

Frenchman with a forked tongue

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM November 16, 2018



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke.

"Patriotism is the exact opposite of nationalism," France's President Emmanuel Macron declared on Armistice Day, before adding, in a thinly disguised swipe at US President Donald Trump, "those who say 'my interests first, regardless of others!' rob a country of what gives it greatness: its moral value".

That Macron was at least partly playing to a domestic audience is beyond doubt.

After all, merely a week earlier, he had seemed to praise Philippe Petain, the World War I general who later capitulated to Hitler and willingly collaborated in the Holocaust. With that gaffe adding to a long series of missteps that have sunk Macron's approval ratings to levels that make Trump's look stellar, playing the anti-American card, which has always

resonated in France, must have been irresistible.

Nor is there any doubt that Macron was being hypocritical. Far from giving weight to the concerns of other countries, he has been at least as intransigent and crudely mercantilist as any of his predecessors in advancing France's interests.

Most of all, however, Macron was being illogical. Yes, patriotism is a virtue. But it is not a virtue one displays in the abstract: there must be something to which one is patriotic. And in the modern world, that is the nation.

To be patriotic is, in other words, to love one's nation. That doesn't imply hating the nations of others, which is usually termed chauvinism. On the contrary, the founding fathers of 19th-century nationalism, men such as Jules Michelet in France, Giuseppe Mazzini in Italy, and Adam Mickiewicz in Poland, professed, as the essence of the national mission, not separation and domination but co-operation and service with other nations.

Instead of being opposites, patriotism and nationalism are therefore two sides of the coin — and for all its flaws, it is a coin that remains worth having.

To say that isn't to gloss over the crimes that have been committed in the name of the nation: from battlefields to mass graves, the earth is littered with nationalism's victims. But if the idea of the nation has proven as powerful as it has, it is because it is so inextricably linked to the democratic ideal.

Nothing makes that clearer than the fact that to define a nation is to define a people. And once a people is defined as the substance of the nation, it is a small step to some notion of popular sovereignty — as the imperial dynasties that bore so great a responsibility for the tragedy of

the Great War learned to their cost.

It was, for example, obviously sensible for Kaiser Wilhelm II to cast himself as “No 1 German”. But in doing so, he implicitly conceded that he was one among many like himself, whom he represented and could, at least in principle, betray.

When disaster struck in 1918, the German people took him at his implied word and, after almost eight centuries of rule, sent the royal house of - Hohenzollern packing.

Of course, merely defining a people is hardly sufficient to guarantee democracy, as the use and abuse of nationalism by despots regularly shows. Nor does it ensure political equality: from the persecuted minorities of interwar Europe to the Rohingya, ethnic, racial and religious criteria have been used time and again to narrow the scope of “the people”, depriving vilified groups of even the “right to have rights”, as Hannah Arendt tellingly put it.

But at least in the West, the strongest force unleashed by the twin ideas of the people and the nation has been that of growing inclusiveness. Slaves, workers, immigrants, Jews, blacks, indigenous people, women — all of them have moved, however slowly and imperfectly, into what US constitutional scholar Kenneth Karst calls the modern nation’s “expanding circle of belonging”.

As that expansion has played itself out, inclusiveness has become the default; it is any exclusion that attracts suspicion and requires justification.

That is as it should be. However, when membership in the national community, which was once a privilege, becomes virtually automatic, the question arises of what, if anything, binds the nation together. “The possession in common of a rich legacy of memories, (born) from a long

past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion", French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan famously answered in 1882.

But that "rich legacy" on which Renan thought modern nations could count has faded almost everywhere, as populations have become more diverse and as what was once common ground, such as religion, has become fractured terrain. Those changes have proven powerful solvents, dissolving the obligations of citizenship, weakening the sense of shared purpose and, in the process, undermining confidence in government.

That matters little to footloose elites, whose income, education and connections allow them to pick the country they live in, diminishing their already limited vulnerability to inadequate public services, growing insecurity and eroding community.

Most people, however, don't have the luxury of choosing their own pond and can only suffer when the quality of local life deteriorates.

Little wonder, then, that there has been so widespread a reaction against factors that threaten to push that deterioration further, such as mass migration and badly controlled inflows of refugees from cultures radically at odds with the Western heritage.

And little wonder, too, that politicians such as Trump ceaselessly vaunt their commitment to protecting the interests of the "deplorables" who elected them, even if that clashes with the internationalist interests and preferences of the great and the good.

There is plenty to worry about in that blowback. But it is absurd to believe that the cure lies in Macron's pieties, which are easily dismissed as "globalist" claptrap. The right response to the revolt of the masses is not a counter-revolution of the elites.

Rather, we need to ask what can be done to give the nation, and the

patriotism it is owed, reinvigorated meaning in today's world — that is, a world in which common descent or a common rootedness in ancestral soil no longer provide the foundations for living together within a national entity.

When the guns fell silent 100 years ago, little had been gained for the appalling toll in human life. And Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, which held out the promise of a just and lasting peace, scarcely lived up to the hopes.

But the principle of Wilson's that survived was that of national self-determination which, with the notion that the international community would be based on a "League of Nations", entrenched the nation as the fundamental building block of the global order.

A century later, that construct and the passions it elicits remain as crucial and as problematic as ever.