

PRAGMATISM ABOUT NATIONALISM

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You know what I am? I'm a nationalist, O.K.? I'm a nationalist. Nationalist! Use that word! Use that word! . . . I am a nationalist. It's a word that hasn't been used too much. Some people use it, but I'm very proud. I think it should be brought back. . . . All I want is for our country to be treated well, to be treated with respect, so in that sense I'm absolutely a nationalist, and I'm proud of it.

—Donald Trump¹

Isolated and excessive nationalism renders international interdependence, now existing as a fact, a source of fear, suspicion, antagonism, potential war. In order that that interdependence may become a benefit instead of a dread evil and possible world-wide catastrophe, educators must revise the conception of patriotism and good citizenship so that it will accord with the imperative demands of world-wide association and interaction.²

—John Dewey and John L. Childs, The Educational Frontier (1933)

You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual.

—Richard Rorty, Achieving Our Country (1998)³

¹ Donald Trump at a political rally in Houston, Texas on October 22, 2018. Quoted by Peter Baker, "Use That Word!': Trump Embraces the 'Nationalist' Label," New York Times, October 24, 2018, p. A12.

² John Dewey and John L. Childs, "The Social Economic Situation and Education," (LW 8:73-74). All citations of John Dewey's writings are to the thirty-seven volume critical edition. This edition consists of three series and an Index:

John Dewey: The Early Works, 1882-1898, 5 volumes, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), 1969-1972.

John Dewey: The Middle Works, 1899-1924, 15 volumes, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), 1976-1983.

John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953, 17 volumes, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), 1981-1990.

In-text citations provide, in order, the critical edition series abbreviation, and then the volume number and page number. For example, (LW 1:21) would be a reference to Dewey's 1925 Experience and Nature, published in the Later Works series as volume 1, the specific passage quoted or cited being on page 21.

³ Richard Rorty, Achieving Our Country (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 101.

In different times and places, nationalism has meant many different things to many different people. It is both rooted in, and gives rise to, many different, often contested, and sometimes conflicting passions, judgments, policies, and institutions. In its most basic, general, and descriptive sense, however, the meaning of nationalism is a rather straightforward matter. Nationalism is commitment to one's nation. This commitment includes both feeling and action; it includes both a felt commitment and committed action. It is felt devotion or loyalty to, and hope for, one's nation. Moreover, it is active advocacy on behalf of one's nation and its flourishing. A nationalist is a person devoted to, and supportive of, his or her nation. (The term "patriot," usually defined almost identically to the term "nationalist" despite its different origins, puts a bit more stress on action and readiness to defend, support, and improve one's nation. Here it may be useful to contrast *patriots* with *chauvinists*, the latter term referring to persons who not only are committed to their nation but who also believe it is superior to all others—at times to the point of being *jingoists*, those who believe that their country forcefully should impose its will on other nations.)

What more specifically does nationalism mean in the United States today? This specification of national context is crucial because nationalism in the USA clearly has a different history and valence than it does in Scotland, Ukraine, Taiwan, South Sudan, Kashmir, Catalonia, the Seneca Nation, or than it did in the United States in 1788 or 1865 or 1945 or 2001, or at any other place at any other time. In the United States today, "nationalism" is a label often applied to, or endorsed by, the Trump Administration, its supporters, and the reactionary political right. (As such, "nationalism" is often only thinly veiled code for "white nationalism" and its factually mistaken claims that the American nation was founded and developed only by Caucasians, by English-speaking, Christian Caucasians, by "real Americans.") Nonetheless, it is not illuminating to call nationalism the world view, fundamental value, or governing philosophy of the Trump Administration; doing so would imply a level of self-reflection and policy coherence that do not exist—or, at the very least, have not been manifested to date. Still, nationalism à la Trump can be

understood in terms of the evidence that his Administration's preferences, public statements, executive orders, and actions collectively provide. This nationalism is a loose class name that includes: rejection, or at least wariness, of international free trade agreements, international treaties (including nuclear arms limits), and international organizations; the view that other nations are above all economic competitors or adversarial rivals (rather than genuine partners) of the United States; a conservative identity politics that favors deep cuts to legal immigration, indifference at best to asylum seekers, aggressive deportation of most "illegal aliens" aka "undocumented immigrants," a southern border wall or "steel slats," and strong visa and travel limitations or bans on Muslims and other non-white, non-Judeo-Christian persons; a consistently abusive, harassing, and mocking stance toward women and the #MeToo movement—to the point of claiming that it is a scary time in American for men but that "women are doing great"⁴; the repeated rejection of equal and enforced protections and opportunities for non-heterosexuals; a proclaimed equal moral status or footing between white supremacists, described as patriots, and persons protesting racial injustice; an oft-stated commitment to racially-coded "law and order;" and the view that American interests are best served by supply-side economic policies and tax cuts for the very wealthy, increased national debt, massive income and wealth inequalities, reduced social services for vulnerable citizens, and the privatization of public goods (from research and education to science and health to national parks and the internet). It also includes belief that America is the wealthiest, most powerful, most principled nation in history---that it is the greatest nation even as the Trump Administration proclaims its goal of making America "great again."

