

The Risks and Benefits of National Stories

Rogers M. Smith 

Even prior to the devastating global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, liberal democrats were reeling at a viral surge of authoritarian nationalist movements and governments, often labeled populist, in countries around the world. In September 2018, former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright warned the Council on Foreign Relations of “the rise of authoritarian nationalism” across the globe.¹ In his maiden foreign policy speech in March 2021, the new U.S. secretary of state, Antony Blinken, repeated that alarm, citing a disturbing recent report, *Freedom in the World 2021*, by the independent analytical group Freedom House.² Freedom House found that liberal and democratic rights had, on balance, declined across the globe every year for the preceding fifteen years.³ The now familiar examples include Viktor Orbán’s “illiberal democracy” in Hungary, Jair Bolsonaro’s far-right authoritarian regime in Brazil, Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalism in India, Xi Jinping’s nationalist communism in China, Donald Trump’s xenophobic America First vision, and Vladimir Putin’s militant Russian nationalism, among many others. Analyses of the sources and prospects of right-wing, authoritarian nationalism dominate the recent scholarship in many disciplines. Most analyses point to how neoliberal economic policies, domestically and internationally, have heightened wealth inequalities and employment anxieties, and how many traditionalists find liberal immigration, cultural, and social policies threatening. Illiberal protectionist and traditionalist policies therefore have considerable political appeal in many places, and some actually do appear

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well suited for protecting the interests of those who feel harmed by liberal domestic and international policies, and condescended to by cosmopolitan liberal elites. The stunning contrast in American and Chinese officially reported coronavirus deaths, however dubious the Chinese statistics may be, has further heightened debates over whether contemporary democratic regimes can serve their people as well as authoritarian nationalist ones.⁴ Consequently, for the first time since perhaps the 1930s, serious doubts about the viability of liberal democracy as a system of governance are now widespread, only three decades after the modern model of liberal democracy seemed to be world history's chosen one.⁵

Many scholars who see themselves as liberals or progressives have, however, refused to counter the tide toward illiberal nationalism by promoting nonauthoritarian, liberal democratic forms of nationalism. Most prefer simply to moderate some neoliberal economic, immigration, and social policies, and hope for the best.⁶ There are notable exceptions, including the Israeli scholar Yael Tamir and the English political theorist David Miller, who have long advocated for liberal democratic or indeed social democratic forms of nationalism.⁷ However, for many potent reasons, including the historical manner in which liberal democracies emerged in alliance with nationalism, many, probably most, left-leaning scholars and activists distance themselves as far as possible from explicit support for nationalism, today even more than in the past.⁸

LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC AND LEFT HOSTILITY TO NATIONALISM

The reasons are not hard to see—and not easy to overcome. The “liberal” elements in liberal democratic thought have always included, at least rhetorically, commitments to universal human rights that are at best in tension with always putting “America first” or “India first.” The “democratic” elements in such views face the notorious “boundary problem” of how to decide, democratically, who gets to decide democratically.⁹ The problem arises because the actions of national governments affect many who are not within their borders and not a part of their official national demos, and who therefore appear to be governed without representation and without their consent. So, it is doubtful, even in terms of the intrinsic ideals put forth by advocates of liberal democracy, whether those ideals justify any strong embrace of national identities and allegiances.

Still more damagingly, the very fact that liberal democratic regimes nonetheless emerged historically in partnership with rising nationalist movements, beginning

in the eighteenth century and continuing through the twentieth, means that most if not all putatively liberal democratic nations today are deeply implicated in many of the worst injustices that the world displays. Historically, liberal doctrines of human rights proved politically compatible with the imposition of imperial rule over populations deemed not capable of, or at least not ready for, democratic self-governance; and liberal defenses of property rights helped justify exploitative labor systems and massive economic inequalities, both domestically and internationally. Appealing to democracy, moreover, proponents of racially and religiously restricted conceptions of their nations defended systems of race, gender, and religious discrimination as legitimate expressions of popular sovereignty. The success of predominantly white, Christian nations claiming to be liberal democracies in structuring, first, a global system of European-centered empires prior to World War II, and then a set of international institutions largely created and run by capitalist nations after World War II, has resulted in a modern world of nation-states that are extraordinarily unequal in their wealth, their military power, and the opportunities they can provide their members.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first century era of neoliberal economic policies, within nations and across nations, severely exacerbated many of these inequalities. As a result, many on the left portray nationalism today as inextricably associated with past and present imperialism, exploitative capitalism, racism, and bigotry, as well as massive environmental degradation and life-threatening climate changes.¹⁰ Today's increasingly extreme authoritarian nationalisms show that these nefarious associations not only characterize nationalism's past but also its present and, quite plausibly, its future.

