JACOB COLLINS

REIMAGINING THE NATION

A Reply to Benjamin Kunkel

A generation ago, at the height of globalization, protests against the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle seemed to augur a new coalition of organized labour and eco-activists. To the merry tinkle of breaking glass, 'Teamsters and turtles'—trade unionists and environmentalists in fancy dress—marched together against the WTO's abolition of protections for Third World farmers and First World manufacturing workers. Shoulder to shoulder, longshoremen, students, teachers, religious groups, yuppies and skin-head punks stood firm against teargas and pepper-spray, until the trade talks collapsed and the Clinton officials flew back east.[1] A decade later, after the Great Crash of 2008, that coalition fell to pieces. Many working-class voters moved right, blaming 'liberal elites' for declining living standards, while climate politics became entangled in the culture wars, taken up by those same elites. Yet today, with the WTO marginalized and the return of protectionist measures, above all in the country that did most to promote globalization, the 2020s lefts are hesitating to rejoice.

In 'The New National Question', published in the last number of NLR, Benjamin Kunkel urges the new lefts to see a potential opening in the 'widespread shift' towards economic nationalism; an opportunity for workers and environmentalists to once again unite.[2] With an Apollinairean flourish, he bids *adieu* to globalization's vanishing worldview. True, the trend to date has been mainly led by the right, with its punitive enforcement of anti-immigrant policies. But historically, as he notes, economic nationalism has often taken left-wing forms, from Nyerere's Tanzania to Latin America's 'pink tide', and in principle, the

left's commitment to an economy oriented towards popular needs, under democratic control, should make it best suited to benefit from and direct a revival of national-economic sovereignty. Yet today's lefts have done little to explore the possibilities that a post-globalized world order might present.[3] Crucially, Kunkel argues, left economic nationalists should distinguish themselves from the new rights by embracing a policy of large-scale immigration, for the 'manifest prosperity and dynamism' that newcomers provide.[4]

'The New National Question' is a subtle and surprising essay, which anticipates many of the questions that might be put to it, without necessarily answering them in full. Some of these are punctual and empirical: is the era of globalization really over? What would a left-nationalist economic strategy concretely entail? Others are analytical and historical: how to explain the ideological shift that Kunkel registers—what drives the apparent resurgence of nationalist forms? In a world of unequal nation-states, what types of nationalism are coming to the fore? For that matter, was globalization itself really a post-national phenomenon, or did it rather entail, as Fredric Jameson argued, a projection of American economic and military power?[5] In discussions of economic nationalism, stress tends to fall on the adjective, but one of the great merits of 'The New National Question' is to prompt us to think more deeply about the noun.

Kunkel is surely right to treat the national frame as unavoidable for any serious political practice, whether one is 'for' or 'against'. What follows will take his cue. I aim to situate today's resurgence by drawing on the ideas of earlier critical theorists of nationalism: Tom Nairn, Régis Debray, Benedict Anderson, Wang Chaohua and Giovanni Arrighi. They proposed a set of hypotheses about the enabling conditions for nationalism's reproduction and some useful typologies of its political-ideological

---

[1] Jeffrey St. Clair, 'Seattle Diary: It's a Gas, Gas, Gas', NLR I/238, Nov–Dec 1999; Anuradha Mittal, Foreword to *The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle*, David Solnit and Rebecca Solnit, eds, Edinburgh 2009, p. 1.

[2] Benjamin Kunkel, 'The New National Question', NLR 160, Jul–Aug 2026, pp. 25–64. Henceforth, NNQ.

[3] NNQ, 40, 55.

[4] NNQ, 34, 60, 62–3.

[5] 'For when we talk about the spreading power and influence of globalization, aren't we really referring to the spreading economic and military might of the US?': Fredric Jameson, 'Globalization and Political Strategy', NLR 4, Jul–Aug 2000, p. 50.

forms, allowing us to think through the complex character of popular-democratic as well as great-power national claims, not least the American sort. First, though, it's worth noting the nuance and singularity of Kunkel's arguments on the fate of globalization, the nature of its nemesis and the case for economic nationalism, about which he is far from gung-ho.

