

Original citation:

Valluvan, Sivamohan. (2017) *Defining and challenging the new nationalism*. *Juncture*, 23 (4). pp. 232-239.

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/93341>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Valluvan, S. (2017), *Defining and challenging the new nationalism*. *Juncture*, 23: 232–239. doi:10.1111/newe.12020, which has been published in final form at <https://doi.org/10.1111/newe.12020> . This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with [Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving](#).

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP url' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

<<CH>> Defining and Challenging New Nationalism

*From Brexit to Trump, it is clear that the idea of nation has recovered its lustre. But **Sivamohan Valluvan** argues that an understanding of this deep nationalist cry requires a number of clarifications currently absent in popular analysis. These interventions include: revisiting the core historical principles of European nationalism, with a particular attentiveness to the place of race and racism; situating economic developments in a manner that does not overstate or misrepresent its influence; and also addressing the multiple ideological forms that new nationalism comprises of.*

Brexit represented the formal consolidation of a new electoral coalition in the UK: middle-income conservatives dotted across the green shires and provincial towns of England hitched to swathes of previously Labour-voting working-class Britain. Much ink has been spilt trying to account for the different motivations and socioeconomic circumstances that aligned to produce this new political pivot where, put proverbially, 'middle England' meets the 'left behind'. Amid all the burgeoning and at times maddening speculation, the one seeming consensus across detractors and supporters alike is the observation that Brexit, and the feelings of resentment and powerlessness that fuelled it, was primarily framed by issues of ethnic difference and immigration.

This is not to discount the various other themes that surfaced during the campaigns – claims pertaining to unaccountable bureaucracies, democratic deficits, the Euro's crisis tendency, the drive towards centralised federalism, and even, from admittedly slightly quixotic leftist factions, the EU as an unapologetically neoliberal single-market body that undermines locally progressive politics. Yet, in spite of these no doubt significant criticisms, it is apparent that the assortment of more overtly xenophobic, race-baiting themes was 'wot won the referendum'. Themes relating to immigration, refugees, Muslims, the spectre of Turkey, the Roma, the tyranny of anti-racist political correctness, and the European Court of Human Rights-sanctioned human rights restrictions that, among other excesses, supposedly impugn the integrity of British soldiers. The fact that populist firebrands across Europe, not least Marine Le Pen, received the result with a flurry of enthusiasm is not a mere footnote to the Brexit episode. It is instead an exemplary expression of the political reality that has come to define contemporary Europe. The well-documented transatlantic dimensions of this new political stage is attested to in Nigel Farage – who by any reckoning must be recognised as the charismatic lynchpin of the Brexit cause – decamping to the United States in order to bolster Donald Trump's own nationalist assertion. An affinity now mirrored in prime minister Theresa May's happy acquiescence to the tune of Trump.

<<H1>>What is nationalism?

Many words have been penned trying to develop an analytic schema that can account for this malaise. A malaise that consigns both the social democratic and liberal left to the ignobly hapless position of bystander, observers to the history dramatically unfolding. This essay adds to that body of writing, advancing an argument that trades on two claims – this first, diagnostic, the second, political.

First, it is clear that the idea of nation has recovered the lustre that had momentarily subsided, a hiatus that fed much hubristic speculation about the ‘end of history’ and the teleological triumph of liberal, ‘post-ethnic’ democracy. Nationalism’s long historical arc in Europe was by my reckoning punctuated by two bouts of intensity: the age of Romantic expressionism and the major nation-making projects it sponsored, as well as the early 20th-century era of protectionist mercantilism tied to fading imperial influence and economic instability that suffused two global wars, fascism, and the subsequent, not unrelated, crafting of the welfare state contract. The west is in the midst of a third such intensity.

Nationalism might be initially understood as the set of discourses by which primary culpability for significant sociopolitical problems, whether real or imagined (depending on one’s political leanings), is attributed to various ethno-racial communities who are understood as *not* belonging. Nationalism can of course be read through any number of other postulations. Such a significant feature of modernity, perhaps even modernity’s centrifugal achievement, is always about so much at once: culture, territory, democracy, the vernacular, alongside the ‘invention of tradition’ and monumentalised elite history. In short, nationalism pertains to the manner in which modernity frames the entire aspiration for peoplehood, community, and the attendant expression of sovereignty. But if one basic proposition about what constitutes nationalism is to be advanced, one proposition from which all else follows, it is the relationship between political discourse, ideology and nation that is the most helpful. Namely, western nationalism can be read as the formation by which a self-appointed normative community attributes its putative socioeconomic, cultural and security concerns to the excessive presence and allowance made to those understood as not belonging. Those who comprise the relevant field of non-belonging include the variously constituted insider minorities but also various foreign peoples and international forces, some of which intertwine with and reinforce the pathologies attributed to those internal, generally non-white groups. (For instance, the intensification in anti-EU sentiment in the run-up to Brexit made extended reference to how the growing number of refugees in Calais and elsewhere in Europe threatened to replenish the already vilified internal minority groups with whom the potential refugees share an ostensible commonality – via Islam, skin colour, or country of origin).

