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Patriotic Language and French National Unity: 1898-1915

The varied use of patriotic language in France from the Dreyfus Affairs to the first Great War is not always straight forward or unifying. Patriotic language can be used to stir passions and divide people by claiming to be representing true loyalty. It has also been used to rally the French people as a whole behind a foreign enemy. During the late 1890s, patriotic language was used to distinguish between Jews and more “authentic” Frenchmen. However, patriotic language has been used to contrast the patriotic fever and nationalism with the fundamental importance of humanity in French government. During the Great War patriotic language was used to spear head the unanimous consent to war and national defense against foreign invaders. During a time of great international tension, some people would claim that courage and bravery come from the cohesion of one’s group and patriotic language helped articulate the need for that cohesion. Women have shown that they are willing and able to take the place of men in masculine work settings as an effort to support the soldiers and strengthen that group. From dividing to unifying, for France or for the humanity that La Republique has been established to protect, patriotic language has been a way for people to gain support, critique or pledge allegiance to France.

Dreyfus and the Jewish French

Patriotic language can be used to divide people. In his election campaign speech in 1898, Maurice Barrès invokes the language of “the fatherland” in order to drive a divider particularly between Jewish French people and non-Jewish French people (Burns, 7). Barrès’ uses la patrie to

pose France as needing protection from the Jewish invasion. Although the invaders he speaks of are legal French citizens, the language may have been intended to stress fabricated, but significantly accepted, ideas about differences between French nationalism and Jewish identity. To this extent it can be argued that the use of this language might be intended to unify a body of Frenchmen against another body of Frenchmen – dividing the French people. Growing nationalism among the French people could have provided a suitable context for language like this to be particularly effective.

An essential element of the new French politics should be to protect all citizens against that invasion, and also to guard against that excessively cosmopolitan – or, rather, excessively German – socialism which would weaken the defense of the fatherland. The Jewish question is linked to the national question. Ranked by the Revolution, with authentic Frenchmen, Jews kept their distinctive traits, and after having once been persecuted, they became tyrants (Burns, 7).

However, patriotic language has been used to contrast the more important, or fundamental, questions about humanity. On page 118 of the Burns text, a section from Jean Jaurès' *La Petite République* discusses the corruption of the French political and military systems during the same year. He makes the argument that blindly or ignorantly consenting to the actions of the Republic may be in truth robbing the French people of a system that honors and protects humanity. "He [Dreyfus] is only a model of human suffering at its most poignant. He is the living witness of the military lie, of political cowardice, of the crimes of authority...In order to remain socialists, we are not obliged to run away from humanity..." (Burns, 119). So it is fair to say that Jaurès is using patriotic language to contrast the importance of the system (*La Petite République*) with what it is meant to protect (humanity).

Poincaré, the Spear Head

By the time President Poincaré is giving his war message in 1914, international tensions have pushed growing French nationalism to the point of widespread focus on the enemy of the French people. Here, patriotic language is used to unite the French behind the cause of war.

The President of the Republic interpreting the unanimous feeling of the country, expresses to our troops by land and sea the admiration and confidence of every Frenchman. Closely united in a common feeling, the nation will preserve with the cool self-restraint of which since the beginning of the crisis, she has given daily proof (Poincaré).

Poincaré uses this language to claim that he is representing the French – that the efforts of the French have been unified at least in support of the soldiers. In this text, the French are the French, where as in the Burns text it is clear that the French are actually divided into more and less French peoples. It is difficult to claim this is an indication of decreasing tensions between different demographics of the French population, but it is clear that this text indicates French unity at least on the international level.

A Soldier's France

Mar Bloch uses patriotic language as a soldier who has risked life in defense of his country, although he is honest that as a soldier he isn't fighting for his country. "Also, I believe that a few soldiers, except the most noble or intelligent, think of their country while conducting themselves bravely; they are much more often guided by a sense of personal honor, which is very strong when it is reinforced by the group... 'Vive la France, et vivement la victoire'" (Bloch, 166). In this text, we have the use of this patriotic language as a soldier describes the importance and

strength of a unified group. To me, it seems that one could infer that the group Bloch is referring to, as a solider, might be considered a microcosm for the importance of a unified France. He claims that people draw the strength and courage to do what's necessary for the greater good out of reinforced backing from your group. A weak group in this sense wouldn't be effective at sustaining French honor, patriotism or courage. Bloch uses this language to rally the French to support each other in a less abstract way. The Great War provided a mutual enemy which the French can unitedly recognize, and Bloch is trying to enforce sentiments that would make the French capable of defending against this enemy.

Women and National Pride

In *Lines of Fire*, ideas of patriotism are articulated by women who are in one way or another connected to the national efforts in the Great War. On page 131, a woman is asked about how her experiences working in a factory. Here, the patriotic language effectively illustrates the kind of transformation French women have been able to make in order to support the cause. It is testament to the unification that this war has had on French people.

Our sense of the present need, of the national peril, of hatred for the enemy, of the courage of our husbands and sons – all tis pricks us on, we work with all our heart, with all our strength, with all our soul. It is not necessary to stimulate us, each one is conscious of the task assigned to her and in all simplicity she does it, convinced that she defends her country by forging the arms that will free it. We are very proud of being workers for the national defense (Higonnet, 131).

One of the major transitions for the French people during the Great War was when women had to start doing masculine work. Statements like the one quoted above indicate that French women

were willing and proud to work in factory settings if that is what France needed. The patriotic language used by this woman included women in the war effort – making their wartime efforts and support of the nation a contribution from French people to the French cause.

Conclusion

Whether to divide or unite or critique, patriotic language has been used to invoke ideas of national identity within the context of events during this history. During the Dreyfus affair patriotic language was used to distinguish between French people – used as a force to divide a people. During the Great War patriotic language was used to support and represent a more widespread unity amongst the French against the foreign enemy. Patriotic language has provided a relevant and significant method to address issues facing the French people during the time from the Dreyfus Affair to the first Great War.