

JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

April 2017, Volume 28, Number 2 \$14.00



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Ghia Nodia

THE END OF THE POSTNATIONAL ILLUSION

Ghia Nodia

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Suddenly, with Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, nationalism is back at the center of political debate. Yet despite its growing practical import, the issue of nationalism still has not received the kind of theoretical reappraisal that it merits. Such a reappraisal would need to consider not only nationalism's place in today's world, but also the broader role that it has played in the development of modernity. Yet despite nationalism's status as one of the most potent forces of modern times, mainstream social science has never seen it as a central problem or even paid it much attention.

This has always puzzled me. One obvious explanation is that social scientists see nationalism as a passing thing, perhaps crucial in some times and places but, in the grand scheme of things, just a moment in history. It is explicitly said or tacitly assumed that under pressure from the general forces of progress and development, nationalism will decline or even wither away altogether.¹ If that is true, nationalism is not worth focusing on too much.

This implies that general progress will move us into a future where nations and nationalism will become insignificant or at least far less significant than they have been and still are. Importantly, this view permeates not only social science, but liberal opinion around the globe as well.² Although some specialists have challenged the assumption that nationalism is transient, mainstream social science has remained largely unmoved, and still expects nationalism to go away.

THE SEYMOUR MARTIN LIPSET LECTURE ON DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD

Ghia Nodia delivered the thirteenth annual Seymour Martin Lipset Lecture on Democracy in the World on 16 November 2016 at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C., and on 19 January 2017 at the Centre for International Studies at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto. The title of his lecture was “The Crisis of Postnationalism.”

Seymour Martin Lipset, who passed away at the end of 2006, was one of the most influential social scientists and scholars of democracy of the past half-century. A frequent contributor to the *Journal of Democracy* and a founding member of its Editorial Board, Lipset taught at Columbia, the University of California–Berkeley, Harvard, Stanford, and George Mason University. He was the author of numerous important books, including *Political Man*, *The First New Nation*, *The Politics of Unreason*, and *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. He was the only person ever to have served as president of both the American Political Science Association (1979–80) and the American Sociological Association (1992–93).

Lipset’s work covered a wide range of topics: the social conditions of democracy, including economic development and political culture; the origins of socialism, fascism, revolution, protest, prejudice, and extremism; class conflict, structure, and mobility; social cleavages, party systems, and voter alignments; and public opinion and public confidence in institutions. Lipset was a pioneer in the study of comparative politics, and no comparison featured as prominently in his work as that between the two great democracies of North America. Thanks to his insightful analysis of Canada in comparison with the United States, most fully elaborated in *Continental Divide* (1990), he has been dubbed the “Tocqueville of Canada.”

The Lipset Lecture is cosponsored by the National Endowment for Democracy and the Munk School, with financial support this year from Johns Hopkins University Press, the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University, the Canadian Embassy in Washington, and the Canadian Donner Foundation. To view videos of the Lipset Lecture from this and past years, please visit www.ned.org/events/seymour-martin-lipset-lecture-series.

Today, however, it is much harder to keep such an expectation alive. Some may wish to retain it on normative grounds, but the events of the last several years in Europe and the United States reveal the indefensibility of anything claiming to be a *scientific prediction* that a postnational future awaits us. If the expectation has turned out

to be wrong, then we must revisit the general assumptions on which it stands.

This, I would note, is not merely a matter for social scientists. On the contrary, the problem of nationalism is bound up with what various people call the recession, decline, backsliding, or crisis of liberal democracy. There is an increasing recognition that this is what is happening in the world now, and it concerns all kinds of regimes: authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states, relatively new democracies, and well-established ones. At present, analysts are mostly describing the phenomenon rather than building theories to explain it. Yet there is a strong perception that the global resurgence of nationalism and the global decline of democracy have something to do with each other. What then, we must ask, is the relationship between democracy and nationalism? The very first essay that I wrote for the *Journal of Democracy*, about a quarter-century ago, dealt with this topic.³ It remains current, but much has changed since then as well, so a fresh consideration is warranted.

