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Commentary

Anthropology and Resurgent Nationalism

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As the battle for ideological high ground rages between advocates of globalism and resurgent nationalism in Europe, India, Russia, the United States, and elsewhere across the world, some commentators have fallen to demonizing or ridiculing supporters of the new right-wing nationalist movements and political parties. This is understandable, given the bitter historical lessons learned (or forgotten) from twentieth-century nationalism-inspired wars and crimes against humanity. More careful analyses of the Brexit referendum and election of Donald Trump have taught us, however, that a certain demographic does bear the externalized costs of a neoliberal global economic system disproportionately and has genuine cause to be disgruntled. The causes of nationalist backlash thus can and must be studied empirically. Social scientists have a responsibility, moreover, to call for any genuine social grievances to be publicly recognized and addressed, as Thomas Piketty (2014) and Elizabeth Warren (2007) have done with their work on rising inequality and middle-class decline.

Supporters of renewed parochialism and xenophobia of course fail to acknowledge the current state of global interdependence and, indeed, the urgent need for even greater global cooperation on issues such as climate change, where mutual recognition of global interdependence has now become a matter of life and death for all of us. They also tend to be poorly educated or misinformed politically, and hence liable to elect representatives who have no genuine intention of actually addressing their grievances. As Adorno's (1978) postmortem of the rise of Nazism in the 1930s already revealed, many individuals also have a psychological tendency to submit to authoritarianism. They assume the democratic "system" must be intrinsically weak or at least corrupt, because it has evidently failed them, and hope a strongman (rarely a strong woman) will save the day. The danger of extreme nationalisms for democracy is thus also very real and deserves close empirical attention, as do the genuine shortfalls of "real-existing democracies" (Schmitter et al. 2011; see also Reuter 2015a) and their prevailing economic systems.

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My position on the substantiality of nationalism as a phenomenon is similar to Kapferer's, as quoted by Bošković. Nationalism, in its diverse forms, is indeed an empirical reality that deserves careful study, and never more so than today. Its constructedness should not deter us from this important task. Since all human relations are the sediment of human actions, all are in one sense constructed. But the generation of nationalist sentiment does require an upward projection of emotions from local experiences of identity onto a larger, more impersonal unit of belonging. This shift in part reflects the fact that family and local community life historically and psychologically preceded the experience of life within a nation, let alone a global community. Nationalism also has its own technologies of largely "mediated" communication and, of course, its own peculiar spectacles, rituals, and symbols, as does globalism. Globalism is the ultimate upscaling of sentiments of "identity" (Castells 2010).

Nationalism is based on perceptions of cultural similarity and a sense of having a shared history and future among members of a larger population. I prefer to use "perception" rather than "imagination" because the former's ambivalence in English nicely captures what I understand the substance of nationalism to be. On the one hand, "perceiving" can mean a sensory perception of what actually exists, such as shared institutions and shared cultural elements within a nation (not always but often coinciding with a nation-state) or ethnic group, and also shared treatment received as a nation from other nations. But, on the other hand, there can also be illusory constructions with insufficient or no factual basis, where commonalities are "perceived" to exist that do not actually exist, or not to the extent that is claimed. Apart from the extremes of vehement exaggeration and invention of commonalities or their utter denial, the politics of identity in their more moderate form are mostly about the degree to which actual commonalities are interpreted and evaluated, ranging from dismissal to celebration. Exaggerated assertions of national (or similar in-group) commonalities are particularly dangerous because they tend to go hand in hand with vehement denials of any commonalities with members of other groups, to the point of dehumanizing them. Such ideologies overshoot and fall short of any reasonable measure of actual cultural (or, for that matter, genetic) commonalities while at the same time falsely homogenizing insiders and dehumanizing outsiders.

Anthropology, in my opinion, has shown quite convincingly that all human beings share a common ground and origin and have much genuine cause to identify with global humanity. Anthropology also shows that cultural diversity exists (albeit in the absence of sharp boundaries), that cultural diversity matters, and that cultural diversity is of intrinsic beauty and adaptive value, as is diversity in nature as a whole. In this sense, anthropology is also a defender of the right to be different and of the value of diversity, which explains the discipline's sometimes questionable links to nationalism and nation building in various parts of the world, as Bošković rightly notes.

If recent tensions between the nationalist and globalist camps arise from differences in positioning, producing winners and losers, and if they also reflect the fact that genuine advantages are associated with diversity as well as with unity, it would seem that there is genuine scope for disagreement and certainly for debate. From a rational perspective, the extreme localist and extreme integrationist viewpoints are both incomplete, and a higher-order perspective is needed to resolve the issue. Anthropology can provide some assistance in finding such a higher perspective because this dynamic has been central to our discipline.

Some of my own research in Indonesia, for example, shows how local and national cultures respond to strong globalization pressures with concrete negative consequences for their autonomy and livelihoods. A range of localization strategies arises in response, with many common as well as some unique characteristics. At different scales, they can produce nationalism or an ethnic-minority localism that rejects the nation-state as much, or more, than it rejects globalization, let alone modernity. Localism is not the same as conservatism. Localization movements are about self-determination and seek to gain greater control of cultural and/or material resources (Reuter 1999, 2009; see also Tsing 2004). To a point, there is nothing wrong with such a desire for self-determination, and the right to be culturally different and free of external coercion is certainly a part of that.

I also gained some complementary experiences of integrationism within two global anthropology organizations that have been created new or been reformed significantly over the last fifteen years and in which I have been prominently involved, namely the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA) and the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES). The diversity of national traditions and communities of anthropologists is greatly valued and actively supported in these organizations (Reuter 2011, 2015b). At the same time, however, both also reflect a growing recognition among anthropologists that we have much to gain from greater global cooperation and mutual engagement in the spirit of a new “world anthropology” paradigm, which Bošković describes and to which he also has contributed elsewhere. Of course, as is true of cultural traditions generally, there has been much fruitful interchange and many well-known and consequential border crossings and knowledge transfers between national anthropology traditions, especially the European ones and their derivatives, and their many commonalities are observable among all anthropologists, even at a global scale. At the same time, there is no denying that until now the relationships between different anthropologies often have been marred by ignorance, inequality, and sometimes blatant disrespect toward more marginal anthropologies. World anthropology and its growing institutions thus strive for a positive balance between the respective merits and risks of localism and integrationism by proposing and enacting a rather unique and perhaps exemplary form of globalization.

A higher-order synthesis is sorely needed today, beyond the world of anthropology, if we wish to overcome the unproductive polarization that is currently poisoning public discourse in many countries. Unity without diversity is meaningless, because a unity based on sameness (the literal meaning of identity) has no communicative and rational potential. Diversity without unity, in turn, precludes the realization of its own rational potential by precluding communicative engagement. One side of the fallacy of extreme identity politics at any scale is the ill-advised desire to eradicate difference until interlocutors have nothing left to say to one another, while the other fallacy is to radicalize difference and refuse communication with others who clearly do have different things to say. The only rational approach is a dynamic unity in diversity that, in my view, has always been implicit in the anthropological project.

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