Article

Culture Wars and Nationalism

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Abstract: Culture war, as an analytical category, is a modern means of cultural struggle between antagonistic positions that seeks monopoly over the legitimate representation of one's own identity. It constructs culturally contestable relations between substantive elements such as life, religion, nation, status or race, which are heavily invested with sacredness, turning the world of values into a fundamental battleground within the civil sphere. The culture war, more than a conflict of ideological interpretations, is a struggle for meaning, and therefore directly affects the question of identity, as particularly affected by the return of emotions. Hence its link with nationalism. From this perspective, and attending to the North American and European, more particularly French, spheres, the article has a bearing on the nature and characters of nationalism as fuel for cultural wars, with the aim of rethinking nationalism and its relationship with patriotism in order to arrive at a renewed idea of patriotism as an antidote to national-populism, constituted today as a privileged place for national worship and cultural warfare.

Keywords: culture wars; nationalism; patriotism; identity; religion; emotions; populism

1. Introduction

Sociological diagnoses coincide in pointing out that we are living in convulsive and disconcerting times, in the midst of uncertainty and fear. The concatenation of crises experienced in recent decades (the 9/11 crisis, the Great Recession, COVID-19, the current geopolitical crisis linked to the war in Ukraine) has highlighted the vulnerability of our societies, spreading a sense of loss of existential security, which has led to questioning the foundations of our societies, of our culture and, ultimately, of our own identity. The rise of social discontent, the growing loss of confidence of citizens in their leaders and institutions, the climate of disaffection towards politics, in short, has generalized the awareness of a democracy in crisis. This atmosphere of crisis, as at other times in contemporary history, has favored a revival of nationalism, in its various manifestations, including its more authoritarian forms, which has come to be called national-populism in Western societies.

The development and apparent triumph of this movement, consecrating the discourse and politics of the here and now, the us first, the installation in a dramatic presentism, shows in its reverse side the disappearance of the idea of the future, which constitutes a novelty with respect to other times of crisis where, together with pessimism, or precisely because of it, utopia flourished.

Every crisis, especially if it is prolonged or if the end is not in sight, implies a reduction of the space of experience and a distancing of the horizon of expectations (Koselleck 1985), which prevents an optimistic vision of culture as an essential factor of encounter and human development, and as a fundamental tool for social transformation. Uncertainty, the painful experience of the crisis and fear of the future generate a state of collective anxiety that opens up to the myth of the golden age, of the prestigious past, of the innocence of other times, and there is also a great receptivity to any promise of beatitude or the advent of paradise on earth. National-populism shares with the millenarian mystification and the totalitarian temptation something as consubstantial to the present society as disappointed desire and anguish. The current pessimism, as in other contemporary times, leads to doubt...
that the technological progress inherent to globalization is accompanied by a true parallel human progress, and brings back to the forefront the question of moral identity. At the same time, however, the fact that the current moment of the globalizing dynamic does not retain its original Western inspiration has encouraged a rethinking of the cultural bases and the debate on the values on which such human progress should be based.

Phenomena such as de-Westernization (the evidence of the limits if not the failure of neo-liberal globalization) or the de-secularization (Berger 1999; Casanova 2007) that this same dynamic has evidenced (the deprivation of religion with the Muslim resurgence since the 1980s) emerge in cultural and political debates under the representation of a new decadence of the West, and the term Westernism has been coined to refer to the ideology of the crisis (Brustier 2013). This image of Western civilization that sees its existence, values and ways of life compromised has unleashed moral fears in the societies around us, which have been exploited by populist movements of different signs, and are manifested in the so-called culture wars (around primordial values such as life, race, nation, personal, sexual or gender identity), struggles where the other is seen as true enemies, and which exacerbate the present social drama. Culture has occupied a central place in the debate to the point of becoming a true academic and social battlefield. Far from manifesting itself as a factor that ensures social order, according to the classic vision of Parsons’ sociology, it is one of the driving forces behind disorder and fragmentation, which in turn threaten, in the new globalizing context, the very existence of the national community where democracies are based. Culture still matters, but not so much in the sense it had for Parsons, that is, as a homogeneous symbolic universe that unified a collective, and considered “social deviants” those who did not share it, but as a field of forces in dynamic tension where different narratives clash with each other in an endless struggle for the monopoly of the legitimate representation of reality (Zerubavel 2018).

The present crisis of democracy, as derived from a larger crisis, makes one feel the need for a great social transformation, which somehow implies, in the framework of today’s complex societies, a project of political and national reconstruction capable of rescuing the ideas of belonging, nation and common good (Etzioni 2019), and of redirecting towards a shared action the dynamics of extreme polarization and radical populism that today endanger pluralism and democratic coexistence. From this perspective, the question of culture wars and their relationship with nationalisms manifests all its ambivalence and demands new attention. In the present article, limited to the North American and European spheres, with a closer look at the French perspective and problems, a brief approach to the concept of cultural war is made first of all. It then reflects on the question of identity as the singularity acquired by emotions as a form of individual and social expressiveness, beyond community identity. The elements or myths inherent to nationalism that provide fuel for cultural wars are then assessed in order to rethink nationalism and its relationship with patriotism, in order to arrive at a renewed idea of patriotism as an antidote to national-populism, which has become the privileged site of national worship and cultural warfare.

