The Roots of Nationalism

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An Old Problem Revisited

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Like many people, I first became interested in nationalism in the 1980s. It was a moment when we seemed to be on the brink of a new ‘springtime of nations’. Names that seemed to have vanished from the map forever as sovereign entities – Latvia, Serbia, Lombardy, Flanders – seemed to be clamoring for national rebirth. Journalists were finding it impossible to resist the seductive, if misleading, image that with the thawing of the Cold War, deeply-buried national passions were again germinating in long-frozen soil. By the late 1990s, with the map of Europe now changed, and nationalism apparently producing a bloody harvest in far too many locations, I decided to write a book about how the phenomenon had arisen in France, and the implications of the French case for other countries.¹

Looking back on that period today, it has become clear that in some important ways, this new springtime of nations was more of a false dawn. For one thing, it now seems apparent that the decades since the end of the Cold War have been at least as deeply marked by globalisation, and the growth of many different sorts of transnational bonds and contacts and movements, as by nationalism. In many cases, somewhat paradoxically, nationalism has only flourished because of these new supra-national connections. The robust national movements in Scotland and Catalonia, for instance, only developed in the way they did because of the assumption that as small independent nations they would find a place in the European Union. In the former eastern bloc, no sooner did nationalist movements achieve their goals, than the nations in question eagerly petitioned to surrender important parts of their national sovereignty to the European Union, while also applying to join NATO. It has also become clear that in an age where states have far greater responsibilities towards their citizens than they once did, the acquisition of territory and population, however much it may serve a nationalist goal, can also amount to a mixed blessing, or indeed to no blessing at all. There are now some territories in Europe that might be defined as, at least in some senses, nationally unwanted. For instance, no French government of late has shown much desire to exploit
renewed ethnic strife in Belgium so as to fulfill the dreams of Louis XIV and annex Wallonia – not when it means having to pay welfare to the region’s unemployed workers, and to rebuild its infrastructure. A century ago, it would have seemed absurd for Romania not to desire reunion with a Moldova freed from Russian control, but precious few Romanians now make this annexation a priority. Europeans know just how great a price West Germany paid to absorb East Germany, and no other European state has anything approaching the resources of Germany. Finally, it has become clear that nationalism did not even drive the violence of the 1990s as much as at first seemed to be the case. If we look at the long chain of conflicts that broke out after the collapse of communism, it has become painfully apparent that the more important pretext for large-scale violence was not nationalism, but religion. Nearly all of these conflicts – from Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabagh to Bosnia and Kosovo, took place along the long and porous borders of Islam.

Historical scholarship has of course responded to these changes. The most important historiographical shift of the past quarter-century has been the set of ‘turns’ variously described as global, imperial, transnational, colonial or post-colonial.2 The historians associated with them certainly recognise the power of nationalism, but they see it as one particular force operating in a larger and more complex field, and often trumped by other forces. Back in the 1980s and 90s, it would have seemed eminently reasonable to most historians to have labelled the nation-state the most important political form in nineteenth-century Europe. Today, more historians would almost certainly give that honour to globe-spanning empires. A book such Frederick Cooper’s Citizenship between Empire and Nation is just one prominent example of work arguing that the rise of the national form to global dominance occurred later, and in far more contingent a manner than historians have generally recognised.3 In The Cult of the Nation, I emphasised the development, in revolutionary France, of a French republican nationalism that took as its object the French nation-state. Consider, however, how a recent historian of empire, Gary Wilder, has described the same subject: ‘Revolutionary republicanism and republican universalism must be dissociated from French metropolitan territory and ethnicity [...] as they] were formed on an imperial scale within an Atlantic system ... and we can understand these processes only if we recognise republican France as an imperial formation rather than a national state’.4 One can argue, as I have done, that this statement goes too far.5 Still, if I were to rewrite The Cult of the Nation today, I would give the French colonies, and France’s place within various Atlantic systems, a far more prominent place.
These changes, both in the world at large and within historical scholarship, have driven home the point that a great deal of earlier writing on the history of nationalism – including, *mea culpa*, my own book – was unduly teleological. In other words, it took nationalism as a necessary constituent element, a *sine qua non*, of modernity, and so treated the development of forms of national identification in the early modern period as necessary steps on the road to this modernity. The single most flagrant example of this tendency was probably the sociologist Liah Greenfeld's influential 1993 book *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. But nearly all of the sociological literature of the late twentieth century that explored the history of nationalism made the same basic assumption to one extent or another. Ernst Gellner, most obviously, labelled modernity 'the age of nationalism'. The schools of analysis which Anthony Smith has called 'perennialist' and 'primordialist' have done more to escape the charge of teleology. But they too generally ascribe to nations, and to forms of national identification, a central place in modern human experience that in fact jibes surprisingly poorly with the experience of the past quarter-century.

