

Cosmopolitanism, Populism, and Democracy

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A B S T R A C T

The topic of my paper is the attack on cosmopolitanism ever since the Great Recession. Since 2008, populist reactions to the ill effects of globalisation have sprung up in many Western countries. Their target is the post-WW II political consensus—at least as far as Europe is concerned—of an ‘ever closer union,’ a policy based on 20th century history and a new cosmopolitan sensibility. This sensibility is now under attack—Brexit being only the most visible sign—and calls for a new nationalism have returned to both sides of the Atlantic. For a West-German citizen born after the war, such a focus on the nation was out of the question for all the well-known reasons. In this paper I engage with the critics of cosmopolitanism, exploring both populist and liberal objections to it. As a result, I arrive at a more nuanced position that takes stock of the negative effects of globalization. I suggest that the road forward—at least for the foreseeable future—might well be a division of labour between the European nation states and a cosmopolitan sensibility.

K E Y W O R D S

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I would like to start with a quote from *After Europe*, Ivan Krastev's 2017 meditation on the future of the European Union. Krastev's book is not a swan song to the European Union. Rather, he tries to find an explanation for the rising disenchantment with this institution as felt in many of its member states. In the process, he submits the following bifurcated observation on cosmopolitanism, which I will use to set the stage for my reflections on the challenge that today's populist movements pose to my own cosmopolitan beliefs. The bifurcation alludes to the different ways Western and Central Europeans conceive of transnational, or cosmopolitan, ideas. Krastev suggests that:

the German drive for cosmopolitanism was [...] a way to escape the xenophobic legacy of Nazism, while it could be argued that Central Europe's anti-cosmopolitanism is partially rooted in an aversion to a communist imposed internationalism [...] (In Western Europe, 1968 symbolizes the endorsement of cosmopolitan values, while in the East it stands for the rebirth of national sentiments). (Krastev, 2017, p. 57)

What I find so instructive about this statement is that the move towards internationalism or cosmopolitanism—is either welcomed or rejected on the basis of a nation's history. Not only do these diametrically opposed reactions to a post-national Europe help explain the gap in the European handling of refugees in Western and Central Europe (Merkel: thumbs up; Orban: thumbs down); they point, in addition, to the cultural and political roots for these divergent policies. Krastev's remark thus provides a first indication that the populist challenge to cosmopolitanism needs to be taken seriously rather than to be rejected out of hand as undemocratic intervention. In what follows I will pass in review recent challenges to the view that cosmopolitanism represents the arrow of history. I will use the term cosmopolitanism in the way Krastev understands it: namely, as the underlying drive of a European post-World War II vision to build a united Europe, an 'ever closer union,' in which, ideally, and eventually, national sovereignty gets dissolved in European sovereignty.

In no country, perhaps, was this drive for a European unification stronger than in West Germany. The burden of the Nazi crimes committed in the name and with the support of the German people, prohibited, after 1945, a patriotic focus on the nation. In the West Germany I grew up in, not all, to be sure, but a large majority of politicians and citizens rejected expressions of nationalist sentiment in any shape or form. In its stead, they espoused a European cosmopolitanism or, at the very least, multilateralism. Led by the vision of a united Europe that would see no more wars, cosmopolitan-minded Germans, even after the fall of the Wall, were Europeans long before they received European passports. Looking back from today's vantage, the decision in favor of cosmopolitanism as a bulwark against nationalism was a very successful undertaking.

What we are learning the hard way today, however, is that, along with nationalism, cosmopolitans rejected the nation state in general. Not in reality, of course, but potentially. For, as is quite plain to see, not only do the European nation states still exist but they also wield political power commensurate with their economic strength. In other words, nation states continue to exist alongside the cosmopolitan project of the European Union. Yet, in theory, the goal of a truly cosmopolitan vision is to step by step merge these nation states into one sovereign European state—whose citizens would eventually agree with Emmanuel Macron's exclamation "Brussels is us"—made during his

Initiative for Europe speech at the Sorbonne in September 2017. Today's populist movements, however, most ardently the supporters of Brexit, are opposed precisely to this endgame of cosmopolitanism.

