

## Chapter 2

# Populist Nationalism in Europe and the Americas

Past, Present, and Future

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We have now sunk to a depth where the restatement of the obvious is the duty of intelligent men.

– George Orwell

First, I argue that today's populism should be regarded as another type of nationalism. While all populisms are nationalistic, not all nationalisms are populist. Nationalism is a broader concept. It claims to defend the "nation," the "patria," or the "country." These concepts include references to "the people" but usually comprise geographical and institutional dimensions as well. Populism is more narrowly focused on a specific group of "people" that it claims to safeguard, defend, and represent. Populists have equated "people" with "nation," but they typically refer to specific groups within a larger national community. Unlike nationalists, they do not usually make strong territorial claims. Second, I claim that the twenty-first-century combination of populism and nationalism is not new; rather, it results from a long historical process: the institutionalization of today we call "national identity." Finally, the chapter predicts that populist nationalism (PN) is not a fleeting phenomenon and that it is here to stay.

## Concepts and Theories

Definitions of populism are controversial and mostly based upon the characteristics of populist rule in particular regions or countries, or philosophical principles removed from the practice of actual populist regimes. Exploring political identities, Ernesto Laclau, for instance, has somewhat obscurely defined populism as a particular "logic"

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(2015, 15) of achieving a sort of distinctiveness that is not harmful to democracy. Others see it precisely as a threat to democratic rule. Still others, like Mudde and Kaltwasser, claim it to be a “moral imperative” (2012). Students of US populism have pointed to its grassroots origins. During the 1890s, the Populist (or People’s) Party represented the interests of farmers, rural, and urban labor, in addition to other lower class folk “seeking to free” the political system from the “grip of money power” (Judis 2016, 72). Other scholars have explained the appeal of populism by pointing to the power of its discourse: “a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class; view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic; and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (Kazin 1995, 22).

Torcuato Di Tella, an expert on Latin America, provides a definition that adds interesting nuances: “the connection between leaders and led is based on a convergence of interests but it must be backed up by charismatic appeal, anti status quo attitudes ... and a common emotional mood” (1990, 31). For Di Tella, as for many others, only those who challenge the “upper strata” of society are populists. He expressly leaves out leaders like Marine Le Pen in France or Ronald Reagan in the US, and treats populism as a movement rather than a party. In this definition, the participation of organized labor (e.g., *Peronismo* in Argentina or Lech Walesa’s Solidarity in Poland) is essential, as is the tendency of populists to define their enemies an “anti-national” (ibid., 34). Di Tella’s definition, stressing charisma and clientele networks that allow the leader to reach down directly to his or her following, coincides with much of what we see in populist governments today. The growth of populism also has been linked to economic and political crisis, especially in Latin America.

In this debate about the meaning of populism, the very definition of “people” seems at times more an act of intellectual imagination than something based upon hard fact. Jan-Werner Muller explains populism as “a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified – but ... ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior” (2016, 26). In their edited volume, Cas

Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, 20) similarly define populism as a “thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.”

One common denominator in these discussions is the acknowledgment that the agendas of populist governments include strong nationalism. One way or another, populists usually point to the damaging effects of foreign influence and investment, to a national identity that begs defending from external influence, and to the need to shield the country from globalization. Populists have, at times, also tried to redefine the national community as a conflict between real patriots and others who – although living in the same territory – threaten “the people” by conspiring against them through entanglements with foreign powers. I submit that this common denominator is a key defining factor of populism and that populism stems from nationalism.

### ***Populism as a Case of Nationalism***

I understand nationalism as the defense of the nation, however conceived. I submit that it has a broader meaning than populism, and I see most types of populisms as cases of nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

Other authors also have come to similar conclusions. Luckacs, for instance, argues that populism can be a special kind of clientele network or mass movement based on hatred of “the other” and extreme nationalism (2005). Nationalism has long postulated populism’s major claims and they historically have been intertwined in ways in which the former has shaped the latter, rather than the other way around. Like nationalists long have, populists believe that “the people” are a special, unique, and, at times, superior group of people that need defending against “the other,” especially from foreign threats and influence. These are also the true nationals. Most of the populist lexicon explicitly and implicitly uses nationalist rhetoric. In addition, nationalist movements and groups have, like populists afterwards, antagonized not only foreign but also local elites. Populism’s mistrust of foreigners, immigrants, and refugees can be traced back to basic postulates of nationalist ideology. And finally,

nationalists also have promoted protectionism and rejected internationalization, which are key points of populist agendas.

