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Exchange

NATIVISTS ARE POPULISTS, NOT LIBERALS

Ben Margulies

Ben Margulies is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Warwick, where he works on the European Research Council's Diasporas and Contested Sovereignty Project. He earned his doctorate in political science from the University of Essex in 2014.

Scholars increasingly cast contemporary politics as a clash between liberal democrats and populists, and especially between liberal democrats and radical-right populists. The latter, as defined by Cas Mudde, are “political parties with a core ideology that is a combination of nativism, authoritarianism and populism.”¹ But it can be surprisingly difficult to distinguish liberals from populists. Any political actor can claim to represent “the people,” and most do at various points. And many—though by no means all—radical-right populists themselves claim to be defenders of liberal values.

In his essay “The Specter Haunting Europe: Distinguishing Liberal Democracy’s Challengers” in the October 2016 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, Takis Pappas attempts to demarcate which parties can credibly be called liberal-democratic, and which are among liberal democracy’s challengers.² He argues that some radical-right populist parties should also count as liberal. He describes this subset of parties as “nativist,” but unlike Mudde, he contends that these parties are part of the liberal-democratic tradition, since they support “political liberalism *for the natives*” and “represent right-wing conservative ideas—the defense of law and order, as well as what has been termed ‘welfare chauvinism’—while being fully committed to parliamentary democracy and constitutional legality” (p. 27).

Pappas is correct to say that some radical-right populists promote, or claim to promote, liberal values. But that is not the same as saying that they *are* liberals, or that their parties can be classified as liberal parties. Pappas’s description of various antisystem parties as liberal is questionable, for three main reasons:

First, Pappas's division between "antidemocrats" and nativists is poorly policed. Parties that he classifies as "antidemocratic" often claim to be defending liberal values.

Second, Pappas does not consider the many ways in which radical-right populist leaders ignore core liberal values such as the rule of law, respect for the rights of minorities, and horizontal accountability, even within the national community.

Finally, there is the question of intent. Do radical-right populist parties adopt liberal values because they value liberalism? Or is their goal to *nationalize* liberalism, to use it to define the nation—and to decide who does not belong to it? Is their adoption of liberalism really just a way of saying "We are different from Muslims," of drawing convenient boundaries and demeaning those outside them? At best, these nativist parties have a conflicted attitude toward liberal values; at worst, these parties deploy such values instrumentally to serve ethnonationalist and illiberal purposes.

Pappas sorts "liberal democracy's challengers" into the categories of antidemocrats, nativists, and populists. The first, as their name indicates, are foes of parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, and free-market economies. They are "ultranationalist—even racist" (p. 24) if on the right, and Leninist if on the left, but in both cases hostile to globalization and the European Union. Such parties on the nationalist right include France's National Front (FN), at least before Marine Le Pen's campaign to moderate it. They also include Hungary's Jobbik, Greece's Golden Dawn, and the Flemish Vlaams Belang. On the left, there are communist or ex-communist parties such as Germany's Die Linke.

Populists are "always democratic but never liberal" (p. 29). In effect, they are majoritarian democrats. Pappas's classification seems to transcend the boundaries between mainstream and outsider parties. This category includes Hungary's Fidesz, Poland's Law and Justice, and Italy's Forza Italia. It also includes several Greek parties, among them the Panhellenic Socialist Alliance (PASOK), Syriza, and the Independent Greeks (ANEL).

Nativists, Pappas avers, are neither populists nor antidemocrats, but simply liberals who believe that the liberal community of equals must be ethnically and culturally homogenous in order to be feasible. They do not oppose "political liberalism for the natives," and "are seen by many middle-class Europeans as the most vocal champions of traditional *conservative* understandings of liberal democracy in their respective societies." Pappas's list of liberal nativist parties includes the "Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ); the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV); the Danish People's Party (DF); Norway's Progress Party (FrP); the Sweden Democrats (SD); the Finns (PS, formerly known as the True Finns); the Swiss People's Party (SVP); the U.K. Independence Party (UKIP); and the

more recently emergent Alternative for Germany (AfD),” as well as the FN under Marine Le Pen, who has been party leader since 2011 (p. 27).

