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Paraskevas Matalas, Κοσμοπολίτες εθνικιστές: Ο Μωρίς Μπαρές και οι ανά τον κόσμο “μαθητές”του [Cosmopolitan nationalists: Maurice Barres and his “disciples” around the world]

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Paraskevas Matalas,
ΚΟΣΜΟΠΟΛΙΤΕΣ ΕΘΝΙΚΙΣΤΕΣ: Ο ΜΩΡΙΣ ΜΠΑΡΕΣ ΚΑΙ ΟΙ ΑΝΑ ΤΟΝ ΚΟΣΜΟ "ΜΑΘΗΤΕΣ" ΤΟΥ
[Cosmopolitan nationalists: Maurice Barres and his "disciples" around the world],
Heraklion: Crete University Press, 2021, 416 pages.

Maurice Barres, the well-known novelist, journalist and politician, holds an important place in the history of European thought. The author of the *Roman de l'energie nationale* trilogy was a central figure in French cultural and political life at the turn of the twentieth century. Due to his organic and traditionalist concept of the nation, based on the cult of the "land and the dead", he established himself as a "theorist" of "new" nationalism. The historical and political literature on his life, his thought and his work is nowadays extensive. Scholars have thoroughly discussed his nationalist doctrine, placing it in its broader context, assessing its decisive influence on the emergence of a radical right-wing current, which ultimately contributed to the rise of European fascism.

This recent monograph by Paraskevas Matalas enriches modern studies on Barres, successfully filling a research gap in the academic output. The author investigates the bonds between the French "master" and his contacts, his followers, his admirers and his "disciples" all around the world. In his essay, Matalas adopts the current nation theories and correctly opposes any essentialist perception of the nation. Such a constructivist point of view gives him the chance to undermine and deconstruct any all kinds of nationalistic stereotypes that continue to bind the collective imagination in public history. But most importantly, Matalas' study enriches our concrete scientific knowledge on nationalist ideology in the early twentieth century.

As implied by the title of the book, nationalism is examined as an international phenomenon, closely intertwined with the concerted action of the intelligentsia. This key feature of the national idea, its formation and its international spread via political and cosmopolitan circles, could certainly be considered as something permanent in time, namely it does not constitute a distinctive difference of nationalism at the turn of the century. But certainly it should be reexamined in the light of the transformations that nationalism underwent over this specific period.

Indeed, almost all studies in the history of political ideas underline that a crucial paradigm shift occurred in the last decades of the nineteenth century: a new nationalism emerged, cut off from the liberal and rationalist elements that

characterised the age of revolutions and national movements in the early nineteenth century. Gradually, under the decisive influence of Herder, Gobineau, Bergson and Nietzsche, new nationalist doctrines moved away from the Enlightenment's legacy and the ecumenical spirit of the eighteenth century. A romantic and irrational nationalism, invested with strong antisemitic elements, appeals to the darker aspects of the collective imaginary. Embracing theories of social Darwinism, glorifying violence and "life-giving" war, nationalism now radically changed its character: from a progressive force opposed to the ancien régime, it became an ardent opponent of the democratic and egalitarian spirit of modernity. Maurice Barres, a man of his times, condenses in his work all these cultural and ideological trends that would soon turn Europe into a "Dark Continent".

In this broader context, Matalas aptly notes the intersection in the history of the nationalist phenomenon, as it is reflected in the political vocabulary of the late nineteenth century. It was Barres who introduced and popularised "nationalism" and "nationalists" as terms of political self-identity, that is, he gave the specific words a positive meaning that they had not previously (17). The situation was similar, for example, in Portugal. There, anti-parliamentary circles established "nationalism" as a distinct political self-description in the early 1900s. They founded the Centro Nacional (which published the *Correio Nacional* newspaper) and in 1903, they created the Partido Nacionalista. These intellectuals and politicians were fervent Catholics, who turned against Jacobins and Freemasons. Some among them, for example José Fernando de Sousa, were in contact with Barres from 1916 onwards (132).

Emphasising in several parts of his book that nationalist discourse constitutes an "exportable product" whose circulation transcends borders and wider regions, Matalas rightly demonstrates that cultural and ideological exchanges constitute a fluid and two-way process. It is not only Barres who shapes, across France, what it means "to be a nation", but conversely he himself is influenced by his meetings on his travels, by his conversations with politicians, authors, institutional players and like-minded thinkers. Such an approach de facto challenges the strict distinction between "core" and "periphery" states, between the cultural environments that produce "original" political concepts and those that passively receive them, while it also refutes another fixed idea, that economically, socially and culturally the "underdeveloped South" leads the way in extreme political phenomena.

However, the main originality of Matala's project remains to be found elsewhere. The author proceeds with a systematic and thorough reconstruction of "nationalism's horizontal scale", if one could put it that way. He discusses in detail the nationalist phenomenon as a complex network of people, as a web of real relations, having Paris as its geographical and symbolic shaft. Taking the French thinker as his key reference, Matalas crafts the – sometimes contradictory and certainly heterogeneous – mosaic of "Barresists", following their footsteps in Italy, in the Iberian Peninsula, in the exotic "East" and the Ottoman Empire.

