

Prepared for the Worst: Disaster Nationalism - “The ‘kairos’ theory of the new right”

Thursday 8 October 2020, by [SEYMOUR Richard](#) (Date first published: 11 September 2020).

The overall psychological improvement was outpacing the material advantage.
Richard Grunberg, *A Social History of the Third Reich*

If individuals behaved like groups, they would be classified as mad.
Hannah Segal

I. Disaster nationalism is the *kairos* theory of the new right. Reaction always thrives on the prospect of annihilation. ‘American carnage’, ‘white genocide’, ‘death panels’, ‘invasion’, ‘great replacement’, ‘Islamisation’, ‘treason’, ‘cultural marxists’, ‘scum’, ‘communism’. The erosion and threatened destruction of worlds of power resembling, from its ideological purview, civilisational collapse, defeat, devastation. With which it is both appalled and enthralled.

We are, pending the medium-term outcome of an explosive, plague-catalysed, economic crisis, potentially more destructive in the short term than the Great Depression, entering a cycle of nationalist reaction. Rupture on the right, not the left, has proven to be the rule. In Braudel’s terms, a cycle, situated somewhere between the *longue durée* and the event, is a period of some decades in which a cluster of social changes germinate, develop and mature. If the cycle that concluded in 2008 was one of neoliberal globalisation, it also nourished and incubated the tendencies of nationalist reflux now abroad. Amid the decomposition of the old party system, the legacy media, and associated forms of public authority, political forces organising around the nation and its enemies have won the major battles of the last decade. What is more, incumbency has been incredibly forgiving of their failures, their political gains proving far less fragile than those of the Left.

Disaster nationalism is not fascism. While today’s reactionary nationalists are anti-liberal, in a way mainstream conservatism has not been since 1945, they have made no moves to overthrow electoral democracy or bourgeois legality. Rather, a form of pseudo-democratic politics, disaster nationalism actively courts a ‘majoritarian’ legitimacy even where it only rarely summons majorities. They have made only the most modest and debatable encroachments on economic liberalism. For all that they berate ‘globalists’, ‘traitors’ and ‘anti-nationals’, they have not developed a cohesive alternative to liberal globalisation. Their anti-liberalism is cultural, as in ‘culture war’, as in cyberwar.

It is a pathetic euphemism to gloss their methods of cyberwar as ‘fake news’. The new right’s stream of demonology, incitement and public shamings is designed for personal destruction and terror. As Bolsonaro’s number-one public intellectual Olavo de Carvalho put it, it is about ‘destroying the careers and the power of people’. When Bolsonaro acolytes accuse teachers of disseminating gay propaganda, or Breitbart or *Guido Fawkes* slander public officials, the intention is that they be hounded out of their jobs, or worse. When Modi’s trolls call someone an ‘anti-national’, it is every bit as much a death threat as when Trump links Ilhan Omar to Al Qaeda. It would be a mistake to see this as an attack on the ‘rule of law’ per se, given that disaster nationalism finds its strongest support in forces of law and order. Rather, it is a war to destroy the exiguous pluralistic, liberal constraints on the violence that can be visited on minorities. The non-synchronous character of disaster nationalism, its evocation of Bloch’s ‘Living Yesterday’ – evincing primordialist fixations

with Crusader ideology (in Europe and Brazil) or Aryanism (in India) – binds this offensive to existential security for the ‘majority’ thus convoked. We belong, they do not.

With the single exception of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is an offshoot and affiliate of the much older and larger civil society and paramilitary organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), they usually have but the thinnest roots in civil society, do not have cadres, and do not constitute a mass movement. And yet, they rule, building in the spaces of centre-left collapse. In most cases, they have amplified the taken-for-granted racist and nationalist predicates of the old governing class. The BJP hardens and renders explicit the soft Hindu nationalism, securitarianism and Islamophobia of the Congress ‘leftists’ they have displaced. Likudnism makes overt the violent anti-Arab racism, militarism and coloniality of Labour Zionism. The Workers’ Party’s deference to the Brazilian military and security sector is more of a reluctant accommodation than the enthusiastic racism of Labour Zionism or Congress nationalism, but still it was exploited by Bolsonaro. And the Brexit Right radicalises the imperial nationalism that was already consensual in Westminster and its green-zoned media auxiliary. It is not fascism, but it does render sharply visible the fascist potentials that were already at work in liberal democracies.

