



Appreciating the Upside of Nationalism

By Steve McIntosh

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I love America and am grateful to be a citizen. However, I'm really more of a globalist than a nationalist. This is largely due to the progressive culture I've been immersed in most of my life, which tends to view nationalism and patriotism as slightly embarrassing, and even somewhat suspect. And now that Donald Trump has become President of the United States, my reflexive distaste for nationalism has intensified. Whatever merits might be assigned to nationalism as an abstract concept, Donald Trump's version of "America First" seems just too ethnocentric to accept. The idea that America is qualitatively superior to other nations feels hubristic and immature.

Yet at the same time, I'm not willing to discard nationalistic patriotism altogether. In fact, when members of the progressive "resistance" equate nationalism with racism—starkly dividing the electorate into noble activists and evil fascists—this tends to rekindle my latent sympathy for the American nation-state. Failing to distinguish xenophobic nativism from healthy patriotism inevitably produces an opposite form of resistance that empathizes with the nationalistic yearnings that motivated sixty-four million Americans to vote for Trump.

Even though I oppose Trump as America's national leader, as a proponent of democracy I feel a sense of civic obligation to do my best to recognize what is right and good about the political positions I disagree with. That is, because I believe that representative forms of government are morally superior to nondemocratic alternatives, I'm duty bound to give some credence to the wisdom of the other side. In light of the results of 2016, it is clear that the electoral majority who voted for Trump thought it would be wise to restore competitive nationalism as a governing principle.

American voters have, of course, made many bad choices in the course of our history. This fact, however, cannot be used as an excuse to roundly dismiss Trump's voters as completely lacking good sense or good faith. "Deplorables" can certainly be found on both the right and the left, but roughly half of America can't be entirely wrong. While history may well prove that Trump was the wrong choice for president, the electorate's larger choice to reemphasize nationalism cannot be so easily dismissed as completely mistaken. Therefore, in this essay I will consider the wisdom of nationalism in the hope of bringing out some of its positive and enduring features that all Americans would do well to endorse.

Recognizing the Interdependence of Nationalism and Globalism

Beyond a certain deference to the folk wisdom of my countrymen, as a globalist, I think the most compelling argument in favor of America's reemphasis of nationalism is that globalism and nationalism are ultimately interdependent. Ongoing globalization as an economic trend, and

globalism as an ideal, both rely on the underlying vitality of nation-states. If the international system of nation-state structures, which has prevailed since the treaty of Westphalia in 1653, were to break down, globalism would be severely set back. Functional nation-states thus provide the foundation for continuing global integration. And the viability of every national polity itself depends on a basic sense of social solidarity that is supplied by nationalistic patriotism.

In the twenty-first century, not only does increasing globalism depend on viable nationalism, but individual nation-states also rely in turn on global cooperation and the smooth functioning of the global economy. Even beyond economic considerations, national citizens worldwide, and especially the young, are encouraged by the promise that increasing global integration will lead to the overall betterment of people everywhere. Aspirations for increasing global solidarity and worldcentric morality thus provide hope for the continuing progress of humanity.

Although the perceived interests of nationalism and globalism may often seem to be at odds, the reciprocally intertwined nature of these levels of political development points to their relationship as an *interdependent polarity*—a relatively permanent dynamic system that, if managed well, can produce ongoing positive social evolution.

The art and science of realizing the developmental potential of interdependent polarities, such as nationalism-globalism, has recently become the focus of leading edge management theorists. “Polarity theory,” as it is known, is now a thriving and even fashionable business practice promoted widely within the field of organizational development consulting.

The basic idea is that in almost every interdependent polarity, the strengths or virtues of each pole can serve to mitigate the downsides of its opposing pole in a recursive process resulting in synergistic progress. Polarity theory describes two basic kinds of polarity: ‘positive-negative’ and

‘positive-positive.’ Positive-negative polarities, such as ‘prosperity-poverty,’ present *problems to be solved*. However, positive-positive polarities, such as ‘liberty-equality’ or ‘competition-cooperation,’ are better understood as permanently recurring *systems to be managed*. According to polarity management consultant Barry Johnson, “Polarities to manage are sets of opposites which can’t function well independently. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, you cannot choose one as a

Globalism as an ideal depends on healthy nationalism



*“On the other hand, we could join
forces and attack the media.”*

‘solution’ and neglect the other. The objective ... is to get the best of both opposites while avoiding the limits of each.”¹ Stated otherwise, when the opposing sides of an interdependent polarity are brought together in an interactive relationship of mutual challenge and support, each side tends to ‘true up’ the other.

Managing the Polarity of Nationalism and Globalism

In practice, bringing out the developmental potential of the polarity of nationalism-globalism involves carefully distinguishing between the pros and cons of each pole. The idea is to tease apart the “dignities from the disasters.” Yet while this may seem fairly obvious, in our current political climate globalists tend to see only the downsides of nationalism and vice versa. So as a corrective to this “one-side-ism,” the chart below shows how globalism and nationalism both include positive aspects that every responsible citizen is bound to respect. And not only are each side’s positive features desirable in themselves, they also provide a perfectly tailored remedy for the deficiencies and pathologies of their opposing pole.

