

ETHNIC NATIONALISM WITHIN THE EXISTING SYSTEM.

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Some thinkers on the left indeed view nationalism as the ‘socialism of the stupid.’ This expresses the idea that ethnic nationalists believe that social and economic hardship are caused by foreign elements that undermine the health and cohesiveness of the nation state, rather than by the way that the political economy is organized.

In ‘representative democratic’ modes of government, ‘constructive opposition’ tends to be construed as a synonym for ‘loyal opposition,’ which in turn is applied to those parties that more or less share the basic goals and purposes of those who are in power, but who believe themselves better capable of realizing these goals than their competitors within the existing political framework, the rules of which are taken to be ‘the

only game in town.’ **Much of the success of the nationalist and xenophobic political movements on the far right of the political spectrum comes from their message that there is something fundamentally wrong with the present system,** a message that often resonates among broad swathes of the general public, especially in times of economic crisis. In such contexts nationalist parties often gain support because they are voicing legitimate grievances of peoples’ unmet needs and are often also correct in their analysis that these needs cannot be met within the existing system.

However, nationalist political parties and movements, in their critique of the outcomes of a market economy and democratic governance, anthropomorphize the logic of global capitalism and the actual functioning of the democratic state by reducing them to particular groups. The particular content of the xenophobic nationalist ‘diagnosis’ of the disease infecting the body politic is the supine subjection of mainstream politicians to foreign interests who have hijacked the country. The archetypal example of such a ‘diagnosis’ can be found in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that blame the failures and problems of the state, and/or its predominant ethnicity, on greedy Jewish financiers not loyal to any country.

Many parties flirt with ethnic nationalism in order to achieve some political points. **First, it is important to clarify another reason why major parties ‘flirt’ with ethnic nationalism besides pure opportunism: namely, they flirt with ethnic nationalism because nationalism is part of their program in any case.**

For example, far-right nationalist parties agree with the major political parties that the goal of politics is the welfare of the people – they differ only in their definitions of who constitute the German people, and how their welfare can be best achieved.

A second question posed here is whether there is such a thing as ‘mild and civilized’ ethnic nationalism. The fact that parties flirt with ethnic nationalism in order to gain political points presupposes that ethno-nationalism is already socially accepted and will gain these parties more support than they may lose. In this sense, the ‘mild and civilized’ nationalism exercised by parliamentary parties is not only possible but also politically effective. What tend to be considered ‘mild and civilized’ versions of ethnic nationalism are in fact those versions of ethnic nationalism that have come to enjoy popular acceptance, and have not come to be questioned by hegemonic powers in the international geopolitical arena.

To pursue the metaphor of ‘disease’ and ‘diagnosis’ a bit further, if we diagnose ‘ethnic nationalism’ or ‘xenophobia’ as diseases akin to a potentially mortal virus infecting the body politic, whether the virus will actually lead to breakdown often depends upon the body’s pre-existing health as well as course of treatment. **The decisive factors determining the success or failure of a given ethnic nationalist movement need to be situated and sought within a framework** capable of incorporating and explaining the broader patterns of contestation of power relations within which the movement is embedded. ■