What, then, of this ill-starred couple, disaster and nationalism? The phrase ‘disaster nationalism’ implies something disastrous, or exploitative of disaster, or in elective affinity with disaster, or opaquely drawn to, or hurtling toward, or yearning for disaster. It is all of this. Leveraging the fear of, and desire for, catastrophe, disaster nationalism is a current that runs through the entire history of nationalist politics. It is a praxis without being a plot, its votaries both manipulating and beholden to disaster nationalist dreamwork.

• • •

If people feel that voting doesn’t change anything then violence is the next step.
Nigel Farage

II. Globally, disaster nationalism thrives in defiance of the golden rule, ‘it’s the economy, stupid’. In December 2019, the BBC asked impoverished food-bank users in Grimsby who they intended to vote for in the general election. ‘It’s going to sound awful,’ a formerly homeless voter said, ‘but I like everything Boris Johnson is talking about.’ Whatever residual class consciousness told him it would ‘sound awful’ to like what Johnson was talking about, he did not need to explain what it was he liked. Johnson talked with obsessive message-discipline about only one thing: ‘getting Brexit done’. For which goal, of restoring the nation’s independence from the European institutions, two thirds of Brexit supporters were willing to see the sacred cow of ‘the economy’ slaughtered, and for which a further forty per cent would willingly lose their own jobs. In the ensuing election, Grimsby was won by the Conservatives for the first time since 1935. Johnson was re-elected with a bigger share of the vote after almost a decade of austerity, wage stagnation and economic torpor. Right-wing nationalism is not thriving because of its appeal to what Burke mockingly called ‘enlightened self-interest’.

Narendra Modi, too, was re-elected as Indian prime minister with a larger share of the vote after the failure of his core economic ideas, above all ‘demonetisation’. Despite international plaudits – Obama-era Treasury official Steve Rattner celebrated Modi’s re-election in the New York Times, saluting his ‘sparkling growth rate’ – India’s economy has been growing much more slowly under Modi than his predecessor. Rodrigo Duterte won the Philippines mid-term elections after two years of chaotic death squad rule in which none of his ambitious promises of infrastructure investment and poverty reduction were fulfilled. This year, Donald Trump, with record approval ratings, is the favourite to win the US presidential election. This despite the non-delivery of his much-hyped Keynesian infrastructure programme, the ongoing manufacturing recession, and the emptiness of

the so-called 'blue collar boom': wage growth was slowing even before Covid-19 visited such devastation. Nor is there evidence that the persistent re-election of the nationalist right in Hungary, Poland or Israel is founded in economic well being. It is, perhaps, this alarming fact that Marianne Williamson has in mind when she scorns the idea that 'wonkiness', the *techne* of enlightened self-interest, could dispel the 'dark psychic focus of collectivised hatred' unleashed by Trump. One might add that nor can a certain version of 'wokeness', in its own way the *geist* of enlightened self-interest. That, for liberals, Williamson's point was merely evidence of her own laughable kookiness, shows how far they are from understanding their dilemma.

This is not to deny that the nationalist right appeals to material interests. It indirectly 'mentions' various social and class interests in its moralising idiom. Bolsonaro's attack on the corruption of *petismo*, just as much as Trump's promise to 'drain the swamp', codes the resentment of the established white middle class, and a segment of workers, over the encroachments of pluralism, welfare and civil rights. Nor is it to claim that the surge of reactionary nationalism does not result, in some mediated way, from the crisis of capitalism and the class dislocations arising from it. However, nationalism speaks, not of self-interest in the classically liberal sense, but of social being, every bit as much a 'material interest' as one's income. Even where nationalists do talk about jobs and wages, it is usually in connection with a sense of loss and entitlement, grievance toward migrants who 'haven't paid into the system' and yet 'take our jobs', and above all resentment toward politicians who have apparently abandoned the nation state. Jobs and wages are synonyms for status, for being loved and not abandoned in the gaze of the Other. This is the sense in which nationalism is collective narcissism, but with the Freudian rider that narcissism is idealism.