Force for Modernization or Sign of Backwardness?

Only within the general context of modern development can the nature of nations and nationalism be understood. Although Seymour Martin Lipset did not focus heavily on nationalism outside the United States, he remains a prominent influence on our understanding of what “modernity” and “modernization” mean. This makes the Lipset Lecture an especially appropriate forum for discussing nationalism, democracy, and modernity.

Let us start by observing that virtually all scholars who write about nationalism find it to be an exclusively modern phenomenon. The French Revolution is the most widely accepted landmark: Nationalism emerged either shortly before it, or after (and as a result of) it. Before that, there were human collectivities based on the attachments of their members, but most scholars think that the similarities of these attachments to nationalism are superficial and misleading.

The second and related assumption shared by almost all scholars is that nations and nationalism are *constructed*. This means that nationalism as a doctrine, and as the emotional attachment to one’s nation that is typical among modern individuals, is not inborn or given, but instead emerges owing to human agency, historical forces, or the course of societal development. Thus for scholars of nationalism the key intellectual task is to determine precisely what causes the “construction” of nations and nationalism, and how. On these topics, authors vary significantly.

The underlying view of nations and nationalism as having been built defines itself in opposition to other assumptions that are typically labeled “primordialism” (as opposed to “modernism”) and “essentialism”

(as opposed to “constructivism”). To be a primordialist or essentialist is to hold the view that humanity has always been divided into units that we call “nations,” and that they are natural objects, “givens” that we can study as parts of objective reality.

Here lies a paradox. As I said, virtually all scholars who study nationalism professionally (at least in the West) believe that nations are modern and constructed. Who then are the “primordialists” or “essentialists,” and what is the point of fighting them? Why is it that most books or dissertations on nationalism begin by criticizing and rejecting primordialism and essentialism even though no mainstream academics hold those views? The most probable answer is that while scholars are usually modernists and constructivists, people who are not trained in the social sciences tend to be primordialists or essentialists. In other words, there is a huge gap between how social scientists (or people under their influence) see nations and nationalism, and how everybody else does. To be sure, scientific views diverge from those of regular people on many subjects, but here we are dealing with something that is close to the hearts of many citizens and has a great role in contemporary politics. Differing attitudes toward “nations” figure in the divide between elite liberal opinion and the views of ordinary people, who greatly outnumber those whose views draw on social science.

The modernity of nations confronts us with yet another paradox. We tend to believe that modernity is about progress and development.⁴ If nations are modern, should not their emergence have a progressive quality? But nationalism is usually considered bad and dangerous—something to be overcome, not celebrated. How can that attitude be reconciled with a recognition of nationalism’s modernity?

First, we should remember that things have not always been this way. In the nineteenth century, most nationalists were also liberals. Liberals fought the conservative, established forces of throne, altar, and aristocracy. Nationalism was the liberals’ ally, for nationalism moved the masses to turn against the *ancien régime* in the name of the people and their hopes of achieving self-government. Not all liberals welcomed nationalism—some always felt ambivalent about any tendency to identify “the masses” with “the people”—but being both liberal and nationalist was nonetheless a fairly typical combination.

The American Revolution is considered one of the most progressive events in world history, but few highlight that it was also a nationalist revolution that created what Lipset called “the first new nation.”⁵ He did not mean that it was new in the sense of the “New World”—that is, something created by immigration from the “Old World” of Europe. Instead, he meant that the United States was the first modern country founded by means of separation from a colonial empire. Supporters of American independence were called “patriots”: Today, the word patriot is still used to describe a “civic” (as opposed to an “ethnic”) nationalist.

This also makes the American Revolution different from many subsequent nationalist movements. It was not about ethnocultural differences between the Americans and the British, and political rather than cultural considerations explicitly underwrote the separation. Yet even if American nationalism was less ethnic,⁶ it was still a kind of nationalism. This recognition is what allowed Lipset to hope that lessons from the American founding could be useful to the new countries that had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of postcolonial movements that had also mixed ideas of democracy and liberation with nationalism as a mobilizing force.

