WHICH NATION? LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND REPUBLICAN POLITICS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE

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In 1882, Ernest Renan devoted a public lecture at the Sorbonne to the question, "What is a Nation?". He affirmed that the nation was a spiritual principle, a personality, shaped by a common will and memory as well as by a process of historical forgetting: ‘Man is a slave neither to his race nor to his language, nor to his religion, nor to the course of rivers nor to the direction of mountain chains. A great aggregate of men, healthy in spirit and warm in heart, creates the moral conscience which we call a nation’. For Renan, common ideas, a common will, consent and shared memory were more important components of nationality than birth, lineage or language. This political conception of the nation, which was predicated on consent and a shared historical past within the spatial grid of a territorial, centralised state, has shaped republican conceptions of French national identity and the historiography of French nationalism since the French Revolution. Indeed, a long tradition in the historiography of French nationalism has posited a static, unitary conception of the French nation. Historians have argued that one of the central differences between French and German nationalisms that emerged from the revolutionary period is the emphasis that the former placed on consent and contract and that the latter assigned to a common culture in defining the identity of the nation. France’s ‘political’ nationalism, shaped by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Germany’s ‘cultural’ nationalism, which was so clearly articulated by J.G. Herder, are frequently contrasted and compared with one another.

This essay argues that the French Revolution left France with a fundamentally contested understanding of the nation’s identity and that by the beginning of the twentieth century the republican nation came to be defined in both political and cultural terms. In replacing the public person of the sovereign with the ‘nation’, the Revolution ultimately spawned differing and shifting conceptions of the nation among the Right and the Left in the post-revolutionary period. Conflicting claims to the nation and the national past were deeply rooted in the political divisions created by the revolution, and these divisions dominated the public arena of politics throughout the nineteenth century. On the one hand, the post-revolutionary nation came to mean a community of people sharing a common (pre-revolutionary) past, a common culture, and a common language. French identity was defined in terms of ethnicity, race and language. The republican Left, issuing from the Revolution, tended to define the nation in terms of a common sovereign will and contract, repudiating language or race as a

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These competing understandings of the nation and the boundaries of this dualistic conception were, however, by no means fixed. At key moments a common culture became an essential defining feature of French national identity among the republican Left as well as among a nationalist Right during the nineteenth century.

By 1900, however, both the republican Left and the Right paradoxically began to define the nation in cultural terms. In no domain is this process of definition clearer than in the way in which the French language became an essential feature of French national identity. Despite the publication of a number of important studies on state formation and national identity in post-revolutionary France, the question of why a single language became a vital part of the cultural system out of which French 'nation-ness' was constructed by the beginning of the twentieth century remains obscure. Under what conditions did language become a necessary constituent element of French national identity, and how was the insistence on a common language reconciled with democratic, consensual understandings of national belonging, which ostensibly eschewed criteria of ethnicity or culture in forming national attachment?

This essay explores changing perceptions of language and culture among the Left and Right from the French Revolution in the early twentieth century, focussing on the role of linguistic policy in both shaping and symbolising shifts in understandings of the nation's identity. By examining the question of why cultural uniformity and the complete renunciation of regional allegiance ultimately became essential components of French conceptions of nationality by the early twentieth century, this essay suggests that the republican nation was a fluid ideological construction shaped by three phenomena: the revolutionary memory; the pre-eminence of religious conflict as the central fact of French political and cultural life; and the appropriation of the nationalist and regionalist cause by the New Right in the 1890s.

I

The centrality of language to definitions of the French political community was quite foreign to the Old Regime. Despite efforts by the French monarchy to encourage the use of the French language as early as 1539, when the Villers-Cotterêts decree made French the language of official documents, there was no implicit relationship between language and patriotism. The sporadic attempts by the French crown to encourage the use of the French language served strategic purposes. Policies were implemented to propagate French among elites in borderland communities in order to facilitate governmental administration. At key moments military considerations governed linguistic measures designed to ensure the loyalty of royal administrators, as in 1682, when the sovereign council of Roussillon issued an edict that allowed only francophones to enter its administrative offices and liberal professions. However, the monarchy made no attempt to impose the French language on the masses.

Although policies created to promote the use of a national language among elites had been an inherent part of French state-building since at least the
sixteenth century, it was not until the French Revolution that language became a necessary feature of fundamentally new notions of national identity in France. From 1789 to 1794 the revolutionary leadership, like the Bourbon monarchy, tolerated linguistic plurality. The revolutionary government of 1789 appeared even more solicitous than the crown had been toward the use of languages other than French, translating government decrees and directives into regional tongues.

