

Knut Åsdam

# Nationalism: Persistence and Political Upkeep

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The world is out of joint. With the resurgence of nationalisms on an international scale, we can re-phrase Shakespeare's comment to relate to any thought of the "world" from an internationalist perspective. There are resurgences of nationalisms across the globe and in my European context. Countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Hungary, Greece, have resurgences of extremist nationalism. Some of these movements are unapologetically neo-Nazi – such as the Jobbik party in Hungary or the Golden Dawn party in Greece. At the same time, there is a more mainstream, populist nationalism emerging in Western Europe exemplified by the recent European Union elections. Some of these populist groups are more centrist and some are more right wing – from the Progress Party (FRP) in Norway, to the National Front in France, to the UK Independence Party (UKIP). But all are gaining prominence by riding on nationalist narratives, anti-immigrant politics, and rampant xenophobia. This forms a dramatic political situation in a Europe that is grappling with political and economic change. From my perspective, though, nationalisms have formed ghost narratives that have followed the political everyday throughout my life. Partly that is due to growing up in a world strongly formed socially and politically by the fall-out of fascist Europe on both sides of the Atlantic – like the cold war dynamics and the invoked horrors of the third Reich or Stalin's Russia, and partly it is due to the persistence, of the narratives of the "national" from the mid eighteenth centuries onwards. However, while nationalism was seen as shameful and kept in the shadows when I was a child, it has crept gradually back into the main political narrative over the past thirty years.

There are two important aspects to the growth of nationalism in Europe that I think are decisive: one is the role of populism, which invokes a narrative of nationalism acceptable to the middle class by blurring the borders between centrist politics and more extreme forms of nationalism. Some have seen the centrist nationalist parties as a firewall against the formation of more extreme parties. But one can also argue that they form a bridge for the normalization within the main stream of xenophobic nationalist opinion from the far right wing. Another important aspect of the political development is the restructuring of extremist nationalist movements into a network of extended participation and communication using social media (as was clearly the case in Anders Breivik's attacks in 2011.)

Nationalist extremists are usually presented as the other to society's mainstream. Because of these groups' professed antidemocratic values, outspoken xenophobia,



Christian Krohg, *17 mai, 1893*, 1893.

racism, and use of violence, they are seen by the mainstream population and the press as having an ideology that is incompatible with society at large. However, the ideology of these extremist groups shares certain traits with the more mainstream “soft” nationalism. This populist brand of nationalism circulates within the *democratic* political field. For right-wing extremists, the national narrative gives the political field its meaning; the nation-state is the anchor of their culture, which is seen as ancient and rooted in the land. Similarly, for populist nationalists, the national narrative gives the *democratic* political field its meaning and purpose, and provides a historical anchor for mainstream national culture. In Norway, for example, there is a widespread belief in an “innocent,” soft nationalism that celebrates the “good” aspects of Norwegian society. This “innocent” nationalism is directly connected to a narrative of the Norwegian nation – which is of course a political narrative. In both the extremist and populist nationalisms, the national narrative is seen as the central productive logic of society. These forms of nationalisms have structural and ideological differences (totalitarian vs. democratic), but both forms give the nation a primary political and ethical status in relation to the state. At the same time, both ignore the obvious historical fact that the idea of the nation-state is political and not the source of culture in and of itself. I will come back to this.

Viewed historically, the claim of cultural origin to a national identity seems irrational since national identity is seen as being rooted trans-historically, beyond many configurations and political ownerships of the regions at stake. It is incredible to witness the historical coup of the nationalist narratives that became dominant in Europe in the mid-1800s. But this is exactly the point: the emotional, foggy idea of a cultural meaning or origin, which itself only exists within that narrative and only temporarily within social history, enables the nationalists to use an emotional power in their political performance that is unsettling because it is unclear. With nationalists, you are presented with an authority without clear borders or a clear foundation in the material social world. If you look at Europe, an “oldish political continent,” most nation-states are actually young – less than 200 years old. And what preceded them looks like a disintegrating fabric of states, political regions, city-states, and empires, all of them claiming some authority outside of themselves: through royal lineage (often fabricated) or historical fantasies. But all of the political narratives and claims were also marked by *realpolitik* and real effects upon their populations in the form of political and religious decisions, wars, and famines. So, as much as the

national narratives were based on silly myth, the histories derived from these claims of authority grow into a stark reality. Such realities developed forms of culture and exchange, as folk culture and changes in language incorporated and changed from the experiences that people lived through. These experiences were of course influenced by political decisions and definitions. The nation-state only promotes culture that it sees as relevant to its self-representation, it is not the source of the culture itself, even though it will influence it. What is apparent for anyone who looks at history is that the old cultures of Europe are not bound to the idea of the nation-state and also not based on a singular people in any one single parcel of land. Rather, the history of European cultures is a history of movements of people, goods, genes, and cultures. The borders, names, and configuration of states at play continue to change and change again every century. The cross-fertilization or conflicts from migratory reality is nothing new. This is of course what has created the food, music, habits, and many of the political changes of our collective history. The same also happened here in Scandinavia.