In all this, two large, fundamental normative commitments are omni-evident. The first is that there is no value greater than national sovereignty. Each nation, as the Trump Administration

⁴ Donald Trump, comments to reporters, October 2, 2018, as reported by Jeremy Diamond, CNN, October 2, 2018;
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/02/politics/trump-scary-time-for-young-men-metoo/index.html>

proclaims, should place absolute value on the sovereignty of all nations—its own sovereignty, of course, but also the sovereignty of other nations. The second fundamental normative commitment of Trump-style nationalism is that the leaders of any country should place the honor, interests, and well-being of its own citizens above the interests of everyone else—above the interests of other nations and their citizens. In the United States, this means, in the Trump Administration slogan, “America First” and it means concern for the well-being of people in Pittsburgh, not Paris—and certainly not Puerto Rico,⁵ Haiti, or all of Africa. More generally it means that each country’s leaders have the right to, should, and must be expected to put their own national interests above all else. *In sum, nationalism in the United States today means most basically an unbridled endorsement of national sovereignty, especially America’s national sovereignty, and an unconditioned commitment to the advancement of American national honor and interests against all rivals and enemies (outside or inside the nation).* This is the meaning of nationalism as proclaimed by Trump and his supporters.

President Trump has expressed and endorsed these dual commitments in virtually all his major speeches to date. Here, in chronological order, are just four examples. First, on June 1, 2017, declaring himself to be “on the right side of history,” Trump announced formally that he was withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement. (Under the terms of this Agreement the earliest effective date for U.S. withdrawal will be November 2020.) This Agreement, initially signed by relevant official representatives of 195 countries, constitutes an international framework and resource commitment to address global warming. In October 2017, Nicaragua signed on and in November 2017, Syria, despite its ongoing deadly civil war, also signed—leaving the post-Obama United States as the only country on earth that is not part of this Agreement following Trump’s withdrawal. Trump’s speech included these passages:

⁵ Puerto Rico, an American Territory, is part of the USA, and all persons born in Puerto Rico are automatically granted U.S. citizenship. Trump’s speeches and public comments seem most often unaware of this fact.

In order to fulfill my solemn duty to protect America and its citizens, the United States will withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord . . . As President, I can put no other consideration before the well-being of American citizens. . . . This agreement is less about the climate and more about other countries gaining a financial advantage over the United States. . . . No responsible leader can put the workers — and the people — of their country at this debilitating and tremendous disadvantage. . . . At what point does America get demeaned? At what point do they start laughing at us as a country? We want fair treatment for its citizens, and we want fair treatment for our taxpayers. We don't want other leaders and other countries laughing at us anymore. And they won't be. They won't be. . . . I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris. . . . It would once have been unthinkable that an international agreement could prevent the United States from conducting its own domestic economic affairs, but this is the new reality we face if we do not leave the agreement or if we do not negotiate a far better deal. . . . As President, I have one obligation, and that obligation is to the American people. The Paris Accord would undermine our economy, hamstring our workers, weaken our sovereignty, impose unacceptable legal risks, and put us at a permanent disadvantage to the other countries of the world. . . . It is time to put Youngstown, Ohio, Detroit, Michigan, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — along with many, many other locations within our great country — before Paris, France. It is time to make America great again. Thank you.⁶

Trump's September 2017 Foreign Policy speech to the United Nations is a second major example of his Administration's commitment (and the commitment of his followers and supporters)

⁶ Donald Trump, "Statement by President Trump on the Paris Climate Accord," June 1, 2017. Trump Administration official web page: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-paris-climate-agreement/> (accessed February 1, 2018).

to unbridled national sovereignty, especially American national sovereignty, and an unconditioned advance of national self-interest. Trump's speech included these passages (quoted here again in the spirit of Trump White House staffers who frequently declare that President Trump's words "speak for themselves"):

We do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. But we do expect all nations to uphold these two core sovereign duties: to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every other sovereign nation. . . . Strong, sovereign nations let diverse countries with different values, different cultures, and different dreams not just coexist, but work side by side on the basis of mutual respect. Strong, sovereign nations let their people take ownership of the future and control their own destiny. And strong, sovereign nations allow individuals to flourish in the fullness of the life intended by God. . . . As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries will always, and should always, put your countries first. . . . All responsible leaders have an obligation to serve their own citizens, and the nation-state remains the best vehicle for elevating the human condition. As long as I hold this office, I will defend America's interests above all else. . . . Major portions of the world are in conflict and some, in fact, are going to hell. . . . While America will pursue cooperation and commerce with other nations, we are renewing our commitment to the first duty of every government: the duty of our citizens. This bond is the source of America's strength and that of every responsible nation represented here today. . . . If we are to embrace the opportunities of the future and overcome the present dangers together, there can be no substitute for strong, sovereign, and independent nations — nations that are rooted in their histories and invested in their destinies; nations that seek allies to befriend, not enemies to conquer; and most important of all, nations that are home to patriots, to men and women who

are willing to sacrifice for their countries, their fellow citizens, and for all that is best in the human spirit. The true question for the United Nations today, for people all over the world who hope for better lives for themselves and their children, is a basic one: Are we still patriots? Do we love our nations enough to protect their sovereignty and to take ownership of their futures? Do we revere them enough to defend their interests, preserve their cultures, and ensure a peaceful world for their citizens?⁷

