nation-state. Today the national community has fragmented and the economic and social foundations of the nation-state have been eroded as a result of the transformation of capitalism. Exclusion and inclusion are now entangled in each other. Mainstream political parties continued to exist based on the old assumptions being still valid but have suffered the consequences of social reality glaringly contradicting those assumptions. The new parties of the right have capitalised on this situation. From being initially protest parties on the fringe, they have now become part of the mainstream.

If the older nationalism assumed a link between the idea of the nation and a common public realm, the new nationalism has severed this sense of a collective interest that rested on the notion of the public as the nation. Instead of the idea of the nation, there is a shift towards the idea of the people, as reflected in general rise of right-wing populism. While the idea of the people is ambivalent in that it can be used for different purposes, it has

been claimed by the new nationalism to mean a certain notion of the nation that does not rest on a shared public domain or interest. The people are whatever its guardians proclaim it to mean; it is generally intended to signify a closed as opposed to an open view of the nation (see Weale 2018). While the older notion of the nation was linked to rights and duties, the appeal to the people is much more nebulous and can be made to serve all sorts of interests. It can also have a subversive potential, as in the notion of a left-wing populism (Badiou, Bourdieu, Butler, Didi-Huberman et al. 2016). However, the notion of the people has been mostly appropriated by the populist right. There is a basic contradiction in their ideology, which reflects the ambiguity of the idea of the people. As populist movements they need to speak for the nation, but they have a much narrower support basis. This contradiction can be resolved only by manipulation and obfuscation as to who the 'real people' are or through the strategies of what has been referred to as 'technopopulism' (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021). While the old nationalisms generally found the enemy outside the nation, as often mentioned in the literature on radical right-wing populism, the new populist nationalisms define the people in opposition to elites or the so-called establishment (see Mudde 2010). This becomes a problem when the populists succeed in becoming the elected government, as there is a limit to the extent to which it can be claimed that they are not elites.

One of the most striking features of the new nationalism is that the illusion of the nation as a common home has been abandoned. In the UK since Brexit this can also be seen in the pursuit of a version of Brexit that made no attempt to seek a compromise with the Remain side. Gone is the pretence of speaking for the whole nation. Neo-nationalism is a nationalism at war with the nation. The people versus elites polarity gives only some animus to neo-nationalism. If anything defines neo-nationalism it is the construction of an internal divide within the nation. The nation does not include everyone. The ideological worldview of neo-nationalism is profoundly hostile to cultural pluralism and more generally to liberal and cosmopolitan values. The reality of contemporary societies is considerable cultural difference, both on the level of the general cultural orientations of the society, as reflected in lifestyles and attitudes, and in terms of membership. Ethnic minorities, migrants and so on, especially in European countries, are no longer marginal groups but have become integral to society. The driving animus of neo-nationalism is not only opposition to such groups, but hostility to the liberal, cosmopolitan elements of society and the de facto reality of super-diversity². The important point in the present context is that to the extent that neo-nationalism is defined by opposition to what can be described as one half of the society, it cannot offer a viable vision of the future for the nation-state, given that in effect it has abandoned the pursuit of the common ground.

My first argument, then, is that the resurgent forces of the new nationalism have abandoned the very idea of the nation and consequently the vision of the nation-state to which they subscribe not only lacks substance but is rife with internal divisions. It could be argued that the old nationalist movements were also partisan, authoritarian and reflected the interests of a dominant sector of the society. However, this is misleading in that they were products of a largely pre-democratic era or a time when democracy was relatively weak. Democracy today is deeply entrenched and societies that have experienced advanced democratisation do not so easily in their entirety fall under the sway of authoritarianism, not at least without a civil war to resolve the problem of opposition.

There is a paradox to this. Neo-nationalism is a product of democracy in that it was liberal democracy that made it possible. For the greater part, neo-nationalism is organised as political parties and competes within the democratic process. Euroscepticism has been similarly nurtured in the European Parliament by right-wing populist parties (de Wilde and Trenz 2012). But it is this very democratic basis to their existence and to their rhetoric (the people versus the elite) that makes possible a form of democratic authoritarianism. It is not the contrary to democracy, but is enabled by democracy, which does not prevent people from having authoritarian beliefs. It is a form of authoritarianism rooted in the appeal to the people, who are supposedly the voice of the nation and silences dissent. The

Brexit referendum is a good example of how a democratic instrument can be used to advance authoritarianism (the outcome was falsely deemed to have been a 'decision' that had to be implemented despite no agreement on the nature of the decision or that it was even a decision). Despite the often-violent origins of the nation-state, the course of history led to the formation of democratic societies. It is difficult to see how this process can be entirely reversed, even if regressions can occur. There are limits to the extent that democracy can be subverted by the invocation of 'the people'.

