

## **Extract from ‘HOW COVID-19 OPENED PANDORA’S BOX IN EUROPE’**

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### **INSIDE THE NEW NATIONALISM**

‘Old’ (or older) nationalism tended to be anti-authoritarian and anti-statist. It prioritised the uncontrolled operation of market forces, extolled private entrepreneurship and complemented the empowered, liberal, secular and pluralist societies. It was *laissez-faire* nationalism. In contrast, the new right is both pro-authoritarianism and pro-statism. It broadcasts a nostalgia for ordered, walled spaces in which small town folk can feel secure and looked after. This entails the weakening of the free-market dogma (i.e., the free market as the magic cure of all ills) and the strengthening of a pro-active, disciplined and more ideological right-wing politics.

The new nationalism needs followers and champions of an anti-liberal agenda that, apparently, is no longer constrained by rules, transparency requirements and oversight. It needs to deliver to its ‘people’ and, for this reason, in pursuing its political programme, does not rule out angry reactions, a backlash against the trend of liberalised and liberalising societies, surveillance and control policies, a more aggressive management of borders, opposition to the perceived ‘cultural’ threat of ‘Muslim’ migration and the alleged ‘burden’ of refugees and the

restoration of the centrality of identity and patriotic pride. Patriotism requires uniformity of opinion; the role of the public sphere is not to encourage different opinions and dialogic exchanges but to promote public order and the government's definition of the public interest. Subjecthood and the state's licensing of public opinion are thus the new values that align with contemporary historical options. The liberal nationalism and civic nationalism of the 1990s<sup>1</sup> have been superseded by an anti-liberal, muscular ethno-nationalism brandishing national identity on the national flag in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But such ideas are both antiquated and out of sync with a culture that by law has to recognise and to affirm diversity, hybridity and respect for 'any' Other.

The new right is thus characterised by a hard survivalist orientation and a projected potency to bring about social and political change without any of the constraints imposed by either constitutional law or international law or EU law. 'Taking back control' is thus a synonym of doing 'what one wishes in an unconstrained manner' including the freedom of elites to be above the law or to step outside law, if this is deemed to be necessary. Its followers breathe an air of entitlement and power: 'I can do what I wish and can get away with it'. It is not that they believe that there are no rules or appropriate actions or truths; it is more about a generalised understanding that strict compliance with them is not necessary, thereby indirectly encouraging corruption and directly undermining the rule of law and the acceptable standards of good governance. Evidently, it is debatable whether such approaches can survive in the long run. Even if institutions are captured by self-serving and authoritarian elites for a certain period

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dunn (ed.), *Contemporary Crisis of the Nation-State?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); E. Hobsbawm, 'Nationalism: Whose Fault line is it Anyway?', *New Statesman and Society*, 24 April 1992, pp. 23-26; A. Touraine 'European Countries in a Post-National Era' in C. Rootes and H. Davis (eds.), *Social Change and Political Transformation* (London: UCL Press, 1994); A. Touraine (1995) 'Democracy: From a Politics of Citizenship to a Politics of Recognition' in L. Maheu (ed.) *Social Movements and Social Classes* (London: Sage, 1995); D. Kostakopoulou, *The Future Governance of Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); *Frames of Mind, Patterns of Change: Institutional Constructivism in Social Sciences and Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

of time, any form of governance cannot be sustained for long on the basis of either a half-hearted commitment to observing rules and laws or contempt for them. Rule breaking is anomie and a disdain for facts, evidence and the truth is a characteristic of corrupt or failed governance.

Turning from politics to economics, the New Right's survivalism is predicated on a form of capitalism that guards against extreme strain, mobility, competition, social alienation while simultaneously being reliant on open international trade as well as on elitist dominocracy. Capitalism thus plays an important role in the programme of reconfiguring the state that has been criticised heavily for having abandoned the 'nation' (- or its poorer members) and in the simultaneous reconfiguration of nationhood by insisting on 'thicker' features and manifestations of it. The latter leads to the exclusion of those who do not share them, the Others, be they migrants, refugees, religious and racial minorities.

The new right has little interest in gender and race equality, human rights treaties and discourse and Europe's colonial, imperial and antisemitic past. The neo-nationalist elites are more interested in self-promotion and the propagation of (national) authoritarian dynamics and ideology. They do not hesitate to use populist rhetoric and existential narratives of protection and social security in order to grasp the imagination of people fearing uncertain futures and who have been affected by the economic downturn of the last 12 years as well as the pandemic.

In the same way they used the economic crisis and migration crisis of 2015 in order to disseminate an anti-liberal or illiberal alternative to liberal democracy, they use the pandemic in order to promote their authoritarian challenge. Political conflict for them is articulated on the basis of anti- or pro-freedom, rights, democracy, the rule of law and binding rules and state power. This is an authoritarian nationalism prepared to turn its back to democratic values and individual empowerment and to transform societies into societies of control and surveillance

through population conditioning and with help of the digital technological giants and private security and internet companies.

Whether the new right will succeed is debatable. Unlike the old nationalism, it is not a comprehensive belief system and depends on electoral exigencies which are unfathomable as well as unpredictable. It is also vulnerable to both critique and societal mobilisation against it. One has no grounds to believe that people's time horizons have shifted in a fundamental sense and will overwhelmingly support it. And although it is true that the pre-pandemic order is not a reliable guide on what may happen in the near future because quite a lot of shifts have taken place during the pandemic thereby creating a new abnormal 'normality' or 'routine', neither democratic processes nor liberties nor the globalised world are easily reversible. It is equally true that quite a lot of things are still unfolding and necessitate new angles that can map out the current juncture and can provide guideposts on what is to be done.

In Pandora's box, hope remained intact. Hope is important. It provides consolation and keeps us moving. But we need more than hope. We have to engage with the world in a right kind of way. We need a normative framing because the societal 'mood' or the 'feel bad factor' can easily be manipulated by populist and authoritarian nationalists. This factor accounts for differences in voting behaviour and will play an important role in the post-Covid 19 era.

We need to re-affirm, defend and strengthen the values of democracy, human rights, rule of law and equality in Covid's aftermath for these are the guideposts for dignified living and good socio-political governance in the future. They provide a clear direction and help frame a democratic humanist project for the globe. If we fail to champion those values,<sup>2</sup> we will be sleepwalking into an uncertain future which right-wing extremism and elite authoritarianism might seek to mould in accordance with their own objectives and ideas and to structure it in

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<sup>2</sup> *Protecting Civic Space in the EU*, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021.

their favour. Interestingly, although right-wing extremism pontificates its appeal to people(s), in reality the executioners of its ideas tend to regard and treat human beings as objects or means or as statistical items apt to categorisation and manipulation...’