

Book review

Book review: *Neo-Nationalism and Universities: Populists, autocrats, and the future of higher education*,
by John Aubrey Douglass

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In many countries, these are not happy times for democracy or freedom of thought – or for higher education. *Neo-Nationalism and Universities* is the first effort to make sense of the impact of the rise of neo-nationalism and populism in these troubled times on universities, applying multi-authored case studies to analyse the effect of these trends.

Primary author John A. Douglass puts forward a 'political determinist' hypothesis in Chapter 2, suggesting that since universities are so deeply bound to the nation state and to nation-building, shifts in the national political context towards neo-nationalism shape 'the mission, role, and effectiveness of universities ... more than internally derived academic cultures, labor market demands, or the desires of students' and 'largely ... determine the internal organization and academic culture of universities' (23). This hypothesis is extended to the role of universities as leaders or followers within the national social sphere, an indicator that Douglass proposes is determined by the national political environment.

We learn through the case studies, with varying degrees of specificity and historical depth, and from differing perspectives, that there are some common driving forces that stimulate neo-nationalism, but that the impact on higher education in each country plays out differently – and that so far, the impacts have been limited in some cases, while being more severe in others. As Douglass implies in his introduction, there are some common stimulants for neo-nationalism, but its impact is largely national. The case study chapters provide discussion and analysis of how national and regional realities have played out.

As Douglass (and many other analysts) have pointed out, the underlying causes for the phenomenon include the often disruptive impact of globalisation on segments of the population – and on many countries. Much of the world has also seen a significant increase in inequality in recent years, with growing segments of the population 'left behind' by globalisation, technological advances and the emerging knowledge economy. The role of social media has also unsettled societies, and is identified as an accelerant in neo-nationalist political movements.

Although the case studies approach the broad topic of neo-nationalism in different ways, there is widespread agreement that universities have benefited from globalisation in many ways, including the rising importance of research in increasingly technology-based economies and global scientific collaboration.

The cases show wide variation of the impact on higher education, but they largely demonstrate that universities as institutions have played little role in resisting neo-nationalism – although there has been some resistance, especially by academics and students. While the chapters make it clear that their academic communities oppose neo-nationalism and seek to defend the traditional values of higher education, there are fewer instances that indicate that academe has had any significant effect on these broader political trends.

It is worth pointing out some of the special implications of nationalism discussed in the case study chapters. These chapters are quite different in presentation and vary in methodological approach – although there is some common policy analysis across the themes of academic freedom, university autonomy, mobility, research collaboration and global engagement – but of course the focus is on the political and social implications of contemporary nationalism for universities in each context.

In the examination of Brexit and the advent of Trump, the UK and the US cases in Chapters 3 and 4 largely appear to support the hypothesis that university functions, and perhaps missions, are significantly affected by the shift towards neo-nationalism. Policy changes had real effects on university commitment to research collaboration, for instance, with the EU via Horizon 2020 in the UK case, or with China, due to visa bans, foreign espionage claims and research budget surveillance in the US case.

Chapters 5 and 6 showcase the variation in different EU states in terms of forms of nationalism within the spectrum of neo-nationalism proposed by Douglass – ranging from neo-national movements to autocratic regimes. These cases particularly distinguish between common regional bases for political polarisation, such as the refugee crisis, economic instability and Covid-19, and variable levels of neo-nationalist response dependent on the historical and contemporary political and social contexts of each country. For instance, the political attack on Central European University, and its subsequent move from Hungary to Austria, or the local objections to the volume of international students in the Netherlands and in Denmark.

Chapter 7 (Turkey), Chapter 8 (China) and Chapter 10 (Russia) each offer detailed and extended historical analyses of cycles of nationalism in relation to their universities. These would be interesting to any higher education scholar purely for an exposition of the national political context in which universities operate in these countries. However, what these cases draw out is the complexity of the concept of nationalism itself, challenging the applicability of the concept of neo-nationalism to every case. While these cases seem to fulfil criteria applicable to illiberal democracies and/or autocratic regimes, whether or not these may be classified as instances of neo-nationalism is arguable. Indeed, Chirikov and Fedyukin (Chapter 10 on Russia) suggest as much – that some countries may simply be 'on

a continuum of autocratic rule by political elites' (237), rather than riding 'the contemporary global wave of neo-nationalism' (221).

Chapter 9 (a comparison of Hong Kong and Singapore) and Chapter 11 (Brazil) bring to light the role of the university in responding to neo-nationalism beyond merely the institution, that is, the university as its community of students and scholars. As a study of the university as leader in a political environment that attempts to suppress it, civil protest and public outcry by academics and students are important to consider. Douglass elevates critical social analysis to be the most important societal function of the university, which seems to be present to a greater extent in Hong Kong than in Singapore (where the political context may appear to better nurture the mission of higher education, at least as visible in global rankings). Similarly, in Brazil, although the Bolsonaro government repeatedly attempted to denigrate universities and curb the budget and functions of higher education, academic responses are shown to be deeply critical and sometimes quite effective at repudiating restrictions.

The book does not provide a concluding chapter; however, some authors explicitly test the fitness of aspects of the theory in their case study chapters. Whether the university evaluated as leader or follower is better indicated by the institutional response or the community response remains up for debate. But without a doubt, this book makes evident the profound impact of the contemporary rise of nationalism, populism and neo-nationalism on national systems of higher education – issuing both a warning and a call for universities to watch for signs of the decline of democracy, and to respond as leaders in their societies.