

Adorno's "Primal Pseudos" and the Impossibility of Nationalism

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Abstract

Even though the term “primal pseudos” appears only once in Theodor W. Adorno’s lecture *History and Freedom*, it is the key for the understanding of Adorno’s concept of nation and nationalism. In the aforementioned lecture the term “primal pseudos” describes the contradiction immanent in the concept of the nation. The critical investigation into the immanent contradiction of the concept of the nation discloses the impossibility of what nationalism wants rather than its falseness.

Keywords

Adorno, Critical Theory, Nationalism.

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I. Introduction

In the heat of the period of the Brexit referendum the former Ukip leader Nigel Farage delivered a speech in the European parliament, which became famous for claiming that Belgium is not a nation. Farage ended his speech with the statement that: "the days of this project [the European Union, W.A.] are over, we want to live in nation-states not false artificial creations."¹ It seems obvious that the European Union is not a natural given, that it is in a strict sense an artificial creation even if it is somewhat historically evolved. But the closing statement of Farage's speech implicitly opens up an opposition between the European Union as an artificial creation and nation-states. For Farage the nation-state is the supposed natural reaction and expression of the people in respect of the way they would like to have their political and social reality organized. Farage's implicit declaration of the nation-state as something not false, not artificial, and not created, but somehow historically and naturally developed, also makes the implicit claim that society has to be politically organized in a corresponding way. Namely, he implies that people want to live in "real" nation-states and that Brexit is accordingly the popular manifestation of this desire. In this perspective – and which was the intention of Farage's attack – Brexit should teach the European Union a lesson on how people really want to live.

However, even at its inception, the concept of the nation and the nation-state was not naïvely thought of as a direct fulfilment of a natural foundation. The controversial, but conservative, Benjamin Disraeli had already written about the English nation in a similar way as Farage complains about Belgium: that it is not a nation in the simple and naïve sense of a bond between nature and society. In 1836 Disraeli wrote: "Although all society is artificial, the most artificial society in the world is unquestionably the English nation" (Disraeli 1913, 343).

Even though terms like "nation" or "people" were, even at the outset, always controversial, it nevertheless seems that nationalistic discourses have not changed that much over time. Unwittingly, Farage addressed in his speech what Adorno, some fifty years earlier in 1964/5 described in his lecture *History and Freedom* during a discussion on Hegel's notion of the spirit

of the people, as the primal pseudos (*Ur-pseudos*). By labelling the nation as primal pseudos Adorno tried to grasp the immanent contradiction within the concept of the nation. It is an attempt at a critical investigation of the concept of the nation intended to demonstrate that it is something artificial, that it even breaks down natural bonds, but – and this makes it a pseudos – which presents itself (as is inscribed in the etymology of the word ‘nation’ itself) as something natural.

Obviously, Adorno’s description of the ideational problem of the nation as primal pseudos occurred in a completely different context. The historical situation of post-war Germany and the cold war was in many ways different from our own time. Just as the world has changed dramatically over the last decades in many different regards, so has nationalism seemed to have adopted different causes and aspects. Besides the divergent historical context, connecting a Hegelian discussion to Farage’s anti-EU speech creates an even odder impression.

However, it is important to grasp why Adorno’s notion of the primal pseudos can still give us an understanding for a critical investigation of the newly rising nationalism on the political far-right. If we want to take Adorno’s notion of the nation and his remarks on the primal pseudos seriously, we have to understand how the concept of the nation is articulated precisely in the kinds of speeches Farage gives us today. In this regard we should not ask how Adorno can be used as an analytical tool today in the hope of some handy solutions. If there is something we can learn from Adorno and his understanding of nationalism it has to prove itself as *still* relevant. As we will see in the reconstruction of Adorno’s argument, even in a dramatically changed world, there is still, in an Adornoian sense, the same fundamental structure of social relations at work today as was the case fifty years ago, and it is exactly on this level that the primal pseudos operates. It does not present a new form of nationalism but remains in its essence fundamentally and problematically the same.²

This article tries to clarify Adorno’s remarks on the concept of the nation and nationalism and aims to show that it is *still* relevant for a critical approach to understanding the political far right and rising nationalism across Europe and other regions of the world. With Adorno we see that nationalism is in its very structure exactly what Farage claims the European Union to be, a false, artificial creation, but it appears not to be so, which is why Farage claims that the nation is not false, not artificial, and not an invention.