If nationalism was considered a force for progress and liberation for such a long time—from nineteenth-century Europe through the post-1945 Third World—how did the negative view of it come to predominate? The two world wars were the turning point. Their carnage made nationalism a dirty word. In their wake, the vision of a postnational world became widely seen as not only desirable, but feasible.⁷ The rise and disastrous fall of Fascism and Nazism dramatically discredited nationalism and legitimized the European Union.

How can social theory make sense of these wild swings in attitudes toward nationalism—from source of liberation to embodiment of evil destined for history's ash heap? The assumption (sometimes implicit) in most theories of nationalism is that it belongs to early modernization and therefore is bound, as development advances, to outgrow its utility and become marginal or even (in the Marxist view) vanish altogether. It is like a common childhood fever that is easy to catch, but which one passes through and leaves behind.

This understanding allows for a happy congruence between normative and theoretical views. Normatively, nationalism is considered bad because it is antiliberal, opposes individual rights, is hostile to minorities, generally opposes diversity, and so on. But luckily, nationalism is also historically doomed because history will make it redundant. It is this assumption of happy congruence that we must now give up.

Postnationalism and Its Demise

In the wake of the Second World War, a consensus formed around the notion that the postnational future was not only desirable but also forthcoming. The EU was deliberately designed to gradually weaken nation-states and make them less relevant, eventually leading to some kind of federal Europe. Moreover, while being in fact a regional organization, the EU was also widely presumed to be a model for the world. After all, in modern times, it was Europe that provided models of development for the rest of the planet. The whole world or at least its most developed part was supposed to gradually move in that direction, even though different countries and regions might choose somewhat different routes.

The post-1945 world was also the world of the Cold War. Importantly, the consensus view of the future as postnational embraced not only the liberal West, but its geopolitical rival, the communist world, as well. Liberals and communists disagreed about many things, but they agreed that nationalism was both pernicious and doomed. Whether the hoped-for goal was universal liberalism, universal communism, or a “third way” somehow bringing the two together, the fate of nations was not an important part of the debate. Postnationalists drew confidence from this: If both sides of the Cold War agreed on something, it had to be true.

Yet before long, nationalism began to reassert itself. Its resurgence came in three waves. The first took the form of Third World movements against colonialism and for “national liberation.” These led to a reluctant recognition that nationalism was still important, and stimulated more scholarly writing, including the important books by Ernest Gellner and others that dominate the study of nationalism to this day.⁸ The assumption of nationalism’s transience survived, however, for were not the newly liberated colonies in the Third World still in the early stages of modernization? If Europe on its flight to high-level development had left behind the encumbering baggage of nationalism, the Third World would eventually do so as well.

The second wave of the nationalist resurgence came with communism’s fall. Both students of communism and communists themselves had seen nationalism as trivial. Few Western scholars of the communist world showed any interest in the “nationalities question.” Thus the huge role that nationalism played in toppling communism and breaking up the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia took Western academics and policy makers by surprise. Those who led anticommunist movements may have invoked liberal-democratic principles in order to delegitimize communist dictators, but in many countries nationalism was the strongest force mobilizing the masses against communism. Multinational communist states were the scene of especially potent nationalist appeals. As discomfited Polish liberal Adam Michnik unhappily quipped, “Nationalism is the last stage of communism.”⁹

If the theories about nationalism were right, how had it made this apparent comeback? Western liberals rejected communism for being repressive, but saw it as a force for modernization. Unlike Third World countries, communist countries were presumed to be modern or developed; moreover, they were fighting against nationalism and appeared to be on the way to the postnational condition.

Even communism’s demise failed to lead to any fundamental reexamination of beliefs about nationalism. Communism had turned out to be a false road to modernity anyway, so its paradoxical relations with nationalism could be written off as a quirk. Belatedly, scholars learned that Soviet and Yugoslav nationality policies had actually boosted rather

than sapped nationalism.¹⁰ But perhaps this was owing to the vagaries of decisions made by Stalin (and his Yugoslav copycats) rather than anything substantive. With nationalism having made a temporary reappearance to help get communism out of the way, the postcommunist countries were expected to become “normal” and get down to the business of embracing democracy and then postnationalism. Did not almost all of them want to join the EU?

