

Nationalism and COVID-19

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[In early 2020, *Nations and Nationalism* asked “several scholars of nationalism to discuss the potential for the COVID-19 pandemic to impact the development of nationalism and world politics. To structure the discussion, the contributors respond to three questions: (1) how should we understand the relationship between nationalism and COVID-19; (2) will COVID-19 fuel ethnic and nationalist conflict; and (3) will COVID-19 reinforce or erode the nation-state in the long run? The contributors formulated their responses to these questions near to the outset of the pandemic, amid intense uncertainty. This made it acutely difficult, if not impossible, to make predictions. Nevertheless, it was felt that a historically and theoretically informed discussion would shed light on the types of political processes that could be triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, the aim is to help orient researchers and policy-makers as they grapple with what has rapidly become the most urgent issue of our times.”]

To answer these questions, as any question regarding the relationship between nationalism and other phenomena, it is necessary, first, to have a clear understanding of how cultures and societies function and evolve, in general, and of the nature of the cultural and social phenomenon of nationalism, specifically. To address these issues in 2,000 or so words fully is impossible, so I shall only state the empirical conclusions of my investigations and proceed on this basis. Even these introductory remarks, however, must be introduced with a methodological consideration. When I am talking about a clear understanding, I do not mean to say “my understanding”; this would be tantamount to a chemist, for instance, saying “my understanding of gas is such and such,” presuming that someone else's understanding is expected to be different. Rather, assuming that cultures, societies and nationalism, just like gases, are empirical phenomena, I am approaching social and historical facts, following classical methodological recommendations, as things, without any prejudgement (Bloch, 1964; Durkheim, 2014).

The cultural (social, political, economic, etc.) process occurs simultaneously on the level of the individual mind and the collective level of the surrounding culture and consists of the constant give and take between these two levels. Every collective trend begins with a new individual experience, to which the mind will react using existing cultural resources, but the reaction may be creative, that is, unpredictable. If the experience is sufficiently provocative and common, a new interest may transform this creative individual reaction into a shared ideal, eventually resulting in a new way of thinking and acting, that is, give rise to a new social institution, adding to the cultural resources and changing the institutional structure—the nature—of a society

(Greenfeld, 2013, 2016, 2019). This, in most basic terms, is how societies change and evolve, in general, and how nationalism evolved, in particular.

In regard to nationalism, specifically, one must keep in mind the following. (a) It is a historical, modern phenomenon: before the 16th century, there were no nations. (b) It is essentially a way of thinking, the basis of any institutional structure—thinking that the social world is naturally divided into sovereign communities of fundamentally equal members (communities called nations) and that a just society, consistent with the human nature, therefore, is an egalitarian society based on the principles of popular sovereignty. (c) As a result, nationalism implies democracy, every nation being a democratic society by definition. (d) The democratic/national principles of fundamental equality of membership and popular sovereignty can be interpreted and implemented differently, producing several types of nationalism: not every nationalism is ethnic. In the monotheistic civilization alone, in which ethnic nationalism is indeed the most common type, there exist two other types of nationalism: individualistic nationalism (such as the original English one) and collectivistic-civic nationalism (such as the French). (e) The broad appeal of nationalism is due to the fact that fundamental equality of membership in the nation and the consciousness of popular sovereignty dignify personal identities of members of the nation (Greenfeld, 1992).

2.1 How should we understand the relationship between nationalism and COVID-19?

In this framework, we can examine the relationship between nationalism and COVID-19. Let us begin with the possible effects of nationalism on the course of the pandemic. The course of the pandemic was certainly affected by the ways it was handled in different countries, and the way it was handled, I would argue, was a direct function of nationalism, specifically, of the national conflict between China and the United States.