Third, Trump again made clear this same view of an American nationalism committed to America's national sovereignty and the primacy of the interests of American citizens across all the competitions and battles of international relations in his 2018 State of the Union Address. His lengthy speech included these brief excerpts:

America has also finally turned the page on decades of unfair trade deals that sacrificed our prosperity and shipped away our companies, our jobs, and our Nation's wealth. . . The era of economic surrender is over. . . My duty, and the sacred duty of every elected official in this chamber, is to defend Americans — to protect their safety, their families, their communities, and their right to the American Dream. Because Americans are dreamers too. . . Around the world, we face rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals like China and Russia that challenge our interests, our economy, and our values. In confronting these dangers, we know that weakness is the surest path to conflict, and unmatched power is the surest means of our defense. . . That is why, tonight, I am asking the Congress to pass legislation to help ensure American foreign-assistance dollars always serve American interests, and only go

⁷ Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly," September 19, 2017. This text is from the Trump Administration's official web page:

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/> (accessed February 1, 2018).

to America's friends. . . As we strengthen friendships around the world, we are also restoring clarity about our adversaries.⁸

Fourth and finally, on September 25, 2018, Trump addressed the United Nations General Assembly on the topics of national sovereignty, his acceptance of "the doctrine of patriotism," and his rejection of the flawed "ideology of globalism" and its "surrender of America's sovereignty to an unelected, unaccountable, global bureaucracy." He declared:

Each of us here today is the emissary of a distinct culture, a rich history, and a people bound together by ties of memory, tradition, and the values that make our homelands like nowhere else on Earth. . . . That is why America will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination. . . . I honor the right of every nation in this room to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions. The United States will not tell you how to live or work or worship. . . . We only ask that you honor our sovereignty in return. . . . We recognize the right of every nation in this room to set its own immigration policy in accordance with its national interests, just as we ask other countries to respect our own right to do the same — which we are doing. That is one reason the United States will not participate in the new Global Compact on Migration. Migration should not be governed by an international body unaccountable to our own citizens. . . . To unleash this incredible potential in our people, we must defend the foundations that make it all possible. Sovereign and independent nations are the only vehicle where freedom has ever survived, democracy has ever endured, or peace has ever prospered. And so we must protect our sovereignty and our

⁸ Donald Trump, "State of the Union Address," January 30, 2018. This text is from the Trump Administration's official web page: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-union-address/> (accessed February 1, 2018).

cherished independence above all.⁹

Trump's "doctrine of patriotism," of course also informs his insistence that America build a wall or steel barrier along its southern border. Without the security that he (wrongly) claims such a wall would provide, he believes there is no national sovereignty. He thus remarked on January 17, 2019 that "without a strong border, America is defenseless, vulnerable, and unprotected":

We need strong borders. We need strong barriers and walls. Nothing else is going to work. . . . The federal government remains shut down because Congressional Democrats refuse to approve border security. We're going to have border security. It's going to be tight. It's going to be strong.¹⁰

Now, this version of nationalism, Trump nationalism, is sometimes labeled populism. If populism, another notion with many different meanings in many different contexts, is understood as belief in the right of people--ordinary, common, regular, and supposedly both virtuous and homogenous people¹¹--rather than political insiders, a wealthy elite, or cosmopolitan, global, or foreign powers--to control their government, then it does make at least some sense to understand a nationalism that includes an absolute commitment to national sovereignty and control as a "populist" nationalism.

⁹ Donald Trump, "Speech to the United Nations General Assembly, September 25, 2018. This text is from the Trump Administration's official web page: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-union-address/> (accessed February 1, 2019).

¹⁰ Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump and Vice President Pence Announcing the Missile Defense Review," January 17, 2019. This text is from the Trump Administration's official web page: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-vice-president-pence-announcing-missile-defense-review/> (accessed February 1, 2019).

¹¹ See Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism* (New York and London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008). p. 3.

However, if Trump Administration nationalism is viewed as part of a populist movement that, like every populist movement, takes for granted a moral division and a political antagonism between common people and powerful but illegitimate elites, then it is a populism of the political right rather than the political left (with which populism more commonly has been associated in the Americas). This right-wing or reactionary populism is thoroughly nativist and anti-pluralist (and thus racist, sexist, jingoist) because it rejects the view that different groups, multiple interests, and messy different values and contesting political wills are all legitimate. It is also essentially anti-democratic because it claims to serve only the supposed legitimate interests of common, ordinary people (otherwise neglected or trampled or victimized by supposed conspiracies to disempower them). In order to do this, it marginalizes and excludes the interests of a great many citizens, undermines democratic institutions (the press, the courts, Congress, public education, public health and insurance, net neutrality, the Justice Department, the FBI, international alliances and partnerships, and so on), and usurps the state just as it claimed elites have done.

