# Building a Better Nationalism

## The Nation's Place in a Globalized World

*Yael Tamir*

*The Virtue of Nationalism*
BY YORAM HAZONY. Basic Books, 2018, 304 pp.

At a rally in Texas last October, U.S. President Donald Trump was delivering his familiar "America first" message, complaining about "corrupt, power-hungry globalists," when he tried out a new line: "You know, they have a word—it sort of became old-fashioned—it's called, 'a nationalist.' And I say, 'Really, we're not supposed to use that word,'" he added, grinning. "You know what I am? I'm a nationalist, OK? I'm a nationalist." As the crowd cheered, "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" Trump nodded. "'Nationalist': nothing wrong with it. Use that word!"

As Trump correctly noted, in recent decades, "that word," and all it suggests, has fallen out of favor. For most political thinkers and elites in the developed West, nationalism is a dangerous, divisive, illiberal impulse that should be treated with skepticism or even outright disdain.

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Yes, nationalism helped give rise to the modern state system, served as a liberating force in anticolonial independence struggles, and fueled anti-Soviet sentiment during the Cold War. But surely, the thinking went, nationalism was a phase that the rich democracies of the world had outgrown—and in those places where it still thrived, it posed more problems than solutions.

Today, however, many elite assumptions about politics have come under assault, including those about nationalism. A small but increasingly vocal group of American and European thinkers have begun to mount defenses of nationalism—some modest, others more full-throated. One of the most enthusiastic advocates is Yoram Hazony, an Israeli philosopher and political theorist. His latest book, *The Virtue of Nationalism*, has brought him to prominence in some American conservative political circles. In it, he presents a spirited defense of nationalism and the nation-state. Although he does not ignore nationalism's flaws, he rightly contends that Western intellectuals have been too quick to dismiss it and that the topic deserves a more balanced and nuanced analysis than what the academy has offered in recent years.

Hazony, however, goes beyond merely defending nationalism. He also launches a fierce attack on contemporary liberalism and its political manifestations, particularly the EU and the American-led "globalist" world order that emerged in the wake of the Cold War, both of which Hazony derides as "imperialist projects." Nationalism, he complains, has been unfairly blamed for encouraging hatred and bigotry, even though "liberal-imperialist political ideals have

*Patriot games: an air show with the French Aerobatic Patrol, Marseille, France, July 2013*

SIMON LAMBERT / HAYTHAM-REA / REDUX

become among the most powerful agents fomenting intolerance and hate in the Western world today." Juxtaposing nationalism and liberal imperialism, Hazony accuses liberals of trying to impose a uniform set of values on nation-states, aiming to displace the authentic, "particular" views and beliefs held in those places.

In reality, few liberals endeavor to establish global governance or oppress illiberal communities and cultures. Rather, they seek a world order of international institutions, multilateral cooperation, free markets, free trade, and the free movement of people. Hazony's insistence that this agenda represents an imperialist assault on nations ignores the fact that liberal and nationalist values often interact. More precisely, modern liberalism arose from national political frameworks. The modern nation-state Hazony is so eager to defend is, in fact, a product of the marriage of liberal democratic and nationalist values. The fact that liberalism and nationalism don't tend to advertise their theoretical interdependence should not prevent one from acknowledging their commonalities and understanding their inherent bonds.

## LIBERAL OR IMPERIAL?

Hazony begins by making a moral and political case in favor of the nation-state. A nation, he writes, is constituted of "a number of tribes with a common language or religion, and a past history of acting as a body." A nation offers the best, most legitimate basis for a state, he argues, because it allows for the realization of the human aspiration to achieve self-rule and collective freedom in the fullest and most satisfactory way. Nation-states represent durable political unions that confer meaning on their individual members, celebrating and giving voice to what Hazony calls "the particular"

(in contrast to the universal). Giving such nations the ability to govern themselves promotes a healthy competition that inspires them to excel, opening up new opportunities for fellow nationals while allowing the international community of nation-states to prosper.

In setting up this analysis, Hazony is clear and persuasive. Yet he muddies the water in two ways. First, he focuses too often on Jewish thinking and history and relies too heavily on Israel and Zionism as the primary example of nationalism under assault by imperialist liberals. This makes what should be a broad argument feel rather narrow and specific. (It is telling, and regrettable, that a book extolling nationalism barely mentions the group that today clamors most loudly for a nation-state of its own: the Palestinians.)

Things get muddier still when Hazony argues that the world faces a stark choice between two moral and political options: the nation-state, which "inculcates an aversion to adventures of conquest in distant lands," and the empire, which seeks "to bring the world under a single authority and a single doctrine." Those reductive, incomplete definitions allow Hazony to rewrite the past and miscast the present.

Imperialism, he notes, produced the greatest destroyers the earth has known, "with moderns such as Napoleon, Hitler and Stalin not least among them." Hazony is right that many empires have been driven by universal ideologies (fascism, communism, and liberalism alike) that turned oppressive. Yet he ignores the vast and often brutal imperial and colonial enterprises launched by nation-states, such as Belgium, England, Portugal, and Spain. This leaves the reader with the odd idea that, by their very nature, nation-states are bound to live happily within their borders, never looking to expand or conquer. If that were true, the reputation of nationalism would be much easier to defend.

Hazony confuses (or purposely conflates) the liberal belief in moral universalism and internationalism with a desire to erect political empires. To him, those who call themselves "liberal internationalists"—advocates of international law and institutions and humanitarian intervention—are in fact "liberal imperialists." Just like the tyrants who sought to rule the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, today's imperialists, he contends, are universalists who harbor a hatred for the particular and seek "to coerce the dissenters—dissenting individuals and dissenting nations—making them conform to the universal theory by force, for their own good."