We need to recognise that what we term nations, national identification and nationalism should all be seen as methods and strategies for organising and mobilising populations and territories – but, crucially, as one set of methods and strategies among many others. Simply lining up quotations that invoke nations cannot by itself demonstrate that nations were the principal means for such organisation and mobilisation. One has to study the context for each quotation, and to try to understand the relative weight of such concepts as nation, kingdom, empire, dynasty, Christendom, and so forth at different periods. It can be argued that nationalism not only developed within specifically modern social and cultural contexts, but has proven especially useful and important in these contexts – I myself would make this argument. But we need to resist seeing nations and nationalism as essential to modernity or, indeed, to human social and political organisation in general. And we need to resist the temptation to think that 'becoming national' is akin to losing one's innocence, crossing a threshold that can never be re-crossed in the other direction. The historian Peter Sahlins, who has written one of the most important historical studies of French nationalism, maintains that forms of national identification often begin for purely instrumental reasons, but over time become 'sticky', acquiring deep and lasting meaning for those who profess them. I quite agree, but with the caveat that even stickiness can be washed away in the proper circumstances. Not every sticky substance is superglue.
With these points in mind, what I would like to do in the remainder of this essay is to return to some of the themes I explored in *The Cult of the Nation in France*, and to consider them from a different angle, in light of the changes just discussed, and in light of subsequent research. In particular, I will draw on new scholarship on the Napoleonic period, which helps us to see the experience of the French Revolution from a new perspective.

**Revolutionary France and the Origins of Nationalism**

In *The Cult of the Nation*, I advanced three broad, related arguments. First, I argued that in the decades around the year 1700, French elites found it increasingly attractive to imagine what they called the ‘nation’ or the ‘patrie’ as the fundamental unit of human coexistence. This shift followed, above all, from powerful changes within the religious sphere, which led these elites to think of the divine as something newly remote and mysterious, and therefore forced them to confront the problem of how human populations and territories might be conceived of, organised and mobilised on their own terms, in ways that did not assume the human world to be bound up in a complex web centred in heaven. And as a result of the shift, the concepts of nation and patrie acquired crucial new political significance. Both the French monarchy and its ideological opponents – the most important of these, significantly, was called the parti patriotique – tried to associate themselves with these concepts. Still, throughout most of the century, both sides continued to define the nation in much the same way it had been defined for hundreds of years. A nation for them was a community of birth: a natural, organic phenomenon that traced its origins back into the mists of time, and that could flourish, wither and die much as individual humans did.

My second argument was that in the turmoil of pre-revolutionary politics and culture, this definition of the nation changed, and became much more demanding. French elites came to see a nation not simply as a natural community, but as a spiritual one, bound together by shared values, shared laws, and by a host of what we would now call shared cultural practices, including the same language. And they therefore came to the surprising and politically potent conclusion that France itself was not, in fact, a nation. The abbé Sieyès, known for his uncompromising assertion of national sovereignty in the year 1789, also spoke, in the same year, of the need to make ‘all the parts of France into a single body, and all the peoples who divide it into a single Nation’. An anonymous journalist...
commented at the same time, even more strikingly, ‘the French perceive quite well that they are not a nation; they want to become one’. After 1789, the leading French revolutionaries nearly all embraced this view of things, and set forth as a principal goal of the Revolution the construction of a nation: the transformation of the many different peoples of France into a single nation united by common values, common practices and a common language (for in 1789, what is today called standard French was still spoken as a first language by a relatively small minority of the population).

