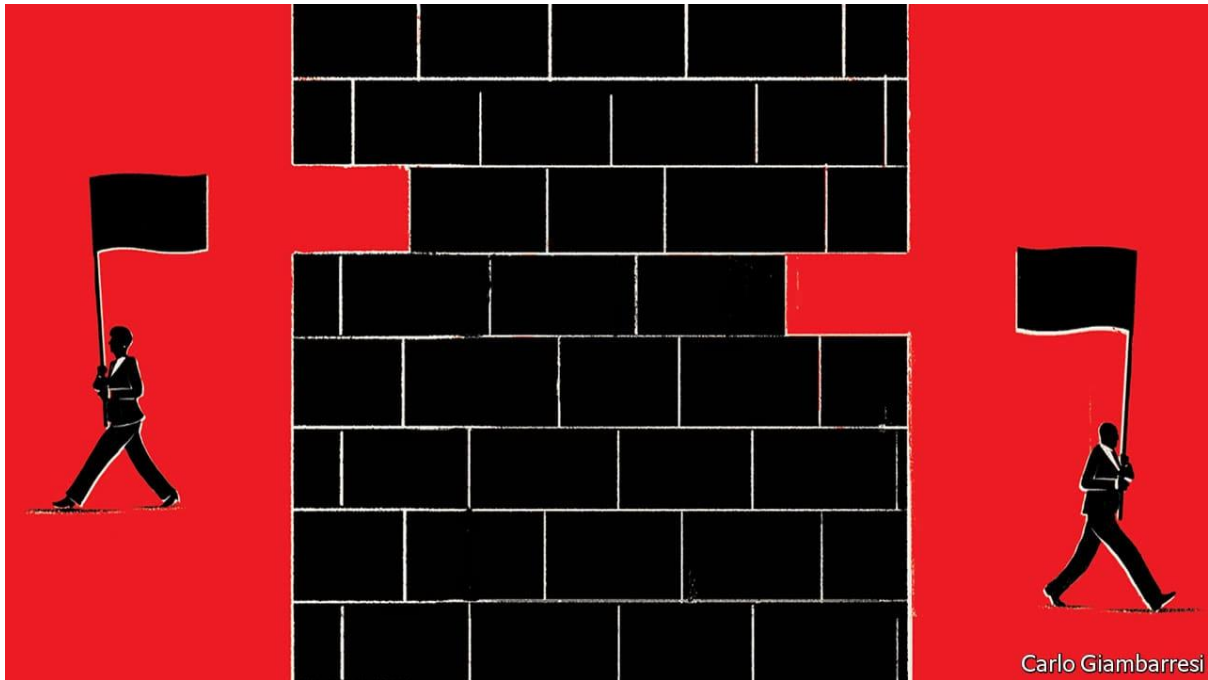


1 Adapted from The Economist © 2017

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3 Whither nationalism?

4 Nationalism is not fading away. But it is not clear where it
5 is heading



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8 Wherever you look, nationalism is rising. Sometimes it takes the form of self-declared
9 nations demanding the right to determine their future: Catalonia in Spain and Kurdistan
10 in Iraq, Scotland in Britain and Biafra in Nigeria. More often it is a lurch to the populist
11 and reactionary right. The Alternative for Germany has won 94 seats in the Bundestag.
12 Marine Le Pen of the National Front won a third of the vote in France's presidential
13 election. In Hungary, Austria and the Czech Republic nationalists have taken power, just
14 as they did in Poland. In post-referendum Britain they have "taken back control", or at
15 least pretended to. Turkey is militant, Japan is shedding its pacifism, India is toying with
16 Hindu supremacy, China dreams of glory and Russia is belligerent.

17 Most remarkable is the nationalist turn in the United States. America was the first
18 nation to declare itself independent of all sovereigns save its people and constitution. It
19 has always seen itself as a place apart. But for most of its history this exceptionalism has
20 been a form of self-regarding universalism; in time, the rest of the world would catch
21 up. Now it has an angry, nativist president who sees America not leading, but being left
22 behind—and vows to make it great again.

