

# Beyond bread and butter

Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism: The Downfall of Liberal Civilization*, (London: Verso, 2024). 288pp., £20.00 hb., 978 1 80429 425 3

Why does the right appear to have been the main beneficiary of recent crises, and why do all tributaries seem to flow into the reservoir of nativist reaction? The more uninspiring impulse in left analyses is to see some sort of neat relationship between the dispossession of the working classes and the appeal of nationalist revanchism. The solution then is a focus on ‘bread and butter issues’. Richard Seymour’s *Disaster Nationalism* shows just how unsatisfactory such a response is.

It *isn’t* the economy, stupid. It isn’t even physical survival. In India, the Philippines, Brazil and the United States, pogroms, death-squad populism, far-right militias and police and paramilitary violence are the driving force of nationalist success. They offer not growth, but the chance to destroy a neighbour. Isn’t this what happens as civilization falls away?

Seymour takes the seductions of disaster nationalism seriously, mapping their libidinal force and their vectors of contagion.

Disaster nationalism is not quite fascism. Or, more to the point, disaster nationalism, is *not yet* fascism. As Seymour explains in the introduction, ‘I think disaster nationalist leaders are pathfinders for a new type of fascism, because in a manner of speaking we are always *pre-fascist* as long as the conditions for fascism have not been abolished. But whatever emerges will not be cosplay of the 1920s and 1930s.’ Disaster nationalism makes no claims to revolutionary anti-capitalism – as interwar fascism did before taking power – but instead pursues a kind of muscular capitalism unshackled from the constraints of liberal international agreements and human rights law. The strongmen at the centre of Seymour’s analysis – Modi, Trump, Duterte and Bolsonaro – were voted in by electoral means, not military coups. And with the exception of Modi, these leaders have no strong civil base; their social and institutional roots are weak.

In any case, Seymour’s comparisons with 1920s and 1930s fascism remain only a sidenote on the way to a highly original reckoning with the contemporary. (Alberto Toscano’s *Late Fascism* [reviewed elsewhere in this

issue] provides a deeper dive into fascist historiography.) Seymour has been circling around the question of fascism in his Patreon blog posts over recent years – many of which find their way, reworked, into the text of this book – describing our moment in terms of inchoate fascism, incipient fascism and not yet fascism. In whichever formulation, the idea that the forces of disaster nationalism are pathfinders to a new kind of fascism is as compelling as it is troubling.

The conditions for the rise of disaster nationalism have been largely negative, based on ‘the stalemate of parliamentary institutions, the declining authority of the old establishment and the breakdown of social life’. It is the latter point which most exercises Seymour: social decay and the attendant psychoanalytic questions that are raised by the collapse of public sentiment and democratic possibility. *Disaster Nationalism* is concerned with micro-fascisms, which means attending not only to far-right political movements but also to seemingly spontaneous acts of individual and communal violence: the lone wolf and the pogrom are central themes in the book. His argument is that Trump, Duterte, Modi and Bolsonaro are symptoms of a wider malaise, one which runs deeper and which requires a theory of the passions. Bread and butter start to look quite plain when you think seriously about what people are willing to kill and to die for, which has always been *the* question for scholars of nationalism.

Seymour’s attention to psychology and his reading of psychoanalysis proves especially generative. He echoes Naomi Klein, in her 2023 book *Doppelganger* ([also reviewed elsewhere in this issue]), when arguing that calling people stupid or disproving right-wing misinformation misses the psychological power and cataclysmic appeal of conspiracy, vigilantism and mob violence. The book is concerned with and by the ‘wild and whirling winds of neighbourly hate’ that mobilise the passions of millions of people. Building on his 2019 book *Twittering Machine*, Seymour demonstrates that our digitally mediated world cannot be analysed or even named without a

series of terms that command psychoanalytic inflection: conspiracy, attention, desire, nostalgia, addiction, apocalypse, sex, death, anxiety. The question for Seymour is, ‘how do such emotions become politicised by salvific nationalism?’, where pervasive anxiety and depression are fixed to ‘a series of phobic objects (Muslims, communists, globalists, Jews and so on).’ The challenge is to theorise how the cruelties and subversive pleasures inherent to late capitalism feed disaster nationalism. Founding political appeals in people’s material interests represents a form of wishful thinking; the perverse desires for repression (of oneself and Others), purificatory violence and for the end of the world do not answer to such instrumentalist strategies.