As a German, born in 1955, it was “natural” to be a defender of cosmopolitanism and of European integration. But given the recent populist attacks on cosmopolitan elites as well as the claim of a democratic deficit in the governance of the EU, I feel the need to re-examine my own premises. In a first step, I will pass in review the *political* objections that recent populist movements have leveled against Europe's cosmopolitan aspirations. In a second step, I will interrogate the *theoretical* arguments leveled against cosmopolitan democracy even by some defenders of cosmopolitanism. I will then suggest that a re-conceptualized cosmopolitanism is nevertheless indispensable for European integration and a peaceful world.

I. The Populist Challenge

Populism itself is not an ideology, if by ideology we mean to designate a particular set of beliefs as they are for example enshrined in religious doctrines or party platforms. Populists, rather, in the words of Ernesto Laclau, ‘construct a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the “underdog” against “those in power”’ (quoted in Mouffe, 2018, pp. 10-11). Populists therefore display an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ mentality, with ‘us’ being the people, while ‘them’ refers to a perceived elite. This formalist conception of populism does not exclude that, at any particular point in history, a populist revolt has a precise political content, purpose, or agenda when it erupts. All we need to do is look to Brexit for confirmation. But because the populist moment has no core set of beliefs, is not attached to any party platform, the revolt of the underdogs or ‘left-behinds’ (Goodhart, 2017) is more easily co-opted, even high-jacked, by demagogues who fill the populist outrage with anti-liberal and anti-democratic content.

In the recent literature on populism, if we zoom out far enough, we can discern two schools of thought when it comes to the legitimacy of populism as a democratic tool. For some, populism is seen as a political means to protest an elite's neglect of their vital interests: Goodhart (2017), Judis (2016), Koppetsch (2019), Manow (2018), and Mouffe (2019) are in this camp. For others, however, populism poses a direct danger to liberal democracy because of its anti-pluralist stance: see Galston (2018), Krastev (2017), Mudde (2017), and Müller (2016).

For the first group, populism emerges as a legitimate political reaction to real existing inequalities that are not on the radar of ruling elites. Populism here represents the pressure from below without which important changes to the political landscape will never happen. It is therefore seen as a democratic counterweight. If handled without giving in to authoritarian, nationalist, or nativist seduction, such a form of democratic populism could even be helpful in stabilizing the political system. The field of those who see populism as a legitimate activity includes defenders of national populism (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2019) as well as leftist populism (Mouffe, 2018). Both camps see populist interventions as the honest expression of a disadvantaged section of the population voicing legitimate complaints against an elite, while staying within the bounds of liberal democracy.

The second school of thought considers populism an undemocratic, and therefore illegitimate, tool of political change—in spite of the fact that its representatives also recognize the validity of the populist complaints against the elites. However, they consider the populists' political demands as but a smokescreen. For them, populist rhetoric is anti-pluralist in orientation and the real danger comes to light once populists are in power (as in Central European countries today), for then they start to erode liberal institutions. This is because populists assume their voice is the authentic voice of the people, which makes all other political positions not just different but inauthentic. Their authenticity, they argue, gives them the right to curtail or abolish fundamental institutions of liberal democracy, such as the state of law (*Rechtsstaat*), the division of powers, and the freedom of the press. In the words of Ivan Krastev:

What characterizes populists in power are their constant attempts to dismantle the system of checks and balances and to bring independent institutions like courts, central banks, media outlets, and civil society organizations under their control.

Populists and radical parties aren't just parties; they are constitutional movements. They promise voters what liberal democracy cannot: a sense of victory where majorities — not just political majorities, but ethnic and religious ones, too — can do what they please.