There is no systematic theory of nationalism or of the concept of nation in Adorno's work. We only find brief and scattered remarks in his published works and in his lectures. Although not a fully-fledged argument, these remarks still provide interesting insights which still hold in today's political climate.

II. The Concept of the Nation and the Natural Form of Society

One of the few short remarks on the concept of nation and nationalism is found in Adorno's aforementioned lecture *History and Freedom*. In this lecture, after a discussion of Hegel's spirit of the people (*Volksgeist*), Adorno questions the position of the nation-concept in the construction of history (Adorno 2006, 105). In the twelfth lecture Adorno begins with a summary of what he elaborated in the previous lecture in the form of a short characterization of what he understands a nation is:

We may say that the nation is the specifically bourgeois form of social organization; it is a form of organization because it has emerged historically in certain definite units, whether geographical or linguistic in nature, or whether otherwise defined (Adorno 2006, 105).

First, Adorno defines the concept of the nation and locates it as a concrete historical entity, emerging in a historical process and thus having its specific position in history. 'Nation' in this sense is something which contextually evolved in the course of history and which can thus also disappear in its course. Obviously, Adorno is against any form of what is known as primordialism, the idea that (national-) identities are somehow given and cannot be made comprehensible by any analysis of social relations.³ But certainly, Adorno does not simply formulate an attack against the notion and assumptions of primordialism either. Adorno is not interested in simply debunking primordialism but tries to argue how nationalism is in its very structure based on the delusive concept of the nation.⁴

Secondly, Adorno defines and describes the nation as a form of social organization within the process of history, and which tallies with a certain historical type of such organization, namely the bourgeois society. This does not seem to be a very unusual characterization of the concept of nation. It does, however, have relevant implications, which Adorno elaborates in depth in the course of his lecture.

Adorno emphasizes that nation is not identical to, nor the manifestation of, a shared history, culture, language, religion or any other identity-endowing institution. If nations and nation-states have evolved historically, they do not have their foundation in such institutions. It does not have its roots in some kind of natural foundation but is essentially an eked-out form of social organisation. It seems obvious that nations can be, and mostly are, oriented along a shared history, culture, language, or other form of identity, but Adorno tries to emphasize that this should not be misconceived as its foundation. He argues the opposite; nations do not build themselves upon these primordial lines, but transgress and negate them in the first place. This should not be understood as a contradiction. The essence of the concept of the nation lies in the misunderstanding of the nation as something natural and not in the realization of something pre-given.⁵ Furthermore, this kind of misunderstanding is a delusion for Adorno: “The delusion is that a form of association that is essentially dynamic, economic and historical misunderstands itself as a natural formation, or misconstrues itself ideologically as natural” (Adorno 2006, 106).

Given that nations orientate themselves in the historical process of their development along a shared history, language, religion or culture, it is for Adorno even more eked-out against what he calls the natural form of society (*Naturalverband*). The nation is for Adorno the specifically bourgeois form of social organization, and what he calls the natural form of society fits into this schematic classification along with feudal society. The misunderstanding, the delusion, or the ideological moment of which Adorno speaks in regard to the concept of the nation, lies for him in this transition from feudal to bourgeois society.

In this sense nations emerged in the historical process not in order to unite a somehow primordial and natural bond between its members into a form of social organization, but on the contrary: it is the very transgression against the natural form of society. But the very crux of this transition lies on a deeper level, that of the logic of the mediation of social relations within these forms of social organization. Referring to Max Weber and Werner Sombart, Adorno calls these two different logics of mediation tradition and rationality.⁶

In order to grasp in which sense Adorno speaks of a natural form of society and its transgression into nations, it is necessary to understand his concept of tradition and rationality in relation to two different forms of social organizations. The most crucial passages on the relation

between tradition and rationality are found in Adorno's writings on aesthetics, but they go beyond the realm of art.⁷ As Adorno clarifies in the *Aesthetic Theory*, he thinks of the concept of tradition as a "historicophilosophical category" (Adorno 1997, 20). As such, the concept of tradition is for Adorno itself dependent on the social and economic reality: "[T]radition itself, as a medium of historical movement, depends essentially on economic and social structures and is qualitatively transformed along with them" (Adorno 1997, 20).

The concept of the nation has its foundation in the relation of tradition and rationality, understood as the fundamental modes of the mediation of social relations. The so-called primal pseudos must be understood from this relation. To be able to grasp the primal pseudos it is hence necessary to understand what their specific logic of mediation is and how they are related to each other.

