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On National Identity

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On National Identity

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reply by

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In response to "[Trump and the Trumpists](#)" (Vol. 3, No. 1).

To the editors:

According to Wolfgang Streeck, there is an inevitable tension between neoliberal capitalism and democratic institutions, a tension that must grow ever more severe until one or the other (or both) break. His *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* describes how, once the Keynesian manipulation of the money supply was abandoned, capitalist economies fueled growth by turning to debt (of the nation or of individuals), a stratagem that led to the 2008 economic crisis.¹ And so neoliberalism faced its demise. Economic and cultural elites maintain their status only through protecting themselves from the anger of the rest of the citizenry through the subversion of democratic institutions. As Streeck puts it, politics has become a form of entertainment, politically irrelevant. His analysis has been vindicated by the election of Trump. For Trump has vowed to reverse the globalization

of the economy and the deindustrialization of the United States, and he has accelerated the degeneration of civic discourse into tweets, memes, and violence.

In “Trump and Trumpism,” Streeck offers new reflections on the phenomenon of Trump and others like him. He argues that charismatic right-wing populists like Trump can be expected to emerge within the fissure that has opened up between the post-Keynesian capitalism of Western economies and the aspirations and loyalties of their working classes. Streeck writes that class struggle has, to a large extent, been replaced by competition among status groups who understand themselves not by virtue of their economic role but by national and cultural identity. American workers are one such status group. Streeck calls their members Trumpists.² Trumpists came to see themselves as one status group among many, the one that, in their view, represents traditional America and that has lost ground in the competition for recognition and aid from the powers that be. Trump’s nationalist appeal caught its ear. He validated its self-perception as constituting the real America, and promised it a return to former dominance. He did so through the oldest trick in the book, stoking fear of and resentment against those who look and act differently. Thus key premises of the campaign were the need to protect American security and identity from what Trump described as “bad hombres” from Mexico and “bad dudes” of the Muslim faith; resentment against blacks and other people of color was an always visible subtext. Although his actual proposals for restoring America to greatness were inchoate and incoherent, his recognition of the Trumpists’ aggrieved and alienated state within American society earned him their allegiance and votes.

Streeck has long recognized that national identity has genuine political and historical importance. In *Buying Time* he criticized both the multinational governmental integration of the European Union and the establishment of a single European currency as violating national sovereignty. Unlike philosophical nationalists such as Yael Tamir and David Miller,³ who take a people’s strong allegiance to national identity to be a good thing, insofar as embeddedness in the culture of a people, constrained by the demands of justice, is taken to be necessary for the human good of flourishing in a social context, Streeck does not pass judgment on nationalistic impulses. Rather, he apparently takes it as a brute sociological principle that people who live in different geographical areas will have different cultures, interests, and modes of social organization that make top-down governance by an international body unfeasible.

American and European nationalism are, however, very different. The United States is geographically vast, with major differences among its local cultures. As Streeck points out, there is indeed great cultural continuity among cities: “Urban elites can easily imagine themselves moving from one global city to another; moving from New York to Ames, Iowa is another matter.” He makes this remark in order to point how liberal “blue” American is largely constituted of a cosmopolitan elite, deaf to the Trumpists who seek a restoration of their wounded pride. But cultural variations are just as severe among Ames, Espanola, NM, Lafayette, LA, Birmingham, AL, and Alaskan fishing villages. Most, but not all, are predominantly Republican. Most, but not all, are culturally conservative and churchgoing, but similarities end there. And what are we to say of other status groups which live in geographical proximity to the Trumpists, but understand their political interests as members of other status groups, defined by race, sexual orientation, or the like? They live and work in close geographical proximity to the Trumpists. Their sense of cultural identity is no less constituted by nationality; they are no less patriotic. That Trumpists take their America to be the real America says little about what the real America is.

Trumpist nationalism is based on nostalgia for a fictive past as well as a fictive sense of what it is to be an American now.

Is there such a thing as a shared American national identity? What is it?