Nationalism, unlike populism, preceded modernity (Greenfeld, 2005).<sup>2</sup> In nationalist literature the notion of “nation” is broader than the notion of “people” as used by populism; it includes human, territorial, and institutional dimensions. Nations are defined as groups of people who believe or imagine that they share something in common (Anderson 1983). At the same time, that group should live under the jurisdiction of the same state and share similar values and historical trajectories. Even in diaspora situations, the relations between nations and states are essential to explain nationalism. The notion of “nation-state” means that the link between the two is indissoluble and that one state rules over one nation, and one nation only. When more than one nation lives under the jurisdiction of the same state or more than one state can rule over the same nation, states and nations also are intimately linked. Thus, regardless of different scenarios, the linkages between nations and states remain essential to strengthen or weaken nationalism and define the nation. This is something that twentieth-century populists have learned and applied, most times substituting the word “nation” for the word “people.” Thus, populists have placed an emphasis on the direct communication between populist leaders (the state) and “the people” that they are supposed to represent.

The origins and evolution of nationalist ideology explains the consolidation and projection of PN in our times. It originated in the West, both in the periphery (Anderson 1983) and center (Greenfeld 1993, 34–77), soon expanding worldwide (López-Alves 2015). By the nineteenth century it was clear that this complex ideological system could shape the way people and governments conceptualized national identity (Hobsbawm 1990). The writing of national history constantly has produced concepts that are incorporated into this ideology and shape the process of differentiation needed for national identity (Hill 2008). Nationalism comprises an intricate, complex set of concepts related to identity and conflict (López-Alves 2015) that has, among other things, paved the way for populism. One of the outcomes of this long process is that in the twenty-first century, our collective consciousness of belonging to “a nation” has actually become part of our individual identity. The

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progression of national identity formation, thus, is key to explaining present day PN, which should be examined within the framework of this multifaceted and rich tradition, rather than within the traditional discussion on populism.

### ***The Institutionalization of National Identity and Populism***

In order to centralize power, facilitate governance, and achieve unity in the face of more urban, heterogeneous populations, during the 1700s western states started to institutionalize national identity. They accomplished this through rituals, myths, nationalistic discourse, the “invention of tradition,” and war (Hobsbawm 1984, 1990). A rising consciousness of belonging to a larger whole and a stronger sense of nationalism soon began to emerge and consolidate. For some, this provided the needed cultural values for the growth of capitalism (Greenfeld 2005). Nationalism also proved divisive and virulent (Marx 2003). During the late 1800s, nationalism grew into a much more coherent and powerful ideological system worldwide; this is the time in which we see the formation of populist movements in the US and other regions of the Americas. Nationalism became capable not only of inciting war but also of setting the tone for public policy discourse and foreign policy. During the 1900s, it provoked collective action and war to an extent that no prior epoch had witnessed. Thus, while states never ceased to encourage nationalism, they tried to harness its destructive power (Hechter 2000, 3–23).

Dividing peoples between “us” and “them,” nationalism conceptualized and redefined the notion of “people,” a key concept of populist doctrine. Nationalists, like populists, argued that culture, ways of life, and religion had to be protected (Hill 2008; Hobsbawm 1984). The struggle against colonialism and post-colonialism also became part of nationalist (and populist) ideology, and this applied both to the colonized and the colonizer. It is no wonder why nationalism, a powerful tool able to accomplish political and social change as well as provide legitimacy to rulers, became a complex and growing ideological system with its own semantics, routines of meaning, social practices, and rituals (López-Alves 2015, 3–10).

Similar to what contemporary PN has argued about “the people,” nationalist ideology cemented the idea that nations had a right to self-determination and that they

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should defend themselves against the “other,” even by war. In the aftermath of WWI, people began to accept that public institutions were viable (and unbiased) if and only if they served the interests of the “national community” (Mee 2014). Constitutions, it was argued, should be written or rewritten to reflect the interests of the nation (or “the people”), public policy should be tailored to benefit nationals and exclude outsiders, and foreign policy should be devised to safeguard the welfare of a particular group of people. Throughout the 1900s, nationalism became the theoretical justification and institutional foundation of different kinds of regimes worldwide, populist ones included. Both in center and periphery, the growth of nationalism was unstoppable. No matter how dangerous it became, governments kept strengthening it. Indeed, after the horrors of WWI and during the time of the Versailles Peace Conference, Georges Clemenceau told the French Parliament that France’s priority was to defend its “identity” by “securing the borders of [the] homeland [and] ... maintaining a strong army.” After WWII, both democratic and non-democratic regimes continued to resort to nationalism as a powerful political tool.