III. Tradition and Rationality

Adorno's criterion for differentiating between forms of social organisations is the mode of mediation of social relations. If for Adorno the specifically bourgeois form of social organization is opposed to the feudal form of social organization, so too are their corresponding underlying logics of mediation of social relations. What Adorno calls tradition corresponds with the feudal society, and what he thinks of as rationality corresponds with the bourgeois society. Each of these modes characterizes different ways of how relations are organized and structured in any respectively given society. What Adorno thinks of tradition is elaborated in a short text titled *On Tradition*. In this text Adorno starts the investigation of the concept of tradition with its etymology. Adorno writes:

Tradition comes from *tradere*: to hand down. It recalls the continuity of generations, what is handed down by one member to another, even the heritage of handicraft. The image of handing down expresses physical proximity, immediacy – one hand should receive from another (Adorno, 1992, 75).

He goes on by understanding this handed-down-from-one-to-another as an unmediated form of transmission, as a "more or less natural relation" (Adorno 1992, 75). If we understand tradition as an historico-philosophical category, as Adorno determines it in the *Aesthetic Theory*, this "more or less natural relation" can be understood as the mediation of social relations in

general and has its specific form of social organization in the form of feudal society; that is, organized along unmediated lines of heritage and the principle of the family.

Rationality as a mode of mediation of social relations not only works in different ways but also contradicts it: “Tradition in the strict sense is incompatible with bourgeois society” (Adorno 1992, 75). It doesn’t have the family, the somehow unmediated natural relation, as principle, but the equality of exchange. This not only means the emergence of new forms of social relations, but that a new form of mediation starts to dominate the totality of social relations and changes the way they legitimate themselves.

This sheds some light on the references Adorno makes to Max Weber and Werner Sombart on various occasions. This differentiation between tradition and rationality is conceptualized along the lines of Max Weber’s typology of authority. Weber conceptualizes three different ideal types of authority – namely, traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal authority. What differentiates these types from one another is their varying legitimations of domination. Adorno thus seems to be interested in Weber’s differentiation between the feudal and the bourgeois society and the underlying forms of legitimizing their social relations. Weber characterizes the traditional “pure types of legitimate domination” as “resting on a belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them” and the rational as “resting on a belief in the legality of enacted rules [...]” (Weber 1978, 215).

It is important to understand that Adorno does not claim that there is no form of tradition at all in bourgeois society, or that there are no rational elements in feudal society. What has changed is how the given society is structured, how it legitimates the forms of social relations. In this sense the line between the natural form of society and the nation can be understood in its underlying logic as the transition between tradition and rationality – as the two different modes of mediation of social relations as such, and furthermore, as contradicting each other.

They are however not only different, or successive, historical moments; they are in a dialectical relation to each other. The logic of tradition, the handed-down, the principle of the family as a somehow unmediated and natural mediation of social relations, is for Adorno negated by the logic of rationality. This does not mean that the family is abolished, but that it “subordinate[s] the family to it” [the principle of equal exchange, W.A.] (Adorno 1992, 75).

It's important to understand this transition not as a succession from one to another, but as a negation. The principle of equal exchange negates the principle of the family because it transforms its unmediated relations into mediated and abstract forms of relations. What was in the past shaped by the transmissive sequence of generations is replaced by bureaucratic and rational forms of social organization. It is determined on the basis of performance and not on succession (Adorno, 1992, 75). This problem is also inscribed into the concept of the nation itself. Precisely in this transition lies the self-misunderstanding of the nation as something natural and which Adorno calls in *History and Freedom* the primal pseudos.

IV. The Primal-Pseudos

In *History and Freedom* Adorno uses the term primal pseudos only once, in the twelfth lecture. On other occasions, and more frequently, he uses the term “pseudos” usually as a prefix in the everyday use of the term,⁸ indicating that something only pretends to be something, to be something which it is in fact not. Adorno tries to specify the pseudo as a tricking into a pretension. There seems to be nothing particularly special in the use of the term pseudos in these cases, but by calling this trick, this mistake, or actual untruth itself, a primal (*Ur-*) he seems to emphasize that this pseudos lies in the very origin of a concept, that it is somehow the foundation of the concept itself. This is very different from the “pseudo” as a prefix. When something is called pseudo-scientific, there is nothing wrong with things being scientific. This is completely different with the idea of the primal pseudos. When Adorno speaks of the primal pseudos in the concept of the nation, he means that there is no nation which is not in this sense a pseudos. And it is in this regard primal because it is grounded on selling itself as something else. There is no nation which is not a pseudo-nation.

