

Rethinking the Boundaries of the Nation: Lessons from the Pandemic Emergency

Anna Triandafyllidou, Toronto Metropolitan University
(formerly Ryerson University)

Triandafyllidou argues elsewhere that we need to pay less attention to the ethnic or civic content of national identity and rather focus more on the ways in which a given understanding of the nation and nationalist ideology interacts with ‘others’, whether real or imagined. She emphasizes that globalisation requires us to pay more attention to that interaction with Others and has proposed the notion of plural vs neo-tribal nationalism.

In this paper, Triandafyllidou takes this reasoning further by reflecting on how the pandemic emergency and its aftermath has pushed the boundaries of our understanding of national identity in both inclusionary and exclusionary directions. Triandafyllidou observes that the pandemic has obliged all nation-states to admit that their borders are permeable even when closed; that we are more interdependent than ever (for collaborating on medical research, exchanging data, distributing vaccines or tests and seeking to fight the pandemic); that citizens sometimes act in uncivil ways (putting their fellow nationals at risk) and non-citizens (migrant workers, including temporary migrants) can become essential to the well-being and safety of the nation. These developments have both pushed towards more inclusion on the basis of merit, civic consciousness and contribution to the public good, highlighting the importance of (effective) residence and active citizenship as criteria for inclusion. At the same time, they have exacerbated geopolitical tensions – igniting vaccine and trade nationalism – as well as anti-Asian (or also anti-Black) racism and anti-immigrant and anti-refugee xenophobia (migrants and racial or ethnic ‘Others’ seen as carriers of the virus). The paper discusses these developments interrogating whether the pandemic is showing the way towards a plural, residence-based, notion of political and civic membership or whether the pandemic has undermined previous advancements of plural, inclusive nationalism.