

Misrepresenting the People

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Region: [Europe](#), [USA](#)

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The recent article League of Nationalists in The Economist (19-11-2016, pps. 51-54) sets out to answer the question: 'All around the world, nationalists are gaining ground. Why?'

Despite noting that 'many countries are shifting from the universal, civic nationalism towards the blood-and-soil, ethnic sort', the authors agree that 'comparisons with the 1930s are fatuous.'

The authors also argue that 'as positive patriotism warps into negative nationalism, solidarity is mutating into distrust of minorities'. It could also be argued that, with the election of Trump, negative nationalism [Bushism] is warping into positive patriotism [Trumpism] as Americans demand that their multinational corporations be held accountable for their evasion of their responsibilities to the state which they managed through the creation of tariff free areas [in the past state income consisted of up to 90% of tariffs], export of jobs [outsourcing] and tax reductions [in Ireland their taxes had been reduced to as little as 2%].

According to the article:

'Many westerners, particularly older ones, liked their countries as they were and never asked for the immigration that turned Europe more Muslim and America less white and Protestant. They object to their discomfort being dismissed as racism.' They liked their countries as they were before when their countries were less indebted, less involved in military activities abroad and basic services did not roll from crisis to crisis. After all, it was not their decision to be re-designated 'consumer' rather than 'citizen'.

They also write:

'Western voters aged 60 and over - the most national cohort - have lived through a faster cultural and economic overhaul than any previous generation, and seem to have had enough.' It is true they have had enough. They have seen university fees and taxes going up and social services going down. They have seen through immigration as mainly facilitating military adventurism abroad. They are long in the tooth enough to know that there is no real democracy in the EU. They want to wrest control of their society back into their own hands for their future and the future of their naive iphone obsessed children. Maybe for the first time in their lives they have made a political decision that was actually in accordance with all the realisations they have had over the years but never acted upon.

They do 'dislike the balkanisation of their countries into identity groups' as they grew up with concepts like that of the 'citizen' where all were equal before the state in the social

contract of rights and responsibilities.

These 'nationalists' are contrasted with liberals whose 'two sources of identity: being a good global citizen (who cares about climate change and sweatshops in Bangladesh) and belonging to an identity group that has nothing to do with the nation (Hispanic, gay, Buddhist, etc).' Liberals stress non-nationalist identities and welcoming in immigrants. This is laudatory except they do this without questioning why the immigrants are coming in and doing something about it or else they support the wars of dominance that result in the mass migrations of their victims to safe havens away from the 'dictators'. The liberal dislike of any state control makes them easy prey to those who really couldn't care less if Bashar al-Assad, for example, is a 'dictator' or not, but, rather whose geopolitical side he is dictating on.

Some populist leaders supporting Brexit tend to emphasise the objectives of ordinary people but studiously avoid the agenda of the 1%. They avoid discussing the geopolitical alignments and re-alignments of their political masters, their agendas for global domination, their constant creation of new free trade areas, their endless sourcing out the cheapest labour costs in the world, their unceasing seeking out of the lowest taxation on their profits and their control of the media and the banks everywhere.

These populists misrepresent people as having narrow concerns like the future of their pensions or racist fears of immigrants 'taking our jobs'. They seek to rile up anger to gain support for narrow right-wing ends. For the liberals any questioning of the weakness of the state is perceived to be a movement towards 'fascism'. However, they miss the point. Unlike the liberals, the working class is not afraid of a strong state. People want a state that protects their jobs, strong borders that keep out criminals, and decent health and education systems that their taxes are supposed to be paying for. The vote for Trump proves that ordinary people are very well aware of the negative sides of neo-liberalism. Trump has talked about bringing jobs home, controlling immigration, investment in infrastructure and creating a stronger pro-people state and the people supported him. The people are also well aware that the liberal cry that 'governments can't do anything about growth' is a sleight of hand when it is no secret that neo-liberals are doing their damndest to reduce the power of the state in the first place.

The Economist article sub-heading 'Nations once again' refers to the poem by *A Nation Once Again* by the Irish poet Thomas Davis who calls on the Irish people to throw off colonialism and take control of their own destiny. However, the article makes a jump from the nationalism, 'controlling one's destiny', referred to in the sub-heading to a 'better question': 'what turns civic nationalism into the exclusive sort?'. To want jobs and better services at home and an end to meddling in other people's countries and economies is anathema to the freedom of the neo-liberal elites to do whatever they like around the world maximizing profits and monopolizing control of world markets.

Sure, Brexit and the Trump elections are good examples of passive politics, of people sitting back, casting a vote and hoping for the best, or at least better. There is nothing new in this, it may even be a case of 'we pretend to vote and you pretend to lead'. In the past the dangers of passive politics were pointed out by various writers such as James Connolly who wrote: 'If the national movement of our day is not merely to re-enact the old sad tragedies of our past history, it must show itself capable of rising to the exigencies of the moment.' [1] Frantz Fanon also pointed this out in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

We have seen [...] that nationalism, that magnificent song that made the people rise against their oppressors, stops short, falters and dies away on the day that independence is proclaimed. Nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a programme. If you really want your country to avoid regression, or at best halts and uncertainties, a rapid step must be taken from national consciousness to political and social consciousness.[2]

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was aware of the dangers of **passive politics**. He advocated a more proactive approach of continual political activity. He wrote, (notwithstanding the existence of slavery at the time), “[a]mong the Greeks, whatever the people had to do, they did themselves; they were constantly assembled in the market place.”[3]

It is likely that Trump will disappoint his supporters given the limitations of his new position but the possibilities for change signaled by Trump should give people hope and make them realise that only by getting out on the streets and showing their strength in numbers, choosing their own representatives and leaders and demanding change will anything progress.

Notes

[1] P. Beresford Ellis, ed., James Connolly: Selected Writings (Middlesex: Pelican, 1973) 121.

[2] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1990) 163.

[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* [1762] (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1998) 45.

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