

Liberalism and Nationalism in Contemporary America

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I am honored and humbled to receive the James Madison Award, and to have the opportunity to deliver this lecture.¹ I will use this occasion to examine the political crisis now facing the United States, with liberalism under siege while nationalism is on the rise. No recent event reflects this development better than Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election. Trump is an unabashed nationalist who explicitly rejects the unbounded liberalism that dominated American politics in the period between the end of the Cold War and his move into the White House.

The present crisis of liberalism is especially surprising when one remembers how the Cold War ended three decades ago. It was widely believed at the time that liberalism was the unchallenged ideology in the United States. It was on the march and nationalism was thought to be a spent force. This development was expected to have a transformative effect on countries all across the globe. There is no better statement of this liberal triumphalism than Francis Fukuyama's famous 1989 article: "The End of History?"

Something has obviously gone wrong with that forecast, not just in the United States, but in other liberal democracies as well. By 2018, it was commonplace to read articles in mainstream Western publications talking about "the crisis of liberalism."² My aim today is to assess why it is that liberalism is now in trouble while nationalism is on the march. I will focus primarily on the United States, but my analysis also applies to other liberal democracies, which face much the same problem.

The United States has been a liberal nation-state throughout its history. The concept of a nation-state is actually an embodiment of nationalism, which maintains that peoples with a powerful sense of collective identity should be allowed to govern themselves. Thus, to say that the United States is a liberal nation-state is to say that its identity is deeply bound up with both liberalism and nationalism.

Given the rich history of liberal nation-states, it is obvious that liberalism and nationalism can coexist successfully. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental tension between those two ideologies, which can cause serious problems for a liberal nation-state. Specifically,

liberalism privileges the individual and is ultimately a universalistic ideology, while nationalism privileges the social group and is ultimately a particularistic ideology. This tension sometimes manifests itself in a clash between these two isms. In effect, there is a tug-of-war between liberalism and nationalism that shifts back and forth over time.

My core claim is that when that balance shifts markedly in liberalism's favor, as it did in the wake of the Cold War, it threatens to undermine nationalism, which no country can do without. This development, in turn, triggers a nationalist backlash. In the ensuing conflict, nationalism wins almost every time, because it is the most powerful political ideology in the modern world. Trump's victory in 2016 as well as Britain's vote to leave the European Union (Brexit) that same year, were largely the result of a clash between liberalism and nationalism that had been playing out beneath the surface in those two countries since at least 2000. This upsurge of nationalism has continued unabated since 2016.

Let me now describe liberalism and nationalism, and then explain how these two isms interact with each other. I will then apply that theoretical framework to the American case, focusing first on the golden age of unbounded liberalism and then on the nationalist backlash under President Trump.

The Essence of Liberalism

Liberalism privileges individualism.³ It assumes that we are at root free individuals who come together voluntarily to form a social contract, not social animals from the get-go. Furthermore, liberalism assumes that humans, despite their impressive reasoning skills, often disagree among themselves about first principles. In extreme cases, these disagreements are so intense that people want to kill those who disagree with them. Thus, a key task is to devise a political system that can maintain order while also respecting individual differences of opinion that are sometimes profound and potentially dangerous.

The liberal solution to this problem has three parts. For starters, it emphasizes inalienable or natural rights. All individuals are said to be born with a set of rights that allows them to

lead their life according to their own core principles. The second part of the formula is to purvey the norm of tolerance – to push individuals to adopt a live and let live approach toward those they disagree with about fundamental political and social issues. But norms have their limits and thus some individuals will invariably try to deny others their legitimate rights and maybe even harm them. Thus, the third element of the liberal blueprint is to create a state that is powerful enough to protect individuals from each other and guarantee their rights, but not so powerful that it encroaches on those rights. In essence, the aim is to create a distinct boundary between the state and civil society, where individuals have as much freedom as possible in their personal lives.

There is an important economic dimension to liberalism that grows naturally out of its conception of individual rights. Specifically, it is essential to create free markets in which individuals can pursue their own self-interest and realize their freedoms. The state may intervene at the edges of the market – to prevent fraud or breakup monopolies, for example – but its primary mission is to defend property rights and break down internal and external barriers to exchange. The underlying belief is that individuals acting egoistically in the market ultimately benefits the entire society.

Liberalism, it should be emphasized, has a powerful universalistic dimension embedded in it, which strongly influences how liberal nation-states think about the wider world. Because individual rights are inalienable and so important in the liberal story, liberal countries are primed to care about the rights of people all around the world. Of course, liberalism allows individuals to form large social groups that control their own state. Still, the rights of those individuals are privileged over any particular social characteristics that might inhere in any group. In effect, liberalism is both individualistic and universalistic at its core, which has profound consequences for how liberals think about important domestic and foreign policy issues.

