

Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?", text of a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11th, 1882, in Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, Paris, Presses-Pocket, 1992. (translated by Ethan Rundell)

I propose to analyze with you an idea which, though apparently clear, lends itself to the most dangerous misunderstandings. The forms of human society are of the greatest variety. They include great agglomerations of men after the fashion of China, Egypt, and ancient Babylonia; tribes such as the Hebrews and the Arabs; city-states on the Athenian and Spartan model; reunions of diverse countries such as were to be found under the Carolingian Empire; communities such as the Israelites and the parsis, lacking a country and maintained by religious bonds; nations like France, England, and most other modern, autonomous polities; confederations after the fashion of Switzerland and America; the great families that race, or rather language, has established between the different branches of Germans, the different branches of Slavs. Such are the types of groupings that exist, or rather existed, and that one confuses only at the price of the most serious inconvenience. At the time of the French Revolution, many believed that the institutions of small independent cities such as Sparta and Rome could be applied to our great nations of thirty or forty million souls. In our days, a yet greater error is committed: one confounds the idea of race with that of the nation and attributes to ethnographic, or rather linguistic, groups a sovereignty analogous to that of actually existing peoples. Let's try to achieve some precision in regards to these difficult questions, questions in which the least confusion over the meaning of words in the first steps of the reasoning process can produce by the end the most disastrous errors. What we are going to do is a delicate operation, indeed, it is nearly vivisection: we are going to treat the living as one ordinarily treats the dead. We shall keep them cold, however, with the most absolute impartiality.

I. Since the end of the Roman Empire or, better yet, since the break up of Charlemagne's Empire, western Europe has appeared to be divided into nations, certain of which, at certain moments, have sought to exercise hegemony over the others without ever having succeeded in a lasting fashion. What Charles V, Louis XIV, and Napoleon I were unable to do, it is likely that no one shall do in the future. The establishment of a new Roman or Charlemagnian Empire has become an impossibility. The division of Europe has reached such a point that any attempt at universal domination too quickly provokes a coalition that returns the ambitious nation to its natural frontiers. A sort of equilibrium has been long established. France, England, Germany, and Russia shall for hundreds of years remain, and despite whatever they will have experienced in the meantime, historic individuals, the essential pieces of a checkerboard whose squares vary ceaselessly in importance and grandeur without ever fully being lost in one another.

Understood in this way, nations are something rather new in history. Antiquity did not know them: Egypt, China, and ancient Chaldea were in no sense nations. They were herds led by a child of the Sun or of the Sky. They were no Egyptian citizens, no more than there were Chinese ones. Classical antiquity had its republics and its municipal kingdoms, its confederations of local republics, its empires; it hardly had a

nation in the sense that we understand it. Athens, Sparta, Sidon, and Tyr were small centers of admirable patriotism but they were cities with relatively restrained territory. Prior to their absorption into the Roman Empire, Gaul, Spain, and Italy were assemblages of peoples, often comprising leagues between themselves but without central institutions or dynasties. The Assyrian, Persian, and Alexandrine Empires also did not constitute fatherlands. There were never any Assyrian patriots; the Persian Empire was one great fief. Not a single nation finds its origins in Alexander's colossal adventure, otherwise so rich in consequences for the general history of civilization.

The Roman Empire was much nearer to being a fatherland. In response to the cessation of wars, Roman domination, at first so hard, quickly came to be loved. It was a grand association synonymous with order, peace, and civilization. In the last days of the Empire, there was to be found among elevated souls, enlightened bishops, and the literate a genuine sentiment for the "Roman peace" that one opposed to the menacing chaos of barbarous countries. But an empire twelve times the size of present-day France does not constitute a state in the modern sense of the word. The schism between the East and the West was inevitable. The attempts to found a Gallic empire in the third-century did not succeed. It was the Germanic invasions which introduced in the world the principle that, later on, would come to serve as the basis for the existence of nationalities.