The contemporary constitutes one such moment where much political discourse projects a significant nationalist orientation. Increasingly shrill populist claims traffic in a number of core nationalist anxieties that hinge on certain iconic figures of non-belonging. Anxieties written upon the figure of the *migrant*, a figure that is articulated via multiple guises – as the labour migrant, as refugee, as asylum seeker, and, less frequently, as rapacious, uncouth foreign capitalists. Anxieties associated with the nihilist materialism attributed to the black inner

city, and the *black male* in particular. Anxieties stemming from the purported vulgar incivility of eastern Europeans (with *the Roma* becoming a particularly visceral signifier of this) amid their unsolicited arrival in the townscapes of provincial Britain. And, of course, the increasingly trenchant anxieties tied to the figure of the *Muslim* – as misogynist, indolent, communal, violent, fanatical, sectarian and, perhaps most invidiously, as protean and unpredictable. It is uncontroversial to note that the entire democratic landscape is being remade by the advances of these above political assertions, assertions that recommend harsher, uncompromising responses to the threats these multiple but often overlapping outsiders represent. Relatedly, nationalist solutions increasingly obtain a panacean value in the popular imagination, suggesting that various significant challenges will be magicked away through the emasculation of the significant others in the nation's midst.

The electoral power of nationalism was of course realised in particularly profound ways during the 2016 US presidential election. To quote the *New Yorker*, in the context of Trump's seemingly carte blanche and largely improvised political programme, 'voters are willing to tolerate' various seemingly unpopular and highly contradictory political measures and personality warts 'in exchange for the rest of Trump's ethno-nationalist ideological agenda.'¹ (Though as Nesrine Malik cautions, the current climate of vilification, not least Islamophobia, 'did not start with Trump, it is only reaching its climax.'²). Indeed, in the wake of Brexit and Trump, it seems banal to assert the contemporary importance of nationalism. Even *The Economist* pithily titled their 19 November issue, 'The New Nationalism'.

It is, however, the case that when critical attention is given to the rising nationalist mood, it often tends towards a well-worn economic reductionism. These accounts ascribe to nationalism some basic illusory properties that merely deflect or manage economic uncertainty and inequality. This frustratingly thin thesis understands nationalism as only applicable to momentary crisis resolution and as deflecting more pressing but inconvenient questions about economic stagnation and wealth concentration.

Economic factors are certainly integral to the emergence of this new nationalism, given that they undeniably cultivate nationalist desires. Hostility towards national governments' transfers to the EU or to international aid, claims over the financial largesse extended to refugees and other undeserving others, or competition for the diminished and seemingly diminishing resources that insecure and low-skilled labour affords, all operate as grist to the nationalist mill. The fact that nationalism has been emboldened at the very moment economic inequalities widen across advanced industrial countries and as economic deregulation and recession have engendered deeper senses of insecurity – which

¹ Surowiecki J (2016) 'Trump's other tax ploy', *New Yorker*, 17 October 2016.
<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/10/17/trumps-other-tax-ploy>

² Malik N (2017) 'Suddenly, Muslims are America's pariahs', *Guardian*, 29 January 2017.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/29/muslims-america-untouchables-donald-trump-ban-islamophobia>

if not always directly experienced is widely felt – cannot be a coincidence.³ However, it is also apparent that such economic explanations only get us so far and to see nationalism simply as epiphenomenal of economic factors misses the way in which nationalist appeals find resonance through both busts and booms and across stark economic divides. Put differently, it may be that it is not the economic that organises nationalism, but that nationalism and ideas of nation itself shape how material forces are comprehended and responded to.

This recognition helps avoid rehearsing a simplistic either/or dichotomy between the economic and xenophobic racism. The economic explanation is commonly staged as either emerging from a rational, legitimate rage at an elite or arising from increased hardship amid deindustrialisation, outsourcing, rising living costs, the casualisation of labour and the dissipation of public services and social security provisions. This is contrasted to the more knee-jerk xenophobic racism that has always animated western modernity. That these two cannot be reconciled is a false dilemma. There are in turn three brief observations that help situate the economic in a manner that avoids attributing to it an exhaustive or misrepresented causality.

