Nationalism, identity politics, and polarization in the digital age

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Despite deepening globalisation and the declining influence of national borders on the spatial movement of goods, people and ideas, understandings of the nation remain at the core of social identity and notions of civic belonging in societies across the world. Immigration and ethno-religious diversification have sparked intense debates and mobilisations regarding the boundaries of national belonging in Europe and North America. As many have noted, discourses and representations of the "Other" provide insight into how collectives think of themselves as a people or nation (e.g., Hall, 1991). The heterogeneity of these discourses and representations, and the vehemence with which they are promulgated, evidence the stark divisions and polarisation surrounding fundamental questions about who we are and how our societies should be governed.

Right-wing or far-right formations typically articulate narrow and exclusionary concepts of national belonging rooted in traditional identities and values. Concepts of national identity among the Right, however, are neither monolithic nor static. Scholars have noted, for instance, how right-wing populist parties, particularly in Northern and Western Europe, increasingly talk about national identity in civilisationist terms, invoking the importance of preserving Western values or (Judeo-)Christian heritage (Hennig and Hidalgo, 2021). For certain political formations, this has involved embracing liberal values like gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights as a means of erecting exclusionary boundaries vis-à-vis ethnic and religious minorities stereotyped as illiberal, most notably Muslims (Brubaker, 2017). This type of ideological manoeuvre is abhorred by more classic variants of the far right.

As Kaufmann (2019) highlights, moreover, purely ethnic understandings of the nation are generally found only among the most extreme segments of the far right. Most right-wing formations in Europe and North America today do not espouse complete ethnic homogeneity, but instead

advocate what he calls "ethno-traditional nationalism", a view "which seeks to protect the traditional preponderance of ethnic majorities through slower immigration and assimilation" (Kaufmann, 2019:435). To be sure, this perspective has been used to promote or justify draconian policies that pose grave threats to the rights of minorities. However, the form of nationalism underlying this view differs from the more exclusively ethnic nationalism that pervaded early 20th century Europe.

For their part, activists, academics and political elites on the Left have tended to advocate more pluralistic understandings of the nation that underpin inclusive philosophies of integration like multiculturalism or interculturalism (Kastoryano, 2018). The notion of "unity in diversity" has gained traction among diverse public and private institutions and organisations in Europe, North America and beyond. While embraced by progressives, pluralistic and inclusive understandings of national identity are viewed with scepticism by others, including a growing sector within the white working classes, as evidenced by their rising support for far-right parties (Gest, 2016). Many who have come upon hard times link their misfortune and feelings of impotence and disempowerment when faced with their loss of status and priority vis-à-vis immigrants and other minorities. This is one of the reasons for the popularity of conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement that have been propagated by right-wing politicians and pundits to stir up resentment toward minorities and progressive political and social trends.[1]

A major obstacle to promoting pluralistic identities and ideals is the lack of a strong structural and organisational basis for building coalitions that are inclusive of diverse socio-demographic and political groups. The case of the US is instructive in this regard. The weakening of labour unions has eroded a critical site for the creation of "bridging social capital" among different segments of the working class (Putnam, 2000). As *New York Times* journalist Ezra Klein (2020) argued in his book, *Why We're Polarized*, both the Republican and Democratic parties once encompassed supporters with diverse points of view and social backgrounds. The internal diversity of these parties created pressure to develop positions that emerged from compromise, and political leaders often sought to moderate the more extremist views among those in their respective parties' ranks. Today, by contrast, the more radical flanks of each party, especially among the Republicans, exert disproportionate influence. This has led to the general impoverishment of political debate, reducing it to inflammatory and reductive talking points that reflect simplistic and Manichean political and social viewpoints.

The US is not unique in this regard. In many societies, it is possible to observe how different positions—and oftentimes basic terminology—are now immediately coded as being associated with one political identity or another, making it increasingly difficult to sustain complex and nuanced discussions in the public sphere. Klein and others have pointed to how news organisations and social media with strong commercial incentives exacerbate polarisation by

1. The Great Replacement theory first went viral in France after the philosopher Renaud Camus' publication of a book of the same title in 2012, but influential variants have also emerged elsewhere in Europe and in North America (Ekman, 2022).

providing people with information they *want* to receive, rather than information they arguably *should* receive, namely more complete and fact-based accounts of key issues. As polarisation has deepened, politics has become more and more tribal. Inclusive conceptions of national identity that traverse partisan boundaries are extremely difficult to cultivate as a result, even during times of crisis, as was evident in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The rise of identity politics has been an extremely important development in the West and beyond, as it has contributed to social reflexivity and awareness of the social injustices suffered by historically marginalised groups. Movements like Me Too and Black Lives Matter continue to play a key role in generating pressure for needed political and social reforms. The challenge is to find a way to engage productively around questions of identity and difference that fosters unity rather than polarisation, and that contributes to change through empowerment but without excessive shaming and denigration. Given that the information we receive on a daily basis is filtered by ever more refined algorithms that reward those who exploit our deepest fears, most virulent prejudices and most savage desires, facing up to this challenge will become increasingly difficult in the years to come.

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