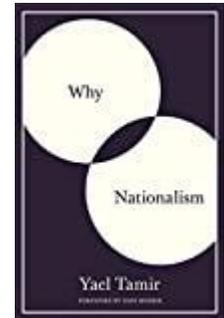




**Yael Tamir.** *Why Nationalism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. xvi + 205 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-19010-5.



**Reviewed by** Vincent Jurg (University of Amsterdam)

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**Commissioned by** Krisztina K. Lajosi-Moore (University of Amsterdam)

### **Jurg on Tamir, *Why Nationalism***

In June of 2021, the Danish Parliament passed a law that would relocate all incoming asylum seekers to locations outside Europe.[1] Under this law, asylum seekers would be granted access to Danish soil only after gaining asylum. Months earlier, it was announced that refugees from war-torn Syria would have their refugee status taken from them and be sent to the capital city of Damascus, which had been declared safe territory.[2] Both laws were met with heavy criticism across Europe, with activists preparing to take the Danish government to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).[3] Opponents saw the laws as populist at best and racist at worst. Nothing new in contemporary Europe, one might think, which seems trampled underfoot by the Far Right. Denmark, however, was an anomaly in Europe. Both laws were tabled and passed by the Social Democrats, who have adopted an anti-immigration stance combined with progressive social economic policies in an attempt to sway working-class

voters away from the far-right Danish People's Party (DF).

The course of the Danish Social Democrats is reminiscent of the point Yael Tamir makes in her book *Why Nationalism* (2019). In short, Tamir argues that the working classes in the West have been forsaken by a strain of globalism that does not work for them, and abandoned by progressive politicians who do not care about them. A combination of neoliberalism and globalism has increased social inequality and decreased social mobility and social cohesion, Tamir argues (p. 156). The answer, in Tamir's eyes, is nationalism. Tamir pleads for a new, economically progressive nationalism that acknowledges national borders but includes minorities as part of the demos. Essentially, Tamir seeks to lure the Center-Left away from globalism and toward acknowledgment of national borders, which means that the book can be seen as a plea for a more nationalist social democracy

rather than a more progressive form of nationalism.

Neither exists today and one should wonder if they can. Tamir hardly looks in her rearview mirror. Historically, both ideologies, social democracy and nationalism, have opposed each other, due to the fact that they have divided societies in vastly different ways. The bitter feud between Karl Marx and Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the founders of Italian nationalism, is well documented.[4] Social democrats owe their loyalty to groups based on class, while nationalists tend to divide society along ethnic or civic lines. Left-leaning governments have respected national borders because they were bound by them, not because they were nationalist; and social democratic parties have been known for their transnational connections. Similarly, nationalist governments and parties have only supported or introduced social policies when they suited their own interests. For a party to be loyal to both social democracy and nationalism in equal measure seems nearly impossible.

Tamir's lack of insight in this sense is a result of the book's lack of historical perspective. Nationalism is not the God-given mental state Tamir makes it out to be. It is an ideology with roots in the nineteenth century that has been tried and tested over time. In trying to reinvent nationalism, Tamir gives the impression that the ideology is brand-new. This is true neither for nationalism nor for the social democracy that Tamir claims to support. Right-wing nationalism has a violent track record (the recent insurrection in the United States carried out by self-confessed nationalists is a good example), and Tamir's argument lacks "speedbumps" in this regard. Tamir claims that liberal nationalism differs from right-wing nationalism but the legitimate question of how it can be stopped from spiraling out of control and turning violent is left unanswered.

Thus, Tamir can be accused of cherry-picking her way through the book, something which other academics who have written popularizing works

have been accused of as well. Tamir seems to accept only those examples and statistics which support her claims while being less accurate on a factual level, falsely claiming that the north of England voted in favor of Brexit (this is only true for the countryside) and boldly considering the United States a nation-state, a matter which has been debated for decades (pp. 78, 139). Authors with grand ideological aspirations often fall short on factual details; this is nothing new. Tamir seems to defend her point with evidence that backs it while ignoring evidence of the contrary. This means that Tamir either has a lack of historical knowledge, or does not see some of the less successful nationalist experiments (e.g., the Italian Carbonari, the dictatorships in Spain and Portugal, imperialist Japan, etc.) as truly nationalist, which means that she suffers from tunnel vision. The latter seems to be the case. Tamir claims that the Left has to "reclaim" nationalism, as if it ever belonged to the Left at all (citing Yascha Mounck, p. 153). Though there are exceptions, nationalism generally tilts toward the right.

Tamir views nationalism as a narrative tool that can support progressive politics (p. 173). While it is true that social democrats have trouble finding a narrative that suits them, nationalism will not solve this problem. Tamir acknowledges that it is impossible for her liberal nationalism not to exclude anyone (pp. 157-158). Besides internationalism, inclusivity has become one of the crown jewels of the Left in recent years, which means that we can only wonder if the liberal nationalism that Tamir seems to favor has any potential for success. Not only does Tamir expect the Left to sacrifice a part of its electorate, but she also expects them to adopt an ideology most leftist politicians do not believe in for reasons of narrative. The aforementioned Danish Social Democrats were nearly expelled from the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D) in the European Parliament, and commentators wondered if the party could still be considered left-wing at all.[5] Meanwhile, bearing in mind the

fact that right-wing populists often favor progressive policies, the question of what separates progressives from conservatives if the Left embraces nationalism is a very legitimate one.[6] Having shifted toward neoliberalism in the 1990s, social democrats can wonder how credible they will be if they sacrifice yet another crown jewel—internationalism—for political gain.

Tamir is right in claiming that globalism has caused a rift between the haves and the have-nots, and her analysis of Western society is decent. Her solution, however, falls short. Tamir is a victim of her own lack of historical perspective, and the fact that her liberal nationalism is not safeguarded against potential authoritarianism is a fundamental problem. Considering the Danish debacle, we can wonder whether a liberal party with nationalist tendencies is perhaps liberal in name only.

#### Notes

[1].“Denmark Passes Law to Relocate Asylum Seekers Outside Europe,” *Guardian* (US edition), June 3, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/03/denmark-passes-law-to-let-it-relocate-asylum-seekers-outside-europe>.

[2]. Bethan McKernan, “Denmark Strips Syrian Refugees of Residency Permits and Says It Is Safe to Go Home,” *Guardian* (US edition), April 14, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/14/denmark-revokes-syrian-refugee-permits-under-new-policy>.

[3]. Bethan McKernan, Rosie Swash, and Annie Kelly, “Denmark Could Face Legal Action over Attempts to Return Syrian Refugees,” *Guardian* (US edition), July 29, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jul/29/denmark-faces-legal-action-over-attempts-to-return-syrian-refugees>.

[4]. Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012), 52-61.

[5]. Sune Haugbolle, “Did the Left Really Win in Denmark?,” *Foreign Policy*, June 7, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/07/did-the-left-really-win-in-denmark-mette-frederiksen-social-democrats-danish-peoples-party-venstre-immigration-asylum/>.

[6]. Jan-Werner Müller, “The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People: Reflections on Populism,” *Constellations* 21, no. 4 (2014): 1–32, 24.

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