The Essence of Nationalism

In contrast to liberalism, nationalism proceeds from the assumption that humans are fundamentally social animals, although they have room to carve out space for their individualism. Humans are born into and thrive in social groups that mold their identities and command their loyalties. The highest social group of real consequence in the modern world is the nation. Most individuals are deeply attached to their nation, which is not to deny that they can also be committed to other groups, such as their family.

Nations need political institutions to help their members live together peacefully and productively. They need rules that define acceptable and unacceptable behavior and also stipulate how disputes will be settled. Nations also need political institutions to help shield them from other nations that might have an incentive to attack and possibly destroy them. Since the early 1500s, the dominant political form on the planet has been the state. Nations therefore want their own state, because that is the best way to survive and prosper.

At the same time, states have powerful administrative, economic, and military incentives to mold their inhabitants into nations, if they hope to flourish and compete with other states in the international arena. Encouraging a profound sense of common identity and a shared destiny fosters unity and makes citizens willing to make sacrifices for the greater good. Thus, states need nations and nations need states.

This symbiotic relationship has two key consequences. First, the nation and the state are tightly fused together in ways that cause most citizens to be deeply loyal to their nation-state, even willing to fight and die for it. Second, the world is now populated almost exclusively by nation-states, which reflects the remarkable influence of nationalism.

Four features of nationalism are especially important for understanding its relationship to liberalism. To begin with, nations have a *sense of oneness*. Almost all its members feel like they are part of a common enterprise. They form what Benedict Anderson famously called an “imagined community,” even though no person knows more than a tiny fraction of the members.⁴ This is not to deny that there may be sharp economic and social inequalities within any nation, as well as a wide gap between the ruling elites and the broader public.

The key point, however, is that the citizenry is tied together by a shared bond. There is a sense of “deep horizontal comradeship,” which helps foster a powerful sense of national identity.⁵

Relatedly, each nation has a *unique culture*, which is to say it has a set of practices and beliefs that are widely shared among the citizenry. Those attributes not only distinguish it from other nations, but invariably give it a sense of superiority as well. There can be overlapping features between different cultures – both Iraqis and Saudis speak Arabic while both Italy and Spain are Catholic countries – but when one looks at the overall package of traits that constitute different cultures, no two cultures are the same. In short, a nation’s members tend to think and act alike in some important ways, which further promotes a sense of national identity.

Another key feature of nationalism is the notion of *sacred territory*. Nations invariably form deep attachments with particular geographic spaces that they consider their homeland. That territory is an integral part of the nation’s identity. Given the intrinsic value of that territory, preserving the borders that enclose a nation-state and delineate it from “the other” are of enormous importance to the citizenry. Those borders, of course, also help protect the nation-state from foreign invasion, unwanted immigration, and undesirable foreign influence.

Finally, there is the all-important matter of *sovereignty*. Nations aim to maximize their control over their own political fate. They care greatly about self-determination, which means they are concerned about how political authority is arranged inside their own nation-state as well as with other nation-states. Regarding the international dimension, sovereignty means that nation-states want to be free from outside interference to make their own decisions to the extent they can on both domestic and foreign policy. Nevertheless, states can delegate the authority to make certain decisions to international institutions without surrendering supreme authority, which is the essence of sovereignty. Still, even this limited relationship will rankle some nationalists, who think any delegation of authority infringes on their nation-state’s sovereignty.

Liberalism & Nationalism Together

Liberalism and nationalism are obviously distinct ideologies. The individualism at liberalism's core, coupled with its emphasis on inalienable rights, makes it a universalistic ideology. Nationalism, in contrast, stresses the importance of the group over the individual and is particularistic all the way down. Still, those two isms are often compatible, as the American experience, among others, makes manifestly clear. Moreover, liberalism and nationalism worked in tandem throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to help bring down dynastic rulers in Europe. Some scholars even maintain that these two isms can be fused together to produce what Yael Tamir calls "liberal nationalism."⁶

This fruitful coexistence is not the whole story, however. There is also a conflictual side to the relationship. Liberalism has the potential to weaken nationalism, which is tantamount to threatening the nation-state itself. This threat becomes real when liberalism is fully unleashed, when its proponents are filled with self-confidence and advance an ambitious agenda that minimizes nationalism's role. Let us call such a campaign unbounded liberalism. When liberalism takes this form, a nationalist backlash is sure to occur.

The Threat from Unbounded Liberalism

What makes unbounded liberalism so dangerous to nationalism is its potential to weaken national identity – that is the powerful inclination for individuals to closely identify with their nation. This development, in turn, leads to a weakening of social cohesion or what might be called national solidarity. In effect, as national identity declines among the citizenry, the all-important bonds that hold a nation together begin to fray.

How does this happen? For starters, the extreme individualism at the core of liberalism cuts against the notion that each citizen is ultimately part of a coherent and vibrant community that has a powerful claim on one's loyalty. According to nationalist logic, what

is good for the overall nation matters greatly for its members. Individualism, however, undermines the sense of oneness that is at the core of nationalism, as individuals tend to see themselves primarily as egoistic utility maximizers.