During the 1950s, professional bureaucracies devoted to education, immigration, border controls, visa processing, policing, and taxation, consolidated collective consciousness about belonging to a larger group of people called the nation. Borders were secured, military budgets were increased, and special bureaucracies were created, in order to defend the “national interest” and regulate the status of foreign nationals. Public bureaucracies also created national memorials and enlarged the foreign service. In Europe, the US, and Latin America, passports and ID cards were issued massively, further strengthening that feeling of sharing a national identity. Only a tiny minority of Europeans and even fewer Latin Americans possessed a passport in the late 1800s; after WWII, proof that individuals belonged to a particular “people” and “patria” became a necessity.<sup>3</sup> Bureaucracies dedicated to intelligence, espionage, and surveillance multiplied, adding to a collective consciousness of “us” and “them.” The enemy also could undermine the nation from within, which led to tighter control over the movements of peoples around the world; indeed, in 1949, “national security” became an official goal of the US government. During the

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twentieth century, populists adopted and expanded on these notions. In the twenty-first, PN has used these arguments to antagonize its foes and defend its friends.

Populism has thus adopted concepts that emerged over the four centuries that marked the consolidation of the notion of national identity. Populists, like nationalists before them, constructed a discourse that intends to speak for the discontented, the left behind, and the losers of internationalization. Indeed, they have argued that interdependence does not promote cooperation but vulnerability, and that the people need to be prepared to defend their ways of life and values. Most variations of PN today promote a divisive ideology that views one group of people as “the people” that represent the real nation, while the rest are perceived as intruders or menaces.

Once could not conceive modernity without nationalism. Figure 2.1 shows that, as a result, most modern political regimes retain nationalist components. It depicts the type of connections that have developed over time between these nationalist components and different types of regimes. It suggests that the influence of nationalist ideology over populist regimes has been greater than in other regime types.

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In sum, nationalism and the formation of the modern state went hand in hand, and thus nationalism became a major engine of regime formation in a variety of political systems. It either inspired regime change and revolution or affirmed the power of elites at the apex of the state, but whatever the case, it stands as a necessary ingredient of modern regimes.

### The Left, the Right, and the Political Tools of PN

The twenty-first-century combination of populism and nationalism has expanded the ideological reach of both of them. It has become an eclectic ideology and this, I argue, is its most powerful weapon. Its discourse seeks to monopolize a conversation that for a long time remained the purview of the left, contrarians, and activists: that is, the defense of the working class. At the same time, PN has incorporated well-known themes and concerns that have worried conservatives and right-wingers across the

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globe, including the loss of their culture and ways of life at the hands of foreign powers, immigrants, refugees, and globalization. The defense of the nation, an appealing argument to both the left and the right, has today fallen into the hands of PN.

Moreover, leftists, liberals, conservatives, and right-wingers traditionally have denounced corrupt political practices and illegal enrichment; today, PN has appropriated most of this discussion. For a long time, leftists have tried to replace elites with a leadership and a state more sympathetic to the needs of the working classes or “the people.” PN claims that it is on its way to accomplishing just that. Conservatives suspicious of welfare systems and socialized public policy have stood against big government and “corrupt” public bureaucrats. Today, PN echoes this mistrust of the workings of government. PN’s voices are no longer the voices of outsiders, since it is part of the political establishment of developed democracies in Europe and the US, and also of most governments in Latin America. Elites in power ignored the pleas of those who lost from globalization, both on the right and the left, and despite their strong nationalistic posture, they profited from globalization.

PN has successfully exposed this hypocrisy and its strong criticism of “politics as usual” has found receptive ears. It has added a different spin to what resembles leftist or liberal opinions on traditional politics because its leaders claim to be outsiders and thus part of the people. PN also has successfully mimicked leftist criticisms of neoliberalism and globalization. But while the left failed to capture the support of those neglected by globalization and technological innovation, PN has done so. A few years ago it was unthinkable that globalization could be stopped. Today, PN’s growth is an indicator that globalization may not be as unstoppable after all. Global networks may no longer be unbreakable, and established international organizations may lose key members. Protectionism is being upgraded from a policy that the World Bank and other organizations had come to consider almost ludicrous to a likely global possibility. Recent events show that the loudest cheerleaders of globalization are no longer in the West but in the East. China, for instance, has become one of its major champions. And resistance to multinational corporations can



come not only from grassroots organizations that mistrust their intentions, but also from states that no long ago support them.

Unlike traditional leftist or conservative incumbents, once in power PN leaders such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, and Hugo Chávez have effectively used social media (and often, television) as vehicles of direct communication with “the people.” Populists indeed claim that their leaders can directly hear the “voices” of their constituencies, a conventional claim of nationalists. While those who do not vote for them may be frustrated with this strategy, it has proven effective at keeping the support of those who do; indeed, criticism of the leader usually is taken as a personal offense because, among other reasons, it is perceived as a criticism against the nation.