From World Cup to World War, nationalism offers ritualised rhapsodies of love and hate, idealism and adventure in the stands and the trenches. As often as it devolves into horrifying violence, or stale banality, it also supplies the 'unforgettable', 'best' moments of one's life. It drills its subjects with shots of adrenaline.

• • •

People who don't think they agree with these racist, philandering pre-Oedipal devourers nonetheless can enjoy the performance of unregulated desire they put on.

James A. Smith

III. The mixed reactions of reaction in the face of disaster, dread and desire, are bound together in the secretion of hormones and the tightening and release of muscles. Disaster nationalist rhetoric administers anxiety before offering relief in the thrill of collective hate. 'There are people, bent upon destroying Gujarat,' chief minister Narendra Modi told a 'Hindu pride' rally at the fourteenth-century city of Mehsana in September 2002. But, he added, to the rapture of his audience, 'if we raise the self-respect and morale of fifty million Gujaratis, the schemes of Alis, Malis and Jamalis will not be able to do us any harm.'

This rally took place six months after the conclusion of an ecstatic, state-orchestrated, Modi-incited, police-enabled pogrom. Hindus from all castes and classes, men and women, participated in the massacre of at least two thousand Muslims: the 'Alis, Malis and Jamalis' of whom Modi spoke. But, as in past communal riots, as in the more recent mob violence at Jawaharlal Nehru University and in New Delhi, the violence was coordinated. Raheel Dhaliwala and Michael Biggs of Oxford University found that the murders were particularly concentrated in areas where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) faced the most intense electoral competition. In aftermath, the BJP vote soared in these areas. Why? Recall that the yield proffered by Modi for enacting what Freud called 'the blindest frenzy of destructiveness', realising the most extreme 'omnipotence-wishes', was self-respect.

If reactionary nationalism has hitherto failed to improve the living standards of its privileged subjects – or even, during a pandemic, to defend their lives – it has consistently delivered on morale-boosting cruelty, racist incitement and intimidation of ‘traitors’ and ‘anti-nationals’. Trump escalates border violence with the ‘Muslim ban’ and the use of concentration camps for migrants on the southern border, incites racist, red-baiting frenzy against Ilhan Omar and defends Nazis after one of their number has murdered an antifascist. Bolsonaro, famously representing the ‘bull, bullet and bible’ bloc – agribusiness, the security sector and Evangelicals – unleashes the moralising violence of all three. Police murders, already the highest in the world, soar. Ranchers wage war by fire against indigenous communities. And Evangelicals fight the culture war against what Bolsonaro and his allies call ‘gender ideology’. Netanyahu says ‘it’s them or us’, calls his opponents ‘Arab-lovers’, formalises the de facto supremacy of Jewish citizens of Israel, and prepares to annexe West Bank colonies. Modi wins re-election by pledging to conquer Kashmir and change the citizenship laws to discriminate against Muslims, promises he swiftly makes good on with expeditious violence. Duterte, styling himself as ‘The Punisher’, posing with guns and boasting of his first murder at the age of sixteen, unleashes death squads ostensibly to murder drug dealers but in practice targeting addicts and random citizens. Much of their popularity has been won because of, and not in spite of, this violence. And the question is what is so morale-boosting, so elevating and enlivening, about cruelty.

Disaster nationalism plies, in the words of William Connolly, the ‘underground resentments’ circulating through life. In everyday neoliberalism, says Connolly, these affects are already organised in a punitive and victimised ‘ethos of existential revenge’. Existential revenge is practised and hardened through the brutalisation of the poor and marginal by the ‘armoured bodies’ of the police and military, or through the prerogatives of management and supervision, hiring and firing, denying applications, refusing credit and collecting debt. It is present in the soft power of the moral professions, from journalism and social work to evangelism. It resonates with the wounded entitlement of those for whom the consolations of ethnic or national belonging have been diminishing in worth. And it is latent in the dysphoria of the downwardly mobile and ascriptively humiliated. It forges improbable alliances between Indian cops and Dalit women, Brazilian military police, agribusinessmen and evangelicals, US veterans, white rustbelt workers, police unions, outlying billionaires, Wall Street hedge funds, and the radicalised new middle class, City boutique financiers, medium-sized business owners, and small town retirees. The strategy of revenge, hitherto hemmed in by law, and eroded by social movements, binds its practitioners in self-love.