This is a straw man. There are no contemporary liberal political movements or institutions seeking the kind of global domination Hazony describes. No liberal empires wish to coerce, govern, and oppress dissenters the world over. Neither the U.S. hegemony that has defined the post–Cold War period nor the liberal international order that Washington has backed can be honestly described as imperial—and both are currently flagging, anyhow. The EU has never tried to extend its rule beyond Europe and is presently fighting for its survival. If there are any imperialists around, they are more likely to be found in corporate headquarters in Silicon Valley or on Wall Street than in Washington or Brussels, and the global dominance they seek is commercial rather than political.

In reality, the nation-state has no serious institutional competitors. International organizations are weak and ineffective; international corporations are powerful and effective but have no desire to spend their energy on governing. The struggle that Hazony describes between noble nationalists and hate-filled imperialists is largely a fantasy. What does exist is a tension between nationalism and neoliberal globalism. Nationalism, in this context, is a theory not just about self-rule but also about the right (and perhaps the duty) of states to intervene in the market in order to defend their citizens and control the malignant effects of hyperglobalism: bringing jobs back home, supporting domestic production, limiting immigration, and raising tariffs. Such policies collide with liberal beliefs in the primacy of free trade and the free movement of people. The real debate between nationalists and globalists is less about identity than about economics.

Until recently, this debate seemed to have been settled in favor of globalism. But recently, national preferences have exploded into full view. The anger over the economic and social outcomes of neoliberal globalism (growing inequality, rapid cultural change) has stirred a populist backlash, some of which has taken on a nationalist bent. Consequently, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are competing for popular support by claiming to represent "the people" and by blaming elites for adopting self-serving policies.

Critics accuse these newly minted nationalists of racism and nativism and of grounding their appeals in fears of the other. One can certainly find ample evidence of bigotry among those now aligning themselves with nationalist sentiment. Witness, for example, the open embrace of anti-Muslim rhetoric by the far-right UK Independence Party; the new wave of anti-Semitism among French nationalists; and the rebirth of "blood and soil" nationalism in the United States, where white nationalist groups have combined populist grievances with racist and anti-Semitic appeals.

Yet not all nationalists are bigots. Many simply feel ill served by globetrotting, cosmopolitan elites who have more in common with elites elsewhere than with their fellow citizens. People hunger for leaders and policymakers committed to serving and protecting their own, giving preference and offering better opportunities to the neediest among them rather than the neediest elsewhere. This is what many American voters hear when Trump cries, "America first!" and it makes them feel safe.

The nationalist resurgence is not solely a right-wing phenomenon. Progressive and left-wing leaders and voters are becoming more openly comfortable with policies that have a distinctly nationalist flavor. This has led to some surprising alliances, such as the one between Trump's lead trade negotiator, Robert Lighthizer, a career Republican policy hand who spent time as a lobbyist pushing for lower taxes and who advocates pursuing a hard line against China, and Sherrod Brown, the progressive Democratic senator from Ohio and a possible 2020 presidential contender, who is a darling of unions and labor rights activists.

But few liberals seem ready to embrace the term "nationalist." Are there any alternatives? Last November, during a ceremony in Paris to mark the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I,

French President Emmanuel Macron tried to offer one, drawing a sharp distinction between nationalism and patriotism. "Patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism," he argued. "By saying, 'Our interests first. Who cares about the others?' we erase what a nation holds dearest, what gives it life, what makes it great, and what is essential: its moral values." But if patriotism does not involve putting the interests of one's own country over the interests of others, what does it involve? Macron argued that French patriotism stems from a "vision of France as a generous nation, of France as a project, of France as the bearer of universal values." But that could just as easily serve as a definition of traditional French nationalism. Far from demonstrating an unequivocal contrast between nationalism and patriotism, Macron managed only to demonstrate that there is no clear, useful distinction between the two concepts.

## A KINDER, GENTLER NATIONALISM

The kind of semantic acrobatics Macron performed would be unnecessary if he and other liberals were willing to openly embrace some forms of nationalism. After all, it is only natural for political leaders to look at global issues from a national perspective and to put their own countries' interests first. Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel endorse a pro-EU position as they identify their countries' national interests with membership in the union and with a measured degree of regional and global collaboration. The government of British Prime Minister Theresa May holds the opposite view and therefore supports Brexit. Slogans aside, Trump makes similar calculations, operating from a belief that the United States benefits less than it should from those global agreements he wants to renegotiate. And on the other side of the globe, Chinese President Xi Jinping has developed the One Belt, One Road initiative, which seeks to tie together vast swaths of the Eastern Hemisphere in a Chinese-dominated network of infrastructure and supply chains: a nationalist project with a globalist twist.

Regardless of Hazony's claims, the main struggle in today's international politics is not between nationalists and imperialists but between different approaches to balancing national interests with the demands of a globalized economy. When liberals indiscriminately attack all forms of nationalism, they fuel an unnecessary ideological struggle—one that they are currently losing. If liberalism is to regain power, it needs to develop its own form of nationalism, one that reassures citizens that their leaders work for them and put their well-being first.

For too long, the least well-off citizens of powerful states have paid the price of globalism. Their demand that leaders protect their interests is just and timely. One need not embrace Trump's crude, zero-sum worldview to believe that the wealth of nations should be produced and distributed as part of a relatively narrow social contract among particular individuals. Liberals should not promote national egoism but support policies that will help make their fellow citizens feel connected and committed to a worthy and meaningful community. Liberalism and nationalism are not mutually exclusive; they can and should go hand in hand.