What did the Germanic peoples do between the great invasions of the fifth-century until the last Norman conquests in the tenth? They had little effect on the races they encountered but they imposed dynasties and a military aristocracy on the more or less important portions of the ancient Western Empire and lent their names to these places. It is here that France, Burgundy, Lombardy, and, later on, Normandy find their origins. The rapid preponderance achieved by the Frankish Empire briefly restored the unity of the West but this Empire was irredeemably shattered around the middle of the ninth-century. The Treaty of Verdun traced divisions that were in principle immutable. From that point on, France, Germany, England, Italy, and Spain were to travel, by frequent detours and across a thousand adventures, towards the full national existence we today see blossoming.

What characterizes these different states? It's the fusion of the populations that comprise them. In the countries that we have enumerated, there is nothing analogous to what you find in Turkey, where the Turk, the Slav, the Greek, the Armenian, the Arab, the Syrian, and the Kurde are as distinct today as they were the day of the conquest. Two essential circumstances have contributed to this result. The first is the fact that the Germanic peoples adopted Christianity as soon as they had some extended contact with Greek and Latin peoples. When the conqueror and the conquered are of the same religion, or rather when the conqueror adopts the religion of the conquered, the Turkish system of making absolute distinctions on the basis of religion is no longer possible. The second circumstance is the fact that the conquerors forgot their own language. The grandsons of Clovis, of Alaric, of Gondebaud, of Alboin, and of Rollon already spoke roman. This fact was itself the consequence of another important particularity: that the Franks, the Burgunds, the Goths, the Lombards, and the Normans had very few women of their race with them. Over several generations, the chiefs married with German women. Their concubines, however, were Latin, their children's nurses were Latin, the entire tribe married Latin women. It was for this reason that the *lingua francica* and the *lingua gothica* had only a short history following the appearance of the Franks and the

Goths in Roman territories. It was not thus in England: the Anglo-Saxon invasion no doubt included large numbers of women. The original Breton population fled and, as a result, Latin ceased to be — indeed, may never have been — dominant in Brittany. One may have generally spoken Gallic in fifth-century Gaul; Clovis and his followers at any rate did not abandon German for Gallic.

That had the important result that, despite the extreme violence of the German invaders' mores, the mold that they imposed over the centuries became the mold of the nation itself. France very legitimately became the name of a country into which only a very imperceptible minority of Franks had entered. In the first *chansons de geste* of the tenth-century, so perfect a mirror of their time, all inhabitants of France are French. The idea of a difference of race within the population of France, so evident in the writing of Gregory of Tours, is to no degree to be found among French writers and poets following Hugh Capet. The difference between the nobleman and the *vilain* is as accentuated as possible but the difference between the one and the other is not at all an ethnic difference. It is a difference of courage and in the hereditary transmission of habits and education. No one has the idea that all of that should have had a conquest as its origin. The false system according to which the nobility owes its origin to a privilege conferred by the king in recognition of services rendered to the nation (such that every noble is in fact "ennobled") first appeared as a dogma beginning in the thirteenth-century. The same thing next happened with all of the Norman conquests. At the end of one or two generations, the Norman invaders no longer distinguished themselves from the rest of the population; for all that, their influence on it was no less profound. They had given the conquered country a nobility, military habits, and a patriotism that it had not had before.

Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation and it is for this reason that the progress of historical studies often poses a threat to nationality. Historical inquiry, in effect, throws light on the violent acts that have taken place at the origin of every political formation, even those that have been the most benevolent in their consequences. Unity is always brutally established. The reunion of northern and southern France was the result of a campaign of terror and extermination that continued for nearly a century. The king of France was, if I dare say so, the ideal type of the secular crystallizer and produced the most perfect national unity there had ever been. However, having been seen from too close, the king of France lost his prestige; the nation that he had built damned him and, today, only cultivated minds know what he was worth and what he did.

It is by the method of contrast that the great laws of Western European history are observable. Many countries have failed in the great enterprise so admirably accomplished — partly by tyranny, partly by justice — by the king of France. Under the Crown of St. Etienne, the Magyars and Slavs have remained as distinct as they were eight hundred years ago. Far from melting down the diverse elements of its domains, the House of Habsburg kept them distinct and often opposed to one another. In Bohemia, the Czech and German elements are superimposed on one another like oil and water in a glass. The Turkish policy of separating nationalities by religion has had the gravest consequences: it has caused the ruin of the East. Take a city like Salonica or Smyrna. You will find there six or seven communities each with its own memories and almost nothing in common. However, the essence of a nation is that all of its individual members have a great deal in common and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows

whether he is a Burgund, an Alain, a Taifala, or a Visigoth. Every French citizen has forgotten St. Bartholomew's Day and the thirteenth-century massacres in the Midi. There are only ten families in France that can furnish proof of Frankish origin and even such proof is essentially defective due to the thousand unknown pairings that can derange every genealogical system.

