

lieves in words. They even like to play with discourse for, by giving ridiculous reasons, they discredit the seriousness of their interlocutors. They delight in acting in bad faith, since they seek not to persuade by sound argument but to intimidate and disconcert.

Of course, all nationalisms are particular, and the enemies they choose vary, although I choose an essay on anti-Semitism advisedly, because it shows us exactly where this can lead. But there is, notes Balibar, a “competitive mimicry” in nationalism – both with historical nationalisms and with current versions. Particularly in this global age, nationalist tropes are repeated transnationally. In their rhetoric, Trump and Bolsonaro appeal to the same conceits, mimic each other’s gestures, copy each other’s slogans. As the “enemies” are emptied of their particularity, so the modes of repression and expulsion can be replicated and made general.

Does it still make sense to call this trend “nationalism”, when it apparently moves so easily from country to country? Those uncertain of their place – the “foot soldiers of every populism”, to use Balibar’s term – are often disenfranchised and uncertain in the same way, and

thus the same rhetoric mobilises them. It would be wrong to call these movements “nationalist” if by that we simply meant a return to the past. Borders and identities are complex now in new ways.

And yet we have arrived at a point which, Balibar argues, we have seen before: the moment where the exercise of power is not only “violent or powerful or brutal, but is also cruel”. The followers of the cruel participate in strengthening their identity through the complete destruction of others.

Its basis no longer human, this cruel ideology loses its place within humanity. How long this takes, and what damage is done while the cycle is being completed, is an urgent problem for all of us. In the words of one of Balibar’s contemporaries, the philosopher Alain Badiou:

When the state starts being concerned about the legitimacy of people’s identities, it can only mean we’re in a period of darkest reaction, as historical experience has shown . . . This is because an identity-based definition of the population runs up against the fact that, since every population in the world today is composite, heterogeneous and multi-faceted, the only reality such a definition will have is a negative one. ●



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