It was this moment, I argued, that marked the birth of nationalism in France. And I therefore suggested the need to make a very strong distinction between national sentiment and pride, on the one hand, and nationalism, on the other. National sentiment and national pride are very old phenomena, traceable at least to the Middle Ages. They are rooted in a recognition of a nation’s existence, and generally involve expressions of devotion to and support for it. Such expressions can be found plentifully in medieval and Renaissance writings. Nationalism, by contrast, is a conscious political programme aimed at the construction of a nation where one didn’t exist, or existed only partially. It generally involves the sort of educational programmes championed by the French revolutionaries – programmes that teach common values, common civic habits and, if necessary, a common language. But it can also involve expanding a nation’s frontiers to include territories and populations unjustly separated from the heartland. And it can involve segregating or even expelling minority populations deemed not to have a home in it. Nationalism also generally presents a substantial paradox, or contradiction. On the one hand, nationalist leaders – Sieyès is a good example – generally make exorbitant claims in the name of the nation, invoking it as a sovereign authority that trumps all others. But on the other hand, at the very same time, they are asserting that the nation does not yet exist, or fully exist, and needs to be constructed. The contradiction is generally resolved by a recourse to history. The nation in question is asserted to have existed since time immemorial, and to possess sweeping rights – to territory, to populations, to international status – derived from this pedigree. But now it has fallen into disrepair, into corruption, into degeneration. It therefore needs to be re-built, re-constructed, re-instated. Its rights need to be re-covered. It is worth noting that the French revolutionaries, even as they specifically disavowed nearly all of the French past, nevertheless instinctively spoke of ‘recovering’ the rights of the nation, rather than of founding the nation as something entirely new. A pair of enterprising revolutionary pamphleteers in 1793 went so far as to insist that
the rights of the original French nation had to be pulled out from under the detritus, not just of the French monarchy, but of the Roman Empire and the Frankish conquest. They therefore suggested that as the true nation re-emerged, it should change its name back to Gaul.15 This, then, was the second argument of my book.

The third argument was that particularly during the radical phase of the French Revolution, in 1793-94, a true nationalist programme took shape for the first time in French history – perhaps in European history. But it did so in a rather ironic fashion. Initially in the Revolution, much of the discussion about things national focused on the need to reform the French national character, which was allegedly too ‘light’ – léger – pleasure-loving and frivolous. I could not resist calling an article I wrote on this subject, in homage to Kundera, ‘The Unbearable Lightness of Being French’.16 Among the means discussed for reforming the French character were a stricter school curriculum, the performance of sober republican stage plays, and the organisation of civic festivals. These were some of the venues which Enlightenment authors had identified as most important for the forming of moeurs – moral habits and customs. In his Letter to d’Alembert, Rousseau had suggested, for instance, that Molière’s play The Misanthrope taught the wrong moral message, by encouraging spectators to believe in the social value of polite mendacity.17 His revolutionary disciple Philippe Fabre d’Églantine rewrote the play in 1790, turning the villain Alceste into the hero and insisting on the need for perfect sincerity in all things. The new play became the greatest hit of the revolutionary stage.18 But by the end of the year 1792, the heads of the revolutionary government had come to realise that the school-educated, theatre-attending, festival-participating population they hoped to reform in these venues in fact constituted only a very small, socially elite part of a much larger nation. This year had brought, along with the proclamation of the Republic, the institution of universal adult manhood suffrage for the first time in European history. It had brought to prominence the urban militants, many of them artisans and shopkeepers, known as the sans-culottes. And it had led to the rapid spread of Jacobin societies in the countryside. All of these events had driven home to the revolutionary leadership that they could not reform the national character by rewriting Molière. They had to reach into the urban slums, into the towns, and above all into the peasant villages where the vast majority of the 28 million French citizens actually lived.