No such contingent factors, however, can explain away the third wave of nationalism’s global resurgence, the one that we are experiencing now. Brexit, which is so far its most salient expression, was an especially heavy blow because Britain is not some developing country or even a new democracy. On the contrary, it is arguably the very cradle of modernity in general, and of modern democracy in particular. The English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution that defeated royal absolutism and limited monarchical power; the rise of Parliament and the common law; the Industrial Revolution—these crucial developments in the rise of the modern world all belong to the history of Britain. Yet it was the United Kingdom whose voters abandoned the “postmodern” paradigm of the EU.

Then came the unexpected and, for many, shocking results of the U.S. presidential election. Trump’s win is broadly seen as yet another victory for nationalism: Presumably, his slogans of “America first” and “Make America Great Again” worked well. And this happened in the world’s most powerful democracy. Nationalism, moreover, is on the rise in almost all Western countries. The National Front’s Marine Le Pen is a credible contender for the presidency of France.

The story of modernity, in its political dimension at least, is largely defined by the English, American, and French revolutions. For a long time, “progress” was a tale whose meaning hinged on those countries. Whether by imposition or example, Britain, the United States, and France spread the lessons of development and showed what it was to be modern. If these three countries, among many others, are now exposing the hollowness of any assumption that nationalism must wane in the developed world, it is hard to defend that supposition at all. Some of us may still believe that a postnational future would be preferable, but we can no longer maintain the illusion that the world is actually headed in that direction.

What Did We Get Wrong?

Where did our thinking about nationalism go awry? Why did we ever think that nations and nationalism would inevitably decline? The most popular argument concerned economics: The trend toward economic globalization was supposed to make nation-states and nationalism obsolete and redundant. Although the concept of “globalization” sounds re-

cent, the actual argument is much older. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels put it very well back in 1848 in their *Communist Manifesto*:

National differences and antagonism between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.¹¹

A century and a half later, the economic liberals and free-market advocates of the 1990s were on the same page as Marx and Engels in predicting that the unstoppable forces of economic globalization would spell “the end of the nation-state.”¹²

In fact, globalization is real and powerful and it treats nations as impediments, so what exactly is wrong with this argument? In a nutshell, it is incorrect because economic determinism is incorrect. The economy is important, but it cannot explain everything. It is not always “the economy, stupid,” despite what some political consultants like to say. And even if it *is* the economy, economic development itself needs to be explained. There is a growing body of scholarly literature that tries to ascertain why some countries are economically developed and others still poor; increasingly, institutions come up as the most important factor.¹³ This decidedly, though not exclusively, includes political institutions. (Then we might ask why some countries have better institutions than others, but that is another topic for another time.) The key point is that explanations based on a single overarching factor such as economic development may look attractive to a social scientist, but they are misleading.

Another popular argument making the case that nationalism must decline springs from the idea that human nature is malleable. The Enlightenment spread a view of human beings as primarily rational creatures. With development and education, we should grow ever more reasonable. The chief obstacle to reason’s advance is “prejudice,” which originally was a polite way of saying religion. It was presumed that development and education would eventually defeat religion, or at least marginalize it by driving it out of the public sphere. There is an important difference between religion and nationalism because the former is obviously premodern, while nations, as we saw, are exclusively modern. Despite that, in this context attitudes toward religion and toward nationalism resemble each other: Neither being a nationalist nor being religious, so the argument goes, has much to do with rationality. Why should a rational individual be attached to some primordial sentiment based on the accident of birth? Why should I be committed to “my” nation rather than to any other? Why should I risk dying for this nation while fighting others? This fails the rigorous test of rationality. Therefore, as individuals become more enlightened and rational, they will stop being nationalists.