In order to understand why the pseudos of the concept of the nation has to be understood as primal, we have to understand what the pseudos refers to, where the pseudos is located in the conceptual and historical structure of the nation. As the nation is a specific form of social organization, the primal pseudos lies in the transition to the nation from its preceding form of social organization. It describes the formal structure of the transition from feudal society to a bourgeois society on the level of the logic of the mediation of social relations, from tradition to rationality. In this very transition lies always a violent moment, and the primal pseudos can be understood as a reaction specifically against this violent moment. It compensates for the

loss caused by the transition itself by claiming to be what is violently destroyed through that transition. It can almost be described as the reaction to a traumatic and painful effort. To describe this somehow traumatic break Adorno uses the example of what happens to children on their first day at school:

The nation developed everywhere through a struggle against feudalism. Feudalism was a world-historical force, but because of its basis in the family it was an essentially natural form of organization. People cling to these natural bonds and to part from them always costs us an effort – just think back to what the first day at school costs a child who has been brought up sheltered by his family, and you will be able to imagine what a nation expects from such natural associations. Thus, by retreating from these natural bonds, the nation also suppresses them, even though it takes over some of their features, and this forces it to act as if it were itself a natural form of society (Adorno 2006, 106).

Here lies the crucial characteristic of the concept of nation as Adorno puts it in his lecture *History and Freedom*. It transforms the natural form of society into a new form of social organization and by doing so it negates its fundamental structure which we understood by the term tradition. But within this form of negation also lies the replacement of the unmediated and natural relations organized through tradition by a new and pseudo-form of natural relations between its members, a bond somehow claimed between nature and society.

The nation is in its formal sense a certain form of social organization but has at the same time its historical position. It emerges within a historical process and thereby against the natural form of society. In doing so the nation transcends the borders of the natural form of society, it negates and oppresses its very logic of legitimation. It negates tradition, in the Weberian sense, by rationality. This aspect makes clear for Adorno that the nation did not grow out of what it thinks of as its foundation, namely a somehow natural bond between society and nature, through any form of identity.⁹ On the contrary, the problem of the nation is precisely that it has to somehow unite the people even if there is no such thing as the natural bond between nature and society, as the nation claims. The nation works as a compensation for what it initially suppresses, which is why its pseudos is primal. The nation is always a pseudos because its notion lies in this very misunderstanding. But this misunderstanding has a certain necessity in the transition from tradition to rationality. In this sense establishing nation-states was also

the condition for bringing rationality into a form of social organization against the feudal society:

I need only to remind you that it was only with the creation of modern nation-states that something like a universal legal system was established – for example that of safe conduct and the like; and, above all, that it was only by bringing large territories together and combining them into a single political unit that it became possible to organize large bodies of people in a rational manner and in harmony with the principle of exchange. For previously, under the feudal system, groups of people were only loosely connected with one another and in those circumstances could not be welded together into the totality of a bourgeois society (Adorno 2006, 107).

As the focus was mainly on the problematic aspect of the nation, there is no doubt that there was a progressive moment in the development of nation-states, which was only possible in transgressing the feudal structure. There is no doubt for Adorno that only with the transgression of small feudal entities was it possible to establish a universal legal system or fuel the development of communication and the forces of production (Adorno 2006, 107).

However, this structural transition, where the emergence of nations transcends the natural form of society but at the same time claims and acts as if it were a natural form of society, is what Adorno calls the primal pseudos. The elaboration of the primal pseudos is the immanent critique of the nation itself. It is immanent because the concept of the nation in itself makes the claim of being somehow natural, and it is a form of critique because it encloses the contradiction within that concept. In this sense the nation *is* a primal pseudos not only in a historical sense, because it developed in the course of history in this specific transgression against the feudal society, but because it is inscribed in the very concept of ‘nation’. That is why this misunderstanding of the primal-pseudos is not a contingent development, and this is why it is a *primal* pseudos and not only a pseudos. Therefore Adorno specifies the nation in regard to the primal pseudos in the following way: “And this is the primal pseudos, the primal delusion implicit in the concept of the nation [...]” (Adorno 2006, 106).

