

---

# New Nationalisms: Sources, Agendas, Languages. An Introduction

---

SIEGFRIED HUIGEN\* & DOROTA KOŁODZIEJCZYK\*\*

\*Dutch and South African Studies, University of Wrocław, Katedra Filologii Niderlandzkiej, ul. Kuźnicza 21-22, 50-138 Wrocław, Poland; Department of Afrikaans and Dutch, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602, South Africa  
Email: [sh@sun.ac.za](mailto:sh@sun.ac.za)

\*\*Postcolonial Studies Centre, Institute of English Studies, ul. Kuźnicza 21-22, 50-138 Wrocław, Poland

*New Nationalisms: Sources, Agendas, Languages*, a seminar organised by Academia Europaea Wrocław Knowledge Hub, the University of Wrocław and the Lower Silesian University, on 25–27 September 2017, inquired into the problem of the rise of right-wing populism in Central Europe. Manifest in responses to the refugee crisis of 2015 and to the Brexit referendum in 2016 across Europe, the populists successfully mobilised constituencies with anti-EU and anti-immigration sentiments. These attitudes, in turn, stimulated the emergence of nationalist agendas on an unexpected scale, moving radical right-wing parties with a pronounced nationalist programme from the margins, much closer to real political power. As part of the *Relocating Central Europe* seminar series, our reflection focused on that region, attempting to answer fundamental questions about the sources, purposes and modes of operation of the new nationalist impetus in political programmes, including those fostered at government level.

At the centre of our discussions was the problem of the rhetorical wrapping of nationalism – in particular, how it gains a legitimating veneer through a triangle of interlocked moves: the restoration of common sense, the restoration of dignity to the long-discarded national sovereign, and opposition against the encroachment of the European Union on member states' basic freedoms, constitutional independence notwithstanding. Despite such rhetorical legitimisation, new nationalisms operate within the framework of an 'us' and 'them' division, and in this respect their *modus operandi* does not differ from the previous models. It is some of new nationalism's rhetorical strategies that do diverge, to the effect of transferring nationalism into the discursive space of the global postcolonial ethos.

The fundamental division remains simple: ‘us’ belongs to the realm of indisputable common sense; it is a natural given – a tradition-respecting national community and ‘them’ is that which impedes the nation’s inalienable right to be who they are. These are the external forces, embodied and intentional – the enemy whose actions are directed against the core national essence. The enemy manifests itself in protean versatility, contingent upon the current political situation and need: the refugees and migrants; the European Commission and, even more so, the European Court of Justice; social and political movements such as ecological, human rights, feminist and other, assessed either to be not serious enough to enter the political scene, or to be trouble-makers branded derisively as ‘cyclists’, ‘vegetarians’, ‘elites’, ‘castes’, the LGBT community rephrased as the ‘rainbow ideology’, or even the ‘rainbow plague’; and, last but not least, an invective subsuming all these into one major adversary: the left, generalized to mean the EU-folly defying national common sense.

Such a radically-drawn division needs a plausible discursive environment which would help cover up the nationalist content under a global discourse of recognition. In Poland and Hungary, where the current governments espouse the nationalist agenda in internal and international politics, the relations with the European Union are staged as part of the ultimate struggle of these nations against the continued colonizing politics of the hegemonic West. This anti-colonial rhetoric functions as an ethical and historical leverage employed whenever the charge of dismantling democratic institutions is brought up against these states by the European Commission or EU institutions. Postcolonialism functions as a rhetorical shield protecting the allegedly vulnerable nation. It turns into a sly strategy of legitimating what otherwise manifests itself as self-assured and militant nationalism, not shying away from barely concealed racism and a condescending attitude towards such gains of the postcolonial paradigm as increasingly multicultural communities and the politics of recognition towards cultural difference.