In any case, the nation-state that once existed is no longer. The British state, encompassing the UK as a whole, is now fractured. Neo-nationalism cannot restore it by force of rhetoric. Its demise was not caused by neo-nationalism, which is a symptom of the ruins of national cultures. Whatever kind of state that neo-nationalist might re-establish, shorn of the European project, it will not be a nation-state, but some kind of authoritarian state.

THE POST-NATIONAL CONDITION AND SOCIETAL POLARISATION

Neo-nationalism is fundamentally divisive. This is undoubtedly true of all nationalist movements, but it is more true today as a result of entrenched cultural pluralism and democratisation. Nationalism does not unite the polity but divides it. As an inherently divisive phenomenon, it does not seek to unite people and build on common ties. Pitting one half of the population against the other, it drives a wedge through the society. During the 1980s and 1990s when the radical right emerged, they were primarily anti-immigration parties. As such their nationalist ideology and rhetoric was decidedly xenophobic, with the national society defined against migrants. In recent years, the radical right has undergone a further transformation (Wodak 2015; Kreisi et al 2012; 2008; Bornschier 2018). Perhaps because of the success of anti-migration politics and the widespread adoption by the centre right of their policies, the radical right has moved to a new position of a more radicalised alterity. Instead of migrants being the main emanation of the Other, the enemy now also includes the liberal, cosmopolitan population. Another and more recent example, is the anti-vax movement and the embracing of opposition to lockdown policies to curb the spread of Covid-19 pandemic. In this fundamentally changed situation in which the nation has become post-national, the radical right redefine the nation against the post-national mainstream (Habermas 2001). What ensues is a re-politicisation of the nation whereby national cultures become themselves the site of struggle.

There are now many examples of a 50/50 divide in many democracies between what can be characterised as a conflict between the post-national political community and the nationalist one. Brexit exemplifies this: the referendum led to more or less this outcome and in the years that have passed, positions became entrenched on an issue that has defined British politics (Evans and Menon 2017; Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley 2017). Similarly in the United States (US), the Trump presidency exasperated an already deep division between Democrats and Republicans to a point that the US is now a fundamentally divided society without a realistic possibility of common ground emerging (Campbell 2016). This erosion of the middle ground is perhaps the major development in the political landscape of recent years. With the declining capacity of the centre to hold together, neo-nationalism offers an alternative vision that presents itself against the status quo. In a situation where the status quo has been considerably shaped by the medley of forces that can be summed up by globalisation, cultural pluralism and cosmopolitanism, neo-nationalism derives its strength in opposition to everything they represent, in essence the post-national order.

Since the 1990s, there has been clearly a growing 'cosmopolitanization', to use Ulrich Beck's (2006) phrase, of European societies. This encompasses processes as different as increased mobility and global communications, social identities, cultural diversity, and

interconnectivity of societies. European integration is in part an expression of these wider societal dynamics that can be related to the more general context of globalisation. While some accounts (for example Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Manuel Castells) have emphasised the more emancipatory aspects of these developments, others have stressed the new social realities that have come with a more globalised kind of capitalism that has produced increased global inequality and culminated in the financial crisis of 2007/8. The relevant consideration in the present context is that globalisation led to a transformation in the class structure of most societies. It led to a shift away from the older social divisions within the class structure and intensified the shift that had already taken place with the formation of post-industrial cultures and so-called post-material values. This trend had already produced a shift in politics from the old left to the new left, as marked by the shift from the predominance of the social question to cultural concerns (Boltanski and Chiapello 2006). However, until the last two decades this occurred within what were still fairly nationally delineated societies. What changed is that European societies became more and more European, and they increasingly lost their national particularity and became more and more post-national in politics and in identities (Risse 2010; Herrmann, Risse and Brewer 2004; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Bruter 2005). A new generation of university educated Europeans were socialised into a very different milieu from those who remained within the older lifeworld of national cultures, leading to the so-called divide between the winners and losers of globalisation. It was not surprising that this discord led to a political division.