The nation as primal pseudos claims to be that which it can never be because it is exactly its disintegration, its transcendence. What the nation claims to be is exactly what the nation makes

obsolete in the first place. The primal pseudos lies in the very misunderstanding of a dynamic-historical and economical bond of society as a natural form of society.

V. Nationalism as Delusion

Given that Adorno understands the primal pseudos as implicit in the concept of the nation, nationalism has in some way to be related to it, and has to be affected by the primal pseudos. As we will see, Adorno thinks of nationalism as the belief in the idea of the concept of ‘nation’, and so nationalism conserves in its belief the primal pseudos as implicit in that concept.

But there is a further twist Adorno gives us with his concept of nationalism which is more directly related to the notion of the primal pseudos than we have elaborated hitherto. The question about nationalism can be understood along two axes: in an historical perspective the question of nationalism arises first as being outdated and yet at the same time still up to date. And secondly the question arises of whether nationalism grows from the bottom up to higher political institutions, or if it is used as an instrument, as propaganda or ideology in a kind of top-down implementation.

The progressive phase during the initial rise of nation-states – and this was mainly the reason for its success – lost its legitimacy in the course of history for the very same reason that nation-states made feudal society obsolete: by overcoming its own boundaries mainly by the process of globalization. In this sense nations as a form of social organization are, for Adorno, and today probably even more so, in a political, economic, and cultural sense “merely rudimentary vestiges” (Adorno, 2006, 110). This loss of political, economic, and cultural foundations of the nation as the form of social organization does not mean that we are done with nationalism however, as can be attested by the rise of new far-right movements today. We are confronted with the problem that the insight into the structures and socio-economic realities of the nation deny it a real force in the progressive sense. This has been lost, as has, for this reason, its legitimation. But at the same time today’s re-emergent nationalism claims to be a legitimate political option for confronting the ecological, demographic, migratory and other social and political crises we are facing today.

To the question of why nationalism did not lose its role as a possible political option in the course of history, Adorno gives us a two-sided answer. On the one hand he describes

nationalism as a particular instrument for the political purposes of integrating peoples into interests which they cannot immediately perceive as their own. It can play the role of propaganda or ideology. On the other hand, Adorno describes nationalism as a kind of reaction to the structure of society, as a response to the reified character of its social reality. It's important to think of both sides as being in some kind of relation. It would be difficult for any state power to plant the seeds of a nationalistic agenda if there were no fertile ground to plant them in. Also, the spontaneous nationalistic reaction people generate has to be organized and absorbed in some way.

However, Adorno addresses this problem in his 1959 speech *The Meaning of Working Through the Past*, written in the historical context of the cold war and post-war Germany.¹⁰ In this speech Adorno asserts that nationalism is today both obsolete and current at the same time. It is obsolete for the already mentioned lack of economic, cultural, or political role nations have, a result of the loss of sovereignty caused by globalization on all the different levels it affects. But nationalism is still an issue for a specific reason. Adorno gives the following answer:

But nationalism is up-to-date in so far as the traditional and psychologically supremely invested idea of nation, which still expresses the community of interests within the international economy, alone has sufficient force to mobilize hundreds of millions of people for goals they cannot immediately identify as their own (Adorno 2005[2], 97-98).

He outlines nationalism in this kind of top-down description as a political instrument for goals people would otherwise not perceive as their own. We can say nationalism works here as a form of propaganda or ideology in order to enforce these goals. One year later, in 1960, Adorno gives a slightly different answer, which can be understood as a bottom-up explanation of nationalism. In his speech *Opinion Delusion Society* Adorno slightly shifts his focus on nationalism and brings us back to the primal pseudos. The task he has set in *Opinion Delusion Society* aims at the problem of nationalism from the perspective of the structure of society itself. This speech no longer presents nationalism as a political instrument for the furthering of the interests of the nation, but as a reaction to the suppression of nature caused by the nation itself in the first place. In this speech nationalism is presented as a very strong form of opinion. In Adorno's words: "The characteristic form of absurd opinion today is nationalism" (Adorno

2005[1], 117). To understand why Adorno calls nationalism the characteristic form of absurd opinion we have to understand what he means by absurd opinion.