Furthermore, the universalism that is built into liberalism calls for treating people all across the world as rights-bearing equals. While the belief that we are first and foremost members of a “global community” has a certain appeal, it is at odds with nationalism, because it challenges the idea that a person is part of a distinct nation with a rich culture and a deep history. As Anderson notes, “No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.”⁷

To be more specific, the universalist impulse undermines national identity and national solidarity in three distinct ways. First, emphasizing that we are part of a common humanity is likely to promote sympathy, if not enthusiasm, for open-ended immigration and a permissive policy toward refugees. Second, that same universalism facilitates the emergence of a global elite tied together by shared economic interests and social networks, and with its own identity as “citizens of the world.” Its members and their children will often attend the same schools, which brings us to universalism’s third distinct consequence. Universities will recruit large numbers of students from across the globe and treat them much the way they treat citizen-students. Those schools will increasingly be seen as international, not national, institutions.

This erosion of national solidarity is of enormous importance, because nationalism is like glue, which helps hold a society together. Remember that liberalism is predicated on the recognition that individuals – even individuals within the same nation-state – often disagree about first principles and those differences can be so intense that they sometimes lead to violence. By emphasizing oneness and deep loyalty to the group, nationalism goes a long way toward binding together people with disparate views on controversial issues. Take away that group solidarity and it becomes increasingly difficult to control the divisive forces found in every country in the world.

Not only does unbounded liberalism eat away at the nation, it also weakens the state, which is the other essential ingredient in nationalism. Liberalism challenges the nationalist vision of a state as a hard shell encompassing a nation and its sacred territory. Borders are porous, maybe even open, because of liberal thinking about immigration and refugee flows. Liberal precepts make it difficult to think in terms of keeping the “other” out. Moreover, liberalism’s emphasis on creating an open international economy further contributes to weakening state borders. At the same time, the notion of sacred territory belonging to a particular nation is at odds with a universalistic ideology that downplays national differences from the get-go.

There are two other institutions associated with liberalism’s economic side that directly challenge and weaken the state.⁸ The first is the market, which is considered a more efficient regulator of economic and social life than the state. For almost all liberals, markets know best. In fact, too much state intervention can undermine markets, which effectively means that a constrained state is a good state. Liberalism also stresses the importance of international institutions, which play a crucial role in managing the open international economy that liberals champion. Those institutions, however, invariably assume responsibilities that allow them to handcuff states in important ways.

In essence, unbounded liberalism’s assault on the concept of a cohesive, hard-shell state, coupled with its emphasis on the virtues of markets and international institutions, undermines the notion of a powerful sovereign state that can meet the nation’s needs. That development, in turn, encourages citizens to lose faith in the state. Thus, liberalism on steroids works to weaken the tight bond between the nation and the state, which is the crux of nationalism.

Nationalism Strikes Back

When liberalism is on the march and nationalism is under siege, a nationalist backlash eventually follows. The ensuing competition between these two perspectives is not a fair fight: nationalism wins every time. Not only does liberalism fail to achieve its most

ambitious goals, but many of its most important gains are likely to be reversed. Indeed, the great danger is that a resurgent nationalism will not merely restore a workable balance of power between liberalism and nationalism but will instead turn liberal democracies into illiberal democracies or worse.

Nationalism is more powerful than liberalism for three reasons. First, nationalism is more in sync with human nature. Humans are intensely social beings from the beginning, not individuals who start life alone and form social contracts when they are mature. We are all born into social groups that nurture us and protect us. Nations, like other social groups, are primarily survival vehicles that are essential for our well-being. Their common culture allows members to cooperate more easily and effectively, which in turn maximizes their chances of securing the basic necessities of life.

Second, liberalism alone cannot provide the glue that holds disputatious people together in a state, which is a monumental task. The liberal solution for the problem – promoting the norm of tolerance and creating a state that is largely confined to maintaining order and protecting rights – is helpful, but not enough to handle those rancorous differences that invariably arise among individuals and groups in any society. Nationalism is essential for accomplishing that difficult task, because it provides a common culture that helps create bonds between people who often have profound differences over first principles. In brief, liberalism needs nationalism, but nationalism does not need liberalism.

Third, nationalism, unlike liberalism, fulfills important emotional needs. One characteristic of a nation that makes it so special is that it provides its members with an existential narrative. It gives them a strong sense that they are part of an exclusive and exceptional community whose history is filled with important traditions as well as remarkable individuals and events. Furthermore, nationalism promises people that the nation will be there for future generations the way it was there for past generations. In this sense, nationalism is much like religion, which is also adept at weaving the past, present, and future into a seamless web that gives members a sense they are part of a long and rich

tradition. This formidable bonding force is absent from liberalism, which has no equivalent story to tell.

