

Breaking down the Term Nationalism

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Nationalism constitutes a value-laden word and conjures up memories of an abhorrent and dark past that swept Europe during the 20th century; a historical period fraught with acts of extreme savagery. To have and express nationalist sentiments can often be problematic in the current context as it might connote a repulsive reflection of human nature that needs to be discarded. At the same time, Europe is experiencing an acute transformation of its established structures, partly due to the devastating consequences of an enduring refugee crisis, which challenges one's perceptions of nation and subsequently perceptions of their identity. The latter becomes blended into an exclusivist idea of the 'Other' propagated and manipulated by various far-right actors who see themselves as the true and only defenders of traditional values and history creating as a result a distorted conception of the nation and nationalism.

However, my point of departure in this blog post is that nationalism is not necessarily a sinister term and should be viewed instead through a broader and more analytical prism. Since it is widely accepted that terminology has a role to play in delineating the ways social phenomena are understood, it seems to me that the idea of feeling nationalist not only can be exonerated from its past sins but also repositioned on a base that deviates from the twisted interpretation given in far-right discourse.

More precisely, Roger [Eatwell](#) suggests that although nationalism consists of many ideological forms, it can be separated into 'liberal' and 'holistic' nationalism. 'Liberalism is modern – it is rationalistic, individualistic, pluralistic and concerned with tolerance and rights ... Holistic nationalism stresses conversion, expulsion or worse of the 'Other' and the defence of a traditional conception of community.' To be clear, both variants refer to the state of individuals being unique and having discrete characteristics as well as traits from each other which should be seen though as a necessary element in the constructions of identity formation. The main difference is that holistic nationalism is hostile to any perceived threats (i.e. people and ideas) that may affect the very narrow view of a homogeneous nation.

The aforementioned description of nationalism reveals the reasons why a conceptualisation shift deems important, especially in the public domain where opposing views come into contact. If the far-right has the power to influence, either directly or indirectly, the style of politics, it is imperative for mainstream parties to challenge its beliefs and perspective. Taking into account the fact that the identifying feature of the far-right is its ideological position on socio-cultural issues such as national identity, immigration, family values and authoritarianism etc., it is likely, at least in theory, that the development of competing frames on topics favourable to far-right representatives can weaken their appeal and resonance within society. Addressing non-materialistic concerns, as in the case of national identity, in a way that do not conflate identification with one's nation with discrimination and negation of otherness is a positive starting point.

Besides that, in his recent article for Carnegie Europe, Jan [Techau](#) explains that nationalism 'allows people to feel solidarity with and connections to other humans outside the limiting frameworks of the family, the clan, and the tribe.' His argument is mainly based upon the exemplar work of Benedict Anderson who gave a comprehensive account of nations' formation (he approaches them as cultural artefacts and products of major transformations) towards the end of the 18th century. Techau points out that European integration is possible to succeed if it follows the steps of the first nations meaning that people do not have to abandon their identity (i.e. affinity with nation) but create a higher level that 'can become politically and emotionally meaningful'; just like when people identified with others beyond their family or tribes. One also needs to keep in mind that different identities within the same person are not necessarily incompatible.

Consequently, nationalism might be viewed as a negative term when it is framed in the discourse of the far-right because it reveals a misleading aspect of human interactions that creates divisions. As has been mentioned, public dialogue (i.e. an arena that can influence to a certain degree attitudes and behaviours) needs to reformulate the meaning of nationalism and especially during a time period where major transformations are taking place in Europe; this shift needs to be emphasised in order to address the concerns

of the local people and at the same time weaken the position of the far-right. It finally seems that the idea of Europe as a whole can be strengthened and give hope that multiple states are able to overcome existing obstacles and truly unite, while taking to account that this process requires time and sacrifices.