He speaks in *Opinion Delusion Society* of opinion above all as “consciousness that does not yet have its object” (Adorno 2005[1], 110). In this “not yet having its object” not only lies the potential for becoming knowledge but also for becoming a delusion. If consciousness confronts itself with its object it can verify (or falsify) its opinion, as in Adorno’s example of the number of stories of the faculty building in Frankfurt (Adorno 2005[1], 106). The opinion that the faculty building is seven stories high can become knowledge if it is in fact seven stories high. But, on the other hand, it also has the potential to become a delusion. For Adorno this is the case if the opinion does not confront itself with its object, but goes progressively nowhere: “Its corrective, that is, the means by which opinion can become knowledge, is the relation of thought to its object” (Adorno 2005[1], 109).

This is why Adorno calls “to distinguish healthy national sentiment from pathological nationalism” (Adorno 2005[1], 118) ideological. It is not a question of the intensity of the belief in the concept of nation which marks the difference between a problematic political (or whatever) attitude and a non-problematic attitude; what Adorno helps us to understand is that nationalism, as the belief in the idea of nation, is from the outset already on the way to becoming pathological, precisely because the primal pseudos is immanent in its very notion. The suppressed nature “is mobilized in the interests of a progressive domination of nature, progressive rationality” (Adorno 2006, 107), but because it is trapped in the primal pseudos it has to exaggerate itself permanently:

More than any other pathological prejudice, the belief in the nation is opinion as dire fate: the hypostasis of the group to which one just happens to belong, the place where one just happens to be, into an absolute good and superiority (Adorno 2005[1], 118).

Nationalism can never reach its goal because it is the consequence of the trick of the primal pseudos, which is inscribed into the concept of nation itself, namely the idea of the nation. What nationalism wants is what it always sublates. In this sense nationalism is trapped in a self-referential cycle of self-abolition. For this reason, nationalism is not just an opinion on

the somehow claimed bond between nature and society which fails to become knowledge, but is in its very concept delusive.

If we go back to the underlying transition from tradition to rationality, which Adorno understands on the level of specific social organization as the transition from feudal to bourgeois society, and the inscription of this transition as primal pseudos into the very concept of the nation, we understand why nationalism can never reach its own goals, why nationalism is always too late, no matter how up-to-date it tries to be. There always remains a lack in nationalism which is caused by the primal pseudos of the concept of nation itself. Nationalism is not only a delusion because the claimed bond between nature and society is wrong, but on a much deeper level: it is a delusion because nationalism thinks in the logic of tradition, in terms of the feudal society; but at the same time the nation is the driving force of rationality and the bourgeois society (because it is its specific form of social organization). This is the paradoxical structure of nationalism caused by the primal pseudos as immanent in the concept of the nation.

VI. The Impossibility of Nationalism

This opens up a very different understanding of nationalism. If nationalism in political discourses is usually addressed as a form of extremism, as containing too much patriotic feeling, we see in Adorno's notion of nationalism that it is not a question of intensity, but of the structure of the concept itself. Nationalism has not simply to be reduced to a socially acceptable level, to the mean of the political spectrum; the problematic aspects of nationalism lie in the aforementioned conceptual and historical dimension, and moreover in the exaggerated and excessive tendency nationalism has.

For Adorno nationalism is, rather, a symptom caused by the structures of society. Even if here is not the appropriate place to elaborate Adorno's social theory, the problem of nationalism does not have to be comprehended as a misconception of the relation between nature and society, but from the unresolved contradiction caused by the concept of nation itself. When nationalism is understood as a delusion, it is inscribed in the concept itself. For this reason, any attack on primordialism or racism caused by nationalistic attitudes is too easy a way out of a more complex problem: "It is not sufficient, or rather it is too easy, to talk about the delusions of racism and to denounce them" (Adorno 2006, 106). The lesson we can learn from Adorno is that it is not enough to simply prove nationalism wrong, to show that there is no special

bond between nature and society, but to disclose the contradiction of nature and society in nationalism itself.

As we are confronted with newly rising nationalist movements and far-right parties gaining ground in national elections, no scientific or empirical argument seems to harm their success. But what can be done is to expose the immanent contradiction of nationalism itself. What nationalism wants is not wrong but impossible. What nationalism wants is to solve the problems caused by rationality with the logic of tradition but without the intention to revert to feudalism. The nationalist project is trapped in this impossibility of having modernity and feudalism at the same time; it is trapped in the contradiction of the primal pseudos.

