

# Reflections on Patriotism

Peter L. Berger



The roots of patriotism are in childhood. At least in Western languages this is expressed in the terms that most commonly evoke patriotic sentiments—fatherland, motherland, homeland, native country. Patriotism most basically refers to places, people and things with which one is at home, and there are few later experiences that can match the sense of at-homeness experienced by the child. The world then is still a very new place, and most of it is very strange, much of it terrifying. The familiar, the secure zones of the world have, for this reason, a particular sweetness about them.

In later life, of course, this constellation of perceptions and feelings is lost or at least greatly weakened. It can be evoked anew, however, often by seemingly trivial stimuli—the sights and sounds of childhood, sometimes its smells or even the touch of objects from that period of biographical dawn. This is not to deny that individuals can leave their place of origin and find themselves at home elsewhere. Migration has been a common human experience from time immemorial. It is safe to say, however, that the very capacity to be at home in the world is formed in very early childhood, and it is likely that those who missed this experience then will have great difficulty achieving it later on, no matter where they migrate.

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The broadest definition of patriotism would be *loving one's own*: This is my place, these are my people, and in this place and with these people I am most myself. On this level of experience, in all probability, there are profound anthropological foundations to patriotism. Put differently, there is a "natural" patriotism, which is rooted in the very constitution of man, and is thus crossculturally and historically constant. In all cultures and periods of history of which we have knowledge, human beings have had these sentiments, have "loved their own," and have had moral notions attached to this experiential complex. Thus everywhere there is some notion of treason—the moral offense of betraying "one's own." And on this very fundamental level it is hard to disagree with the moral judgment. The affirmation of patriotism and the moral condemnation of its betrayal are constitutive of man (if you will, of "human nature"), and by this same token human society would not be possible without this moral basis. (Of modern theorists, incidentally, it was probably Emile Durkheim who understood this most clearly.)

As soon as we move from this primal level of patriotic sentiment and morality to more complex levels, however, we enter a sphere of cultural and historical relativities. While the *core* of patriotic allegiance is, as it were, anthropologically given, its *outer limits* are historically relative and socially constructed. They are matters of agreed-upon definition: The people on this side of the river, who are descended from the great water buffalo, are my people; the people on the other side, descended from some evidently inferior being, are not. If the aforementioned core patriotism is anthropologically given, this extended patriotism is sociologically basic. On

such social definitions of who constitutes "one's own" hinge all elementary forms of human interaction—economic, sexual, political or whatever. The incest tabu was, in all probability, one of the most archaic institutions embodying this definition of limits, straddling the "natural" and the "artificial" elements of solidarity. I may not marry "my own," be it my sister with whom I have grown up since childhood, or my fifth cousin whom I have rarely met but with whom I share membership in the water-buffalo clan.

For much of human history the line between these two types of belonging, and the patriotic sentiments pertaining to them, was fluid and probably not very clearly perceived. The reason for this is very simple: Most people lived in small communities all their lives and had at least occasional face-to-face encounters with just about everyone classified as belonging to "their own." In principle at least, and probably in practice, all the individuals belonging to the water-buffalo clan were physically accessible to each other. Even Horace, who wrote in one of his Odes that it is sweet and proper to die for one's fatherland (*patria*), was speaking of a somewhat overgrown village, most of whose inhabitants probably knew each other fairly well and who frequently met face to face. To a surprising degree this type of patriotism has survived into very modern times. Benjamin Barber's recent study of Swiss politics (*The Death of Communal Liberty*, 1974) gives an eloquent account of the conflict between such an archaic patriotism and the abstract solidarities of a modern nation-state. (One of the merits of Barber's work is that he rejects the facile characterizations of the former as "backward" or "reactionary.")

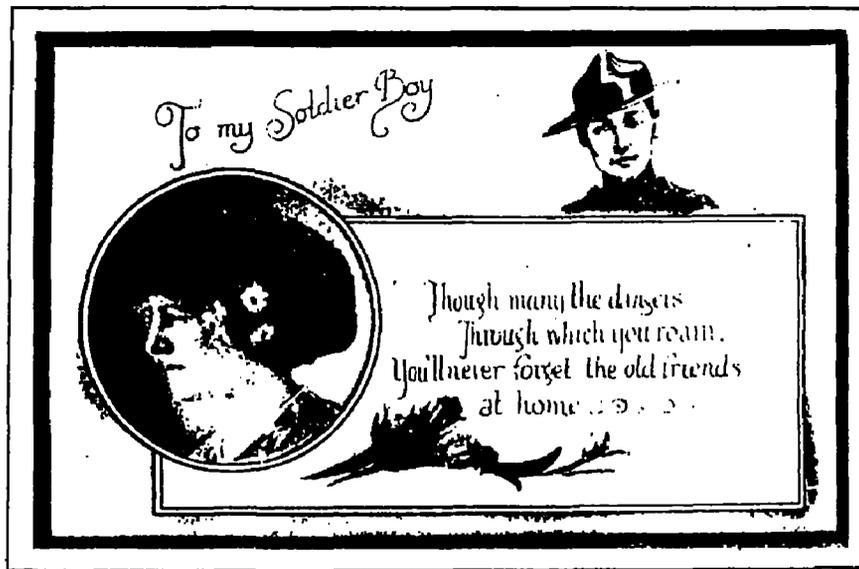
Thus we may distinguish three types of patriotism, depending on the range of people perceived as "one's own"—those with whom the individual has shared a substantial portion of his life experiences; those with whom the individual can, at least in principle, enter into face-to-face relationships; those with whom such relationships are not possible in their entirety, so that the individual can only perceive them as "his own" by virtue of an act of abstract thinking. I belong with my sister in a way different from my relationship with the entire clan. This difference, though, pales when compared with the way I belong, say, to the Swiss nation, most of whose citizens I have never met and *can* never meet, even if I live in Switzerland all my life. For our purposes the distinction between the first and second type is not essential; we may subsume both types (following Barber's usage) under the heading *communal patriotism*. This may then be contrasted with *abstract patriotism*—that is, with perceptions and sentiments of belonging with people whom one has never met, never will meet, and at least in their aggregate cannot meet face to face. It should be noted that

this comparison is not necessarily odious—while it is a mistake to hang pejorative labels on communal solidarities, it is equally a mistake to romanticize them.

Leaving aside the problems of members of the water-buffalo clan and denizens of remote Alpine valleys, every individual in a modern society is likely to have two quite different sets of patriotic allegiances—those that link him with others whose lives he has actually shared in concrete face-to-face experiences, and those that unite him with large numbers of people on the basis of an abstract categorization not produced by his actual life experience. The cognitive and emotional contents of the two statements "I'm a Red Hook Italian" and "I'm an American citizen" may serve by way of further illustration. The latter statement is not less real, but its reality is of a different order. Nor is one or the other form of patriotism morally superior—the former is more "natural," in that it is more firmly rooted in the totality of the individual's biographical experience. For example, it is possible for an American citizen never to have set foot in the United States nor even to speak English (say, the child of Americans living in a foreign country), and yet to have a strong patriotic allegiance to the country of his citizenship. By contrast, to be an Italian in the Red Hook section of Brooklyn necessarily requires a sequence of biographical experiences which cannot be obtained by virtue of a legal document or any comparably abstract instrumentality.

Communal patriotism is clearly possible without abstract patriotism. Indeed, it has existed as such through most of human history. A more interesting question is whether an abstract patriotism can be viable without rootage in the patriotic sentiments of empirically available human communities. Edmund Burke thought that it cannot be. Only if, as he put it, an individual feels loyalty to his "small platoon" can he then be loyal to any larger social entity. One of Burke's crucial criticisms of the revolutionary ideology of his time was that it glorified abstractions ("the people," "the nation," "humanity," and the like) as against the concrete communities in which men live. He emphasized that such abstractions cannot survive unless they are rooted in much more concrete experiences of human community. Very probably he was right.

One of the great themes of modern sociology has been the transition from communal to abstract solidarities—in the by now classical terms of Ferdinand Toennies, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. A number of sociologists (among contemporaries we may mention Robert Nisbet) have expressed the view that this transition can never be complete: Unless *Gesellschaft* is "supported" by a network of *Gemeinschaft*-type relations, its institutions will soon become "hollow," devoid of reality, and therefore will



not long survive. Put differently, the virtues of American citizenship are unlikely to survive or even be real to people unless they are grounded in the virtues of much smaller communities, virtues that are ongoingly realized in the face-to-face dealings of people with each other. This does not mean, however, that abstract patriotism can be logically deduced from communal patriotism. It is, after all, possible for me to be a "Red Hook Italian" and have only a minimal stake in my American citizenship. Nor is it altogether obvious why I *should* have such a larger stake. An *argument* of some moral complexity may be necessary to convince me that I should regard as "my own" Californians of Swedish ancestry—as against my uncle, who lives around the corner on Union Street, but who has never bothered to be naturalized. Again, this need not mean that such an argument would be fallacious. It does mean that abstractions are always a somewhat cerebral business, as against the concrete experience of being a (let us assume) cherished nephew.

Modernity is indeed characterized by the very high degree of abstraction pertaining to its institutional order (the Dutch sociologist Anton Zijderveld has aptly described the latter as "the abstract society"). Still, the tension between communal and abstract patriotism is by no means an exclusively modern phenomenon. The Apostle Paul, a Jewish tentmaker from a provincial hamlet in Asia Minor, could boast about coming from "no mean city" and at the same time announce (proudly, one surmises) his Roman citizenship. What is peculiarly modern is that the nation-state (itself a very recent apparition on the stage of history) has become the major focus of patriotic sentiment. Indeed, the very idea of patriotism has come to be associated so closely with the nation-state that a considerable amount of reflection is required to grasp that patriotism has older and different roots.

By its very nature the patriotism attached to the nation-state is highly abstract. This is even true in quite small countries. The individual can no more have face-to-face experience of 4,000,000 fellow-Swiss than of 200,000,000 fellow-Americans. For this reason, modern patriotic identities are subject to considerable variability. This becomes particularly evident in the case of new nation-states.

Sometimes from one day to another a subject of the Habsburgs redefines himself as a Czechoslovak, or a Kikuyu as a Kenyan. In territories disputed by competing modern patriotisms it often happens that members of the same family opt for different national identities. The parts of Central Europe once governed by the Habsburgs can serve as a rich laboratory for this. Older nation-states differ from newer ones, not so much in the degree of abstraction of their patriotism, but simply in the degree to which people have become habituated to it. In principle, it is no more "natural" for an individual to be French than to be Czechoslovak; it is just that France has been around longer as a nation-state, so that people have become accustomed to taking the abstraction as reality. But as recent "mini-nationalisms" are making increasingly clear, even the oldest nation-states are far from immune to the possibility that national identities can be redefined—as with the Breton, Basque and Provençal movements in France.

National (or ethnic) identities can be constructed, reconstructed, disassembled—not exactly at will, but with a good deal of flexibility. The patriotic ideologies of nation-states, of course, are constrained to deny this. They must present the arbitrary constructions as necessary facticities, that is, as *given*. Patriotic allegiance to the particular nation-state is legitimated by virtue of a common culture and language as well as of a common history. But any one of these can be highly fictitious. It is misleading to think that, as a rule, a common history produces a sense of national belonging. On the contrary, in

many instances the common history is freely invented in order to legitimate the national construction. Modern educational systems, invariably under the control of nation-state governments, are the most important purveyors of these "myths of origins." African schoolchildren were made to write essays in French schools on "our ancestors, the Franks." Funny, perhaps, but no more absurd than the same essay being written by children in the former territories of the Count of Toulouse.

Nevertheless, the abstractions can be concretized in everyday experience. What is more, the longer the abstractions have been around, the more massive will be these concretizations. Language is probably the most important vehicle of this process. The French language is very much a reality of individual experience, and it is so today for the inhabitants of Toulouse no less than for those living in the lands of the old Kingdom of the Franks. Apart from language, there is a collage of specifically French experiences and French things, by now more or less common to all regions of the nation-state. If one wants to know what these are, there is an easy answer: *It is all those experiences and things that a Frenchman will miss when he goes abroad.* And they are anything but abstract: the peculiar mixture of order and sloppy chaos characteristic of French urban scenes; the elegant invectives exchanged by French motorists (centuries of malignant court-language put on wheels by Renault); the smell and touch of French bakeries; the more than a little tired theatre of French eroticism. . . .

To be sure, these concrete realities have little to do directly with the grand rhetoric of national patriotism. Yet there are important mediations between the two. Unless concrete, experiential associations can be evoked by the rhetoric, it will remain empty, unconvincing (except perhaps for the very short periods that most people can be inspired by pure ideas). No wonder that patriotic rhetoric must always come back to homes, mothers, children playing in the streets—*French* homes, to be sure, and *French* children on *French* streets. It could well be that, if all the motives were known, more French soldiers fought at Verdun for the smell of French bread than for the great ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. Nor is such sacrifice for the sweet, familiar things of home necessarily an illusion. A personal reminiscence here: In my childhood, in the 1930's, I spent several summers in the South Tyrol (renamed Alto Adige by the Italians) when Mussolini's government was trying systematically to suppress the German language. There were people then who said that they would rather die than give up their language, and some even said this about the colorful regional costumes (which were also banned by the government). It seems to me that one ought to think very seriously before one dismisses such sentiments as irrational.

It is possible now to amplify what was said previously about the necessary rootage of abstract patriotism in communal patriotism. The character of this rootage is what we have called concretization. In other words, *the abstract notions of patriotism attached to the nation-state will be (and remain) plausible to individuals to the degree that they can be related to concrete everyday experiences in ordinary life.* This fact serves as a limit to the arbitrariness of abstract definitions of identity. But the limit is by no means rigid. Just as national identities can be invented, concrete experiences can be engineered. The longer such an engineering feat can be kept going, the greater will be its plausibility (Czechoslovakia, that is, is ahead of Kenya in this game of reality construction). Obviously there are many variables involved in each historical instance of this dynamic—amount of coercion, ideological currents, economic interests, availability of alternatives to the particular national identity being "engineered," and so forth. All the same, there is a remarkable sociological and psychological continuity in all of this: Frenchmen are not all *that* different from Kikuyus.