Liberalism and Nativists

Many nativist parties do in fact proclaim themselves to be defenders of many (though not all) liberal-democratic values, and even some that would be considered libertarian. Marine Le Pen has drawn wide notice for her efforts to “de-demonize” the image of her party. The FN now accepts democracy, republicanism, and secularism—core aspects of the French Revolutionary settlement that it had once rejected.³ The party has abandoned its previous espousal of anti-Semitic themes. In a 2011 magazine interview, Le Pen declared the Holocaust “the height of barbarism.”⁴ That same year, she publicly denounced racism and anti-Semitism. The Sweden Democrats, a party with roots in Swedish neo-Nazism and neofascism, announced their support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, gender equality, and civic nationalism, stating that Sweden is defined by culture and not bloodline, and thus “open to people with a background in other nations.”⁵

The Dutch populist right has consistently differentiated between the liberal and tolerant Dutch *ethnos* and “backward” Islam. The Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) took a markedly libertarian stance, supporting “freedom of choice in ethical questions like abortion, euthanasia, or sexual relations.”⁶ Pim Fortuyn was shot to death at the height of the 2002 Dutch election campaign by a left-wing activist named Volkert van der Graaf, who said at his murder trial that he objected to what he saw as Fortuyn’s making “scapegoats” of Muslims.⁷ Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), has since taken up the mantle of defending Dutch liberalism, especially when it comes to women’s rights and gay rights, from an “intolerant and backward Islam.”⁸ Like Fortuyn, Wilders sees Islam as the foe of a central Dutch value: tolerance. The nationalism of both Fortuyn and Wilders is civic rather than ethnic.

The radical-right populist appropriation of liberalism appears to be a generalized phenomenon. Daphne Halikiopoulou, Steven Mock, and Sofia Vasilopoulou analyze six radical-right populist parties in Europe and find that “these parties have annexed civic values in their discursive toolkit, including the notions of democracy, citizenship and respect for the rule of law.”⁹ So it is clear that Pappas’s “nativists” do propound and support at least some values associated with political liberalism. But does this make them liberal?

The first problem with Pappas’s categorization of nativist parties as “liberal” is that his distinction between nativists and antidemocrats does not quite work in practice. Parties that are clearly *not* liberal at all have nonetheless been known to proclaim support for national liberal values in order to make themselves seem more “normal.” Pappas himself cites

the British National Party (BNP) as an example of an antidemocratic party, and it clearly has roots in neofascist ideology. But in its 2010 manifesto, the BNP implicitly placed itself on the side of “modern secular western democracy” in the course of claiming that the “historical record shows that Islam is by its very nature incompatible” with this form of government.¹⁰ Belgium’s Vlaams Belang, a direct heir to the explicitly racist and ethnonationalist Vlaams Blok, also appears on Pappas’s list of antidemocratic parties. Yet the Vlaams Belang’s leaders have been at pains to “promote themselves as defending liberal values and democracy against Islam.”¹¹ The Vlaams Belang has even called for defending the liberal values of secularism, free speech, and gender equality to the point of forcibly returning to their countries of origin any immigrants who reject these ideas.¹²

A Very Partial Liberalism

Many of the parties that Pappas classifies as nativist either advocate authoritarian or repressive policies or pursue them while in office, showing little respect for such central values of political liberalism as constitutionalism, pluralism, legitimate opposition, and horizontal accountability.

The Freedom Party of Austria ignored a 2001 Constitutional Court ruling requiring the installation of minority-language public signage (in this case, in Slovene) in the state of Carinthia, where the party’s then-leader, the late Jörg Haider, was serving as governor. Haider also brought libel suits against critics, including political scientist Anton Pelinka, and “suggested that MPs who had allegedly refused to ‘defend their country abroad’ [against sanctions imposed on the government] should be held criminally liable.”¹³

In the years immediately following 9/11, the Netherlands’ Geert Wilders dwelt upon the ability and the need to flout legal and constitutional norms: “In times of real crisis, Wilders stressed more than once, the margins of democratic politics are as small as we want them to be: ‘we can do everything, we can change the constitution, we can denounce international treaties.’” His party has also proposed “selling” the (majority nonwhite) Netherlands Antilles, though those Caribbean islands are integral parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and their people are Dutch citizens.¹⁴

The National Front, despite Marine Le Pen’s efforts at liberalization, has remained markedly intolerant not just of immigrants, but of those who advocate their rights. Even with Marine Le Pen at the helm of the party, local governments under FN control often politicize cultural policies and freeze out cultural associations and producers who do not align with the party’s traditionalism. The municipal government in Mantes-la-Ville cut funding to civil society groups working in low-income or minority neighborhoods, and barred those working with the departmental authorities in these areas from participating in municipal cultural activities.¹⁵