Linguistic uniformity did not become a political and cultural goal until the Revolution and, more specifically, until the establishment of the first French Republic. Soon after the overthrow of the French monarchy in 1792, linguistic unity was introduced as a major subject of political debate, and in 1794 the French state launched a campaign of 'linguistic terrorism' by implementing far-reaching policies designed to promote linguistic uniformity. In short, during the course of the Revolutionary decade, the sovereign nation une et indivisible came to supplant the public person of the monarch and to be predicted for the first time on a unitary social body bound by a single common language.8

In 1794, year II of the Republic, abbé Grégoire, the renegade republican priest, and the fiery orator, Barère, submitted independent reports on the necessity and means through wish to abolish regional tongues and to universalise the use of the French language,10 as the knowledge of the French language became an essential indicator of national loyalty under the Republic. When Urbain Domergue declared 'let us efface [local] jargons as we have effaced the provinces',11 he voiced the sentiment of the majority of members of the Committee of Public Safety and the leaders of the Republic in 1794. It soon became clear that Grégoire and other revolutionary leaders associated patois—local variations of French—and regional languages, such as Flemish, Basque, Breton and Provençal, with religious fanaticism and therefore with counter-revolution, making specific recommendations to enact policies to eradicate their use completely.12

Why did language become a public political issue in 1794 when revolutionary leaders had not seen it as such in 1789? The politicisation and nationalisation of language after the establishment of the first French Republic in 1792 has been variously explained in terms of the internal dynamics of revolutionary politics and as a logical extension of certain linguistic and political theories of the Old Regime.13 Some historians, moreover, have concluded that the republican nation issuing from the French Revolution by definition represented the juridical expression of popular sovereignty, and that this sovereignty implied 'linguistic unity'.14 In short, the politicisation of language has been viewed first as an outgrowth of the changing nature of French domestic and foreign politics, and second as a product of the ideological articulation of national identity during the First Republic.

By 1794 the leaders of the newly created French Republic had executed France's king and had embarked on an internal crusade to purge the country of its internal and external enemies. Revolutionary attempts to impose linguistic uniformity can be considered a component of this effort to rid the country of its enemies and to forge a new national consensus in the midst of war. Patrice Higonnet has also persuasively argued that it can be viewed as a kind of politics of diversion, which turned attention away from more fundamental social and
political tensions. The Committee on Public Safety's language policy was an outgrowth of a domestic political crisis, the perceived threat of secession and subversion by the enemies of the Republic: the priest and the noble. The federalist crisis of 1793 revealed the extent to which the centrifugal forces at the periphery could threaten the stability of the nation. Movements of counter-revolutionary insurrection in the Vendée led by renegade priests and nobles reinforced the revolutionary association of regional idioms with disunity. According to Barère, the continued use of Basque, Breton, Italian and German merely perpetuated 'the reign of fanaticism and superstition', thus assuring the domination of priests and nobles hostile to the revolution and preventing revolutionary ideas from penetrating the nine departments where the idioms were spoken: 'You have taken the saints away from these erring fanatics through the calendar of the republic, take from them the empire of priests through the teaching of the French language'. By 1796 regional languages were invested with a new political and cultural significance as they were intimately associated with federalism, clericalism, religious fanaticism and counter-revolution.

The importance of language in defining the new French nation must, finally, be located in the First Republic's larger utopian, democratic blueprint. It must be regarded as an essential component of the republican agenda, which insisted on political unity and conformity that would be predicated on a common language. In other words, the eradication of local languages was a logical extension of a democratic project designed to erase the historical memory of monarchy and oppression with a new calendar, revolutionary festivals, a new religion, new administrative units, and a single language. Language policy, like the Revolutionary festivals that Mona Ozouf has so skillfully analysed, worked for an enlightened citizenry and the 'homogenisation of mankind'. As Citizen Barère declared before the convention in 1794, 'It is necessary... to destroy this aristocracy of language which seems to establish a refined nation in the middle of a barbarous nation. We have revolutionised government, laws, customs, dress, commerce and thought even; let us then revolutionise language'. Language had become an essential litmus test to define the unitary social body that was to comprise the Republic. A politics of reason made linguistic plurality unacceptable precisely because a multiplicity of languages reinforced the superstitions and historical memory that the Revolution wished to efface. Language became a defining feature of a distinctly republican conception of national identity, and the language policies of the First Republic came to express the Revolution's obsession with unity as well as its negation of its monarchical past.