First, despite regular intimations to the contrary, it is not just the ‘white working class’ that has experienced hardship as a result of the broader neoliberal consensus, most acutely experienced in the wake of the 2008 recession. In Britain, as elsewhere, many minority ethnic groups remain disproportionately worse off across a range of indicators in the areas of employment, housing, health and poverty, and have been severely impacted by both the recession and subsequent state austerity. The play to class as being the preserve of white people is therefore, at best, naive, and at worst, an incendiary racial nativism.

Second, the voter base for new nationalist politics is not exclusively this oft-invoked ‘white working class’. Its support also sources the middle and lower middle-classes, as well as capturing a not insignificant share of the affluent conservative vote⁴ – responding to similar homilies regarding moral decay, multicultural excess, and welfare dependency. Needless to say, the appeal of new nationalism confounds traditional class distinctions, and for that matter, always has. A defining hallmark of fascism was, after all, its ability to rescue from the ruins of industrial exploitation and fin-de-siècle alienation, an invigorating, putatively unifying ethnic ecology. Similarly, one simple context that immediately compromises the economic thesis regarding new nationalism is the case of Norway. Norway has seen over the past decades the slow emergence of the very same nationalist political discourse and electoral capture that is now being rehearsed elsewhere. The reality that Norway famously enjoys some of the highest living standards in the world, as premised on its well-managed petro boom, seems to do nothing to dispel the nationalist anxieties around

³ Shatz A (2016) ‘The Nightmare Begins’, *London Review of Books Blog*, 10 November 2016. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2016/11/10/adam-shatz/the-nightmare-begins/>

⁴ Antonsich M (2017) ‘The Return of the Nation – When Neo-nationalism becomes Mainstream’, *Society and Space*, 31 January 2017. <http://societyandspace.org/2017/01/31/the-return-of-the-nation-when-neo-nationalism-becomes-mainstream/>

immigration, Muslims and multiculturalism that are definitive of the nationalist formation.⁵

Third, some try to equate nationalist populisms with certain new left, anti-capitalist agitations – reading the nationalist rise as a misrecognised critique of contemporary neoliberalism, a critique that otherwise sits more naturally within the supposedly equally prominent left-wing agitations. If only. This wilfully optimistic reading of the political spectrum bundles the newly emboldened, often youth-driven leftist movements' *desire for change* with the *actual change* and brokerage of power already exercised by nationalist factions. Only one brand of politics and mobilisation has successfully claimed the mantle of power – democratic, media and otherwise. That brand is nationalism. Brexit belongs to the real. Occupy and Momentum to the hopeful. The Front National belongs to the general, the Nuit debout protests to the particular. The People's party and the Progress party, both long-term Nordic stalwarts of xenophobic alarmism, are *in* government, not merely aspirants. (Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece represent powerful counter examples but remain exceptions that prove the rule and are also buffeted by historical and present circumstances that render both contexts substantially different to the broader northern Europe clustering, and the place of Britain in particular, that is of interest here). Theresa May does not secure her otherwise absent mandate as premier through an appeal to the virtues of class solidarity, scrutiny of capitalist precarity, and an end to boom-and-bust crisis cycles. No, rather more prosaically, May shores up her legitimacy through an unambiguously nationalist interpretation of Brexit as having constituted a straightforward proxy referendum on immigration. A proactively nationalist gamble that, according to Kenneth Clarke, the resident dissident of the Conservative party, would make even Enoch Powell blush.⁶ This is therefore not the age of populisms *sui generis*, as is suggested by John Jodis in his otherwise dazzling 2016 tour de force, *The Populist Explosion*.⁷ It is instead the age of *nationalist*-populism. This specification is not a minor quarrel. It instead fundamentally alters how we, as analysts and critics, diagnose the present.

<<H1>>Which nationalism?

There is, however, an underlying validity to the argument that the contemporary populist form is not merely right-wing and summarily conservative. But, herein lies the second observation upon which this essay's argument turns. Namely, it is not that populisms of all different constitutions are currently competing in a largely unresolved contestation for ascendancy. It is rather that new nationalist populism, as *the* ascendant form, does absorb and rearticulate a wide variety of political constitutions – constitutions that traverse, crudely put, the Left–Liberal–

⁵ Bangstad S (2014) *Anders Breivik and the Rise of Islamophobia*, London: Zed Books

⁶ *Guardian* (2017) 'Tories would even surprise Enoch Powell', 31 January 31 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/31/article-50-mps-must-honour-british-peoples-leave-vote-david-davis-brexit>

⁷ Jodis J (2016) *The Populist Explosion – How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, Columbia Global Reports. (See also Jan-Werner Müller, another indispensable contemporary authority on the populist form.)