Of course, to the extent that this nationalism does not actually as a matter of fact serve the interests of common people and to the extent that social interests are not shared, this understanding of nationalism may be criticized as demagogic and only rhetorically populist. As Robert Kuttner, suggesting that genuine democracy and capitalism seem increasingly at odds with one another, recently observed “wealth has crowded out citizenship, producing greater concentration of both income and influence. The result is an economy of extreme inequality and instability, organized less for the many than for the few.” “To the chagrin of those who look to the democratic left to restrain markets,” Kuttner continued, “the reaction is mostly right-wing populist” as angry and economically stressed people sign on “to Make America (France, Norway, Hungary, Finland . . .) Great Again”:

We have been here before. . . . The great prophet of how market forces taken to an extreme destroy both democracy and a functioning economy was not Karl Marx but Karl

Polanyi. Marx expected the crisis of capitalism to end in universal worker revolt and communism. Polanyi, with nearly a century more history to draw on, appreciated that the greater likelihood was fascism.¹²

And so we find ourselves with increasingly unrestrained global capitalism and increasingly unrestrained fascist nationalism in response. This is Trump Administration nationalism: It is a fascist nationalism, an authoritarian nationalism, “isolated and excessive” nationalism, a populist-in-rhetoric but elitist-in-action nationalism. It is a nationalism of how democracies die.¹³

In short: *Trump Administration nationalism is conceptually incoherent and politically dangerous.*

Accordingly, *we desperately need to think and act in radically different ways.* And this means we also need to consider the resources and tools at our disposal to do this if we are to have an opportunity to wake up tomorrow in a country a less like the one in which we woke up today. This point was made over and over and over by John Dewey. Beginning more than a century ago, his critical arguments remain so compelling and his reconstructive insights and proposals are still so penetrating that they merit serious, sustained attention today. This is not a plea to simply *retrieve* Dewey’s philosophy. Indeed, nothing would be less-Deweyan—because even when we’ve been here before, Dewey knew that we’ve never before been *exactly just here and just now.* So, instead, it is a suggestion to *recover and reconstruct* Dewey’s pragmatism about nationalism.

Dewey was a constant critic of American nationalism. In 1922 he called it “exacerbated” (MW 13:249). That same year and again in 1937 he wrote that it was “acute” and “narrow” (MW 13:249; LW 11:252). In 1933 he labeled it “isolated and excessive” (LW 8:273). In 1927, he described it as a piece of “social pathology” (LW2:341). A decade later, he termed it a kind of “indoctrination” “miscalled

¹² Robert Kuttner, “The Man from Red Vienna,” *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. LXIV, Number 20 (December 21, 2017), p. 55.

¹³ Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018).

patriotism” (LW 11:574). And, he suggested it often was a “disguise” for selfish economic interests, private profits, and an increasingly deadly and destructive means to gain support for wars fought by many in the service of profits for the few (LW 7:368-369). So, when Senator John McCain, accepting the 2017 Liberty Medal at the National Constitution Center, asserted that “we [Americans] live in a land made of ideals, not blood and soil” and referred to Trump’s values and policies as “spurious nationalism,” that is one of only a few critical adjectives that Dewey had not already put to use.¹⁴ Putting it most bluntly in his 1927 “Fruits of Nationalism,” Dewey wrote that “sinister interests” have made “nationalism a power for evil” (LW 3:152).

Recognizing “the evil side” of nationalism (LW 3:204), Dewey also thought it had a good side in so far as it involved a consciousness of histories, communities, and purposes larger than “the family, the parish, the sect, and the province.” It broke down “clannishness and provincialism;” it extended love of family, friends, and neighbors to love of country (LW 7:368). In 1916, a year before US entry into World War I, Dewey observed:

The upbuilding of national states has substituted a unity of feeling and aim, a freedom of intercourse, over wide areas for earlier local isolations, suspicions, jealousies and hatreds. It has forced men out of narrow sectionalisms into membership in a larger social unit, and created loyalty to a state which subordinates petty and selfish interests. (LW 7:203)

In 1927 as the US stock market experienced a speculative boom and as Hitler rose to power in Germany, Dewey again connected nationalism’s good side with its origins:

Nationalism was at least a movement away from obnoxious

¹⁴ John McCain, “Remarks by Senator John McCain at 2017 Liberty Medal Ceremony, October 16, 2017. This text is from Senator McCain’s official web site and press release:

<https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=3E879161-766F-4E0B-8FC9-F446A9F341F5> (accessed February 1, 2018).

conditions—parochialism on one hand and dynastic despotism on the other. To be interested in a nation is at least better than to restrict one's horizon to the bounds of a parish and province. Historically, Nationalism is also connected with the decay of personal absolutism and dynastic rule. . . . In addition to these two historical changes, Nationalism is associated with the revolt of oppressed peoples against external imperial domination. (LW 3:152)

However, this good side of nationalism is intimately linked to its bad—very bad--side, Dewey claimed. Indeed, without its historical gains and goods, it “could not be perverted to base ends” or “exploited as it is in the interest of economic imperialism and of war, latent and overt.” Dewey wrote:

This emotion of supreme loyalty to which other loyalties are unhesitatingly sacrificed in a crisis could hardly have grown to its high pitch of ardor unless men thought they had found in it the blessings for which they have always resorted to religious faith: protection of what is deemed of high value, defense against whatever menaces this value, in short an ever present refuge in time of trouble. . . Thus Nationalism starting as an unquestioned emotional loyalty, so supreme as to be religious in quality, has invaded the whole of life. It denotes organized ways of behavior and a whole system of justificatory beliefs and notions appealed to in order to defend every act labeled “national” from criticism or inquiry. By constant reiteration, by shaming heretics and intimidating dissidents, by glowing admiration if not adoration of the faithful, by all agencies of education and propaganda (now, alas, so hard to distinguish) the phrases in which these defenses and appeals are couched become substitutes for thought. They are axiomatic; only a traitor or an evilly disposed man doubts them. Bias, prejudice, blind and routine habit reign supreme. But they reign under the guise of idealistic standards and noble sentiments. (LW 3:152-154)

Long before Trump, in his January 2017 Inaugural Address,¹⁵ declared that Americans “will be protected by God” and so need have no fear that their country will become, as he later described it, one of those “major portions of the world” apparently unprotected by God and so “going to hell” or already there, Dewey frequently called attention to the *religious* character of nationalism. He noted the ways it stands in opposition to experimental method, education, and social knowledge—commitments central to effective democracy. For example, in discussing limits to free communication in The Public and Its Problems, Dewey identified anti-scientific emotions and habits of thought as the pre-condition or basis for the authoritarian manipulation of public opinion. He observed:

One of its commonest forms is a truly religious idealization of, and reverence for, established institutions; for example in our own politics, the Constitution, the Supreme Court, private property, free contract, and so on. The words ‘sacred’ and ‘sanctity’ come readily to our lips when such things come under discussion. They testify to the religious aureole which protects the institutions. . . .As supernatural matters have progressively been left high and dry upon a secluded beach, the actuality of religious taboos has more and more gathered about secular institutions, especially those connected with the nationalistic state. (LW 2: 341)

This deeply felt but superficially reflective religious nationalism, Dewey warned, stirs up international hostility and war; it leads citizens to make the immense sacrifices of wars and suffer the peace-time “burdens of taxation due to wars;” and it masks the private economic interests advanced by wars (LW 7:367). In a brief essay titled “Freedom,” Dewey explained:

¹⁵ Donald Trump, “The Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2017. This text is from the Trump Administration’s official web page: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/> (accessed February 1, 2018).

Because of acute nationalism every nation lives under the burden imposed by past wars and under the pall of threat of future wars. There is no other single force so completely destructive of personal freedom as is modern war. Not merely the life and property of individuals are subjected by war to external control, but also their very thoughts and their power to give them expression. War is a kind of wholesale moral enslavement of entire populations. (LW 11:252)

“Were it not for facts in evidence,” Dewey added, “it would be hard to conceive that any sane man could parade the motto: ‘My country right or wrong.’” Or, presumably, “Make America Great Again.”

Dewey’s observation is so relevant that it reads as though it were written yesterday. It needs to be heard again today. Nationalism, Dewey asserted, “has created a purely fictitious notion of national interests” and national honor. It “has no being outside of emotion and fantasy:” “the erection of a national territorial State into a Person who has a touchy and testy Honor to be defended and avenged at the cost of death and destruction is as sheer a case of animism as is found in any savage tribe” (LW 3:155).

Dewey viewed national sovereignty, the first commitment of Trump nationalism, as the foundation or centerpiece or “culmination” of nationalism. As the notion of sovereignty passed over time from monarch, dynasty, and Church to modern nation, Dewey understood that “it retained all the evils that inhered in the notion of absolute and irresponsible personal power (or power responsible only to God and not to any earthly power or tribunal) and took on new potencies for harm.” He explained:

The doctrine of national sovereignty is simply the denial on the part of a political state of either legal or moral responsibility. It is a direct proclamation of the unlimited and unquestionable right of a political state to what it wants to do in respect to their nations and to do it as and when it pleases. It is a doctrine of international anarchy; and as a rule those

who are most energetic in condemning anarchy as a domestic and internal principle are foremost in asserting anarchic irresponsibility in relations between nations. . . . I spoke in terms of the popular fallacy when I referred to the 'right' of a state to do as it pleases when it pleases. For *right* here is only a polite way of saying power. It was usual during the World War [I] to accuse Germany of acting upon the notion that Might makes Right. But every state that cultivates and acts upon the notion of National Sovereignty is guilty of the same crime. (LW 3:156-157)

Dewey's multi-decade critical analysis allows us to diagnose Trump Administration nationalism—an absolute commitment to national sovereignty and an “American first” commitment to the primacy of one's own national interests--as a particularly virulent strain of the evil side of American nationalism. *There are four main points here.*

First, a strong commitment to national sovereignty is immoral, politically dangerous (if not catastrophic), and intellectually dishonest and self-deceptive. The notion of national sovereignty is immoral because it assigns absolute value to the mere existence of national will regardless of the content of that will. Supreme, absolute, uncontrollable power does not guarantee morality. If anything, history shows that absolute power tends to corrupt.¹⁶ That a country wills to kill its people in genocides, ethnic cleansings, chemical attacks, and campaigns of extermination and supposed manifest destiny, or wills to imprison or otherwise silence its political opposition, or wills to enslave and impoverish people in or beyond its borders, or wills to manipulate the beliefs of many in the service of the selfish interests of

¹⁶ In an 1885 letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, John Dalberg-Acton now famously observed that history shows that wrongdoing increases as power increases: “Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority, still more when you superadd the tendency or the certainty of corruption by authority.” *Historical Essays and Studies*, ed. J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907), p. 96.

a few does not render these actions moral. With respect to morality, there is no national sovereignty.