What has taken shape in most western societies over the past two decades is a new division between those who largely identify with national culture and those whose horizons have been extended beyond the limits of traditional markers of class and nation. In the context of the post-2007/8 upheaval this set the conditions for a further cultural and political clash between two very broad spectrums of the population, which are termed 'nationals' and 'cosmopolitans'. This cleavage, the basis of what Fligstein (2008) has termed a Euro-clash, is almost perfectly mirrored in the Brexit referendum, with Remain versus Leave as two internally diverse sectors of the population who have come to occupy polarised positions (see Delanty 2017). Underpinning these political positions are quite different lifestyles and cultural orientations. Such divisions exist in most societies and are in effect a generational clash, but in the UK the referendum provided a fulcrum for them to be translated into a political division, which in turn reinforced the social and cultural difference transforming it into a condition of societal polarisation. However, this alone would not explain the full extent of the success of neo-nationalism, which has attracted the support of a wider spectrum of voters who are not all necessarily economically disadvantaged (for example, the support basis of the British Conservative Party, the Party of Freedom in the Netherlands or the Austrian Freedom Party). As argued elsewhere (Delanty 2021) one factor that underlies the diverse groups who are attracted to neo-nationalism is authoritarianism. Individuals with authoritarian cultural orientations are more likely to support parties with strong nationalist and populist policies, such as opposition to migration or hostility to the EU (Delanty 2021).

Neo-nationalism is unable to solve the basic problem of societal polarisation, which provides it with its conditions of existence. Contemporary societies are riveted by deep divisions, which are exacerbated by neo-nationalism. In this situation, it is difficult to see how anything like a project of nation-state building is possible in the absence of a politics of compromise and common ground. As I have argued, neo-nationalism thrives on division, discord, fear and polarisation. It feeds from resentment and the sense of being left behind; but it is also driven by latent authoritarianism.

A further limitation of neo-nationalism is that it lacks what is surely a premise of nation-state building namely the rule of law. A feature of neo-nationalist governments is the flaunting of the law, whether through outright corruption, defiance of legal processes, the systematic weakening of the juridical foundations of the state. For these reasons, it cannot be said that neo-nationalism is seriously a project of nation-state building. Rather it could

be argued it is the systematic weakening of the state. Again the UK exemplifies this destructive forces of nationalism. The implementation of the referendum has led to the weakening of the UK itself, whose constitutive parts – Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – have been forced to follow a project that is driven by the conservative elements of England. Until now, the revived case for Scottish independence is the main expression of what Tom Nairn (1981) predicted as likely, ‘the break-up’ of the UK.

Finally, the resurgent forces of neo-nationalism illustrate what I would call the cultural collapse of the nation. It has become a battle ground of different positions. The nature of the battle is that it cannot be easily won under the conditions of what are still liberal democracies. The post-national space cannot be simply eradicated, but it can be fragmented with the result being societal stagnation.

THE ABSENCE OF AN IMAGINARY

One of the major weaknesses of neo-nationalism is that its success is due to the weakness of the mainstream right and left than because of any policies of its own. As widely recognised, it can be seen as filling the vacuum created by the declining fortunes of the parties of the centre. Its success is perhaps particularly due to the declining appeal of the traditional social democratic left and the related loss in social status of its traditional support basis in the industrial working class. The divisions within the mainstream provide neo-nationalism with opportunities to draw voters and generally win over public opinion. While many neo-nationalist parties have been very successful even to the point of becoming governing parties, as the examples of Poland and Hungary illustrate, such movements are more generally eclectic and feed off the main parties, which in turn adjusts to them. Thus, the British Conservative Party in the general election of 2019 staved off the Brexit Party (formerly UKIP) by simply taking on board its policies. To make a general point, neo-nationalist parties, while clearly now more powerful, are still predominately oppositional parties and movements. A notable exception is Austria, where the far-right Freedom Party has formed a coalition with the People’s Party. To be sure, while Macron decisively won the presidential election in France in in 2017, Marine Le Pen of the National Front made it to the run-off. This is a stark reminder of the potential for a significant victory for the radical right. However, it is also an example of an unsuccessful campaign. While there can be no doubt of a tremendous expansion of the far right, it is still the case that these parties are most successful as opposition parties than as governing parties. The failure of Trump’s presidency is perhaps the clearest sign of the limits of neo-nationalism at least to maintain its grip on the state.

