

# Economic nationalisms in a world on fire

An introduction

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**ABSTRACT:** In the recent context of a global pandemic, wars, and climate-related crises amplified by capitalism's structural violence, a wave of economic nationalist regimes have come into power with anti-globalist stances exemplified by the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union and Trump, Putin, and Bolsonaro's defiance of transnational treaties. What do economic nationalist policies share transnationally, and how are they distinct in terms of their political articulation and the lived experiences of those most affected by them? The ways in which economic nationalist arguments are used, often in combination with populist and white supremacist tactics, to violently restrict cultural and national citizenship, close borders, silence minority voices, oppress workers, and reject oversight of environmental destruction and human rights violations are discussed in this issue by authors working in the United States, India, Brazil, Guatemala, Italy, the Kurdish region, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Ethnographic exploration of the plurality of economic nationalisms makes it possible to compare state-specific political strategies while noting parallels in the ways in which economic nationalist rhetoric emphasizes the protection of those imagined as belonging to the enisled economic nation while ironically relying profoundly on global constellations of labor and resource extraction and circulation.

**KEYWORDS:** ECONOMIC NATIONALISM; GLOBALIZATION; LABOR; CITIZENSHIP; IMMIGRATION.

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*Economic nationalisms in a world on fire. An introduction*

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Globally, the COVID-19 and rapid climate change (IPCC 2021) crises<sup>1</sup> have demanded collaboration and have had no regard for human-imposed national borders. Across the world, however, especially among the nations that have promoted a hierarchically controlled system of global economic integration since World War II, there has been an increasing turn away from international integration and toward policies that (rhetorically, at least) emphasize national economic and political interests. The Russian state's recent actions exemplify such a turn. In this thematic issue, we continue a transnational comparative anthropological conversation about economic nationalism begun in 2018 in a congressional meeting of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, now combined with the World Council of Anthropological Associations in the World Anthropological Union (see Kingsolver *et al.* 2022). Drawing on the archival and ethnographic strengths of anthropological analysis, we examine varied articulations, implementations, and experiences of economic nationalism across national contexts. As Helleiner (2021: 230) has pointed out, political economic analyses of the resurgence of economic nationalism(s) have been Western-centric in their theoretical influences, ahistorical, and have not attended clearly to key differences in what gets glossed as a single concept, economic nationalism, but which is actually quite a distinct range of neomercantilist and neoliberal approaches to state policies on labor, migration, and trade. Matthew J. Baltz (2021: 799), for example, parses "militarist, developmental, liberal and populist" emphases in economic nationalisms within and between nations, and calls for "rigorous investigation of economic nationalisms in specific times and places (*ibidem*: 811)".

This thematic issue takes up that challenge in a world apparently facing what James Baldwin (1963) predicted as "the fire next time" – radical racial and other social, economic, and environmental injustice, as entire communities are flooded or burn to the ground; go without food, water, and access to health care; and are displaced from, and/or denied full citizenship in national territories. While economic nationalist rhetoric (especially as articulated by populists like the U.S.' former President Trump and Brazil's President Bolsonaro, but also by many others invoking nation-first policies) may express an interest in the well-being of the "national public," who comprises that national public is increasingly limited, as associated anti-immigrant and internally

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1. Obstfeld (2020) would add to this list cybersecurity. Our emphasis here is not on that particular aspect of statecraft and challenges to national and industrial security, but on the well-being of those who have been displaced and most silenced and marginalized by the economic nationalist policies disregarding global collaboration and human well-being.

disenfranchising policies demonstrate. We pay, in the connected discussions in this issue, particular ethnographic attention to the effects of quite distinct economic nationalisms on the forced expulsions, rejections, or circulations of people – often in the name of protecting those workers imagined as “belonging” to the national community. Global capital, and policies (Peck, Theodore 2015), may circulate much more freely than selectively marked people in this tapestry of increasing economic nationalisms. We situate these specific analyses in vital historical context. The reliance of national economies on global circulations and involuntary displacements of workers over the entire arc of capitalism has been well documented by Cedric Robinson (1983) in his discussion of racial capitalism. Within and between nations, there have been tensions about liberalization of trade and border policies in relation to conceptualization of political and economic nationalist interests along what Berger and Fetzer (2019: 2) have usefully articulated as the “nationalism-economy nexus.” Within a specific nation like the United States, for example, how have Presidents Trump and Biden’s “America First” policies been similar and different from each other? The policies and practices to discourage immigration to the U.S. (particularly from the Global South) seem to be more seamless than might be indicated by political party lines. Ethnographically, we do not see vast disruptions with changes in administration as much as capitalist elites using economic nationalist discourse in different ways to justify increasing social and economic injustices, rendered transparent by the transnational calls in 2020-2021 for accountability for racialized state violence, for global health justice in access to care during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for climate justice in response to numerous human-engendered environmental disasters and displacements.