Consequently, those seeking to build a healthier, more progressive world generally regard it as far too risky to pursue the path I will defend in this essay. That path is to try to curb the most virulent current forms of right-wing nationalism by supporting more egalitarian and inclusive nationalisms, in the hopes of, first, quelling the current political pandemic, and then moving toward a world in which the worst evils of the global nation-state system, and perhaps that system itself, may eventually be displaced by more broadly beneficial forms of political community.

THE NEED FOR STORIES OF POLITICAL PEOPLEHOOD

Understandably, many will fear that this cure is worse than the disease, if it is not simply the disease itself. Yet serious opponents of severe capitalist inequalities,

global imperialism, racism, environmental destruction, and other disabling political systems must acknowledge that they face enormous political challenges in seeking to overcome them. They must build coalitions powerful enough to achieve fundamental changes, and they must build political communities enduring enough to implement those changes on a sustained basis.

Along with many scholars in many disciplines, I have long insisted that building powerful coalitions and sustaining political communities requires compelling stories of political peoplehood.¹¹ Some scholars who agree with this contention argue that the modern left is averse to telling political stories of most if not all kinds.¹² That claim seems overblown, because as Yuval Harari has argued, virtually all human collective action relies on participants sharing some kind of story of their identities and purposes.¹³ It is specifically nationalist stories that most on the left abjure today. Left scholars and activists do, however, advance critical narratives of the evils of global capitalism, imperialism, racism, sexism, national chauvinism, religious bigotry, and more—stories that are often richly detailed, deeply historically informed, and movingly told. These accounts often include invocations of the possibility of a more just, democratic, environmentally sustainable, and harmonious world—but generally do not offer much more than a vague sketch of what such a world would look like or how to get from here to there.

This preference for critical stories is intellectually understandable, given the absence of any clear map of the possible paths toward a better world or blueprints for its design. It is also far from politically naïve. Critical, negative stories are often ferociously effective in spurring impassioned support. They are central to the oratory of many current right-wing nationalist movements, with leaders like Trump and Orbán much more frequently engaged in vilifying corrupt liberal elites than they are in elaborating just what it is that makes America or Hungary great. Denunciations of global capitalists have, moreover, been equally prominent in the rhetoric of popular left leaders, such as Bernie Sanders and Hugo Chávez. As many have argued, people form senses of shared and valued identities by focusing on threatening and disdained features of an “Other” (features that are often projected onto that Other), as much or more than by narrating positive accounts of themselves.¹⁴ In light of the realities of shared sufferings from various forms of injustice, and the very great deficiencies of powerful actors and institutions benefiting from and perpetuating those injustices, in many contexts it makes sense for those rousing support for progressive transformations to feature

sharply negative critical stories without advancing any highly delineated positive vision of political community or peoplehood.

For many of the same reasons, various left-leaning scholars and activists also favor emphasizing what I have termed “economic” and “political power” themes in their political stories.¹⁵ They seek not only to call attention to the economic hardships and political disempowerment experienced by many millions of people under the dizzyingly stratospheric systems of inequality that structure human life in the twenty-first century. They also strive to avoid the divisive ethnocentric appeals that so often comprise what I have called “constitutive” themes, accounts of why particular identities, including national identities, have intrinsic worth.¹⁶ Many quite reasonably fear that attention to such themes not only distracts attention from unjust material inequalities but in doing so may also help to maintain them.¹⁷

Often in politics, it may not only be feasible but perhaps wise for progressives to advance stories of political peoplehood that define “the people” in terms no more specific than “the desperate, the damned, the disrespected, the disinherited, and the despised”—as Jesse Jackson described the core of his Rainbow Coalition¹⁸—combined with all on the left who seek to act in solidarity with them. Even if all politics requires stories, then, perhaps the Left can safely avoid potentially pestilent national stories.

