

Commissioned Book Review: *Beth Rabinowitz, Defensive Nationalism – Explaining the Rise of Populism and Fascism in the 21st Century*

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Based on: *Defensive Nationalism – Explaining the Rise of Populism and Fascism in the 21st Century* by Rabinowitz Beth. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, 304 pp., £21.99, ISBN: 978-0197672044.

This timely and insightful book investigates how defensive nationalism (or ‘populism’) came into being in the twentieth century and asks how this process rhymes with its recent resurgence. The general argument is that to understand the developments that facilitated the rise of populism in the United States and Europe in recent decades, it helps to look again at the same regions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to identify the forces that facilitated an uprush of populism. Each era was preceded by a period of peace, at least between the Great Powers – that is, from 1815 to 1914 and from 1945 to 2020. This enabled a flourishing of international trade and technological innovation. Rabinowitz sees this as the main facilitator of the rise of ‘reactionary movements’ in both eras. To this end, the book centres on a comparison between the Second Industrial Revolution (1860–1910s) and the Digital Revolution (1960–2010s).

In both periods, Rabinowitz argues, North America and Europe tipped from liberal stability into populist turbulence due to the liberal commitments, initially at least, of the hegemonic powers: Britain, then the USA. Each presided over tariff reductions, expanding international trade, the establishment (initially at least) of a stable monetary system and increased capital mobility. However, these globalisation processes led to blowback in the guise of right-wing and left-wing populism. Market-fundamentalist globalisation generated socioeconomic strains, such as economic crises, economic insecurity and extreme wealth inequality – the Gilded Age, with its tycoons, avaricious individualism and worship of markets, ‘certainly does rhythm with today’s Digital Age’ (p.

208). These strains combined to sow fear and paranoia, mentalities conducive to the 'anti-liberal populism and ethnic and economic nationalism' which was to follow. Rabinowitz's case studies show that, in both periods, left-wing and right-wing movements appeared simultaneously across multiple countries, the left generally focused on reasserting economic sovereignty and protesting the extreme concentration of wealth; the right objecting to the dangers they perceived in mass immigration and the undermining of the 'traditional family'.

Rabinowitz's argument draws on theories of two political economists, Joseph Schumpeter and Karl Polanyi. Using Schumpeter's insights into the role of new technologies in generating international financial speculation, she argues that 'the driving force behind the economic and political changes of the first half of the twentieth century were the new technologies developed during the nineteenth'. As to Polanyi, Rabinowitz deploys his idea of the 'double movement'. This refers to a twin process: liberal marketisation (the commodification of land, labour and money), and the resistance to this: a 'countermovement' centred on appeals for social protection through labour regulation, tariffs and suchlike. Combining Schumpeterian and Polanyian theory, the author suggests that Polanyi's double movement can be interpreted as 'a response to technological revolutions'. In addition, and largely ignored by Polanyi, technology enabled the massification of the media, which, given the pressures of a commercialising world, proved a potent ingredient in the rise of populism.

Finally, the author enquires into linkages between technological revolutions and international finance. Four factors are identified, applicable to both periods: new tech-enabled trade and industry to expand; trade growth took off in liberal states which then pushed for global economic liberalisation; trade expansion generated pressures to establish an international monetary system; these processes led to global economic crisis, which spurred the dismantling of the earlier protective order. In combination,

these factors explain the technology-driven marketisation of the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries, which in both cases ushered in a Polanyian double movement.

Defensive Nationalism is an important contribution to the study of populism, as well as offering insightful comparisons of the Gilded Age and the Digital Age. Rabinowitz succeeds in keeping numerous balls in the air – trade trends, immigration, patriarchy, counter-Enlightenment, mass media and so on – while tracing their intersecting curves. On Rabinowitz's use of Polanyian theory, there is no doubt the 'double movement' thesis is relevant to the theme of populism; however, there is significant scope for greater clarity and depth in the use of Polanyi's work as a whole. Notably, Rabinowitz understates his radicalism. Whereas she sees communism and fascism as 'extreme ideologies', totalitarian twins, he was a fellow traveller of the former and an implacable foe, and victim, of the latter. The book's bracketing of fascists and socialists, Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbyn, as 'defensive nationalists' is questionable. Corbyn, notably, represents an internationalist and anti-imperialist political current. As such, his nationalism has been continually questioned and found wanting – not only by the far right but also by centrists. *Pace* Rabinowitz, centrist social democrats are generally more nationalistic than left 'populists' of the Corbyn stripe. A case in point is Gordon Brown, British prime minister and originator of the 'British Jobs For British Workers!' slogan.

A related question can be asked of Rabinowitz's discussion of the populist right. In the case of Britain, she notes that Margaret Thatcher constructed 'a conservative populist movement'. Thatcherite 'populism' indeed became increasingly influential in Tory thinking and remains so today. Indeed, under pressure from the far right (in the form of UKIP, not the National Front which is centred in Rabinowitz's account), it dominates the party, as manifest in the dehumanising of asylum seekers, attacks on human rights lawyers, and the disparaging as 'woke' of virtually anything that carries a hint of human compassion.

What, for Rabinowitz, was the root cause of the 'extreme ideologies', communism and fascism? She finds it in the 'excesses of liberalism'. This represents a marked departure from Polanyi, whose lens was trained on the very constitution of liberalism: the market system and the separation of economics from politics. He did not suppose, as Rabinowitz has it, that the culmination of the double movement would be 'embedded liberalism' (p. 211). For him, rather, any embeddedness worth the name would take land and labour outside of market relationships, via the expansion of democracy to every social sphere. Arguably, Polanyi and Rabinowitz concur on a factor that underlies the rise of the market system (for Polanyi) and its excesses (for Rabinowitz), namely the role of technology. Rabinowitz quotes Polanyi's view that when 'elaborate machines' began to be used in production processes within 'a commercial society, the idea of the self-regulating market system was bound to take shape'. In Rabinowitz's reading, 1860–1910 and 1960–2010 were periods of rapid technological change that generated economic globalisation. What, then, of the astonishing technological breakthroughs of 1910–1960 (automobiles, jet aircraft, telephones, television, etc.)? The claim that these technologies lacked globalising consequences is debatable.

As these commendatory and critical comments alike suggest, Rabinowitz's book remains throughout an engaging and thought-provoking work. Impressive in historical analysis, it will find readership among scholars of populism, globalisation theory and beyond.

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