

“Nationalism” and the Missing Dialogue Between the “East” and the “West”

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

For someone who has written extensively on the dangers of nationalism, the following may come as a surprise. However, I believe we should make a distinction between the types of nationalism that are resurfacing in the world today, and more importantly, rather than unilaterally bashing them for their otherwise nefarious effects, we should approach these nationalisms through a careful investigation of the historical causes that led to their reemergence.

Not so long ago, I was engaged in a Facebook debate (as more of us unfortunately seem to be) regarding the title of a *Guardian* editorial which, in view of the increasingly anti-liberal measures taken by Hungary’s notorious prime-minister, univocally called for this country, which “is making a mockery of EU values” to be “kicked out” of the European Union. [1]

As others have claimed before me, what I argued was that such a move (coming ironically in the thick of Brexit!) would not only feed into the hands of populism, but it would endanger the critically fragile communication between defenders of the said “European values” and those in support of “authoritarianism,” a convenient umbrella term increasingly used today to describe the figure of the ‘Easterner’ in contrast to which the sine-qua-non upheld belief in the superiority of Western democracy, with its infallible resonance, is being reinforced.

The sound of *The Guardian’s* call to arms in the name of democracy vis-à-vis Hungary made me somewhat curious, and, after cursorily browsing the headlines of major Western newspapers, I arrived at the conclusion that in both news, opinion editorials, and reportages, the West’s attitude toward the East in general, whether that is the East of Europe or the far(ther) East, comes across as unabashedly condescending.

Whether couched in sarcasm, as in the case of *The Economist*, [2] or downright demonization as in the case of the numerous op-eds ridiculing China in *The New York Times*, a recent barrage of accusations directed by various Western media outlets toward the “backlash” in the East is not only winning the West definite enemies all around the world, but it reveals the fundamental insularity of Western politics that may come at high cost for the stability of world peace.

This is not the place to give history lessons, but it would be a mistake to believe that the colonial gap (and I mean to include here the gap between the postcolonial as well as the post-socialist world and the West), has been in any way “closed,” either following the ludicrous “end of history” argument, or the intervening 30 years of postsocialist democracy. In these circumstances, semantics is not something to be taken lightly, particularly when it comes to intercultural dialogue, and, as the past has plentifully shown, the media can help deepen or clarify the oftentimes disoriented course of politics (as well as the misguided

course of politicians).

By taking for granted the “Easterner’s” identity as somehow... identical to its own, the West fails to understand what in this new bipolar context seems to reemerge as “The Other.” More importantly, what is critical to understand in this fraught Western-Eastern dialogue, which many are starting to tout as “Cold War II,” is that the tone in which the “democratic” West speaks to the “autocratic” East eerily resembles that of the recent colonial past.

Let’s not forget in this sensitive context neither the self-proclaimed Western superiority over the rest of the world, nor the highly propagandist language of the Cold War (this time on the Western side), which developed not so much in response to the threatening emergence of Eastern socialism, but was a continuation of the patronizing attitude that characterized over five centuries of colonialism, an attitude that appears to be far from passé vis-à-vis both the postcolonial and the postsocialist worlds.

I am not defending either authoritarianism or nationalism. Nor am I saying that threats to authoritarian governments promoting fascist practices such as the Hungarian and the Polish are out of place, as long as they are indeed defending democratic values. I am merely pointing out that what increasingly fills the pages of Western media is not a language of dialogue but a type of self-defending narcissism which, unfortunately, is blindly reinforcing the superiority of the Western position.

Are we to discount as primitive, in the context of this attitude toward them, the reaction – the backlash even – of some “Eastern” patriarchal figures like Putin, Orban or Xi? Nationalism has been, since its very emergence in the romantic 19th century, essentially a reactive, defensive move meant not so much to “protect” traditional ways of life, as to defend local elites from being displaced from their privileged positions in the local hierarchy of power. And if the West doesn’t understand that, then it doesn’t understand anything. For it is this very hierarchy that has been pushed down the throats of Eastern governments – in the image of Western superiority – econo-political as well as cultural – for at least five centuries.

Should the “East” be dictatorial, by all means, let’s be vociferous about it! But in the meantime, let us not forget that the West may appear to the “Other” just as authoritarian as the East is currently being perceived by the Western imagination. Furthermore, let us not forget that Hungary – to return to our original example – was at one point both “colonizer” and “oppressed nation,” [3] and, as a culture that has lost its status as an imperial power, it is in no way different, after all, from Britain, or the United States, for that matter. It is quite clear that the reemerging conflict between the East and the West is, indeed, as most of the media claims, one between former and current “great powers.” But in that case, shouldn’t resentment become a *de facto* common ground between these former “have beens,” both “Eastern” and “Western,” and, who knows, maybe even a starting point for the emergence of a semblance of dialogue?

Promoting fascism is one thing and demonizing based on perceived threats – as in the case of China – is another. I believe it is important to realize that as well-intended as the West might be, its “liberal” mediatic practices might not be apprehended in the same manner in New York, Budapest, or Beijing. Headlines advocating radical measures may be taken for threats in places, and not for the conventional jargon of exalted journalism, which, more often than not, they are. Following interpretation, this kind of language, when “translated”

elsewhere, will in fact reference nothing but old Western superiority. And instead of perpetuating this new arms' race of misunderstandings between East and West, which can be nothing but a premonition of uglier things to come, let us slow down and do our basic research on the historical, social, and political backgrounds of the people whose older and wiser brothers we have been posing to be for at least a few hypocritical centuries now.

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Notes

[1] First Thoughts piece published in The Guardian on June 22, 2018 by Owen Jones: "Hungary is making a mockery of 'EU values'. It's time to kick it out."

[2] See for instance the unsigned report on the Putin-Xi Jinping meeting in "Brother enemy: The realities of life in Russia's far east" published in this year's September 15th edition of The Economist.

[3] I refer, of course, to the dual role that the kingdom of Hungary played in the Austro-Hungarian Empire until its disintegration in 1918 (the year celebrated all over Eastern Europe this November/December as the birth of national states), as well as to its status as member of the "Soviet bloc" in the second half of the twentieth century.

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