2. Approach to the Concept

Aguiluz et al. (2022) established in detail the sociological genealogy of culture wars and the fixation of the concept, derived from the thesis of the “new warrior gods” formulated by Max Weber in 1920 in his approach to modern polytheism; passing through the neo-romantic cultural criticism of the 1960s, which produced around May ‘68 an explosion of post-materialist values centered on self-expression, and continuing with the triumphant neoconservative criticism of the 1980s, which reacted against the moral revolution produced in the two previous decades, until reaching the concept of cultural war, coined in 1991 by James Davidson Hunter in his book Culture Wars: The Struggle to define America (Hunter 1991), where the original German term Kulturkampf undergoes a semantic change to be understood in the United States no longer as cultural struggles, but as culture wars. Aguiluz, Beriaín and Gil continue with Huntington’s (1996) thesis of the clash of civilizations, and
dwell particularly, with very suggestive analyses, on the current neopopulism that has led to the radicalization of the culture war.

In a complementary manner, and to focus my own analysis, I would like to contribute some notes on the evolution of the meaning of the concept in the French sphere, where the term cultural war already appeared at the end of the 1970s in a book of combat that is somewhat extreme in its title, Gobard’s (1979) La Guerre culturelle: logique du désastre (Cultural war: the logic of disaster). The work is a plea, at the end of the Glorious Thirties, against the rise of American capitalist globalization and its dissolving effects on the cultural level. The author conceives of the culture war as an undeclared war, attacking not bodies but hearts, but just as deadly: “It is the war of a poisonous society against the culture of a people.” “The cultural war uses and abuses all freedoms to enter everywhere and destroy from within all the values, all the differentiations, all the spiritual riches of the peoples.” The homogenization of the market, the emergence of a world clientele with the same consumption habits, and the processes of cultural massification: “The more the economy develops, the more culture decomposes”. The thesis is clear. “Atlantic cosmocapitalism is the absolute evil, a disaster such as the world will know no other for it entails the destruction of everything” (Gobard 1979, pp. 9, 13, 17, 24, 30, 38).

The nationalist undertone of this provocative text does not go unnoticed. Gobard had earlier denounced, in terms of linguistic alienation, the growing influence of the English or rather Anglo-American language in France, encouraging cultural resistance. “By renouncing to speak one’s own language in one’s own country one signs the abdication of the last sovereignty that might still be indisputable, the cultural sovereignty of all peoples” (Gobard 1976, p. 144). “I defend here not my culture, but all cultures, not only France, but all of France, France-Brittany as well as France-Alsace, France-Vasque, France-Corsica, France-Provence, France-Gascony, France-Flemish. I am referring to all of France whose voices are so rarely heard, I defend all peoples, all!” (Gobard 1979, p. 24). It is not, then, the assimilationist French nationalism of the Jacobin character, but the exaltation of a plural nation that must rise up against the cultural invasion that threatens to transform the French into “Gallo-Rican primates”. American imperialism and Atlantic globalization leads to deculturation, to the loss of the sense of concrete belonging, to the disappearance of the cultural man and of the world of values that are proper to him (Gobard 1979, pp. 79, 86).

In 1986, the issue of Permanences dedicated to the cultural war underlined how it acts on the image or perception that individuals have of the world and of the society in which they live, activating the rejection of the present society, in order to launch into the “peaceful conquest of political power by taking control of the public or citizen spirit”, which is the ultimate object of the cultural war. Projecting this perspective in Gramscian terms, and in the spirit of arming the left, Brustier, in the 2010s, links the concept already coined by Hunter to the crisis of Westernism, understood as the ideology of the crisis. The fear of the West after the 2001, 2004 and 2005 attacks in New York, Madrid and London (and later Paris), the 2008 financial crisis and the de-Westernization resulting from the emergence of a multipolar world have all provoked a real identity crisis. The specter of decline vis-à-vis the East, as an explanatory factor for all current difficulties, has animated in the West—the United States and Europe—a representation of the crisis that has paralyzed the left and mobilized the right. “Westernism is the West defined by a West that perceives itself in danger and on the verge of decadence. Without this meta-ideology, without the cultural hegemony it exercises, neither the moral panics that animate our societies nor the strong ideological evolutions that have marked them are understandable” (Brustier 2013, p. 15).

As for Gobard, France finds itself in Brustier’s eyes at a crossroads in its history. It is no longer a matter of opposing the denationalizing effects of a Western globalization led by the United States, but of reacting against the Westernism that has taken over the socio-political dynamics of the country, arming French national-populism and strengthening certain imaginaries such as Islamophobia, which are at its base, but which cross other ideological boundaries to build in the urban territory authentic citadels of identity. In contrast to the simplistic nature of populist xenophobia, which appeals to the essential purity of the people,
the reality is more complex: globalization leads to a proliferation of identities that forces a diverse citizenry to recompose its imaginary according to its experience. Hence the call Brustier addresses to the French left—if it does not want to disappear—to think outside Westernism, to deconstruct the ideology of the crisis, to de-Westernize the republican idea (which has been dressed for two centuries as “white” and “masculine”), to not define the universal via the sole criteria of its Western sources, to nurture another vision and another political project, consequently summoning it to the culture war. “The culture war has only just begun . . .” (Brustier 2013, p. 222).