From the end of the French Revolution to the 1890s six different political regimes succeeded each other in turn. Each regime—First Empire, the Restoration, July Monarchy, Second Republic, Second Empire and Third Republic—made the diffusion of French a national and practical objective in a country where as late as 1863 over a quarter of the country's population did not understand a word of French. None of these regimes insisted, however, on linguistic uniformity. Even though language became an overarching political concern during the First Republic, which rested on universal manhood suffrage, language was not defined as an essential feature of the republican nation in 1848.
or during the early years of the Third Republic, as Renan’s 1882 speech suggests. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century writers and politicians with republican sympathies articulated a conception of a nation predicated on consent rather than culture. For the historian Michelet, unity and personality were what elevated individuals as well as nations. In *Tableau de la France*, he observed that ‘esprit local has disappeared each day; the influence of terrain, climate, race has ceded to social and political action...society, liberty have quelled nature, history has effaced geography’. Similarly, Leon Gambetta, who dominated republican politics in the 1870s and 1880s stressed such contractual, consensual conceptions of nationality that were nonetheless invested with a spiritual and sovereign force. Gambetta informed a group of ardent republicans in 1872 at Annecy that the French Republic was not the ‘meeting of associated provinces...it is not the Touraine united with Provence, nor Picardy joined to Languedoc, nor Burgundy attached to Brittany...No! this whole, this unity, it is the French Republic’. Gambetta’s eloquent language recalled Jules Michelet’s evocative articulation of the French nation as a living personality. Michelet and Renan ultimately embraced the Rousseauist conception of nationhood that emphasised the contractual nature of the republican nation, clearly rejecting racial or ethnic definitions of the nation. Indeed, the rejection of ethnic components of French identity had been reflected in the work of a series of republican theorists from Rousseau to the abbé Sieyès to Emile Littré. Littré defined ‘nation’ in his 1881 *Dictionnaire de la langue française* in the following terms: ‘the assembly of men living in the same territory, subject or not to the same government, having for a long time interests more or less in common’. As Claude Nicolet has argued, although nation, in etymological terms, has a genetic, organic, racist connotation, Littré posited that since the ancien régime this racial component had been superseded by definitions that privileged the common will and common interest. Nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in Sieyès’ 1789 *What is the Third Estate*: “Is there a prior authority which could have told a multitude of individuals: ‘I put you together under such and such laws; you will form a nation on the conditions I prescribe’. We are not speaking here of brigandage or domination, but of a legitimate, that is to say, voluntary and free, association...Where is the nation to be found? Where it is: in the 40,000 parishes which embrace the whole territory, all its inhabitants and every element of the commonwealth; indisputably, the nation lies there”.

What was the importance of the language policies of the First Republic for republican articulations of the nation and the nation’s identity? Did they represent the aberrations of the political moment? Policies enacted to obliterate the use of local tongues in 1794 ultimately failed along with many of the utopian dreams of the republican movement, but they left an indelible mark on public memory by linking support for the preservation of regional tongues with counter-revolution and the insistence on the use of a single language—French—with the nation.
Historians have generally identified renewed policies of linguistic repression toward the end of the nineteenth century with the establishment of the Third Republic. Eugen Weber, for example, has suggested that the drive for linguistic uniformity was part of the larger republican mission civilisatrice, its quest to civilise and assimilate the far reaches of the nation that only incompletely accepted and supported French republican rule and whose clergy were opponents of the Republic. Indeed, in the nineteenth century, the clergy were generally regarded as ardent defenders of popular tradition and opponents of the centralising power of the French state. Parish priests preferred to preach in local languages. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the parish priest more often than not was a defender of local culture and saw, as did the state, the maintenance of regional tongues as a means of preserving the Catholic faith.

For a positivist generation of French republicans, the theological age necessarily had to give way to the democratic and positive age enshrined in the Republic, which was both ‘laic’ and anticlerical. Its mission was to ‘found a new spiritual power, solidly based in science, destined to assure the profound unity of the social body’. By the early Third Republic the nation was explicitly defined in opposition to the Catholic Church. Indeed, Jules Barni’s 1871 Manuel républicain saw the Republic as a secular ‘chose publique’ that could not be separated from the nation itself. For this reason, the separation of Church and state and the ‘transfer of sacrality’ to the nation were implicit parts of the republican programme. Like much of the revolutionary, republican project, this symbolic transfer of the sacred was not so easily achieved. Religion and politics remained ‘deeply, inextricably intermingled’.

