

Subjective Nationalisms: Structuring “Self” and “Other” in the Emotional Appeals of U.S. Right-Wing Political Discourse

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Abstract

As in Europe, democracy in the U.S. is both mobilized and threatened by appeals to emotion (to a degree that, indeed, calls into question how “deliberative” U.S. mechanisms are). As an American and Americanist who will be present (and presenting) in Europe this October, my perspective is necessarily rooted in how these issues are playing out in the U.S. At the same time, I am deeply interested in absorbing and deepening my understanding of these issues from [a] European perspective[s]—in part because the name we apply to an increasingly significant dynamic in the U.S. is rooted in European (or, as one might phrase it from here, “Old World”) views of nation, people, and the “structures of feeling” [1] understood to connect the two.

“Nationalism,” as a term, falls in and out of use in the U.S., but is currently seeing a sharper rise than at any time since the 1960s [2]. A problem here, however, is that—for reasons that in Europe apply less strongly if at all—the fundamental meaning of U.S. “nationalism” has never been clear, and it seems to describe a different entity in each historical moment that pulls it into use. Its construction in the Cold War, which primarily framed an idealized ideology of globally-relevant “American-style” democracy and “freedoms” against the restrictions and coercions of a conceived Communism, is, if anything, almost opposed to the anti-colonial “nationalism” of the U.S.’s revolutionary and nation-building period. Meanwhile, the contemporary “nationalism” used to describe the structures of belief and feeling evoked by Donald Trump in his base is a construct rooted in ethnicity and religion: a “white” “Christian” “U.S.” “nationalism” that mirrors neither its predecessors, nor any specific phenomenon among the nations of Europe since, perhaps, the Crusades. My aim is an exploratory outline of the emotional rhetoric of “nationalism” used in contemporary U.S. right-wing politics, with specific focus on the lacunae and internal contradictions we find when trying to parse its referents as “a nation,” with the secondary and follow-up goal of seeking clearer understanding of its parallels and contrasts to “nationalist” emotional rhetoric in the context of European political and media discourse.

[1] After Raymond Williams (cf. e.g. *Preface to Film*, 1954).

[2] Cf., e.g.:

Google N-Gram:

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=nationalism&year_start=1800&year_end=2018&corpus=en-US-2019&smoothing=3

Keywords

Discourse analysis, nationalism, populism, political emotions, Trumpism

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Bio

Raised in California and the northeast U.S., I hold BA and MS degrees in English literature and media studies from Harvard University and MIT.

Returning to research after 15+ years teaching in France, Japan, and the Middle East, I turn an insider/outsider perspective on American studies, investigating what contemporary and historical discourse analysis tells us about U.S. moral and epistemological beliefs—particularly those that are outliers in the modern West.

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(I am in the process of pivoting back to academia, and my academic web site is still in development. Some basic information is available at my LinkedIn page:

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Recent and forthcoming presentations include:

- Mandel, S. (Forthcoming: 2023, November 9-10.) Three Hundred Years of Racial Fear: Eschatology, Epistemology, and Post-Confederate “Dog Whistles” in 21st-Century U.S. Political Discourse.

To be presented at “Negative Solidarities: The Age of Anger and Hate Speech in the Anglophone Globalized Public Sphere,” University of Naples “L’Orientale,” Naples, Italy.

- Mandel, S. (Forthcoming: 2023, December 11-13.) Seeding Exclusivism In U.S. Right-Wing Political Discourse: Frank Luntz, The Moral Majority, and the "Contract With America."

To be presented at "HEPP4: Emotions, Populism and Polarised Politics, Media, and Culture," University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.

- Mandel, S. (2023, May 18-20.) Only in America: Illuminating Choice, Constraint, and Violence Under U.S. Hypercapitalism in the Short Fiction of George Saunders. Presented at the American Literature Association (ALA) 34th Annual Conference, paneling with the George Saunders Society, Boston, MA, USA.

- Mandel, S. (2023, April 5-9.) When “Earning” Means Spending: Meaning Slippage in U.S. Consumer Advertising and the Discourse of Economic Absurdism.

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