PROGRESSIVE NATIONAL STORIES

Perhaps, but probably not. Though they may be sufficient at times, sooner or later economic and political power themes on behalf of indeterminate conceptions of “the people” generally prove insufficient to build broad coalitions and sustain political communities. The reality of human beings is that their economic interests and political power are always intertwined with, and partly defined by, a range of other elements, including their religious beliefs, their senses of their ancestry and cultural heritage, their attachments to certain places, their social networks, practices, and experiences, and much more. The reality of human politics is that it is always competitive: there is never a shortage of would-be leaders trying to gain power by appealing to whatever senses of identity and interests current power holders can be charged with neglecting, violating, or abusing. In the contemporary political environment, if progressives do not try to articulate compelling senses of national identity, conservatives will do so, and they may well do so successfully.

Both the recent and the longer-term past of the United States, for example, show that appeals to American national identity, and specifically American political traditions, have always had broad resonance with the American electorate. The same is true in most other contemporary nations. Most people have, after all, been deeply socialized into senses of their national identity. Most are therefore likely to trust leaders who claim to value this national identity, and most are likely to see supporting such leaders as a promising way to achieve lives they can regard as worthwhile. As Rogers Brubaker has argued, “Notwithstanding repeated assertions of its obsolescence, the nation-state remains the decisive instance of belonging even in a rapidly globalizing world, and struggles over belonging *in* and *to* the nation-state remain the most consequential forms of membership politics.”¹⁹ Consequentially, at this moment in world history, it may not be impossible, but it is extremely difficult to build broad coalitions for constructive changes, and to sustain support for transforming political communities, without deploying a national story that portrays those changes as inspiring expressions of shared national values, rather than as assaults on them.

American experience demonstrates, moreover, that even though national stories always risk fostering chauvinistic abuses, they have nonetheless assisted many of the nation’s most successful left-leaning movements and political actors. To be sure, movements on the American left have sometimes pursued different strategies. America has a socialist tradition with a long ancestry that has at times stressed international worker solidarity over nationalistic support for American capitalists, especially during World War I.²⁰ America’s greatest philosopher of democracy, John Dewey, whose ideas spurred a wide range of influential progressive causes, despised nationalism and never joined in American patriotic cheer-leading.²¹ American political development has also been shaped to a greater degree than has often been acknowledged by Black political traditions that have frequently given allegiance to transnational and sometimes subnational movements, as well as by indigenous traditions that have presented even more stark alternatives to American nationalism and to related conceptions of liberal democracy borne of the European Enlightenment.²²

As Eric Foner, among others, has argued, however, American socialism lost the considerable political momentum it had in the progressive era when it opposed American participation in World War I.²³ Though its objections to the war as a capitalist endeavor were sound, its refusal to embrace the national cause permitted it to be branded as unpatriotic, creating a stigma that has only begun to fade in our

own time. The influence of Dewey on American politics was, moreover, indirect and limited: his democratic progressivism contributed some ideas that have been taken up by mainstream American political movements, but it lost force amid the militant nationalism of World War II and the ensuing Cold War. The ideas of Black radical thinkers about injustices perpetrated against people of color are, perhaps, more influential on the American left today than they have ever been, with the diffusion of critical race theory from law to many other disciplines and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Indigenous thought, too, is gaining greater attention in the United States and in other settler societies. The proponents of right-wing nationalism in America, however, confidently see these developments as paving the way to political victories for them, and many analysts across the political spectrum agree.²⁴

They have solid grounds for doing so. Although appeals to socialism and democracy and the perspectives of oppressed peoples—made with little reference to American national identity—have helped to build successful reform movements at times, they have most often lost. More and greater victories have come through alliances with more liberal versions of American religious patriotism, American republicanism, and especially the egalitarian, inclusive rhetoric of the opening of the Declaration of Independence, presented as definitive of America's distinctive national identity and historic purpose. At least since Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, American reformers and indeed revolutionaries have found their messages to be most politically potent when they have blended universalistic appeals with nationalistic stories celebrating America's potential for unique contributions to humanity, in ways that could in fact persuade Americans that progressive transformations represented the realization, not the abandonment, of their core values.