A sober case

As far as globalization is concerned, Kunkel freely acknowledges the persistence of globalized production chains and financial flows, citing the figures that prove it.[6] But, as he puts it, this doesn't mean that the political-ideological shift towards economic nationalism has not been 'real and significant'. At a minimum, Western rhetoric now presents 'an agonistic image of the world economy' rather than a cooperative one, and the state 'now emphasizes rather than downplays' its role. But if globalization has hitherto met with greater ideological than practical defeat, this 'intellectual and political comeuppance' should not be minimized. It has been brought about by the rise of an alternative system: the free-market discourse of inevitability (Thatcher's 'there is no alternative') could not withstand 'the towering Chinese example of mass escape from poverty and snowballing growth', achieved by 'something like state-capitalist methods'. For Kunkel, the ideological consequences are immense: if states enjoy the capability of securing national well-being in defiance of global markets, they also assume the responsibility for doing so.[7]

Defining economic nationalism as 'external protection and internal direction', Kunkel locates its theoretical warranty in Friedrich List's *National System of Political Economy* (1841), a democratic manifesto that aimed to protect emerging nineteenth-century economies from Britain's world-trade supremacy through a synthesis of German ideas for an enlarged common market with French *dirigisme* and American schemes for infrastructure buildout behind tariff walls. But though he advances theoretical arguments for a left-inflected version, and grounds for it being distinctly preferable to Trumpian jingoistic-clientelist and Bidenesque lily-livered liberal sorts, his prognosis is sober. Renewed economic competition between states under international conditions of stagnation, debt and

[6] NNQ, 40. See also Alan Beattie, 'How Supply Chain Superheroes Have Kept World Trade Flowing', *Financial Times*, 26 September 2024.
[7] NNQ, 55–56.

overcapacity will only compound the acknowledged challenges of overpriced import substitution and shrinking export markets.[8]

Kunkel combs through a set of left authors, often reading against the grain, to glean more grist for his case. *Contra* the 'revolutionary fatalism' of Jamie Merchant's *Endgame*, where capital is all-powerful, he points to China's relatively successful capital controls. Richard Seymour's nightmarish trawl of hard-right social media in *Disaster Nationalism* supplies the reason why these new far rights are 'such mediocre economic nationalists'—they lack List's 'expansive, inclusive and avowedly democratic understanding of an imagined national community'. Kunkel concurs with Branko Milanovic that Trump blames China while protecting the super-rich whose wealth has soared in the period of its rise; but, radicalizing Milanovic's dialectics of neo-imperialism and inequality, he argues that Trump's 'redistributive impasse'—his support for the 'homoploutic' elite—is MAGA's Achilles' heel and a key opportunity for the left. In Wolfgang Streeck's *Taking Back Control*, he salutes a persuasive case for bending economic nationalism to left-democratic purposes.[9] Nevertheless, the world outlook for it is bleak. Kunkel manages to draw a gleam of hope from looming ecological disaster, in that this will compel economic-nationalist states to seek international solidarity, as a condition for survival; but the silver lining is a thin one.[10]

Nationalism's critical theorists

One of the striking features of 'The New National Question' is the negligible role that 'national' features seem to play in it. Only in the penultimate pages does Kunkel suggest that newly arrived immigrants should be exposed to 'a certain innocuous cultural nationalism', bound to stir the pride of many native citizens: 'free anthologies of national literature and film, free instruction in national music and dance, a frank national commitment to freedom of worship.'[11] It's attractively

[8] NNQ, 35, 57.
[9] Jamie Merchant, *Endgame: Economic Nationalism and Global Decline*, London 2024; Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization*, London and New York 2024; Branko Milanovic, *The Great Global Transformation: National Market Liberalism in a Multipolar World*, London 2025, Wolfgang Streeck, *Taking Back Control: States and State Systems after Globalism*, trans. Ben Fowkes and Joshua Rahtz, London and New York 2024.
[10] NNQ, 62–64.
[11] NNQ, 60.