This insight very much changes the way in which nationalism has to be confronted. The “mainstream” analysis portrays the new far right too often as uneducated and marginalized, as racists or Nazis, as being in fear of economic or social demise. Nationalism is too often confronted with gestures of moral superiority. The many scandals produced by leading figures of the new far right often do them no harm in any way and can even become more effective strategies for breaking taboos and provoking outrage to gain public attention. It seems that any reaction of outrage or disgust even helps the far right to justify and strengthen their position by pushing the envelope of political discourse in their favor. We all know the many examples from Orbán, Bolsonaro, or Trump. None of their many lapses seems to have really affected their political careers in a severely negative way. On the contrary, the far right plays it off as an attack against free speech. Even the scandal of the Ibiza affair in Austria seems to have had less of an impact for the FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) than many had expected.

As we can see from Adorno’s critique of the concept of the nation, the issue is not about wrong opinions or immoral attitudes (even if the discourse of the far right is morally more than questionable). It’s not about proving them morally or empirically wrong, or exposing them as stupid, as racists or Nazis, but about going one step further and disclosing the immanent deadlock of the concept of nation itself. The discourse of the far right is mainly focused on perceived threats against their national identity or “way of life” presented by their favorite targets: migration, Islam, the so-called climate hysteria, multiculturalism, LGBTQ+ rights, and so on. The predominant issue on which their political program is based is fear of the abolishment of

their nation. But what they are trying to defend is already impossible in the first place; this is what the primal pseudos of the concept of the nation teaches us.

It seems obvious that the far right's framing of the problems and threats it claims to see are often oversimplified or even empirically wrong. There should be no difficulty in demonstrating that Islam is not at war with the west, as Geert Wilders claims,¹¹ or that Leonardo DiCaprio is financing the burning of the Amazon, as Jair Bolsonaro asserted.¹² We should be able to agree that these kinds of assertions should not gain any public attention or merit serious discussion. But the immanent deadlock of nationalism manifests itself in what the far right presents as the solution to the problems and threats it claims exist.

The nationalistic discourse tries to prevent the national identity claiming any natural bond of membership through culture, language, or ethnicity. Whatever it means to be Hungarian, German, British, French, or any other national identity, it has to be defended in the nationalist's eyes against disintegration through its infiltration by alien cultures, religion, or multicultural liberalism and globalization. Along these lines Marc Jongen, a member of the German far-right party AfD (Alternative for Germany), also known as the AfD party philosopher, gave a talk in October 2017 at the 10th annual conference at the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College in New York.¹³ The talk was followed by a short conversation with Ian Buruma and questions from the audience. In the discussion Jongen tried to defend the notion of the nation as the savior of democracy because, so he argued, the dissolution of the nation also dissolves democracy. To defend one's nation is thus, in his view, to also defend democracy. For Jongen democracy is only possible on the basis of a common "we", which has to be established through shared values, language, and a *Leitkultur* (guiding culture). Consequently, democracy needs a more or less homogenous society. Jongen gave two interesting answers during the discussion after his talk: on one hand, he agreed with Buruma that democratic institutions regulated the social field primarily to solve any conflicts of interests within relatively small communities; on the other hand Jongen also claimed that culture and national identity are deeply and strongly fixed, and for this reason very stable and difficult to change. Obviously, Jongen here runs into a contradiction which makes democracy an impossibility; but the impossibility lies in the injection of nationalism into democracy, and not in its historical circumstances, or in the idea of democracy itself. By linking democracy to a nationalistic "we",

the primal pseudos reproduces itself under the umbrella-term “democracy”. The structure remains the same. If democracy is the transformation of relatively small communities into a bigger unity, but is at the same time based on a national “we”, democracy remains in permanent crisis. That’s why we can understand Jongen’s defense of the nation for the sake of democracy as what Adorno described as the primal pseudos.

The political agenda of the far right is guided by the notion of the nation as being a cultural and naturally homogenous social formation, as the fulfillment of the claimed special bond between nature (or at least as a deep and stable identity) and society. But as we learned from Adorno, this guiding notion is in itself contradictory. No matter how the problems of migration, demographics, economics, education and so on is framed by the far right, their nationalistic solution goes against the strength of the nation. It remains in permanent crisis. It is trapped in a permanent reproduction of newly rising threats. Trapped in the delusion of nationalism any discourse is guided by the fear of breaking the bond between nature and society and by the attempt to reestablish this bond through political means.