Put simply, people rarely vote with their interests (indeed, Seymour nicely traces how the notion of self-interest was advanced by liberal philosophers as a means of advocating the value of greed and avarice against the passions of lust and ambition). In fact, people are animated by the things that they love and they love the things they have to make sacrifices for. It is therefore apposite that the first substantive chapter, ‘Class: Not the Economy, Stupid’, establishes a more sophisticated analysis of how disaster nationalism thrives on class violence and *ressentiment*. While resentment itself can be a good thing when mobilised toward the struggle against injustice, that healthy consolidation of class hatred we might call consciousness, *ressentiment* is that kind of resentment which remains enthralled with a sense of its own powerlessness and victimhood. These feelings have proliferated with the decimation of the left – falling trade union membership, widening inequality, increased uncertainty and precarity, social atomisation – so that the injuries of class are made invisible and apolitical. Interestingly, the evidence suggests it is not the most deprived workers who are most vulnerable to the nationalist contagion but those higher up the class hierarchy – those who have something to lose, the downwardly mobile middle, business and professional classes. It is not deprivation, then, but a trajectory of decline that most predisposes people to disaster nationalism. We are not talking here about ‘a class, properly speaking, but a passively resentful conglomeration of individuals who believe they obey the law, respect authority and resent queue-jumpers and outsiders’. Seymour then shows how this twenty-first-century brand of authoritarian populism is

put in service by political leaders and parties who on the whole seek to instigate capital accumulation without the guardrails – from India to Brazil, the Philippines to Argentina.

Seymour’s psychoanalytic flair is most fully realised in the chapter on sex, where he asks what kind of arousal the erotic catastrophe of disaster nationalism produces in its adherents. He writes, ‘pornonationalism promises to eroticise social life, not only by reviving repression but also by liberating sexual violence. It brings disaster and death into the mix. And it promises the impossible: by killing the sexually nefarious and terrorising women and LGBT people into retreat, it claims to be able to restore an era of glamorous male sexual power’. He sketches lines of connection between disaster nationalism and misogyny, but not in a schematic way; this is not about intersections or analogies but ressentiments that are formed out of the same anomic sludge. The desire for order, hierarchy and repression relates as much to gender and sexuality as race and nation. But amidst the incel’s complaint about their unfuckability, Seymour remarks that it is not sexual gratification that is collapsing but desire: ‘Something about late capitalist civilization and its diminished sociality is just not very sexy’.

This analysis of incels and the manosphere is one more example of Seymour’s insights into the online spaces where reaction is nurtured. *Disaster nationalism*, then, is fundamentally a story about digitally mediated nationalism, where cyberwar offers the most concrete case study. While Trump is a kind of one-man troll farm, and Modi ‘reward follows’ his most virulent citizen-trolls, Duterte spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a particularly advanced ‘disinformation architecture’. This architecture was absolutely central to his ascendance, which relied on hundreds of workers disseminating his key messages via troll accounts and fake online profiles:

The trolls did not simply start blasting propaganda. Rather, they worked to establish a rhythm. Those who seeded Facebook groups based in local communities, for example, would start by posting regular material in the local dialect without an obvious political slant. They built up memberships approaching 100,000 each. As the election neared, because Duterte’s issue was crime, they began posting one news story about violent crime per day. And because Duterte’s specific appeal was the drugs war, they would usually leave a comment blaming drug dealers. Then, as the election drew closer, the rate of

posting would increase to two news stories per day. Then three. Then more. They generated a rhythm of seemingly spontaneous, locally rooted, apolitical ‘concern’. A few thousand well-orchestrated accounts with professionally built audiences was sufficient to game the algorithms by forcing hashtags and ‘trending topics’ up the agenda, changing what the social industry platforms showed to users and forcing media coverage.



Of course, digitally mediated cultures of ultra-nationalism do not stay online (if only). The online shitstorm gets armed and takes to the streets; the social media mob materialises in ‘meatspace’; the keyboard warrior becomes the lone wolf. Previous tensions between electoralism and collective violence no longer appear to hold; mob violence is not damaging to political leaders, but rather becomes their chief selling point. In the words of Duterte: *‘Hitler massacred three million Jews ... there’s three million drug addicts ... I’d be happy to slaughter them’*. Duterte’s deathsquad populism has been extremely popular, with 84% supporting his campaign against drugs in 2020, ‘despite the fact that a similar majority (78 per cent) were either “somewhat worried” (33 per cent), or “very worried” (45 per cent) that they or someone they know could be a victim of an extrajudicial killing’. Duterte

publicly boasted about killing drug users himself, and incited members of the public to take revenge: ‘If you lose your job, I’ll give you one. Kill all the drug addicts’. It is this brazen call to vigilantism and summary killings that seems to characterise disaster nationalism, wherein the only response to social breakdown, in this case manifest in drug addiction and petty crime, is via recourse to extreme and unaccountable violence.

