I have tried for the past couple years to disconnect myself from the daily bombardment of news and commentary which permeates our everyday lives. This constant assault on our thoughts has now expanded its reach and power through social media where algorithms ensure you only hear echoes of your own ideas infinitely reverberated in the chambers of those networks which make us think we are truly “connected”, that there is such a thing as a “public platform”, a general debate amongst all the individuals or at least the different factions and groups of individuals which constitute a society. To do this as a young French-canadian living in Montreal I used very simple tactics; unfollowing people on Facebook who are eager to share they’re “thoughts” on a regular basis for everyone to see, I have stopped consulting any news and favoured magazines which tend to focus on reflective analysis of contemporary events instead of both spreading and commenting with eagerness every relevant piece of news, of actuality, and, more generally, I have stopped “caring”. Stopped engaging in “political” discussions; as I grow older they seem to me increasingly, vacuous, vapid, redundant and merely expressions of other needs than to one the communicate or have an elevated conversation. Those needs would be, and the list is not exhaustive, to belong to a tribe, to show other people we are more educated or smarter or wittier, or merely to antagonize and provoke.

This strategy is now failing me as the next American elections are monopolizing every medium for they are fascinating in exhibiting everything that is inconsistent in our collective politics are. We know intuitively that politics are spectacle, this is now a rather commonplace idea, and yet we strive to be optimistic and see this as collateral damage of “democracy”. A necessary negative externality in the development of modern liberal state.

I would like to make the point that this is not the case, at all. That this spectacle is the result of the major paradox of our conception of modern politics, namely, nationalism. It is a tired cliché to say that the most pervasive ideology of our times. The best exposition of this cliché would probably be the following old joke: An old fish swims by two younger ones and says “Nice water today”. Later one of the younger fish would turn and ask his friend “What the hell is water.”

I would say that nationalism is the water we swim in everyday without ever seeing it. When we do, it is in an externalised form, we think of nationalism as an anomaly, something that happens when certain people are backwards and cannot recognize the convergence of modern times to federalization, or, as backlash when current boundaries by which the states live are misaligned. This is also a very tired explanation of why Africa is a continent that has seen so much devastation; the colonizers left with absurd lines traced as territory without regard for “actual” ethnicities.

This is wrong. It is wrong simply because we are so enmeshed in nationalism, in our every thoughts, in our every conversation that we cannot it anymore. We are merely amused by absurdities revealed by for example the PQ’s absurd internal conflicts based on whether or not they should hold a referendum, and anyways what *is* the true nature of Quebec’s culture, an absurd question in many respects, as if a common cultural identity could be neatly defined, in a charter, ridiculous.

However the absurdities introduced by nationalism are deeper than those revealed by Trump’s explosive bigoted statements or by the fractures in Quebec local political discourse. Many scholars have attempted to decipher nationalism in the past decades, amongst them Ernst Gellner is a well-known Canadian scholar and Benedict Anderson’s modernist explanation in “imagined communities” is now old news for certain spheres of academia. It is however in John Breuilly’s essay “Approaches to nationalism” that I found the most clear cut straight to the point accounting for all the absurdities I hear in conversation:

“Logically the two concepts of a nation - a body of citizens and a cultural collectivity- conflict. In practice nationalism has been a sleight-of-hand ideology which tries to connect the two ideas together”

At this point I’d like to address some reserves some people might have with my claim that nationalism is at the center of virtually every political discourse. I’d do this by saying that the modern state is the fundamental concept in modern politics and simply ask on what the legitimacy of its power over a clearly defined territory is usually based. To which the answer is quite obvious I think.

The paradox that Breuilly synthesises in a quite shockingly concise manner is I think the key to understand all the ridiculous aspects of current politics. South of the border there are endless debates over immigration, what does it mean to be a good “American”, what wars are legitimate to protect “Americans”. Who are “Americans”? Are the illegal immigrants that have been living there for decades and working and raising families without any official proclamation of their legitimate belonging to “America” proper “Americans”? There is no answer, because, of course, this is a ridiculous, a *preposterous* question. The terms are not clearly defined, and, more importantly, we gain simply *nothing* by asking it.

PQ Mathieu bock coté multiculturalisme.