	Globalism	Nationalism
Positive Upsides	<p>Economic globalization reduces poverty & promotes cross-cultural understanding</p> <p>Globalization increases democracy and reduces human rights abuses</p> <p>Globalism promotes environmental awareness and collective action on pollution</p> <p>Global free trade makes business more competitive and produces better products</p> <p>Increasing global integration deters war and promotes international solidarity</p>	<p>Nation-states make democracy possible (there is no global democracy)</p> <p>Patriotism helps define personal identity & promotes self-sacrifice and civic virtue</p> <p>National solidarity makes compassionate social programs politically viable</p> <p>National defense requires patriotic loyalty, which also fosters military morality</p> <p>Global peace and cooperation depend on strong and sustainable nation-states</p>
Negative Downsides	<p>Global free trade creates a ‘race to the bottom’ on wages and regulations</p> <p>Globalization destroys traditional cultures</p> <p>Globalization can result in unchecked multinational corporate power</p> <p>Globalism can lead to indifferent elitism and even reverse-patriotism</p> <p>Globalization displaces workers in developed nations</p>	<p>Nationalism can result in nativism and racism</p> <p>Strong nationalism makes war more likely</p> <p>Economic protectionism is bad for the economy</p> <p>Nationalism can result in the election of demagogues</p>

Positive and negative aspects of the interdependent polarity of globalism and nationalism

For instance, nationalism’s patriotic loyalty can help preserve the unique features of our nation’s traditions in the face of globalism’s cultural homogenization. Conversely, globalism’s commitment to free trade and international cooperation can counter nationalism’s predilection for a bellicose foreign policy.

Acknowledging the reciprocally beneficial relationship between nationalism and globalism—recognizing that they are interdependent levels of evolutionary development—helps us better appreciate how these competing ideals actually provide the two legs of our collective progress. While

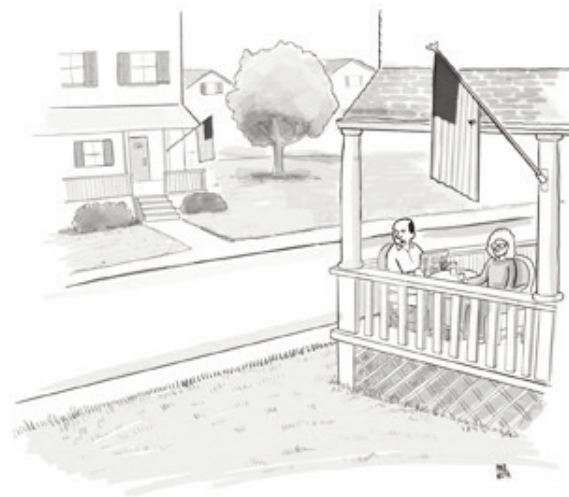
The best way to advance our own values is to affirm the foundational values of our opponents

our current political situation may oblige us to resist the xenophobic downsides of nationalism, our resistance will be more effective if we conscientiously affirm the upsides of nationalism that we need to preserve. Moreover, this kind of “inclusive resistance” also requires us to acknowledge the downsides of globalism and admit that we may have indeed over-extended ourselves in this pole’s direction.

As an example of how this might work, consider Trump’s attempts to suspend immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries. Personally, I think this is a bad idea that will make America less secure in the long run. But for the millions of good people who voted for Trump, his travel ban is seen as an important gesture affirming that America is not a global public utility that is unconditionally open to all citizens of the world. Even if such a temporary ban is largely symbolic, and even if it is on balance bad for America, Trump’s efforts to secure the border provide reassurance for his supporters that our nation is still sovereign, while reaffirming the larger value of nationalism itself.

Inclusive resistance, however, does not require us to condone Trump’s attempt to indiscriminately deport thousands of people who are already in our country. It’s one thing to prevent people from entering the U.S., and quite another to round people up who have been here for years. However, because nationalism and globalism are essentially interdependent, our ability to effectively oppose mass deportation will be more persuasive and effective if we acknowledge the need for a modicum of corrective rebalancing to strengthen the positive aspects of nationalism. Taking a hard line against every attempt by nationalists to enforce immigration laws only strengthens xenophobia.

The political key to opposing the negative expressions of nationalism, such as mass deportations, involves actively welcoming policies that advance the positive features of nationalism, as shown in the chart above. For example, such welcoming might include globalist acquiescence to stepped up border security. Stated as a general principle: when faced with an interdependent polarity like nationalism-globalism, the best way to forward the values of our preferred pole is to actually affirm the foundational values of the pole



“I can’t believe their flag isn’t even wearing a flag pin.”

we oppose. This principle has even been embraced by leftist political commentator Robert Reich, who writes: “Failure to choose positive nationalism almost surely promotes its negative twin, because the losers are left vulnerable. ... Nationalism is not the danger. The real danger comes in allowing the negative nationalists to claim the mantle of patriotism for their own ends.”²

In this time of national division, the most effective remedy for America’s ills is to foster greater civic virtue. And if democratic civic virtue means anything, it certainly includes a degree of sympathy for the legitimate values of those with whom we disagree. When faced with any positive-positive political polarity, practicing civic virtue requires more than simply acknowledging our opponent’s point. We have to authentically *value*—cherish and esteem—the positive upsides of the pole we oppose. While this practice can be difficult, polarity theory provides systematic instructions for distinguishing each pole’s dignities from its accompanying disasters.

Understanding the deep political principle of interdependent evolutionary development—how each level depends on the healthy functioning of its predecessor—can help us appreciate why every globalist has a compelling interest in preserving nationalism’s positive aspects. Those of us who want to see the further progress of globalism and the ongoing integration of the peoples of the world will therefore do well to honor the necessary and enduring values of patriotic nationalism.

1. Barry Johnson quote: *Polarity Management* by Barry Johnson (HRD Press 1996), p. xviii.

2. Robert Reich quote: “Good and Bad Nationalism,” in *The American Prospect*
<http://prospect.org/article/good-and-bad-nationalism>

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