For example, my father grew up in the medieval Norwegian town of Trondheim in the 1940s and '50s. He was a bit of a street kid who spoke in slang made up mostly from words used by Eastern European Jewish people. He wasn't aware of that at the time and there weren't many Jewish people in Trondheim then, but the terms would have come to him through the cultural migrations of pre-World War II Europe. Likewise, his family was regarded as typically Norwegian, but if you looked under the surface, you would find French Huguenot and Sami in the mix. Being a coastal seafaring country, exchange has been at the basis of Norwegian existence as a region and in its various political arrangements. So why then is the idea of the national so strong in Norway and in other places in Europe, if it is only one narrative among others in our many histories? What is it with nationalism that makes it so persistent even today?

Is there something behind contemporary European nationalism other than the slow aftereffects of nineteenth-century nationalist movements that emerged in part as reactions to older empires or feudal states? Part of it is due to the ricochet effect of our own colonialisms. Let us not forget that European countries also colonized each other. The effects are still clear in cases like Northern Ireland, Norway, or the Baltic states. Northern Ireland exists as the result of English colonialism, Norway just made it out of 500 years of Danish and Swedish rule 100 years ago, and the Baltic states have been colonized by Sweden, Finland, and Russia. All of these

countries are next door to each other. Given these situations, nationalism was in many European countries, like in other parts of the world, seen as synonymous with liberation from a colonial oppressor. It gave a rationale to political liberation, which could have had a different form, but in this case was the constructed myth of a unified national identity. This placed nationalism in a privileged position in the emerging states. Subsequently, the narrative of nationalism, rather than the material reality of the actual national political state, was seen as essential to the upkeep of political authority and power. This was a time when nationalism was indeed populist to an even larger extent than today, and engaged majorities in several countries.

Europe has been through many political restructurings since the 1800s, including two world wars, a cold war, and the creation of a pan-European political entity, which is today the EU. The political landscape in which nationalist groups operate today is very different than fifty or 100 years ago. If we look at the current situation, how can we understand the new structures and functions of the nationalisms and fascist groups that have emerged? There is an interesting relation between the ultranationalism we see today and the international nationalist blogs and networks – through which are shared anything from how to make and buy weapons, to transferable ideological texts, and instructions on how to organize. It is a paradox only in a sad theoretical manner that ultranationalists are in fact working from transnational networks.

This is one of the things we learned from Anders Breivik's terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya in Norway in 2011. He was a loner in everyday society, but extremely well connected via the internet to right wing virtual communities, and also planned his attacks by buying parts necessary to make his weapons more lethal online: one part from Poland, another part from the US, and so on. Like other nationalists today, he used an international scene, albeit a partly virtual one, in order to hit national goals. This again was intended as an international participation. His focus was an attack against the Norwegian multicultural social democracy, but his manifesto was intended as an international contribution – addressed to people with similar concerns with regard to their local environments. At the time before the attacks, the personal isolation and virtual community had made him invisible to Norwegian media.

Just a couple of months before his attacks, I listened to a new radio documentary that claimed that the right wing in Norway had shrunk down to a handful of people whose identities

everyone knew. While the virtual connectivity of Islamist radical groups had been widely observed and discussed, society as a whole hadn't understood that the far right had also gone through a similar restructuring. Even though several researchers attempted to sound the alarm about a structural change in the Norwegian right wing, the media, the politicians, and the police relied on an outdated method for identifying fascist groups based on how they operated in previous decades. They totally missed their target. It was no longer sufficient to look for people who were in fact hanging out together, working as a group in physical space and making the occasional local action or demonstration. Fringe groups, like many other parts of society, had turned to remote political participation, where essential information and goods are shared by server, not by hand.

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Knut Åsdam, *Untitled: Archive (Migration)*, 2010-. 3500 A4 color photocopies and print outs from computer files; Installation size variable.