In the style of a modern self-esteem movement, disaster nationalism is dedicated to psychological improvement. ‘The good days are coming.’ ‘Bring us sunshine.’ ‘So much winning.’ This is not a promise to restore bourgeois happiness. Reaction has generally been subtle enough to reject ‘materialistic’ notions of happiness. Such happiness, Mussolini sneered, was not true well-being, but a degradation of humans to the status of cattle purveyed by ‘the economists of the mid-eighteenth century’. For Karl Jaspers, the ‘banal happiness’ of a technicised world was dystopian. For Heidegger, ‘infinite progress’ and ‘the happiness of the greatest number’ was a form of ‘passive nihilism’ that deserved to lose to National Socialism. Better than happiness, was the sublime encounter with death through conquest. Better than contentment, was well-being through supremacy.

• • •

We could perhaps go so far as to say: when – in the human realm – we come across something and have absolutely no clue what it is, we can be pretty certain that it ‘has to do with sex’.

Alenka Zupancic

IV. This is where disaster nationalism becomes, in Dibyesh Anand’s felicitous term, ‘porno-nationalism’. Wherever disaster nationalism takes root, it produces an erotica of biological disaster.

Anand's term describes the Hindutva fascination with images of sexually wicked, seductive, predatory Muslims. The 'Love Jihad', or the 'Romeo Jihad' is a cuck fantasy of Muslim male potency and Hindu submissiveness which, according to RSS timekeeping, extends back some 1,200 years. Hindu nationalist propaganda in one stroke invokes the anxious erotic appeal that such submissiveness might have among its adherents, then redeems them and blames it all on an appeasing, secular, anglicised upper crust that is somehow identical with the Left.

That cuck fantasies of neo-nationalism draw directly from the visual idioms of *Der Stürmer*, which represented 'Germania' as a beautiful, blonde female in the clutches of an unattractive yet sexually successful Jew. Hitler's expostulations about 'bow-legged Jewish bastards' seducing German girls are now subject to a million multimedia remixes, multiplying like memes in tabloids, Tumblr and lone wolf manifestos: cucked by powerful black men, Romanian immigrants, Chads, Mexicans, the Chinese, trans women, lesbians. In this almost rote Theweleitian fantasy, the nation is contaminated, physically enfeebled, swamped. Both inciting and revelling in this fear, the exit offered by disaster nationalism is the production of a new type of sexual pleasure. Disaster nationalism offers '*Kraft durch Freude*': erotic pleasure as a principle of supremacy.

In no way does the record resemble a police state 'coming to the relief of the church guards', as Maria Macciocchi once claimed of fascism. Foucault was right, where Reich was wrong. At least for 'Aryans', the Third Reich sought to produce sexual pleasure, encouraging extramarital affairs and adolescent sex, and soliciting the right to 'carouse' freely for soldiers on the frontline. This was a mode of unrepression.

The sexual braggadocio of Berlusconi, Trump, and Duterte, very much in the spirit of D'Annunzio, is as pre-sexual revolution as Modi's austere celibacy. The sexual admiration for these men, indeed, hinges on their apparent breach of civilised norms, and their air of violence. Much as, perhaps, some people admire serial killers, such as the English fascination with the 'absolute legend' Raoul Moat, a sadistic murderer who went feral during a week-long pursuit by the police, before killing himself. And nor is the sexual admiration for these figures exclusively masculine and homoerotic. Rather, heteronationalist erotics, for their female fans, combines a kind of wilding fantasy with the traditionalist strategy of managing the effects of patriarchy by relying on a strongman. Thus, it is no particular surprise that, just as Trump is sexually admired by 'Walmart moms' who compare him to a Ferrari, a Porsche, or a lion, so Modi has his fans who consider him 'the most eligible bachelor in India' (Bollywood actress Mallika Sherawat) and 'wild - like a lion in that beard of his' (former Miss India America, Priya Warrick).