In more sociological terms, it could be argued that a greater weakness of neo-nationalism is that it lacks a social imaginary (Taylor 2004), or has at most a very weak one. A social imaginary is a way a society or movement articulates an image of itself. It is a projection of the self-image of a collectivity as a unity and entails symbolic, cognitive and normative elements (see Adams, Blokker, Doyle, Krummel et al. 2017). Nationalism, as Benedict Anderson (1983) outlined, is based on an imagined community in that it requires an image of the social life of the nation since people cannot directly experience the nation in their daily life. The success of nationalism in the past has clearly been related to its tremendous capacity to articulate an imaginary. According to Castoriadis (1987), all societies project an imaginary signification of themselves. Many movements have a radical imaginary that enabled them to bring themselves into existence. This is especially the case with a movement that seeks to create a new reality. The modern age witnessed the birth of a plethora of such movements, of which perhaps communism was the most striking, but the point pertains to many nationalist movements.

Looking across the spectrum of neo-nationalist movements, it is difficult to see many examples of anything that corresponds to a social imaginary. That is not to say there are

no examples. In the UK, the Leave campaign reveals a social imaginary at work, the imaginary of an imperial nation that had defeated European tyranny. However, this is an imaginary that does not easily translate into a viable political project. It is by definition nostalgic and does offer a vision for the future. Such an imaginary may be effective in political campaigns, but in order to create new realities they also need to be translatable into something more tangible than an imagined reality. Anderson's (1983) work drew attention to concrete and material phenomena, essentially in this case print media that made the imagined community of the nation a reality. This is the problem that neo-nationalist movements have today. To the extent to which they can articulate a social imaginary, it does not extend beyond the level of a fantasy and is underpinned by fear (see Wodak 2015).

One possible explanation why neo-nationalism lacks a capacity to create a social imaginary is that to expand their mass appeal they have to borrow from both the right and the left. While right-wing in spirit and substance, they distance themselves from the neoliberal end of the right and in some cases are defenders of the welfare state, while being opposed to progressive politics of the left (see Brown 2019; Balorda 2019). The more successful ones pursue authoritarianism on cultural issues while adopting social protectionism on economic issues. In this way, characteristic right-wing politics co-exist with the traditional policies of the left. The Johnson government in the UK is a very good example of this balancing act, which to varying degrees is adopted by much of the radical right. It was also reflected at least on the level of rhetoric by Trump. While this can lead to considerable success in the short term, for example in the polls, combining these orientations from the right and left is not a recipe for a durable political project, such as a return to the nation-state. Such a project would require a more inclusive conception of political community if it is to win popular support. In other words, a nation-state cannot be created on the basis of partisan support.

THE LIMITS OF THE ALT-RIGHT AS A GLOBAL MOVEMENT

The resurgence of nationalism, the extreme right and various kinds of radical right-wing populist movements across Europe in recent years is not only a European trend, but is clearly part of a world-wide movement. To the extent to which it is a global movement, it is underpinned by the Alt-right. This is a white nationalist movement based in the USA but has a global reach with a civilizational mission (Hawley, 2019; Hermansson et al 2020). The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016 gave a boost to this movement, which has ties with Putin and is generally supportive of authoritarian leaders throughout the world (see Snyder 2018). The movement is also associated with conspiracy theories offering different political epistemologies, especially on climate change and on the Covid-19 pandemic. The Alt-right also seeks the destruction of the EU; it is opposed to the liberal Enlightenment heritage of the West. It is, in short, a radical right-wing movement. Neo-nationalism in Europe is part of this more general movement and its post-truth politics. It is true that neo-nationalism in Europe preceded the rise of the Alt-right and is not dependent on it and this is the case with neo-nationalism in many other parts of the world. European neo-nationalist movements unlike the alt-right invoke the European heritage to add legitimacy to their xenophobic and racist policies. In that sense, they are perhaps not anti-western. Yet, the Alt-right movement gave to these movements, which are never coherent in their worldview, at least the illusion of a global movement.