The right wing is also far more professional than before, not only in their organization but also in how they work and communicate to the popular opinion. They have attained better political skills and strategies aimed at not alienating possible sympathizers. As one Norwegian researcher put it: "There are less drugs and there is more structure." Being more professional, they also seem more ambitious for real political power. The right-wing discussions are also increasingly crossing class barriers. While previously, right-wing groups were often linked to some rural working class environments, and were actively recruiting local youth that were struggling socially. The more efficient communication through the internet and more streamlined messages make right wing groups involve and communicate with people across different class layers. Already blinded by presumptions that a terrorist attack would come from Islamist radicals, those searching for the

Norwegian right wing were not able to see past their own expectations. The media was able to talk about new Russian extreme fascist groups running tattoo parlors in Oslo simply because they were so easily spotted. But the same journalists, commentators, and researchers weren't able to see the homebred son of a career diplomat from the rich west side of town who posted images of himself on a website that translates to something like "mrhandsome.no,"[1] but who was also buying up huge quantities of fertilizer and who had in fact developed a substantial right-wing web presence.

Today, in mainstream discussions in Norway, the focus continues to be on issues of integration and immigration, not on new fascist and nationalist movements unless it happens abroad. It is clearly easier to talk about a problem *out there* – like the seemingly more traditional fascists in Ukraine or Russia – than to see how fascism functions on your own turf. The radicalization of Islamist youth is a problem, but equally dangerous are the new forms of right-wing extremism. The daily focus on immigration in the news as a political narrative of crisis, and as something that is new, also contributes to building social anxiety around the idea of the nation when the nation is seen as a signifier of what has been – something that evokes safety and history.

How is it that nationalism commands so much attention in the discussions we have, and has become such a growing force in EU politics, even with moderates? The narratives of nationalism show clearly that culture is as much a contested field as anything else since nationalism attempts to claim culture for itself – a claim that is usually met with a counterclaim by non-nationalists. Typically, these claims center on music, literature, flags, buildings, and even landscapes. The argument goes that nationalism is the identification with a culture, and what distinguishes that culture from others. It allows a kinship with cultures that are close to one's own. It has a local emphasis. However, Europe is full of confluences of old cultures and nationalisms that don't leave behind a coherent narrative – either politically or in terms of peoples' culture. Again, the moment you look closely at nationalist narratives, they collapse, and this vulnerability must be suppressed in order to sustain a narrative that imagines the nation as a sort of cultural truth. But we miss the point if we focus on this as only a lie and construct, because the rise of nationalism is symptomatic of a vacuum in people's political worlds.

The problem in Europe at the moment is twofold. First: There are no alternative narratives

that appear on the popular front. The growth of the populist and nationalist right fills a narrative vacuum previously occupied by ideological and class-based narratives: people no longer seek refuge in narratives of capitalism or communism, and the sense of solidarity through unions and socialism, previous societal and transnational anchors, has eroded across Europe. There is also less difference between the political parties that have a reasonable chance of gaining political power. This increases the sense of a lack of alternative political narratives as people face larger economic or political superstructures like global free trade or the EU – which feel out of political reach. And this is why, secondly, people feel alienated by the ambiguity and opaqueness of the EU as a political superstructure that strongly affects people's everyday struggles, but fails to offer people a sense of influence in decision-making processes.

Even though I am positive about the potential of the EU as a long-term project for the political development of Europe, it has serious structural problems that make it a distant bureaucratic political voice to many people. It feels unreachable, unapproachable. Power sits too far from home and seen from an individual country, the EU appears to have a democratic deficit. Furthermore, there are still huge social and economic discrepancies between different member states, leading those with less to feed their working youth into wealthy states. It also leads the states that have more to cling to what they have. Given the above and the fact that there are twenty-six million unemployed in the EU today, it is unfortunately easy for the right wing to assemble protest narratives using bizarre and unfounded nationalist myths. One can only hope that perhaps in future generations we will see people disenchanted with the narratives of nations and nationalism, seeing them as the empty shells they are. But this raises another question: Where are new alternative narratives going to come from? With what new content are we going to fill the vacuous shells we are left with?

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Knut Åsdam is a filmmaker, installation artist, sculptor, and photographer. Expressed in diverse forms, the main interest of Åsdam's work remains a concern for contemporary society and its psychological and material effects, and the toll of everyday life. Åsdam investigates the usage and perception of public urban spaces, including their structures of political power and authority. These concerns often relate to themes of dissidence and to analysis of space in terms of desire, usage, and history. Åsdam's work has been shown at Tate Modern; Bergen Kunsthall; Tate Britain; Boijmans van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam; Venice Biennial; Kunsthalle Bern; Istanbul Biennial; FRAC Bourgogne; MACRO, Rome; Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo; Manifesta 7; Moderna Museet; MoMA P.S.1, and Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, among others. Feature articles on Åsdam's work have been published in *Artforum*, *Grey Room*, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *Untitled Magazine*, and many more.

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See <http://mrhandsome.com/>

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