

A Theoretical Survey on the Relationship between Conservative Nationalism and Populism

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Abstract

In recent years, many conservative nationalist movements and parties have been criticized for being populist and applying populist political strategies. Keeping it in mind, this paper addresses the relationship between conservative nationalism and populism, and questions whether there is any factor which causes conservative nationalist movements to adopt populism. Instead of analyzing certain movements and making deductions from them, the research is directly carried out on an ideological level and a philosophical research method is employed in accordance with this preference. As a consequence, it has been found that there are two main factors which create a tendency in conservative nationalist movements to populism. The first one is the inherent inconsistency and tension between the constituents of conservative nationalism, namely conservatism and nationalism. The second one is the transformation of conventional nationalism especially in the European context within a new framework which is discussed as the new nationalism in the paper.

Keywords: conservatism, conservative nationalism, nationalism, new nationalism, populism

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1. Introduction

Conservative nationalist movements and political parties are usually criticized for applying populist strategies and employing populist discourses. The same situation can be observed in many different countries. Based on this motive, this paper examines conservative nationalism and questions if there are any factors in this ideology which create a propensity in conservative nationalist movements for populism.

A comprehensive discussion on the historical processes and the nature of the concept of ideology would be beyond the scope of this study; yet, the elucidation of it to a certain extent is essential to conceive what they mean in the political and social spheres since I will address conservatism and nationalism in terms of their ideological grounds. That is why, instead of the issues such as the transformations of it from the first formulation by Antoine Destutt de Tracy as “the science of ideas” (Strath, 2013) or discussions on its pejorative descriptions in some Marxist approaches such as practical effectiveness or loss of reality (Vincent, 2010; Eagleton, 1991; Freedon, 2006), I prefer to construe the common core in almost all of the definitions of the concept briefly.

Heywood (2003, p. 5) gives ten different meanings attached to ideology whereas Eagleton (1991, p. 1-2) makes a list of sixteen definitions of ideology in circulation at the beginning of his notable book *Ideology*. Both contend that it is not possible to reach a single adequate definition of the term since it is very elusive in nature and variable in different contexts. Still, it is possible to encounter a recurrent core in almost every definition and contemporary understanding of ideology: a coherent set of beliefs, values and ideas both to understand and to explain the world, and a program for action based on this set (Heywood, 2003, p. 11; Freedon, 2006, p. 16; MacKenzie, 2003, p. 2).

As a well-designed example, I will go through the definition of ideology by Ball, Dagger and O’Neill (2014, p. 5) as a “fairly coherent and comprehensive set of ideas that explains and evaluates social conditions, helps people understand their place in society, and provides a program for social and political action.” It is apparent that the internal consistency in this set is a crucial matter for an ideology. Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether ideologies can constitute such internally coherent structures in cases of combinations on the political level.

Keeping these in mind, this paper will try to take a novel look at the ideological composition of conservative nationalism, and it investigates the probable factors which drive conservative nationalist movements to populism. For this purpose, firstly, the concept of populism will be examined, and what is meant by populism in this study will be elucidated. Secondly, conservatism and nationalism will be addressed, and the transformation of the second one under the influence of increasing globalization

processes, in particular, will be discussed. In this way, the paper will attempt to reveal if there is an ideologically rooted impulse in conservative nationalist movements towards populism.

2. Populism as a Political Strategy

Reviewing the literature on populism, it is possible to encounter a wide variety of approaches and also descriptions based on those approaches. According to the frequently cited definition by Mudde (2004), populism is “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (p. 543). Nevertheless, he adds that it is a thin-centered ideology with a restricted core, and it can be easily combined with very different thin and full ideologies.

Weyland (1999, p. 381) defines populism as a political strategy with some characteristics; rather than an ideology. He asserts that it requires “a personal leader which appeals to a heterogeneous mass of followers who feel left out and are available for mobilization”; the leader bypasses intermediary organizations, such as political parties, to reach the followers in a direct manner. Mostly, party remains as “a personal vehicle with a low level of institutionalization.” Hence, it is posited that populist politics undervalues the institutional importance of political parties since it posits an unmediated connection between the voters and the voted (Mair, 2002, p. 89).