expressed; but how innocuous, exactly? How should degrees of nationalism, cultural or otherwise, be understood? Rather than repressing such questions, history teaches they are better brought out into the light; examined critically, rather than unthinkingly silenced or propounded. That was the aim of the critical theorists who addressed the national question some fifty years ago. Contrary to nationalist myths of unified ethnic histories stretching back to the dawn of time, these thinkers defined the idea of nationality as contextually determined, unstable, generative and, above all, modern: the rallying cry, '*Vive la nation*!', was supposedly first sounded in 1792 by the French revolutionary forces at Valmy, where they held their ground against the invading Prussian infantry; in earlier times, it would have been, '*Vive le roi!*'.

Much of the groundwork for this iconoclastic theory was laid by post-war scholars like Ernest Gellner and Elie Kedourie. 'Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century', in Kedourie's formulation.[12] In the mid-seventies, Tom Nairn proposed a more materialist reading that located the origins of nationalism in a defensive-offensive reaction to the uneven character of capitalist-industrial development. Radiating out in 'concentric circles of upheaval and reaction' across the world, the impact of capitalist modernization was experienced as a tidal wave of outside interference, signalling first Anglicization, then Western- or Americanization. To avoid being drowned, peripheral elites had to 'take things into their own hands' and cobble together their own form of development, in Listian fashion, while mobilizing their society on a new footing—'as a militant inter-class community rendered strongly (if mythically) aware of its own separate identity vis-à-vis the outside forces of domination.' In this rather stylized history, the great powers themselves then took over the ideology of the nation, giving it 'real muscle'. Contrary to the perpetual peace that Kant had predicted would ensue as bourgeois commerce diffused across the planet, capitalism's uneven development engendered 'a perilous and convulsive new fragmentation' within the world market it created. Though waged for the most part as socio-economic warfare, this constantly threatened to descend into the military kind.[13]

---

[12] Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism*, London 1960.

[13] Tom Nairn, 'The Modern Janus', NLR I/94, Nov–Dec 1975, pp. 11–12, 14–16. Nairn radicalized Ernest Gellner's insight that nationalism was connected 'not so much with industrialization or modernization as such, but with its uneven diffusion.' By replacing modernization, a one-off event, with the ongoing uneven development of capitalism, Nairn expanded the insight's applicability far beyond its original context. See the chapter 'Nationalism' in Ernest Gellner, *Thought and Change*, London 1964.

For Nairn, all nationalisms were by nature ambivalent, 'a means by which societies try to propel themselves forward to certain kinds of goals' by 'a certain sort of regression—looking inwards, drawing more deeply on their indigenous resources', which meant that forms of irrationality—prejudice, sentimentality, collective egotism, aggression—stained them all. Nationalisms could and should be distinguished, morally and politically; Nyerere's Tanzania was not Mussolini's Italy. But those distinctions rested on different criteria—the class character of the society in question, its place in the inter-state order. The two faces of nationalism, progressive and regressive, could not be prised apart; they were conjoined on a common head, like the Roman statues of Janus placed above gateways: one face looking forward, one looking back.[14]

In France, Régis Debray would agree that 'the idea of the nation is the most materialist of ideas', but he went deeper. The nation-state is a historical creation, but it is a variant of a type of collective organization that has been vital for the survival of the human species from the start—a defence against entropy, which required marking a starting point in time and delineating a space within which 'life is rendered untouchable, or sacred.' The problem of 'belonging', over which critical theorists of nationalism had typically stumbled, was for Debray a simple anthropological fact. If nationality was its modern form, the left had no choice but to work with that. As he never ceased to point out, every successful revolution—China, Cuba, Vietnam—had been embodied in a struggle for national liberation.[15]

By contrast to the Old World-centred tradition, Benedict Anderson relocated the origins of national consciousness to the Americas, where the work of imagining a national community for the new *creole* republics had to be done from scratch; settlers began to develop a sense of their own distinctive history and culture, a love for their own geographies and climates—and, south of the Rio Grande, a nationality that was a mix of Iberian and indigenous peoples; north of it, an emerging patchwork of ethnically hyphenated would-be citizens—in societies very different to the metropole's. The rise of cultural-linguistic ideas of the nation in Europe after the French Revolution, drawing on Herder's conception

[14] Nairn, 'The Modern Janus', p. 18.