In this new rhetoric of postcolonial awakening, the us/them division is recast as an act of rejecting Western Europe’s hegemony by a subaltern nation seeking historical justice and claiming the right to its own identity. The state is developing a special brand of historical politics whose task is to mobilise memory of the denial of national identity for the countries of Eastern and Central Europe in modern times. In this context, any deliberation with EU institutions turns out to be a real or potential impingement on sovereignty. Removing EU flags at the first press conference given by the Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło in 2015, or the election campaign in Hungary in 2018 where Viktor Orbán predicated on an anti-migration narrative showing posters with a sinister-looking George Soros whose Open Society Foundation allegedly sought to inundate Europe with migrants, are but two among many examples of how a nationalist agenda is reinforced through a range of symbolic gestures. It polarises the social imaginary in which the healthy essence of the nation needs to be protected from external and internal dangers united to annihilate it. Why would these forces seek such an annihilation just to enable an easy relocation of migrants baffles any logic, but, nevertheless, it induces fear in constituencies.

Affect control is a cogent strategy in mobilising nationalist sentiment by way of creating fear and managing it as a resource for gaining political control. The catastrophic plot of either 'us' or a total annihilation of the nation in an invasion of alien ideologies, identities and fads is commonly employed. The affective polarisation shifts the paradigm of doing politics from deliberation and debate into a matter of national struggle for the ultimate independence, always incomplete when the state is bound by the limiting international treaties and laws. The strong focus on identity as an endangered national attribute plays the central role in the grand narrative of postcolonial awakening of nations against the folly and imperial hegemony of the EU.

Despite careful PR-processing to wrap it up in a discursive innovation of the global language of postcolonialism, new nationalist discourses reiterate the ideological premises and rhetorical strategies from nationalisms of the past. The question of what brought the new waves of nationalist sentiment to the centre of political reality is, thus, of great importance to the authors contributing to this volume. Chantal Mouffe claimed in her *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (Mouffe 2013, 43–64) that the European transnational integrative project was based on a discourse of rationalisation and individualism, subsequently positioning national loyalties in the space of a lingering past and premodern tribal affect. Other critics point out to a related phenomenon of the crisis of liberal democracy that seems to offer less in the deliberative process of political decision-making than the populist discourse appealing directly to the communal effect of togetherness in identity, shared fate and common purpose of sustaining the national selfhood.

However, one could also wonder whether it is the affective appeal of nationalist populism that attracts a sufficient number of constituencies to enable the populists to enter governments and parliaments, or, rather, the shrewd strategy of disguising radicalism and brazenness of nationalism as mainstream, objective politics grounded in common sense and rationality. New nationalism emerges indeed as an ultra-modern project that combines the allure of essentialist, ethnic identity rooted in mythical beginnings, with the discourses of rationalism, common sense and technological literacy. Collectively, new nationalism manifests itself as the necessary and natural part of civilisational advancement against the madness, irresponsibility, and overall irrationality of liberal projects. In this sense, it is not reason (of the European integrative project) failing when confronted with the allure of the nationalist appeal to essential identity, but, rather, a rationalist disguise to the otherwise old imaginary of charismatic power putting the will of the national sovereign over deliberation.

New nationalisms enter the political stage with a revolutionary impetus. The strict language politics that navigates between revolution (change, new deal, ultimate victory) and conservatism (reinstating thwarted values such as family, tradition, religion, dignity, common sense and common-sensical self-interest) has proved so far very successful, first and foremost because it has managed to set the rules of the game. In Poland, for example, the pathos of national sovereignty functions as a master-signifier competing with any forms of politics predicated on sharing, hospitality, and difference.

The apparent novelty of the new language game of nationalism is spectral, though. It needs the ghosts of the past it itself evokes, rewriting the national history, overturning heroes into villains, installing new myths to produce a new national identity. These ghosts, however, are not simply given new life. They come with a haunting legacy of old nationalisms. These, in turn, are mobilised only tacitly – new nationalism in the official discourse is an unofficial mobilising force, a palpable operator that appears in evidential material, but is nevertheless denied. The rhetoric of common sense and restoration of dignity give new nationalism a safe shading. The language develops alternative meanings, erasing some words and reversing the meaning of others.

