

Rethinking Nationalisms

Trump and Alt-Right “White Nationalism”¹

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Interest seems to have been rekindled in the study of nationalisms. Events have forced us to look at and analyze this phenomenon: the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union (Brexit); political and economic crises; the EU refugee crises; the emergence of different poles of power; Trump and his “nationalist, protectionist” discourse; the enormous weakening of multi-culturalism; the reawakening of the clamor for independence in Catalonia; and, lastly, the rise of the racist, xenophobic, anti-immigrant right, one example of which is the visibility of white nationalism, accentuated after Donald Trump’s victory.

My aim here is to reflect on two aspects: the current state of nationalisms and the specificities of white nationalism. About the latter, I should say that the advance of the ultra-right and conservatism in the United States has been gradual; that is, it did not start with Donald Trump’s campaign. It is also important to observe that these movements are not homogeneous and that at this political, historic moment in that country, the so called alternative right (the alt-right) seeks to position

itself in the public debate using social networks and digital media, which play a central role in disseminating its ideology.

THE ALT-RIGHT AND “WHITE NATIONALISM”

Information about the alt-right and white nationalism is scarce and diffuse, posing a problem for anyone who tries to do research on the topic. Few academic articles deal with the construction of U.S. American and Canadian nationalism.² This shows that, until now, the specialists have not been interested in white nationalism; this is probably explained by the fact that the idea of the melting pot suggested that national identity, and therefore, a kind of nationalism centered on a particular identity, was unthinkable in U.S. society, and that the extreme right and white supremacy are not seen as a problem appropriate to studies on nationalism. My thinking focuses on this point.

Despite a practically fruitless search for information about white nationalism, it cannot be said categorically that there has been no research on the matter. Erik Kauffman has stud-

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ied it, focusing on Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia.

The phenomenon emerged first in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, associated with the rise of the nation-states. Ernest Renan posits that nationalism is a plebiscite that happens every day.³ In his *Nations and Nationalism*, Ernest Gellner says that nationalisms in industrialized states are a construct of modernity;⁴ however, this approach does not explain the nationalism of proto-nations (the Basques, the Catalans, the Welsh, the Corsicans, etc.), that were expressed before the existence of the nation-state, even if their ultimate aim is to have their own state, as Adam Smith points out in his broad body of work. Nationalism is also a political instrument that uses national history and symbols, politicizing them to achieve an aim. Nationalism is not necessarily destructive: it depends on the moment in history and the legitimacy of the political aims of those who call for mobilizations to further nationalist ends. Will Kymlicka even speaks of a liberal nationalism.⁵

It is important to emphasize the symbolic and ideological resources that are useful to nationalism and that the intelligentsia appropriates and gives a new meaning to in accordance with that ideology’s objectives. These resources are a common history, the belief in a “Golden Age” and a glorious past, and the possession of a flag and a hymn. But most important is the idea of a national language. In an interview in *The New York Times*, Eric Kauffman said,

White nationalism is the belief that national identity should be built around white ethnicity, and that white people should therefore maintain both a demographic majority and dominance of the nation’s culture and public life. So, like white supremacy, white nationalism places the interests of white people over those of other racial groups. White supremacists and white nationalists both believe that racial discrimination should be incorporated into law and policy.

The terms are not synonyms: white supremacy is based on a racist belief that white people are innately superior to people

of other races; white nationalism is about maintaining political and economic dominance, not just a numerical majority or cultural hegemony. For a long time, white nationalism was less ideology than the default presumption of American life. Until quite recently, white Americans could easily see the nation as essentially an extension of their own ethnic group. But the country’s changing demographics, the civil rights movement, and a push for multiculturalism in many quarters mean that white Americans are now confronting the prospect of a nation that is no longer built solely around their own identity.⁶

It is important to underline that Kauffman situates the rebirth of white nationalism in the mid-twentieth century, relating it to demographic changes caused by migratory flows, multiculturalism, and the movements against racial segregation in the United States. The first two aspects prevail today: a big change in migratory flows and a multicultural society.