This notion is also politically dangerous because it practically guarantees that all international disagreements and differences will involve parties each of which views itself as absolutely justified in enacting whatever it wills and each of which asserts itself properly free of foreign interference—despite finding itself in a world of international connections and entanglements. (Thus Trump, without any apparent awareness of irony, is able in one breath to advocate national sovereignty and in the very next breath to proclaim that America will not allow other nations—North Korea, Iran, China, Canada, and a long list of others—to act as they have so willed.) In conditions of increasing globalization, national sovereignty is increasingly an obscene fiction, a recipe for hostilities, terrorism, and war—and policies driven by tweets about who has the “bigger and more powerful” “Nuclear Button.”¹⁷ It is a recipe for life as war, for war without end, for one nation that considers its will to be sovereign against another nation that equally considers its different will to be sovereign.

Moreover, this notion of national sovereignty is intellectually inconsistent, dishonest, and self-deceptive because practically every exercise of national sovereignty impacts—and thus violates the sovereignty of other nations. Thus, for example, at present the United States and North Korea both appeal to the exact same policy of national sovereignty as they pursue conflicting practices and policies—as their current leaders now dangerously taunt each other about whose weapons of fire and fury are the largest, whose nuclear button is biggest, who has the most might. National sovereignty in America (or in any other country) today is not really a principle; it is a calculated rhetoric—a mistaken calculation disguised as a principle.

Second, Trump-style nationalism is misguided about genuine national interests. The problem here is not that the Trump administration claims that it seeks first or only to serve American

¹⁷ Donald Trump, tweet (@realDonaldTrump) 7:49pm, January 2, 2018. Reproduced by CNBC: <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/01/02/trump-tweet-says-he-has-bigger-nuclear-button-than-kim-jong-un.html> (accessed February 1, 2019).

national interests. The problem is that it almost wholly misunderstands what those interests actually are. American citizens, like the citizens of all other countries, in reality are not in some sort of zero-sum reality show or winner-take-all sports match about economic prosperity, health policy, educational systems and learning, global environmental sustainability, or technological innovation. In fact, it is not the case that ordinary, average Americans become wealthier or lead more secure or meaningful lives only at the expense of other nations around the world. As Susan E. Rice, former United States ambassador to the United Nations, has written:

In Mr. Trump's estimation, we live in a world where America wins only at other's expense. . . The new strategy enshrines a zero-sum mentality: 'Protecting America's interests requires that we compete continuously' . . . This is the hallmark of Mr. Trump's nationalistic, black-and-white 'America First' vision. . . America's strength has long rested not only on our unmatched military and economy but also on the power of our ideals. Relinquishing its moral authority in these difficult times will embolden rivals and weaken ourselves. It will make a mockery of the very idea of America first.¹⁸

Americans don't "win" only if and when the rest of the world "loses." To think this way is to confuse relative and absolute standards of living. It is to focus myopically on individual losses rather than aggregate gains (of, for example, global trade or immigration or international climate pacts). It is to miss the large extent to which the interests of interdependent citizens of different nations are shared. And it is to divert public attention and policy efforts from addressing massive wealth inequality at both national and international levels—a diversion that could only be called "nationalism" with a straight face if one meant "white 1% nationalism."

This dangerous, hyper-nationalistic view of the United States as first and foremost a combatant in a zero-sum, win-or-lose death

¹⁸ Susan E. Rice, "America First' Makes America Weak," New York Times, December 21, 2017, p. A31

match with all other nations is rooted in tribalism and its two-fold fear. "Skillful politicians and other self-seekers," Dewey noted, "have always known how to play cleverly upon patriotism, and upon ignorance of other peoples to identify nationalism with latent hatred of other nations" (MW 10:204). In a remarkable address, "Racial Prejudice and Friction," delivered in China in 1922, Dewey explained these two aspects of this fear: fear of other peoples who are different and fear that one's own asserted (and desired) superiority may not be real. Dewey wrote:

We are struck by the instinctive aversion of mankind to what is new and unusual, to whatever is different from what we are used to, and which thus shocks our customary habits. . . . Such words as stranger, foreigner, alien, outsider are psychological words rather than geographical ones. . . . There is no lesson of anthropology more striking than its testimony to the universal antipathy which is aroused by anything to which a tribe or social group is not adjusted in its past habits. . . . We shall then not be surprised to learn that foreigner, stranger, alien are originally synonymous with enemy. . . . Latent anti-foreign feeling is usually rendered acute by some crisis.