But how to accomplish this task, in a country where the state still had a very small presence in most people’s daily lives – where justice had until
recently been rendered by seigneurial lords, most tax collection had been contracted out to private companies, and police forces remained small and scattered? Recent history offered only one compelling example of how an institution might actually reach into villages and reshape the lives of millions of peasants, and this institution was not the French state. The revolutionary leader and Protestant pastor Jean-Paul Rabaut de Saint-Etienne identified it in a speech he made to the Convention in December 1792, on the theme of how to re-educate the French, and, in his words, ‘to make them into a new people’. The task, he explained, required ‘an infallible means of transmitting, constantly and immediately, to all the French at once the same uniform ideas’. And who had previously managed to do such a thing? Here is Rabaut’s answer: ‘The secret was well-known to the priests, who, with their catechisms, their processions ... their ceremonies, sermons, hymns, missions, pilgrimages, patron saints, paintings, and all that nature placed at their disposal, infallibly led men to the goal they designated ... In this way they managed to cast many far-flung nations, different in their customs, languages, laws, colour and physical makeup, into the same mold, and to give them the same opinions ... Should we not do in the name of truth and freedom, what [they] so often did in the name of slavery?’19 I argued that in fact it was the great evangelising ‘missions’ of the Counter-Reformation which provided the most important model for French revolutionary nation-building. Indeed, the revolutionary programmes were devised in the first instance by clergymen turned revolutionaries such as Rabaut, Henri Grégoire, Antoine-Adrien Lamourette, Hyacinthe Sermet and Joseph Cerutti.20 This debt to the clergy became visible especially in the revolutionary debates about the need for a national language. The French Old Regime monarchy had rarely treated France’s enormous linguistic diversity as a serious problem. Only with the Revolution did it become seen as vital for all French citizens to have a means of understanding each other, and the state. Initially, the revolutionary government pursued a policy of translation, hoping to make laws and parliamentary debates available in print in the principal local languages and dialects. By 1794, thanks above all to the influence of the abbé Grégoire, the pendulum had swung towards forcing the entire population to adopt standard French, not merely as the language of public exchange, but as the language of the home. Throughout the revolutionary period, the debates on language were dominated by clergymen, and followed directly from Reformation-era debates about the role of language in imparting to peasants a proper understanding of the Christian religion and Christian morality. Most of the documents actually printed in local
dialects during the Revolution concerned the Revolution's attempt to restructure the Catholic Church in France.21

These were the principal arguments of my book, and in my conclusion I suggested that the French revolutionary experience had important consequences for the larger story of nationalism, both in France and elsewhere. Following on the French example, the idea of nation-building, of conscious political programmes aimed at constructing or reconstructing national communities, spread throughout the Western world. These programmes could take different shapes from the French one, most notably in focusing far more heavily than in France on the creation of ethnically homogenous nation-states in historically national territories. But the impulse towards nation-building remained the same. And in France itself, I suggested, such programmes became vital to the identity of later republican regimes. The Third Republic, in particular, became tightly identified with a nation-building programme aimed in the first instance at French peasants, but that also extended in different ways to colonial subjects and to immigrants.22

Looking back on this conclusion today, I would defend most of it, but I am also quite aware that I engaged in a certain sleight of hand. Specifically, I jumped too quickly, and too easily, from the end of the radical Revolution in 1794 to the foundation of the Third Republic in 1870. I briefly discussed the Napoleonic experience, and the way that non-republican forms of French nationalism took shape in the early nineteenth century – forms that put more stress on ethnicity, on religion and on monarchical tradition than on republican values and a shared culture. But I took for granted, not simply a continuity of national thought from the First Republic to the Third, but a cumulative process whereby the seeds first planted by the Jacobins burst fully into the sunlight of republican modernity at the end of the nineteenth century. Looking at these assumptions from the vantage point of the past quarter-century, I am not sure if they were entirely justified.

To explore this question further, I will now look more closely at the experience of one particular piece of post-Revolutionary French history, namely the Napoleonic Empire. How does it fit into the history of French, and more broadly, European nationalism? Did it see a continued development of the national and nationalist ideas and practices I have just been discussing? And to the extent it did not, should we understand it as nothing but a temporary deviation from the main lines of force of French history? Or did it represent a path which, while not taken, was no less modern and perhaps even no less viable than the one that France, and European nation-states, ultimately did follow?
The Napoleonic Empire and Revolutionary French Nationalism

There are certainly ways in which the form of nationalism that took shape in the Revolution continued to shape French political culture through the Napoleonic period. The continuities are linked to the fact that French revolutionary nationalism was also, paradoxically, universalist. It associated the French nation not with a particular ethnicity or territory, but with universal values, and a universal model of civilisation to which all peoples could aspire. The most important requirement for being French, in this view, was simply the desire to be so, the will to integrate into French civilisation. And so the French nation-building process could extend to territories newly conquered by the revolutionary armies just as easily as to territories that had belonged to France for centuries. In both cases the goal was the same: to replace older customs, values and language with those of the French Republic. Brittany and the Rhineland, Gascony and Lombardy: même combat. This universalism was defined and defended as early as 1790 by the deputy Philippe-Antoine Merlin de Douai, in a famous speech to the National Assembly concerning the integration of Alsace into France. ‘The Alsatian people joined the French people because it wished to; it is therefore its will alone, and not the Peace of Westphalia, which has legitimised the union’.23 It is a statement which anticipates Ernest Renan’s famous definition of a nation’s existence as a ‘daily plebiscite’.