According to Aslanidis (2016, p. 99), populism does not have the intricacies and nuances of ideologies as a phenomenon. It is more suitable to analyze it as the frame through which the simplistic and Manichean nature of the populist message is conveyed. He also argues that discourse, in the meaning of the textual production of a political actor, is what should be focused upon to identify a political practice as populist; if populist elements cannot be encountered here, it is quite unlikely to discover those within the other areas. That is why, in order to both grasp the cognitive aspects of the populist message, and obtain a firm methodological framework for the empirical research, he conceptualizes populism as a discursive frame, rather than an ideology (p. 98).

Referring to the remarks on ideology in the previous parts, Aslanidis’ argument against regarding populism as an ideology is plausible. Yet, he contends that Weyland’s approach is not convenient since strategy is inherent in any political activity. It can be objected easily by saying “so is discourse”; however, I think we can gain an insight by comparing the meanings of discourse and strategy. Taking the lexical meanings in the online Oxford dictionary (n.d.) as a reference, strategy is “a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim,” and discourse is “written or spoken communication or debate.” The first one holds the program and indicates the dimensions to deal with populism phenomenon as a whole whereas the second is rather an indicative

or means of these dimensions in the phenomenon. Thus, I argue that populism is a political strategy which is based on a specific discourse which highlights “will of the people,” an anti-elitist stance and simplification of politics through sharp dichotomies and polarizations.

Drawing on a Manichaeian division in the political arena renders populist strategy a quite suitable means to conceal gaps or inconsistencies in ideological ground of any political party or movement. The combinative texture of this strategy as stated by Mudde is another significant aspect of populism that makes populism ubiquitous for any political organization from many different ideologies including conservative nationalist ones.

3. A Review of Conservative Nationalism

Conservatism and nationalism are considered two prominent ideologies especially in right-wing politics. In cases of some political movements and/or parties, a blend of a set of ideas from both is considered as the ideological ground. Although it is possible to claim nuances among them, conservative nationalism, national conservatism, nationalist conservatism and national conservatism refer to a variant of conservatism that puts a special emphasis on national identity and national interests. The historical course of this combination is expounded in Encyclopædia Britannica as follows:

Conservatives, like other political groups, had to establish majorities in parliament if they wanted to hold power, and the progressive expansion of the franchise meant that they had to cultivate support from a broad electorate. But their chief source of strength, the rural peasantry, was declining in numbers relative to other social groups and was in any case too small to support an effective national party.

Conservative parties eventually solved this problem by identifying themselves with nationalist sentiments (Ball et al., 2017).

Although this explanation has a diagnostic value in terms of what conservatism lacks as an ideology, it is necessary to remember a simple fact that national sentiments cannot be conceived separately from the ideological background, namely nationalism, from which they have been generated. Since political ideologies offer coherent sets of perspectives, values, ideas, beliefs, and road maps related to the organization of political, economic and social life, combining conservatism with nationalism requires taking into account the ideological aspects of the latter as well. Therefore, it is significant to discuss this combination with regard to the ideological consistency it demonstrates. Moreover, reconfiguration of the conventional nationalism in the face of new challenges arising from globalization processes in the last decades forces us to rethink this combination in the contemporary context.

3.1. Conservatism as an Ideology

With an intellectual attack to the French Revolution, *Reflections* by Edmund Burke in 1790, conservatism starts to form as a political thought. Burke (1987) criticized this revolution due to the sharp change it imposed to society, break of historical continuity, and its extreme commitment to rationality. He predicted that such a commitment could pave the way for tyranny or dictatorship by destroying traditional checks and balance, and Napoleon would fulfill this prediction soon. Even if this pamphlet did not have a systematic character (Müller, 2006), it constituted a foundation for later conservative thought and politics through the notions it attributed importance; such as a gradual reform, private property and traditional continuity. Since that time, a conviction about human imperfection and some inferences from it such as the opposition to revolutionary ideas, politics and movements have formed the foundation of conservative thought. The belief in the inadequacy of people's rational faculties to comprehend the complexities of the social world, and in this way, the opposition to the guidance of abstract reasoning for social and political aims, lead conservatives to established, familiar rituals and traditions stemming from organic social interaction as a guide to political behaviour and government (Green, 2002, p. 282).