Finally, the evidence shows that nationalism is the more powerful of the two ideologies. For example, the international system is populated almost completely with nation-states. Of course, there are many liberal democracies as well, but they have never numbered even half of the countries in the world and ultimately each of them is a liberal nation-state. Moreover, as Anderson notes, “Every successful revolution has defined itself in *national* terms.”⁹ Regarding communism, it did battle with nationalism throughout much of the twentieth century in countries like Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia, and nationalism won every time.

The bottom line is that liberalism can coexist with nationalism, but when it gets overly assertive, it is sure to prompt a nationalist backlash. That reaction, in turn, will cause serious problems for liberalism, at least in the short term.

Let me now shift gears and show how these ideas can help us understand what has happened in the United States over the past three decades.

Liberalism’s Golden Age

The first twenty-five years or so after the Cold War are often referred to as the “unipolar moment.” But they could also be called the “liberal moment.” Never in history has liberalism been a more powerful force than it was during this period. The balance of power between liberalism and nationalism in countries like Britain and the United States shifted sharply in liberalism’s favor. Indeed, many in the West thought that nationalism was a spent force that had no future. “It appeared to some globalists,” Jill Lepore writes, “that nationalism had died.”¹⁰ Western elites welcomed this prospect, as almost all of them viewed nationalism as a malign force that not only threatened liberalism, but also was a major cause of war, including the two world wars. Western academics especially dislike

nationalism, in part because modern universities are fundamentally liberal institutions that are threatened by the particularism and conformity that nationalist thinking promotes.

Given this disdain for nationalism, Western elites embraced a remarkably ambitious set of liberal policies in the aftermath of the Cold War. In fact, this unbounded liberalism actually began gaining traction in the United States as well as Britain during the 1980s. President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who were both nationalists, were also deeply committed to pursuing a “neoliberal” economic agenda that was widely seen as a fundamental challenge to the economic orthodoxies of the day. Specifically, they pushed policies that promoted individualism and the virtues of unrestrained markets, while criticizing big government.

Reagan said in his first inaugural address that, “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem.”¹¹ Instead, he championed markets and to quote the author of a recent history of economic ideas, Reagan was “the poet laureate of this new emphasis on individualism.”¹² Thatcher’s privileging of the individual over society, as well as her skepticism about what the state can do to help people, are captured in her well-known comment in a 1987 interview: “I think we have been through a period when too many people have been given to understand that when they have a problem it is government’s job to cope with it.... They are casting their problems on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no governments can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.”¹³

Reagan and Thatcher’s neoliberal agenda was given a powerful boost by the triumphalism that took hold in the West after the Cold War. Then, in the mid-1990s, neoliberalism took hold in the Democratic Party with Bill Clinton’s “New Democrats” initiative and in the Labor Party with Tony Blair’s “Third Way” initiative. For example, Clinton announced his intention in early 1995 to “shift ... resources and decision-making from bureaucrats to citizens, injecting choice and competition and individual responsibility into national policy.”¹⁴ A year later he announced that, “The era of big government is over.”¹⁵ By the mid

1990s, both the left and right sides of the political spectrum in these two paradigmatic liberal democracies embraced a thoroughly liberal agenda based on smaller government and free markets. Unsurprisingly, Alan Greenspan boasted in 2007: “It hardly makes any difference who will be the next president. The world is governed by market forces.”¹⁶

The Triumph of Individualism

How did the central features of what I call “unbounded liberalism” weaken American nationalism during the liberal moment? Two of the key elements in the story – individualism and unrestrained markets – have already been mentioned, but more elaboration is required.

The emphasis on individualism, which is a central feature of liberal ideology, encourages people to maximize their own utility and not worry about the welfare of other. The claim that egoistic behavior ultimately benefits the entire society justifies this selfish behavior. It produces a rising tide that lifts all boats, so the story goes. Thinking and acting in purely self-regarding ways, however, clashes with the notion that individuals are part of a larger collective held together by strong social bonds. In short, this radical individualism is like an acid that corrodes national solidarity and the sense of oneness that lies at the core of nationalism.

Relatedly, unbounded liberalism emphasized that the best way to regulate economic life is to privilege the market over the state as much as possible. Markets that allow individuals to maximize their utility were considered highly efficient, while the modern state, with its enormous power to intervene in a society’s daily life, was seen as an impediment to efficiency and growth, even freedom itself. This line of thinking strikes at the core of nationalism, not just by undermining the state’s legitimacy, but also by weakening the bonds between the nation and the state. After all, the claim that citizens cannot rely on the state to serve their best interests is sure to undermine their loyalty to that important institution.