I think the most important element in this ideology is racism. We should reorient our analysis of racist manifestations, of the violence these groups exercise; and I think it is fundamental to study how the ultra-right groups have grown and risen in the political spectrum in the United States. The idea that the borders between one community and another are formed by racial differences leads me to think about this ideology as one whose crosscutting axis is the belief that races exist and that the white race is better than the others.

Race, as a social and cultural construct and a historical fact, also emerged in modernity. This means that for white nationalists, U.S. identity originates in its European heritage, in the Anglo-Protestant culture, and the English language. Once again, its center of gravity is racism. Teun Van Dijk, in *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, explains that ideologies are linked to cognition, society, and discourse. They are systems of social beliefs that distinguish between general beliefs taken as givens for a society or culture, and more specific beliefs that are often sectarian, of various social groups within one general culture or another. Ideologies belong to the second kind of beliefs.⁷

If ideologies are the bearers of shared beliefs that control the group’s opinions or attitudes and its knowledge, which can be related to its interests or domination, then, in line with Kauffman’s thinking, white nationalism is an ideology whose central trait is the idea that a white national identity exists, based on what they consider to be a fact: the white race. This belief is fostered and reproduced by ideologues with broad access to certain digital media, for example, *Breitbart News*.

The alt-right is a political-ideological movement that is very active on the Internet, concretely on social networks. Some of its members see themselves as supremacists and espouse chauvinist nationalism with a racist discourse. They denounce what they consider discriminatory policies toward whites and argue there is a debacle of traditional family values due to the legalization of abortion, feminism, and the recognition of sexual diversity. They argue that national sovereignty is being lost because of foreign influence and mass migration and oppose political correctness.

Alt-right ideologue Jared Taylor wrote an article, “What Is the Alt Right?” on the American Renaissance website to explain that this movement “is a broad dissident movement that rejects egalitarian orthodoxies [and is] also skeptical of mass democracy. The entire Alt Right is united in contempt for the idea that race is only a social construct. Race is a biological fact.” And he emphasizes that “the Alt Right is a necessary alternative to a ‘respectable’ right that has completely capitulated.”⁸

The alt-right is an umbrella term spanning a broad range of right-wing movements. J. M. Berger says that “the community’s ‘center of gravity’ has always been white nationalism.”⁹ The Associated Press, for its part, has said that the term alt-right is “meant as a euphemism to disguise racist aims.”¹⁰ The concept “white nationalism” is a conglomeration of different movements and ideologies with affinities and divergences, and that is what makes it ambiguous. I think that, in accordance with the classical definitions of nationalism, there is no such thing as white nationalism. That is why I agree with those who state that it is only a euphemism of the alt-right, which seeks to position itself politically, and therefore distance itself from more radical and even violent stances.

WHITE NATIONALISM AND THE AMBIGUITY OF THE TERMS: BETWEEN RACISM AND NATIONALISM

As mentioned above, there are two theoretical approaches that deal with the issue of nationalism: the one that associates it with modernity, explained above, and the “perennialist” position, according to which it precedes the emergence of modern nation-states. We have, then, peripheral and centralist nationalisms.

As representatives of the first approach associating it with modern nation-states, I look at two thinkers as a starting point: Benedict Anderson and Michael Billig. In his celebrated

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Imagined Communities, Anderson associates the emergence of nationalism with the dissemination of vernacular languages and the use of the printing press. He defines the nation as

an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.¹¹

He explains that there are three key elements for constructing the imagined community: language, culture, and a conception of temporality that unites all the members. Thus, the nation was conceived from the principle of language, not blood, and we could be invited to the imagined community. This idea is fundamental for understanding white nationalism as a movement that, as stated above, seeks to reposition the race issue at the core of the U.S. public debate.

For their part, in Michael Billig and Rosamaría Núñez’s “El nacionalismo banal y la reproducción de la identidad nacional” (Banal Nationalism and the Reproduction of National Identity), they maintain that “nationalism should be considered as a series of ideological beliefs, practices, and routines that reproduce the world of the nation-states.”¹² To explain nationalism in these terms, the authors delve into the issue of identity and put forward the idea that this process is not only psychological, but also social. Thus, identities, far from being internal states, may well refer to, or be constituted as, ways of life situated socially and historically. Identity is a way of life. This is the case of national identity, and this terrain may be so familiar and so banal that it is taken as a given, since we live every day in our national corner of the world of nations.