As one of the most significant representatives of intellectual conservatism in the 20th century, Russell Kirk (1960) traced the historical route of modern conservative thought in his magnum opus, *The Conservative Mind*, and attempted to answer the question "what is conservatism?" By addressing the founding fathers of conservatism as well as statesmen, literary critics and authors who contributed to the formation of modern conservative philosophy, he drew a conclusion that there were six canons of conservatism. These can be listed as follows:

- Belief in a natural law or transcendent order which rules society,
- Defense of the variety and mystery of traditional life against the systems which impose a narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism and utilitarian goals,
- Surmise that classes and rule of law are requisite for a civilized society,
- Claim that freedom and property are inseparably connected,
- Faith in the prescription and conventional wisdom passed by tradition and customs,
- Recognition that change is not always good for society and it has to take place with providence.

He asserts that these are the general principles to which most conservatives have adhered during the last two centuries although various deviations from or numerous additions to them could have been observed (pp. 7-8).

Freeden (2006, p. 409) posits that "support for gradual, natural, or organic change, and an appeal to an extra-human legitimation of order and orderly change" are the identifying

characters of conservative ideology. Yet, he provides some adjacent concepts which range from individual rights, respect for the law and liberty to the extolling of authority, inequality and a paternalistic concern for the public good. Freeden also adds that sometimes these principles compete with each other or become prominent according to perceived threats towards the conservative core. He admits that a superficial observer may label it opportunistic. However, conservatism's consistency relies on its morphology as a whole (p. 382).

In addition to all these, conservatism has a distinctive place among political ideologies. Quinton (1978, pp. 12-16) asserts that conservatism's rejection of political doctrines about the stable universal rights of human beings and universally ideal form of political institutions makes it a theory-prohibiting theory and causes an apparent paradox. This situation renders it difficult for any formulation. However, there is an assumption under this rejection as well, which is not political, but rather epistemological. It is the imperfection of human nature both in intellectual and moral terms. Therefore, the prescriptions laid out by political ideologies are deemed doubtful to a large extent by conservatism. According to Scruton (2001, pp. 13-14), considering society as a means to some future goal is absurd to the conservative, because ends and aims are discovered in the life of society by sharing his way of seeing, rather than being predetermined and imposed through the close readings of recipes of utopian doctrines. By virtue of the fact that society has personality and will, conservatism is concerned with the sustainment of the life of society as an organism "through sickness and health, change and decay"; instead of considering it as a way to some predetermined targets.

By and large, conservatism can be seen as an ideology which is based on experience of society, which is maintained through traditions and experiences rather than human reason and rationality in the rival ideologies. The political programs it offers depend on this foundation which differs in any society whereas those are clearer and more fixed in other ideologies. Interventions on society and revolutionary acts which interrupt the continuity in it are not endorsed or tolerated by conservatives. Society is not viewed as a means to attain some ultimate goals since it is an organic unit with its own character, and it is an end in itself.

3.2. Nationalism as a Thin Ideology

While addressing nationalism here, the focus is not on the long-lasting debates of nationalism studies such as the one on the emergence and nature of nations. Instead, it will be shortly reviewed in terms of its ideological and political core ideas which lay the foundation for nationalist politics. Through this review, there is an expectation to comprehend some critical issues arising out of the combination of conservatism and nationalism; and to observe the points of compatibility and incompatibility among them on a theoretical level.

As a leading figure in nationalism studies, Gellner (2006) defines nationalism as “a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” (p. 1). Breuille puts forward a similar view; however, he claims that nationalism is more than a principle; it is a political doctrine built upon three foundational assertions:

- Existence of a nation with an explicit and peculiar character.
- Priority of the values and interests of this nation over all other interests and values.
- Essentiality of the independence and sovereignty of this nation (Breuille, 1993, p. 2).

