Globalisation and nationalism

Many things have changed in Australia since I first came here in the mid-1990s. One of these is a noticeable increase in displays of national ardour: for instance, there is the ever-expanding flag-waving and display of the national colours on Australia Day; or there is the fact that there has been a resurgence in ANZAC Day ceremonies since the 1990s after decades of decline; another example can be found in the introduction of citizenship testing for prospective citizens in 2007. I often discuss these changes with my students as we try to understand why Australia has become a more nationalistic place in the past two decades. The best argument is usually put forward by those who argue that nationalism is a reaction to globalisation and increased immigration, where the national flag becomes a symbol of stability in times of rapid change.

Indeed, the debate around the relationship between globalisation and nationalism is wide open. While increasing nationalism can be read as a reaction to globalisation, a diametrically opposed argument is also put forward. Two new studies (Ariely 2012; Machida 2012), for instance, have found that people in more globalised nations such as Australia are less ethnocentric, less patriotic and less inclined to fight for their countries than their counterparts in less globalised nations. These researchers suggest that nationalism is not a reaction to globalisation but that globalisation actually serves to reduce nationalism. Globalisation will eventually be the end of nationalism – or so this line of argument goes.

Both globalisation and nationalism are notoriously broad concepts and the contradiction between claims that globalisation increases or decreases nationalism must be sought somewhere in how the concepts are understood. If we define globalisation as the latest phase of capitalist expansion under the ideological banner of neoliberalism, a convincing case can be made that globalisation is likely to lead to an increase in state-sponsored nationalism, as Blad and Koçoğlu (2012) do. Blad and Koçoğlu (2012) provide a case study of the rise of Islamism as a political legitimation strategy in Turkey over the past decades. Specifically, they argue that

[...] contrary to analyses that point to political Islam as a cultural reaction to modernity or Western imperialism and facilitated by an ever-weakening state in the globalization era, we argue that the rise of political Islam in Turkey is tied to strategies to bring the state more in line with neoliberal, modernist governance and is a function of sustained state authority. (p. 370)

For Blad and Koçoğlu (2012), the story goes like this: neoliberal economic globalisation has meant that states are increasingly losing their economic legitimacy. For most of the 20th century, the legitimacy of the Turkish state
had rested in the fact that it was seen to protect its population from the negative effects of economic inequality. It offered state-led development and with it social security. However, in the 1970s its foreign debt began to catch up with Turkey and it needed to turn to the IMF for a bailout. In exchange it was forced to devalue its currency and accept a range of austerity measures, which were intended to bolster production for export and to curb public spending. The latter in particular meant that the Turkish state largely lost its ability to ensure social stability through the remediation of economic inequality. Initially, the 1980 military coup ensured stability at gunpoint but then the problem for the state became how to return to democratic governance after having lost the ability to offer economic protection. And that is where “culture” comes in:

The neoliberal Turkish state clearly required authority to maintain stability if its economic reforms were to have any efficacy. However, it also needed to remove the state from its position of protectionist authority. The solution was an integration of cultural—that is, Islamist—legitimization strategies in two exemplary areas. The first was the Islamization of Turkish labor through the state advocacy of cultural, rather than the traditional class-based, trade union organizations. The second was the reduction of state-managed social service provision and the privatization of these services under Islamist patronage. (p. 45)

Blad and Koçer (2012) thus argue that the Turkish state wilfully adopted Islamism as a means to maintain state legitimacy while allowing for state withdrawal from the economic sphere. The latter is a direct requirement of the imposition of neoliberalism as a global ideology that requires the state to give up its economic regulatory capacity while still maintaining social stability.

Of course, there are as many differences between the Australian and Turkish cases as there are similarities. However, as our public transport, healthcare and education decline, it is obvious that the legitimacy of the state as a system to ensure social security is under threat. At the same time, cultural legitimacy comes cheap (in contrast to the provision of welfare).

The political economy of language and culture in neoliberal times will be a research problem for generations of students and I would recommend reading Blad and Koçer (2012) to all of them.