The rise of these parties is symptomatic of the explosion of threatened majorities as a force in European politics. They blame the loss of control over their lives, real or imagined, on a conspiracy between cosmopolitan-minded elites and tribal-minded immigrants. They blame liberal ideas and institutions for weakening the national will and eroding a national unity. They tend to see compromise as corruption and zealotry as conviction. (Krastev, 2017, pp. 75-6)

Thus, while both schools of thought agree that the populist revolt stems from opposition to elites, it is the second for whom the true nature of populism surfaces in the anti-democratic slippage that occurs when legitimate complaints of a loss in political solidarity take the form of anti-liberal, authoritarian politics. For the danger is that, for the loss of solidarity to be regained, populists often make use of ethnic or religious nationalism.

Thus, while populism of the first kind looks to establish political solidarity in democratic fashion, the second—potentially—conceives solidarity on the pre-political level of the nation as ethnic or religious community where, at least potentially, non-national others may be persecuted. John B. Judis (2016) refers to the first kind of populism as dyadic (people/elite) and to the second as a triadic (people/elite/other to blame]. This debate about the true nature of populism is in full swing and both sides have serious arguments on their side.

What is interesting for my purposes is that, in both cases, whether as animus against the reigning elite or as threat to the institutions of pluralist democracy, cosmopolitanism finds itself in populism's line of fire. This is so because cosmopolitans are seen as lacking, even as challenging the kind of solidarity populists want to reclaim.

II. Cosmopolitanism, Globalization, and the Problem of Solidarity

In order to see if this assessment of cosmopolitanism is justified, we need to dig deeper. Since the mid-1990s, a great number of books and essay collections on cosmopolitanism have appeared, among them Archibugi (2003), Brock and Brighouse (2005), Brown and Held (2010), Breckenridge (2002), Cheah and Robbins (1998), Robbins and Lemon Horta (2017), and Vertovec and Cohen (2002). These different collections interrogate cosmopolitanism from all points of view: systematic, historical, philosophical, ethical, political, sociological, and Eurocentric.

One of the reasons for this busy publishing activity is the challenge to which the idea of cosmopolitanism has been put in the wake of what Dani Rodrik (2019) has called hyper-globalization—an economic trend which itself is the result of drastically changed political circumstances since the early 1990s. After the fall of communism, the economic and political alternatives to Western-style liberalism and capitalism seemed exhausted. Some even suggested that History, understood as the sequence of economic and political formations, had come to an end. Buoyed by this sentiment, laissez-faire capitalism and neoliberalism underwrote the liberalization of world markets including the free flow of people, products, and capital across international borders.

As it turns out, hyper-globalization while it contributed to economic growth during the last 25 years, has also brought about immense inequalities. The reason for the failure of hyper-globalization, as Rodrik sees it, is two-fold: a first failure consists in the fact that since trade will produce comparative advantages for some and disadvantages for others, the international community should have taken care of the losers of the liberalization of markets. That did not happen. Rather, a broad section of the middle classes in the US and Europe were left behind; blaming the elites for their fate, they have lost all trust in the system. A second failure of hyper-globalization is to be seen in the fact that multi-national companies and international organization were allowed to dictate rules and regulations across international borders that clashed with deeply held values about regulatory diversity or national autonomy. For Rodrik, the trouble started when hyper-globalization, rather than serving the broad economic interests of the world community, came to be seen as an end in itself.

The flow of people across borders—this is where cosmopolitanism comes in. For the globalization of trade included the rise of a new class of professionals and technocrats without national roots, whose values, interests, connections, and identification are not with their immediate environment, but rather with “rootless” people like themselves, be they in faraway places or in the neighborhood. David Goodhart (2017) who researched this phenomenon in the case of Brexit, labeled this new class the Anywheres. What unites them is that their values and identifications are not rooted in the nation. On the contrary, they pride themselves on having a broader view because they are no longer attached to a national community. They are the new cosmopolitans, the winners of globalization, who are affluent, able to move to a different place when times get hard. The Somewheres on the other hand, are the locals, those who cannot and do not want to leave their local attachments. Many of them have been losers of globalization who feel that their livelihood, their traditions, their country, and their nation is in danger of being transformed by policies and ideologies designed by a far-off European

Union for the benefit of the rootless Anywheres. In Goodhart’s view this is the reason why the Somewheres voted to leave the European Union. Thus, the effects of globalization are here identified as the culprit that fueled the populist explosion leading to a nationalist backlash in England as well as in other liberal democracies.’

