

Nationalism Is Rising, Not Fascism

May 31, 2016 The claims of an increase in fascism in Europe and the U.S. derive from a misunderstanding of the term.



By George Friedman

Recently, there have been a number of articles and statements asserting that fascism is rising in Europe, and that [Donald Trump](#) is an American example of fascism. This is a misrepresentation of a very real phenomenon. The nation-state is reasserting itself as the primary vehicle of political life. Multinational institutions like the European Union and multilateral trade treaties are being challenged because they are seen by some as not being in the national interest. The charge of a rise in fascism derives from a profound misunderstanding of what fascism is. It is also an attempt to discredit the resurgence of nationalism and to defend the multinational systems that have dominated the West since World War II.

Nationalism is the core of the Enlightenment's notion of liberal democracy. It asserts that the multinational dynasties that ruled autocratically denied basic human rights. Among these was the right to national self-determination and the right of citizens to decide what was in the national interest. The Enlightenment feared tyranny and saw the multinational empires dominating Europe as the essence of tyranny. Destroying them meant replacing them with nation-states. The American and French revolutions were both nationalist risings, as were the nationalist risings that swept Europe in 1848. Liberal revolutions were by definition nationalist because they were risings against multinational empires.

Fascism differs from nationalism in two profound ways. First, self-determination was not considered a universal right by fascists. Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini and Francisco Franco, to mention three obvious fascists, only endorsed nationalism for Germany, Italy and Spain. The rights of other nations to a nation-state of their own was at best unclear to the fascists. In a very real sense, Hitler and Mussolini believed in multinationalism, albeit with other nations submitting to their will. Fascism in its historical form was an assault on the right of nations to pursue their self-interest, and an elevation of the fascists' right to pursue it based on an assertion of their nations' inherent superiority and right to rule.

But the more profound difference was the conception of internal governance. Liberal nationalism accepted that the right to hold power was subject to explicit and periodic selection of the leaders by the people. How this was done varied. The American system is very different from the British, but the core principles remain the same. It also requires that opponents of the elected have the right to speak out against them, and to organize parties to challenge them in the future. Most important, it affirms that the people have the right to govern themselves through these mechanisms and that those elected to lead must govern in the people's name. Leaders must also be permitted to govern and extra-legal means cannot be used to paralyze the government, any more than the government has the right to suppress dissent.

Fascism asserts that a Hitler or Mussolini represent the people but are not answerable to them. The core of fascism is the idea of the dictator, who emerges through his own will. He cannot be challenged without betraying the people. Therefore, free speech and opposition parties are banned and those who attempt to oppose the regime are treated as criminals. Fascism without the dictator, without the elimination of elections, without suppression of free speech and the right to assemble, isn't fascism.

Arguing that [being part of the European Union is not in the British interest](#), that [NATO has outlived its usefulness](#), that [protectionist policies](#) or anti-immigration policies are desirable is not fascist. These ideas have no connection to fascism whatsoever. They are far more closely linked to traditional liberal democracy. They represent the reassertion of the foundation of liberal democracy, which is the self-governing nation-state. It is the foundation of the United Nations, whose members are nation-states, and where the right to national self-determination is fundamental.

Liberal democracy does not dictate whether a nation should be a member in a multinational organization, adopt free trade policies or protectionism, or welcome or exclude immigrants. These are decisions to be made by the people - or more precisely, by the representatives they select. The choices may be wise, unwise or even unjust. However, the power to make these choices rests, in a liberal democracy, in the hands of the citizens.

What we are seeing is the rise of the nation-state against the will of multinational organizations and agreements. There are serious questions about membership in the EU, NATO and trade agreements, and equally about the right to control borders. Reasonable people can disagree, and it is the political process of each nation that retains the power to determine shifts in policy. There is no guarantee that the citizenry will be wise, but that cuts both ways and in every direction.

The current rise of nationalism in Europe is the result of European institutions' failure to function effectively. Eight years after 2008, Europe still has not solved its economic problems. A year after the massive influx of refugees in Europe, there is still no coherent and effective policy to address the issue. Given this, it would be irresponsible for citizens and leaders not to raise

questions as to whether they should remain in the EU or follow its dictates. Similarly, there is no reason for Donald Trump not to challenge the idea that free trade is always advantageous, or to question NATO. However obnoxious his style and however confusing his presentation, he is asking questions that must be asked.

In the 1950s, the McCarthyites charged anyone they didn't like with being communists. Today, those who disapprove of the challengers of the current system call them fascists. Now, some of the opponents of the EU or immigration may really be fascists. But the hurdle for being a fascist is quite high. Fascism is far more than racism, tinkering with the judiciary, or staging a violent demonstration. Real fascism is Nazi Germany's "leader principle" - which dictated absolute obedience to the Führer, whose authority was understood to be above the law.

We are seeing a return to nationalism in Europe and the United States because it is not clear to many that internationalism, as followed since World War II, benefits them any longer. They may be right or wrong, but to claim that fascism is sweeping Europe and the United States raises the question of whether those who say this understand the principles of fascism or the intimate connection between nationalism and liberal democracy.