But neither religiosity nor nationalism has disappeared. The former

has declined to some extent, especially in more developed parts of the world such as Europe, but it continues to be rather important, and in some parts of the world its importance is rising rather than falling. Nationalism, as we have seen, displays similar features.

The “forces of modernity” could not have created modern nations unless there had been something there for them to act on, some ground in history on the one hand and human nature on the other.

So, what did we get wrong? Are we not rational creatures? Did the Enlightenment not really change the world? Should we give up on its legacy? No, there is no need to go that far. I am very far from being a proponent of “postmodernist” (that is, post-Enlightenment) thinking. The Enlightenment itself, however, can be understood in different ways. Our perception of it is too much defined

by the ideas of the eighteenth-century French *philosophes*. Theirs is not the only way to respect progress and rationality; one can do that without enforcing too strict an opposition between reason and anything that looks like “prejudice.”

The Scottish (and, more broadly, the British) version of the Enlightenment suggests a more nuanced approach that allows for development based on the spread of education, support for individual freedom, and toleration of differences, but without rejecting religion or respect for cultural traditions.¹⁴ The Scotsman David Hume was a great Enlightenment thinker and a friend of progress, but he also said this scandalous thing about reason: “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”¹⁵ Contrary to what one might think, this does not imply a celebration of irrational instincts, or of any kind of “prejudice,” but allows for a more realistic understanding of the place of rationality within the structure of human nature.

The other general supposition that underpins the expectation of the coming decline of nations is the idea that human nature itself is largely constructed. Again, I will refer to Marx, who believed that there is no such thing as “human nature,” but only the “ensemble of social relations.”¹⁶ We are all shaped by “social forces.” Some combination of these has made us nationalists, but some other combination will “cure” us of that, as well as of any tendency to be religious, or even (so Marx believed) to be selfish. Humanity is plastic, the thinking runs. It can be made over, and made better. This Marxian vision is the wellspring of the social constructivism that has become so influential in the social science of our day. The outright and rigid rejection of anything that even remotely smacks of “primordialism” or “essentialism” comes from this source.

This approach, however, with its suggestion that the human mind is

a “blank slate” whose content is determined by the social environment, is not only the *bête noire* of some conservative-leaning philosophers. It also strongly contradicts findings of contemporary evolutionary biology and psychology. Drawing on these sciences, Steven Pinker argues that we have both “inner demons” and “better angels” that are part of our nature.¹⁷

Our nature is not a blank slate, but this in no way precludes the possibility of progress in matters human. Civilization’s advance has dramatically changed our lives and has made them much better in many ways, including especially in the areas of material well-being and violence reduction. It is right to celebrate the achievements realized so far, and to aspire for more. But our inner demons as well as our better angels are still there, and they cannot be eliminated by redesigned political institutions or consciousness-raising campaigns. Unless we take this into account, our well-meaning social designs will produce some very undesirable or unexpected results, if not create new monsters (people who have lived under communism are especially well acquainted with the latter).

This should prompt us to reappraise constructivism’s account of nationalism with a critical eye. When does constructivism stop being a useful tool and become a rigid dogma? Gellner has left us a concise expression of radical constructivism in his fascinating short essay asking, “Do nations have navels?”¹⁸ He argues that the creation of nations in modern times may be likened to God’s creation of the world: They are both *ex nihilo*, that is, created out of nothing. Adam had no navel. Nations are created by economic development, the spread of literacy, and the like; they require no preconditions from premodern times. Some modern nations such as the French, Jewish, or Russian peoples may have links to a premodern past, but that is irrelevant.

Other scholars such as John Armstrong and Anthony Smith are what I would call moderate constructivists (in the literature, they are usually referred to as “ethno-symbolists”). They see some sort of continuity between premodern ethnic collectivities and attachments to them on the one hand, and modern nations and nationalisms on the other.¹⁹ These authors are still modernists and constructivists. They regard nations as modern phenomena, for never before have there been such large, fairly stable mass collectivities that (crucially) trace the legitimacy of the political order to that order’s service to a nation. That is a modern idea indeed.