That the literal erotic lionisation of such leaders is limned by a fascination with transgressive power, that breaks domesticating constraints of civilisation, is hardly lost on reaction. Hence, neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin's try-hard efforts to forge a 'Chad Nationalism' of 'sexy', 'dangerous', gym-hitting boys. However, the sexuality of disaster nationalism is not Salò-style perversity, but a normalising project, an attempt to produce a 'healthy' sexual pleasure. As in the sentimental, embryonically New Age, naturist sexuality of the Nazis, contrasted with made-up, burlesque, Weimar-era, 'Jewish' sexuality. From this, of necessity, millions were excluded, subject to family separation, internment forced sterilisation and murder. Such was the 'cure' for the cuck fantasy, then, and so it is now, from #nofap to the Bolsonaro regime's war on 'gender ideology'.

As Tad Delay puts it, the subjects of rightist nationalism are squares in the guise of rebels: neurotics posing as perverts. The psychological improvement afforded by disaster nationalism hinges, not on thwarting sexual desire, but on reinstating it as a desire for subjugation, a desire to 'know one's place'.

• • •

The individual German, he isn't so bad, you know. But put three Germans together in a room and you can kiss the good world goodbye.

Philip Roth, The Professor of Desire

V. Nationalism has always had a peculiar affinity with the prospect of civilisational collapse, in the face of which it promises to reset reality to its purported cosmic factory setting. Everything in its right place.

Freud, writing in 1929 just as world capitalism crashed, propelling the Nazis to power and Europe to another war, addressed this affinity indirectly. His emphasis was on psychological improvement: the curative effects of decivilisation. Life was hard enough, he wrote, and modern civilisation demanded the foregoing of drive-satisfactions on the one hand, and the ceaseless pursuit of impossible satisfactions on the other. It made people miserable and unwell. And if individual psychology was crushed by civilisation, group psychology was particularly disposed to shrugging off the bonds of civility, and even sanity. 'If the deprivation [imposed by civilisation] is not made good economically,' he wrote, 'one may be certain of producing serious disorders.' Someone had to pay the price to keep civilisation going at such moments. The Jewish people, Freud darkly stated, had 'rendered services which deserve recognition to the development of culture' by being available as Europe's scapegoats. Every civilisation, built on what Hegel called the 'slaughterbench of history', contains its decivilisation, or death drive.

Why ought masses necessarily be more dangerous in this regard than individuals? Studies of mass psychology, until Freud, had been content to describe group feeling in terms of contagion. The assumption of Gustave Le Bon, Freud's chief interlocutor in this subject, was that crowd behaviour was intrinsically irrational. As though fascist mobs were infected, peer-to-peer, in horizontal exchange. Collective ideas and emotions were epidemics, public health emergencies; the social space an epidemiological space. As the sociologist Gabriel Tarde suggested, the very cohesiveness of society presupposed a vast, non-conscious network of mimetic interactions. Social invention occurred in a somnambulistic state, wherein desires appeared which shot out 'incessant radiations', 'imitative rays', 'which harmoniously intersect with thousands of analogue vibrations in whose multiplicity there is an entire lack of confusion.' Hence the 'special desires, of social origin' which neuromarketers go to such lengths to stimulate.

It is more polite, today, to refer to contagion as 'diffusion'. The contagion metaphor can be profoundly misleading, if it is taken to mean that ideas and emotions behave exactly like pathogens. As Damon Centola demonstrates, the ideal society for a virus to transmit in is a 'small world' network with many weak ties. From the point of view of a virus, the clustering of many strong ties in neighbourhoods and communities is network redundancy that impedes diffusion. Social movements have never behaved like this. From the Paris Communes to the Civil Rights movement, movements spread in spatial waves, through tightly knit communities, the contagion ignoring the opportunities for transmission represented by weaker ties. Indeed, the presence of lots of weak ties actually impedes diffusion. This is because the reflexivity involved in the spread of complex contagions, like political commitments, or protest tactics, means there is a far higher threshold for uptake. In any field of social contagion, there are innovators and early adopters; but the majority need to see an idea validated and embraced by several highly esteemed contacts before they begin to take it seriously as an option for themselves. This suggests a productive distinction between the 'simple' contagion of meme-based protests – the Gilets Jaunes, for example – and the more 'complex' contagions that result in sustained mass movements. Still, simple or complex, social trends behave like contagions: the S-curve of diffusion applies as much to technological uptake, the use of sexual contraception, financial bubbles, the spread of social movement tactics, or the diffusion of alt-right memes, as to viruses. And the majority of this diffusion process, like the majority of everyday social cognition – think of motor, postural and behavioural mimicry that occurs between humans in

microseconds – is non-conscious.

