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There Is No Left Case for Nationalism

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In the face of far-right extremism, liberals and leftists have been asking themselves about the viability of their politics. This is not a bad thing; a shakeup on the scale we're seeing today should push us all to think more critically about our beliefs, our tactics, and their broader impact on the world. But this self-reflection, often conducted publicly, has given rise to a tendency for some on the left to play the adults in the room and denounce their more radical comrades.

In a recent essay titled "The Left Case Against Open Borders," Angela Nagle, author of *Kill All Normies*, takes her fellow leftists to task for advocating for free migration. She characterizes the ideals of the open-borders left as an intransigent and shortsighted form of purism—one that works against other left projects like redistribution, protecting organized labor, and universal programs.

Her argument is full of straw leftists. She cites the economist George Borjas to make a point about the negative effects of migration on wages, without noting that other economists have thoroughly discredited this work. She later refers to Karl Marx's support for Irish nationalism to "prove" that open-borders politics are somehow incongruous with his vision—never mind that there's a long history of socialist internationalism, and that the passage she invokes was less about Marx's loving borders than his supporting the Irish workers against British imperialism.

More important for Nagle is her argument that advocates for free migration are "useful idiots" to corporate interests and libertarian think tanks like the Cato Institute. She claims that the open-borders left, by advocating a more open migration system, does capital's bidding, making it easier to find migrant workers to exploit. But in the same way that Nagle's critique of open borders does not necessarily mean she shares motives with ethno-nationalists—and, Tucker Carlson appearance notwithstanding, I think it's safe to assume she does not—a left open-border policy does not necessarily follow from or aid the interests of corporations or neoliberal economists.

Most on the left who advocate for the movement of people, in fact, insist that an open-borders policy also requires a radical rethinking of what life is like within, and outside, those borders. For an open-borders politics to work, we would need policies addressing the inequalities between people within a state and the inequality between states.

The point is that without unjust forms of inequality between states and citizens, no exploitable foreign class of laborers would exist for big business to take advantage of. Nagle has a fair point about the ill effects of “brain drains” on developing countries, and it is true that in many respects, globalization as we know it has always been on the right’s terms. But not liking the globalization that we have should not cause us to disavow the globalization that we ought to have.

It’s unfair to single out Nagle, especially given that she’s an expert on Internet trolls, not migration (and has perhaps succeeded in trolling us). However, it is worth examining Nagle’s arguments about borders as just one of the volley of pieces by liberals and people to the left of center who have derided the out-of-touch utopianism of open-borders advocates and called on them to espouse a kinder, gentler nationalism.

Variants of this argument have come from former Harvard president Larry Summers, author John Judis, and former secretary of state Hillary Clinton, to name just a few. These thinkers all share a set of assumptions: Migration, for many of them, is a zero-sum game. Whether because an influx of new citizens will incapacitate states from administering welfare programs, or because their sheer presence will exacerbate xenophobia and swing elections to the right, they contend that achieving justice and equality within a country’s borders comes at the cost of achieving justice and equality outside it.

They also argue that the current moment is somehow exceptional and not an indictment of right-wing policies both at the local and global level; and that if the political dilemma of our time is dealt with properly, then we can all happily go back to a mythical “liberal world order.”

Their impulses are understandable. Of course we ought to do everything in our power to defeat Trumpism and its international variants; of course pragmatism matters. But it’s important to remember that the policies formulated in a crisis have a tendency to stick around—how we treat migrants now is how we will almost certainly treat migrants for the foreseeable future.

In a [*2016 Washington Post* op-ed](#), Summers, an early adopter of this genre of polemic, epitomized this tendency to ignore the real sources of xenophobia when he encouraged liberals to embrace a “responsible nationalism” in the face of “populist opposition to international integration” or globalization. Liberals, he argued, need to put citizens ahead of some notion of a “global good.”

In [*The New York Times*](#), Judis made his case for a liberal nationalism on similar grounds, insisting that “to achieve their historic objectives, liberals and social democrats will have to respond constructively to, rather than dismiss, the nationalist reaction to globalization.”

“Today’s nationalist revival,” he added, “is in reaction to the failure of global, not nation-based, initiatives that sailed over the heads of ordinary citizens.”

They’re both right that governments should do far more to help workers and poor people, but to do so requires a global framework, with new forms of redistribution across borders, not just within them. Wealth is unevenly distributed; so is power. These new structures, be they a global accountability mechanism for multinational taxation or more say for workers around the world in trade agreements, need to adapt to the realities of the 21st century, not try to take us back to a previous time.

The left-wing economist J.W. Mason has recently made arguments analogous to Summers's and Judis's (albeit, in his words, "cautiously"), calling on the left to argue for policies that "de-link" the world's economies to alleviate the worst effects of globalization on working people. That might mean holding a firm like Apple accountable to actual tax responsibilities based on where its clientele is rather than where its profits are booked, or breaking up conglomerates into smaller local parts. And that would be fine; at the same time, those policies seem as likely *or* unlikely to happen as the adoption of a global wealth tax, or a database of the offshore wealthy, or a way to cut carbon emissions around the world, or any number of supranational agreements.

Thinking primarily in terms of the nation is easier, of course; it's an older political form, and indeed, the default one. But it also betrays a lack of imagination, and, more worryingly, it misses what is really at the heart of the current crisis: The problem has never been globalization in and of itself, but that the globalization we have had puts the well-being of capital and capitalists over that of ordinary men, women, and children.

Of course globalization is flawed. Of course it sucks. But the problem with foreign money isn't that it's foreign; it's that it's money.

In a recent *Guardian* interview, Clinton made a slightly different case for liberals to embrace a nationalist rhetoric about borders: If liberals in Europe make concessions on immigration, they will be able to better compete with the far right. A charitable reading of her statements would conclude that, in an era menaced by the extreme right, she's calling for a politics of compromise. But Clinton evidently came out of her 2016 "deplorables" gaffe with the wrong lesson: Instead of pinning populist discontent to a range of easily identifiable social and economic ills, her takeaway was to start speaking like the deplorables.

There is a difference between compromise and becoming compromised, and that is why a strain of pro-nationalist thinking on the left and among liberals is so dangerous. It is hard to miss that Nagle published her essay in *American Affairs*—a magazine that set out to give intellectual legitimacy to Trumpism, failed miserably at this ambition, and now has rebranded itself as a space for ideas with no home on either side. But there should be sides. Politics is not only about finding middle ground; it is about building a base on the strength of your own principled positions. Liberals and the left don't have to meet a revanchist right on its terms. We should be trying to bring over those who might be compelled by our arguments.

Nagle accuses leftists of shooting themselves in the foot. But it's hard not to think that it's arguments like hers that damage the left by legitimizing the idea that someone arbitrarily born on the wrong side of a line is less deserving of a good life. It's true that your instincts might be to save the drowning child at your feet, not the one you can't see—but the point of a left ethics is to bridge that gap, not widen it. The willingness of the left to play by the far right's rules and according to their narrative is part of what got us into this mess. We may be howling at one another not to normalize Trump's absurd theatrics, but the normalization we really should be worried about is what happens as a result of them.