The other consequence concerns the psychological effect of rule upon the dominant political group. Arrogance and contempt are fostered. Moreover we hate those whom we have wronged. . . . The disdain and contempt of the overlord class for the inferior is moreover usually complicated by an uneasy subconscious feeling that perhaps the subject people is not really so inferior as its political status indicates. Then the expression of superiority assumes a noisy and aggressive form on the psychological principle the 'lady protests too much.' An assured superiority would be more calmly complacent. (MW 13:243-248).

It requires no special insight to see the first fear dramatically manifest in the Trump Administration's promotion of travel bans for peoples from dominantly Muslim countries, the Trump Administration's

determination to build a “beautiful” wall along the southern border with Mexico, or the claim that we need more immigrants from Norway but no immigrants from “shithole” countries like Haiti or the nations of Africa—an outlook consistent both with Trump’s real estate company’s efforts in the 1970s to avoid renting apartments to African-Americans and also with his promotion of the baseless claim that Barack Obama was born in Kenya rather than the United States. Similarly, it requires no advance training in psychology or degree in counseling to identify the second fear at work in Trump’s claims that America is the richest, most powerful, and greatest country in history and that God is on the side of America. These claims parallel his more personal boasts that he has the biggest vocabulary and “best words,” highest IQ, and largest inaugural crowd, and that he is the “least racist” person. These personal fears go hand in hand with fear-based nationalism and its power for evil.

Third, in place of this fear of difference and the zero-sum thinking it fosters, a genuinely democratic form of nationalism must advance genuinely democratic values. These interests are not neatly bounded by national borders; they are the interests of all persons: education and growth; a sustainable environment and healthy life; equal opportunity, fair and equitable treatment, and due process; societal care for those who are particularly vulnerable--the young, the weak and powerless, the poor, the sick, the old, the isolated and neglected and lonely, and the victimized, abused, and dehumanized); access to resources that nurture inventive and imaginative activity; and free and meaningful expression and association. It is only as nationalism serves these human values that it avoids being a spurious social pathology.

Dewey noted that to change our understanding of nationalism and our own national interests in this way “is a matter of ideas, of emotions, of intellectual and moral disposition and outlook” and that as a result “it depends for its accomplishment upon educational agencies, not upon outward machinery” (MW 10:203). To understand national interests in terms of genuinely democratic values, it is necessary to rethink or reconceptualize nationalism. It is necessary, as Theodore Roosevelt put it in a remarkable speech in Osawatomie, Kansas in 1910, to develop a “new nationalism.” Identifying the very meaning of American Republic with “the triumph

of real democracy,” Roosevelt claimed: The American people are right in demanding that New Nationalism, without which we cannot hope to deal with new problems. . . . Those who oppose all reforms will do well to remember that ruin in its worst form is inevitable if our national life brings us nothing better than swollen fortunes for the few and the triumph in both politics and business of a sordid and selfish materialism.”¹⁹

Agreed. At the same time, this philosophical work is not sufficient. It is crucial here to recall what I take to be the guiding insight of all pragmatist pedagogy: The best way to change hearts, minds, and habits is an indirect, even visceral²⁰ way; it is not a matter of simply preaching for changes to habits (because people would not have or hold on to their habits if those habits did not in some sense seem to them to work) but, instead, it is a matter of changing the institutions, practices, and cultural conditions (that have shaped and sustained old habits) so that they now come to cease working well. Simply articulating a new, genuinely democratic view of nationalism, an expansive rather than narrow version of nationalism, is ineffective unless it is joined by changes in cultural practices, policies, institutions, and forms of social interaction. Similarly, as is so often urged today, to wish that everyone would just come together “as one team, one people, and one American family”²¹ is nearly empty as long as existing anti-democratic political, economic, religious, and other intersecting social forces are actively embraced or merely passively tolerated. Indeed, often philosophical reconstruction—the very values and thoughts we have—not only requires but also must wait on political, economic, and social reconstruction. I take this to be the guiding principle of all pragmatic, practical social action and change.

Fourth, a democratic nationalism that renounces incoherent and dangerous notions of national sovereignty and reconstructs the meaning of American national interests in terms of shared social growth, harmony, and

¹⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism,” speech at Osawatimie, Kansas, August 31, 1910. <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/271293-roosevelt-speech.html> (accessed February 1, 2019).

²⁰ Vincent Colapietro, “Visceral Politics and Heuristic Democracy, this issue of *Dewey Studies*.