This is the first point I concede to the populist challenge. I find it hard not to agree with this critique of an economic cosmopolitanism that as a result of hyper-globalization has led to economic hardship for those who cannot compete with the new cosmopolitan realities. I am convinced that globalization contributed to this state of affairs, and the lack of national and EU attention to the fate of certain segments of British society has led to a loss of a sense of solidarity that gets expressed in populist anger.

Yet the critique of cosmopolitanism does not only come from the populists. A similar critique of cosmopolitan democracy comes from the discipline of political sociology that, on a more theoretical level, shares some of populism’s principal complaints. I am thinking in particular of the work of Craig Calhoun. As it turns out, the crux here, as in populism is the notion of solidarity.

III. Cosmopolitanism, Nationalism, and the Nation State

“Nationalism is not a moral mistake” (Calhoun, 2007, p. 1). This first sentence of Craig Calhoun’s collection of essays published in 2007 under the title *Nations Matter* really hit me when I first read it. It hit me because—as a proponent of cosmopolitanism—this is precisely how I thought about nationalism—as a moral mistake. Since this is the first sentence of the book, I assume I was not the only one to think so.

The sentence is worth repeating along with the paragraph that follows:

Nationalism is not a moral mistake. Certainly it is too often implicated in atrocities, and in more banal but still unjust prejudices and discriminatory practices. It too often makes people think arbitrary boundaries are natural and contemporary global divisions ancient and inevitable. But it is also a form of social solidarity and one of the background conditions on which modern democracy has been based. It has helped secure domestic inclusion and redistributive policies even while it has inhibited cosmopolitan attention to the needs of non-nationals. Nationalism helps locate an experience of belonging in a world of global flows and fears. Sometimes it underwrites struggle against the fantastically unequal and exploitative terms on which global integration is being achieved.

We should approach nationalism with critical attention to its limits, illusions, and potential for abuse, but we should not dismiss it. Even where we are deeply critical of the nationalism we see, we should recognize the continued importance of national solidarities. Even if we wish for a more cosmopolitan world order, we should be realistic enough not to act on mere wishes.

(Calhoun, 2017, p. 1)

After much soul searching, and in spite of my personal convictions, I tend to agree with Calhoun that abstract cosmopolitanism, as in the case of my “natural” support for the EU, has a hard time providing a sense of belonging as long as national populations in its member states do not feel that their interests are represented. As long as that is the case, they will—rightly—fall back on the national solidarities they are used to and feel supported by.

I am also in agreement with Calhoun’s point that national solidarities are providing the background conditions for liberal democracy to function. His main point is that, historically speaking, democracy does best when it is linked to a nation state that provides the framework for the growth of social solidarity as well as a sense of belonging. Through shared tradition, religion, and culture, the nation guarantees and fosters meaningful identifications. Here laws are created and enacted, policies are made, and the balance between the free market and the welfare state is worked out. As John B. Judis remarks in *The Nationalist Revival*: “Democracy needs a “We.” People make sacrifices (e.g., pay taxes, go to war) only if they identify with the community that demands them. That is to say, people act this way only if they feel they have a voice in the community; hence the link between democracy and nationalism.

These are two additional points I concede to the critics of cosmopolitan democracy and actually existing cosmopolitanism. Yet, despite my general agreement with Calhoun’s remarks, I feel uneasy when it comes to his broad support for nationalism. For me to agree more wholeheartedly with him, nationalism has to be qualified as liberal and distinguished from illiberal nationalism. I therefore much prefer to speak of allegiance to the *nation state* rather than of nationalism. For not all nationalisms are the same, and it makes a huge difference whether or not the nation state is defended on the basis of liberal ideals or on a brand of ethnic, nativist, or otherwise exclusionary forms of nationalism. To me, it makes all the difference on what the sense of belonging is based.