In this introductory essay, we briefly review the diverse ways in which economic nationalisms are understood and articulated in the scholarly literature and by national political administrations, and discuss the historical context of waves of economic nationalist policies and power relations among nations emphasizing or deemphasizing economic nationalist policies in relation to broader transnational relationships (e.g., Global North and South, core/periphery nations in post-World War II international alliances, capitalist and noncapitalist contexts, developing and waning industrialist economies, etc.). We also provide an example of plural and historically contextualized iterations of economic nationalism within one nation, India, before introducing the three articles collected in this thematic issue for transnational compar-

isons of economic nationalisms: Ayşe Seda Yüksel's discussion of economic nationalism in Turkey in relation to the Syrian War as a way to understand policies that promote and rely on dispossession in historical context; Giuliana Sanò's discussion of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic in highlighting Italy's reliance on "invisible" refugee labor for food security (refiguring those denied cultural and national citizenship suddenly as essential workers), underscoring the hypocrisies of economic nationalism; and – extending that discussion of the hypocrisies of economic nationalisms – Julia Morris' discussion of U.S. anti-immigration policy and closed-border rhetoric, global outsourcing of national "security," and the investment in discouraging immigration through the U.S. policy she calls "frontiering through development" in Central America.

The term economic nationalism has recently been an object of scrutiny and critique by international political economy scholars. Among liberal economists and international relations practitioners, economic nationalism is commonly considered a set of economic policies identified with trade protectionism through tariffs and the subsidy or the incentive of local industries (Pryke 2012). As Takeshi Nakano (2004: 211) explains,

Political economists have conventionally identified economic nationalism with mercantilism, statism, industrialism and trade protectionism. Its policy prescriptions have been associated with tariff protection, subsidies for firms, legal regulation of markets, reorganisation of industries and many other industrial policies.

This "economistic" conception of economic nationalism (Pickel 2003) leaves out of the analysis areas that demand consideration. First, it excludes the historical, social, political and cultural contexts in which these forms of policies or practices are embedded in different countries. Second, as a policy based on a strict and clear economic doctrine, economic nationalism could be easily compared across time and space (e.g., De Bolle, Zettelmeyer 2019), but these would be anachronistic comparisons if they were to refer to contemporary economic nationalism as a version of early sixteenth century mercantilism (Fetzer 2020), since nationalism, a modern ideology (Anderson 1991), did not yet exist. It could also be the basis of a misleading contrast with economic liberalism (considered as another set of policies), as if both doctrines were mutually exclusive or unrelated (Helleiner, Pickel 2005). Lastly, the above-mentioned economistic literature tends to criticize economic nationalism as a set of policies (the USA's "buy American" policies, for example) advanced by and for special economic interests or agendas pretending

to attend to the general interest (Pickel 2003, Kingsolver 2023). This kind of analysis treats economic nationalism as a “set of attitudes rather than a coherent theory” (Nakano 2004: 211). Such a moral and political assessment of this form of economic policy can be set up as a chimeric (or straw) position. In contrast, economic liberalism is considered to have evident empirical support and even the possibility of benefiting the larger public. The ways in which these arguments are intertwined, then, is much more than a simple binary between, for example, trade protectionism and liberalism, and it is those contradictions and complexities we attempt to understand ethnographically within several national contexts.

In the attempt to grasp the historical and spatial diversity of forms of policies, practices or rationalities of government that fall under the umbrella of economic nationalism, some political economy scholars have tried to formulate a more precise definition of the term. Pickel (2003) argues that economic nationalism should be understood as a “generic phenomenon that can accommodate almost any doctrinal content [...] economic nationalism is not so much about the economy as it is about the nation.” This point resonates among scholars who contend that policies presumed to convey the principles of economic liberalism in different contexts might also be implemented for nationalist interests or inspired by ideas regarding the preservation or development of the nation. There is no reason why the promotion of international trade should be dissociated from the advancement of nationalist goals (Helleiner, Pickel 2005: 2). As Eric Helleiner (2021) demonstrates when comparing recent economic nationalist doctrines of the United States and China, even protectionist – neomercantilist – policies can be diverse in the way they enact nationalist ideas.

