

Covid Nationalism

Written by Mark Juergensmeyer

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MARK JUERGENSMEYER, SEP 6 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought out the best and worst in people around the world. On the one hand, it has encouraged a sense of global citizenship that focuses on our common humanity and encourages the sharing of resources and information to combat the health crisis. On the other hand, it has strengthened authoritarian regimes and prompted the rise of a new kind of populism. At the extreme edge of this surge of anti-restriction protests is the merger of virus conspiracy theories with defensive patriotism. It is this new phenomenon that might be called 'Covid nationalism'.

After six months of lockdowns, quarantines, the closure of shops and bars, and the limitation on public mobility, large sections of populations around the world have understandably had enough. In late August in Germany, a huge crowd of young, angry and mostly males, many of them without masks or social distancing, stormed the streets of Berlin and attacked the parliament buildings. Nine hundred were arrested. Similar street protests were held in London and Zurich. In Melbourne, Australia and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, crowds not only protested the restrictions but claimed that the virus was a 'scam' created to spread fear falsely among the public.

Perhaps nowhere in the world has there been a greater backlash against the pandemic restrictions than in the United States. It is a resistance rooted in a deep-seated American individualism and fostered by the conspiratorial fantasies of the US President Donald Trump. Since April, anti-restriction protests have erupted in every state in the US. On 30 April 2020, a crowd of armed protestors entered the Michigan state capital and threatened lawmakers with automatic weapons. Other protests have been organized by a group called 'Operation Gridlock' that encourages protestors to use their automobiles and trucks to block off streets around public buildings. Many of the protestors wear red caps with the logo 'Make America Great Again' – the Make America Great Again (MAGA) hats of Trump supporters. These activists are protesting a new global threat, a virtually invisible one caused by tiny virus cells. Covid-19 is the new global enemy, imagined to be aided by those scientists, health professionals and public leaders who appear to conspire with the virus to vex the ordinary lives of angry white males with MAGA hats. More than a public nuisance, the restrictions created by Covid-19 are thought to be undermining the American way of life.

Covid-19 is a neologism created by shortening the phrase *coronavirus disease 2019*. Like SARS and the other coronaviruses, it is highly contagious. Because it was likely first transmitted to humans from live animals in Wuhan, China, it has been possible to link the disease with sinister foreign and global forces out to undermine the American way of life. The conspiracy theories regarding its origins and spread are ubiquitous. To a paranoid segment of the right-wing community in the US, these conspiracies have been linked to globalization. In these theories, the virus was the attempt of China, or the UN, or Microsoft founder Bill Gates, or 5G technology — or some other sinister force — to scare Americans and deprive them of their liberty. Rather than blaming the government for its ineptitude in allowing the virus to spread rapidly, making the US by far the most infected nation on the planet, the blame was placed on fictional foes.

Perhaps the most frightening of the imagined falsehoods has been the notion that the disease is not real, but a hoax perpetrated by clever liberals to sedate the populace. Hence those who held to this fiction could cavalierly ignore any of the recommended restrictions, crowding together in public and thereby endangering everyone else. Doctors treating some Covid-19 patients have had to contend with their arguments that they could not possibly have the disease since it was a hoax, and it didn't actually exist. These fears and the anger over having been hampered by

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restrictive pandemic regulations have brought hordes of gun-toting angry white men and women out on the streets in protest. Before American cities erupted in demonstrations against police brutality, led largely by young Blacks and progressive whites, these white MAGA hat-wearing protestors had the media's attention. They will likely return in force, especially if new restrictions are adopted when the predictable new waves of virus infection occur.

What is disturbing is the increasing nationalism of the protest rhetoric. This is especially true in the United States, where American flags and patriotic songs are part of the theatre of protest rallies. But it has also been the case in Melbourne, where the Australian national anthem was sung in an anti-restriction protest, and in Berlin where German flags were part of the visual drama of protest events. In the United States, the nationalism of the protest movements has been increasingly associated with racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Trump and his followers insist on speaking of the 'China virus' or the 'Wuhan virus' rather than simply the 'coronavirus'. The response has been a rising anti-Asian sentiment in the country that has led to attacks on people of Asian ancestry. In May, CBS news reported that there had been over two thousand such attacks around the country, including physical assaults. Mexicans and Muslims have also been targeted with the imagined fear that they are bringing the virus into the country with them, despite the fact that the US percentage of virus infection is much higher than in Mexico or virtually any Muslim country.

Yet this racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric helps to shore up a sense of xenophobic nationalism that had been a part of the public discourse in pre-pandemic days. Only a few months ago some of the same MAGA-hat wearing protestors were on a somewhat different nationalist crusade. At that time the perceived global assault on American nationalism was economic — entangling trade alliances that were touted as taking away American jobs — or forms of cultural globalization aimed at undermining the American way of life. The perception that there was a global cultural assault on nationalism was easy to imagine since the evidence of it was closely at hand. After all, waves of new immigrants from non-European countries entered the United States in recent decades, some illegally. They were easy to marginalize since they were different from white Euro-Americans, not only ethnically but in some cases by their religion. Worst of all were those who were Muslim.

But the new pictures of virtually the same angry white males with MAGA hats show them protesting against Muslims or Mexicans not just because of their ethnicity or religion, but also because they are perceived to be bearers of the virus and the cause of the restrictions. Early on in the pandemic, Trump was stating that the threat of Mexican-born virus was a new reason to increase border security and gain funding for his much-touted border wall. It appears that the resentment over the global pandemic and its restrictions has joined forces with right-wing populist rage. The racist and anti-immigrant cultural nationalism of recent years has found an ally in an angry nationalism that is equally anti-global and defensive, a Covid nationalism. The culture wars and the animosity against immigrants, refugees, and Muslims have merged with the individualist nationalism that protests against the Covid-19 restrictions

Whether or not Covid nationalism will be the prime vessel of anti-global xenophobic nationalism in the future is a question that is not easy to answer. It largely depends on the future of the pandemic. The optimistic scenario is that the worst is over, that the rate of infections around the world will continue to decline, national and global economies will slowly re-emerge and a vaccine will be found to be effective by the end of the year. In this scenario, the current fears may subside in the re-emergence of normalization. And the old forms of cultural nationalism and its disdain against immigrants and minorities may again surface. Or perhaps by then, they will have been forgotten.

But the optimistic scenario is not the likely one. The possibility is real that there will be waves of new infections and with them new restrictions for at least a year or more to come. The greatly anticipated vaccine may be years off, and perhaps not discovered for decades. There is still no vaccine for HIV/AIDS, for example, though it has become a managed disease. Perhaps the same could be the case with Covid-19. The world could learn to live with it, though many of the health restrictions would continue to be in place. This means that resentment against the restrictions will continue. The conspiracy theories are likely to proliferate, and the sense that the luxurious independent ways of life are being corroded by sinister global forces may expand. Covid nationalism could be a major element of the continuing right-wing populism of the future. But that does not mean that cultural nationalism will be forgotten. We may see the generation of even more conspiracy theories — similar to those already propagated — that blame immigrants, minorities, liberals, foreign interference and global forces for the pandemic and its restrictive assault on

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familiar daily life. Thus, the two forms of populism could forge an even deeper unhappy alliance.

At present Covid nationalism — the populist protest against an imagined global intrusion of pandemic restrictions — is largely but not solely an American phenomenon. Like the virus itself, it easily spreads across borders and has become a feature of angry segments of the populace in Europe and other parts of the globe. There, too, it has merged with existing anti-immigrant cultural nationalism. The global emergence of Covid nationalism is the perfect storm of the future.

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