When thinking about PN’s prospects in Europe and the US, the experience of Latin America with other types of PN (mostly on the left, but also under military rule) reminds us that either defeated or victorious, PN leaves behind strong legacies that tend to bring it back to power or to produce new schisms in the status quo ante. This is, in part, the history of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and Venezuela. In the early 2000s, PN regimes in the region secured the loyalty of about 30 percent of the electorate (Aragón 2013) and this kept most of them in power or contributed to their return to office. Likewise, in France Marine Le Pen’s party lost the 2017 election but consolidated enough votes to remain an important force in government.<sup>4</sup> Conservative versions of PN also have gained a voice in government in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark, Holland, Germany, and Switzerland. As Judis has put it, “Rightwing populists champion the people against an elite that they accuse of coddling a third group, which can consist, for instance, of immigrants, Islamists, or African American militants” (2016, 75).

Therefore, the firming of nationalist ideology worldwide and the construction of national identity as something that is in constant peril and needs guarding has paved the way for the consolidation of PN in both periphery and core. Its growing influence in domestic and foreign policy, especially in developed democracies, gives this type of nationalism enough leverage to influence and shape a global system in transition. Important questions, however, still remain. How did this particular combination of

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populism and nationalism become a force worldwide? Why did PN unexpectedly travel from the periphery to the center at this particular point in history?

## Why ~~Twenty-First~~Century PN?

Let me list the main factors that triggered the rise and consolidation of PN during the ~~twentieth~~ and ~~twenty-first~~ centuries, and suggest why PN is here to stay.

### *States and Nationalism*

Since their early stages of formation, states consistently have encouraged nationalism; this in part explains the spread of PN globally. There were times in which nationalism and populism were perceived as ideologies that found their natural home in developing societies or the communist bloc. Developed democracies seemed immune to their influence. The aftermath of WWII was such a time; it forced Latin America – and the Soviet Union – to confront US competition in a Europe reshaped by the Marshall Plan. This reignited nationalism and provided an opportunity for military leaders to step into politics and establish PN. They implemented strong protectionism, established alliances with the “people” using the labor movement as a vehicle, and promoted the idea of isolating their countries from international influence. Getúlio Vargas in Brazil after the great depression and Juan Perón in Argentina in the aftermath of WWII are archetypical cases.

In contrast, two world wars appeared to have quenched Europe’s thirst for nationalism. Most analysts believed that under the aegis of the so-called liberal order that allied the US with Europe, PN and other “isms” could only consolidate in imperfect types of democracy or authoritarian regimes. Postwar Europe seemed safe and America somewhat immune. In the early 1950s the threat of PN, communism, or Marxist socialism, appeared far away. Modernization theory supported this idea. As “traditional societies” struggled in their pursuit of higher levels of economic development, nationalism and collectivism were due to disappear. At the apex of the developmental scale – which not surprisingly coincided with democratic rule in developed societies – nationalist rhetoric still existed but was relegated to electoral campaigning, a part of the democratic process.

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Predictably, some considered the US in a league of its own, immune to the disruptive influence of nationalism, free from totalitarianisms, and harboring only a mild populist tradition likely to be washed away by development and democracy. Never mind that both populism (Muller 2016; Epstein 2017; Berlet and Lyons 2000; Judis 2016) and nationalism had long been important currents in US politics.<sup>5</sup> There seemed to be something special about the US. In comparison to its Latin American (López-Alves 2011) and European forms (Kramer 2012), US nationalism generated a different culture and vision of the nation that looked to the future, was progressive, and open to change. But as with many other nationalisms, it also looks backwards: Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump, for instance, emphasized past national glories. My point is that both nationalism and populism are not alien to the US. Lieven indeed reminds us that this is “a feature of American radical conservatism ... the Republican Right and the Christian Right with their rhetoric of taking back America and restoring an older, purer American society” (2004, 7–8).

What broke the artificial barriers that seemed to contain PN as a political choice for states in the periphery was globalization itself. Yet convergence theory also presumed what modernization theory had assumed: that radical nationalism and populism did not belong with development. Instead, globalizers believed that in the late 1980s, the final fatal blow against nationalism (and populism) had taken place when governments around the world adopted globalization as part of their foreign policy and surrendered to the dictums of the global market and its regulators. During the 1990s, there was mounting evidence that religious, ethnic, and cultural resistance to internationalization was growing; yet liberals and conservatives interpreted these events as passing trends. While other ideologies such as communism, bureaucratic authoritarianism, anarchism, and neo-corporatism suffered ups and downs or went out of fashion among academics, in the day-to-day practices of states, nationalism remained a guiding principle both in underdeveloped and developed countries.