The modern nation is therefore the historical result of a number of facts that have converged in the same direction. Sometimes unity has been achieved by a dynasty as was the case in France; sometimes it has been the expression of the direct will of provinces as was the case for Holland, Switzerland, and Belgium; and sometimes by a general spirit finally overcoming feudal caprice as in Italy and Germany. A profound *raison d'être* has always presided over these formations. In similar cases, the same principles from one day to the next in the most surprising outcomes. In our lifetimes, we have witnessed Italy unified by its defeats and Turkey destroyed by its victories. Each defeat advanced the interests of Italy; by each victory, Turkey lost. For Italy is a nation and Turkey, outside of Asia Minor, is not one. It is the glory of France to have announced, by the French Revolution, that nations exist by themselves. We must not find it objectionable that others imitate us. The principal of the nation is our own. But then what is a nation? Why is Holland a nation while Hanover and the great duchy of Parma are not? How has France persisted in being a nation once the principle that created it ceased to exist? How is Switzerland, which has three languages, two religions, and three or four races, a nation while Tuscany, for example, which is so homogenous, is not one? Why is Austria a state and not a nation? In what respect does the principal of nationality differ from that of race? These are the questions to which a critical mind, in order to avoid contradicting itself, must give its attention. The business of the world is hardly ruled by this sort of reasoning. Still, men who apply themselves can bring reason to these questions and untangle the confused muddle wrought by superficial minds.

II If one is to follow certain political theorists, a nation is above all else a dynasty representing an ancient conquest, one first accepted and then forgotten by the mass of the people. According to the theorists of whom I speak, the grouping of provinces brought about by a dynasty through wars, marriages, and treaties ends with the dynasty that has brought it about. It is quite true that the better part of modern nations have been the work of a family of feudal origins that has contracted with the soil and in some measure formed the nucleus of central government. The frontiers of France in 1789 had nothing natural or necessary about them. The large zone added by the Capetian family the straight edge of the treaty of Verdun was entirely the personal acquisition of this family. At the time of the annexations, no one had any idea of natural limits, the right of nations, or the will of provinces. The union of England, Ireland, and Scotland was similarly a dynastic fact. Italy has waited as long as it has to become a nation because, amongst its numerous reigning families, not one has served as a unifying center before our century. Oddly enough, it has been the obscure and hardly Italian island of Sardinia that has taken the royal title. Holland, a nation that created itself by an act of heroic resolution, has nevertheless contracted an intimate marriage with the house of Orange and runs a great risk the day this union is compromised.

However, is such a law absolute? Without a doubt, no. Switzerland and the United States, both formed as conglomerations of successive additions, have no dynastic

foundation. I will not discuss the question as it concerns France: that would require having access to the future. Let's just say that this great French kingdom had been so highly national that, the day after its fall, the nation was able to go on without it. And then the eighteenth-century had changed everything. After centuries of abasement, man returned to the spirit of antiquity in regards to himself and his idea of rights. The words 'fatherland' and 'citizen' once again had meaning. Thus was accomplished the most difficult operation every carried out in history, comparable to what would be, in physiology, restoring life and identity to a body after having removed its brain and its heart.

One must thus admit that a nation can exist in the absence of the dynastic principle — even that nations that have been formed by dynasties can separate themselves from these without for all that ceasing to exist. The old principle that only takes princes into account should no longer be observed: apart from the right of dynasties is the right of nations. But on what criterion should we base this national right? By what sign shall we know it? From what tangible fact can we derive it?