Regional languages were intimately linked to the maintenance of the Catholic faith during the nineteenth century. In 1863, a school inspector in the department of Finistère put it this way: ‘... we cannot bar the use of Breton in an absolute manner, even in public schools. Two reasons oppose it: first, the teacher really must use this idiom so as to be understood... in the second place, the teacher owes his pupils an instruction in religion’. He went on to explain that all religious instruction was given in Breton. ‘From the day that one would... impose the exclusive study of the French catechism in classrooms, one would see the welling up of opposition that would soon render them empty. For right or for wrong, most of the members of the clergy think that without Breton, one would see the disappearance of faith and religious customs’. The link between local idioms and popular religiosity, first articulated during the French Revolution, was reiterated by the state and the ecclesiastical establishment in France, which often refused, when requested, to propagate the French language in religious instruction.

The conflict between the institutional church and an ardently anticlerical state over primary education, which culminated in the Separation of Church and State in 1905, dominated French politics from the 1890s to the First World War. Although the Church ultimately fought a losing battle in all but the most Catholic regions of France, the threat that the Church posed to the Republic shaped a new set of cultural policies in the 1890s. Republican calls for vigilance
and a reconsideration of the language issue appeared particularly important after the 1885 national elections in which the Right made significant gains. As these elections were closely followed by the Boulangist attempt to overthrow the Republic in 1889, republicans in power were particularly concerned about challenges to the new regime. Moreover, the New Right emerging from the Boulangist affair came to appropriate regionalism as a political cause.

During these bitter and strident skirmishes between the Church and the Republic, republican sentiment toward regional languages and culture shifted abruptly. Linguistic unity came to be articulated as a political and national necessity. By 1890 government officials demonstrated little sympathy for local languages and culture. This change became clear in 1890, when Armand Fallières, senator of Lot-et-Garonne, proposed legislation that would prevent priests from preaching in local languages. In October of that year Dumay, Minister of Religious Affairs, issued a letter of warning to the prefect of Finistère regarding the use of ‘local dialects and foreign languages’ by priests, which he implied might endanger ‘national unity’.34 He reminded the prefect that the state budget, which paid the salaries of the clergy under the terms of the Concordat, only paid for services performed ‘in the national language and in the French interest’.35 Dumay’s circular indicates a significant transformation in republican thinking: the French language was now implicitly linked to national unity and identity, and, for the republican regime in Paris, regional languages had become an intolerable threat because they had become a political instrument through which the Church undermined national consensus.

The goal of cultural unity made the claims of nation and region incompatible and ultimately justified an increasingly aggressive state-sponsored ‘civilising mission’ that sought to eradicate cultural differences by creating common cultural referents. This goal was symbolised in a 1903 decree that banned the use of Breton, Basque, Flemish and Provençal in religious instruction and in the appropriation of the regionalist cause by the Right. The debate that this decree elicited in the Chamber of Deputies demonstrated the degree to which linguistic plurality was deemed a threat to the republican nation itself because of its association with clericalism. Supporters of the measure charged that the ban on the use of regional languages in religious instruction would ultimately disarm the clergy and the enemies of the Republic, depriving them of a vital tool through which to undermine national unity. Although a number of the decree’s opponents were republicans, they found it difficult to dispel the association of regional languages with clericalism, superstition and backwardness.

By the turn of the century, then, a significant change had occurred in the attitudes of republicans toward cultural and linguistic diversity. Emile Combes, the radical leader of the republican/socialist coalition of 1902 told a divided chamber that the use of regional languages was a clear demonstration of a lack of patriotic allegiance. A common language and cultural unity had become an essential part of republican articulation of nationality.
The political relationship between language, national identity, and republicanism in France indicated the way in which the anticlerical struggles of the 1880s served to associate cultural pluralism—as manifested in the debate over regional languages—with the interests of the Church. To this extent, shifts in republican articulations of nationality can be directly traced to the political fallout engendered by the Republic's *mission civilisatrice*, to the anticlerical policies of the French state. Equally important, however, new linguistic policies and articulations of the republican nation must be linked to competing claims to the nation on the Right.

During the Boulangist crisis and the Dreyfus Affair of the late 1880s and 1890s, a new, nationalist Right challenged the legitimacy of the Republic and justified its political assault in terms of a 'nation' defined in ways that called the Republican leadership's abstract, consensual, national community into question.

The Boulangist and Dreyfus Affairs marked the gradual and, one might argue, paradoxical appropriation of both nationalism and regionalism by the Right. Whereas the republican leadership of the 1880s expressed the national idea in terms of unity, *laicité* and contract, the 'droite révolutionnaire' came to define nationalism in ethnic and racial terms. The virulent right-wing nationalism that characterised the 1890s is frequently regarded as evidence of the transfer of nationalism from the Left to the Right that occurred in the years between the Commune and the First World War.\(^36\) It might best be seen as less of a transfer than as an alternative articulation of national identity.