The EU presented convergence theory with its most defiant stumbling block. There, states continued to invoke nationalism despite being formally a part of a supranational organization. Nationalism did not soften. Despite Brussels’ efforts, it drove politics and finally secured PN a place in the governments of several EU member

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states. And of course, Spain, Britain, and Italy had long suffered from internal nationalistic resistance to the state. “Autonomous communities,” or what nationalists have argued are “nations within nations,” constantly defied central authority. The case of Cataluña and the *independentistas*’ capacity to seriously disrupt government from within stands as proof of PN’s power. In the EU today, PN’s supporters hold approximately 20 [percent](#) of the seats in national parliaments, more than double what they had 30 years ago. They are in power in Greece and Hungary and are making good progress in Spain (Luce 2017). In Italy, the Five Star Movement recently has gained considerable electoral terrain, becoming a solid political force. PN representatives sit in one-third of European houses of governments today.

Does Vladimir Putin’s Russia fit the definitional parameters of PN? I argue that it does. Putin has successfully cemented a PN regime and is rewriting national history and reconstructing the state (Ostrovsky 2017; Myers 2015), as is Viktor Orbán in Hungary. This rewriting of national histories evokes a homogenous religious and ethnic past with little interference from outsiders. The French National Front and the UK Independence Party also are cases in point, and we can find similar attempts in the US. In sum, the intimate relationship between nationalism and the modern state has provided firm foundation for the consolidation of PN as a worldwide political force. PN can remain strong as long as nation-states continue to be the major actors of the global system. And there is no evidence that this is going to change any time soon.

### ***Neoliberalism***

A second development that since the mid-1980s facilitated PN’s expansion was the dominance of neoliberal policies on a global scale. This triggered strong nationalistic reactions in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and elsewhere. Neoliberalism paved the way for populist leaders in Latin America; Europe soon followed, and later the US. Anti-neoliberalism was equated with nationalist principles, the defense of local cultures and ways of life, and the rejection of foreign interference in the affairs of the nation. Populists added that “the people” had been the most negatively affected. In Europe first, and then in the US, conservative versions of PN that advocated ethnonationalism grew and developed. Meanwhile, leftist forms of PN in Spain, Italy,

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and Greece also flourished. Like many populists in Latin America, proponents vowed to redefine the nation against the elites and to represent the interests of the dispossessed.

Neoliberalism became more than just economic theory: as applied by governments and international financial organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Inter-American Development Bank, it grew into an ideology with its own cultural, institutional, and political components. In many cases, it demanded a redefinition of national values, identities, and visions of the world. In the final analysis, neoliberalism tended to question the very meaning of “nation.” Because it required most countries to surrender to the demands of a vaguely defined global market, it called into question national autonomy and self-determination. In addition, powerful countries that claimed to be free traders kept protecting their key industries, while the rest faced stricter demands to make structural economic adjustments.

The results soon became apparent. Neoliberalism exacerbated nationalist sentiment, fueled claims for self-government across Europe and Latin America, worsened conflict between labor and capital, contributed to the formation of an anti-globalization movements, and prompted the rise to power of PN leaders who claimed to incarnate the best defense against foreign multinationals and banks. Even traditional politicians conceded that neoliberalism undermined national values. Small businesses complained about unfair competition that made them powerless against big corporations, unskilled workers felt left behind, and organized labor in both the core and periphery denounced the negative consequences of neoliberal policies.

### ***Powerlessness and Accountability***

Powerless and accountability also are important in explaining the worldwide expansion of PN. As national governments seemed to transfer power to supranational entities, political elites claimed exoneration from accountability. In a situation in which nobody seemed to take responsibility, voters in Europe and America shared a sense of powerlessness. In Latin America, average citizens felt that “others” made decisions that affected their lives. When asked, “Who do you think makes the

decisions that affect your country?” a survey conducted by this author in 2012 showed that 45 [percent](#) of respondents in Argentina, 35 [percent](#) in Colombia, and 36 [percent](#) in Uruguay answered “the IMF, the United States, multinationals, the World Bank, and China.”<sup>6</sup> Only 32 [percent](#) of respondents in Argentina blamed the national government for the declining situation of the country. In Colombia and Uruguay, the numbers were 57 [percent](#) and 50 [percent](#), respectively. Likewise, European politicians shrugged away responsibilities, alluding to TINA (“there is no alternative”) politics.