What leads me to say this? The comparison between coronavirus and previous pandemics: be it H1N1, SARS, MERS, Ebola, HIV-AIDS of the recent decades, or such historically remote lethal attacks of infectious disease as the Spanish flu of the last century or the plague (Black Death) in the Middle Ages. None of the previous pandemics involved worldwide lockdowns, cessation of normal activities and massive state-sponsored and state-controlled mitigation. Both the Black Death, which, incidentally, also came from China, and the Spanish flu were incomparably more lethal than coronavirus: the plague would kill one in two people, 50%, in settlements it reached; if one contacted it, the fatality rate was between 85% and 100%. Yet, only a few governments, such as that of the city of Milan, ruled by a most brutal dictator, attempted to mitigate (Benedictow, 2004). Of course, one can argue, no government at the time but a brutal dictatorship in a small city-state had the means to control its population (and the spread of the disease) to the extent that nation-states of today have. But this cannot be said of the influenza of 1918 and even less of recent pandemics (SARS, H1N1, etc.), when the means of disease

control at the disposal of governments were identical to what they are now. SARS and H1N1, for instance, were at least as frightening as coronavirus (Snowden, 2019). But no worldwide panic ensued. Neither the world economy nor that of any separate nation came to a standstill. One may argue that all of the recent pandemics proved far less devastating than was originally expected. But mitigation of coronavirus on a massive, coordinated scale began *before* it was known how devastating it might be (which is still not really known): reports that China was investigating a respiratory illness in Wuhan appeared only on December 31, 2019. The Chinese government imposed a lockdown on the 10-million-large city of Wuhan on January 23, 2020. On January 29, when only one case of infection on the American soil was identified, the coronavirus task force was created in the United States, and on January 31, a ban on travel from China was imposed. Closure of inessential businesses and schools, stay-at-home orders and construction of new medical coronavirus-ready facilities in record-breaking times followed. Although the response of some other countries (Japan, South Korea and Taiwan in the immediate vicinity of China, but also Italy) was independent, most of the world was directly influenced by the reaction of China and the United States. Within the first two months of the pandemic, economies contracted around the world, registering negative growth, unemployment skyrocketed, lives were universally disrupted, leaders interpreting this as they would results of a war on domestic soil and publics taking this in stride as they would indeed a war effort.

What was different in the cases of H1N1, for instance, and coronavirus in the first two months of the declared pandemic? Nothing. The difference in the reaction was not a function of the known difference in the nature or threat of the virus; it was a function of a difference in the political configuration of the world at the two points in time when the virus appeared. In April 2009, when H1N1 was first reported, the United States was still the one uncontested (though resented and attacked) superpower in the world. No nation yet took the place of the Soviet Union vis-à-vis it, challenging its position as the world's leader and arbiter. The superiority, the dignity and authority of the United States were beyond competition, if not beyond idle question. In 2020, this was definitely not so. China, which only announced its nationalism in 2008 at its coming out party during the Beijing Olympics, has been steadily and at an increasing speed gaining on the United States in this competition in the past 11 years, and the chief American national interest—the interest in superiority, dignity and authority—was now at stake. Chinese leadership used coronavirus (whether intentionally or not) to challenge the United States to a single combat, so to speak. Could you match us, President Xi essentially offered, in containing a pandemic? The United States could no more disregard this challenge than it could disregard the Sputnik in 1957. And so, the public health race started: who could build a larger hospital in a shorter period of time, produce more PPE, administer more tests, stop outbreaks sooner and ensure more cooperation from the population? What could the rest of the world do, but follow the example of the two giants, disputing who would preside over it past 2020?