The New Right, as represented in the work of Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras, arrived at a new formulation of nationality by way of regionalism and *revanchisme*. Indeed, alternative claims to the French nation coincided with the embracing of the regionalist cause by the New Right issuing from the Boulangist and Dreyfus Affairs. The 'strange relationship between dynamic (pre-) fascist nationalism and desperate regionalism'\(^37\) ultimately resulted in the re-politicisation of language and of regional culture. Barrès' and Maurras' new formulation of nationality was a logical extension of their appropriation of the regionalist cause.

Maurras' and Barrès' interest in regionalism grew out of their involvement in provincial literary movements and out of philosophical concerns expressed in their literary work in the 1880s and early 1890s. Their regionalist ideas came to be placed in distinctly political terms after 1895 when they launched attacks on republican efforts to laicise and republicanise France. Both Maurras and Barrès increasingly attributed the moral degeneration of the French nation to efforts to impose cultural and political uniformity on the diverse regions of the country. Both viewed regionalism as a means to regenerate the French nation, but the two had very different ends in mind, reflecting their commitment to divergent social and political ideals.

Barrès' interest in regionalism, or in what he termed federalism, dated from the completion of his novelistic *Culte de Moi* trilogy, and grew out of a philosophical problem of reconciling the individual with society. Although his secretary, Albert Tharaud, claimed that Barrès' interest was more apparent than real and that he continued to reside in Paris,\(^38\) he devoted seven years of his life, from 1888
to 1895 to the federalist campaign, both a politician, as contributor to the *Quinzaine*, and as editor of *La Cocarde*, a newspaper whose professed aim was to reconcile 'individualism' and 'social solidarity'. Barrès proclaimed in none too ambiguous terms that *La Cocarde* advocated administrative decentralisation and liberty of association in order to resuscitate 'our faculties of cohesion'. Citing the Provencal poet Frédéric Mistral, he claimed that every region had its own temperament, its own *raison d'être*, and that the individual could only acquire a sense of social solidarity by affirming his relationship to his *pays natal*. However, he emphasised that regionalism was a necessary consequence of the democratic tradition by claiming that the French Revolution, in principle, was a reaction against administrative centralisation, uniformity and the corporate society of the *ancien régime* defined in terms of privilege. Indeed, in the 1880s, Barrès never failed to insist on the value and legitimacy of the democratic tradition and argued that decentralisation by no means contradicted the principles of the Revolution.

His support for regionalism in the 1880s and 1890s was also a consequence of his growing concern with the social question, with the conflict between capital and labour, and with the plight of the French worker. In an article entitled, 'Le socialisme sera décentralisation', Barrès argued that decentralisation would not necessarily provide a solution to the social problem, but that it would facilitate a solution. According to Barrès, each particular region was a 'social laboratory', with its own needs and economic resources. He perceived that the intense conflict between capital and labour, unemployment, and the terrible poverty of the French worker were aggravated by the growth of centralised industrial enterprises based in Paris and supported by foreign capital. Urban industrialists felt no qualms about importing cheap labour, the *métèque*, from Belgium, Italy and Spain, who destroyed the independence and security of the French worker.

Regionalism was also an argument, in effect, against international collectivism. He suggested that one of the great dangers of international socialism was that the worker would again be forced to follow the dictates of a central decision-making authority which would ultimately fail to respond to the needs of different national and regional economies. He praised the Bavarian section of the Frankfurt Congress in 1894 for refusing to submit to the central control of the party because the latter failed to recognise and deal with the particular needs of the Bavarian worker. He railed against the way in which international socialism suppressed the legitimate and concrete basis of national allegiance; it substituted the abstract principles of equality stressed by republicans in the tradition of Renan for an allegedly more natural attachment to kin and soil. In short, in the early 1890s, Barrès worked out an eclectic brand of what he called 'national socialism'. He actively supported freedom of association, the cooperative movement, and labour policies discriminating against the *métèque* or foreigner.

Although Barrès never wholly repudiated the principles of the Revolution of 1789, his nationalism and his concern for national unity came to be articulated in a new way as a result of the Dreyfus Affair and his conversion to the doctrine of 'la terre et les morts' (blood and soil). As Zeev Sternhell has pointed out, Barrès' conceptions of nationality in the 1880s and 1890s were jacobin—a far cry from
the notion of 'organic nationalism', which he came to espouse in the *Roman de l'énergie nationale*, published in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair.  