Left- and right-wing populists in both Latin America and Europe effectively tapped into this widespread sense of powerlessness. In the early 2000s, populist governments built support around nationalistic platforms in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. These included challenging the demands of international regulators, rewriting constitutions (or at least trying to do so), centralizing power in the executive, adopting dismissive attitudes toward domestic institutional practices, and creating foreign policies based on anti-Americanism and rapprochement with China and India. Soon the “people” that they represented became the “real nation,” and populist rulers their defenders. Populists in Europe and the US today, from both the right and the left, use nationalistic discourse to discredit the establishment and to oppose globalization. As James Kirchick points out, populism in power – like the extreme right-wing Orbán government in Hungary and the far left Syriza party in Greece – keep a tight nationalistic agenda with similar goals (2017, 134, 220).

### ***Liberal Indifference***

By many accounts, globalization in developing countries has improved the lot of the very poor. Steven Radelet states that

1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty during the last two decades ... [this] surely ranks as one of the greatest achievements in human history. ... Poverty is falling, incomes are growing, debt levels have plummeted, inflation is at its lowest level in decades.

(2015, 33–34)

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In terms of the overall creation of wealth, the world is richer today than ever, and some claim that it is a matter of time before a trickle-down effect takes place. Others, however, argue that in the long run globalization has increased inequality (e.g., Milanovic 2016), and assert that the problem is not the creation of wealth but its distribution. This debate gets even more complex when one adds the impact of technological innovation and the “virtual immigration” phenomenon of the “new globalization” (Baldwin 2016).

What cannot be disputed is that the process has created winners and losers, fueling the consolidation of PN. In both developed and less-developed democracies, differentials favoring technocrats and those who have the “right” educational credentials have grown disproportionately. Edward Luce writes that in recent years,

more students attended American elite universities from the top 1 percent of income backgrounds than from the bottom 60% ... [and] about 1 in 4 of the richest Americans attended an elite university compared with less than half of 1 percent for the bottom fifth. ... Why would not the losers be angry?

(2017, 34)

He adds that while in 2000 one-third of those in the US described themselves as lower class, it was almost half by 2015. Ask a Spaniard, an Argentine, or an Italian performing a low skill job whether she or he feels like a winner or a loser in globalization. Most of them pick the latter (Aragón 2013).

Most Trump voters and those who support PN in Europe are suspicious of a system that seems to have forgotten them. Indeed, while politicians blamed their counterparts in other parties as well as “the other” (strangers in their midst) for their nation’s debacles or wrongdoings, voters felt neglected. PN supporters mistrust both domestic elites and international institutions. Stephen D. King has pointed out that a big dilemma at this point is whether it is possible to create new twenty-first- century institutions that could “combat this perception ... particularly given the potential clash in values between what might be described as Western democracy and Eastern autocracies” (2017, 27).

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Can PN actually do something for those left behind? In the US, for instance, it would be very difficult to change the situation of poor whites or the way society looks at them. So far, neither Republicans nor Democrats have been willing or able to change a class system that has “hinged on the evolving political rationales used to (historically) dismiss or demonize ... white rural outcasts” (Isenberg 2016). As Isenberg argues: “Over the years populist themes have emerged alongside more familiar derogatory images but never with enough force to diminish the hostility projected onto impoverished rural whites” (ibid., 18).

Both Democratic and Republican incumbents in the US have been somewhat blind to the discontent of the working class and the rural poor. Indeed, in the 1992 and 1996 elections, Ross Perot and Pat Buchanan challenged the system from the moderate left and the right, respectively. Both of them were strongly nationalistic and tapped on frustrations similar to those that suffuse PN today: illegal immigration; the loss of manufacturing jobs to China, Japan, and Mexico; capital flight to places offering lower labor costs; and the indifference of liberal, corporate, and professional America to the suffering of those left behind by globalization. Yet once the threat of a third party disappeared, those citizens were again forgotten. Maybe, as the liberal press has itself pointed out, “the Democratic Party has gotten too rich for its own good” (Edsall 2017).

The failure of the center-left to acknowledge and act upon the needs of the less educated and working classes has, in the long run, helped pave the way for PN as a global phenomenon. The left constructed a balmy liberal global order that, especially in the developed core, promoted the wellbeing of liberal and leftist constituencies, technocrats, high tech professionals, and those who benefited from political correctness.