While these two key elements of unbounded liberalism are commonly associated with the economic policies that fall under the rubric of neoliberalism, their influence has implications for all aspects of life. As Wendy Brown notes, neoliberalism is more than just “a set of economic policies.” It is “a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality [that] transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic.”¹⁷

The Triumph of Universalism

Another distinguishing feature of liberalism is its universalism, which was clearly reflected in the American elite’s thinking about immigration, refugees, and borders. Specifically, the core belief that all individuals are members of a global community made it difficult to put meaningful limits on immigration. After all, liberalism has no place for distinguishing between cultures and nations, much less privileging one’s own group over another on those grounds. Thus, unbounded liberalism tended to favor not just open-ended immigration, but was also tolerant toward illegal immigration. Lepore, for example, maintains that anyone who accepts the American creed “belongs in this country.”¹⁸ Liberal elites also favored generous policies regarding refugees.

Given this open arms policy toward immigration and refugees, it is unsurprising that the notion of a hard-shell state that fenced off sacred national territory came under attack during the liberal moment. The emphasis among elites was instead on maintaining porous, if not open, borders. The starkest manifestation of this perspective is the Schengen Agreement, which effectively created a borderless world inside liberal Europe. The president of the European Commission went so far as to say, “Borders are the worst invention ever.”¹⁹

Liberal thinking about immigration and borders cuts against nationalism in profound ways. It directly challenges the very notion of national identity. To be clear, nationalism does not preclude immigration, even on a large scale. Indeed, the United States has benefitted enormously from the huge number of immigrants that have landed on its shores over time.

But that flow of newcomers must be firmly controlled and designed to help maintain a robust American nation. Immigration in a liberal world, however, is based on the belief that we are above all else citizens of the world; thus, Americans should have a relaxed view toward immigrants and treat them as fellow members of global society, not as foreigners seeking to join their nation. Relatedly, unbounded liberalism takes dead aim at the core nationalist belief that states are sovereign entities that have the authority and responsibility to strictly control their borders, so as to maintain the integrity of the nation and protect its sacred territory.

Unbounded liberalism has yet another key dimension – this one more economic than political – that helped undermine the hard-shell notion of the state and push toward a borderless world. After the Cold War, American elites worked assiduously to create a wide-open international economy that maximized free trade and fostered unfettered capital markets. This hyperglobalized world economy, which was much more ambitious in scope than the economic order that prevailed in the West during the Cold War, helped break down or weaken many of the existing barriers between countries and sought to weave them together into a seamless economic order.

The Rise of a Transnational Elite

This new economic order had two other effects that worked to undermine nationalism. It helped cultivate a powerful transnational elite whose members tend to have more in common with each other than their fellow nationals, while also damaging the economic fortunes of many of the latter. This combination of results pointed a dagger at the heart of nationalism.

Hyperglobalization expanded contacts between elites of all kinds – business, intellectual, media, and policy – from all over the world. Those elites did not abandon their national identities, but they acquired a powerful cosmopolitan or transnational identity as well. They spoke English, often went to the same schools, read the same publications, and were committed to neoliberal economic policies. This new identity, however, worked to put

distance between Western elites and their fellow citizens, which naturally weakened the nation. Former British Prime Minister Theresa May captured this phenomenon in 2016 when she said: “Today, too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass in the street. But if you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what the very word ‘citizenship’ means.”²⁰

Moreover, those transnational elites – and elites more generally – became increasingly wealthy while many of their fellow citizens struggled. As countless studies have shown, the economic policies that underpinned hyperglobalization have greatly benefitted a narrow slice of the American public, not only creating staggering inequality, but also damaging the economic fortunes of massive numbers of lower-class and middle-class workers. The resulting human despair is so acute that life expectancy in the United States decreased from 2014 to 2017.²¹ These economic and social consequences of hyperglobalization eat away at the American nation by fueling the belief that the globalized elite that runs the United States has abandoned the average citizen in pursuit of its own narrow interests. In short, hyperglobalization threatened the sense of oneness that is the essence of the modern nation-state.

There is another dimension to unbounded liberalism that relates to the open international economy. To make that system work efficiently, liberal elites in the United States and other Western countries increased the power of international institutions. For example, the WTO, which was created in 1995 to manage international trade, was markedly more powerful than the GATT, the institution it replaced. Although countries did not surrender sovereignty to these international bodies – they were simply delegating the authority to make decisions, not giving up supreme authority – that was not the public perception. Thus, international institutions were seen as an instrument for weakening sovereignty, one of nationalism’s core elements.

Furthermore, the rules these institutions promulgate constrain countries – even the mighty United States – by limiting their ability to protect their citizens from economic harm. Given all the creative destruction that comes with hyperglobalization, these limits invariably weaken the bonds between nation and state, which strikes at the heart of nationalism.

Universities and Identity Politics

American universities played their own role in undermining nationalism. The vast majority of these universities are profoundly liberal institutions—in the best sense of that term—and they increasingly see themselves as international or transnational institutions. They welcome people from all over the world, in part because non-nationals provide diversity to the faculty and the student body, but also because university leaders believe, as a former Yale dean put it, “If we want to train the next generation of global leaders, we better have the globe here.”²² Furthermore, this openness makes financial sense and it brings some of the best and the brightest from around the world to U.S. universities. Once they arrive, of course, foreigners on university campuses are typically treated no differently from their American counterparts. After all, the main criterion for assessing individuals in academia is how smart and capable they are relative to their peers, not their nationality. This extreme open-mindedness, which is at odds with nationalism, naturally helped create and nurture the transnational elite.