The term, in any case, is not commonly accepted. Olivier Roy (2022) contests the thesis of culture war or conflict of values, because what is in crisis in his view is the very notion of culture. He diagnoses a phenomenon of deculturation, which affects not only France but the whole world, as a consequence of the liberation of customs, the Internet revolution, neo-liberal commodification and deterritorialization linked to the end of the nation-state and to migrations. We are witnessing a dynamic of “subcultures”, without historical roots, replacing inherited cultures, responding to processes of radical individualization. Global culture is nothing more than a dust bowl of cultures embodied in the melting pot of one’s own subjectivity: infinite cultural fragments, emerging from everywhere, circulating universally through the algorithms of communication networks. The absence of a common culture, of a community of thought and action, at the national and international level, leads to what he calls an “autistic future” dominated by the rule of codes and meaningless norms. Roy thus agrees with Gobard in stressing the phenomenon of deculturation, but he does not associate it with American or, more broadly, Western cultural imperialism, or with any other. His black painting of a humanity abandoned to a radical deculturation, to individualized cultural practices anchored in a virtual world that eclipses any shared social imaginary, supports in a time of crisis the thesis of dehumanization, but does not offer answers about the possible ways of recovery of the collective.

3. The Emotional Labyrinth of Identity

Culture war, as an analytical category, is a modern means of cultural struggle between antagonistic positions that seeks the monopoly of the legitimate representation of one’s own identity. It constructs culturally contestable relations between substantive elements such as life, religion, nation, status or race, heavily invested with sacredness, turning the world of values into a fundamental battlefield within the civil sphere, which is much more violent and decisive than that based on the opposition of interests. The culture war, more than a conflict of ideological interpretations, is a struggle for meaning, and therefore directly affects the question of identity, as it has an existential dimension. The constructed character of collective identity is affected today by the growing fragmentation and heterogeneity of the social body, the pluralization of social identities, the weakening of ties and the greater vulnerability of people in the face of difficulties and experiences of crisis. Rosanvallon (2021) has insisted on the notion of the trials of life as a new sociological category that leads to a value of the profound personal impact they entail, and consequently the importance of the emotional reactions they generate. Emotions pervade everything in times of difficulty (Collins 2004; Scribano and Roche 2023). The traditional sense of community and belonging is subjected, today more than ever, to the imperative of emotions and to the very dynamics of communities of emotions. We are what we feel: emotional identity, in the personal and social sphere, is imposed on community identity anchored in permanent institutions.

This perspective reinforces, in any case, the sentimental or emotional dimension of nationalism and its traditional understanding as more than the strong national idea, as the state of mind of a society (Kohn 1944), the expression of a particular collective atmosphere, before crystallizing in an ideological discourse that systematizes the original irrational background: an inexhaustible well where historical memory, mythical references and sentimental traditions intermingle (Plumyène 1979, pp. 11–12), and which provides the necessary fuel for the culture wars. Psychoanalytical approaches have also highlighted the strength of affective bonds as the main reason for the persistence and success of nationalist
identification. The Freudian Eros, which plays a central role in the construction of every community, acquires relevance in the understanding of nationalism and its capacity to mobilize on a large scale the human desire for identity from the attractive promise of an encounter with national jouissance (Stavrakakis and Nikos 2006).

This attention to emotions in the exaltation of national sentiment and values has been highlighted by theorists of French nationalism. Girardet (1965, pp. 436–37) speaks of the nationalism of restlessness or anguish, which develops in a climate of alienation or threat, and the nationalism of satisfaction or euphoria, based on a feeling of triumph and power. He also distinguishes between the nationalism of the nationalists who claim the label, who are structured and organized, and the nationalism of those who can be objectively recognized as such, although their expression is diverse, diffuse and disorganized, because, like the former, they make everything related to national identity the supreme value, the value above any other value (Girardet 1983, pp. 9–10). Both set themselves up as the ultimate interpreter of the deepest values that define a given society or civilization, and protest against the domination of foreign ways of behaving, thinking and feeling, as revealed in Godard’s text quoted above.

Nationalism, by creating an image of the nation in confrontation with the other, turns against society itself, and against other images or collective representations shared and sustained in plurality. Nationalism, mobilized by its own emotional language, divides socially and thus acquires a notorious projection in the cultural war in today’s complex societies, making problematic its determined will of “incorporation of human values in a historical field, of incarnation of the spirit in a determined social space, of identification of the person in a deep community of belonging” (Grand’Maison 1970, pp. 33–34). The religious element stands out particularly as a differentiating factor in nationalist expression and in the current cultural war, fueling new struggles for religious freedom, new crusades or also new forms of holy war, as revealed by the conflict of nationalisms between Westernism and Islamic fundamentalism. Nationalism can, on the other hand, propose its own religious imperatives and impose itself as a substitute faith, as various theorists of nationalism have stressed (in addition to Girardet, E. Gellner, A.D. Smith, B. Anderson or S.J. Mock, among others).

This idea of nationalism as a spiritual absolute that leaves no room for other absolutes is not shared by Bouchard. On the assumption that religion and nation refer to two different registers, although religion has sustained collective life for centuries (from the tribe to the nation state), the thesis seems to this author to be incoherent from the contrasted fact of the survival and active role of religion in a good part of contemporary nations considered at the time as the most secularized (Casanova 2019), which disproves the theory of modernization and the reduction of religion to the pre-modern framework as opposed to the modern framework of the nation, since religion is a constant and a social fact of primary importance in the contemporary world. Bouchard proposes to take religion out of the equation and introduce in its place social myths, which constitute the symbolic foundation of the nation. “The nation is not sacred in itself; it is the myths, including religious myths, on which it rests that sacralize it” (Bouchard 2014, pp. 190–91). It might be objected that the authors with whom Bouchard argues are not so much talking about nation as nationalism, but one would in any case have to go back to Hayes’ classic volume, Nationalism: a religion (1960), which does not pose the question in terms of substitution, but by analyzing the development of the religious character of nationalism, the transfers of sacredness that take place from the time of Jacobin France and throughout contemporary history, and at the end of the work, the reciprocal action between nationalism and world religions, especially Christianity, which is what has acquired new relevance in the culture wars.

Man and the groups in which he lives have created and in turn have been re-created by mythomotors, by constellations of meaning that give them a certain sense of belonging, traditionally linked to the religions of salvation, and which have in the modern day found a fabulous channel of transmission in the different forms of nationalism. Such bonds of belonging are indispensable survival mechanisms that confront the problem of the horror vacui of nothingness. The human being needs, like the blood that runs through its
veins and arteries, these symbolic links that place them in the heart of a group. Religions were initially constituted as communities of beliefs and practices (Durkheim), or, in other words, as communities of salvation and worship (Max Weber), which, from the end of the eighteenth century (that new time that changes the very notion of time, since the space of experience of the past is enormously distant from the horizon of expectations of the future) underwent a major transformation. The churches and ecclesiastical institutions, once their traditional historical functions as a community of worship have been transferred to the secular national state (the latter acting as a source of collective representations of imagined national communities, in Benedict Anderson’s terms, and as a vehicle of collective memory), in many cases continue to maintain, but in others also lose, their effective capacity as religions of individual salvation during this process. Salvation communities and cult communities are not always synchronized, and thus the specific initial process of European secularization and “nationalization” entailed a weakening of salvation communities and a correlative strengthening of cult communities (the nation and nationalism being their stellar agents). Although nationalism constructs powerful legitimations of death and suffering—in the manner of sociodicies—that take place in the name of the nation, this should not lead us to think of it as another religion of salvation. They are two devices of meaning that give rise to two different kinds of community.

Hayes’ pioneering work brought home how ever since modern nationalism burst into Western Europe, it has partaken of the very nature of a religion. “Nationalism, like any other religion, asks of us, not only the will, but also the intellect, the imagination and the emotions.” The intellect constructs a theology of nationalism; the imagination, a world never seen around an eternal past and the infinite future of one’s nationality. “Emotions awaken in us joy and ecstasy as we contemplate the national god, who is infinitely good and protects us.” We desire to obtain his favors, we feel respect and reverence when we consider the immensity of his knowledge and power; and worship naturally springs up as an expression of these feelings. In nationalism as in all religions, “its most important rites are public rites, which are performed on behalf of a community and are intended to achieve its salvation” (Hayes [1960] 1966, pp. 217–18). The commemorations and ceremonials linked to national symbols and hymns; the processions, pilgrimages and places consecrated by the nationalists: Hayes also refers to the (American) national myths as the “fruit of a vigorous nationalist faith, and they are justified and must be true, because they come to satisfy exactly a national need”. It is nothing but the fear of patriotic intellectuals that the masses might lose their national faith and enthusiasm that fills the nationalist discourse with myths in order to “strengthen that faith and increase popular devotion to the fatherland” (Hayes [1960] 1966, p. 225).

The power of myths is, in fact, determinant in the dynamics of nationalism and the culture wars. The myth (story, representation or idea put into action), rising above the true and the false, presents itself as the immortal truth of certainty, the total impossibility of something not being or being otherwise, unlike the scientific truth that may be proven false tomorrow. Vulnerable to criticism, myth seems to perish and disappear, but it always tends to return, for myth ultimately responds to a need to believe, and it assures, it protects; it offers to fill the void and the vertigo, it corrects and overcomes insurmountable disparities and contradictions. For better and for worse, myths structure cultures and shape consciences, give the group its cultural cohesion and moral coherence, compose the identity code of the community or nation, effectively contributing to set its course, and decisively come into action in situations of change and conflict (Carbonell 1990; Sánchez-Prieto 1996; Bouchard 2014, pp. 176–79). The elements of nationalism that serve as fuel for the culture wars remain clothed in the sacredness of myth.

(A) Metaphysical myths: the nation as part of God’s salvific plan, the specificity of the chosen people, the genius of the people, the collective soul or spiritual principle of the nation, the mystical foundation of the nation-state, which today resists disappearing, the myth of the final happy kingdom (from Christian eschatology to the Third Reich or the socialist paradise on earth). It is important to highlight the affiliation of the nation with
the myths of ethnic choice, objectified in the concept of mission, coupled to the historical development of certain groups rooted in the narratives of Judeo-Christian monotheism (Gorski 2020). However, in order to objectify this mission, the collective in question requires a time for the development of a narrative self-representation that provides meaning and identity to each and every one of its members, as well as a space that serves as a stage on which the national community ritually institutes its imaginary.

(B) Myths referring to nature: mother earth, the sacred soil of the ancestors, the territory, the hereditary enemy, race, blood, instinct, which conditions everything. The centrality of race considered as a fundamental factor of nationality (as opposed to the historical experience of miscegenation) and the myth of the superior race as an inducer of racism and xenophobia maintain their full force in the national-populism of the 21st century, as exemplified by Christian white supremacism in the USA and xenophobic sentiments in Europe (identity separatism, the rejection of the foreigner, the discrimination of the immigrant population, even when it is the second generation, the stigmatization of racial groups), the diabolized otherness also introducing religious and cultural elements regarding Islam. The myth of the barbarians, the legitimation of purifying violence, which has evolved from anarchism to jihadist terrorism, is also still in force.

(C) Myths related to culture. War as a cultural agent that makes the people a nation, in its dramatic struggle for existence, as exemplified today by Ukraine once again in its history, claiming dignity and respect in the face of a Russian imperialism that feels protected by social Darwinism. Language as the quintessence of a culture that affirms itself as a nation and has to constitute a state or maintain it over time, if it does not want to recognize its historical failure (although the reality of complex societies shows that the pretended national language is not the original language of a large part of the population, as is the case with race). The historical narrative, consecrating the remote origins of the community and the common past of the nation, becomes the privileged instrument of homogenization for the nationalists, giving continuity to the nationalizing task of the old national histories. This invention of tradition (Hobsbawm 1983) is also registered within the culture wars, which are extremely effective both for the construction and the reproduction of myths. Myth, taking advantage of the limits and loopholes of rationality, persists as a powerful engine of culture and communication, mixing, at high combustion, emotions, images and symbols. In this way, it becomes the great driving force of social and national imaginaries. “There is no society without myths, there are only societies that maintain the illusion of not having them”, ignoring perhaps that “reason and emotion form a very old couple concerning the structures of the human spirit” (Bouchard 2014, pp. 185, 192).

4. Rethinking Nationalism

The current revival of emotions, as a consequence of social malaise and weariness provoked by the concatenation of crises, invites a rereading of nationalism in relation to the culture war. Historically, nationalism tends to reinvent, reproduce and strengthen itself in an atmosphere of crisis. In the present context, this may be paradoxical, since the lack of interpersonal trust is correlative to the distrust of rulers, which is consubstantial with the current protracted crisis of representativeness, which has rarefied the political climate and increased polarization in many Western countries. On the other hand, the same continuing experience of the crisis has highlighted the practical limits of globalization and the post-national perspective when it comes to providing answers, as was the case with COVID-19. From the community point of view (and here the culture war comes into play), the main question is to assess whether this polarization affects secondary values, and differences can be redressed by invoking primary values, or whether, on the contrary, it is holistic in nature, leading to irreconcilable discrepancies. Globalism focuses here the criticism of nationalism, judging it as an essentially dangerous anachronism, capable of transposing the darkest part of human nature to a powerful subject, which confers on it, frozen by identity myths, a violent and heartbreaking potential, without nationalism being fully aware of the injustice it commits (Mayerfeld 1998, p. 576).
Etzioni, with allusion to the debate between liberals and communitarians in the USA, and positioning himself against the globalist perspective, has highlighted—among other points supported by scientific evidence—the mental health problems and the aggressive demagogy of isolated people or those who have lost their social moorings, to emphasize the importance of communities for the self-regulation of people. At the same time, he judges excessive the faith of the globalists that public policies can transform communities of identity and meaning. The very difficulties of the European Union in shaping a wider community of supranational character show that “nationalism is neither dead nor dying” (Etzioni 2019, pp. 45–46). If there are dangerous nationalists who favor extreme polarization and threaten the communitarian bases of democracy (the self requires a we for its own development), there are also extremist anti-nationalists, apparently humanist, but who hide their true face, and reveal themselves to be equally sterile. The globalizing dynamic has not given a charter to these “stateless anti-nationalists”—according to Grand’Maison’s old expression—whose pretended pragmatism involves “neither political thought, nor spiritual risk, nor faith in man, nor, after all, a profound experience of human solidarity” (Grand’Maison 1970, pp. 34–36).

The trials of life, which affect one’s existential security, are shaking the foundations of identity in many countries in the current scenario of crisis, and point to various forms of nationalism as a response, also helping to rethink it. The retreat into existential security favors the rise of authoritarianism, hyper-leadership and populism. On the other hand, the need to be seen, respected and appreciated, inherent to the human person, provokes in the social groups most affected by the crisis—in the victims of globalization—different reactions of protest and subversion, of strong emotional content (Skitka and Morgan 2014), that is, the movement of the “indignados” in its different versions, the most recent and emblematic being that of the Gilet jaunes in France in their eagerness to be present and recognized, even while remaining anonymous. Rosanvallon (2021) has analyzed in the French case the evidence of contempt, injustice, discrimination and uncertainty, and the social dynamics derived from the emotional reactions they arouse (humiliation, resentment, anger, indignation, bitterness, rage, anxiety, defiance). “The act of sharing an emotion is a way of creating commonality” (Rosanvallon 2021, p. 83). The new communities of experience and indignation are not defined by the identity of their members (opinions, myths, beliefs, belonging to the same territory, class or profession), but by their proximity to concrete situations experienced in common. The collective begins to be constituted and rethought in terms of functionalities and interactions, of resonances between the self and others that allow us to reconstitute the social bond and our relationship with the world, beyond the organizational-identity forms of the past (Rosa 2019). The cultural war, which is nothing but a new form of social struggle, is not independent of the dynamics of these new unstructured communities, but clearly outlined in the combats they undertake without a leader, and which create a bond of solidarity both in the symbolic and practical order.

As in any other notion of collective, the reference to a common or shared project maintains its validity when applied to the nation, over and above sovereignist logics. Rereading Ernest Renan, this is how Ortega and Gasset defined the nation a century ago, as a suggestive project of common life. This idea obliges today’s democracy to overcome the comfortable short-termism in which it remains installed, forcing it to think and operate in the long term to ensure the rights of future generations, which would help to dispel the present social atmosphere of uncertainty. The nationalization processes of the last two centuries were concerned with nationalizing the past, based on the conviction that there is no nation without a collective experience inscribed in the writing of history. The challenge in the 21st century is the nationalization of the future, based on the consideration that the response to the problems and threats of globalization—those that affect democracy itself—involves not only the new dignity of political power and governance—at its different levels—as a public service and guarantor of the future, but also the reconstruction of the national community. That is Etzioni’s bet, in his book Reclaiming Patriotism (2019), reintroducing into the debate the old distinction between nationalism and patriotism, with
its moral background. Against the harmful nationalism that divides and generates violence, he opposes the unionist force of patriotism concerned with the common good (the “good nationalism”), which has to emerge not from a political party but from a social movement. The suggestion deserves attention when in Europe the very new social movements of the 2010s, linked to the Indignation, seem to have failed, with authoritarianism and national-populism gaining strength in their place (Pleyers and Álvarez-Benavides 2019). Hence the new calls for cultural warfare.

5. National-Populism Versus Patriotism

Neopopulism has strained the politics and cultural debate of the 21st century, as it manifests a chameleon-like nature by adopting nationalist or radical left and right positions. It can be understood as a sign of alarm or of democratic hope, as a protest movement or a call for help from the popular classes, but it cannot be separated from the continuing experience of the crisis and the loss of confidence in the future. In broad layers of the population in Western societies, the conviction has taken hold that the past was better than the present, and that the future will be even worse (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). In this sense, populism converges with Westernism as an ideology of decline, and finds an important echo among the victims or losers of globalization. First of all, this is because its discourse is indeterminate and expressed through simple images. The populist narrative forces the image of the elites in power—essentially corrupt and the source of all social and political ills—as opposed to that of the pure, heroic and savior people, from whom the leader who speaks out frankly, on behalf of the majority, against the privileged minorities, must emanate. It is a variant of the myth of the two nations, well located in the cultured European language of the last quarter of the 19th century (the healthy nation of the subsoil, without fissures, the nation of the future, confronted with a dominant, corrupt and inefficient political minority, the nation in power).

As a discursive configuration, the abstract people of the populists as an imagined community resembles the nation of the nationalists, but presents its own characteristic. Rather than expressing itself ideologically, it constructs, from heterogeneous social demands, a real relationship between social actors beyond class interests, achieving an antagonistic repoliticization of depoliticized domains of everyday life (Laclau 2008; Mouffe 2018). The populist contraposition between the them and the us, those above and those below, the caste and the system, traces an inner boundary that divides the social into two antagonistic camps, reactivating the friend/enemy relationship, the construction of the internal enemy, the insider turned outsider (Inglehart 2019). We also find associated with populism a whole regime of passions and emotions (Rosanvallon 2020, pp. 63–75). The populist counterposition in the French case has revived the two Frances and explains the current strength of Marine Le Pen. Political and religious traditionalism, racism, anti-Semitism, authoritarian nationalism or fascism are part of the French substratum of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with the revolutionary tradition, secular republicanism and social democracy. Imperialist practice, decolonization and the experiences of economic crises from the 1970s onwards brought as a consequence a growing influx of non-European immigration, strong social and cultural tensions, and a feeling of threat to the integrity of French identity, aggravated by the activity of Jihad (Roudinesco 2021). The National Front, created in 1972, evolved from anti-communism to a radical identity, and is based on a repulsion to Islam, initiating after 2008—and verifying the change in the leadership of the party—a process of de-diabolization that has allowed it to penetrate deeply into the working world, peri-urban areas and transversally in other social groups, capitalizing the “anger” of the people and establishing itself as the best expression of national-populism, which its 2018 change of denomination, Rassemblement national, clearly points to. The national-populist success of the French extreme right, challenging Macron’s aestheticized republicanism, has ended up mobilizing Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s left-wing populism, launched into a cultural war against it (as Brustier invited in 2013).
This success of French national-populism has to do, in a particular way, with the very evolution of its religious discourse and its attitude towards secularism. Within the extreme right, Marine Le Pen distanced herself in the 2010s from the Identitaires movement (originally a current linked to the National Front and, in its ideological sources, to the New Right), which emphasizes the defense of European (or Euro-Western) civilization from an ethnic and religious perspective. The fight against Islam is justified via its consideration as a religion hostile to European civilization and its religions: Christianity and neo-paganism\(^9\) (François 2008). This position expresses above all a European nationalism against the Muslim invasion (a colonization in reverse) from which it would be necessary to protect oneself in order to avoid the genocide of the white race, and takes the religious question as a main argument. Marine Le Pen has somewhat reversed the perspective by progressively abandoning the defense of Catholicism to present herself as the firm guardian of the French Republic and its values, particularly secularism, in order to ideologically de-radicalize the obsessive rejection of Muslim immigration by the extreme right. Against European Westernism, the French national priority; and against Christian identity, secularism and laïcité (Roy 2016). With Marine Le Pen the party abandons its traditional opposition to secularism to unite secularism and Christianity as features of French identity, and appeals to old myths such as Joan of Arc, not as a Christian figure but as a true patriot. Christian secularism or secular Christianity are the expression of a secularized identity, capable of affirming belonging without belief, as opposed to Islam which is contemplated as a set of beliefs, values and practices that are properly religious, and whose mere presence in the public space undermines the neutrality of the State (Innerarity Grau 2023). This calculated self-representation of the French extreme right as the defender par excellence of secularism and republican values has certainly had an impact on the mobilization of the left\(^10\).

Regardless of its evolution and different versions, national populism is founded on negative emotions, on polarization, and on particularities rather than on a positive sense of commonality. The proposal for a new patriotism in the face of the divisive logic of all nationalism is based precisely on the recovery of commonality, of shared values and bonds; of hope as an expression of meaning, confidence and purpose, of longing for a shared future, as something inherent to every project of coexistence and national community, what has traditionally been called the national ethos. Patriotism implies redefining and committing to the common good, assuming social responsibilities and moral obligations towards others (Koselleck 2006). It calls for a generous effort to accommodate the complexity of currently proliferating identities, being able to understand and reinforce the nation as a community of communities, which in turn requires an imbrication in the social fabric and the mobilization of civil society, valuing the importance of the third sector. A patriotism thus understood, which in the face of immigration knows how to combine diversity within unity, via respect for the whole and for all, without seeking assimilation or falling into a multiculturalism without limits, is the best antidote to national-populism (Etzioni 2019, pp. 54–56, 94–108)\(^11\). This is undoubtedly unfinished business, which requires prior reflection on the different scales to be considered, and on which values and practices refer to unity and which to diversity. Even before that, it requires a change of sensitivity, which also affects the academic debate.

In France, there is the archetype of the assimilationist model\(^12\); Rosanvallon has insisted on this same idea, deepening the idea of equality, appealing to the equality of singularities, which, far from resting on a project of sameness, implies that each individual manifests what is unique to him or her, in order to build society on the basis of this specificity. Diversity as a standard of equality leads to a type of society based not on abstract universalism or on identity communitarianism (or any other form of identity-defensive fundamentalism), but on the “generalized recognition of particularities” and the corresponding expectation of reciprocity and mutual recognition. This change of perspective entails, as a requirement of a fully democratic society, “the inclusion of all in the nation, sharing the same community of destiny” (Rosanvallon 2021, pp. 99, 149, 157). This is an old formula that in the current context points to a new democratic age of the nation, for
the nation remains the main political community in democracies, even if new approaches to the social processes of nationalization are needed in times of globalization. Attempts to build supranational institutions, such as the European Union, have not dispensed with national communities, beyond the debate on the federalist project, which continues to find major detractors in France, from the attachment to the idea of nation (Gauchet 2017). These institutional efforts can be harmed by nationalisms, but benefit on the contrary from patriotism, with a greater capacity to combine tradition and innovation and to broaden their perspective of a community of destiny, where the very notion of humanity is finally found.

6. Conclusions

The de-Westernization linked to the new globalizing dynamics has revived the debate on identity, presented to the audience as a cultural war, although—beyond its analytical operability—the term is not universally accepted. Either because the diagnosis of the present reality emphasizes the twilight of cultures, stressing as a global fact the idea of a deculturation that does not lead to a new acculturation, or because it is understood that the culture war is at the very origin of phenomena such as polarization or populism that deeply erode democracy and lead to an exacerbation of nationalism. The moral undertone of the term is, in any case, obvious. The neo-populist tide has revealed the moral fracture that separates the people from the elites, which must be bridged by the authenticity, truth and commitment that political actors must be able to convey to the democratic audience as a whole. It also indicates the revival of a collective feeling of nationhood, which promotes the recognition of the moral obligations we all have towards others, where the notion of common good and the exercise of civic virtues are based, oriented not only to the development of personal autonomy, but also to care for the freedom of others, near and far (both in space and in time).

Nationalism yesterday and national-populism today have attempted to solve the problem of moral identity, where the real question of identity lies, by offering sure answers to the question of “who am I”, which requires clarifying the value and importance we give to things, which we put in the foreground to the point of committing our lives to them. Overcoming the crisis of modern identity, suggests Charles Taylor (1989), means specifying “what it is good to be” before trying to clarify “how we should act”. In the face of the radical individualism that sustains today’s presentism, it is necessary to rediscover the meaning of collective decision and to deepen the “proper spirit”, reconnecting in each case with history and recognizing as part of it those who, from their singularities, make up the new plural nation. In the proposal of a renewed patriotism, as an antidote to the disintegrating nationalism, the essentialist vision of the nation, historically constructed by the nationalist ideology, is questioned. Patriotism, closer to the affective and emotional component of identity, although balanced by rational motivation, flows from the bottom up, rediscovers the local roots of the sense of belonging and does not sacralize the nation as the ultimate community of destiny. Therefore, it appears capable of articulating an integrating project of coexistence that requires, in any case, a comprehensive vision of the nation as a community of communities.

In this proposal of patriotism, we also see the aspiration to replace cultural wars with moral dialogues (Etzioni 2019, p. 32). Dialogues that allow us to objectify and discern the variety of moral cultures at stake; the existing difficulties in determining the values that must be shared within a community or nation to maintain unity and those corresponding to the field of diversity that demand respect; the limits and complexity of their articulation in the public sphere, without falling into cultural relativism; the validity of human rights as collective morality and its eventual transformation. Only on the basis of this dialogue can restorative actions be undertaken after an evaluation of the ravages caused by the culture war and the forging of new consensuses.

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Notes

1. From the idea of the concatenation of crises, it is worth adding other strong moments—after Brustier’s date of writing—such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, which have increased this fear.

2. An interesting specific case can be found in Sáez de la Fuente (2002).

3. Recent studies such as Santiago (2015) and Zulaika (2014) are clarifying in this regard.

4. Let us recall the important distinction introduced by Max Weber (1978, pp. 322, 364 et seq.), when he distinguishes between communities of salvation and communities of worship. For example, American civil religion is a community of worship, but not a religion of salvation, while Buddhism is a religion of salvation, but not a community of worship.

5. For his part, Shafer, another classic author, cites among the characters that help in determining the nature of nationalism (abundant in its emotional and religious character) devotion to the nation, common pride for great deeds and affliction for national misfortunes, disdain or hostility towards those other groups that impede or threaten the independent national existence, hope for a future of greatness and supreme glory (Shafer [1955] 1964, pp. 14–15).


7. Beyond the significant milestones that can were established in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries associated with the crisis of the Ancien Régime in Europe, the social consequences of the industrial revolutions, the interwar crisis or the end of the Cold War, we must highlight particularly illustrative studies of the dynamics of nationalism in times of crisis such as that of Ian A. Morrison (2019) on the case of Quebec, which covers a broad time span and allows us to assess, by distinguishing moments, changes and permanence in certain discourses and practices linked to the problematic of identity.

8. Recent empirical data, without going into the dimension of nationalistic consciousness, indeed show that most people maintain a strong loyalty to their place and nation (World Value Survey 2020).

9. Although the movement recruited young conservative Catholics, the most radical discourse does not hide its pagan content by justifying the rejection of Christianity in favor of a return to the pagan religions of European antiquity, finally advocating a differentialist conception of the world, where each culture has the duty to preserve itself from miscegenation in order to preserve its identity, with the consequent rejection of multiethnic and multicultural societies.

10. A comparative study between the French and Québécois cases would be of interest, not only in light of the proximity reflected in the respective current debates on the secular and the religious in the definition and regulation of the public space—as the study by Morrison (2019) allows us to infer—but also in view of the evolution and the concurrence of nationalisms of different signs in the public sphere, even if the framework of understanding of the respective nationalisms is very different. In the case of Quebec, a defensive and traditionalist nationalism that rests on the triptych of language, faith and rural vocation continues to operate under different forms, while it is possible to recognize, in the context of the culture war, a perhaps misnamed leftist conservatism as a kind of hybrid between anti-capitalism and nationalism (Dupuis-Déri and Éthier 2016).

11. Etzioni, from the dualism he establishes between bad nationalism and good nationalism (which should be overcome, like other dichotomies in use, such as those established between civic and ethnic, political and cultural, Western and Eastern nationalism, etc.), maintains the nation as the main communitarian referent of patriotism, when the very idea of a community of communities allows for understanding patriotism at very different scales (both at supra and sub-national levels), thus increasing its effectiveness as an antidote.

12. Even if that model is contested in the framework of the culture war (May 2016).

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