

## Book Review

Douglass, J.A. (2021). *Neo-nationalism and universities: Populists, autocrats, and the future of higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. 320 pp. \$49.95 (paperback). ISBN 9781421441863.

### Purpose and Central Argument

On December 15, 2019, the Delhi police, controlled by the government of India, entered the campus premises of Jamia Millia Islamia University and disrupted a peaceful demonstration against a newly passed citizenship act, attacking and detaining students perceived as “anti-nationals.” Similarly, in January 2021, after Rodrigo Duterte accused the University of the Philippines of serving as a communist recruitment hub, the Philippine government terminated an agreement with the university that prohibited state security forces from entering its campuses, threatening academic freedom and student activism in the process (Ayson & Reyes, 2021). This pattern of authoritarian leaders bringing universities to heel reveals that neo-nationalism – what Sata and Karolewski (2020) have referred to as Caesarean politics – is becoming increasingly mainstreamed and is leading to democratic backsliding under thinly veiled pretexts such as taking back control, eradicating insurgency, and making nations great again.

*Neo-nationalism and Universities*, a collection of essays edited by John Aubrey Douglass, a professor of public policy and higher education at the University of California, Berkeley explores this global phenomenon. The book underscores how chauvinistic leaders are milking nationalism – whether rooted in faith/religion or racial/ethnic/cultural supremacy – to romanticize reprinted pasts, regulate scholars, defund universities on ideological grounds, and demonize Others, including foreign states and peoples, religious/ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, Marxists, and feminists. The book is structured as a series of national and pan-national case studies that reflect neo-nationalist movements, ranging from low-key illiberal to full-blown autocratic regimes. Through these case-wise examinations, the book’s contributing authors – seasoned academic researchers and leaders – assess the meaning and impact of neo-nationalism on the behaviors, roles, and values of major universities.

### Overview of the Book

The book illustrates that old nationalisms have taken on new configurations across the world, sparked by stimulants such as the acceleration of social change, mismanagement of refugee crises, and social media-inflamed polarization, forces which, in tandem, have enabled neo-nationalist parties to sow discord, bridle universities, weaponize science, and gain political mileage. In the **first chapter**, Douglass conceptualizes the university as an extension of and inextricably bound to the nation-state, and notes that universities shape and are shaped by their national environments. In the **second chapter**, Douglass offers a framework for neo-nationalism, identifying four overlapping types: nascent populism, nationalist-leaning governments, illiberal democracies, and authoritarian regimes. These introductory chapters set up the premise that while neo-nationalism is fueled by similar mainsprings, it manifests in varied ways and with varying degrees of influence on the missions, activities, and priorities of universities.

For instance, in the **third chapter**, Brendan O’Malley, detailing factors underlying Brexit, lends credence to findings that Brexit’s nationalist project played up long-standing ethnic myths and symbols of English identity (Schertzer & Woods, 2022), nostalgia for an imagined past (Orazi, 2022), and social anxieties concerning multiculturalism (Calhoun, 2017), all of which contributed to the United Kingdom (UK)’s divergence from the European Union (EU). In the **next chapter**, Douglass describes Donald Trump’s ascendancy and refashioning of previous forms of national populism in the United States (US), delving into issues such as campus culture wars, White supremacy, and Sinophobia in America. In **chapter five**, Wilhelm Krull and Thomas Brunotte cite reasons such as the geopolitics of emotion and anti-Brussels paranoia

as contributing to the rise of neo-nationalism in Europe, corroborating Brøgger's (2021) observation that Europe's nationalisms of the past have evolved into a novel configuration, one that opposes both the forces above (i.e., the EU) and the forces below (i.e., EU migrants).

Universities are local actors and at the same time becoming increasingly international, and this book illustrates that inward-looking nativist, xenophobic, and parochialism sentiments jeopardize internationalization and stymie knowledge generation and sharing. For instance, in the third chapter, O'Malley uses the example of the UK's inability to participate in programs such as Erasmus+ to highlight the loss of academic mobility and cooperation caused by neo-nationalism. This echoes Otto's (2021) observation that Brexit compromised the ability of higher education institutions in the UK, EU, and US to partner with one another in collective pursuits of positive institutional outcomes in teaching, research, and service. Wellings (2022) has stressed that neo-nationalism should be analyzed as an important variable in the politics and process of disintegration in the EU, and Marijk van der Wende takes on this analysis in **chapter six**, shedding light on how de-Europeanisation, propelled by neo-nationalism, impedes the free flow of skills, talent, and ideas across the borders of EU's member states.