Andreas Pickel (2003) reminds us that economic nationalism cannot be understood without an appreciation of the meanings of nationalism in different contexts. This implies further investigation into the constitution and transformation of national economies and national states where such policies and ideas are said to exist, as well as nationalist discourses, their performative effects and historical circumstances in which they emerge. Economic nationalism can be studied as the way nationalist ideas and discourses, or national identities, are related to economic policies (Helleiner 2002).<sup>2</sup> Some authors, such as Sam Pryke (2012) suggested that, even though the recent literature

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2. On the importance of a theory of nationalism for the study of economic nationalism see Nakano (2004).

has contributed to unveiling the limitations of the economistic view of economic nationalism (beyond trade protectionism and towards national ideals and identities), new definitions of the term have amplified the field in too many directions. As a proposal, he construes economic nationalism as a “set of practices designed to create, bolster and protect national economies in the context of world markets” (Pryke 2012: 285). However, we understand this definition also delimits the term to very specific sets of economic policies and disregards the fundamental ideational and discursive character of nationalisms worldwide, particularly the way these ideas connect with local histories, political struggles and social inequities.

In recent years, political economist Thomas Fetzer has produced a series of articles (Berger, Fetzer 2019; Fetzer 2019, 2020, 2022) that, while discouraging the use of the term economic nationalism, opens the field to the many relations possible between nationalism and the economic realm. His focus on the “nationalism-economy nexus” (Fetzer 2021) is particularly relevant for the construction of an ethnographic perspective on economic nationalism, as we propose in this special issue. Fetzer explains that we should pay attention to how people conceptualize economic nationalism, instead of thinking of it as related simply to protectionist, anti-globalization state policies (*ibidem*: 2). In his view, this is fundamental to be able to consider at the same time how the economy stands as a field in which nationalist ideologies, discourses, movements and sentiments are expressed, and how it develops according to these ideas and practices. Also, Fetzer makes the point that economic nationalism tends to be regarded consistently through an international relations perspective (*ibidem*: 3).<sup>3</sup> It would be equally important to consider the processes and relations between the economy and nationalism that occur domestically, which were always the focus of interdisciplinary nationalism studies. For example, he mentions that discrimination against “outsiders” is frequently directed against “internal” national or immigrant populations (Fetzer 2021).

Fetzer’s comparative research agenda therefore intends to foreground how local contexts sustain and produce different forms of relations between nationalism and the economy. He considers nationalism in four different ways in a political economy approach (Fetzer 2021): (i) as an ideology – e.g., how national growth and development, economic self-rule and autonomy are embedded in

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3. “Nationalism, in whichever way it is conceptualised, always addresses notions of community whose production (and successive reproduction) involves not only imaginations of a nation’s relationship with the outside world, but, first and foremost, a domestic dynamic of community building” (Fetzer 2021: 6).

nationalist ideologies understood as prescriptive programmes, (ii) as a political discourse – e.g., practical categories that legitimize political actors and agendas, such as national values, historical events and a “nation’s predicament”; (iii) as a political movement – e.g., when the cause of the nation mobilizes groups through separatist movements, economic boycotts, national reforms and fiscal grievances; and (iv) as everyday sentiment – e.g., lived experiences, sentiments and categories of national belonging that inform a variety of quotidian practices, such as national identities and symbols, national pride and national economic cultures (Billig 1995; Knott 2015). Fetzer’s attention to the variety of enactments of nationalist ideas and practices, as well as his broader agenda, from ideologies of elite policy makers to ordinary people’s experiences, to the relation between nationalism and the economy, provides a framework to reflect on what political and economic anthropologists are already doing, as demonstrated in this introduction and in the papers that follow it.