Universities undercut nationalism in yet another way. They are deeply committed to truth-telling, which means their historians and social scientists are going to produce scholarship that undermines the founding myths that are an essential ingredient of American (or any other) nationalism. The resulting tension between the scholarly enterprise and nationalism causes many academics to intensely dislike nationalism. This sentiment is reflected in Lepore’s comment that, “Hatred for nationalism drove historians away from it in the second half of the twentieth century.”²³ Hatred for nationalism, however, extends far beyond history departments in the academy.

Finally, a word is in order about identity politics, which is closely linked to universities but certainly not restricted to them. Mark Lilla sees this movement as a critically important dimension of unbounded liberalism. He maintains that this “identity liberalism” is based on “radical individualism” and is effectively “Reaganism for lefties.”²⁴ While there is no question that identity politics focuses on individual identity and individual rights, it also devotes considerable attention to how marginalized groups can gain equal recognition and treatment from their surrounding society. Given the attention paid to groups, it is hard to argue that identity politics is a straightforward liberal phenomenon.

Identity politics is actually a compelling illustration of the extent to which citizens often disagree among themselves – sometimes bitterly – about first principles. Those disputes, in turn, show why nationalism is needed as a glue that can help hold those citizens together in a functioning society. Yet most people who engage in identity politics are openly hostile to nationalism and focus instead on promoting their own as well as their group’s interests in the face of stiff resistance from other groups. This notion of separateness is obviously at odds with the sense of oneness that is the essence of nationalism.

These different dimensions of unbounded liberalism were remarkably influential in the American body politic during the initial twenty-five years after the Cold War.

Unsurprisingly, Western elites tended to think that nationalism hardly mattered inside the United States or other liberal democracies, although nationalist political parties were gaining strength in Europe by 2015. Still, there was no sense among the liberal elites that nationalism was a powerful force to be reckoned with and that liberalism would soon find itself mired in crisis. That situation changed abruptly in 2016.

The Nationalist Resurgence

Two seismic events struck at the heart of the liberal enterprise that year: Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. What made these events so remarkable is that they occurred in the two paradigmatic liberal democracies. The outcome in both cases was caused in large

part by resurgent nationalism. In essence, the events of 2016 were the result of a conflict between liberalism and nationalism that had been imperceptibly at play since at least 2000.

To be clear, nationalism did not go away during liberalism's golden moment, although the balance between those two isms shifted markedly in liberalism's favor. The most obvious evidence of nationalism at play was the breakups of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia, which occurred because different national groups within those countries wanted their own nation-state.²⁵ There were also national groups in Western Europe like the Catalonians in Spain and the Scots in Great Britain, who threatened to break away and form their own nation-state.

There were other telltale signs of nationalism's staying power. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, a deeply committed liberal, was asked in 1998 why the United States was contemplating using military force against Iraq. She replied: "If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us." Note that she refers to the American "nation," the core concept in nationalism, and then makes the case for American exceptionalism, which is precisely the kind of chauvinism that undergirds nationalism. Note also that the European Union, the most ambitious liberal institution ever built, has not transcended nationalism. When citizens of the member states are asked what their primary identity is, invariably, less than 5 percent say they view themselves as Europeans only. The overwhelming majority view themselves according to their nationality alone or primarily their nationality.²⁶

Although nationalism did not disappear during the liberal moment, unbounded liberalism threatened it in significant ways. Given that nationalism is the more powerful of those two ideologies, it was only a matter of time before there was a nationalist backlash and the tug of war between those competing isms shifted back toward nationalism. That shift happened in the United States with Donald Trump's election. He won the White House for a number of reasons, but one of his key assets is that he ran as a nationalist against both Democrats and Republicans who embraced unbounded liberalism.

Moreover, Trump has governed as a nationalist and continues to challenge unbounded liberalism at every turn. One can question his competence as president, and I would be among the first to do so, but there is no question that he has pursued a nationalist agenda from the beginning of his political career and that it helped propel him into the White House. His rivals, on the other hand—especially Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign—recoil at his nationalist rhetoric and continue to embrace unbounded liberalism.