23 People who cross borders and cultures easily, and who prosper as they do so, find this
24 new nationalism disturbing. They see it hindering peaceful countries from trading,
25 mingling and co-operating on the world's problems. But they tend to think that it will
26 pass, like a fever. It may put off the day when the differences between nations finally
27 melt away; it does not mean that day will never come.

28 That is to brush aside what is happening far too lightly. Nationalism is an abiding legacy
29 of the Enlightenment. It has embedded itself in global politics more completely and
30 more successfully than any of the Enlightenment's more celebrated legacies, including
31 Marxism, classical liberalism and even industrial capitalism. It is not an aberration. It is
32 here to stay. Putting aside the concerns of a cosmopolitan elite, this is not necessarily a
33 bad thing. Like religion, nationalism is capable of bringing out the best in people as well
34 as the worst. It can inspire them to bind together freely in pursuit of the common good.
35 But it can also fill them with a terrifying, righteous certainty, breeding strife and
36 injustice.

37 Sadly, the new nationalism plays to the paranoid, intolerant side of this legacy. It sees
38 every "citizen of the world" as a "citizen of nowhere", in the mocking phrase of Theresa
39 May, Britain's prime minister. When the citizens of the world call them bigots, the
40 nationalists retort that the citizens of nowhere are traitors. That turns politics into a test
41 of loyalty. When nations eye each other with contempt, the global order which was
42 stitched together after the second world war under American leadership starts to come
43 asunder. Geopolitics becomes a free-for-all.

44 To see where this leads you need a handle on what nationalism is and how it works.
45 What connects a skinhead wrapped in the flag of St George to a granny waving at the
46 Queen with a Union Flag on a stick? When Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of Law and
47 Justice, whips up one of the mass-meetings at which he peddles conspiracy theories on a
48 chilly Tuesday evening, what alchemy persuades each member of his audience that he is
49 summoning an ancient and personal loyalty? Why would someone avoid talking to a
50 stranger on the bus but lay down her life for him on the battlefield? The answers draw
51 on politics, philosophy and psychology. But they begin with history.

52 Nations have existed for centuries. Nationalism came of age in Valmy, in northern
53 France, on September 20th 1792, round about noon.

54 That was when, in an engagement as mythologised as the Battle of Warsaw, French
55 volunteers confronted a superior army of Prussian regulars under the Duke of
56 Brunswick. In the crucial moment, General François Kellermann brandished his hat on
57 the end of his sword and roared "Vive la nation!" From battalion after battalion the cry
58 went up, a wave that carried the citizen-soldiers to triumph.

59 It was the first victory of the Revolutionary War, claimed for the nation not the king. It
60 inspired the National Convention in Paris to be done with the monarchy. A stunned
61 Europe grasped that the divine rule of kings really was coming to an end. The order that
62 replaced it was built on three philosophical claims:

63 1) Legitimacy is not handed down from God; it surges up from the people. Thinkers like
64 Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke drew on a well-established sense of nationhood,

65 particularly visible in England, to explain how individual citizens have the right to join
66 freely in a nation that will protect and benefit them. Three years before Valmy, Article
67 III of the Declaration of the Rights of Man had said: "The principle of all sovereignty
68 resides essentially in the nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority
69 which does not proceed directly from the nation."

70 2) Government is not just an agreement between individuals, but also a statement of the
71 nation's general will. As Rousseau argued, individual rights can be qualified: a state
72 wields its power in the name of the collective. Scholars quarrel over whether Rousseau
73 meant to trample on individual rights or protect them from the majority, but
74 governments have used and abused the principle ever since.

75 3) Each nation is different. By the time Napoleon was invading his neighbours, France's
76 fraternal claim to be spreading the universal virtues of liberty and equality looked to the
77 rest of Europe very much like brazen conquest. German thinkers turned to the
78 philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, who insisted that each nation is shaped by its own
79 unique past and that its true essence emerges from history, culture and, ultimately, race.
80 The French could not impose their version of liberty and equality; only Germans could
81 know what those ideas mean for the powers and principalities that would eventually
82 form Germany.

