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Commentary: Ethnic Nationalism Reconsidered

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Over the past several decades, social scientists and historians have continuously been engaged in defining and re-defining such terms as ‘nation’, ‘nationality’, ‘nationalism’, ‘patriotism’, ‘nation-state’, ‘ethnic nationalism’ or ‘ethnonationalism’, ‘ethnic minority’, ‘ethnolinguistic group’, etc.¹ Not only has the use of such terms become complicated in just English lexicon (academics seldom concur on correct or appropriate usage, moreover a distinction may be drawn between academic and popular usage), such terms – or their equivalents in a particular language – may signify quite different things in other languages. Now, it would seem, politicians again have their own nationalistic agendas together with further redefinitions – specifically, how what they perceive to be ‘nationalism’ relates to ‘patriotism’, ‘ethnic nationalism’, and even ‘internationalism’.

In a speech in Paris commemorating the centennial of the armistice ending the First World War, on November 11, 2018 (Remembrance Day), French President Emmanuel Macron decried nationalism as ‘the exact opposite of patriotism’, and warned of ‘old demons’ resurfacing. “Nationalism is a betrayal of patriotism. In saying ‘our interests first, whatever happens to the

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others' [strikingly reminiscent of U.S. President Trump's 'America First' and 'Make America Great Again' slogans], you erase the most precious thing a nation can have, that which makes it live, which causes it to be great and which is most important: its moral values." He subsequently explained that this message was directed primarily at French supporters of the Rassemblement National (the former Front National) led by Marine Le Pen, who after meeting with populist leaders Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary and Interior Minister Matteo Salvini of Italy, opined that "the choice [in the next European elections] will be between the EU of Macron, marching toward federalism and mass immigration, and the Europe of Free Nations, of the identities and protections that we represent". Thus Macron views himself as the 'principle opponent' of perceived nationalist forces seeking to undermine the EU's very foundations. As German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been easing out as de facto leader of the EU (not the least due to mounting political pressure in Germany over what opposition parties view as overly permissive mass immigration), Macron is increasingly considering himself to replace her as the effective EU leader, concurrently making France indispensable again, especially with Brexit and the shift of several countries into a negative position on the EU and open borders.²

Indeed, what is viewed as 'nationalism' has unfortunately been pre-empted in Europe by populist leaders, 'alt-right' and even self-defined neo-fascist political parties. Yet nationalism is a normal, longstanding attachment to (not simply defense of) a country, despite historical inclinations toward extremism and present economic repercussions – in short, equated with patriotism. What has now been (mis)labeled as 'ethnic nationalism' is found in a fearful variety represented by President Trump in the United States and the far right in Europe, persuading the populace to believe that some members of their country are more legitimate than others.³

Just how this may relate to what has conventionally been called 'ethnic nationalism' or 'ethnonationalism' – in the sense of *minority* nationalism or sub-nationalism within a state – has continued to be problematic. Specifically, does minority nationalism necessarily imply disloyalty to the central state? Certainly secessionism would, but not necessarily autonomism. Members of territorial/regional minorities can be concerned with minority interests – and can organize politically to represent and advocate those interests – without being unpatriotic. French centrism – a national policy emphasizing patriotism toward the central state (the nation as a whole) – consequently has had limited empathy for regional or historic minority interests; so, too, it could be argued has German centrism in the past and Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Ukrainian, etc. (the list could go on) in the present.

In striking contrast, a recent Canadian editorial pointedly commented that:

As countries across the world retreat into a resentful nationalism or lurch into the aggressive kind, Canada offers a vision of a more nourishing love of country, one that puts no stock in skin colour or ancestry, accommodates a world's worth of cultural practices and is eager to cooperate with other countries on an equal footing; it is a nationalism that draws its ardour from past accomplishments and a common future, not from some mystical folk ideal or mutually tended grievance – a love of country that is 'real and generous' – It's not patriotism or nationalism we need to worry about ... it's the scoundrels.⁴

This may be fine and well, from a Canadian ideological perspective, however Canada has not come easily to this point – it has experienced a long history of institutional and popular discrimination directed against ethnic and religious minorities. Moreover Canada's national identity (thereby patriotism) is complicated by the fact that this country not only emphasizes – actually almost invented – a national policy of multiculturalism (which perhaps may be applied as a model to European countries currently dealing with increasing pluralism only with reservations) but also contains a virtual state-within-a-state: French-speaking Québec (autonomous in many respects and harbouring a longstanding secessionist movement which has occasionally engaged in militancy and terrorism), as well as a fast-growing Indigenous population speaking more than 60 traditional languages (which is increasingly politicized and was hardly enthusiastic about celebrating Canada's 150th anniversary in 2017).

Secessionism – especially in its more militant manifestations – could be viewed as the most extreme form of separatism, legitimate only when other alternatives fail – yet this conclusion would seem to be circumstantial. Autonomy – which could be far-ranging though a more modest form of separation – would usually seem preferable in that it preserves intact the larger encompassing nation (the central state) while preserving ethnic minority cultures having a territorial/regional basis. In short, it is entirely possible – and perhaps preferable – for minority members to be loyal both to their unique territory or region and to the larger country. Yet central state repression and sublimation of territorial minorities is obviously counter-productive.

In this sense, civic nationalism could be equated with patriotism, ethnic nationalism with regionalism; moreover both the historic claim of ethnic minorities to territoriality and immigrant integration could effectively be accommodated within a national multiculturalism policy, i.e. state recognition, better yet appreciation of pluralism and diversity – even in Europe, just as has already long been done in primarily immigrant-origin countries globally (although admittedly such countries have been reticent about granting any sort of official autonomous status, with the possible exception of Indigenous self-government to a variable and limited extent).

¹ See, for example: Barten, U. 'What's in a Name? Peoples, Minorities, Indigenous Peoples, Tribal Groups and Nations. *JEMIE*. 14(1) (2015). The meaning of terms relating to nationalism and ethnicity has been debated in the *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* for decades; one attempt at clarification was: Riggs, F.W., ed.

Ethnicity: International Conceptual Encyclopedia for the Social Sciences, vol. 1: Glossary: Concepts and Terms Used in Ethnicity Research. Paris: Committee on Conceptual and Terminological Analysis (COCTA), International Social Science Council, UNESCO, 1983.

² Yakabuski, K. 'Macron's anti-nationalism isn't about Trump'. *Globe and Mail* opinion column, November 15, 2018, A13.

³ *Globe and Mail*. 'The two sides, good and bad, of nationalism'. *Globe and Mail* editorial, November 17, 2018, O10.

⁴ *Ibid.*