Disguised as common sense, sanctioned by the project of decolonisation, and, additionally, deployed only inferentially, new nationalisms operate implicitly but perniciously at the very centre of political life today, often with the barely hidden support from state institutions. The role of new media in creating communities of affect, the ease with which fake news enters public space, the impact of a migrant way of living, and the commodification of political (speech) acts to boost opinion-poll results urge us to look for models of analysis that will allow consideration of the multi-modality and contingent operating in the phenomenon of new nationalisms. And although our focus has been on Central and Eastern Europe, we should look at this region as only one of many examples of virulent nationalism entering mainstream politics.

The responses to exploring the sources, agendas and languages of new nationalisms of this focus come from a range of social and humanities disciplines. The social sciences perspective seeks to investigate the motivations behind adhering to nationalist projects, most notably the factors determining a sense of safety, rootedness, and belonging to a community. The humanities perspective seeks to shed light on the formation, alliances and permeability of discourses that new nationalisms appropriate and exploit. It also investigates imaginaries and conceptualisations of belonging in culture, and its opposite, the mechanisms of exclusion and forms in which they are justified, naturalised and in all other ways fostered in nationalist discourse. The examination of affect as a major factor in nationalist discourse plays an important role in acknowledging the power and appeal of new nationalisms.

The first three articles in this Focus on ‘New Nationalisms: Sources, Agendas, Languages’ look at how new nationalisms use old and new discursive strategies to make their agenda more persuasive and appealing, and, as a result, claim to be the mainstream political project, not a radical margin. The authors point to the following: appropriating the space occupied by minority groups and forming, on that basis, predatory identities (cf. Arjun Appadurai 2006, 51), commodifying the semi-otic space of national symbolism and developing a determinate historical politics with the purpose of claiming dignity for the nation.

In his ‘New nationalisms and identity politics: minorities, majorities and universal emancipation’, Viacheslav Morozov discusses how the new nationalisms exploit what he terms the regime of truth established in liberal democratic societies, performing what we see in this volume as the appropriation, indeed a hostile takeover, of the discursive tools whose values they otherwise deplore or reject. The author argues that

putting forth the universal language of emancipation and equality gives a chance for developing an effective tool against what he calls the hijacking of minoritarian discourse by predatory identities.

In 'The PowerPoint nation: branding an imagined commodity,' Göran Bolin and Per Ståhlberg investigate how the use of the modern medium of representation and communication, namely 'PowerPoint', fosters new imaginings of the nation. Parallel to Anderson's understanding of how print capitalism prompted the development of the nation as imagined community (Anderson 2006 [1983], 45–47), the authors show how this technology of representation turns the nation into a logotype and effectively commodifies it.

Kornelia Konczal in her 'Mnemonic populism: the Polish Holocaust Law and its afterlife' analyses the short but turbulent history of a piece of Polish legislation that officially was to litigate against the notorious phrase, 'Polish death camps', often used in the international press in reference to the Nazi German concentration camps in the occupied territories of Poland during the Second World War. Effectively, however, the law, soon termed the 'Holocaust Law', was to allow the prosecution of all those whose texts, enunciations and research would prove or merely suggest the complicity of Poles in the Holocaust, on the basis that such statements automatically implicate the Polish state or the Polish nation in the Holocaust. The international protest against the consequences of the law that would effectively be able to bring charges against regular academic research, artistic activity and, in general, curb freedom of speech, forced the Polish government to withdraw the law and revise their historical politics of dignity. The author, analysing a range of political contexts locating the infamous law at the centre of the Polish government's project of empowering the nation, designs a new methodology bringing together memory and populism studies to more effectively research how new nationalism helps solidify illiberal politics.