[15] Régis Debray, 'Marxism and the National Question', NLR I/105, Sept–Oct 1977, pp. 26–29. The reflections in this interview were developed in his *Critique de la raison politique*, Paris 1981.

of a proto-national people expressing its particular genius through its language and culture, with a deep feeling for place, was a separate development; it offered Czechs, Poles, Ukrainians, Celts the basis to make national claims for autonomy or independence from the old dynastic empires: Habsburg, Romanov, Hanoverian. Like Nairn, Anderson understood the ideology of nationhood as forged on the periphery; but he put more emphasis on the way it had then been adopted as 'official nationalism' by the imperial powers, who began to assert monolithic notions of cultural-linguistic or blood-and-soil nationhood, to foreground territorial claims and to mobilize their societies for war.[16]

In a later contribution, Anderson proposed a comparative typology of nationalist forms, which often appeared as combined or hybrid types—settler-republican, cultural-linguistic, 'official' imperial, anti-colonial and, in the era of globalization, *émigré* long-distance nationalisms. The typology was further developed by Wang Chaohua, who noted the emergence of 'client nationalisms' seeking support from the superpower.[17] While Nairn in 'The Modern Janus' foregrounded the uneven political-economic terrain beneath nationalist upheavals, and Anderson in *Imagined Communities* examined the cultural and political work of nation-making, Wang pointed out that nationalists typically appealed to a roster of claims for self-determination—economic interests, democratic rights, culture and language, ethnicity, religion—whose order of priority can shift over time. Like many others, Anderson had noted the PRC's remarkable combination of a revolutionary national-liberation movement, asserting popular-democratic and social claims, and an official nationalism, asserting its unitary-territorial status. Wang pointed to the changing balance between the two as the official formula became predominant, codified in the early 2000s with the doctrine of the Three Represents, where the Party was deemed to represent 'the greatest interest of the Chinese nation' as a single monolith.[18]

One final theorist, whose work may be of use in thinking through the issues raised by Kunkel's call: in *The Geometry of Imperialism* (1978),

---

[16] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London and New York 1983.

[17] Benedict Anderson, 'Western Nationalism and Eastern Nationalism', NLR 9, May–June 2001; Wang Chaohua, 'A Tale of Two Nationalisms', NLR 32, March–April 2005.

[18] Wang, 'Tale of Two Nationalisms', p. 94.

Giovanni Arrighi approached the national question by way of its dialectical nemesis, imperialism. Reconstructing the moves of J. H. Hobson's 1902 study, Arrighi defined imperialism as the tendency of nation-states, in conditions of uneven growth, to expand beyond their borders.[19] This took four (ideal-type) forms: settler colonies, formal imperialism (as with the British Raj), informal-economic imperialism (as with the City of London's investments in Argentina), and rival military-nationalist imperialisms (as with the clashing imperial blocs of Hobson's day). Each form then generated further nationalist reactions: settler colonies developed their own national identities and rebelled against the metropole; formal imperialism engendered anti-colonial revolts; informal economic imperialism promoted uneven development and the rise of new powers, unsettling the inter-state order. For Arrighi, the hegemon's reaction—Britain's competitive hardening and extension of its imperial holdings—was crucial in determining the era of inter-imperial conflict that followed, until the mutual exhaustion of the rival national-imperialisms in two world wars cleared the field for the expansionist nationalism of the American superpower, projected through both formal-military and informal-economic means.

Drivers of the shift

What light can these considerations shed on today's discussions on economic nationalism, or whatever the sequel to US-led globalization proves to be? First, they can help us to situate the present moment, analytically and historically, by exploring the relationship of nationalist resurgence to today's uneven capitalist development. Second, they prompt us to analyse the character and claims of these new nationalisms, both popular-democratic and official-imperial, to determine which are the emergent, dominant or residual strands. Finally, they raise the political problem of imperialist or great-power nationalism and its relevance to Kunkel's appeal.