If one thinks about French nationalism in this manner, then the expansion of the Napoleonic Empire far beyond France’s historical boundaries can be seen as simply providing a much larger context for the same essential nation-building project to continue, and this is very much the view that several recent scholars of the Empire have taken. Michael Broers, notably, has written several works trying to apply the concept of ‘cultural imperialism’ to the Napoleonic enterprise, in which he argues that Napoleonic administrators saw the bulk of the newly-conquered populations under their control in very much the same way that their counterparts back within the historical French boundaries viewed the local peasantry: as savages in need of a distinctly French civilising mission. In detailed studies of French rule in the annexed regions of Italy, Broers cites Napoleonic officials there who sounded very much like their earlier revolutionary counterparts, insisting on the need to unite Italian populations, in their own words, ‘entirely to the French’.25 To be sure, this nationalist civilising project was no longer republican, but the continuities with the First Republic still seem clear. Just as in the Revolution itself, wartime conditions made it very difficult to put specific programmes of acculturation into effect. Still, it is worth noting
that, following upon the abbé Grégoire’s revolutionary-era survey of the languages spoken in France, in 1806 Napoleonic officials began to carry out an even more ambitious survey of the languages spoken throughout large swathes of the Empire.\textsuperscript{26}

Broers’s work can easily be seen as reinforcing the view I put forth in \textit{The Cult of the Nation}, namely that an enduring current of nationalist thought and practice flowed forward from the Revolution through subsequent French history, and constituted a necessary part of French, indeed European, modernity. Broers himself situated his work in very much this way, invoking my work in the process.\textsuperscript{27}

And yet, it is easy to exaggerate the universalist reach and ambition even of revolutionary French nationalism. The historian Marc Belissa has argued that Maximilien Robespierre and his allies consistently resisted this implicitly expansionist view of the French nation and put forward a vision of France as one of a number of nations – defined more or less by their traditional historical boundaries – existing in peaceful cooperation with one another.\textsuperscript{28} Edward Kolla has demonstrated very convincingly that the early revolutionary promises to accept into France any territory that requested annexation did not reflect any sort of a priori ideological vision. Rather, they amounted to improvised responses to demands that arose from pro-Revolutionary factions in particular territories, notably Corsica and Avignon, as a result of conflict there.\textsuperscript{29} Merlin de Douai made his speech on Alsace to support Alsatians seeking to deprive German princes of the feudal rights they claimed in the province. So, at the very least, the universalist, expansionary implications of revolutionary French nationalism were more complex and contested than might appear at first glance.

Secondly, the argument that the Napoleonic Empire continued the revolutionary nationalist project relies heavily on testimony from a relatively narrow group of actors. Broers and others put great weight on the top civilian administrators in the newly annexed territory, and these were men who had disproportionately Jacobin backgrounds. It is very much unclear how much their views and aims were shared by lower-level French officials, or by the French military.\textsuperscript{30} We do not really have much of a ‘native’ view either. Nor is there any real indication that the project of ‘integrating’ native populations in the newly-annexed territories reflected a deliberate policy elaborated at the highest levels of the imperial state. In 1793-94, the projects I have called nation-building were discussed and debated incessantly by the National Convention. There was very little equivalent discussion under the Empire. Even the linguistic survey carried out by Baron Coquebert de Montbret and his son for the Ministry of the Interior starting in 1806 seems
to have been largely scientific in nature. It was not intended, as Grégoire’s had been, to prepare for and justify a massive project of language reform.  

The nationalist rhetoric of assimilation and integration was also brutally contradicted by the actual treatment of the newly annexed territories. In theory, after all, the former Jacobins were promising to Italians, Germans, Dutch and Belgians precisely what they were promising to Gascons and Bretons and Alsatians: namely, in return for integration, the full benefits of French citizenship and civilisation. But in practice, the French regime was far more concerned with extracting resources from these territories to feed the war effort, and with crushing all possible resistance. Certainly Napoleon himself, on the evidence of his correspondence, paid far more attention to questions of resources and resistance than to questions of cultural integration. For this reason, many historians are still ready to endorse Paul Schroeder’s view of the Napoleonic Empire as an enterprise driven almost entirely by practical military considerations – Schroeder himself called it a ‘criminal enterprise’ – because of its supposed violations of international norms.

