

# Globalization's Legitimacy Deficit and the Reassertion of Nationalism

Written by Aviel Roshwald

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/02/28/globalizations-legitimacy-deficit-and-the-reassertion-of-nationalism/>

AVIEL ROSHWALD, FEB 28 2017

It was Edmund Morgan who pointed out that all political systems rest on fictions, whose broad acceptance constitutes the key element of that most elusive yet essential of qualities in any structure of governance: legitimacy (see Edmund S. Morgan's *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America*). The appeal to a shared national identity has been a core element in the creation of plausible fictions of popular sovereignty—one of the formative features of political legitimacy in modern history. Be it for good or for ill, in the course of the 18th-20th centuries, the Euro-Atlantic paradigm of the nation-state became the planet's dominant model of governance. Do the norms and practices associated with late-20<sup>th</sup> and early-21<sup>st</sup>-century globalization rest on equally sustainable fictions? Possibly not.

One criterion of a political system's legitimacy is its ability to retain public acquiescence in the face of its own inconsistencies and contradictions, its shortcomings and setbacks. The current global wave of chauvinistic backlash and retrenchment, of which Brexit represents but one of many examples, suggests that the institutions and policies of economic and cultural globalization are ill-adapted to survive prolonged or acute frustrations and disappointments. To take the most obvious illustration, as long as European integration was associated with post-war reconstruction, prosperity, and the rise of an American-style consumer economy, the gradual concessions of national sovereignty that it entailed seemed a price worth paying. The Europeanist project was able to muddle through the stagnation precipitated by the oil crises of the 1970s thanks in part to continued West European ideological solidarity in the final decades of the Cold War and in part perhaps to the still living memory of the horrors of militant nationalism during the Second World War. Moreover, the chronic subordination of democratic purism to technocratic hegemony at both the national and supranational levels was offset by gestures and policies appealing to national sentiment and emblematic of popular sovereignty and collective self-determination, as in De Gaulle's anti-American posturing or West German governments' outreach to East Germany (from Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* to Helmut Kohl's national reunification).

As the European Economic Community evolved into the European Community and then the European Union, with a common currency zone at its core, national sovereignty was ever more visibly undercut even as Europe and the world raced over a cliff into the Great Recession. The halting and uneven global recovery since 2008 has been more than offset in the public mind by the trials and tribulations of terrorist mass killings and crises of immigration. And the steady fading of memories of World War II combined with the social-democratic and liberal-democratic Left's abandonment of its traditional working-class constituencies on both sides of the Atlantic has opened up enticing new opportunities for revived forms of right-wing, nationalist and populist extremism (on the social-democratic deficit, see Cas Mudde's "Europe's Populist Surge: A Long Time in the Making").

What this suggests is that the fictions on which the liberal-internationalist and technocratic-integrationist versions of globalization rest are too brittle to serve as viable, long-term sources of legitimacy in the face of the hierarchies, inequities, and disruptive changes that inhere in human history and that are perceived as being exacerbated by increasingly porous political, economic, and cultural borders. Those fictions' greatest vulnerability is that their core element is an all too readily falsifiable promise: that of material improvement to people's lives. To be sure, nationalist movements have also always played on the hope for a better life. But successful versions of nationalism are able to frame this promise in collective terms, such that chronic failures to fulfill individual expectations may be offset by a

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sense that the nation as a whole—in whose fate the individual has an integral stake—is prospering. Alternatively, if the nation as a whole is obviously not doing well, the blame can be placed at the feet of “alien” forces (be they internal or external). A ruthless national government can provoke conflicts that shift the criterion of success from the realm of material well-being to that of collective dignity, in whose name almost any sacrifice can be justified. The sense of “we-ness” that successful nationalist projects cultivate thus lends itself to the deployment of an almost infinite array of compensatory and diversionary mechanisms in the face of economic and political failure and injustice. Supranational modes of governance, by contrast, are much more vulnerable to a sudden collapse of public support the moment they visibly fail to fulfill their own promises of peace and prosperity.

Nationalism and the nation-state have been associated with a great deal of violence, injustice, and instability in world history. Yet an unconditional embrace of all that is transnational and global may only unleash chauvinistic backlashes. Politically progressive movements and governments place their causes in peril when they abandon the nationalist field for right-wing movements to monopolize. Of course, in times of crisis, reactionary and authoritarian movements will always enjoy the inherent advantage of framing problems and their purported solutions in simplistic, reductionist, and xenophobic terms that many voters find more emotionally satisfying than the complex analyses of more responsible politicians and commentators. But this does not mean that the latter should abandon the effort to thread the political and ethical needle: to articulate visions of liberal (and/or social-democratic) nationalism (cf Yael Tamir's *Liberal Nationalism*, and David Miller's *On Nationality*) that link the crucial fiction of bounded collective identity to values and modes of conduct that are worthy of humanity.

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## About the author:

**Aviel Roshwald** is Professor of History at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. He is the author of the following books: *The Endurance of Nationalism: Ancient Roots and Modern Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914-1923* (London: Routledge, 2001); *Estranged Bedfellows: Britain and France in the Middle East during the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). He is also the co-editor, with Richard Stites, of *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).