To start with uneven development. Kunkel rightly notes the intellectual challenge that the Chinese system poses to neoliberal globalization's defenders. But the material relationship between the rise of Chinese manufacturing and the hollowing-out of the American productive economy are surely of greater significance to the economic-nationalist turn.

[19] J. H. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, London 1902. Whether Hobson would have recognized himself in Arrighi's reconstruction is an interesting question.

Kunkel of course registers the facts of China's rise; its GDP per capita grew at a cumulative rate of 8 per cent between 1992 and 2022—the mirror image of the West's 'long downturn' in growth and profitability rates, and in part a solution to it.[20] China's economic ascendance helped cement the shift towards an official nationalism, brooking no questions of its role, as well as creating pressures for expansion. In the West, the US hegemon reacted by hardening its positions, while at the popular level declining median incomes fuelled calls to 'take things into our own hands'. In this sense, as Nairn would have agreed, the shift towards economic-nationalist outlooks is not just intellectual, nor voluntarist—not due to the rise of particular economists or demagogic influencers—but expressive; explicable by their 'fit' with the times.[21] Nor did capitalist 'upheaval and disruption' come to a halt with the rise of Shenzhen and decline of the Upper Midwest; it continues to engender new forms of reaction through the unevenness of 'post-development'—the run-up of non-productive asset prices—and 'de-development': emptied rust-belts, debt peonage, unaffordable housing and healthcare. Here are the grounds for Kunkel's left solution to the crisis.

What types of post- or anti-globalist national reaction are now on the rise? Formal-military American imperialism was always a destabilizing factor, engendering forms of resistance; but during the high noon of globalization, circa 1991–2006, as the USAF pounded Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, no nationalist reaction was seismic enough to trouble the inter-state system.[22] Religious modes—al-Qaeda, ISIS—mimicked the universalist forms of capital itself, networked and de-territorialized; but both proved short-lived. Debray might say they lacked the deep roots that a nationally embedded project like Hezbollah or Hamas could establish. The scale of anti-globalist reaction changed after the 'convulsive' crisis of 2008, when Western capital faced its greatest moment of danger since 1931. 'The New National Question' doesn't

[20] 'Never in history have so many people improved their incomes so much over such a long, uninterrupted period': Milanovic, *The Great Global Transformation*, p. 16.

[21] See Brendan O'Leary's critique of the Kedourie–Oakeshott approach to 'the nationalist doctrine', 'In Praise of Empires Past', NLR 18, Nov–Dec 2002.

[22] Kunkel acknowledges that globalization was never as peaceful as its apologists made out, noting that just a few years after Thomas Friedman put forward his 'Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention' in 1996, the US and NATO were bombing Belgrade, where the first McDonald's in the Balkans had opened its doors in 1988: NNQ, 29. Nevertheless, the role of US warfare carries little weight in his account.

pay much attention to the processes that drove this shift, but they can tell us something about the types of nationalism in play.

First, on the economic front, the layers politicized by the debt, unemployment and austerity of the Great Recession in America and Europe reacted with waves of anti-elite protest. These new oppositions, left and right, were bound to try to re-animate their national-political spheres as the only site where they could get a hearing and perhaps get their hands on the levers of change. If the new rights came to enjoy greater electoral traction, the new lefts also appealed to a national-popular community. That was meaning of the Greek *Oxi* in the 2015 Eurocrisis referendum, invoking the great tradition of national resistance to the Nazi occupation. But the same logic applied to Mélenchon's invocation of '*La France, la belle, la rebelle*', or to Corbyn's of Shelley.