The examples began mushrooming as soon as leading white Americans began professing their dedication to the cause of securing inalienable rights. As early as 1774, Massachusetts slaves petitioned their state's governor to recognize their "naturel [*sic*] right to our freedoms."²⁵ They failed, but after the American Revolution, the incorporation into the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution of the view that "all men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights" prompted Massachusetts chief justice William Cushing to state in *Commonwealth v. Jennison* (1783) that no sentiments "more favorable to the natural rights of mankind, and to that innate desire of liberty, which heaven, without regard to complexion or shape, has planted in the human breast—have prevailed since the glorious struggle for our rights began." He concluded that in

consequence, “slavery is in my judgment effectively abolished . . . perpetual servitude can no longer be tolerated by our government.”²⁶ This ruling was a key development in the “first emancipation,” the gradual ending of slavery in the Northern states following the Revolution.²⁷

Subsequently, a wide variety of groups who felt they were at least as oppressed in the American Republic as the white settler colonists had been repeatedly turned to the language of the now venerated Declaration to link their grievances and aspirations with American national values and goals. In 1829, the New York Working Men’s Party promulgated “The Working Men’s Declaration of Independence,” championing the “natural and inalienable rights” of “one class of a community” against “other classes” who denied them a “station of equality.”²⁸ In the first issue of the *Liberator* published in 1831, William Lloyd Garrison thundered that the principle “maintained in the American Declaration of Independence, ‘that all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights’” required “the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.”²⁹ In 1834, the Boston Trades’ Union announced that “we hold that all men are created free and equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” and that “laws which have a tendency to raise any peculiar class above their fellow citizens, by granting special privileges” violate those rights.³⁰ In 1848, the feminist-oriented “Declaration of Sentiments,” produced at the Seneca Falls Convention, held it to be “self-evident” that “all men and women are created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” which included the franchise for women.³¹

Later, Abraham Lincoln argued that America’s founding principles compelled opposition to the powerful anti-immigrant Know Nothing movement of the 1850s. He believed those nativists falsely read the Declaration to hold, “All men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners, and Catholics.”³² Still more importantly, the Union’s victory in the Civil War enabled Lincoln’s Republicans, after his assassination, to adopt the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments. The three Civil War amendments collectively embedded the view that the Constitution aimed to secure for all the basic rights of the Declaration more firmly, though still not unequivocally, into the Constitution’s text.

These invocations of the Declaration usually gained political force, if not always success, by tying universalistic aspirations to America’s historical national identity and mission. Before its passage, for example, the Tennessee representative and

Republican William Moore opposed the Chinese Exclusion Act by contending that such a racist measure “by the United States, the recognized champion of human rights—the nation of all others in the world whose chief pride and glory it has been to truly boast of being known and recognized everywhere as the home of the free, the asylum of the oppressed, the land where all men, of all climes, all colors, all conditions, all nationalities, are welcome to come and go at will . . . is one that does so much violence to my own sense of justice that I cannot . . . consent to aid in establishing it.”³³ Massachusetts senator George Hoar later denounced proposals to deny constitutional rights to the inhabitants of the territories acquired in the Spanish-American War by contending, “You will have to enlarge the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence . . . before you can find your right to buy and sell that people like sheep,” even “for all this wealth, all this glory, all this empire.”³⁴

Subsequently, Franklin Roosevelt presented his New Deal as the fulfillment, not the repudiation, of American constitutional principles.³⁵ In the civil rights era, Martin Luther King Jr. repeatedly turned to the “inalienable rights” proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence as “the arc of the moral universe” to justify his calls for national actions for racial equality, which helped set the political stage for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.³⁶ Also in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson championed the repeal of the race-based national quota system for immigrants by contending that those restrictions violated “the basic principle of American democracy” rooted in the Declaration, making them “un-American in the highest sense.”³⁷

Indeed, even the Black Panthers’ 1967 Ten-Point Platform and Program urged the courts to follow the Fourteenth Amendment, and it culminated by quoting the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence in full. The Panthers contended that its principles justified a plebiscite, to be supervised by the United Nations, “to be held throughout the black colony . . . for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny,” and they did not rule out that the verdict might be to blend Black and American nationalism.³⁸

More recently, when journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones argued for a broad-ranging reparations agenda in the spirit of the Black Lives Matter movement, she described America as “a nation built on the espoused ideals of inalienable, universal rights.” Rather than repudiating American nationalism, she contended that “if we are to live up to the magnificent ideals upon which we were founded, we must do what is just.”³⁹ Unlike abolition, trade union rights, women’s rights,

opposition to Chinese exclusion, other forms of race-based immigration restrictions and Jim Crow segregation, and the expansion of social welfare rights, recent calls for Black reparations and self-determination have so far won only very limited successes, chiefly in the form of municipal programs to aid Black homeownership.⁴⁰ The historical record of these other causes shows, however, that calls for progressive reforms can be incorporated into more inclusive and egalitarian narratives of national values and identity, and that doing so has been judged by activists as useful for building and sustaining genuinely transformative political coalitions, institutions, and policies.