Nevertheless, the foundation for contagion theory in the early twentieth century was the nebulous and suspiciously telepathic notion of mesmerism. Freud, perhaps precisely because the notion of telepathy fascinated him, was keen to deprive the concept of its power. He claimed that suggestion was merely a form of transference, or love relationship. Crowds were bounded together through love of the leader who, they mistakenly believed, loved them all back equally. That is, he displaced the question of mimesis, contagion, and of horizontal, molecular solidarities, with that of fathers. Indeed, pressed to explain the existence of group psychology, Freud could do no other than invent the myth of the primordial father who, like the Nephilim of Genesis 6:1–4, had the right to rape ‘the daughters of the earth’. Only in the murder of this father by his sons to divvy up the women among themselves, thus in the guilty kinship of fathers, was group psychology established. Everything in group psychology, including the binding, spellbinding power of nationalism, comes back to the love of fathers.

About the politics of this, Freud was notoriously ‘wrong’. Although he would subsume all integrative, civilising impulses under the rubric of Eros, nothing in his inventory of the psyche would allow one to grasp their spread in horizontal contagions. Without fathers, there could only be a war of all against all. Nor would the Freudian psyche allow one to understand civilisation as a process, and one in which the self-restraint entailed in it was selective, and shaped to particular social objectives, divisions of labour, and state formations. Freud indexed a relationship between civilisation, the disciplining of bodies and the management of pleasure and moulding of affects, but he mythicised, rather than historicising, the problem. Freud was determined to resist the lure of ‘beautiful illusions’ that might get one killed: hence the odd opening detour in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, dissecting the pacifist Romain Rolland’s apprehension of an ‘oceanic feeling’ as the basis for religious sentiment. In the interests of public safety, Freud invented some ugly illusions. Dangerous illusions. If, as Slavoj Žižek argues, the ‘primordial father’ more closely resembles the modern totalitarian leader than a primitive figure, then Freud was not explaining group psychology but deceiving himself about fascism. And thus also, about how his advice to the German military, freely given in *Group Psychology*, might end up being used.

Yet, Freud not only anticipated the looming fascist assault on civilisation; he indexed the way in which it would exact a price in blood for its imagined renewal. Fascism blew up, detonated, an ambiguity intrinsic to nationalism. In its miscarried mourning, as Clara Zetkin warned in her frantic premonitions, it roused and swept along ‘broad social masses who have lost the earlier security of their existence and with it, often, their belief in social order.’ Fascism leveraged both the popular belief in civilisation and the popular desire for its downfall. It was, that is, both a revolt against civilisation, and an imperial plan for its reconstitution through blood sacrifice. It was both apocalyptic and counter-apocalyptic; apocalyptic to the extent that it was counter-apocalyptic.

No reader of *Mein Kampf*, for example, could fail to be struck by the number of times Adolf Hitler evoked civilisation and enumerated the alleged sources of its downfall: ‘social egotism’, race-mixing, ‘contamination’ or ‘adulteration’ ‘of the blood’, mass unemployment, social democracy, ‘the Jewish doctrine of Marxism’, communism, artistic decadence, urbanisation and mass democracy. This was written four years after the collapse of civilisation in Europe, in which unprecedented numbers of young men had been wiped out. The loss left an unmistakeable impression on fascism. Fascist Italy had its cult of ‘the fallen’, and its squadristiwidows attacking communists with sharpened knitting needles. Hitler, during a shell-shocked spell of ‘hysterical blindness’ in the trenches, had hallucinated mother Germany, her secret enemies, and himself as her saviour. Almost as a self-cure for the mustard gas attack, and the apprehension of a coming loss, he hoisted up the nation, a fetish, which is to say an endopsychic crypt in which a mourning is forever sealed off. In the redemption of which, as Tim Mason has argued, he had to crush the working-class movement that he blamed for its

defeat.

• • •

VI. The earliest germs of nationalism emerged by way of cancelling the apocalypse. The proto-nationalisms of western Europe, Anthony Marx argues, were aroused in the context of intense religious civil war, amid fear of apocalyptic rupture and triumphant anti-Christianity, magnified by the early convection cells building to a de/civilising storm of capital accumulation. In the process of early-modern state formation, with central authority expanding and drawing unprecedented masses of people into coexistence in the same exploitative order, the nation-fetish emerged as an incipient ruling-class praxis to stabilise some of this turmoil.