I. By race, many say with assurance.

The artificial division that resulted from feudalism, princely marriages, and diplomatic congresses are null and void. What remains firm and fixed is the race of the population. That is what constitutes right and legitimacy. According to this theory, the Germanic family, for example, has the right to reclaim its scattered members, even if these member do not ask to rejoin it. The right of "germanism" to such-and-such a province is stronger than that of the province's inhabitants. In this manner, one has created a sort of primordial right analogous to the divine right of kings; for the principle of nations one substitutes that of ethnography. That is a great error, one which, should it become dominant, will result in the destruction of European civilization. To the same degree that the right of nations is just and legitimate, the primordial right of races is narrow and full of danger for true progress.

Amongst ancient tribes and cities, we know, the fact of race had an importance of the first order. The tribe and the ancient city were only extensions of the family. In Sparta and Athens, all citizens were to one degree or another related. It was the same amongst the Beni-Israel and is still thus amongst the Arab tribes. From Athens, Sparta, and the Israeli tribe let us now turn to the Roman Empire. There, the situation is quite otherwise. Initially formed by violence and then kept together by mutual interest, this great collection of absolutely different cities and provinces delivered a severe blow to the idea of race. Christianity, with its universal and absolute character, was in this sense even more effective. Together with the Roman Empire, Christianity formed an intimate alliance. As a result of these two incomparable agents of unification, ethnographic reason for centuries remained remote from the government of things human.

The barbarian invasions were, despite appearances, yet one more step in this direction. The jagged outlines of barbarian kingdoms had nothing ethnographic about them: they were determined by the strength and whim of the invaders. The race of the populations they dominated was a matter of total indifference to them. Charlemagne accomplished in his manner what had already been done by Rome: a single empire composed of the most diverse races. The authors of the Treaty of Verdun, in

imperturbably tracing their two great north-south lines, had not the least suspicion of the race of the men who found themselves on one side or the other of these. Changing frontiers in the Middle Ages also lacked any ethnographic tendency. If the policy followed by the house of Capetian was to reunite the territories of ancient Gaul, this was not an expression of any tendency on the part of these places to join with their fellows. Dauphiné, Bresse, Provence, and the Franche-Comté no longer recalled any common origin. Any Gallic conscience had perished in the second-century A.D. and only an erudite regard can today retrospectively identify the individuality of the Gallic character.

Ethnographic considerations have therefore counted for nothing in the constitution of modern nations. France is Celtic, Iberian, Germanic. Germany is Germanic, Celtic, and Slavic. And in no country is ethnography more embarrassed than Italy. Gauls, Etruscans, Pélasgians, Greeks, and any number of other groups have crossed there producing an unquantifiable mixtures. The British Isles, taken together, present a mixture of Celtic and German blood the proportions of which are singularly difficult to define.

The truth of the matter is that there are no pure races; making politics depend on ethnographic analysis is to have it repose on a chimera. The most noble countries — England, France, and Italy — are those in which blood is the most mixed. Is Germany in this respect an exception? Is it a purely Germanic country? What an illusion! The entire south of the country had been Gallic. All of the area east of the Elbe is Slavic. Are the parts that claim to be genuinely pure really that? We touch here on a problem of the greatest significance to making ideas clear and preventing misunderstandings.

Discussions of the idea of race are interminable because the word 'race' is taken by historical philologists and physical anthropologists in two entirely different senses. For anthropologists, race has the same meaning as in zoology: it refers to actual descent, a blood relation. However, the study of history and languages does not support the same distinctions. The words 'brachycephaly' and 'dolichocephaly' have a place neither in history nor in philology. In the human group that created Aryan [Indo-European] languages and institutions, there were already to be found brachycephalics and dolichocephalics. The same can be said of the primitive group that created what one calls the Semitic languages and institutions. In other words, the zoological origins of humanity are tremendously anterior to the origins of culture, civilization, and language. The primitive Aryan, Semitic, and Touranian groups had no physiological unity. These groups are historical facts that had a place at a certain epoch — let's say fifteen or twenty thousand years ago — whereas the zoological origins of humanity disappear in incalculable shadows. That which ones calls physiologically and historically the Germanic race is without a doubt a distinct family in the human species. But is it a family in the anthropological sense? Certainly not. The appearance of Germanic particularity in history only occurred a very few centuries before Jesus Christ. Apparently the Germans had not risen from the earth at this time. Before that, mixed with the Slavs in the great indistinct mass of Scythia, they had no separate individuality. An Englishman is very much a type amongst his fellow men. However, the type that one very improperly refers to as the Anglo-Saxon race is neither the Breton at the time of Caesar nor Hengist's Anglo-Saxons, Knut's Danes, or William the Conqueror's Normans. It is the result of all those things. The Frenchman is neither a Gaul, a Franc, or a Burgund. He is that which has left the great boiler in which, under the supervision of