2.2 Will COVID-19 fuel ethnic and nationalist conflict?

Now let us address the question of the possible effects of the pandemic on nationalism. Would it, for instance, strengthen nationalist and especially ethnic-nationalist conflicts? Given the news reaching us from Washington and Beijing, it seems clear that it has strengthened the nationalist conflict between the United States and China, which is as momentous as a nationalist conflict for the world today, as the nationalist conflict between the United States and Russia (ruling over the Soviet Union) was at the time of the Cold War. It is also quite clear that the pandemic had brought to the surface the nationalist conflicts within the EU, undermining the confidence in globalization in the one region which has been seen by experts as its empirical proof—the proof that human society was becoming transnational, transcending its national stage and moving towards a global community—and even among its staunchest erstwhile supporters. The universal reversion to nationalist policies and defence of particularistic national interests at the expense of transnational solidarity during the pandemic, however, only proved that rumours of nationalism's demise in the core Western European nations have been grossly exaggerated. Widespread manifestations of Euroscepticism, such as strong national feeling in France, Italy, the Netherlands and so on, or even Brexit, have not been regarded by theorists of globalization as an empirical contradiction of their theoretical position, but as proof of reactionary, right-wing or even extreme right political agenda of populist leaders and benighted, false consciousness among their uneducated followers. Now it is obvious to all that the theorists were wrong (though how long this would remain obvious is another question): thanks to the pandemic, globalization today no longer seems the obvious current stage of human development, and nationalism no longer appears as the stage obviously transcended. Nationalism in Western Europe (in distinction to Central and Eastern Europe, for instance) has traditionally not been ethnic however, but rather individualistic, as in Britain, or collectivistic-civic, as in France, Italy and Spain.

Would the pandemic fuel ethnic nationalist conflicts? The psychological foundation of ethnic nationalism is *ressentiment*, that is, existential envy, which is most efficiently assuaged by the humiliation to the point of elimination of the envied other; therefore, ethnic nationalism is inherently aggressive (Greenfeld, 1992; Greenfeld & Chirot, 1994). Where it exists, anything can serve as fuel for ethnic aggression. The pandemic has already added to anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (very much in line with medieval poisoning of the wells narrative born during the Black Death) in Palestine and among certain publics in Europe (ADL, 2020). Anti-Semitism, of course, is the most deeply embedded institution (established way of thinking and acting) in the monotheistic world, predating nationalism by many centuries—and for this reason offering a particularly virulent and reliable channel of expression to ethnic nationalism—but one can imagine temporary flare-ups of less widespread ethnonational hostilities, in which a group identifies the object of ethnic national antagonism as the carrier of the virus.

2.3 Will COVID-19 reinforce or erode the nation-state in the long run?

And, finally, will COVID-19 reinforce or erode nation-state—that is, nationalism, nationalist institutions—in the long run? Leaving aside the question of what can be said about the long run, in general, we should consider this in the wider framework of processes involved in social change, briefly sketched above. To use the most striking example of the social disruption caused by a sudden assault of infectious disease, the Black Death, the plague might have disrupted the medieval society of orders and shaken this social structure. Land became cheap and labour dear, which allowed people from the lower classes to behave as if they belonged to the upper ones and encouraged intermarriage between poor noblemen and daughters of rich commoners. However, as with a dilapidating building, the unravelling of society did not in itself provide any orientation for reconstruction. The thinking remained the same, and for several centuries after the plague years of 1348–1350, the reconstruction took the form of piecemeal patch-ups: sumptuary laws characterized the period, reflecting both that the old order was unravelling and that the only way society was imagined was exactly as it had been before the pandemic (Cantor, 2001; Cohn, 2010; Herlihy, 1997). Only when reality was *reimagined* and new (national, as it happened) consciousness appeared did the direction of reconstruction become clear and set. Institutions, which, as already Durkheim emphasized, are just established ways of thinking and acting, are never stable—they are always in the process of waxing and waning, strengthening, weakening and modifying. Conceptualization—ways of thinking, that is, to use Weber's terminology, *ideals*, especially if encoded in laws, sacred texts, whether religious or secular, such as the American Declaration of Independence, popular and high culture, and so on—is always their strongest feature, but can rapidly be abandoned, if the *interests* supporting these ideals disappear. The interest behind nationalism and its institutions (e.g., nation-state)—dignity of personal identity—is alive and well. COVID-19 also ranged behind it the essential material interests (health, life and livelihood), pointing at the same time to the inability of transnational institutions—globalization—to serve these interests. It is transnational institutions, rather than nation-state, that are likely to fall victim to the pandemic.

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