

The Role of Nationalism in the Appeal of the Far-Right

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Abstract

We use a psychosocial approach to explore the important role nationalism plays in underpinning the resurgence of far-Right populist parties. We first define nationalism as an everyday phenomenon, with a banal form that structures our lives, that makes the hot form possible (Billig, 1995). We then look at social and psychological reasons why people would be drawn to the far-Right. Socially, the far-Right take advantage of people's alienation and the deteriorating economic circumstances, to argue that others are responsible for undermining the national spirit, sending the nation into decline. Psychologically, authoritarian leaders provide an opportunity for people to resolve their frustrations at their status: they see themselves reflected in the leader's glory, by subsuming themselves to the nation. National identity, combined with these forces, thus explains the attraction of the far-Right as providing a seeming resolution to their social and psychological struggles, through the immortality of the nation.

Keywords: Nationalism, far-right, national identity, Civilisation and its Discontents

Across the world, there is a resurgence of far-Right populist victories: from Trump in the United States of America, to Alternative für Deutschland obtaining 21% of the vote in the German federal elections (Kirby, 2025), to Georgia Meloni and the BJP being in power in Italy and India respectively. This piece will argue that psychosocial approaches can help understand the appeal of far-Right populism, through the lens of nationalism, which is “the master concept of the radical right” (Bar-On, 2018: 18). First, we will establish what nationalism is as an everyday phenomenon that structures people's lives. We will combine this with Adorno's reading of Freud to set out how the populist Right uses nationalism to appeal to people, as the solution to difficult social circumstances.

Michael Billig, in *Banal Nationalism* (1995), sought to explain how nationalism structures our identity, despite not necessarily being overtly part of our awareness. Billig divides between ‘hot’ nationalism, the eruption of passions that can lead to violence, and banal nationalism, which sits in the background and affirms the “ideology by which the world of nations comes to seem the natural world – as if there could not possibly be a world without nations” (Billig, 1995: 37). The nation thus works as a latent force, largely forgotten, but constantly ‘flagged’ to us in ways that remind us of our identity and that we live in a world of nations. Examples of this include the subtle presence of national symbols in everyday life, such as a national flag displayed in pub windows or supermarket labels that read ‘From

British Farms', or the way politicians and newsreaders use words like 'we' or 'our', confidently demarking a distinction between members and non-members of the nation (Billig, 1995: 95-99). Banal nationalism also shapes, and is reinforced by, popular media, which often structures even fictional worlds into distinct nations (Kerr, 2024a).

At its core, nationalism is an exclusionary doctrine: there are members of the nation, who have access to its legal protections and state services, and outsiders who cannot access these resources (Wimmer, 2004). This is an extension of in-group and out-group thinking, but it is one that we implicitly accept as normal and unavoidable. It is this banal element that enables the 'hot' instances of nationalism. These instances can be mobilised by the populist Right, particularly in discourse about who is a member of the nation or who deserves to be one, in response to sociopolitical crises. As Wimmer (2004: 217) notes, xenophobia ultimately sits at the heart of nationalism. While the boundaries of who is a member and who is not is something that is constantly being negotiated, that process can both expand and contract the definition of who belongs at the arbitrary will of contemporary nationalist sentiment.

Recent debates on immigration and the value of it can be seen in this light, as are the culture wars that the populist Right engages in. In the UK the increasing hostile environment and restrictions on immigration (Fang, 2020), which has accelerated post-Brexit, are part of this attempt at renegotiation. Immigration is blamed for the state of the NHS as well as generalised damage to communities and loss of jobs for the 'native' population. Culture wars are the means by which this link is made and interpreted (Hutchinson, 2005). Political leaders take advantage of difficult circumstances to push their solution to the problem, arguing that the nation needs to be revitalised and revived. The core of, for instance, Donald Trump's messaging about 'make American great again' rests on the implicit notion that it has fallen from status, because of multiculturalism and immigration alongside other ills, and needs to be revived.

Nationalism on its own, however, cannot explain the appeal of the populist Right. We need to understand it as a conjuncture of both social and psychological forces. On the social side, the populist Right gains a foothold through the failures of (neo)liberal democracy and the alienation it generates among various groups, pitting them as competitors for limited resources, as in the contest between 'workers' and those claiming welfare, and neglecting the needs and concerns of the disadvantaged and materially deprived. Since the financial collapse in 2008, many of the Western states imposed strict austerity measures that have led to crumbling public services, loss of jobs, and loss of clear pathways in life. Against this backdrop lies increasing existential fears around climate change. Combined, these create an environment where people feel increasingly alienated and hopeless (Toscano, 2023). The damage of austerity is also linked to the rise of Fascism, with the destitution people experience leading them to entertain radical proposals in the hope of solving their problems (Galofre-Vila et al., 2021; Mattei, 2022).

On the psychological side, Theodore Adorno (1951) provides an understanding of the appeal of authoritarianism and populism. Drawing on Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents*

(1930), he argued that the leaders of populist parties offer the people a form of erotic bond, tapping into our primordial passions towards an ideal(ised) father.