Barrès’ conversion to 'rootedness', to 'organic nationalism', occurred between 1895 and 1902, during the course of his work on the *Roman de l'énergie nationale*, his penultimate novel, which concerned itself with several major themes: the moral degeneration of France, the problem of national unity, and, finally, with the cult of Alsace-Lorraine. On the political level, it was an indictment of republican attempts to laicise and republicanise the French countryside. More specifically, it was a condemnation of the French educational system. Thibaudet, Maurras and Charles-Brun claimed that, in essence, Barrès’ novel popularised the regionalist cause; *dénraciné*, the uprooted, became a part of the political language of administrative reform in the early twentieth century. More importantly, perhaps, Barrès forged the link between fin-de-siècle nationalism and regionalism.

The *Roman de l'énergie nationale* was both an explicit attack on the republican regime and on the political corruption of parliamentary politics. It provided a solution to the national degeneration of the country by spelling out the basis of a regionalism, to which the concept of 'organic nationalism' was intimately linked. This attack is embodied in the figure of the schoolmaster Bouteiller. Described as a 'pedagogical product, a son of reason, stranger to our traditional, local, and familial customs, completely abstract, and truly suspended in the void', he is entrusted by Gambetta with the task of instilling republican ideals and patriotic fervor in his students.

Bouteiller teaches the central characters in the novel notions of abstract liberty, patriotism, and a universal Kantian morality which is summed up in the maxim: 'I must always act in such a way that I can wish to have my action serve as a universal rule'. One of the main characters in the book, Saint-Phlin, a native of Lorraine, finds such prescriptions to be 'half Parisian, half German', dreamt up by the Ministry of Education to serve political objectives. Barrès condemns the republican regime for making citizens scorn their localities, their *petite patrie* without providing them with a basis on which to identify themselves with the French nation: ‘To uproot children, to detach them from soil and social group where all is joined, in order to place them beyond their prejudices in abstract reason, how will that trouble him, he who has neither roots nor society?’

Bouteiller, in Barrès view, fails to give his students a sense of social cohesion. In essence, Barrès attempted to show how regionalism and nationalism, two sides of the same coin, were a means to achieve his aim of national regeneration. At the international federalist congress in 1895, he proclaimed that Paris had given France an abstract notion of liberty, which had no real concrete basis. He argued that the French nation was composed of regional *patries* and that in order for the citizen to have a sense of national identity, he had to have precise and tangible reasons to love his country: 'That the word country not only be a metaphysical expression used by orators at agricultural fairs, at banquets...one will only love ones country if one touches it'. By the late 1890s he believed that French national identity was not derived from the Revolutionary principles, as he had claimed in the 1880s; rather, national allegiance rested on the individual’s consciousness of the historical, climatic, cultural and racial forces that shaped his development.
Maurice Barrès’ new formulation of the basis of French patriotism in the 1890s was clearly embraced by his monarchist compatriot, Charles Maurras, founder of the Action Française. In 1895, Maurras wrote in *La Cocarde*: ‘Country is a certain place in the world where one has flesh-and-bones ancestors…’ He contrasted ‘real France’, defined in terms of provincial variations, ‘her rich nuances’, with ‘artificial France’ defined in terms of uniform, rational administrative units. He praised Barrès for being the first to emphasize the intimate distinction between nationalism and federalism. Barrès’s book, *Déracimés*, he argued, helped to publicise the federalist cause and to indicate the ways in which ‘metaphysical nationalism’, espoused by republicans, must be replaced by a territorial and ethnic conception.

Maurras derived his conception of nationality not only from Barrès, but also from Auguste Comte, Le Play and Hippolyte Taine. Comte’s ‘elementary axiom of sociology’ was that ‘human society is composed of families, not of individuals’. The family, which was the natural vehicle of tradition and the least artificial form of association necessarily provided the basis of a ‘concrete patriotism’.

In the words of Marcel Prélot, whereas efforts to decentralise governmental institutions prior to the 1890s might be viewed as a ‘technique’, regionalism became a sentimental ‘mystique’. As representatives of the New Right, Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès played crucial roles in popularising the ‘mystique’ of both nationalism and regionalism. Maurras, in fact, argued that Barrès was the first to reconcile nationalism with regionalism, to show that it was necessary to substitute ‘administrative patriotism’ with ‘territorial patriotism’, to replace the republican notion of ‘ideal France’ with a new notion of ‘real France’. In this sense Barrès was largely responsible for politicising the term regionalism by linking it to a national past rooted in the Old Regime.