Nationalism not only permitted the imagining of communities distinct from Roman power, but also organised the suppression of conflict and even of memories of conflict. French absolutism demanded that the St Bartholomew's Day massacre be treated as though it never happened. English restoration necessitated an Act of Indemnity and Oblivion. We are all in it together. Hence also the exclusionary dynamic of nationalism, as civil conflict was displaced into new modes of exclusion, forced assimilation, subalternisation and what Michael Hechter characterises as a class-aligned form of 'internal colonialism'.

This precocious nationalisation of the masses, tailored from a selective merger of faith, war and politics, later acquiring the garb of race and coloniality, was a civilising process in the sense described – and tacitly endorsed, for he was both an admirer and victim of German nationalism – by Norbert Elias. The formation of a 'national habitus', wherein the experience of being at home in the world was forcibly conjoined with the abstract category of nationhood, was of necessity a moulding of the drive economy, an installation of new types of repugnance and shame, new social prohibitions regarding expressions of sexuality and aggression.

Nationalism was also, by virtue of its exclusions, concurrently a regime of decivilisation. It entailed new modes of permissiveness, sometimes quite extreme depending on where one stood in the hierarchies of race, class, sex and culture. As Sheldon George wrote of antebellum slavery, the shaming gaze was absent in a slaveholder's relationship with slaves: he could do whatever he liked to them. The cultivation of a 'national habitus', then, might allow one to 'feel American' precisely to the extent that one shared in the liberty to oppress. These practical experiences could work, for the interpellated American, as palpable confirmations of a nationalist cosmos in which, as Fox evangelicals fondly imagine, God is a white man who loves other white men.

Disaster nationalism is native to nationalist politics. One might say it is endemic. A decivilising pathogen maintained in a human reservoir, ready to spark into outbreak when the tornado of creative-destructive power, the storm of de/civilisation, the vast and complex organised anarchy of capitalism, brings us to the brink of another catastrophe.

• • •

I'm sorry, some people will die, they will die, that's life. You can't stop a car factory because of traffic deaths.

Jair Bolsonaro

And yet, with the disaster of Covid-19 driving the world economy into a recession more comparable to 'transition' economies of Eastern Europe than the Great Depression, disaster nationalism has been initially blown off course. The plague has thrown all existing calculations up in the air. Indeed, it has problematised the relationship between the two valences, disaster and nationalism.

For, disaster nationalism does not salivate over this catastrophe with as much relish as it has courted imaginary threats. To the contrary, many of its partisans have been markedly defensive, uncomfortable about the role apparently demanded of them by pandemic. This, of course, hasn't foreclosed downright opportunism. In Hungary and Israel, reactionary governments have cheerfully leveraged the situation to install themselves as emergency dictatorships. Yet the pandemic would seem to represent an obvious opportunity for nationalist leaderships to build a much larger and more resilient hegemony, especially when their terms of art are 'protection', 'security' and control'. Why should the enemies of 'globalists' hesitate to grasp a moment that appears to be crying out for some degree of deglobalisation? One might argue that a virus is much more difficult to pressgang into a friend/enemy distinction than, say, a terrorist attack. Yet other viruses, from SARS to Zika, have swiftly been racialised, assigned without hesitation to immigrants and global enemies. And there have been attempts to cement the same intuitions in this context, with reference to the 'Chinese virus' or, as Donald Trump puts it with his idiot-savant gift for such agitation, 'Kung Flu'. For some reason, the diffusion of these ideas has been limited, and they have yet to mutate into an efficient pathogen.

Instead, the dominant tone among disaster nationalists has been hesitant and resentful, evincing a form of denialism (both literal and implicative) usually reserved for climate change. Jair Bolsonaro has put up the strongest resistance to the new dispensation, denouncing media 'hysteria', and scolding state governors for their emergency measures. He is emphatically #sorrynotsorry that people will die. Others have vacillated. Trump swerves hard between reluctantly and belatedly implementing necessary steps, and downplaying the crisis, suggesting that the cure – shutting down much of the economy for the emergency – could be worse than the disease. Lega Nord has been politically confused, beginning with denialism, then pivoting abruptly to calls for lockdown. Rodrigo Duterte took almost a month from the first death from Covid-19 in the Philippines, to implementing a public emergency. Although he swiftly found his groove when he threatened to shoot dead those protesting lockdown because they had no food, his penchant for hardman nationalist paranoia has rebounded on him. He is now a target of popular conspiracism unleashed against the Philippines' Chinese minority, with whom he is supposedly in cahoots.