This view is itself something of an exaggeration. For one thing, as Stuart Woolf and Isser Woloch have forcefully demonstrated, the Napoleonic administration often did take on a life of its own. Considering the Napoleonic Empire without Napoleon is not quite like performing *Hamlet* without the prince. But more importantly, it is a mistake to insist on simple, rigid distinctions between regimes driven by ‘ideology’ on the one hand, and those driven by so-called ‘pragmatic considerations’ on the other. All regimes of course need to take issues of resources and survival into consideration. And all regimes pursue goals that follow from a certain vision of the world; they operate according to particular principles, and are run by people who hold particular values. The most battle-hardened and cynical soldier operates according to a set of ideas about how humans behave and live together, no less than the most fanatical ideologue does. The visions, principles and values at play in a given regime may not amount to a formally elaborated ideology that fits neatly between book covers. They may be confused and contradictory. But they are there, and require historical study.

From this point of view, it is worth noting that Napoleon Bonaparte himself certainly did elaborate a vision of European integration during his years as Emperor, even if he spent more time worrying about how to extract resources. His Police Minister Fouché remembered him saying, on the eve of the invasion of Russia, that he wanted ‘to finish what has so far only been sketched out. We need a European law code, a European high court, a single currency, the same weights and measures, the same laws.
I must make all the peoples of Europe into a single people, and Paris, the capital of the world'.\textsuperscript{34} In exile on Saint-Helena he often came back to these ideas. In 1816, he told one of his retinue that he had wanted to make the French, Spanish, Italians and Germans ‘one single and uniform nation’.\textsuperscript{35} His chronicler Las Cases recorded that he repeatedly returned to the idea of a single law code, court system, currency and weights and measures, so as to make Europe a ‘single people’, a ‘single family’.\textsuperscript{36}

These remarks might seem to support the thesis of nationalist continuity between the Revolution and the Empire, and to provide evidence that the local officials in Italy were in fact acting in pursuit of some sort of coherent, official policy. Yet Napoleon did not speak about absorbing other countries into the French nation. He spoke deliberately about ‘Europe’, and a project of European integration. Moreover, he did not attempt what we would now call cultural unification. To be sure, the official language of his imagined European Union would have been French, but Napoleon gave no sense, here or anywhere in his correspondence, that he expected the Germans or Italians or Spaniards to adopt French as the language of local government and business, still less as the language of their homes. When he talked about a single and uniform nation, he meant single and uniform on the level of laws and institutions. In short, his united Europe was not a nation in the sense that the Jacobins of 1793-94 meant the word nation, and it was not a nation in the sense that the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century would mean a nation. It was a purely political and administrative union, not a spiritual one.

The differences between the Napoleonic period and the Revolution becomes even clearer in light of recent work on the public culture of the First Empire. In his book *The Economy of Glory*, the literary historian Robert Morrissey has examined Napoleon’s cult of personality, and taken it more seriously than most historians have done.\textsuperscript{37} He has looked beyond the kitsch, and the scorn that Old Regime aristocrats showed for the jumped up artillery officer from Corsica. And he has made an intriguing argument, namely that Napoleon tried to raise the quality of glory to the level of a social principle, to make it a means of binding people together. ‘As an affirmation of the individual in his or her relationship with the collectivity’ Morrissey writes, ‘glory enabled a reconciliation of the irreconcilable, personal interest with the general interest’.\textsuperscript{38} He traces the way that the public culture of the Empire tried to develop this principle, providing fame and public recognition to acts of selfless devotion to the common good, through institutions such as the Legion of Honour. I would argue that the First Empire in fact saw in the abstract quality of glory very much what the revolutionaries
had seen in the abstract figure of the nation, namely a means of binding people together and pushing them to act for the common good – organising them and mobilising them – without reference to religion. This system of glory rested on two bases. First, it rested on solid, impartial, rational institutions – the sort of autocratic institutions that Napoleon had begun to construct under the Consulate. And secondly, it rested on absolute loyalty to a single individual who could pose as the absolute incarnation of the principle of glory: Napoleon himself. In this sense, the First Empire was anything but a traditional monarchy, despite all the attempts made by Napoleon’s panegyrists to surround him with the trappings of the Caesars and Charlemagne. Napoleon’s legitimacy and authority did not reside in his imperial office, but wholly in his person, in his glory, which he could only maintain through his military victories. Napoleon himself was thoroughly conscious of this point. As he told Las Cases in exile: ‘I was the keystone of a structure that was not just brand new, but built on such shaky foundations. Its survival depended on each one of my battles’.39