Not surprisingly, proponents of the New Right became ardent and vocal defenders of the use of patois and regional languages. Barrès met with Charles Le Goffic, the Breton patriot, in Brittany in August 1886, where they decided to form a regionalist review, *Chroniques*. The project proved to be a failure, but Le Goffic, and Barrès continued to correspond until the latter’s death in 1942. He also had a number of ties with local literary societies that included the Félibrige, which was devoted to the preservation of Provençal culture, to local languages, and to the poet Mistral, who served as an inspiration for the group. Barrès, in fact, made a pilgrimage to Provence to visit Mistral in the autumn of 1895 with Maurras, and again in October 1898. Regional literary societies formed during these years, and specifically those dedicated to the preservation of local languages, were composed of notables of the Old and the New Right, which, for republicans, further emphasized the Right’s political appropriation of regional culture for political purposes.

The Right’s articulation of national identity in terms of linguistic, ethnic, and emotional attachments to ‘blood and soil’ was a powerful reaction against the agencies of the state’s *mission civilisatrice*, including patronage politics, the educational system, national development programs, and the building of a railway network, which ostensibly served to create new allegiances and to undermine the natural and historical division of provincial France. The Right was quick to exploit the contradictions inherent in republican conceptions of national identity and its *mission civilisatrice*. The republican government
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ostensibly remained committed to a nation based on consent, contract, and a shared revolutionary past, but, at the same time, it needed the political support of even the most remote anti-republican constituencies. The new nationalist Right made the republican leadership confront the problem of cultural diversity head on: how could the republican government tolerate linguistic and cultural pluralism and, at the same time, retain control of reactionary regions such as Brittany where an allegedly anti-parliamentary nobility successfully controlled the vote?

In the 1890s regionalism and the defence of local languages and culture came to be associated with the New Right in the popular mind. Indeed, many believed that Barrès had coined the terms ‘regionalism’. For Thiebault Flory, Barrès’ ‘politicisation’ of the term regionalism was not a welcome event because it ultimately gave the movement a ‘nationalist and reactionary tint’.

The New Right’s emphasis on a conception of nationality defined in terms of ‘blood and soil’ and the regionalist project shaped changing perceptions of national identity among republicans. The politicisation of regional culture ultimately resulted in the politicisation of language and of regional difference more generally. By 1914 regionalism and the use of local languages came to be associated with the Church, as a bastion of tradition, and with the New Right. When the clergy in Lower Brittany, for example, founded a weekly newspaper, *Feiz Ha Breiz*, ‘Faith and Brittany’, whose motto, ‘Faith and Brittany are brothers and sisters’, they clearly wished to use local allegiance as a means of maintaining religious faith. When Barrès attacked the bloodless, reasoned claims to nationality among republicans, he wished less to defend regional culture or language than to harness them for political ends.

The broader implications of the New Right’s nationalism and its sanctification of provincial languages and traditions were in the end disturbing to republicans. In 1906, Maurice Barrès was elected to the conservative first district of Paris. Maurras claimed that he became concerned with two major problems: how to defend France against the German threat and how to develop ‘notre antique sève française’. His concern for the individual and the social question, which was worked out in terms of the integration of nationalist and regionalist doctrine, became subordinated to the *revanche*, which translated into the cult of his native province Alsace-Lorraine. In 1904, he wrote that if the French nation was ‘badly run’, the predominance of southern politicians in the Chamber of Deputies was responsible.

He began to attribute the paralysis and corruption in parliamentary politics to the ‘preponderance of southerners’ in the Chamber of Deputies—to men like the socialists Jean Jaurès and Alexandre Millerand, on whom he blamed the problems in the French national community: ‘against this southern preponderance, there are objections, not only those from Lorraine, Normandy, Brittany, Flanders, but French objections’. Paradoxically, Barrès used regional cultural difference as a basis to attack the republican leadership for undermining French unity. According to Barrès, the crime of southern politicians consisted of allowing old enmities to reappear, or of failing to respect the regional traditions of other parts of France: ‘Across the Loire river, two irritated Frances stare at one another. What is there in common between us? Understanding of provincial
variation should be at the centre of a French man of state's science, essential to his concerns. The question that Barrès raised—'What is there in common between us?'—was the logical, and for republicans, frightening consequence of a redefinition of the nation in territorial, ethnic and linguistic terms. Although Barrès continued to argue that regional allegiance formed the primary component of national allegiance, for republicans he confirmed the dangers and apparent contradictions in this view.

The politicisation of language and regional culture on the Right ultimately hardened republican opposition in Paris to provincial difference. At the periphery, however, it placed republicans in the almost impossible position of reconciling regional and national allegiances. Indeed, these competing allegiances and the Republic's civilising mission spawned conflicts that would not easily be contained. For it was precisely in a France filled with almost infinite cultural variation that Barrès question—What is there in common between us?—came to haunt the defenders of the Republic.