Civilisation, in Freud's view, relies on the internalisation of the primordial father figure within the psyche of its descendants, from which emerges the super-ego, which Freud likens to a "garrison in a conquered city" (1930: 105), imposing control and order over archaic instincts deemed incompatible with the father's rule. This metaphor provides an acute analogy for examining today's rise of far-right nationalist ideals, as seen in the rhetoric of nationalist leaders like Viktor Orbán who declares (2023), "Hungarians are protecting not only Hungary, but also the whole of Europe...against illegal immigrants." And, similarly, Narendra Modi (Sharma, 2024), speaking at a political rally, asked, "Should your hard-earned money be given to infiltrators?" in a reference to Muslims. Both statements reflect the idealisation of ethnic nationalism as a fortress for a unified, monolithic collective and the state leaders as the guardians of its purity and tradition. The latter grants them the power to recruit collective allegiance to its rigid, exclusionary ideals whilst vilifying those who disrupt the dominant vision of national identity and interests.

For Freud, the ego, as "a poor creature", is torn between the competing demands of the "three masters: the external world, the id, and the super-ego" (1923: 56), pressured into continuing allegiance to the super-ego amidst the internal chaos of discontent – of its instincts being "conquered" by the super-ego. The weakened ego, perceiving itself on the verge of disintegration due to its castration from the instinctual bond with the id ('what I really want'), naturalises and strengthens the narcissistic idealisation of the primal father ('what others want of me'). This identification with the external authority serves to fill the lack, as the ego seeks to reconcile its inner fragmentation by aligning itself with an external source of authority and approval (Kerr, 2024b).

The surge of 'hot' nationalism can be understood as deeply entrenched in collective perceptions of precarity and deprivation, the psychodynamics of which can be understood through Adorno's (1951) analysis of authoritarianism. Adorno argues that populist leaders capitalise on collective moods of frustration and discontent, to create a mass out of individuals. Narcissistic identification with the leader is forged, with the leader idealised as a symbol of power, allowing the people to share in the leader's triumphs and alleviate their own discontent with societal struggles. This dynamic is central to the populist Right, which blends strongman imagery with nationalist symbolism, portraying the leader as the embodiment of the nation's spirit and promising to revive and restore its former glory. The ego, in search of wholeness and security, clings to this nationalist ideal, finding self-preservation in submitting to the omnipotent authority. Hatred must be directed at those who challenge or deviate from nationalist ideals, as they threaten the illusion of unity and control promised by the father.

In this way, a symbiotic relationship between the leader and the mass is established: the ego becomes increasingly dependent on the imagined power of the authority figures outside, which simultaneously reinforces its own disempowerment. The leader's authority promises to restore the ego's sense of wholeness and security, albeit in illusion. This dependency on the

external paternal authority reinforces the illusion of control, while perpetuating a cycle of disempowerment and continued reliance on the idealised power promised by the state father.

With these two tendencies established in the political economy of lack and fulfilment, we can see how the populist Right leverages them to strengthen its appeal, particularly by offering scapegoats for the problems faced by the people. The 'other', as the target of violence and hatred, absorbs aggression that would otherwise be aimed at the original source of discontent – the structural conditions or social inequalities that create frustration and anxiety in the mass. A perennial anxiety in populist Right movements, across the world from the USA to India, is a fear of replacement – that the 'native' population is going to be overrun (usually, in the contemporary world, by Muslims) (Bhatt, 2020; Thobani, 2019). This plays into two fears, an existential one of the nation, or the nation's spirit, being destroyed in some way, and also the fear of the burden on services and the state. The populist Right, in essence, uses the crumbling political sphere to argue that the problems are caused by outsiders, either people who are not members of the nation, or those whose loyalty to the nation is suspect. The problems can, therefore, be solved by removing such people, either through restrictive immigration policies, or through deportations. The leader of the populist Right appears as a saviour, willing to take the 'difficult' decisions and enforcing a natural order of who is a member of the nation, and in doing so redeem the nation for its 'true' members.

In the UK, we can see this most obviously in the pronouncement of Nigel Farage, who claimed that immigration was the reason for the increasing costs of housing and the NHS in the UK (Chu, 2024). However, it is also evident in the current Labour government's increasing crackdowns on 'illegal' immigration, tightening of the social welfare, and deportation raids (Burford, 2025), as well as Keir Starmer claiming that the previous Conservative government had failed its experiment in "open borders" (Maddox, 2024). All of these deploy both explicit and implicit nationalist rhetoric to exploit people's anxieties, framing outsiders as threats to the nation. In this narrative, the right leader represents an authority capable of restoring the nation, and improving people's lives. This appeal taps into a collective need for stability and control in an uncertain world.

To understand the populist Right's appeal, we must recognise how national identity and nationalism operate in the background of our consciousness, shaping our perceptions of belonging, security, and the 'other'. Nationalism, ingrained in both our cultural and psychological frameworks, becomes a tool through which populist rhetoric can channel dissatisfaction, offering simple yet overdue solutions to complex social and political problems.

Nationalism may not always be a conscious force – in its banal form, it quietly operates in the background, waiting to be 'activated'. When it turns 'hot', the impact is profound: it isn't just about who bears the brunt of state violence. At the deeper level, it is also about how the self becomes alienated from itself and from others, as difference is feared and homogeneity enforced, to allow the majority to turn a blind eye on the violence occurring to our fellow humans and accept it as justified, or even necessary, to save the nation.

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