Billig and Anderson agree on the central role played by the media in the construction and reproduction of nationalism, nationalist ideology, and the national identity. I situate my analysis within this first approach, based on the analytical perspective of Anderson, Billig, and Núñez for three rea-

sons: first, because WASP national identity (or nationalism) in the United States arose in the modern era after the Civil War; second, because of the importance they give the media in the emergence, dissemination, and reproduction of nationalism. In this regard, Billig and Núñez explain that the discourse of banal nationalism is not limited to what politician-celebrities constantly spew. Nationality is transmitted regularly through the media, which adopt a national perspective and construct their public through a national “we.” There can be a game, a subtle deictic, in which a few short, barely noticeable words show the nation as the “context of the statement.” Naturally, this national “we” is not the only “we” reproduced in our regular media consumption. However, careful analysis of the discourse would also reveal a universal “we” that communicates to all of humanity or the world. In addition, there is the foreign “we” that comes to “us” daily through film and television.¹³

My third reason for using Anderson, Billig, and Núñez is the distinction they make between nationalism and racism:

Nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history. Niggers are, thanks to the invisible tar-brush, forever niggers; Jews, the seed of Abraham, forever Jews, no matter what passports they carry or what languages they speak and read.... The dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of class, rather than in those of nation: above all in claims to divinity among rulers and to “blue” or “white” blood.... Colonial racism was a major element in that conception of “Empire” which attempted to weld dynastic legitimacy and national community.... Another instructive indication of the aristocratic or pseudo-aristocratic derivation of colonial racism was the typical “solidarity among whites,” which linked colonial rulers from different national metropolises, whatever their internal rivalries and conflicts.¹⁴

Lastly, I think it is important to underline a few points that I consider central to this reflection about white nationalism and the alt-right. One is the importance of digital and alternative media. We have to rethink the media as political actors; this will allow us to understand how *BreitBart News* had a huge influence on the 2016 U.S. balloting. Another point is that we have to reformulate our questions about nationalism and the movements that self-define as nationalist, even if they do not come under that category according to

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what has been theorized about the topic. My starting point is that white nationalism is not truly a nationalist movement. In that sense, it seems appropriate to redirect the analysis toward the issue of racism and its resurgence. It is not that racism had been eradicated, but there was a moment when it was more a cultural issue, that is, something that extolled cultural differences. Today, it seems to have been combined, and both contents, the cultural and the racial, manifest themselves everywhere and are widely disseminated on social and digital media.

Finally, I want to quote Anderson, who was very emphatic in saying, “The reality is quite plain: the ‘end of the era of nationalism,’ so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”¹⁵ That is why it is worthwhile to rethink nationalisms and the phenomena inherent in them. ■■■

NOTES

¹ This article was originally part of a presentation made at the Mexican International Studies Association’s 31st congress held in Huatulco, Oaxaca, in October 2017.

² See, for example, Jasper M. Trautsch, “The Origins and Nature of American Nationalism,” *National Identities* vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 289-312.

³ Ernest Renan, *¿Qué es una nación? Catas a Strauss* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1987), pp. 85-86.

⁴ Ernest Gellner, *Naciones y nacionalismo* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988).

⁵ Will Kymlicka, *La política vernácula. Nacionalismo, multiculturalismo y ciudadanía* (Mexico City: Paidós, 2003).

⁶ Quoted in Amanda Taub, “White Nationalism’ Explained,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/world/americas/white-nationalism-explained.html>.

⁷ Teun Van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Sage, 1998).

⁸ Jared Taylor, “What Is the Alt Right?” *American Renaissance*, <https://www.amren.com/news/2016/10/what-is-the-alt-right-jared-taylor/>.

⁹ Natasha Bertrand, “White Nationalism in the Alt-right’s ‘Center of Gravity’—and Trump Can’t Condemn One but Not the Other,” *Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-alt-rights-connection-to-white-nationalism-2017-8>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London and New York: Verso Books, 2006), p. 22.

¹² Michael Billig and Rosamaría Núñez, “El nacionalismo banal y la reproducción de la identidad nacional,” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* vol. 60, no. 1, 1998, p. 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-153.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19.