On the one side, this global context provides neo-nationalism with a strength that it otherwise lacks, but on the other it also has its weakness. The global reach of the Alt-right is ultimately limited. The movement has its roots in white supremacist nationalism in the USA and as such it is limited to its American specificity. Through the efforts of its spokespersons, such as Steve Bannon, it seeks to gain international recognition by right-wing nationalist movements and anti-western leaders in other parts of the world. While it

had considerable success, there are limits to its expansion, which is underpinned by semi-organised and ad hoc trolls. It is a coalition of very diverse factions, including white supremacists and neo-Nazi organisation, Christian white nationalists, anti-Semites, anti-Muslim organisations, radical libertarians (Berger 2018). Many of these moments came together on 6 January 2021 in Washington in the occupation of the US Capitol, a symbol of modern liberal democracy. As a global movement, it is relatively weak in comparison to other global movements. These are highly diverse factions and many are illegal underground organisations that mobilise through the 'dark net'. The important point here is that while the radical right have enjoyed an undoubted boost since the election of Trump, this was from a low base. The left and generally progressive politics have suffered a setback, but are arguably in a stronger position when it comes to global politics. Without the Alt-right, neo-nationalism does not have a significant global power. The movement was ultimately held together by the existence of Trump as president of the US. His departure from the presidency, almost certainly means the movement will have lost its fulcrum.

Unlike progressive political movements, neo-nationalism does not, and cannot have, in any significant sense a global imaginary (see Steger 2008). Its worldview is a particular and closed conception of the nation and a politics of denial. Lacking not only the capacity to express a social imaginary, its politics requires the denial of the possibility of a global imaginary. As a global movement, it is limited to radical opposition to the left, liberalism and cosmopolitanism. Since it is opposed to the idea of the world as a common home, it cannot articulate a global imaginary.

For these reasons, I argue that neo-nationalism is ultimately weak and lacks a capacity for major systemic transformation. When modern nation-states were created from 1648 onwards, they were part of a post-Westphalian international political order that recognised the nation-state to be the basis of the modern world. Putting aside the European and colonial aspects to this and the fact that the new right has itself a particular brand of reactionary internationalism (de Orellana and Michelsen 2020), it is a reminder that modern nationalism, which was strongly influenced by liberalism and republicanism, was international in outlook and universalist in support of the constitutionalism and democracy. Neo-nationalism has no such outlook. In a world where everything is connected, a political movement that is based on the denial of such connectivity is doomed to failure.

When neo-nationalists proclaim a return to the nation-state, they fail to see that the historical nation-states of Europe were different from their narrow conception of political community. While nationalism has taken many different forms, ranging from liberal and republican constitutionalism to ethnic nationalism, Soviet socialism and fascism, the nation-states that were created in Europe, for good or bad, were highly universalist in their self-understanding.

CONCLUSION

Overall, neo-nationalism will not bring about a return to the nation-state because that particular historical entity no longer exists. The resurgence of nationalism today is in part an expression of the demise of the nation-state and in the particular guise of neo-nationalism the political community that the nation encapsulated has been all but abandoned. The growing influence of neo-nationalism, whether as opposition or governing parties, has been most evident in the politicisation of political discourse through nativism, hatred and fear. While such forms of nationalism are targeted against migrants or anyone seen to be an outsider, there is a new focus of hostility against those who hold to liberal and cosmopolitan ideas. This group, effectively half of the population, is equated with the mainstream or the establishment elites. In this way, the new-nationalism combines nativism and anti-elitism. This results in a significant shift in political discourse but stops

short of a major systemic transformation of European integration or the dissolution of the EU.

My argument is that the resurgence of nationalism does not alter the fact that the world is more interconnected than it is divided. These new nationalist forces do not have a capacity to bring about an end to post-national developments. Anti-cosmopolitan currents have certainly become more pronounced, but like all movements they are fraught with contradictions. I agree with Runciman (2013) that democracies are vulnerable to breakdowns due to their fragility, but they are also resilient. Contemporary democracies are also post-national in Habermas's (2001) sense of the term in that they are not the nativist enclaves that neo-nationalists seek to retreat into. National societies are in reality post-national societies. European democracies have all been transformed by Europeanisation. The post-national constellation cannot be so easily unravelled.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Ireland is an exception, as was Spain until the recent rise of Vox and Portugal until the election for the presidency in January 2021 when a far-right candidate got 12 per cent of the vote.

² Super-diversity, or hyper-diversity, refers to cross-cutting diversity within and across ethnic groups, which as a consequence are no longer homogenous.

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