Particular attention is paid to the role of diplomats and to some "paradoxical conversions", such as the case of Ernst Jünger (an important figure of the radical right in the "conservative revolution" in Germany), or the case of Léopold Sédar Senghor who promoted the idea of "negritude". The last two chapters focusing on Barres' ties with Greece and his relations with Greek intellectuals take up almost half of the book.

As all this extensive historical evidence is modularly organised in chapters that deal with a wider region or a country each time, the connecting thread that runs through the book is the nodal link between nationalism and literature. Matalas studies nationalism as a "literary phenomenon" in the widespread atmosphere of elitism, aestheticism and modernism of the period. For example, he highlights Barres' contacts with Prezzolini, Papini, Corradini, Marinetti and D'Annunzio in Italy. He illustrates their contradictions and their political disputes on the meaning of nationalism, thoroughly explaining how most of them ended up in Mussolini's Fascist party (51–105).

Furthermore, in his work Matalas emphasises the strong correlation between nationalism and the "individual ego" of the artist, who deeply despises the masses but, at the same time, addresses them with an aesthetic sense of superiority. In addition, for Barres himself, and for many of those who accepted his ideas, there was a crucial transition from the cult of the ego to that of the nation. From the Barresian point of view, the individual does not exist in its abstract, universal dimension but it is defined by history, by the past, by his land's memory. Having lost his roots, modern man must rediscover them. He must analyse his own existence, which is culturally determined, in order to become again an organic part of the national community, namely the higher collectivity that establishes his individuality as a being (20, passim). And once the artist has found his particular national self, it is his duty to shape the national consciousness of the multitude, keeping the role of the ideological leader for himself. This intellectual's egoistic ambition, thirsty for fame, glory and recognition, this strong desire to be something "excellent and unique", this passion for power, all these contributed significantly to the spread and reproduction of nationalist ideas in the literary and political salons of the time (367–68).

As far as the Greek intelligentsia is concerned, such a deeply aristocratic and hierarchical perception of the self is clearly depicted in the case of Ion Dragoumis. In one of the best chapters of the book, Matalas outlines with great mastery the ideological and psychological portrait of the novelist, illuminating his shifts and clarifying his passages from one political view to the next. At first, Dragoumis passionately embraced both Barres and the national ideal, afterwards he broke with them. In these pages, the neurotic conceit of the intellectual who is torn and wavering between his egoism and the nation becomes clearly visible. What's more, Matalas aptly explains how Dragoumis initially was driven to nationalism through the Barresian concepts of ego and energy, supplemented by a Nietzschean will to power. In his diary for years 1904–1905, he openly confesses that he "fights because he likes

war" and he wonders what's the point of "making nations", just to answer that a nation serves one's need to cultivate his self (278–84).

What's more, one should also take into account Matala's excellent remarks on the specific way in which nationalist discourse aestheticises both the landscape and the idea of war on behalf of the nation. Echoing Walter Benjamin's perspective, the author shows us how, in times of deep alienation, self-destruction and death are presented as extreme aesthetic pleasures. Nikos Kazantzakis is a prime example. In 1936, Toledo, devastated by the Spanish Civil War, reveals to him his "truth", his "warlike, brave soul". In the footsteps of Barres, the Greek writer far surpasses the "master", as he openly stands ecstatic against the war disaster. Now, horror itself has become the ultimate attraction (330).

Similarly, the Spanish Ignacio Zuloaga, Franco's painter, celebrates the burning of Alcazar in Toledo. He paints a kind of anti-Guernica, a tribute to the resistance of the nationalists (331). But it's not just Spain. It is also Sparta, which Kazantzakis approaches through the spirit of Barres. He has been obviously affected by his *Voyage de Sparte* (1906), although he has concealed his debt to the French writer. Matalas masterfully explains that Kazantzakis' Sparta is a vision of male dominance: The peaceful feminine valley "Helen", defeated and humiliated, is brutally raped by the male mountain Taygetos. At the same time, in this bellicose and vitalistic outbreak, Kazantzakis laments the decline of his times and he calls for the uplift of his "fallen race" (326–27). Additionally, Matalas points out that, from the 1930s onwards, the mountain becomes the symbol of the "male spirit" and continues to cast its shadow over the aesthetic invention of "authentic Greece". For example, Myrivilis in 1936 writes for a "return to Greece", talks about the race and the breed, while he anticipates the advent of Metaxas' Third Greek Civilisation (353).