To repeat, this was a political vision very different from the nationalist one of the Jacobins. One did not become part of the imagined community of the First Empire by speaking French and participating in common civic rituals and adopting Republican values and practices. One became part of it by submitting to the Empire’s institutions and laws, and by giving complete and utter obedience to the Emperor. And one did so believing Napoleon had the mandate of God, not because he held a particular office or was the representative of the people, but because he embodied better than anyone else on earth a sublime quality, capable of inspiring his followers to glorious actions of their own. Arguably, this was a frail ideological basis on which to build a regime. More specifically, it could be argued that what Morrissey calls the ‘economy of glory’ in fact consisted mostly of militarism – that it exalted specifically military glory over all other sorts of contribution to the common good. Despite Napoleon’s initial protestations on the subject, fully 97% of the nominations to the Legion of Honour under his rule went to soldiers.40 He acted repeatedly to strengthen the position of the army, and gave huge preference in civilian society to his most successful commanders. He imposed forms of military discipline on the state administration and secondary schools, and dreamed of reconstructing the city of Paris around a series of military monuments.41 Could such a regime have survived without constant war and victory? Benjamin Constant, for one, thought not. In his 1814 anti-Napoleonic tract *The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation*, he argued that in a modern world of constitutional regimes and commerce, a regime like Napoleon’s was a grotesque anachronism.42 It could be added that the
economy of glory acted to reinforce the separate, more purely military logic of Napoleon’s epic duel with Great Britain pushing him into ever greater military efforts and risks, in what I have elsewhere called the ‘first total war’. In other words, it may have been self-defeating.

But hindsight is something to be handled with care, and we need to be careful about assuming that the Napoleonic enterprise was doomed to failure, and that the nationalist movements that were beginning to emerge in Europe at the time – many of them in direct opposition to Napoleon’s rule – were assured of success. After all, for a time Napoleon did enjoy spectacular success, and many historians have made the case that even after his catastrophic failure in Russia, he still had opportunities to save at least a remnant of his empire. Few moments in history seem as prey to pure contingency as the years 1813-14, when peace seemed tantalizingly close at many moments.

Furthermore, while Napoleon’s regime itself did of course finally collapse, the ‘economy of glory’ did not vanish with it. In fact, it could be argued that something very similar provided an ideological foundation for the expanding European overseas empires of the nineteenth century. The cult of glory and of the heroic military leader remained alive and well among Europeans in Africa and Asia, most especially among European soldiers. Many historians have recently speculated about a relatively direct connection between nostalgia for the Napoleonic Empire and the imperial impulse in Algeria. I would suggest that an imperialist economy of glory coexisted, throughout the long nineteenth century, with the nationalist passions, and that they were just as important to European political culture.

But these speculations take me far away from the subject of this essay. So let me simply conclude by briefly restating the main point I have been trying to bring across. I would still argue today, as I did in The Cult of the Nation, for seeing nationalism as a modern, conscious, political programme, the first examples of which took shape in the era of the French Revolution. More specifically, I would put in a plea for considering it as a set of conscious, political methods and strategies for organising and mobilising populations and territories. But I would add, with my own hindsight, that we should not assume that some intrinsic logic of modernity favoured these particular methods and strategies over all others. They have proved enormously useful at particular periods for particular groups of people. But at other times other strategies could in fact prevail over them, as was the case immediately after the French Revolution, during the Napoleonic Empire. And as has also, arguably, been the case in much of the world over the past quarter-century for very different reasons.
Notes

13. As in Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers-État?* ([Paris], 1789).
14. See Bell, *The Cult of the Nation*, 140-68.
15. Dupin and Lagrange, *Petition pour rendre à la France son véritable nom* (n.p.: n.n. [1793]).
20. See Bell, *The Cult of the Nation*, 140-68.
22. Ibid., 198-218.
41. See David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare As We Know It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 244-9.
42. Benjamin Constant, *De l’esprit de conquête et de l’usurpation dans leurs rapports avec la civilisation européenne* (Paris, 1814).
43. Bell, *The First Total War*.