Seymour argues that the canary in the coalmine, as far as this trend in recent history goes, is the ‘Gujarat model’. In 2002, the carnival of violence against Muslims, in which thousands were killed, raped, tortured and burned alive in an orgiastic pogrom, catapulted Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, to his now well-established status as father of the (Hindu) nation. ‘It is in this calculated use of mobs, vigilantes and lynchings, from Delhi to the West Bank, that disaster nationalism accumulates much of its strategic force, as well as its “anti-systemic” credentials ... the trend is towards a fusion between legal violence and far-right extra-legal violence’. In India, majoritarian mob violence would go on to find legislative voice in India’s Citizenship Amendment Act, which critics worry has made possible the mass disenfranchisement of a significant number of India’s over 200 million Muslims. The chapter on ‘the armed shitstorm’, framed by the ‘Gujarat model’, then opens out onto an account of disaster nationalism in Israel and the unspeakable horrors of the last twelve months. The argument here is that, ultimately, disaster nationalism spells genocide, because it offers a ‘vision so unrealisably remote that the desire it expresses can never be satiated and can never stop short of disaster’.

To conclude, Seymour asks how climate collapse – ‘a force multiplier testing the very energetic foundations of contemporary civilization’ – intervenes in this dismal story. If disaster nationalism erodes democracy through its hateful longing for ethnic struggle as a means of restoring order, then climate change everywhere places enormous stress on its material foundations. And yet this final chapter is not all doom; it is also where Seymour reminds us that the left has its own passions, however embattled: ‘if workers are drawn into struggle by a combination of need and hope, pulled into the rhythms and contradictions of the historical process with its volatile upturns and downturns, conceive of themselves as part of that history and form the radical need for community

and universality, then they are to that extent inoculated against the paranoid, anti-social and vengeful passions of disaster nationalism'. And it is not only organised workers but also activists in social movements who know that sacrifice. Communal fellow feeling, love and rage make it possible for us to do things with and for one another. 'Disaster nationalists need not be the only ones to benefit from the crisis of liberalism'.

Seymour describes our current cycle – defined as 'a period of some decades in which a set of social changes or conflicts germinates, develops and matures' – as one of 'nationalist revanchism'. Nationalism is therefore *the* question for our times, connecting the book to a larger archive of critical work on nationalism. For example, sociologist Sivamohan Valluvan reminds us that nationalism always involves self-definition through the exclusion of ethnoracial outsiders and minorities; the buzzword most invoked to name our present cycle, populism, therein becomes a stunted misnomer, distracting from the larger and more enduring problem of nationalism, which is inherently majoritarian and exclusionary. In the words of Arjun Appadurai: 'the road from national genius to a totalized cosmology of the sacred nation, and further to ethnic purity and cleansing, is relatively direct'. With this wider tendency in mind, we might ask some clarificatory questions. Most crudely, when does nationalism become disaster nationalism?

This relates to Seymour's selection of cases, which is not supposed to be exhaustive but invites the question as to why some states are included and not others. Russia's omission seems worthy of comment, as does Turkey's. Not unrelatedly, I felt the chapter on Israel-Palestine fit somewhat awkwardly, with long sections on the *sui generis* history of Israeli state formation and settler colonial violence that seemed detached from the flow of the argument, even if Seymour's desire to situate the genocidal war in Gaza within the frame of his argument is understandable. The point that disaster nationalism ultimately leads to genocide is well made, but urgent and dire circumstances may have rushed the analysis.

In a very different vein, how do we square nationalist revanchism with other characteristic features of our time – digitally mediated nihilism, post and anti-politics, and social dissolution – especially those that don't feed nationalist feeling but result in desultory apathy? After all, most people are unlikely to partake in an armed shit-

storm, more likely to collapse into a screened fugue, only passively dreaming about the nation's restoration and its promise of order. The point is that Seymour's impressionistic style can necessarily be critiqued for a lack of definitional, typological work. Such a critique can be stale – bemoaning what authors don't include is much less interesting than working with what they do – but here it might raise useful questions about the global conjuncture.