Unlike these names, Calhoun (1997) regards nationalism as a discourse and conceptualizes it through some common features of the rhetoric of nation. The discourse about the nation concept posits some definite premises. First of all, a nation is an integral, indivisible unit in its boundaries of territory, population; or both. It has sovereignty or an aspiration to sovereignty. Any government should be built on its will and act according to its interests as the source of legitimacy. Each individual has the right to participate in political affairs as an equal member of a nation in political terms. As another aspect, a nation has a temporal depth, common descendants and special historical (even sacred) relations to a certain territory. Lastly, members of a nation share a common culture, such as a common language, values and beliefs, and habitual practices.

Although dealing with the nationalism phenomenon in different ways, all of the names above provide useful perspectives to comprehend the nationalism phenomenon. However, this paper considers nationalism as a thin ideology. In order to make sense of this preference, Freedman's (1998, pp. 749-751) definition of ideologies as “sets of political ideas, beliefs and attitudes that involve the adoption of practices which explain, support, justify or contest socio-political arrangements, and which provide plans of action for public political institutions” should be taken into consideration. He argues that nationalism cannot meet the requirement to offer a fairly wide or comprehensive range of answers to the political questions engendered by societies in order to be a full ideology, and thus, it oscillates between being a thin-centered ideology and being a component of existing ideologies (pp. 749-751). In my view, it is plausible to esteem it as a thin ideology. Because, even though it cannot provide definite action plans and solution plans, it directs political actions through its internalized set of tenets. In other words, the link between thought and action still exhibits an ideological character. Freedman settles five concepts which demarcate the ideological core of nationalism. These can be juxtaposed briefly as prioritization of a particular group (nation), positive valorization assigned to a nation, desire to give politico-institutional expression to the first two concepts, space and time as the crucial determinants of social identity and a sense of belonging which has a large place for sentiment and emotion (pp. 751-752).

3.3. Defining the New Nationalism

From the Gellnerian principle of nationalism, which is the congruence between political and national units, it is quite possible to infer two clear premises:

- Nation should be sovereign within its territory.
- The world has to be divided by nation-states which are sovereign powers within their territories.

Nevertheless, in recent decades, these have been powerfully challenged by developments within the economic, legal, social, and (especially in the European context) political domains. If it is necessary to illustrate them with some examples, the operations of multinational companies whose interests have no relationship with national interests most of the time can be reckoned in the economic domain. The international courts and ad hoc tribunals can be conceived as structures which surpass national legal frameworks. The conditions created by the migration phenomenon and refugee crises constitute an example in the social domain; since these are presented as threats to the assumed social unity through national identity in nation-states. As the last one, a supranational political entity like the EU which can be seen a challenge to the conventional notion of national sovereignty exemplifies the situation in terms of politics. Of course, there are no firm borders among these domains, and they are in interaction with one another on a large scale; however, this is not the point here. The point is that the stated premises of nationalism and the nation as a sovereign power are overridden by them to a great extent.

In the conventional understanding of nationalism, the external enemies and “constituting others” are usually the other, and most of the time neighbor nations and countries with which the nation has some historical conflict, border disagreements and so on, and the internal enemies are the historical minorities in the national territory, who are perceived as violators of national integrity. However, the new conditions discussed above have recently called forth a new kind of nationalism. International, transnational and supranational structures which challenge the sovereignty of nation states have given nationalism a new external enemy. Migrants and refugees who are seen as being disharmonious with the culture and traditions of nations have emerged as the new internal enemies. Of course, enmity may not be the most convenient concept to reflect the discomfort and concerns related with these issues, and these conditions have not been observed evenly all over the world. Yet, they have apparently gained nationalist arguments a new ground, and thus, engendered a new kind of nationalism. In his article for *Politico*, Hirsh (2016) puts forth an important dimension of this new nationalism:

Displaced working people of the world are uniting—in their demand, paradoxically, for disunification. The common refrain is “we want our country back.” Back from whom or what is unclear, but the biggest bogeymen appear to be international institutions, open trade and (let’s be honest) the influx of brown-skinned migrants. (para. 2)

Banks and Gingrich (2006, p. 2-3) defines the new nationalism as the re-emergence of nationalism under different global and transnational conditions. After the Cold War, nationalists came across many dimensions of the globalization process which they had to adjust or react to such as the immigration issue and central EU decisions, and a new nationalism was the outcome. However, the characteristics of the earlier variants of nationalism such as preserving “eternal values,” defending “timeless aspirations” and efforts for a continuous “invention of tradition” also still apply to this new variant to a large extent.