Nationalism’s Revenge: Donald Trump

A close examination of Trump’s commitment to nationalism provides stark evidence of the nationalist backlash against unbounded liberalism. Indeed, he openly described himself as a “total nationalist” in February 2017.²⁷ He re-emphasized that point in a controversial speech in Houston in October 2018 and told reporters the following day “I am absolutely a nationalist, and I am proud of it.”²⁸ Trump also placed heavy emphasis, especially in his inaugural address, on the theme that the United States is “one nation.” “For too long,” he said, “a small group ... has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost.” Moreover, “the establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country.” That situation was about to change, he stressed, as “a nation exists to serve its citizens.”²⁹

Trump also frequently talks about the importance of sovereignty, one of nationalism’s core concepts. “There can be no substitute for strong, sovereign, and independent nations,” he told the UN in September 2017 in a speech that was filled with references to the virtues of sovereignty. “In foreign affairs,” he maintained, “we are renewing this founding principle of sovereignty.”³⁰ Relatedly, Trump has made it clear since he started campaigning for the presidency that he was committed to putting America’s interests first. “From this moment on,” he said in his inaugural address, “it’s going to be America First.” Unlike his recent predecessors, Trump never extols the virtues of the “international community.”

Trump also praises American culture, although not in a chauvinistic way. Indeed, he made it clear before the UN in September 2019 that he believes it is good that the world is populated with sovereign states with different cultures: “Like my beloved country, each nation represented in this hall has a cherished history, culture, and heritage that is worth defending and celebrating, and which gives us our singular potential and strength. The free world must embrace its national foundations. It must not attempt to erase them or replace them.” He went on to say: “Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their own country first. The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors, and honor the differences that make each country special and unique.”³¹

Trump’s nationalism is also reflected in his views on immigration, refugees, and especially borders. For example, he made it clear to the UN in 2018 that his administration was working hard “to confront threats to sovereignty from uncontrolled migration,” especially illegal immigration.³² A year earlier in the same venue, he emphasized that although he was not opposed to accepting refugees, he wanted an approach that limited their numbers “and which enables their eventual return to their home countries.”³³ Relatedly, he has frequently highlighted his intention of maintaining tight control over America’s borders. “I have a message,” he told the UN in 2019, “for those open border activists who cloak themselves in the rhetoric of social justice. Your policies are not just. Your policies are cruel and evil.”³⁴

The media and universities are also frequent targets of Trump’s wrath. In July 2020, for example, he sent out a tweet stating: “Too many Universities and School Systems are about Radical Left Indoctrination, not Education. Therefore, I am telling the Treasury Department to re-examine their Tax-Exempt Status.”³⁵ Moreover, he recently tried, but failed to force foreign students to leave the country if their universities taught all their courses online. Plus, he has put limits on Chinese graduate students entering the United States. Trump’s hatred of the “liberal media,” which he frequently describes as an “enemy of the people,” is constantly on display.³⁶

Finally, Trump consistently rails against the open international economy and international institutions, or what he more generally refers to as globalism. He maintains that, “Globalism exerted a religious pull over past leaders, causing them to ignore their own national interests.”³⁷ In particular, “the United States opened its economy ... with few conditions” and other countries took advantage of that openness.³⁸ He heaps scorn on “global bureaucrats” for “attacking the sovereignty of nations” and declares “We will never surrender America’s sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy. America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism.”³⁹

Nationalism and Political Parties

Although Trump has benefitted politically from nationalism’s resurgence, he did not cause it. His election was the manifestation of a process that was well under way by 2016. Indeed, unbounded liberalism’s troubles were on full display by that point. Remember that Senator Bernie Sanders, a self-declared socialist, almost beat Hillary Clinton, a staunch defender of unbounded liberalism, in the Democratic Party primaries.

One could even see glimpses of nationalist thinking in Barack Obama’s rhetoric before 2016. He famously advocated doing “nation-building at home” and his emphasis on creating a unified nation in his second inaugural address is remarkably similar to what Trump would say four years later. Obama actually made it clear throughout his speech that liberalism requires a vibrant nationalism to flourish. As he said in 2013: “Preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action. For the American people can no more meet the demands of today’s world by acting alone than American soldiers could have met the forces of fascism or communism with muskets and militias. Now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation and one people.”⁴⁰

In recent years, most Democrats have been unable to bring themselves to embrace nationalism in any meaningful way. Hillary Clinton, for example, could not bring herself to

counter Trump's "America First" rhetoric during the 2016 campaign by stressing that she would of course put America's interests first as the president of the United States. When Ambassador Michael McFaul, a deeply committed liberal in the Obama administration, was asked about Trump's self-identification as a nationalist, he replied, "Does Trump know the historical baggage associated with this word, or is he ignorant?"⁴¹ As Lepore notes, Democrats have "gotten skittish about the word 'nation,' as if to fear that using it means descending into nationalism."⁴²

This antipathy toward nationalism is a huge liability for Democrats. In effect, they are handcuffing themselves and allowing the Republicans to use this powerful political weapon against them. If Joe Biden wants to be president, he would be well-advised to make sure that his own nationalist bona fides are crystal clear to voters.