### ***Max Weber and the Notion of “Prestige”***

When one looks at why many working class constituencies support PN today and mistrust those with prestigious credentials, Max Weber’s definition of the nation, rather than the current debate on populism, comes to mind. He argued that the notion of nation is partly based upon prestige. The intellectually privileged and elites who

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claimed to incarnate this prestige, he wrote, came to believe (or conveniently believed) that they represented the “nation” itself. Weber thought that this feeling of prestige “often extend[s] down to the ... masses and political structures rich in the historical attainment of power-positions ... [and which] may fuse with a specific belief in responsibility toward succeeding generations” (1946, 179). Educated elites thought that they comprised a “special strata” of “partners” in a culture that eventually should trickle down to others. Under the influence of these “influential circles,” the naked prestige of power is “unavoidably” transformed into the idea of the “nation,” and the state becomes “an imperialistic power structure demanding unqualified devotion” (ibid., 170–73). In order to achieve unity and avoid social unrest, the state and the upper classes used the idea of “nation” to create an artificial “emotional attachment.”

Today, new classes of technocrats and professionals that incarnate a new notion of “prestige” have emerged. Having the right credentials, education, and international connections have become necessities to access positions of power. Political elites linked to corporate interests and the global system, rather than domestic ones, seemed to run the show. PN reacted against this. It redefined the nation, going back to its cultural origins and traditions (invented or not), and contrasted the “real” nation to this idea of “prestige” which, linked to international interests, seemed to betray the very notion of nationality. The people, PN argued, needed to guard themselves from these new elites that showed nothing but indifference to their pleas and betrayed old national and local values.

### ***Democratization and its “Waves”***

Starting in the early 1980s, the world experienced what many have called the third or fourth waves of democratization (Huntington 1991; Howard and Hussain 2013). This, to some degree, crafted a sort of global political homogeneity based on a similar institutional design. This empowered PN. While there are many variations among democracies, the historical record shows that PN successfully has consolidated in different contexts of political competition and at different levels of development. One can thus argue that democratization has facilitated the spread of PN worldwide, both

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in its right- or left-wing versions. In a world where elites and institutions still need democratic settings, electoral competition, or other forms of popular plebiscites in order to gain legitimacy, PN has excellent chances of increasing its global influence.

### ***Public Opinion and Discredited Political Elites***

Globalization and democratization have enhanced the importance of public opinion worldwide, and polls indicate that most people perceive traditional political elites as incapable of, or unwilling to, deliver promised goods. This represents a significant change. At the Versailles Peace Conference following WWI, politicians seemed to incarnate the best hope for a new and better world. Royalty had ceased to embody the nation and, instead, “the people” did (Aronson 2014). Newly emerging politicians seemed much closer to the people and better able to understand their needs. Although this had been the case in the US since the [eighteenth](#) century, and in most of Latin America since the late [nineteenth](#), Europeans and their colonies also now embraced this principle.

By the early 1950s and after another world war, western public opinion in developed democracies still had faith in political leaders: citizens viewed them as victorious warriors who had spared the world from evil. But by the 1960s and 1970s, voters became skeptical and the “people” increasingly displeased. Mainstream political parties across the world started to lose prestige and political apathy seemed to settle in. While a majority in the US and Europe still held the postwar system in high esteem, social movements, the young, and critics of the establishment strongly voiced their discontent.

Nationalism grew sounder. Political leaders claimed that their mission was to “rescue” traditional national values from corruption, political malpractice, public overspending, and secrecy. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher ran on nationalistic platforms, held anti-government views, and claimed not to belong to the political establishment. Reagan’s promise to restore greatness to the US was echoed by Trump in his 2016 campaign. Outsiders were popular precisely because they were outsiders. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, something similar happened in Argentina, Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

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Liberals, aware of weakening levels of trust, also employed nationalist discourse, even though they often favored a pro-globalization foreign policy when in office. Bill Clinton gained the White House in 1992 by claiming that the US needed an urgent recovery and should focus more on its own people than problems abroad, as had been the case under his predecessor George H. W. Bush. In Latin America, studies of public opinion showed that during the 1990s and early 2000s, citizens were hardly optimistic about their elected representatives and a meager 22 percent trusted the system (Aragón 2013).

Mistrust in the establishment strengthened PN. While most young voters still oppose its conservative, right-wing versions, they often are enthusiastic about “progressive” and socialist varieties such as *Podemos* in Spain or the Syriza Party in Greece. Young constituencies also have supported Latin American populist leaders.