Valluvan (2017, p. 4) attributes some economical concerns to the new nationalism and notes that the transfers from national governments to the EU and to international aid, financial allocations for refugees and other “undeserving” groups and the increased competition caused by the mentioned groups for the diminished and diminishing resources fuel it up. However, he claims that considering nationalism as epiphenomenal of economic factors would be a misinterpretation since it would mean that the economy organizes nationalism. On the contrary, he adds that “nationalism and ideas of nation itself shape how material forces are comprehended and responded to”; but a discussion about the supremacy of one of them is not the matter in this study.

Lastly, propounding the change in nationalism, the argument is not that nationalists renounced some of the tenets which were exposed earlier. What I assert is that they have recently been forced to take positions against the conditions originating from globalization processes, and it has given nationalism a new shape, even though the core has been protected to a great extent. I should note that it will be especially helpful after examining populism in the related part, in order to discuss the convergence between them.

4. Combining Nationalism and Conservatism: The Parallels, Motives and Conflicts

Only fifteen years after the Second World War, by comparing the US and Europe with regard to their relationships with nationalism, Wilson (1960) was writing that “the conservatives of Europe have been increasingly hostile to the ravages of nationalistic passion” while there had been no effective extreme nationalism in the US. The reasoning behind it was that Europe had been in a crisis since 1914 which was engendered by extreme nationalism and the ideologies allied to it (p. 279). It indicates that everything

between conservatives and nationalists was not always smooth and harmonious as widely perceived.

Conservative attitudes apparently spring from a sense of belonging to an already existing, on-going, and familiar social world and order since they connote to a will to sustain the comfort which is provided by this continuity and familiarity. Freedon (1998) thinks that core notions of conservatism such as the organic view of society and extra-human sanctification of the social order are suitable to be reinforced by nationalist core ideas (pp. 762-763). Hayek (1960) also adds that conservatives' hostility to internationalism and proneness to a strident nationalism are "its weakness in the struggle of ideas," and the close connection between conservatism and nationalism "frequently provides the bridge from conservatism and collectivism" (pp. 405-406). In this context, it is likely to draw a parallel to nationalism. But conservative and nationalist ideologies mean more than that, as we have seen so far, tensions between them are inevitable in cases of combination, since they threaten each other's internal consistency.

The main source of tension between nationalist and conservative political thoughts could be understood by Oakeshott's famous dichotomy between the politics of faith and the politics of scepticism. According to Oakeshott (1996), the politics of Europe have witnessed the tension between these rival understandings for five centuries, although he notes that in concrete examples, the styles are not as easily separable as in these abstractions. The politics of faith prescribes that perfection is achievable through human effort. Setting the goals, it mobilizes the enthusiasm of the people in order to obtain power and achieve this perfection. As a matter of course, the mentioned power can be entrusted to human beings. The politics of scepticism, on the contrary, is suspicious of the perfection through human effort, and use of enthusiasm in order to attain the power to set goals towards ultimate destinations. Therefore, it expects less from the political agents, simply not more than simple tasks such as maintaining the public order and keeping the institutions working well.

Nationalism inherently seeks mobilization of popular enthusiasm to rule out threats to national integrity and sovereignty while conservative thought has doubts about such quests. Nevertheless, as Scruton (2001) argues, conservatives lack the offerings such as freedom, equality and social justice as in the case of other main ideologies. In order to maintain the political power, they may need to combine their ideological positions with nationalism which helps them to set up "national" goals by which the masses are mobilized. However, conservatism is actually at odds with other ideologies since those view society as a means to the ends and goals of their utopian doctrines; because it is based on the idea that those are discovered and decided within the life of society. This causes an apparent problem of internal coherence for conservatism.

As another issue to be addressed, the recent impulses of nationalism against the rapid and severe transformations imposed by the processes of globalization are compatible with the

prudent change notion in conservatism and it paves the way for the convergence between the two political stances. However, while conservative concerns are focused on the threatened moral issues and traditional dimensions of social life, nationalists are worried about the national legal, political and economic power blocks deteriorated by transnational and supranational forces and structures. To enhance the nation-state's realm of authority is not an acceptable solution in conservative terms even if the state is seen as the realization of the nation and national will in the nationalist sense.