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to think that linking national narratives with liberal reform would be easier in the United States than in other countries, given its view of itself as being dedicated to the project of realizing the principles of the Declaration of Independence over time. As I have sought to show elsewhere, however, in many countries there are comparable materials for telling resonant national stories that incorporate values favorable to liberal democracy. India, for example, has a variety of prestigious traditions celebrating it as an inclusive multicultural democracy, not as a Hindu nation; for many Israelis, Jewish nationhood must always be combined with a universal humanism that provides equality of social and political rights for all.⁴¹ Failure to advance liberal national stories has arisen not so much from a lack of resources to elaborate them as from a lack of political will to do so. Fears of the risks of using progressive national stories to combat illiberal nationalist accounts are, again, reasonable as well as widespread. And furthermore, if human progress ultimately requires moving beyond the current nation-state system, even telling “better” national stories may do more harm than good.

But though the authoritarian nationalist storm surge threatening to engulf modern liberal democracies has receded slightly in some places, it persists throughout the contemporary world. Those on the left who reject constructing the barriers against virulent right-wing nationalisms that liberal democratic national stories may provide should perhaps contemplate the consequences of resisting efforts to invest in safeguards against storm-driven floodwaters due to high monetary costs. The result, all too often, is to leave all too many people awash in death and despair.

NOTES

- ¹ Madeleine K. Albright, “The Rise of Authoritarian Nationalism,” phone interview by Irina A. Faskianos, Council on Foreign Relations, September 19, 2018, www.cfr.org/conference-calls/rise-authoritarian-nationalism, September 19, 2018.
- ² “Authoritarianism and Nationalism Are on the Rise around the World: Blinken,” *Business Standard*, March 4, 2021, www.business-standard.com/article/international/authoritarianism-and-nationalism-are-on-the-rise-around-the-world-blinken-121030400036_1.html.
- ³ Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege,” Freedom House, freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege.
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- ⁹ See, for example, Sarah Song, “The Boundary Problem in Democratic Theory: Why the Demos Should Be Bounded by the State,” *International Theory* 4, no. 1 (March 2012), pp. 39–68.
- ¹⁰ For an example of such assessments advanced by advocates for Chinese socialism, see Danny Haiphong and Carlos Martinez, “The Universalization of ‘Liberal Democracy,’” *Friends of Socialist China*, socialistchina.org/2021/12/16/the-universalization-of-liberal-democracy/. Note, however, that China professes to champion national sovereignty, and that its global vision of a “community of shared future” claims to endorse a multipolar world of diverse nation-states, even if it clearly contemplates ultimate widespread emulation of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” See, for example, Bill Hayton, “China’s Vision of Sovereignty for the Next World Order,” *Interpreter*, October 9, 2020, www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-vision-sovereignty-next-world-order.
- ¹¹ I have made this suggestion most recently in Smith, *That Is Not Who We Are!*, on which I build here.
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- ¹⁷ For a compelling recent statement of these concerns, see Adolph Reed Jr., “‘Let Me Go Get My Big White Man’: The Clientelist Foundation of Contemporary Antiracist Politics,” *Nonsite.org*, May 11, 2022, nonsite.org/let-me-go-get-my-big-white-man.
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- ³⁴ George Hoar, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 166.
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Abstract: Authoritarian nationalism is on the rise in many countries around the world, threatening liberal democracies. Many on the left rightly fear that any and all celebrations of national identities risk heightening these dangers. It is questionable, however, whether illiberal nationalism can be defeated politically without some reliance on progressive stories of national identity that advance themes of equality, freedom, and inclusion in ways that resonate with many of the traditions in which those whom progressives seek to mobilize have been raised.

Keywords: Nationalism, democracy, peoplehood, liberal, authoritarian, inclusive, egalitarian, stories