It is for this reason that I am following Harvard historian and New Yorker staff writer Jill Lepore, rather than Calhoun, when it comes to a sense of national belonging. In 2019, in a series of shorter pieces on the nature of American nationalism in *Foreign Affairs*, the *New York Times*, and a small book entitled *This America: The Case for the Nation*, Lepore (2019 a,b,c,) puts forward an interpretation of American nationalism that entertains a close relationship to a liberal sense of belonging. In these texts, she reminds her readers that the first nationalists in the US called themselves federalists, that is to say, their nationalism found expression in the political confederation of states that led to the writing of a constitution. US national sentiment therefore co-originate with the founding of the state. Because the political union, the state, is at the basis of American nationalism, Lepore calls the United States a state-nation rather than a nation-state.

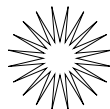
What this means in the context of my argument here is that the sense of belonging to this new nation was based on a liberal creed rather than a pre-political national sentiment. (John B. Judis [2018], by the way, holds the opposite view, namely, that American nationalism stems from the ethno-religious community of Anglo-American Protestantism.) In order to counter the resurgence of illiberal versions of American nationalism today, Lepore exhorts her fellow historians to retell the history of American nationalism as the contest between liberal and illiberal forces and to side with the liberal national sentiment as it was articulated by Frederick Douglass and W.E. B. Du Bois, among others.

What Lepore describes as American nationalism here, post-WWII German thinkers labeled constitutional patriotism—an allegiance to a liberal creed with cosmopolitan dimensions. The hope was that the European Union could be founded on such a creed as well, turning into what Lepore calls a “state-nation,” and that the idea of constitutional patriotism could function as a blueprint for European cosmopolitan democracy. But as we know the proposed European constitution was not ratified by all member states and was subsequently transformed into the Lisbon Treaty—dealing a crushing blow to the hopes for a cosmopolitan democracy. Furthermore, today’s populisms, as shown above, allege an essential disconnect between cosmopolitanism and democracy. Some of this development is to blame on the confusion that because of its underlying universalism (love of humanity rather than nation) cosmopolitans see their ideals as superior to national sentiments and can therefore introduce their ideas by fiat. But as Calhoun rightly states with respect to actually existing cosmopolitanism: ‘cosmopolitanism is not universalism; it is easiest for those who belong to a social class able to identify itself with the universal’ (Calhoun 2012, pp. 106–07). The mistake of real existing cosmopolitanism was to assume that it represents a superior loyalty rather than a different one.

Real existing cosmopolitanism merely targets a larger, transnational, audience as opposed to a local, regional, or traditional one, and the solidarities it offers are largely based on interactional and rational, rather than cultural, ethnic, or religious grounds. My personal preferences lie with this ‘larger loyalty’ (Rorty, 1998) offered by cosmopolitanism. I feel closer to people who have moved beyond their local communities and inherited cultures, who embrace a broader outlook. But I have learned that cosmopolitan democracy is a particular political stance, not a superior one, and like any other political position, in order to become implemented, it needs to find a majority.

And it is here that, for example, EU cosmopolitanism runs into trouble with its democratic deficit. Unless and until the EU convinces the populations of its member states of the benefits of an ever-closer union, cosmopolitan democracy will not be attractive. Because of the democratic deficit, the question has resurfaced as to whether or not the long-term cosmopolitan goal of the overcoming of nation states is the best way to go. Calhoun and most of the critics assessing the rise of populism maintain that for theoretical and practical reasons it would be a mistake to try to overcome the nation state and national attachments at this point in history.

Having passed the arguments against cosmopolitan democracy in review, I conclude by agreeing with Calhoun when he says: ‘Cosmopolitanism – like NGOs and civil society—makes much more sense as a complement to states, and sometimes a corrective to state politics, than as an alternative to them’ (Calhoun 2012, p. 117). I am therefore, at least for now, left with cosmopolitanism as corrective. What precise form this is to take, remains to be explored at another time.



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