Right⁸ spectrum. Put differently, contemporary populism *is* nationalism, but nationalism's current appeal and vitality lies precisely in its ability to draw upon an assortment of opposing ideological traditions, meanings and symbols.

A passing glance at the historical theorisation of the nation-state helps situate this claim. As Hobsbawm and Ranger⁹ memorably clarified, nationalism hinges on the 'invention of tradition' that establishes a polity's preferred historical bearing and its entrenching of what Benedict Anderson¹⁰ called 'simultaneous temporality' – a conception of peoplehood that ties the present to a particular imagining of the past but also the future. These narrative mechanisms culminate in engendering a profound sense of a timeless 'We'. A 'deep horizontal comradeship', to again invoke Anderson's distinctive phrasing, that placates other social divisions. The nation consequently offers modernity the fundamental lens through which it renders *community*, as the appeal to a shared entity of belonging beyond those whom we know and congregate with at any given moment. No other modern social formation has been able to generate the communitarian taxonomy and feeling that is, in any historical context, so central to how a society manages and expresses its sociopolitical transactions and ambitions.

It is now certainly a truism, in the time after E.P. Thompson and Benedict Anderson, to note that the nation is a historically specific artefact, finding its proper expression only via the waves of Romantic nationalism and the subsequent mass society, state centralisation periods that succeeded it. This historical contingency of the nation was perhaps made most beguilingly apparent in Massimo d'Azeglio's 1861 exhortation, as an ambivalent observer of the Risorgimento, '*We have made Italy, now we must make Italians.*'¹¹ Less well understood, however, outside of the shamefully neglected canons of postcolonial and anti-racist scholarship, is that this construction of the national *we* is not in any sense benign. Rather, as scholars attuned to the nuances of racisms' centrality to colonial modernity have observed, nation-states do not simply reflect pre-existing framings of ethno-national membership. Rather, societies actively produce and entrench ideas of nation, conceptions of the national subject (its 'fictive ethnicity' as goes the memorable phrase of Balibar¹²) that are necessarily *exclusionary*. To revisit an elementary sociological observation, in the making of the nation, definitional emphasis is in fact placed on who is *not* part of that nation. And crucially, this process of national self-definition through relational negation has always found ideas of ethno-race and broader

⁸ For an important early sketch of this emergent ideological multiplicity, see Kundnani A (2012) 'Multiculturalism and its Discontents: Left, Right and liberal', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15:2

⁹ Hobsbawm E and Ranger T (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

¹⁰ Anderson B (1983) *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso

¹¹ For a thorough scrutiny of the statement's perhaps apocryphal origins, see Hom SM (2013) 'On the Origins of Making Italy – Massimo D'Azeglio and 'Fatta l'Italia, bisogna fare gli Italiani'', *Italian Culture*, 31:1

¹² Balibar E (1991) 'The Nation Form – History and Ideology' in Balibar E and Wallerstein E, *Race, Nation and Class*, London: Verso

civilisationist constructs of the 'West and the Rest'¹³ to be its most instructive typology. As Paul Gilroy¹⁴ and David Goldberg¹⁵ have regularly noted, the fact that the European nation and ideas of race both began to find their thickest political and cultural definition at the same historical moment is no coincidence. It is instead the fundamental interplay that the very premise of European modernity regarding its sense of peoplehood rests and, and as recent events attest to, continues to rest upon.

This brief theoretical digression regarding the historicisation of the nation is necessary here only in order to clarify an understanding of nationalism's relationship to the more general concern of political ideology. Simply put, the nation, which is at its plainest a constitution of the normative 'we', has no inevitable political complexion other than that of its own exclusionary, ethno-racial desires. Contrary to the often assumed affinity of the nationalist to the crudely pictured conservative, a more watchful analysis will note that nationalist sway at any given historical moment requires a particular kind of racial othering that is able to assemble an ideologically disparate collage. Comparable to what the sociologists Solomos and Back¹⁶ have called, in the course of summarising George Mosse's important commentary on racism's elasticity, 'a *scavenger ideology* which gains its power from its ability to pick out and utilize ideas and values from other sets of ideas and beliefs in specific socio-historical contexts.'