The nativist commitment to inegalitarianism extends to questions of gender equality and women's empowerment among the majority ethnic group. The Sweden Democrats frequently claim that "gender equality" is a Swedish national attribute, but mainly when contrasting Sweden with Muslim societies or immigrant populations. In other contexts, the party claims that there are essential and permanent differences between men and women; it rejects the idea that Swedish women face gender-based pay discrimination and condemns attempts to increase women's participation in the police and armed forces.¹⁶

Pappas defines the nativist project as the preservation of a liberal community of equals for the members of that community alone. But is the point to defend liberal values or to defend the national community? Liberal values are, by definition, universal values, the common heritage and right of all humanity, and not the specific attributes of one national group or a collection of nations. For nativists and radical-right populists, however, liberal values are specifically *national* values. Those defined as "others" do not share them, and the alleged failure or refusal of these outsiders to live by liberal values renders them threatening. Nativists do not merely defend liberal values, but *nationalize* them in celebrating the moral goodness of the nation, whose essence is to be free. Their liberalism is secondary to their nationalism.

In defining certain groups not just as illiberal, but as inherently unassimilable, Pappas's nativists scant several aspects of the liberalism that they claim to defend. These include a commitment to human equality; the belief that individuals, not groups, are the main subjects of political life, and that they are capable of making free and rational choices; and the universal appeal and applicability of liberal values.

Radical-right populists and nativists seem less committed to liberal beliefs in equality and human worth, and more concerned with how liberalism makes their national collectives superior to others that they dislike. They "emphasise the superiority of the nation's institutional structure and its right to emancipation from the advances of other 'inferior' nations whose political systems are portrayed as undeveloped, undemocratic and unrepresentative."¹⁷ In the present decade, these "inferior" nations have usually been Muslim, and have been portrayed as backward, *essentially* illiberal, and incapable of understanding, appreciating, or adopting the progressive values of the European *demos*.

Pappas's nativists almost universally call Muslims alien and inferior. The Danish People's Party, in its 2001 electoral campaign, declared the Islamic "way of life" to be "medieval" and implacably opposed to liberal democracy.¹⁸ After 9/11, one of the party's MEPs was reported to have said that "there was no real difference between ordinary Muslims and the 9/11 terrorists," since "both shared 'a hatred founded on a sick ideology.'"¹⁹ The Swiss People's Party launched a successful campaign to ban the construction of minarets in Switzerland in 2009, justifying

this as a barrier against “beacons of jihad” and “an ‘intolerant culture, which puts its God-given, Islamic laws over the laws of the country.’”²⁰ Wilders once called for a tax on “head rags.”²¹ The Party for Freedom’s 2017 manifesto included calls to close all Islamic schools, ban the Koran, and bar all immigration from Islamic-majority countries, under the heading of “de-Islamizing the Netherlands.”²²

Does it make sense to support “liberalism in one country?” One can certainly frame liberalism as a national value and pledge to defend it from external enemies. But it is quite another thing to define the nation as “liberal” primarily as a way of defining other nations as “evil,” or of responding to the fact that raw ethnonationalism has gone out of fashion. Despite his claim that nativists seek to defend “political liberalism for the natives,” Pappas’s nativist parties cannot be credibly classified as liberal or readily distinguished from parties that Pappas places in his other categories. The “nativists” whom he identifies share discourses and strategies with “antidemocratic” parties such as the Vlaams Belang (plus its predecessor the Vlaams Blok) and the British National Party. Furthermore, the nativists show little real commitment to liberal values, often expressing at best qualified support for core liberal principles such as constitutionalism or the autonomy of civil society. Nor do they credibly defend egalitarianism within the national community.

At best, Pappas’s nativists defend a shallow and chauvinistic liberalism. It serves mainly to deny universalism, draw exclusionary boundaries, demean Muslims, and establish a hierarchical relationship between the “pure people” and the “others” (mainly Muslims). It is not liberalism as a set of convictions, but as a tool, even a weapon. Pappas argues that populists can be democratic, but never liberal. By that measure, his nativists are just as populist as his populists.

NOTES

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2. Page numbers corresponding to quotes from Pappas’s article appear in parentheses in the body of the text.

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