Language has proved to be a powerful tool for the symbolic construction of national communities in old and new states. This essay has sought to explain why and how language became a fundamental defining feature of the republican nation in France between the Revolution and the First World War. It argues that the consensual, revolutionary definition of the nation evoked by Renan in his 1882 lecture was invested with new cultural meaning by 1900, and that this new meaning must be understood in terms of the bitter religious conflicts of the post-revolutionary period and the embrace of nationalist and regionalist caused by the New Right in the 1890s.

Republican articulations of national identity were however, in a deeper sense shaped by the memory of the revolution and a contested past. In repudiating many of the institutions associated with the Bourbon monarchy and in attempting to erase the memory of the Old Regime, the revolutionary experience left France with an understanding of the nation that was both grounded in principles of the revolution and in a shared cultural past. The nineteenth century proved to be a battleground for a people who have tried to come to terms with the claims to a largely disputed national idea. The fundamental divisiveness of the founding moment of the Revolution has continued to shape uncertainties concerning the identity of France. Indeed, the shifting importance of the French language to definitions of the nation illuminates the fundamental paradox facing French national community in the twentieth century: how was the insistence on a common language and culture, the repudiation of cultural or linguistic pluralism, reconciled with a nation whose existence is, in the words of Renan, a 'daily plebiscite', a 'common will in the present'?

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NOTES


5. Georges Mounin, Histoire de la linguistique des origines au XX siècle (Paris, 1985), p. 120.


7. Sahlin, Boundaries, op. cit., p. 116. Sahlin argues that before the Revolution, state policies of gallicisation remained ‘limited to administrative and political contexts’ (p. 118).


14. ‘Tant que l’Etat français sera défini comme la seule traduction juridique de la
souveraineté nationale et populaire, qui n'a d'expression légitime que dans la loi, il faudra bien que la loi soit la même pour tous et qu'elle soit souveraine... il faut qu'elle soit exprimée dans un seul langage, ce qui implique bien évidemment, à ce niveau étatique, l'unité linguistique. La loi française doit parler français. Il est grave d'avoir à le rappeler aujourd'hui, où fleurissent tant de sottises sur "l'impérialisme" linguistique...". Claude Nicolet, *L'Idée républicaine en France: essai d'histoire critique* (Paris, 1982), p. 461.


26. One scholar has argued that since the beginning of the nineteenth century the French state played a major role in the construction of national identity and that "ideologically, then political community is, in France, identical to cultural community". This conflation of cultural and national identity only came to be articulated in absolute terms toward the end of the nineteenth century. David Beriss, 'Scarves, Schools and Segregation: the Foulard Affair', *French Politics and Society, 8* (Winter 1990), pp. 1-13. P. Sahlins has made a convincing case for a continued separation of cultural and national identity in the Catalan Cerdagne at least into the 1860s. Sahlins, *Boundaries, op. cit.*


33. When the bishop of the diocese of Quimper in Brittany was sent a deliberation on the utility of propagating the French language in religious instruction, the bishop informed the prefect that he would not authorise any of his curés to recite the catechism in French. A.D. Finistère, 1T68, letter from the bishop of Quimper to the prefect, 14 March, 1838. For the close connection between Catholic instruction and regional languages in other regions of France see Gérard Cholvy, 'Enseignement religieux et langues maternelles en France au XIXe siècle', *Revue des langues romaines*, lxxviii (1976); and E. Coornaert, 'Flamand et français dans l'enseignement en Flandre française des annexations au xxe siècle', *Revue du Nord*, llii, No. 209 (1971).

34. A.D. Finistère, 1V56, letter from Dumay to prefect of Finistère, 30 October, 1890.
Rémont argues that an entire set of nationalist 'sentiments and values heretofore considered the birthright of radicalism' were transferred to the Right, René Rémond, *The Right in France from 1815 to de Gaulle*, trans. James Laux (Philadelphia, 1966), p. 208.


*La Cocarde*, 17 October, 1894, p. 1. In the last issue of *La Cocarde*, which was published on 7 March, 1895, Barrès wrote 'Individualisme et solidarité. Tel à été la formule constante de *La Cocarde* pour affirmer qu’entre ces deux termes, l’individu et collectivité, il n’y a pas une antinomie irréducible' (p. 1).


Ibid.


Ibid., pp. 8–10.


Ibid., p. 96.


Renan, ‘What is a Nation?’, in *Nation and Narration*, p. 19.