I accordingly argue that any real reckoning with the current nationalist moment must better locate its mooring within very different and at times contradictory ideological clusters. This diffusion is in fact central to its current triumph. The ability of nationalist affirmation to find its sense amid contrasting ideological vocabularies and symbols plays a significant role in accounting for the intelligibility of contemporary nationalism to so many different factions and recesses constitutive of Britain's current political scene.

To give this claim some initial, albeit inadequate, definition, what is of interest here is the ability of contemporary nationalist discourses to appropriate and occupy a number of prominent platforms, each of which has had a substantial role in shaping the recent political history of western Europe. These multiple discursive heritages that become susceptible to nationalist co-option include: the *liberal* – as the self-arrogated and ethnically exclusive European claim to values of tolerance, free speech, secularism, the rule of law, alongside the more indefinite sense of liberal civility and everyday etiquette; the *neoliberal* – as the symbolic premium placed on a moral distinction between the deserving, self-reliant and entrepreneurial capitalist self ('homo economicus') on the one hand, and the increasingly racially inflected understanding of the work-shy dependency of others; the *conservative* – as the nostalgic appeals to the moral

¹³ Hall S (1992) 'The West and the Rest – Discourse and Power' in Hall S and Gieben B (eds) *Formations of Modernity*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

¹⁴ Gilroy P (1987 [2002]) *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack – The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, London: Routledge Classic; Gilroy P (2000) *Between Camps – Nations, Cultures and the Allure of Race*, London: Routledge

¹⁵ Goldberg D (2001) *The Racial State*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell

¹⁶ Solomos J and Back L (1996) *Racism and Society*, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 18-19

and aesthetic clarity of provincial, imperial and/or rustic whiteness; and the *communitarian left* – as the welfare state and as anti-market, anti-globalisation sentiment, sentiments which are increasingly expressed through the allure of ethno-national community. Across these primary contours also lurk more finely tuned political lexicons, not least the disingenuously and instrumentally purposed feminist rhetoric of gender equality and sexual liberation, the conservationist feeling and visualisation of bucolic environmentalism, and even certain speculations about ideal urban life – in terms of regeneration, consumption and habitation.

Recognising this expansive ideological map accordingly prevents the convenient attribution of the current malaise to an allegedly vulgar, largely emotive rump of fear and bigotry. Instead, any attempt to resist nationalism must first involve properly addressing its sophisticated affinity to multiple ideological forms, some of which we mistakenly consider to be inured from such trends. I am not in a position here to sketch further how these multiple ideological vocabularies all inform the deep nationalist cry being sounded across the west. But, importantly, I am not simply arguing that all political repertoires are capable of racism: that is, the left too can be racist or the liberal too can be nationalist. That is already very well understood and I have no wish to rehearse such truths. Rather, I am merely positing that nationalism, in order to become ideologically over-determined, requires all these various repertoires. And part of the resistance to this nationalist wave, as much as it involves a critique of the economic conditions that render populist-nationalisms more likely, is also about clawing away at these ideological contradictions that comprise European nationalisms.

This argument also constitutes a reminder to those with left or left-of-centre leanings that nationalism cannot be opportunistically gamed for other political ends. Nationalism is itself the populist play – all else is merely marshalled in its service. Of course, as Maya Goodfellow¹⁷ comments, to realise a popular politics without appealing to the totems of anti-immigrant, xeno-racism¹⁸ might seem a Sisyphean task. But it is the challenge that must be reckoned with, as otherwise, one merely gives further succour to the nationalist call; a call that might absorb other ideological positions but is ultimately promiscuous, only committed to its own ethno-racial exclusion and nativism.

It is within this context that the ever-observant Ash Sarkar recently despaired via Twitter, 'I asked last year if it was possible to do leftist populism without nationalism, and Labour apparently cba [can't be arsed] to even try.'¹⁹ Sarkar's frank frustration is warranted. There are increasingly vocal summons that ask the left to bargain with the nationalist case. This is of course a fool's errand. Nationalism cannot be seen to be a viable vehicle for other political ends, not least, leftist collectivism. Nationalism is always, in the final instance, about its own exclusionary racisms – anything else is simply a convenient bedfellow rallied to make its appeal more likely.

¹⁷ Goodfellow M (2016) 'What should Jeremy Corbyn's brand of leftwing populism look like?', *Guardian*, 19 December 2016

¹⁸ Fekete L (2001) 'The Emergence of Xeno-Racism', *Race & Class*, 43:2

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/AyoCaesar/status/818768092209774592>

Sivamohan Valluvan is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Manchester. The argument set out in this essay is a key point of departure for a book that Valluvan is currently writing, provisionally titled *The New Nationalism* and due to be published by Manchester University Press in 2018.