

Nationalism and Populism



Francis Antonie is the Director of the Helen Suzman Foundation. He is a graduate of Wits, Leicester and Exeter Universities. He was awarded the Helen Suzman Chevening Fellowship by the UK foreign Office in 1994. From 1996 to 2006 he was senior economist at Standard Bank; thereafter he was director of the Graduate School of Public and Development Management at Wits University. He is the founding managing director of Strauss & Co.

In the (Western) triumphalistic aftermath of the collapse of Communism – most readily associated with the appearance of Francis Fukuyama’s important “End of History” – the future seemed if not quite pre-determined, then at least more certain. A combination of economic growth, fostered by unleashing market forces and greater democratisation of states and societies, would ensure greater peace and stability not only in individual societies, but also to the international order.

There were criticisms levelled at this view from both the left and the right. Needless to say Fukuyama distanced himself from this parody of his thoughts. But a more troubling account by Huntington – concluding the clash of civilisations – was largely bypassed, if not ignored, as it did not fit in with the hopes of the globalists, some of whom sought to extend democracy even by war.

The financial crisis of 2007/2008 no doubt brought home the reality of the tenuous underpinnings of globalisation. People began to count the costs of this process and elites, especially, were asked to account for themselves.

Accompanying these developments the state once again became central to social and political developments. The emergence of Donald Trump, Brexit, the political shifts in India, Turkey, Russia, the flood of immigrants and refugees into (Western) Europe all herald, if not an end to the globalist ideal, then, at least, a serious reversal. It is within this context that we see a re-emergence of nationalistic ideals which centre, on the state as the principal agent of political life.

In their alarm, some commentators have suggested that “we are going backwards”. But it is unclear how far backwards we are going (favourites are the 1930s or 1914). It is too early, as yet, to write the obituaries of either the nation state or of globalisation. But undoubtedly the emergence of – in Benedict Anderson’s famous characterisation of the nation – the “imagined community” requires that we reconsider what nationalism means in today’s world with its great income disparities, breakneck technological innovations and its moral malaise.

How then does nationalism seek to address these issues? Or is it a consequence of them? And what are we to make of the emergence of populism, the unruly offspring of nationalism? This edition of Focus seeks to address some of these issues.

Milton Shain considers the historic rise of nationalist politics globally through the lense of history, with the parallels to nationalist and nativist movements of the past offering a stark warning for our modern day politics. The development of these movements and their migration across, is so often accompanied by

hateful narratives. With this in mind Shain looks at South African politics and the growing trend of divisive and inflammatory political rhetoric that is of deep concern for those with an eye for the lessons of the past.

Rafael Friedman explores one of the unspoken bogeymen of the global trend towards the enactment of populist economic policies, automation. While far too complex a topic to make for an easy target at a campaign rally or on the world's most volatile twitter account, the effects of automation and advances in artificial intelligence have a profound effect on the underlying insecurities that help foster nationalist sentiments. This has seen the global trading system become a prime target, too, in a proxy battle around those who have benefitted from the gains of globalisation and those who have not. Friedman explores the propensity for division in South African society that this creates and the vulnerability we face as technological advances fundamentally alter traditional job creating industries.

Leslie Dikeni offers crucial insights into the development of nationalist and populist theory over the last century. Multiple schools of thought have emerged in this period in relation to both, and their development has been profoundly shaped by the impact of the prevailing political ideologies of the time. Dikeni analyses the underlying theoretical trends that have informed the development of these concepts in South Africa while also looking at their potential impact on South African society today.

Harking back to Ernest Gellner's assertion that it is "nationalism that engenders nations and not the other way around" this piece explores our often superficial connections to our countries, by interrogating South African patriotism, and searches for the substance behind emotional connections to physical elements and theoretical lofty ideals.

Cecelia Kok and **Jason Werbeloff** posit a different take on patriotism by looking at the fundamental myths that commonly underpin individuals' professed love for their country. While many common tropes around why people are committed to their national identity seem uncontroversial, this piece analyses the underlying assumptions that they foster and the notion that any of these, often arbitrary, factors should inspire us to hold a particular reverence for our home state. Kok and Werbeloff look at this in the context of the rhetoric used to mobilise nationalist sentiments and urge citizens to rally around a particular national identity. Harking back to Ernest Gellner's assertion that it is "nationalism that engenders nations and not the other way around" this piece explores our often superficial connections to our countries, by interrogating South African patriotism, and searches for the substance behind emotional connections to physical elements and theoretical lofty ideals.

Graham Dominy looks at the controversies around the University of Cape Town's art collection and the diverse nature of freedom of expression. As student protests have intensified the University's extensive art collection has seen itself become the centre of controversy about institutional culture. The controversy has seen student protesters burn pieces of art deemed colonial remnants or demeaning of black people, while a University task team has

recommended that 75 works of art be removed from display. This has driven world renowned South African photographer, David Goldblatt, to relocate his photographic collection to Yale University. Dominy explores the Freedom of Expression issues at stake as well as what this controversy means for our national attitude towards engagement and dialogue.

Charles Simkins considers the current crisis of African nationalism. With an undoubtedly ailing ANC increasingly focussed more on its own internal battles than on its role in any national project, South Africa's traditional centre of African Nationalism is not holding. Simkins explores the reasons behind this and looks to the future for what will emerge out of it. In doing this, the prospect of a lurch towards ill conceived economic populism is considered with an analysis of the scale of the damage this could potentially inflict on South African society and its economy.

We conclude with two compelling book reviews; Martin Plaut's *Promise and Despair. The First Struggle for a Non-Racial South Africa*, reviewed by **Professor Milton Shain** and Justice Dikgang Moseneke's *My Own Liberator* by **Justice Dennis Davis**.

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