This book, further, describes how neo-nationalists are curtailing academic freedom in their attempts to direct university research and teaching in ways that align with their agendas. That neo-nationalists prefer ideology unchallenged by evidence (Slaughter, 2019) is particularly well demonstrated by Krull and Brunotte in chapter five. Through examples such as Viktor Orbán's decisions to dismantle gender studies programs and oust the Central European University from Budapest, the authors delineate how universities in Hungary, Poland, and Germany are being used as pawns by power-tripping demagogues. Similarly, in **chapter seven**, O'Malley explains how Recep Tayyip Erdoğan fanned Islamic nationalism in Turkey and solidified his sway over higher education through ministerial controls on management, the censorship of criticism, and the elimination of suspected Gülenists, Kurdish sympathizers, and other threats – real or perceived – to the legitimacy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Karin Fischer continues this discussion on academic freedom in **chapter eight** by detailing methods used by Xi Jinping (e.g., the harassment of Charter 08 signatories) to coerce China's universities to toe the party line. While nationalism and globalization are often viewed as antithetical processes, Fischer elucidates how Xi has attempted to reap the dividends of globalization through the Belt and Road Initiative, reminding readers that if universities are crucibles of dissent, they are also propellants of innovation and international esteem, which might explain why Xi, who views open inquiry in the academe with caution, seeks also to invest in world-class universities and harness science as geopolitical leverage. In the **penultimate chapter**, Igor Chirikov and Igor Fedyukin list Vladimir Putin's maneuvers to tighten the Kremlin reins around Russia's universities (e.g., replacing rector elections with appointments and placing constraints on interpretations of Russia's past and contemporary politics), tactics that hearken back to Soviet legacies of control over higher education. The authors also contemplate the future of Russian university autonomy and the scope of increasing re-Sovietization, issues that acquire urgency in the wake of the pandemic and Putin's invasion of Ukraine.

In the **closing chapter**, Elizabeth Balbachevsky and José-Augusto Guilhon-Albuquerque trace Brazil's deleterious turn toward fascism, describing the ideological war waged by Jair Bolsonaro's administration against Brazil's knowledge regime. Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this chapter – and this compilation of essays, as a whole – is that universities, despite neo-nationalist pressures to domesticate them, must strive to promote the common good while maintaining the dignity of free persons. This exhortation is particularly driven home by Balbachevsky and Guilhon-Albuquerque, who inform readers that Brazil's universities, despite the neo-fascist assault that they had to endure, continued to defend human rights, mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, and deploy science in the service of society. By concluding on such a positive note, this book affirms that while universities are susceptible to authoritarian arm-twisting, they can function as responsible actors in society. This echoes Robertson and Bayetova's (2021) claim that educating students in liberal values, such as critical thinking and freedom of expression, can effectively counter a state's authoritarian impulses.

## Strengths, Weaknesses and Contributions

The book leaves the impression that neo-nationalism resembles a multi-headed, shapeshifting monster, mutating and metamorphosing into different shapes and forms (e.g., ethnocentrism, religiocentrism, and false patriotism) across different social, historical, political, and regional contexts, often coming to be known by different names (e.g., Trumpism, Orbánism, Bolsonarism, and Putinism). Douglass and his colleagues have warranted a clarion call to universities to keep an eye out for signs of democratic erosion or demise and remain committed to their civic mission of leading change, inclusively and systematically, for public welfare. The authors have suggested that universities can and should be bellwethers of change, defend the freedoms of minorities from the whims of the majority, and harness science and scholarship for the health and

sustenance of the communities in which they are situated. However bleak the future of universities seems in these trying times, this book leaves the hope, however rose-tinted this yearning might be, that higher education can be a potent weapon to slay neo-nationalism, whatever hideous and tyrannical form this monster might take.

Despite this book's numerous merits, its conspicuous limitation is that it does not adequately examine neo-nationalist formulations across Third World contexts. With the exception of Turkey, Douglass and his co-authors do not explore what Shakil and Yilmaz (2021) have described as civilizationism, the fusion of religion with identitarian populism. The book does not address questions such as these: What are some unique features of Third World religio/ethnic-populist civilizationism, examples of which include Hindutva Brahmanical nationalism in India, Sinhala-tva Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka, and Imran Khan's brand of Islamist nationalism in Pakistan? How might Third World scholars remain committed to truth and justice if their campuses become proxy battlegrounds for competing, conflicting hegemonic and peripheral nationalisms (e.g., Indian and Kashmiri nationalisms, Sri Lankan and Tamil nationalisms, Pakistani and Baloch nationalisms)? What are the implications of blasphemy laws, anti-terrorism laws, and colonial-era sedition laws for the future of universities in postcolonial countries? These questions could serve as a starting point for students and scholars of comparative and international higher, political science, and cultural studies interested in expanding the conversation on neo-nationalism and higher education.

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