Conclusion

The unbounded liberalism that dominated the political landscape in the United States after the Cold War is in serious crisis, mainly because it threatened American nationalism, which has reasserted itself under President Trump. Even so, liberalism per se is not about to disappear in the United States. As Louis Hartz famously argued, the roots of the "liberal tradition" run deep in America.⁴³ Liberal democracy also has many virtues. I am forever grateful that I was born and raised in liberal America and teach at a thoroughly liberal university.

Moreover, liberalism has a crucial role to play in taming nationalism's dark side. Specifically, liberalism's emphasis on individual rights and tolerance, coupled with its universalist impulse, goes a long way toward countering nationalism's dangerous and ever-present potential for demonizing "the other" and dealing with it harshly or even brutally.

Although liberalism is here to stay, the United States will continue to be a liberal *nation-state*, not just a liberal state. Nationalism remains the world's most formidable political ideology and neither it nor the nation-state is going away anytime soon. Indeed, the

challenges posed to the United States by the rise of China and Covid-19 are likely to reinforce American nationalism, as external dangers typically do. Although liberalism and nationalism will always have an uneasy coexistence, nationalism's staying power is ultimately good news for liberalism, because liberalism alone cannot deal with the disruptive forces that invariably tear at the fabric of liberal societies. Nationalism is still needed to help provide that glue.

ENDNOTES

¹ I am indebted to the following individuals for their excellent comments: Michael Desch, Thomas Durkin, Eliza Gheorghe, Brendan Green, Jennifer A. Lind, Lindsey O'Rourke, Sebastian Rosato, Burak Tan, and Stephen Walt.

² See, for example: "Some Thoughts on the Crisis of Liberalism—and How to Fix It," *The Economist*, June 12, 2018.

³ For more detailed discussions of my views on liberalism and nationalism, see John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); and John J. Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019), pp. 7-50.

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1990).

⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 7.

⁶ Yael Tamir, *Liberal Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1993.

⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 7.

⁸ The modern liberal state is powerful and interventionist at its core, which means there are limits on how much it can be weakened. See Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, pp. 68-74.

⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 2.

¹⁰ Jill Lepore, "Don't Let Nationalists Speak for the Nation," *New York Times*, May 25, 2019.

¹¹ Ronald Reagan, First Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981.

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¹² Binyamin Applebaum, *The Economists' Hour: False Prophets, Free Markets, and the Fracture of Society* (New York: Little, Brown, 2019), p. 340.

¹³ Quoted in Samuel Brittan, "Thatcher Was Right – There is No 'Society'," *Financial Times*, April 18, 2013.

¹⁴ Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 24, 1995.

[http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/william-jefferson-clinton/state-of-the-union-1995-\(delivered-version\).php](http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/william-jefferson-clinton/state-of-the-union-1995-(delivered-version).php)

¹⁵ Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, January 23, 1996.

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¹⁶ Quoted in Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 1.

¹⁷ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), pp. 9-10.

¹⁸ Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case for the Nation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019), p. 135.

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- ¹⁹ Michael Savage, "Juncker: Borders Are Worst of Inventions," *The Times*, August 23, 2016.
- ²⁰ "Theresa May's Keynote Speech at Tory Conference in Full," *Independent*, October 5, 2016.
- ²¹ Ann Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 33.
- ²² Nick Anderson, "Surge in Foreign Students May Be Crowding Americans Out of Elite Colleges," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2016.
- ²³ Jill Lepore, "A New Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (March/April 2019), p. 18.
- ²⁴ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), pp. 9, 85, 93.
- ²⁵ This talk emphasizes how nationalism can serve as a glue to help hold a society together. These cases illustrate that nationalism can sometimes help tear a country apart.
- ²⁶ "Eurobarometer—40 Years," in European Commission, *Public Opinion*, downloaded August 24, 2020. <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Archive/index>
- ²⁷ Peter Baker, "'Use That Word!': Trump Embraces the 'Nationalist' Label," *New York Times*, October 23, 2018.
- ²⁸ Felicia Sonmez, "Trump: I'm a Nationalist and I'm Proud of It," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2018.
- ²⁹ Donald Trump, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>
- ³⁰ Donald Trump, UN Address, September 19, 2017. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>
- ³¹ Donald Trump, UN Address, September 25, 2019. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-74th-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>
- ³² Donald Trump, UN Address, September 25, 2018. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/>
- ³³ Trump, 2017 UN Address.
- ³⁴ Trump, 2019 UN Address.
- ³⁵ Quoted in David A. Graham, "What a Direct Attack on Free Speech Looks Like," *The Atlantic*, July 10, 2020.
- ³⁶ Margaret Sullivan, "Trump Has Sown Hatred of the Press for Years. Now Journalists are Under Assault from Police and Protesters Alike," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2020.
- ³⁷ Trump, 2019 UN Address.
- ³⁸ Trump, 2018 UN Address.
- ³⁹ Trump, 2018 UN Address; Trump, 2019 UN Address.

⁴⁰ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>

⁴¹ Quoted in Baker, "Use That Word!."

⁴² Lepore, "Don't Let Nationalists Speak."

⁴³ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955).