83 Nationalism slips and slides between these three divergent claims. Flag-waving patriots
84 who get weepy over the Olympic games and the poems of Rudyard Kipling draw on
85 history and culture, but go easy on the general will. Civic nationalists, from places like
86 Brazil, America and Australia that are largely made up of immigrants, exalt universal
87 values and the example their nation sets in pursuing them. They dally with Rousseau's
88 general will, urging newcomers to assimilate, but tread lightly on race and culture,
89 which are not shared. Ethnic nationalists mine race and history to create a politics that
90 sacrifices individual liberty to the will of the majority.

91 The late Benedict Anderson, an Irish political scientist, called modern nations "imagined
92 communities"—imagined because people are drawn together within them who have not
93 met and never will. It is the power of such imagination that allows an essentially modern
94 doctrine like nationalism to feel so deeply rooted in the past. Today's Polish nationalists
95 hark back to the country's commonwealth with Lithuania, which at its height, in the 17th
96 century, was one of Europe's great powers. Zimbabwe takes its name from ruins
97 abandoned hundreds of years before the country's boundaries were carved out by
98 colonialists. Germany's 19th-century nationalists romanticised the tribes who fought the
99 Roman legions—which is why Wagner throngs with spear maidens and knuckleheaded
100 heroes.

101 Today's nations are, in a sense, products of nationalism, rather than, as nationalists
102 might claim, it is of them.

103 The manipulation of history and culture has a long tradition. The French army beat the
104 Prussians at Valmy because of its professional gunners, rather than its citizen
105 volunteers. Diponegoro, whom Indonesians hail as a national hero for opposing Dutch
106 colonial rule in the 19th century, intended to conquer Java, not to liberate it; Anderson
107 noted that he seems to have had no concept of who the Dutch were nor any desire to

108 expel them. When Italy was unified in 1861, only 2.5% of the population spoke standard
109 Italian. Massimo d’Azeglio, a leading patriot, declared: “We have made Italy; now we
110 must make Italians.” So much for Herder’s unique community bound by language and
111 culture.

112 This process of national construction can be harnessed for violence and hatred. Simon
113 Winder, an author and publisher, exaggerated when he said on BBC radio some months
114 ago that “nationalism always starts off with folk-dancing and ends up with barbed wire”.
115 But such journeys are all too easy, especially when nationalism is contaminated by
116 theories of racial purity. Then it was able to fuel the Nazi drive to “protect” ethnic
117 Germans in neighbouring countries, and to permit the building of concentration camps
118 and gas chambers. That spectre has haunted nationalism ever since.

119 But nationalism has liberated oppressed people as often as it has fired up anti-Semites.
120 In the 19th century, beneath the carapace of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman
121 empires, liberals and radicals built movements of national liberation. After the first
122 world war, when Woodrow Wilson, America’s president, championed the principle of
123 national self-determination, these new nations emerged, blinking, into sunlight, a
124 process typically accompanied by national anthems that sounded like subpar Verdi.

125 Once Europeans had accepted self-determination, it was just a matter of time before
126 Africans and Asians founded national-liberation movements of their own. James Mayall,
127 a British academic, points out that European powers could sustain empires only so long
128 as they believed that their imperial subjects were barbarians who did not count as
129 people with rights. When the Europeans’ arguments were turned back against them,
130 their great empires collapsed under the weight of their own contradictions.

131 A new internationalism was born; cosmopolitans looked with pleasure on the United
132 Nations, alike in dignity, diverse in their national dress. They saw a world of nations
133 which, in the words of the 19th-century writer Ernest Renan, “serve the common cause
134 of civilisation; each holds one note in the concert of humanity.” Liberal multiculturalism
135 carries an echo of the same feeling, promising a civic nationalism so strong and
136 legitimate that Herder’s different peoples can jostle along within it, separate yet united.