### ***Nationalism and War***

Finally, the high frequency of war and conflict has facilitated the growth of PN. Strife in Africa and the Middle East continue to push the young and unemployed out of those regions, triggering strong nationalistic reactions from right-wing PN in Europe and the US. What I call an *ideology of emigration* has taken root and forms a critical piece of the contemporary global system.<sup>7</sup> Most current wars are about the protection of national values, cultures, religions, and ethnicities, precisely the points that PN has successfully brought forward. Peoples claiming a common ethnicity, religion, or national identity fight for their right to create new states that would accommodate their needs. The frequency of conflict is higher today than during the period prior to WWI (Wimmer 2013, 11–20), and thus provides a constant stream of refugees that also fuels conservative PN.

### **Conclusions**

The spread and consolidation of PN in the present time is tied to the long historical process that institutionalized and consolidated national identity in the West, as well as to the formation of an international system in which nationalism has been a constant presence. At the present time, PN is contributing to the fragmentation of the

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international system and the multiplication of global actors; in other words, it is reshaping the notion of “global order.” I argue that the variables that have prompted its growth and expansion will not go away anytime soon, and therefore one can expect PN’s influence to grow.

PN, right or wrong, has claimed that the uneducated, the rural poor, the small-town folk, the less skilled, and the unemployed, represent a “people” and a “nation” that have been taken over by the educated, the beneficiaries of globalization, the technocrats, elites tied to international capital, and, sometimes, the politically correct. It has tapped into Weber’s idea that “the nation,” as a unifying consciousness, could be a hoax orchestrated by the upper classes. Populists in Latin America, Spain, Hungary, Greece, and elsewhere have accused traditional elites of hiding class struggle and discrimination behind the mantle of democracy. The discontented and those who lost jobs due to capital flight feel they are “strangers in their own land,” as Hochschild (2016) phrased it in her analysis of the US. Another important factor that has helped populists of all persuasions has been the decline of organized labor, not only in the US but also in Europe, which deprived blue- and white-collar workers of a voice that they could feel as their own. PN offered to become such a voice. For right-wing and conservative populists, multiethnic, multicultural nations – which dominate the developed world today – are dangerous and anti-national.

Can PN be the solution to the increasing inequality that has characterized many developed democracies? The historical record shows that, in the short run, selected lower income sectors usually benefit from populist governments. In the long run, however, most populist regimes do not break class structures; rather, they create a new political elite tied to a more powerful state. They fail to resolve the problem of income differentials, and their developmental strategies often run into bottleneck problems that paralyze the export economy and provoke antagonistic reactions from the business sector, as seen in Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Bolivia. In the developing world as a whole, PN policies have decimated the middle classes, swelling the ranks of those under the poverty line, while increasing crime. Despite charges of corruption and wrongdoing, however, once PN regimes have conquered that magical 25–30 percent of the electorate, they have secured a loyal clientele that kept voting for the

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same leaders. It is to be seen if the experience of PN in the periphery of the global system applies to its core.

## Notes

- 1 One could ask whether the US politician Bernie Sanders is an exception, a populist who is not a nationalist and therefore promotes the unity of “all” people regardless of nationality. I suggest that, as Sanders himself has stated, his position is more that of a socialist than of a populist (Sanders 2017).
- 2 There is of course an ongoing debate about the origins of nationalism. I see it as an essential component and engine of modernity but agree with Greenfeld that in embryonic forms, the notion of “nation” and nationalism preceded the sixteenth century.
- 3 After an international agreement standardized passports in 1920, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and, to a lesser extent, Spain, modernized their emission. In the Americas similar policies were enacted. In Britain, the Nationality and Status Aliens Act of 1914 made it obligatory to be of British birth to obtain a British passport. Photographs and signatures as well as a personal description of the bearer were required, thus reaffirming the connation between nationality and the self.
- 4 It should also be noted that in France, President Emmanuel Macron and his less than two-year-old party represent a rejection of politics as usual.
- 5 Populism can be traced to the era of President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837), and one could argue that the US has been one of the world’s most steadily nationalistic countries. From its origins to what Lieven has defined as its “troubled” relationship “with the world that the country has created” (2004, 7, 22), nationalism in the US has never waned.
- 6 Raúl Aragón, Director of the Public Opinion Program of the Universidad de la Matanza, Argentina, designed the questionnaire and helped interpret the surveys. Respondents were residents of Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Montevideo, and their surrounding areas, with a sample size of 1,400 in each city and a  $\pm 2.3$  percent margin of error ( $p = 0.05$ ).
- 7 Even in peacetime, large numbers of the young and poor have been socialized to think that migration is their only chance for a better future, thanks in part to social media, the Internet, easy access to cell phones, and informal networks of communication. In places like Mexico, most of Central America, parts of India or Thailand, Northern and Central Africa, and increasingly in Eastern and Central Europe, more than three generations of people have reached maturity expecting to migrate to the West.

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