Yet people have always lived in communities that they believed were based on common descent as well as a common language, religion, and set of customs. The sense of belonging to such communities was important to them. At all times of which we know, there has existed a sense of boundary based on the above features: Here are “our people,” and there are “other people.”²⁰ This does not mean that “others” are always to be hated or feared, though quite often they are.

Because this sense of belonging and boundaries has been there as far as historical studies can reach, we may assume that it has something to do with human nature. But we also must recognize (for we are still “constructivists” to a degree) that, over the course of history, all kinds of things have changed dramatically. This includes the sizes and composition of groups, the boundaries between them, specific markers such as language or religion, and indeed the importance that people attach to all the foregoing. These changes have tended to depend on historical contingencies. But the “forces of modernity” could not have created modern nations unless there had been something there for them to act on, some ground in history on the one hand and human nature on the other. Here we see the outlines of a modernist but more nuanced understanding of nationalism.

Democracy’s Shadow

As I noted at the outset, the resurgence of nationalism resonates with the issue of democratic decline. At the very minimum, we have lost our sense of optimism about the global advance of democracy, and many people have begun to fear that democracy is now in danger even in its historic strongholds, Western Europe and the United States.²¹ What are the actual indicators of this decline, especially among consolidated democracies? When the *Journal of Democracy* invited several authors to analyze this trend in Continental Europe, it prefaced the articles with a two-page introduction in which the editors listed five chief challenges to liberal democracy, namely, “populism, nationalism, nativism, illiberalism, and xenophobia.”²² Two of those five terms, nativism and xenophobia, describe different aspects of nationalism (especially when this term is used in a pejorative sense), while “illiberalism” is an umbrella term that summarizes all four of the other terms on the list. Democracy’s crisis today is the crisis of a patient hit by pathogens (populism and nationalism) against which no proper antibiotics are on hand.

I do not have any antibiotic to propose, but I want to ask a question: Should we treat these genuinely disturbing trends as infections from outside, or rather as expressions of problems that inhere in democracy as such? To use social-science terminology, are we dealing with phenomena that are exogenous or endogenous to democracy? The first instinct of many analysts is to favor the former answer. Usually they begin by citing economic globalization; somehow it has turned out that economic globalization is not so good for advanced capitalist countries, or at least for significant segments of their populations. Investment and jobs go to low-wage and high-growth economies such as China’s and India’s, while people in the United States and Western Europe are left to struggle with underemployment, unemployment, or (at best) stagnating

real wages. These people consider themselves losers from globalization and turn against both the foreigners who steal their jobs and their own cosmopolitan establishment, which is selling them out. This is the most

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popular way of explaining Brexit, the recent U.S. elections, and the rise of nationalist or populist parties in Europe.

The other exogenous factor often cited alongside globalization is the tragic turmoil in the Middle East that has “spun off” radical Islamist terror and a large influx of Muslim refugees into the developed countries of Europe and North America. This has led to a xenophobic and nativist backlash

against immigrants, of which nationalist or populist parties have been able to take advantage.

Both explanations make a lot of sense, but there will always be economic difficulties and security-related complications: Is not democracy supposed to be resilient when faced with such challenges? While trigger factors may really be exogenous, they cannot call populism or nationalism into being, but can only strengthen them when they are already present. It is especially difficult to portray populism as something exogenous to democracy. After all, *populus* (Latin) and *demos* (Greek) both mean “the people.” Saying that democracy is something good and populism is something bad is linguistically counterintuitive. Are not rebellions of the “regular people” against the elites—something that populist movements are most often associated with—part of the *ethos* of democracy?

It appears that populism is a concept used to denote everything that we consider bad about democracies. This reminds me of the concept of the “shadow” coined by the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung. In his understanding of the human personality, our “shadow” is the dark, least desirable aspect of our personality, or maybe even an alternative personality, that our conscious ego refuses to recognize as part of itself. But this is a losing game: We cannot avoid casting shadows. Therefore, it is better to recognize our inner demons and deal with them, because otherwise they will push us to do even worse things.²³ Likewise, democracy cannot help being populist to some extent. Every democratic leader has to please the *demos* and may have to make compromises with his or her conscience while doing so. Populism has not come from outside to strike democracy: Populism has always been there. But in some circumstances it may become more destructive.