the king of France, the most diverse elements were together fermented. A inhabitant of Jersey or of Guernsey differs not at all in his origins from the Norman population on the neighboring coast. In the eleventh-century, the most penetrating eye had not noticed the slightest difference between the two sides of the Channel. Due to certain insignificant circumstances, Philip-Augustus did not take these Islands along with the rest of Normandy. Separated from one another for seven hundred years, the two populations have become not only strangers to one another but also altogether dissimilar. Race as it is understood by us historians is therefore something that is made and unmade. The study of race is central to discovering who figures in the history of humanity. It has no application whatsoever to politics. The instinctive conscience that has presided over the construction of the European map has taken no notice of race; indeed, the most important nations of Europe are those in which the blood of different peoples is the most mixed.

The fact of race, a fact of the greatest moment at the outset, has always been diminishing in importance. Race is not everything as it is amongst rodents and felines and no one has the right to go about the world examining men's heads and then grabbing them by the throat, saying "you are of our blood; you belong to us!" Aside from anthropological traits there is reason, justice, truth, and beauty, things that are the same for all. This ethnographic politics is anything but certain: you use it today against others but tomorrow will see it used against you. Can one be so certain that the Germans, who have raised so high the flag of ethnography, will not one day witness the Slavs analyzing in their turn the names of Villages in Saxony and in Lusace, searching for traces of the Wiltzes and the Obotrites and demanding an explanation for the massacres and expropriations inflicted by the Othons on their forefathers? For everyone, it is better to forget.

I very much like ethnography. It is an unusually interesting science. However, as I wish to live free, I desire that it have no political application. In ethnography as in all studies, systems change; that, after all, is a basic condition of progress. The limits of states would thus follow the fluctuations of scientific knowledge and patriotism would depend on a more or less paradoxical dissertation. One would come to say to the patriot: "You were wrong. You spilled your blood for this cause, believing that you were a Celt. No, you are a German." Then, ten years later, one would discover that you are in fact a Slav. In order to avoid falsifying science, we should forgo holding views on such questions, questions on which too much rides. Be sure that, were one to ask ethnography to contribute to diplomacy, one would often discover it doing nothing at all. Ethnography has better things to do. Let us only ask the truth from it.

II. *What we have said of race must also be said of language.*

Languages ask to be united, they do not force it. The United States and England, like Spanish America and Spain, speak the same language but do not constitute a single nation. By contrast, Switzerland, so well-made because created by the consent of its different parts, contains three or four languages. The desire of Switzerland to be united despite its linguistic variety is a much more important fact than similarity often achieved by humiliation.

An honorable fact about France is that it has never sought to achieve linguistic unity by means of coercion. Can't one have the same sentiments and thoughts and love

the same things in different languages? We spoke earlier of the inconveniences that would result were international relations to depend on ethnography. They would be no less so were it to depend on comparative philology. Let us leave these interesting studies full liberty in their discussions and not mix them with things that would upset their serenity. The political importance that one attaches to languages comes from the fact that they are regarded as indications of race. Nothing could be more false. Prussia, where today only German is spoken, spoke Slav several centuries ago. Gallic countries speak English. Spain and Gaul speak the primitive idiom of Albe. Egypt speaks Arab. The examples are innumerable. Even at its origins, linguistic similarity does not imply similarity of race. Take the proto-Aryan or proto-Semitic tribes, for example. One would have found their slaves speaking the same language as their masters, though the slave was often of a different race than his master. Let us say it again: the division of Indo-European, Semitic, and other languages, invented with admirable sagacity by comparative philology, coincides with no divisions in anthropology. Languages are historical formations that imply nothing in regards to those who speak them. Nor should languages in any way shackle human liberty when it comes to determining the family with which one unites one's self in life and in death.