Cuisine, language, and religion, as well as skin pigmentation, are the most obvious manifestations of national identity, and to be sure the Trump campaign appealed to these in order to ramp up xenophobic fear: “Taco trucks on every corner,” “While we’re in this nation, we should be speaking English,” and “We are all going to say Merry Christmas again.” But surely American national identity is not exhausted by this sort of thing. Are there not deeper historical and sociological roots? In his last major work, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity*, Samuel Huntington argued that American national identity has deeper roots: an Anglo-American Protestant culture grounded in a strong work ethic, anti-authoritarianism, and individual responsibility.⁴ Huntington took these to be such that they cannot be grafted onto other cultures gaining dominance through immigration. Huntington, like the Trumpists, looked with fear and alarm at cultural and demographic changes as threatening the American culture. Indeed he can be seen as providing, in advance, the sort of intellectual support for Trumpism that Trump himself is incapable of supplying. His argument was roundly criticized as racist, which it may well have been, but it had the merit of reminding us that national identity can be constituted, both directly and indirectly, by ideas and ideals, and not merely by language, cuisine, and other elements of local color.

Both Streeck and Huntington understand national identity and its concomitant patriotic emotions to be incompatible with a spirit of openness to new cultural, religious, and sociological influences. This is a mistake. The geographical expanse of the United States has demanded that its self-understanding embraces and celebrates a multiplicity of radically differing cultures, a multiplicity whose celebration has always been part of its own self-understanding, and it is that which distinguishes American from European varieties of national identity. Ideals of opportunity and inclusion are constitutive of American national identity, and it is these that have allowed the United States to grow and prosper as a nation of immigrants. The influx of Irish, Italians, and Jews, among others, as well as the emancipation of slaves of African ancestry, were all at some point decried as corrosive to American character and identity; all such fears have proven groundless, as American culture has been vitalized and informed by the cultural contributions of these different groups—though the process has not been without severe growing pains.

American patriotism is marked by emotional appeals to liberty that are a manifestation not only of the high value placed on the figure of the rugged individual—think of cowboy imagery and the spirited attachment to guns—but, more importantly, of openness to the new and different modes of life and experience, including that of the immigrant. Consider some of the most potent symbols of American national identity. The Great Seal reads *E Pluribus Unum*; geographically- and culturally-distinct states persist as a necessary substrate of the single nation. The Statue of Liberty is an explicit celebration of openness to the immigrant. And so forth. Do these symbols, and the values that they represent, retain their potency or are they ciphers, mere flags hoisted by a dishonored status group?

Streeck evaluates the state of the American Union from afar, and offers dyspeptic takes on prospects for both the economic well-being of American workers and the revitalization of American democracy. His pessimism may well be justified in regard to economics. But the palpable excitement of the Obama and Sanders candidacies, predicated on the defense of diversity and openness as traditional unifying American values, suggests that the game is not yet up for American democracy; its political institutions

are not yet wholly hollowed out. Trumpists' aggrieved sense of a national identity under attack led to the ascendance of Trump, but Trumpism's attack on deeply embedded traditional American values has ignited another, opposing movement, also motivated by the sense that American national identity under attack. This may yet be the source of America's salvation from Trump and Trumpism.

Wolfgang Streeck *replies*:

Somehow, at some point, I got sucked into an essentialist debate on national identity, which I never expected would happen to me. I care about nation-states as political institutions, and about national sovereignty as a precondition of effective national democracy and as a protection against imperialism (a weak protection I admit, but still the strongest we have). American liberalism knows only one indispensable nation, the United States, the shining city upon a hill; I think there are and should be more of them. How they are composed—by culture, ethnicity, race—whether they reproduce biologically or by immigration, how they manage their internal diversity (to the extent that they welcome it), how much identity they want and how they define it, and in what way their citizens love their country was and is of secondary interest to me. I defend the nation-state as a political organization uniquely suited to being democratized. There are now roughly two hundred nation-states around the globe, more than twice as many as in the 1950s, before globalization began. As they are pretty small—their median size is 7.1 million inhabitants—we can assume they differ significantly from each other, externalizing a good deal of diversity into the international system. Given how popular it is, there must be *something* to national statehood.

What I do object to is being placed in the same drawer as Huntington, at least the way Goldin paraphrases him. Cultures are perpetually in motion, for internal reasons as well as because they inevitably learn from each other, for the better and, sometimes, for the worse. Cultures border on other cultures, within and between nation-states. Where they meet they change, beginning on the margins and moving into the center, more or less slowly. The history of Europe, from antiquity until today, is one long, uninterrupted process of—peaceful and conflictual, voluntary and imposed, symmetrical and asymmetrical—joint creation and recreation of cultural similarities and differences at the same time. Something like this has also been taking place in the United States and still is. In both cases, and indeed generally, I would not necessarily describe what happens in the border regions between cultures in quite the glowing terms suggested by Goldin; lots of blood has been spilled there, not least in the U.S.