

The need for progressive national narratives

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The recent rise of authoritarian nationalist movements has reinforced the tendency of many on the left, and some on the right, to reject all forms of nationalism, writes Rogers M. Smith in "Toward Progressive Narratives of American Identity," published in *Polity's* May Symposium on the Challenges Facing Democrats.

Nationalism, Smith argues, is seen by some as prone to the repression of minorities and other [vulnerable groups](#) within states, and as hostile to the concerns of all outsiders, as well as to free movement of goods and people. "Liberals and progressives in America and elsewhere have failed to counter with politically resonant narratives of national identity that champion greater and more egalitarian inclusiveness."

Some argue chauvinistic forms of [nationalism](#) must be opposed by developing better forms, not by rejecting nationalism outright. "In light of the recent surge of virulent nationalisms, better rather than worse national stories are part of what liberal parties like the Democrats need now," Smith says.

The paper offers three criteria for devising such narratives: resonance, respectfulness, and reticulation, which Smith defines as recognizing the reality that public policies in every society treat persons and citizens in ways that are enormously variegated. "When a society's variegated rights and duties form a logically explicable and practically useful (and always evolving) network of statuses, they are suitably 'reticulated.'" While "separate but equal" policies are to be avoided, it is necessary to accept that in politics we must seek to create not absolute uniformity, but

appropriately egalitarian reticulated civic statuses.

"We must have stories of peoplehood that not only permit but valorize efforts to protect and expand opportunities for all by recognizing and accommodating, not ignoring or suppressing, many human differences," Smith says, to enact policies that resonate desirably with the different values and identities of the multiple groups in all modern societies; that display respect for as many of those values and identities as possible; that militate against harsh treatment of ethnocultural minorities and outsiders, and against reinforcement of the advantages of dominant groups.

The paper also contends that America's democratic traditions, its constitutional traditions aimed at achieving a more perfect union without effacing legitimate diversity, and its quest to realize the goals of the Declaration of Independence over time all provide rich resources for stories of American peoplehood that can meet these criteria and, perhaps, defeat narrower nationalist visions. Smith says it is hard to see Trump's America First agenda as genuinely respectful toward all Americans, much less all persons. "Yet the political potency of Trump's nationalism cannot be gainsaid." Smith suggests it is wise to explore whether there are better stories of American peoplehood that might check these features of Trump's vision, while also responding to legitimate concerns to which he has spoken powerfully. "But rather than insisting one narrative is 'the' American story, the quest must be to identify a variety of inclusive, egalitarian stories of American peoplehood that can serve to build progressive coalitions among those with overlapping yet distinguishable values and identities."

Smith posits perhaps the best story of American peoplehood today is one first advanced by anti-slavery constitutionalists, including Lysander Spooner and Frederick Douglass, and then made prominent in modified form by Abraham Lincoln and the new Republican Party of the 1850s.

"All these figures presented the story of America as a collective historical endeavor to fulfill the principles of the Declaration of Independence—to secure basic rights, including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, for, in Lincoln's words, 'all people, of all colors, everywhere.'"

Telling the [story](#) of American peoplehood as a quest to realize more fully the goals and values defined in the Declaration of Independence is the best way to elaborate a resonant, respectful—and suitably reticulated conception of American nationality today, Smith says. It defines a sense of purpose that is more demanding, but also more elevating than "America First." "Toxic forms of nationalism represent the world's worst political poisons. They must be countered by nationalist antitoxins that can serve as balms for the festering wounds visible in all too many bodies politic today."

More information: Rogers M. Smith, *Toward Progressive Narratives of American Identity*, *Polity* (2020). [DOI: 10.1086/708743](https://doi.org/10.1086/708743)

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