This exclusive interest in language as a criterion of nationhood has, like that of race, its dangers and inconveniences. When one exaggerates its importance, one limits and closes oneself up in a particular culture understood as national. One leaves the open air that one breathes in the midst of humanity in order to lock one's self away in little freemasonries of one's compatriots. Nothing could be worse for the mind nor more regrettable for civilization. We must not abandon this fundamental principle: that man is a reasonable and moral being before he is penned up in this or that language, a member of this or that race, or a participant in this or that culture. Before French, German, and Italian culture is the culture of mankind. Look at the great men of the Renaissance; they were neither French nor Italian nor German. They had discovered in the study of antiquity the secret of the true education of the human mind and they devoured it body and soul. And they were right to do so!

III. Religion no longer offers a sufficient basis for the establishment of a modern nationality.

At its origin, religion valued the very existence of the social group. The social group was an extension of the family and the rites of religion were the rites of the family. The religion of Athens was the cult of Athens itself, of its mythic founders, its laws, and its customs. It implied no dogmatic theology. This religion was, in the full sense of the term, a state religion; one was not Athenian if one refused to practice it. At its basis, it was the cult of the Acropolis personified. To swear on the altar of Aglaur was to take an oath to die for one's country. It was the equivalent of drawing lots or the cult of the flag. To refuse to participate in such a cult was the same as it would be in our modern societies to refuse military service: it was to declare that one was not Athenian. On the other hand, it is clear that such a cult had no meaning for anyone who was not from Athens and no one attempted to force foreigners to accept it (Athenian slaves, for instance, did not practice it). It was the same in several small republics during the Middle Ages. One was not a good Venetian if one did not swear by Saint Mark. One was not a good Amalfian if

one did not put Saint Andrew over all other saints in paradise. In these small societies, that which would late be persecution and tyranny was legitimate and had as few consequences as our practice, today, of observing father's day or addressing vows to him on the first day of the year.

That which was true of Sparta and Athens did not hold for the Roman Empire — indeed, it did not even hold of the kingdoms that followed upon Alexander's conquest. The Antiochus Epiphany's violent attempts to introduce the cult of Jupiter Olympian, the official religion of Rome, to the East was a mistake, a crime, and a true absurdity. In our days, the situation is perfectly clear. There are no longer masses of people believing in a uniform manner. After his manner, each believes and practices as he can and as he likes. There is no longer any religion of state: one can be French, English, or German while being a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, or someone who practices no religion. Religion has become something individual and concerns the conscience of each. The division of nations between Catholics and Protestants no longer exists. Religion, something that, fifty-two years ago, played so major a role in the creation of Belgium, still maintains its importance in the interior of each individual. But it has nearly nothing to do with the reasons that determine the limits of various peoples.

IV. Community of interest is assuredly a powerful link between men.

Do interest suffice to make a nation? I do not think so. Communities of interest determine commercial treaties. However, sentiment features in the making of nations. A nation is a body and soul at the same time. A *Zollverein* [customs union], by contrast, is never a fatherland.

V. Geography and what are called natural frontiers certainly play a considerable part in the division of nations.

Geography is one of the essential factors in history. Rivers have distributed the races; mountains have stopped them. The former encouraged whereas the latter discouraged the great historical movements. But can one say, as certain parties believe, that the limits of a nation are inscribed on the map and that a given nation has the right to judge what is necessary in rounding its corners or in striving to reach this mountain or that river? I know of no more arbitrary or disastrous doctrine. With it, one justifies every kind of violence. After all, is it the mountains or the rivers that form supposed natural frontiers? It is incontestable that mountains separate. Rivers, however, tend to unite. And then not all mountains run between states. Why do some mountain ranges serve to separate and not others? From Biarritz to Tornea, no river has a more delimiting character than any other. If history had so wanted, the Loire, the Seine, the Meuse, the Elba, or the Oder would have seemed natural frontiers allowing, as has the Rhine, so many violations of the fundamental law that is the will of men. One speaks of strategic reasons. However, nothing is absolute and it is clear that many concessions must be made to necessity. But one must be certain that these concessions do not go too far otherwise all the world would claim military necessity and it would be war without end. No, geography makes a nation no more than race does. Geography provides the substratum, the field of battle and of work but man provides the soul. Man is everything

in the formation of this sacred thing that one calls a people. Nothing material suffices. A nation is a spiritual principle resulting from the profound complexities of history — it is a spiritual family, not a group determined by the lay of the land.