It is only Hindu nationalism, despite its predilection for conspiracism and pseudo-science, that has fully embraced the disaster, and then only belatedly after a great deal of complacency. The communist-governed state of Kerala was practicing testing, tracing and isolation for weeks while Modi was practicing a deliberate silence. Modi's eventual embrace of lockdown was preceded by confused announcements, such as asking Indians to observe a 'people's curfew' for a few hours. The resulting chaos, when the government finally imposed a lockdown without warning, saw panic buying, and police beating up citizens for buying milk or other supplies. Modi's reluctance may be, in part, attributable to the Hindutva promise to deliver India to global capitalist vigour and Chinese-style growth. Nonetheless, when Modi moved, he did so more decisively than some of his nationalist peers. What explains the difference? The deep civil society reach of Hindu nationalism is undergirded by a doctrinal reactionary corporatism, in which disaster is to be permanently externalised onto Muslims and migrants. The majority of disaster nationalist currents are embedded in thin civic association and are ideologically sociophobic. Indeed, that sociophobia, inherited from neoliberalism, is coextensive with their catastrophilia.

Covid-19 is the latest, but definitely not the last, of a series of viral threats: SARS (2003), swine flu (2009), MERS (2012), Ebola (2014), Zika (2016), and of course the ongoing threat of bird flu. The pandemic age is with us, and demands a response in the register of biopolitics, promoting and preserving sacred life. This can, though it need not, cut against the grain of racist sovereignty. The World Health Organisation, and various national health bureaucracies, have more authority in such circumstances than the Pentagon, or Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Various states,

including in the US, have been compelled to release prisoners in the interests of public health. The British government has been forced to release several hundred detainees from its detention centres for refugees.

The ultimate ruling class response to this pandemic is liable to be a biopolitical security state, characterised by a stronger fusion of monopoly capital with the state, in which 'big data' will have a privileged role in helping governments trace activity and control flows of goods, people and viral particles. This is clearly congruent with a version of reinvigorated nationalism. However, such a state will of necessity include forms of public healthcare resilience with which disaster nationalism – ever committed to the enlivening encounter with death, and to the austere moralising effects of social Darwinism – is uncomfortable. Moreover, although employers will seek to exploit the crisis to intensify labour market precarity, the exposure of millions to a punitive unemployment regime designed to discipline a small minority may well lead to politically efficacious demands for stronger social security.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed a hard, and for the Right worrying, limit to the popular acquiescence in capitalism. Boris Johnson's early suggestion that we should 'take it on the chin', get sick and develop 'herd immunity', was supported by a range of assertions about the economic damage of doing otherwise. For example, that closing schools would cost 3 per cent of GDP. What was a few hundreds of thousands of deaths compared to that? It ultimately proved too politically costly to keep people working for capitalism. Even Trump can't pull it off, while Bolsonaro's resistance to the new dispensation is liable to cost him.

The plague is testing, or perhaps refiguring, the alliance between nationalism and social catastrophe. It is also causing other complex contagions to spark and diffuse. Outbreaks of imitative solidarity, mutual aid, do not merely verify that politically generative feelings of sameness need not be nationalised. Disaster nationalism has thus far behaved, in most cases, like a simple contagion. With low commitment, low risks for involvement, and low thresholds for uptake, the pathogen has spread best through a social network with as many weak ties as possible and little of the network redundancy that comes with clusters of strong ties. The danger is that, as solidaristic, non-nationalist affects become folded into the mechanical habits of daily life, they create new social network structures that are both resilient to nationalism and conducive to more complex contagions. That is the plague that haunts disaster nationalism

Richard Seymour

P.S.

• Salvage. September 11, 2020:
<https://salvage.zone/in-print/prepared-for-the-worst-disaster-nationalism/>