As the last point, in conservative thought, the economy is conceived as an autonomous area which is the outcome of the actions of individuals and groups in accordance with their interests, and it should be free from state planning or intervention as much as it can. Although there is no specific economic model identified with nationalism, if thought about within the frame of national interests which are above anything else according to the nationalist main tenets, state intervention in the economy is not strange, and it is even occasionally urged. As a part of a social system, designing or using the economy as a tool for political aims is another intolerable aspect from the perspective of conservative thought.

The discussed tension and conflicts between conservatism and nationalism bring about the lack of a consistent ideological framework for conservative nationalist movements and political parties. At this point, populist political strategies enable them to cover up such a deficiency through the simplification of politics and separation of the political stage between friends and foes. This can be viewed as the inherent tendency in conservative nationalism towards populism. However, there is another factor which reinforces this tendency. As discussed above, nationalism is more functional for the mobilization of the masses and for this reason it becomes the prominent component in the compound. Regarding this situation alongside the transformation of the conventional nationalism to the elucidated new nationalism especially in the European context, this component engenders another predisposition towards populism.

5. Populism and (New) Nationalism

De Cleen and Stavrakakis (2017) asserts that nationalism and populism can be distinguished from each other by a focus on their discursive architectonics. They are right that both of those discursively construct and also claim to represent “the people.” However, in nationalism it is taken as “the nation” while in populism it is seen as “the underdog.” They argue that a clear distinction is helpful to understand how different political projects blend these in particular ways. Yet, I maintain that they share the same ground to a large extent in the contemporary context. In the new kind of nationalism which was previously discussed, the underdog and the people are increasingly perceived as the same in the face of globalization. Deteriorating sovereignty of a nation in relation to international, transnational and supranational forces makes it an underdog as a whole.

As another aspect, new nationalists attack the liberal values such as rule of law, since it brings about autonomy of law from national political frames and connect legislation to universal principles and usually to the international courts based on them. This situation deteriorates the judicial power of a nation. From the populist perspective, it is possible to interpret this scene that some judicial elite alien to the values and culture of the people have the authority to decree the issues concerning the people. The overlap between the positions is obvious.

The current appeal and vitality of nationalism rely on an assortment of contrasting ideological traditions, meanings and symbols (Valluvan, 2017). Nationalism's current form has the ability to be jointed to various ideologies regardless of their contrasting premises and positions in the political spectrum, and it enables us to construe it as contemporary populism. To sum up, the nationalist themes are interlocked with populism in the contemporary context. Instead of a comprehensive ideological structure, they form together a populist nationalism which is based on the simplification of politics through dichotomies around the intersection of "the people" and "the nation."

6. Conclusion

This paper questions if there is any propensity in conservative nationalism for populism on the theoretical ground. It takes conservatism as an ideology, nationalism as a thin-centred ideology, and populism as a political strategy, and explicates the reasons for these choices.

As a result, it ascertains that conservative nationalism has a high potential to transform to populist nationalism. Briefly, two factors are responsible for this potential:

- There are contradictions and tensions between the ideological structures of conservatism and nationalism; thus, populist strategies are necessary to cover up these via the simplification of politics.
- Through the challenges of globalization, nationalism has gained a new formation in the last decades; and this new nationalism sets the stage for populism on a vast scale.

These factors bring populist political strategy reinforced by nationalist elements forward whereas the conservative component regresses by losing ideological integrity. Although certain conservative themes and motifs are preserved in discourses, their functions do not go beyond that of embellishing the main line of populist nationalist politics in order to speak to the voters who have conservative sentiments.

This paper unveils the intrinsic and conjuncture-dependent factors which pave the way for conservative parties and movements to adopt populism. However, it does not have a claim that populism is an inevitable ending for every individual case of conservative nationalism. It rather asserts that the aforementioned reasons can explain the ideological ground of the predisposition of conservative nationalist political movements and parties to populism.

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