We now see what *does not* suffice to create such a spiritual principle: race, language, interests, religious affinity, geography, military necessities. What more could there be? Given what has already been said, I will not need to hold your attention much longer.

III. A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things which, properly speaking, are really one and the same constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is the past, the other is the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the desire to continue to invest in the heritage that we have jointly received. Messieurs, man does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the outcome of a long past of efforts, sacrifices, and devotions. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate: our ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past with great men and glory (I mean true glory) is the social capital upon which the national idea rests. These are the essential conditions of being a people: having common glories in the past and a will to continue them in the present; having made great things together and wishing to make them again. One loves in proportion to the sacrifices that one has committed and the troubles that one has suffered. One loves the house that one has built and that one passes on. The Spartan chant, “We are what you were; we will be what you are”, is, in its simplicity, the abridged him of every fatherland.

A people shares a glorious heritage as well, regrets, and a common program to realize. Having suffered, rejoiced, and hoped together is worth more than common taxes or frontiers that conform to strategic ideas and is independent of racial or linguistic considerations. “Suffered together”, I said, for shared suffering unites more than does joy. In fact, periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort.

A nation is therefore a great solidarity constituted by the feeling of sacrifices made and those that one is still disposed to make. It presupposes a past but is reiterated in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is (please excuse the metaphor) a daily plebiscite, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life. Yes, I know, that is less metaphysical than divine right and less brutal than so-called law of history. In the scheme of ideas with which I present you, a nation has no more right than a king to say to a province: “You belong to me, I am taking you.” For us, a province is its inhabitants and, if anyone in this affair has the right to be consulted, it is the inhabitant. A nation never has a true interest in annexing or holding territory that does not wish to be annexed or held. The vow of nations is the sole legitimate criterion and that to which it is necessary to constantly return.

We have chased metaphysical and theological abstractions from politics. What now remains? Man remains, his desires, his needs. The secession and, in the long run, collapse of nations are the consequence of a system which placed these old organisms at the mercy of often poorly enlightened wills. It is clear that, in such a matter, no principle should be pushed too far. Truths of this order are only applicable when taken together and in a very general way. Human will changes but then what doesn’t beneath heaven?

Nations are not eternal. They have a beginning and they will have an end. A European confederation will probably replace them. But, if so, such is not the law of the century in which we live. At the present moment, the existence of nations is a good and even necessary thing. Their existence is the guarantee of liberty, a liberty that would be lost if the world had only one law and one master.

By their diverse and often opposed faculties, nations serve the common work of civilization. Each carries a note in this great concert of humanity, the highest ideal reality to which we are capable of attaining. Isolated, they have their weaknesses. I often tell myself that what are in an individual faults, in nations — where vainglory is nourished — pass as virtues. Whoever would be so jealous, quarrelsome, and egotistical, always reaching for his sword at the slightest provocation, would be the most insupportable of men. But all of these dissonances of detail disappear when taken together. Poor humanity, you have suffered so much! Tests await you still! If only the spirit of wisdom could guide you in order to preserve you from the innumerable dangers that threaten you on your way!

I summarize, Messieurs. Man is a slave neither of his race, his language, his religion, the course of his rivers, nor the direction of his mountain ranges. A great aggregation of men, in sane mind and warm heart, created a moral conscience that calls itself a nation. As long as this moral conscience proofs its strength by sacrifices that require the subordination of the individual to the communal good, it is legitimate and has the right to exist. If doubts are raised along the frontiers, consult the disputed populations. They certainly have a right to express their views on the matter. There you have what makes the transcendents of politics smile so, those infallibles who pass their lives being wrong and who, from the eminence of their superior principles, feel pity for our mundane world. “Consult the populations, you say! What naiveté! These sickly French ideas that pretend to replace diplomacy and war with an infantile simplicity!” Let’s listen, Messieurs, and leave the reign of the transcendents. Let’s know how to submit to such strong disdain. Perhaps, after many fruitless experiments, they will later return to our modest empirical solutions. At certain moments, the best way to be right in the future is to know how to resign one’s self to being out of fashion.