Therefore, all parts of the book that refer to the central role of landscape in the ideological constructions of nationalism are of particular interest, because each time a different aspect of a truly complex issue is highlighted insightfully and subtlety. So, it is really fascinating what Matalas tells us about Barres' successive visits to Spain (from 1892 to 1902) and the decisive influence of his writings on the formation of a nationalist Spanish identity. The author discusses thoroughly the neo-romantic, medieval, mystical and orientalist vision of both the Spanish landscape and Greco and the cultural invention of "Spanishness" by the writers of the literary Generation of '98, some of whom (for example, Ramiro de Maeztu) would subsequently turn to the nationalist radical right (119–31).

Within this complex adventure of nationalist credos, Matalas aptly highlights the importance of the Great War as a turning point, after which the nationalist and fascist movements would spring. Although Barres himself did not go as far as those influenced by his work in glorifying military violence, between 1914 and 1918 the idea of war took on a high meaning, an additional aesthetic value, namely it became an existential goal, which contributed decisively to the strengthening and further diffusion of radical nationalism. At this juncture,

Barresian nationalism, along with the nationalism of the Action Française, in combination with Italian Fascism and German Nazism, would inspire the currents of the extreme right all over the world (360–62).

Another important virtue of the book is the careful handling of the challenging historical evidence, as regards certain difficult points. Being a well-trained and experienced historian, Matalas points out the different crossroads in Barres' intellectual path, explaining in detail how specific aspects of his thought played an important role in the diffusion of nationalism under particular circumstances. So, it is important to know that Barres' socialist and federalist views had a significant impact on the development of the Catalan separatist nationalism (110–19) or to understand various changes in the intelligentsia's social relations, due to political calculations and personal ambitions.

Generally speaking, in a book which manages to illuminate the international dimension of Barresian nationalism in all its complexity, the reader can find such a variety of interrelated topics that he could go on debating for hours. On the other hand, as far as the general synthesis of the book is concerned, Matalas seems to adopt a Marxist guideline in his hermeneutics: he relates the emergence of extreme-right nationalism to the strengthening of the socialist movement in the same decades, he emphasises the bourgeois profile and the upper social status of the intellectuals, while he stresses the class dimension of the nationalist discourse vis-à-vis the opposing discourse of social emancipation (363–64, passim).

Given such a perspective, which is also a theoretical commitment, the author could have taken more into account the particular political and cultural contexts that determine the reception of Barresian ideas around the world. Inasmuch as the discourse and the practices of nationalists respond to socialism, its different status in each country or region should be taken into consideration, for the ideological orientation and the organisational feature of the socialist movement display a wide variety from one situation to another. Besides that, it is not just nationalists and socialists who are in conflict, but both right and left confront bourgeois democracy in different terms, given the fact that the political controversy is not identical in each country.

In France, for example, Barres' nationalism, born out of the Dreyfus affair, was in wild conflict with republicanism, whose legacy was particularly heavy. In this case, nationalism is shaped through all these currents that fight democracy: anti-parliamentarianism, Boulangism, populism and non-Marxist socialism. In Italy, the deadlock and failures of the Risorgimento led both the left and the right to question the legitimacy of the parliament. During the Red Biennium (1919–1920), nationalism and new-born fascism gained strength through the failure of the government to deal with the factory council movement. Amadeo Bordiga, the leader of the far-left tendency, divided the Italian socialists, while the political upheaval reinforced the social stream towards Mussolini. On the other hand, in Greece, the communist party was in search of its political identity, via Moscow's interventions, so it had not yet

gained the social hegemony that would allow it to threaten the bourgeois regime. This would happen during the resistance. On the contrary, it was right-wing nationalism that demonised communism, inventing the "domestic enemy". And it did so in a period of profound crisis for the political system, when authoritarian and dictatorial solutions were chosen even by politicians of the Venizelist centre. In this context, nationalism, seen either as anti-communism or as the ideological discourse that arrived to define anew the national identity in various ways, was closely related to the general political and social breakdown after the collapse of the Great Idea, in 1922. In this regard, co-examining such specific national aspects would enrich the study of the international nationalist network, which Matalas thoroughly and consistently reconstructs. Research on the field of ideological influences would be well supported by a stronger comparative perspective, for the benefit of our further historical understanding.

In conclusion, *Cosmopolitan Nationalists* is a valuable contribution to modern historiography, because it deals with a hitherto neglected subject and brings many new issues to light. Being the fruit of long-term systematic work, the book promotes academic dialogue and opens up new fields of research. Undoubtedly impressive in its documentation (including rich photographic evidence) and competent in the management of the historic material, it fairly gains the appreciation of the historian community. The author definitely succeeds to illuminate the human links beneath the general history of ideas, showing the idiosyncrasies, antagonisms, calculations and personal interests that governed the doings of the intelligentsia at the turn of the twentieth century. Capturing the matrix of nationalist ideas, showing their admixtures and underlining their contradictions, Matalas offers us a really useful intellectual map, which highlights the particular impact of Maurice Barres' political thought at a crucial time: the decades before World War II, when the conservative right, reactionary radicalism, authoritarianism and fascism were dangerously gaining in popularity everywhere, without anyone yet being able to imagine what was to follow.

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