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*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism: A Post-Pandemic Balance?

By Terri-Anne Teo

SYNOPSIS

Reactions to COVID-19 suggest a resurgence of exclusionary nationalist sentiments, and the decline of social cohesion. The melding of national and global sensibilities may provide a remedy to an otherwise fractious future.

COMMENTARY

IT IS opportune to consider what we envision as our guiding societal framework, whether in or beyond times of crisis. While the nation is an [imagined political community](#), as Benedict Anderson puts it, nationalism has a historic role in constructing Singapore's identity through narratives of multiracialism and a shared past.

This said, it is timely to look at how ideas of inclusion may be widened to encompass those who appear foreign, transient and unfamiliar. This pandemic has seen a global resurgence of racism and xenophobia, and Singapore is no exception. At the same time, reactions to COVID-19 include ground-up initiatives that signal a will to help those in need, within and beyond national borders.

Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism

To make sense of this discordance, it is useful to revisit notions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism as distinct yet complementary ways of thinking about inclusion. As

we move forward, what forms of solidarity do we want to take with us, and what should we leave behind in order to build a better society?

While nationalism as a concept and lived reality has contested definitions, it has at its core the binding of an 'us' through the creation of an 'Other'. This demarcation between members and non-members may take the form of difference based on citizenship status, ethno-cultural and/or ideological perspectives.

Hence, while nationalism has unifying potentials, this pandemic demonstrates the insidious side of nationalism. First, [protectionist policies](#) inhibit the export of medical supplies and other essential needs. This approach disrupts access to resources, free flowing exchanges and mobilities. Borders are fortified, with the export of protective medical equipment and travel restricted.

These practices of economic nationalism, while understandably reactionary, undermine the need for cooperation in times of crisis. E.B. White, novelist and essayist, forewarned that nationalism presupposes local self-sufficiency, and entitlement based on belonging. The pandemic has pulled this curtain back.

Signs point toward a [renewed awareness](#) of how interconnected and interdependent we are, with resources, knowledge and national economies contingent on the survival of the international community.

Pandemic and Xenophobia

Second, nationalism explains how the pandemic has exacerbated xenophobia and racism. In the context of [pandemics](#), the connection between disease and foreignness is not new. US intellectual [Susan Sontag](#) points out that syphilis in the 15th century was termed the 'French pox' by the English, '*morbus Germanicus*' by the Parisians, and the 'Chinese disease' by the Japanese.

In today's context, this same logic manifests in [exclusionary political rhetoric](#) and racism towards individuals identified as [Chinese](#), specifically because they were seen as a key vector of COVID-19. Such incidents affect those close to home, including Singaporean-Chinese migrants who endured COVID-19-related attacks in [Australia](#) and the [United Kingdom](#).

Unfortunately, these exclusionary sentiments are also present in Singapore. With the caveat that xenophobia and racism [precede COVID-19](#), the pandemic triggered more [Sinophobic sentiments](#) in Singapore, with calls to ban travellers from China. More recently, [transient migrant workers](#) were [critiqued](#) for being responsible for the spread of COVID-19, particularly those of South Asian descent who are already subject to [stigmas of poor hygiene](#) and [posing threats to public order](#).

That nationalism is not necessarily divisive should be noted. Political scientist [Yael Tamir](#) argues that 'xenophobic nationalism [is] an expression of valuable ideas gone astray' and isolationist practices are far from the norm. Nationalism can be a salve in times of crisis, and there is perhaps no better time for national unity than the present. It is however necessary to acknowledge and remedy the toxic effects of nationalism on social cohesion.

Moral Cosmopolitanism?

Cosmopolitanism provides a foil to nationalism through the idea that all humans are members of a single community. Some proponents of [economic cosmopolitanism](#) advocate for a single global economy and limited state intervention.

However, the mobilisation of grassroots aid efforts toward rectifying inequalities during this pandemic is not one that appears driven by economic logic. Instead, it speaks to moral cosmopolitanism, which calls for an ethical responsibility to extend concern for the individual beyond borders and to all of humanity.

This ethos of moral cosmopolitanism resonates with efforts not motivated by an ethics of outcome but an ethics of right action. For moral cosmopolitans, decisions are made based on whether they are deemed right or wrong, regardless of their consequences.

To illustrate, countries are providing resources and refuge for those [stranded at sea](#), donations are made across borders to healthcare workers through [personal protective equipment](#), and communities are rallying together to form support networks for the poor, differently-abled and marginalised, regardless of nationality.

Unconditional Goodwill to Migrant Workers

Aiding others beyond the national 'us' is also evident on a local level. Here, Singaporean citizens and residents are offering their [homes to Malaysians](#) affected by the lockdown, while coordinating food and clothing donations. When the government distributed Solidarity Payments to Singaporeans, [donations](#) were made to NGOs and charities, including those dedicated to migrant workers.

There are also numerous [ground-up initiatives](#) seeking to ease the plight of migrant workers by raising funds, distributing essential needs and raising morale. Such moments of unconditional goodwill are promising, suggesting the need and potential for continuity.

A duty of care forms the foundation of these movements. Beyond national bonds is a moral commitment to help those in need regardless of nationality, as a matter of justice and human rights. This rationality, and the acts they entail, counter the oft-held presumption that attachments to fellow citizens should be exclusive and privileged.

A Key Language

While a general ethos of moral cosmopolitanism can have positive effects on a community, it should not be treated as a replacement for nationalism. Where nationalism has its exclusionary properties, it is also necessary for social cohesion. As this crisis shows, moral cosmopolitanism and nationalism are not fundamentally opposed but are effectively two sides of a coin.

More than ever, we are reminded of societal complexities as xenophobia is juxtaposed with acts of compassion toward migrants, and as nations both compete and cooperate for resources and knowledge to overcome this pandemic.

Nationalism's collective spirit and cosmopolitanism's duty to others beyond our own should both be harnessed. Taking a balanced stance is particularly salient in Singapore, where economic and social progress hinges on both national solidarity and an openness to diversity.

Developing a good society may well be the remedy for fractiousness and antagonisms whether in exceptional or unexceptional times. Looking forward, this period reinforces the necessity of leaving behind old habits of exclusivity and taking with us compassion toward strangers in our midst.

Terri-Anne Teo is a Research Fellow with the Social Resilience Programme at the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. This commentary by the CENS/FIT (Future Issues & Technology) research cluster is part of an RSIS Series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg