

Reid A. Kleinberg  
PhD Candidate, University of Essex  
[Rk19251@essex.ac.uk](mailto:Rk19251@essex.ac.uk)

*Agnostic Patriotism or Republican Communitarianism? A Response to Chantal Mouffe*

In a 2021 [interview with Tocqueville21](#) editor David Klemperer, Chantal Mouffe discusses the current challenges and future strategies relevant to left-populist movements. Agreeing with much of what she says, my interest is nevertheless piqued by her response to a specific question posed by Klemperer: “Does the left need to make more use of nationalist sentiment?” Mouffe’s answer – in so many words, that she ‘prefers the term patriotism’ and that the Left would do well to capitalize on the affect bound up in the various signifiers of nationality – raises some challenging – and potentially troubling – questions that I would like to explore here in greater detail.

Klemperer’s question about the role of nationalism amongst the populist-left does not come out of the blue. The various left-populist movements of the last decade have at times struggled with [accusations](#) that their platforms and makeups have been aggressively nationalistic. In this context, Mouffe’s academic and activist guidance to these movements suggests that at a minimum she believes any potential risks of a left-nationalism can be avoided by smart politics, while at most she sees national community as a prerequisite to hold together a democratic society<sup>1</sup>. In the space that follows I wish to highlight an important equivocation in Mouffe’s advocacy that left-populists embrace patriotism and the ‘national signifier’ in the Tocqueville21 interview, namely, between patriotism and nationalism. I highlight this equivocation not only because it might invite the charge of inconsistency (patriotism and nationalism are, after all, different concepts), but also because it reflects a tendency amongst advocates of left-populism to view their project as inseparable from nation-state sovereignty. I argue we must guard against this tendency: As long as left-populists remain fixated on the prism of the nation and the nation-

---

<sup>1</sup> Mouffe 1993, 65-72; Mouffe 2018, 71

state, they will undermine efforts to mobilize affective desires for communal belonging in a democratic way.

I would like to start by defining what the terms ‘nationalism’ and ‘patriotism’ mean because I think much of the controversy over this issue stems from either confusion, indifference, or debate about the work done by these two terms. The prefixes of these two words are distinct. *Nation* comes from the Latin *natio* “something born”, and amongst the Romans a *natio* was commonly “understood to be a group of men who belonged together in some way because of similarity of birth” (Zernatto and Mistretta 1944, 351-352). Yet the linguistic use of ‘nation’ had to undergo multiple changes before it was imbued with the mythical ‘organic’ spirit with which we associate it today.

In the Middle Ages its use was restricted to describing unions organizing various foreign-born residents at Universities according to similarity in background (Zernatto and Mistretta 1944, 355). In Medieval France, it was used to denote representative bodies that formed when the King called aristocrats to confer on laws and decisions (Zernatto and Mistretta 1944, 361). Prior to the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, and the need to ‘invent’ a national culture, ‘nation’ was exclusively used in *legal* contexts (Margerison 1998). Indeed, it was specifically because of this legal understanding of the nation that early French dissidents could contend that the Monarchical state had acted tyrannically by operating in spheres of society that had not been authorized by the ancient constitution (Margerison 1998, 14). Today, it is generally accepted that there are two key forms of nationality: ethno-cultural and civic. Ethno-cultural nations consider themselves to be organic, pre-political constructs, while civic nations are considered to be a product of state-building and political decisions that bind a population to invented national ideals. Yet, at the most fundamental level, even these two variants are united by the same form: a nation *must* be a bounded community of people delineated by some infallible norm (Yack 1996).

Turning now to *patriotism*, Maurizio Viroli’s treatise *For Love of Country* is a lucid unpacking of this term as a political concept. By presenting patriotism in the context of the intellectual history of republican political theory, Viroli identifies the transient and changing language of republican patriotism. Patriotism also contains a Latin ancestor. ‘*Patria*’, derived from the Latin religious concept of *terra patria* or the land where the forefathers were buried,

was adapted by the Roman republicans to signify their virtuous devotion to the *respublica*, or political common good (Viroli 1995, 18-19). Hence in contrast to nation, *patria* historically had a more territorial connotation. For example, in early 18<sup>th</sup> century France “it meant the place, even the local place, where a man was born” and not a group of people or community (Palmer 1940, 98). Viroli explains that in the classical republican tradition, *patria* developed to delineate the institutions, laws, procedures, and jargon of the republic. Indeed, *patria* was used to denote the political culture of specific territorial republics - the political way of life of these places.

According to Viroli, the eventual conceptual confusion of patriotism and nationalism coincided with the onset of Modernity (Viroli 1995, 111-125), and the critiques of the German scholar Johann Herder and the movement of German Romanticists specifically, whose target was the ‘coldness’ of French republics. In fiery reprisals, Herder produced an understanding of patriotism bound to the nation where, working together, the concepts conveyed the importance of developing collective cultural practices as spiritual progress (Viroli 1995, 113; 118-119). To be patriotic meant to support the growth of the nation’s uniqueness. While today, ‘the nation’ is understood as a bounded community and a unique way of life that organizes membership, for patriotism, the original republican referent - the elusive *patria* - has seemingly lost its place in popular consciousness (Xenos 1996).

I would suggest that cases of honest conceptual confusion between patriotism and nationalism have been engendered by the contemporary nation-state system. Because we are used to thinking of states as tools of nations, perhaps we have also normalized thinking patriotism in terms of the nation. Yet if we wish to continue using patriotism and nationalism as distinct terms, I suggest that patriotism *should* be re-articulated to fit our contemporary post-modern world. Digital communications technology, rapid transport, diffusion of cultures, climate change, post-colonial connections, and voluntary and involuntary migration all drill holes in the monolithic structure of the nation-state. Contemporary usage of patriotism should mirror the form of the ‘traditional’ republican imagination but should also be updated to reflect neutrality in relation to logic of life existent in a polity. We must cut out any inherited ‘communitarian’ elements from patriotism, republican or nationalist, and the idea that we should privilege specific iterations of community because they are ‘ours’. A salvageable conception of patriotism would also need to detach itself from republicanism’s moral and restrictive gatekeeping of the

community and take a more proactive agnosticism towards the type of life in the polity. It would need to re-claim the prefigurative idea of a pure political-geographic autonomy.

My reservation against republican patriotism is that it is ultimately an exclusive and anti-democratic practice. The republican patriot's defense of a specific 'political way of life' *because* it is 'one's own' must be seen as indefensible to the contemporary advocate of democracy, just as much as the nationalist's defense of 'cultural homogeneity'. The tension between republicanism and democracy is longstanding. Republicanism has long been criticized for elitism and a mistrust of the people's ability to manage its affairs. I am skeptical of republicanism's lack of horizontal inclusivity and argue that republicanism creates restrictive barriers for persons to enter the political community. In contrast, the democratic position maintains that as many people as reasonably possible should enter the community because that is the only way to ensure that all of those who have a stake in the outcome of political decisions can have a chance to participate in the formative process<sup>2</sup>.

There are two arguments for the republican version of community. The first is that it is okay to defend the specific way of life of the polity because that way of life is what makes us 'us' (call this the traditional defense). The second, is that it is acceptable to be exclusive because the polity is better off only when its members are republicans, namely that a good polity *is* a republican one (call this the ideological defense). The first one to me seems purely conservative. It implies the natural benefit of positive identity without offering reasons. This sense of the importance of 'us' *ipso facto* is not an argument but a feeling, a powerful feeling, but a feeling none the less. Further, as soon as one starts to begin the argument for the value of 'spiritually' or culturally distinct communities as valuable *ipso facto* they have reached the terrain of communitarianism or nationalism. Overall, the traditionalist argument moves the referent of republican patriotism closer to a defense of community for its own sake.

The ideological defense also fails to be convincing. In practice, it means that members of the polity all accept republicanism as a theoretical premise. But in terms of pluralism this amounts to a paradox! On the one hand, actual states are not founded by only 'true adherents' to political movements. Any idea of foundational unity is instead mythical and usually produced

---

<sup>2</sup> See Bauböck 2018

retroactively to give foundings the air of legitimacy (Yack 1996, 198-199). This means that founding institutions and principles, like constitutions, are treated as beyond reproach. This reverence for an inherited institution, for the ‘already existing thing’, creates immediate barriers for dissenters to enter the community, participate in the political process, and realize the full extent of their citizenship. To give an example, the Canadian province of Quebec, under its status as the special province of the French-Canadian nation (Quebecois), has autonomy to set its own immigration criteria distinct from the federal government. As a consequence, the province can and does mandate that immigration is open only to French speakers. While there is certainly a cultural nationalist motivation to this law, it stems from Quebec’s particular implementation of republicanism. The policy is an extension of the premise that a good community must be cohesive and can deliberate in a shared, homogenous, language. In contradistinction, there are many functioning states employing multilingualism or allowing linguistically autonomous communities to thrive. Really, Quebec’s policy is based not on instrumental merit, a better state, but on ideological aims: a homogeneity in public life that reflects traditional understandings of what it means to live in the province. Republican Quebec’s formulation of a traditional and distinct political culture *qua* French monolingualism occludes perfectly capable and qualified citizens from entering the community. The practice of exclusion becomes self-serving, it is predicated on a fundamental rule beyond the reach of those who have a stake in contesting it.

To conclude, my sense is that the continued use of patriotism by political theorists, especially those operating under the post-Marxist and left-populist banner, belies a tendency to want to ‘save’ some redemptive quality about the *nation* rather than the *patria*. It is becoming quite common to hear others echo Mouffe’s call for the Left to embrace and imagine a ‘Left patriotism’ that takes seriously the affective attachment the masses have for their culture. What I find troubling about these calls, is that they often use the word patriotism but often never in the strict and disciplined context of the republican political theory that Viroli suggested it deserved. Instead, scholars say patriotism and then start talking about the nation, about communal cultures descendent from history and historic right rather than the liberty garnered by moral laws and institutions. In this way, the prefigurative sense of patriotism is replaced by the conservative and defensive quality of nationalism. The affect here is bundled not with ‘Liberty’ but with cultural practices because they are viewed as partial to the being of the exclusive community. That this linguistic move occurs by members of the Left suggests that we are less inclined to want to ‘give

up' on the security that comes with being part of a community than we might want to imagine. We retain some kind of childlike attachment and nostalgia for that grand idea of being part of the national community - of being a child of America or France - which we see as protagonist in the moral struggle. While this tendency is perhaps ubiquitous, it is no less ideological and begs the question not just of the affective forces that center this operation of thought and desire, but the political effects of clinging to the linguistic use of the term patriotism when affectively we *mean* nationalism. Instead of this restrictive patriotism that simply gatekeeps the community in terms of tradition, history, decency, and a positive 'love of country', a true left-wing patriotism for our age takes form as the horizon of establishing unadulterated democracy in a specific place.

#### References:

- Bauböck, Rainer, ed. 2018. *Debating Transformations of National Citizenship*. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92719-0>.
- Margerison, Kenneth. 1998. *Pamphlets and Public Opinion: The Campaign for a Union of Orders in the Early French Revolution*. West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press.
- Mouffe, Chantal. 1993. *The Return of the Political*. Revised ed. edition. London; New York: Verso.
- . 2018. *For a Left Populism*. London; New York: Verso.
- Palmer, Robert R. 1940. "The National Idea in France before the Revolution." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1 (1): 95–111. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2707012>.
- Viroli, Maurizio. 1995. *For Love of Country: An Essay On Patriotism and Nationalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Xenos, Nicholas. 1996. "Statelessness: The Making and Unmaking of Political Identity." *The European Legacy* 1 (2): 820–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848779608579488>.
- Yack, Bernard. 1996. "The Myth of the Civic Nation." *Critical Review* 10 (2): 193–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913819608443417>.
- Zernatto, Guido, and Alfonso G. Mistretta. 1944. "Nation: The History of a Word." *The Review of Politics* 6 (3): 351–66.