137 A lot of movements—most notably Marxism—have aimed to surpass the nation. None
138 has succeeded. Delegates to a pan-Slavic congress in the mid-19th century could not
139 understand each other and had to fall back on German. Pan-Arabism and Negritude
140 failed to unite the Middle East or Africa. Far from creating a post-national caliphate,
141 Islamic State and al-Qaeda have divided Sunni Islam.

142 The most ambitious attempt to lay nationalism to rest is the European Union. It has
143 succeeded in that war between EU members is unthinkable. But the European nation
144 state has not withered away as some of the pioneers hoped. National governments still
145 run Brussels, national machinery is hard to dismantle and institutions, such as the press
146 and the bureaucracy, cannot easily be unplugged. Someone, somewhere always seems
147 to want to hang on to power.

148 Instead, as empires have fallen apart, Wilson’s principle of national self-determination
149 has spread around the world. The philosophy that nations are sovereign and uniquely

150 able to say what suits them is incorporated into the bedrock of the UN, the Bretton
151 Woods institutions and the whole of international law. Everything else follows from it.

152 Indeed, nationalism has become so much a part of the backdrop that you hardly notice
153 it—except, as today, when there is a crisis.

154 After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama, an American political scientist,
155 famously wrote that humanity had reached the end of history, because the only system
156 of beliefs left standing was liberal, democratic capitalism. Led by America, the West
157 energetically promoted this vision, both in its formal foreign policy and through NGOs
158 and think-tanks. Its suasion mostly used example and encouragement, urging supply-
159 side reform, deregulation and privatisation. Occasionally, in the former Yugoslavia, Iraq
160 and Libya, it used force.

161 But when Communism fell, liberalism was not the Enlightenment's only remaining
162 legacy. Mr Fukuyama reckoned without nationalism, which he expected to fade away.
163 But his prediction proved wrong as the leaders of Russia, China, India, Turkey and
164 others have seen the West's promotion of universal values as a cynical ploy to subvert
165 their rule and their ambitions.

166 The attempt to repel Western universalism has been stunningly successful.

167 Once, America would have stepped in. But the champion of universal values has
168 undergone a dramatic change of heart. Rex Tillerson, America's secretary of state, told
169 his dismayed diplomats this year that his priorities were security and the economy.
170 Promoting American values had, he said, become an "obstacle".

171 President Donald Trump could not have been clearer when he addressed the UN's
172 General Assembly last September: "We do not expect diverse countries to share the
173 same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. But we do expect all nations
174 to uphold these two core sovereign duties: to respect the interests of their own people
175 and the rights of every other sovereign nation."

176 To grasp how much ground Mr Trump has surrendered, consider that two world wars
177 led America's leaders to conclude they needed to make the world safe for their country.
178 That meant forging a broad-shouldered alliance based on democracy, the rule of law
179 and an open economy. It was the most powerful alliance in history, based on an intense
180 civic nationalism that promoted Western values. By endorsing the world of blood and
181 soil, Mr Trump has tossed aside that common cause. If each country defines its own
182 values, what holds the alliance together?

183 The new nationalism does not just insist on the differences between countries, it also
184 thrives on the anger within them. Michal Bilewicz, a social psychologist at the University
185 of Warsaw, explains this anger in terms of what his profession calls "agency"—the
186 power to control your own life. Nationalism is determined not by patriotic ardour, he
187 argues, but by self-esteem. Loyalty to the nation combined with confidence and trust
188 favours altruism. By contrast, feelings of frustration and inadequacy tend to lead to
189 narcissism.

190 Men and women lacking in, or deprived of, agency look to nationalism to assure them
191 that, in their own way, they are as good as everyone else—better, even. It is just that the
192 world does not give them the respect they deserve. They are quick to identify with those
193 they see as on their side and to show contempt for others, Mr Bilewicz says. At the same
194 time they are obsessed by how others see them. Their world is that of Carl Schmitt, a
195 German Nazi and constitutional lawyer, who believed such conflict to be the
196 fundamental stuff of politics, both within nations and between them: “The distinction
197 specific to politics...is that between friend and enemy.” In Schmitt’s view, politics is a
198 kind of civil war. Everything boils down to loyalty.