²¹ Donald Trump, “State of the Union Address,” January 30, 2018.

sustainability rather than supposed zero-sum testosterone-fueled cage matches has both a special opportunity and a special responsibility to recognize the internationalism that lies at the heart of any nationalism to which the United States might aspire. (If put in more lofty philosophical language, this amounts to thinking beyond, or beneath, a nationalism/globalism dualism or a provincial/cosmopolitan dualism.²²) As Dewey accurately noted, the US is “complex and compound,” “interracial and international,” composed of a multitude of peoples speaking different tongues, inheriting diverse traditions, cherishing varying ideals of life:”

No matter how loudly any one proclaims his Americanism, if he assumes that any one racial strain, any one component culture, no matter how early settled it was in our territory, or how effective it has proved in its own land, is to furnish a pattern to which all other strains and cultures are to conform, he is a traitor to an American nationalism. . . . I find that many who talk the loudest about the need of a supreme and unified Americanism of spirit really mean some special code or tradition to which they happen to be attached. They have some pet tradition which they would impose upon all. In thus measuring the scope of Americanism by some single element which enters into it, they are themselves false to the spirit of America.²³

Earlier, evil, false-spirited, fascist versions of nationalism give rise to intellectual, emotional, and political habits that are not adapted to present realities. If these habits and ways of life ever did work well,

²² See, for example, Vincent Colapietro, “Toward a Politics of Cohabitation: ‘Dwelling’ in the Manner of Wayfarers;” José Medina, “Cosmopolitan Ignorance and ‘Not Knowing Your Place’;” Jessica Wahman, “Citizen or Guest? Cosmopolitanism as Homelessness;” Jennifer L. Hansen, “Cosmopolitan Hope;” Cynthia Gayman, “Hospitality or Generosity?: Cosmopolitan Transactions;” and John J. Stuhr, “Somewhere, Dreaming of Cosmopolitanism.” *Cosmopolitanism and Hope*, eds. Jessica Wahman, José M. Medina, and John J. Stuhr (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-205.

they do not work now. Their outcome is war and oppression and inequality. They immiserate people across the world, both outside and inside this country. Dewey recognized this, I think, and he summarized this way:

Patriotism, National Honor, National Interests and National Sovereignty are the four foundation stones upon which the structure of the National State is erected. It is no wonder that the windows of such a building are closed to the light of heaven; that its inmates are fear, jealousy, suspicion, and that War issues regularly from its portals. (LW 3:158)

The task ahead is both simple and difficult: Today any effective nationalism—a genuinely democratic nationalism—a nationalism worthy of American ideals (even as those ideals in significant measure are yet to be realized)—must constitute in part, and be congruent in whole with, what Dewey called “democracy as a way of life” and the “constructive tasks of peace.” Any country loyal to democratic values can embrace only a version of nationalism that really advances those values. Any other form of nationalism, no matter what its public relations arm may proclaim, is authoritarianism. And any nationalism that proclaims “America First” must recognize that this now should mean “Democracy As A Way Of Life First.” Any other form of nationalism is fake. Any other form of nationalism is ultimately fascist. In the spirit of Dewey, who observed that “artists have always been the real purveyors of news” (LW 2:350), any other form of nationalism is captured and criticized effectively by these lines in Tony Hoagland’s “Ode to the Republic”: “America, you big scary baby, didn’t you know when you pounded your chest like that in public, it just embarrassed us? When you lied to yourself on television, we looked down at our feet” and “I thought I had to go down with you hating myself in red, white and blue, learning to say ‘I’m sorry’ in more and more languages.”²⁴

By means of social reconstruction—including changes in

²⁴ Tony Hoagland, “Ode to the Republic,” [Application for Release from the Dream](#) (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), p. 8.

politics, economics, education, communication and media practices²⁵—, the task for expansive nationalists and genuinely democratic patriots today is to grow the tribe of folks committed to the values of shared and plural democratic ways of life and to their fact-based,²⁶ experimental pursuit. The task is to resist being a passive spectator to the murder of democracy under the banner of nationalism. Persons committed to and engaged in this (also tribal) undertaking and its fighting faith²⁷ really are pragmatists about nationalism.²⁸

²⁵ See Jennifer Hansen’s analysis and extension for the hashtag era of Dewey’s recognition that community requires communication, “The Hopeful Hashtag: Digital Feminist Publics in the Trump Era,” in this issue of *Dewey Studies*. And, as Yascha Mounk has observed “Once any string of words is considered as true as any other, any course of action comes to be seen as legitimate as any other. . . . As a result, the public sphere quickly degenerates into a battleground in which opposing tribes string together words to wield as weapons.” “The Real Coup Plot is Trump’s,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2017, p. A31. Democracy dies—rather, it is killed—as it becomes a zero-sum war.

²⁶ Long before the Trump Administration, authoritarian regimes have propped up their own “alternative facts,” accurately recognizing the ways in which experimental inquiry and free communication are “enemies of the state.” In this context, it is interesting to note the research findings of Noam Lupu and Nicolas Carnes that it was not the working class that elected Trump: “People without a college degree or fewer years of education were more likely to vote for Trump. But that’s true across all income groups.” *Vanderbilt Magazine*, Fall 2017, p. 23.

²⁷ See Vincent Colapietro’s “Visceral Politics and Heuristic Democracy” in this issue of *Dewey Studies*.

²⁸ An earlier version of this article was presented at the meeting of the John Dewey Society at the Eastern Division, American Philosophical Association meeting in Savannah, GA on January 4, 2018. I am grateful for, and have learned from the papers presented by my fellow participants, Vincent Colapietro and Jennifer Hansen.

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