In any case, Seymour is highly original in his attention to new geographies of the radical right, which is both a testament to his mode of restless critique and an indictment of much popular critical thought. Identifying synergies between India, the Philippines, the US and Europe is suggestive, although we need more work on how these proto-fascist formations materially relate to one another and how they travel. Still, there is a lot of emphasis on the US context in *Disaster Nationalism*, especially regarding the disturbing particularities of North American conspiracism (e.g. QAnon), which feels idiosyncratic, even if of undeniable global relevance (especially in light of Trump's re-election). Understandably, this emphasis in the book likely reflects the relative ease with which Seymour can access a larger and richer archive on US politics – assuming he is reading mostly in English – but it is a reminder of the immense challenges of theorising from the South and East (the examples I have cited here gently counter that preponderance of US examples, if for no other reason than because I am less interested in that particular horror show). With that in mind, we might turn to theorists writing from the African continent who have provided us with a useful set of provocations. The Comaroffs have made a compelling case that the twenty first century requires 'theory from the South':

contemporary world historical processes are visibly altering received geographies of core-and-periphery, relocating southward not only some of the most innovative and energetic modes of producing value, but the driving impulse of contemporary capitalism as both a material and cultural formation.

Or note here how closely Achille Mbembe, writing in 2016, resembles Seymour:

Almost everywhere the law of blood, the law of the talion, and the duty to one's race – the two supplements of atavistic nationalism – are resurfacing. The hitherto more or

less hidden violence of democracies is rising to the surface, producing a lethal circle that grips the imagination and is increasingly difficult to escape. Nearly everywhere the political order is reconstituting itself as a form of organization for death.

Such resemblances suggest that a fitting supplement to the terrain already sketched by Seymour is to fold into the analytic remit, with even more emphatic resolve, the events, circumstances and attendant theorisations unfolding in Asia, certainly, but also Africa.

Seymour remains extremely convincing on his main point: that we need to think about the reactionary passions and desires being animated by our current order. That said, I wonder about the link between psychology and culture. After all, it is through cultural analysis that the left has built a tradition of critiquing crude materialism while attending to the symbolic and to processes of subjectification. Perhaps Seymour thinks cultural studies approaches are less suited to a digitally mediated world, but it cannot be that he hasn't thought about it, and it would be interesting to hear him reflect on the study of culture today.

We might also consider the less spectacular ways in which popular culture mobilises various forms of micro-fascism. Anna Kornbluh's recent book, *Immediacy, or The Style of Too Late Capitalism* offers some ways in here, in its attempt to read our contemporary malaise through culture: fitness and wellness culture; the aesthetics of Netflix; the gamified paralysis of dating apps; the way music is produced for atomised listeners and watchers on Spotify and YouTube; and the viscerally affecting but always solipsist first-person realism popular in today's literature. But we also need to track the rhythms of and in people's lives; the everyday which is not amenable to the analysis of online content and large-scale surveys. What we discover from such an ethnographic sensibility will likely be both better and worse. Better because most people do not join the mob; worse because the nation still retains a hold over their political and cultural imagin-

ations. What is it about the broader terrain which channels so many unfulfilled desires into nationalist longings for order, and makes hopes for substantive democracy increasingly beleaguered, even if this nationalism falls short of civilisational downfall and apocalyptic longing?

Perhaps this is merely another way of staging my earlier query: what is the relation between nationalism in general and disaster nationalism? Seymour might reply that disaster nationalism is not a type that he wants to distinguish from non-disaster nationalism, but rather a tendency, one defined by a particularly unstable and intense set of myths, passions, violent longings and practices. This is the best way to read the book, as a theoretically searching text, an attempt to capture something emergent, the character and texture of incipient fascism rather than a new theory of nationalism. All that being said, I retain some reservations about the method which views lone wolves and the armed shitstorm as portents of what is to come – or maybe I'm just in denial. Either way, this approach can be complemented by attention to the ordinary and the mundane – both to observe how microfascisms permeate the everyday, and where they don't.

This means journeying to the ordinary places where the rhythms of living with one another mitigate isolation and anomie, places where the false allure of race and nation lose their hold. There is certainly a point to be made about building institutional power – party, union, state – which can be phrased in familiar oppositional language, but Seymour's attention to desire, passion and subjectification also suggests the cultural as a terrain of struggle. Politically, the fight is always to convince people that nationalism is not in their interests, even when they are being included. But to combat 'wild and whirling winds of neighbourly hate' we also need *cultural* resources of hope, and it might be through attention to lived, popular and alternative culture that we can best identify counter currents, polyrhythms and sites of sociality and humanness in the everyday.

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