Differently from Fetzer (2020, 2021), who considers the term economic nationalism misleading, we do not intend to abandon the term whatsoever. On the contrary, economic nationalism is already a frequent and accepted denomination in policy arenas and in scholarly and lay discourses for explaining, justifying or criticizing forms of political action and thought.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it exists as a concept that acquires local meanings and expressions throughout the globe. In the United States, for example, former presidential advisor Steve Bannon considered the principle of “economic nationalism” a key pillar of the Trump administration in its trade war with China (Evans 2017). In Brazil, by contrast, the former minister of foreign relations of the Bolsonaro administration, a known anti-globalist campaigner and politically allied with the Trump government, considered economic nationalism an outdated ideology, giving preference to an ultraliberal economic stance at the same time as he defended a radical nationalist discourse of Judeo-Christian civilization (Dieguez 2019). Different meanings, different uses, in different contexts. Having emerged at the end of the World War I (De Bolle, Zettelmeyer 2019; Heilperin 1960), the term economic nationalism has been appropriated variously, reflecting local social environments.

“Economic nationalism” can carry very different connotations even within the very same national context. In India, the term has a long ancestry, per-

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4. De Bolle and Zettelmeyer (2019) demonstrate how the online use of the term “economic nationalism” and the mentions in online news have peaked in recent years, probably as a result of the election of President Donald Trump in the United States of America.

haps first employed by the historian Bipan Chandra in his 1966 book *The rise and growth of economic nationalism in India*, which chronicles the searing critique of the economic impact of British rule in India made by writers such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Romesh Chunder Dutt, Mahadev Govind Ranade and others between 1880 and 1905 (Chandra 1966). These ideas were influential, affecting not only India's decolonization movement but indeed guiding the post-1947 import substitution and planned development policies of independent India. Coming after the damage inflicted by centuries of colonial rule, Chandra (like many other observers) tended to regard the economic nationalism of India's decolonizing generation as benign, even worthwhile. Though Chandra was sternly taken to task by a reviewer for being insufficiently critical of the cosy relationship between India's nationalist leadership and industrial capitalist class (Ramarao 1968), it has been pointed out again recently that both Indian nationalism and Indian capitalism of that era were quite distinctive (Velkar 2021). Velkar maintains that "Swadeshi capitalism – protection of Indian capital for the benefit of Indian nationals – was a cultural, political, and economic response to colonialism" (*ibidem*: 1033-1034). Be that as it may, it was certainly a far cry from contemporary Modi-era capitalism and contemporary Modi-era economic nationalism in India.

Protected markets (and the ensuing benefits to the Indian bourgeoisie, if not to the Indian public) lasted in independent India from 1947 until 1991, when "economic liberalization" policies came into force. These sweeping neo-liberal economic reforms, with their emphasis on foreign direct investment, have been interpreted by some as marking the death of economic nationalism in India. However, Surajit Mazumdar points out that these policies did not amount to an abandonment of the Indian capitalist class. Economic liberalization has in fact accommodated the changed needs of big business in India, which had outgrown the autonomous development strategy of the past era and stood to gain from greater integration with the world economy (Mazumdar 2012). The new economic nationalism of the post-1991 period has seen the state becoming ever more attuned to the interests of the Indian capitalist class, at the expense of the urban and rural working classes and the agricultural sector. As the Hindu right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has risen to power on the national stage, the economic liberalization agenda has continued to gather speed, to the accompaniment of increasingly shrill nationalist rhetoric. Prime Minister Modi's "Make in India" initiative and its glorification for an external elite audience of the fact that labor is cheap in India exempli-



fies this new kind of economic nationalism in strong contrast to the intended domestic audience for Swadeshi economic nationalism (Kingsolver, Pandey 2019). Thus, the Indian case makes it clear that the rubric of economic nationalism can cover very different policy and discursive variants even within a single national context. Transnational comparisons, then, as between the Modi and Trump economic nationalist rhetoric Kingsolver and Pandey (*ibid.*) compare between recent national administrations of India and the US, require close attention to the diverse economic nationalist rhetoric, strategies, and policies within nations and to historical context.

Inspired by recent literature that conceptualizes economic nationalism as more than a specific set of protectionist policies, and considering a broad perspective on nationalism – as discourse, social movement, ideology and everyday sentiments, as suggested by Thomas Fetzer (2021), and within historical context, in our example above – to analyze the political economy domain, we propose an ethnographic approach to economic nationalism, grounded in the anthropological tradition of investigating local settings and contexts. In the following three articles, the authors' ethnographic discussions show that complexity of plural economic nationalisms within specific national contexts and also offer possibilities for transnational comparison.