This may not be so obvious in the case of nationalism, but it also is part of democracy rather than external to it. In order to have a democracy, you

need a community of people who want to have a common political future and common political institutions. This requires some kind of horizontal solidarity of trust, or what we call “common ground.” This is something that forces us to accept even a government that we hate: We must accept it because it is “our people” that has elected it; we have to respect the will of this people because we belong to it. If we do not have this sense of shared belonging, then it is not *our* government. If modern nations are “constructed,” they are also called into being by this demand for a polity based on a sense of common belonging that can provide legitimacy to the government serving (or claiming to serve) “the people” or “the nation.”

In that sense, while we want to avoid excessive expressions of populism and nationalism—and there can be no denying that they hold many dangers—we also must keep in mind that expunging anything which smacks of them from democracy can only be done at the expense of democracy itself. There is nothing really new about the problems that we are facing today. What we call the dangers of populism, nineteenth-century liberals such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill called the “tyranny of the majority.” They clearly understood that this threat is intrinsic to democracy. Today’s concerns about Brexit or what might happen in the wake of the latest U.S. elections are also fears of the tyranny of the majority.

Efforts to deal with this threat are also as old as the project of modern democracy. The Founders of the United States, fully conscious of these threats, introduced an elaborate system of checks and balances to counter them. These mechanisms are very important and have generally proven effective, but the Founders themselves acknowledged that they may not always be sufficient.

Nineteenth-century liberals also hoped to constrain democracy’s darker side by limiting the right to vote. They denied it to those people whom they considered lacking in education or a proper sense of social responsibility. Today, universal suffrage is sacrosanct and this option is out of bounds. Yet more than a few reactions to Brexit and the 2016 election in the United States revealed a wish that some of those “deplorables” (in the nineteenth century, their opponents would have called them the “rabble” or “mob”) who voted for Leave or for Trump had not had a right to go to the polls at all.

In the wake of Brexit, Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, drew a contrast between the “diplomatic” and the “demotic” visions of Europe. The former, he wrote, was embodied by the EU, while the latter was represented by the U.K. Independence Party and Brexit.²⁴ Supplanting the adjective “democratic” with “demotic” does not help much here. Leonard’s line of argument reinforces the view, held by those who reject the EU, that it is a conspiracy of globalist elites against the people.

So how should we go about solving the troubling issues that confront

democracy in our day? I have no specifics to offer. Instead, I can only call for old-fashioned Aristotelian prudence. If we want to preserve, develop, and advance liberal democracy, we must recognize democracy for what it is. We must stop trying to free democracy from the will of the people, and from the propensity that those same people have to care more for their own homelands, traditions, and beliefs than for the homelands, traditions, and beliefs of others. Efforts to “liberate” democracy from the people will not end well. They will only generate more “populist” reactions by even more angry majorities, leading to outcomes that none of us is going to like.

NOTES

1. For an explicit claim that nationalism will go away, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 119–22.

2. I understand the word “liberal” not in the narrow U.S. sense of “liberal versus conservative,” but as generally denoting those committed to the Enlightenment, which in the U.S. context would include both liberals and conservatives, or at least most of them.

3. Ghia Nodia, “Nationalism and Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 3 (October 1992): 3–22.

4. The term “modernization” is not as fashionable as it was when Lipset was writing his most important works, but its replacement, “development,” is a near synonym, as is “progress.”

5. Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: The United States in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).

6. In reality, there was always an ethnic or racial component to it, expressed in attitudes toward blacks, indigenous peoples, and later some other groups as well.

7. Although the idea of a “United States of Europe” first came up for discussion near the dawn of the twentieth century, the Allied victory in what was then called the Great War brought the triumph of U.S. president Woodrow Wilson’s liberal nationalism, which focused on “national self-determination” for Europe’s smaller peoples and the creation of the League of Nations.

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