Another more powerful factor driving the shift was of course Washington's offensive against China. Already in 2012, Obama was boasting that he had doubled the number of trade cases brought against the PRC and imposed a series of protective tariffs.[23] Official economic-nationalist claims soon came to override the popular-democratic appeal of anti-Wall Street voices. Trump's key move was to combine the two under capital's hegemony, redoubling the potency of America's move against China through mass-popular support, while protecting the Wall Street–Silicon Valley nexus. Biden, of course, followed suit: companies with CHIPS Act funding were prohibited from manufacturing semiconductors in China, with aggressive export controls. Trump's second term saw the triumph of an aggressively nationalist-imperialist strategy. Competition with China now justifies any amount of blind investment in hyperscale AI—'Whoever wins superintelligence, wins'[24]—while resources (rare-earth minerals) and technology infrastructure (5G networks) have become key fronts of geoeconomic competition.

Overlapping with these are the geopolitical reactions against Washington's military-expansionist drive in Eastern Europe, the Western Pacific and the Middle East. Where the US wields the economic weapons of sanctions, blockade and financial exclusion, the targeted countries—Iran, Cuba, Russia, the DPRK, Venezuela pre-2026—are obliged to adopt

[23] Barack Obama, 'Remarks by the President on Fair Trade', 13 March 2012, available online at the Obama White House archive.
[24] Donald Trump, speech given at the UN General Assembly, 22 September 2026.

economic-nationalist strategies like import substitution. Here again, US strategy serves to belittle the ideology of globalization and contribute to the fragmentation of the world economy. The battle over AI is also increasingly about national-security and military interests, as AI-guided weapons systems are honed in Ukraine and Gaza. *Pace* Kunkel, the ideology of globalization has taken a bigger hammering from the Oval Office than from the shock of the Chinese other.

Kunkel's view of globalization's resilience as an economic phenomenon, despite ideological defeat, might be compared to Nathan Sperber's recent analysis of neoliberalism's fortunes. Sperber found that, while its principles and intellectual thematics have been either jettisoned or hybridized with their opposites, and its policy doctrine has unravelled, neoliberalism's pattern of accumulation and pro-capital class settlement endure; indeed, the norms were discarded in a series of policy moves calculated to preserve its fundamental structure.[25] A parallel analysis might see the largely US-driven 'end of globalization' as a way to preserve the fundamental structures of US supremacy, against the threat of a rival in the world-market/inter-state system. Whether this means that the new era is automatically one of reviving democratic sovereignties is less clear; at this stage, it's hardly a given that a regime of economic nationalisms is due to replace the foundering cosmopolitan order. Most mainstream commentators, for example, would still cluster around the idea of a geopolitical fracturing of the world economy, driven by US–PRC rivalry, perhaps with Russian and Iranian bolt-ons, rather than re-nationalization as such; the outcomes are usually predicted to be a new cold war, shifting multipolar blocs or a *longue durée* great-power struggle, on the model of eighteenth-century France and Britain.[26] Nevertheless, to lodge this caveat by no means disqualifies Kunkel's argument, which is really one of principle: the case for an inclusive left answer to the contemporary national question.

Great-power nationalism?

Still, if the most powerful propellant force towards economic nationalism has been America's turn to overt imperial competition, this is hardly

[25] Nathan Sperber, 'Beyond Neoliberalism?', NLR 158, March–April 2026.

[26] Recent examples would include Paul Tucker, *Global Discord* (2022) or Neil Shearing, *The Fractured Age* (2025). There is also a burgeoning Beltway literature of self-congratulation written by technocrats responsible for deepening the fractures.

a lineage that its would-be left heirs can ignore. Can progressive forces simply take over the national-imperial shell of the state and run it more justly? Or does that path lead to the 'social imperialisms' of Bernstein, the Webbs and Bernard Shaw, with proletarians killing proletarians for King and Country? This was the question posed by Evgeny Morozov of Bernie Sanders's latest initiative—a national AI sovereign-wealth fund to build gigawatt-scale data centres in the Philippines and elsewhere, sucking up cheap energy and local water to pay dividends to US worker-shareholders. In Morozov's summary, the fund would be not a custodian of collective intelligence but a collector of geopolitical rent, keeping China's AI down and the world's AI bills up, through a US chokehold on chips and bullying weaker states for resources: 'Income at home from land and power abroad has an old name: empire.'[27]