The next three articles delve into questions of what factors motivate the supporters and authors of nationalist programmes and right-wing populisms. Based on official statements of political actors and interviews with social actors, these contributions offer analyses of how nationalist sentiments and imageries are developed, used, and influence the individual and group sense of identity.

Adam Mrozowicki and Justyna Kajta analyse in their 'Young people, precarious employment and nationalism in Poland: exploring the (missing) links' interviews with young nationalist and right-wing activists, how in these personal narratives the contexts of labour market and the overall perspectives for the young determine these persons' views and create the need to anchor their sense of identity in strong identitarian discourses, such as nationalism. The authors conclude that although the interviewees mention such factors as their motivations, their economic situation does not, ultimately, determine their identification with the nationalist agenda.

In 'Nationalism in Europe: trends and cross-national differences in public opinion,' Marcel Coenders, Marcel Lubbers, and Peer Scheepers present a broad international study of data from 20 countries collected in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s to measure identification with nationalist views. The authors observe that although visible differences were found between particular countries in how their

nationals adhere to nationalist views or programmes, within the individual countries the level of nationalist sentiment remained more or less stable. The question for further research remains, then, whether the years 2015–2016, which brought so many changes to Europe’s political and social scene, did not bring any important change to these stable levels.

The new nationalisms collection is closed by Julia Rysicz-Szafranec’s ‘Ukrainian “working through the past” in the context of Polish-Ukrainian dialogue on Volhynia-43. Asymmetry of memory.’ The author investigates how the traumatic history of the massacre of Polish inhabitants of Volhynia, in pre-war eastern Poland, today Ukraine, under the Nazi occupation during the Second World War, influences the interstate relations decades later. Using the method of discourse analysis of political speech acts, the author investigates how the so-called Volhynia discourse has functioned in public memory and politics since the collapse of communism and the establishment of the Ukrainian state. First an object of discussions between historians, the Volhynia discourse became part of the political agenda in both Poland and Ukraine and it represents the rising power of the nationalist component in bilateral relations. The analysis of the Volhynia discourse in mutual relations shows a very urgent problem of how nationalism effectively helps influence and manipulate the public/national memory for political purposes.

### References

- Anderson B** (2006 [1983]) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and the Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Appadurai A** (2006) *The Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mouffe C** (2013) *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. London and New York: Verso.

### About the Authors

**Siegfried Huigen** is professor of Dutch and South African Literature at Wrocław University (Poland) and visiting professor of Dutch Literature and Cultural History in the Department of Afrikaans and Dutch at Stellenbosch University (South Africa). He was elected as a member of the Academia Europaea in 2013. Among his books and co-edited volumes in English are *Knowledge and Colonialism, Eighteenth-Century Travellers in South Africa* (Brill, 2009), *The Dutch Trading Companies as Knowledge Networks* (Brill, 2010), *Reshaping Remembrance. Critical Essays on Afrikaans Places of Memory* (Rozenberg, 2011), as well as a special issue of the *European Review* about Central Europe and Colonialism, edited together with Dorota Kołodziejczyk (2018).

**Dorota Kołodziejczyk** is assistant professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of Wrocław, founder and director of the Postcolonial Studies Center,

co-founder and board member of Postdependence Studies Center, the national university network located at University of Warsaw. Dorota is the author of publications in the field of postcolonial studies, comparative literature and translation studies, a translator of postcolonial theory into Polish and a translation editor. Recent publications include, with Siegfried Huigen and Pieter Emmer, 'Central Europe and Colonialism', *European Review* (26(3), 2018); 'Comparative Posts Going Political – the Postcolonial Backlash in Poland' in *Postcolonial Europe. Comparative Reflections after the Empires*, edited by Lars Jensen, Julia Suarez-Krabbe, Christian Groes, Zoran Lee Pecic (London & New York: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2018), and, co-edited with Cristina Sandru, *Postcolonial Perspectives on Postcommunism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Routledge, 2016, 2018 – reprint of the Special Issue of *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48(2), 2012).