As with Modi's version of economic nationalism in India, Ayşe Seda Yüksel argues that Turkey's current economic nationalism on the state level is outward-facing. In that context, she makes the point that it is vital to analyze economic nationalism in relation to wars. This resonates with global analyses of economic nationalisms in the transnational policy contexts of the post-World War II economic organizations (most recently, the World Trade Organization) and their enforcement of structural inequities, for example, and of independence movements and postcolonial nation-building resisted and exploited through neocolonial relationships. Yüksel does not leave her ethnographic focus on state-level economic nationalisms in the context of war-related structural inequalities, however, but follows the ways in which "economic nationalist discourses are actively adopted and locally reproduced by local actors." This is the contribution that we argue can be made by anthropologists in interdisciplinary conversations about economic nationalism: seeing states as multivalent in strategy, temporality, and vocality, and in following diverse, specific threads through everyday contexts and interactions. Yüksel parses the distinct economic nationalisms of two main political parties in Turkey (the CHP and, following especially, the AKP), their stances shaped

in relation to the Syrian war and those refugees who have been displaced by it. Through her discussion of how work permits for Syrian refugees, and the deployment of their dispossessed labor, get variously represented by local actors – particularly business elites – in relation to the “national interest,” Yüksel demonstrates the pivotal role of those seen as non-citizens in citizen-focused economic nationalist strategies and discourse.

Giuliana Sàno, like Ayşe Seda Yüksel, centers her analysis of economic nationalism on those whose labor is essential to national economies and strategies but whose invisibility and exclusion are emphasized in economic nationalist projects. Sàno’s ethnographic article focuses on the transnational migrant workers in Italy’s agricultural sector, and on how the COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly rendered that labor force visible within the state context, revealing the essential labor contributions to the national public from which these workers are excluded, often through racialized injustice, even as – paradoxically – they are vital to the “Made in Italy” products distributed globally. She analyzes the “normalization” of spatial and social segregation of agricultural workers (like Yüksel, emphasizing the essential role of the international work permit to national economic projects) and the racial capitalist foundation for both economic nationalism and global economic circulations. Sàno examines the way that the immobilization of labor migration from Eastern Europe to Italy shifted the organization of agricultural labor and the reliance on (if not public recognition of) more marginalized transnational workers (e.g., from northern African nations) as essential to the national economy and, in turn, Italy’s essential role in the global agro-food supply chain even as living and labor conditions for those workers worsen.

Julia Morris’ article continues the focus on labor mobility and immobility in relation to economic nationalisms. She focuses on the U.S.’ role in both widespread dispossession from land in Guatemala and in immobilizing and rejecting Guatemalans’ migration north to the U.S. through Mexico, with that potential mobility being a resource frontier for extracted, marginalized labor in Guatemala necessary to economic nationalist domestic consumption in the U.S. In the context of U.S. imperialist “frontiering” in Guatemala, Morris connects U.S. and transnational NGO neoliberal investment in “local” skill-building and livelihood programs, often aimed at Indigenous young people – ostensibly for the well-being of Guatemalans – with the bordering project of immobilizing labor circulations between Guatemala and the U.S., thus ventriloquizing U.S. national interests as Guatemalan national interests,

and rhetorically “conserving” both indigenous landscapes and livelihoods and economic nationalism for U.S. residents read as citizens in moral economic discourses.

Demonstrating the transnational ethnographic approach to economic nationalisms we advocate, the three articles together emphasize that the state may be the rhetorical emphasis in economic nationalist discourse but is not the most useful unit of analysis in understanding economic nationalisms. Such projects advanced by state actors – like national leaders Modi, Trump, Bolsonaro, and Erdogan – rely on deeply transnational histories and practices of racial capitalism and large-scale dispossession through war, land grabs, and climate injustice which lead to the circulations and immobilizations of low-wage and non-wage workers, vigorously denied national and cultural citizenship (Ong 2006) within the nation-states in which economic nationalist projects are negotiated between state, local, and transnational actors in everyday life. The COVID-19 pandemic, as Sano particularly notes, has only brought this reliance of economic nationalist projects on marginalized transnational labor circulations (or suppression of those circulations, as documented by Morris) into sharper focus.

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