This—the problem of great-power nationalism—is a third reason to return to its critical theorists. Debray was the most sanguine on this point. Belonging to a dominant nation entailed 'a critical and selective process'—not liquidating the entire national inheritance, which was necessarily ambiguous, but only what is 'domineering and imperialist' within it; and recovering its positive features—Debray listed Valmy, Saint-Just, the Paris Commune, the Resistance—as a way to take it forward.[28] More broadly, grappling with their own great powers' nationalisms had been a central problem for the international revolutionary generation of 1895–1924. In 1908, Lu Xun pondered how China could defend itself against the imperial powers, 'fierce as tigers and wolves', without succumbing to its own beast-like tendencies; eternal self-criticism was the antidote he proposed.[29] More concretely, his teacher Zhang Taiyan had argued for the independence of the non-Han lands that had been conquered by the Qing Dynasty even as Western imperialists were implanting their treaty ports down the Pacific Coast: 'If the Muslim chiefs . . . fiercely desire independence to restore the domains of their Turkic ancestors, then we should yield to their wishes, knowing they look on us as we look on the Manchu.'[30]

---

[27] Evgeny Morozov, 'An AI Sovereign Wealth Fund Isn't Progressive, It's Techno-Imperialism', *FT*, 12 October 2026.

[28] Debray, 'Marxism and the National Question', pp. 39–41.

[29] Cited in Wang Xiaoming, 'On Civilization and Its Barbarisms', NLR 152, March–April 2025, pp. 62–3.

[30] James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenes Became Chinese*, Basingstoke 2007.

'Can a nation be free if it oppresses other nations?', Lenin asked. 'It cannot.'[31] Operating within the Romanov Empire, in which 'the nationalism of the Great Russians . . . is the principal obstacle to democracy and to the proletarian struggle', Lenin famously soldered anti-imperialist strategy to a concrete political proposal: recognizing the right of any oppressed people to national self-determination, meaning the right to secede and establish their own independent state, even if one would not necessarily advocate the exercise of that right in many cases. Tom Nairn's later polemics against Britain's rump-imperial state were in the same vein.[32] Kunkel doesn't address the great-power character of American nationalism as such. His proposal may be intended for smaller states, with stronger lefts; which would be reasonable enough. The US is undoubtedly the hardest case, but it is a crucial one for his argument. Not only is it an economy on a continental scale, rich in resources, with a long history of proto-Listian development; it is also the country where the case for economic nationalism is now among the most advanced, followed by Germany and France. If the lineaments of a left economic nationalism can be thought through anywhere, it should be here.

The question, of course, is whether Debray's Gaullism, or something like it, is possible in the US, which has a much fainter revolutionary tradition and a symbolically impoverished democratic-socialist culture, as well as a far larger footprint abroad.[33] Indeed, in Debray's conception, any economic project would have to be subsumed into a larger symbolic-national framework: the citizen cannot be mobilized merely by appeals to material wellbeing. Might American lefts start to imagine a national community free of the expansionist sentiment that has informed the country from the start? Abandoning Abe Lincoln, would they acknowledge the right to secede? The idea of America as a force for good in the world, whether so ordained by Providence or by overweening Wilsonian liberal imperialism, runs deep. Quit the bases? Leave Okinawa to the Okinawans, Ramstein to the Rhinelanders, Camp Bondsteel to the Kosovars? Kunkel's attractive invitation to an inclusive and democratic eco-socialist future suggests that the lefts have a good deal of work ahead.

---

[31] V. I. Lenin, 'The Right of Nations to Self-Determination', in *Imperialism and the National Question*, London and New York 2024, p. 75.

[32] Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain; The Enchanted Glass*, London 1977; *Pariah: Misfortunes of the British Kingdom*, London and New York 2002.

[33] Régis Debray, *Charles de Gaulle: Futurist of the Nation*, trans. John Howe, London 1994.