This seems to be the reason why it is simply not sufficient and, in some cases, even counter-productive, to simply point a finger at the many scandals, lies, manipulations, and misinformation the far right is responsible for; it is more about understanding that in order to reveal the delusion of nationalism it is necessary to make apparent the contradiction inherent in the claimed threat against the concept of the nation itself. And these threats against nationalism are immanent in that concept. The threat is usually – as Farage does in his speech – labeled as artificial, as unnatural, or ideological (and is specifically a threat against the tradition-guided natural national order). Or in Jongen’s case, it is masked by the term “democracy” in order to defend nationalism. Any critique of the far right should lie in a concrete disclosure of the contradiction of nationalism itself, in its immanent impossibility. It should disclose the artificial core of nations and its immanent claim of being natural by pushing its contradiction to its end.

VII. Conclusion

To follow Adorno’s concept of nationalism means to understand the belief in the idea of nation as problematic in two different ways: firstly in a conceptual sense, and secondly in a historical one. Nationalism is in a conceptual sense problematic because the concept of the nation, as a

primal pseudos, is always too late (even in the very first instance of its emergence and in its time as a progressive force). It always raises the misunderstanding of a bond between nature and society which it transcends from the outset. The very concept of the nation is in itself nothing but this misunderstanding, it is nothing else but the inscription of the transgression of the natural form of society within the idea of the nation itself. This is what the primal pseudos is all about. It is “primal” precisely because it is the foundation for the concept of nation upon which the misunderstanding, its pseudos, relies. And second, it is problematic in a historical sense because the nation no longer has any progressive force, such as it had at the beginning of the rise of nation-states. Nation-states had themselves been transcended on many different levels by inter- and transnational institutions and globalization in general.

In regard to this theoretical framework, the main focus of the confrontation with the wave of new right-wing movements should not lie with the identification of any moral wrongdoing or empirically false claims, but on the inner contradiction of nationalism itself. The focus should be on the disclosure of the primal pseudos and the impossibility of nationalism.

Notes

1] The speech is accessible on many different sites. See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/may/03/nigel-farage-belgium-not-a-nation-world-cup-charles-michel>

2] Adorno emphasizes the continuity of the social condition for fascism on many occasions: See for example: *The Meaning of Working Through the Past* (Adorno 2005[2]), or recently published *Aspekte des neuen Rechtsradikalismus* (Adorno 2019).

3] See Edward Shils' article *Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties* (Shils 1957), or more recently Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973).

4] A fundamental critique on primordialism was already formulated by Eller and Coughlan (Eller & Coughlan 1993).

5] For Etienne Balibar the very task of any nation in order to survive is to produce its foundation, not the other way around: “No modern nation possesses a given ‘ethnic’ basis, even when it arises out of a national independence struggle. And, moreover, no modern nation, however ‘egalitarian’ it may be, corresponds to the extinction of class conflicts. The fundamental problem is therefore to produce the people. More exactly, it is to make the people produce itself continually as national community.” (Balibar, 1991, 93).

6] Adorno makes only short reference to Max Weber and Werner Sombart, when it comes to the transition from tradition to rationality without clarifying it. But it seems that he is thinking of Weber's typology of authority (Weber 1978) and among other things Sombart's text *Why is there no Socialism in the United States?* (Sombart 1976).

7] The most crucial passages on the concept of tradition are found in *On Tradition* (Adorno 1992, 75-82), *Dissonanzen* (Adorno 2003, 127-142) and in the passage titled “The New: Its Philosophy of History” in *Aesthetic*

Theory (Adorno, 1997, 19-23).

8] See for a short discussion on pseudos as a prefix: Theodor Adorno and the Century of Negative Identity (Oberle, 2018, 229).

9] Franz Neumann, in his voluminous study on National Socialism, writes: “In its decisive function, the nation is the ideological ground that justifies a central coercive authority over the feudal, local, and ecclesiastical powers. It serves as a mechanism for unifying the vast network of individual and group interests – this in the period when the middle classes become conscious of their own objectives and succeeded in impressing them upon the whole people.” (Neumann, 2009, S. 100).

10] Adorno held the same speech again in Berlin in 1962. In a short introduction, in which Adorno tries to justify the actuality of his speech, he emphasizes again that it is crucial to understand their depth in order to know how to deal with the threatening situation (Adorno 2003[2]).

11] Geert Wilders wrote a whole book on this topic. See: *Marked for Death: Islam’s War Against the West and Me* (Wilders, 2012).

12] See i.a.: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-50613054>

13] Full-length video of the talk and the discussion is available on Hannah Arendt Center’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUCt_48xzms

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Biography

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