The patriotism of the nation-state is one of the most potent ideological forces in the world today. It is mainly among Western intellectuals that patriotism has of late acquired a bad name. This is not the place to explore the reasons for this (an undertaking that would require another essay of at least this length). In view of the almost pornographic status of patriotic sentiments today, however, it is appropriate to ask whether the ethical depreciation of patriotism has merit beyond the peculiar intellectual milieu in question.

An easy, too easy, answer would be in terms of a differentiation between patriotism and nationalism. The former may be accorded ethical value while the latter is condemned. Nationalism in that case is defined as some sort of exaggerated patriotism, a quasi-religious dedication to the nation or nation-state. Perhaps such a distinction has some relevance, but current usage is quite confused, and, in any case, the distinction is unlikely to be of much help in answering the ethical question: If one decides, on whatever grounds, that some cases of patriotism are ethically meritorious, one will be constrained to extend this approbation to some cases of nationalism, however defined. Perhaps the most that one can say to the distinction on the grounds of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that any instances in which the nation is placed at the very top of the hierarchy of values should be deemed idolatry. There are cases in which such a judgment may be ethically significant (as it was, for example, in the case of Nazi Germany). Most of the time, however, one must deal with far more complex cases. Also, in a Judeo-Christian perspective the absolutization of *any* hu-



man institution, even of the family, may be deemed idolatrous—the nation is just one of many possible candidates for the role of chief idol.

More likely, for purposes of ethical valuation, it will be necessary to explore each case separately. There are great differences between nations, nation-states and national ideologies. One must ask, in each case, just what they *represent* in terms of human realities and human values. This question applies both to the abstract (*ipso facto* heavily ideological) level of patriotic sentiments and to the concrete everyday experiences in which these are rooted. In other words, the question has relevance both to the great ideas of the French Republic and to the smell of French bread.

On the latter level, it seems possible to propose a general human right: *Every human being has the right to his own tradition.* Put differently: *No one may be deprived of his own childhood.* Thus the South Tyroleans were correct in perceiving their fundamental human rights being violated when the Italian government sought to rob them of their language, and of the sounds and sights of their childhood. The right to the language of one's origins probably makes the ethical point most clearly: Every language is an immensely valuable depository of human experiences, of joys, sorrows and uniquely irreplaceable perceptions of the world. Those whose lives have been shaped by a language have a basic right to its possession—and, if necessary, its defense. Conversely, there is an ethical and political obligation to protect the human values deposited in any language. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same thinking applies to other components of a tradition, including some that may seem trivial to an outsider, such as the sight of a group of Tyroleans, dressed in regional garb and carrying their ancient banners, marching down a familiar street to the stirring music of a *Trachtenkapelle*.

Like other human rights, this one is not absolute. There are traditions that embody the oppression and enslavement of others. There are even happy childhoods full of cruelty to others (contrary to current

beliefs, happiness is not in itself a sign of virtue). It seems impossible to propose general criteria for this sort of ethical differentiation. Each case will have to be looked at separately.

Similarly, one must ask what values are represented by nation-states and their ideologies on the level of abstract patriotism. The French Republic represented very different values from Nazi Germany, a fact that would only have been obscured by either the approbation or repudiation of *both* nationalisms. The United States represented different values when its armies poured into Europe in 1944 than when they fought in Vietnam. The goal of national integration has vastly different meanings in Western societies and in the Third World. Again, no general ethical formulas seem possible here. There appears no alternative to a painstaking exploration of each individual case: To what degree have the Nazi past and the requirements of world peace made the ethical claims of German national unity obsolete? Does American patriotism have an *a priori* claim to the allegiance of every group within the country, including those who would reject the claim (such as some blacks, say, or Chicanos)? Was the goal of national integration worth the human costs of the Nigerian civil war? If so, does the same logic lead to a repudiation of the insurrection that led to the dismemberment of Pakistan? More generally: When is "Balkanization" a genuine evil and when is it evoked as a cover for oppression? What is being suggested here amounts to a procedure of *ethical costs/benefits analysis*. Such a procedure does not exist at the present time. What is worse, few people are even interested in developing one.

It has often been pointed out that American patriotism is distinctive in that it refers to a very specific ideology, what Gunnar Myrdal aptly called the "American creed." This is, of course, a valid description, even though American patriotism is not quite as distinctive in this respect as some would have it. There are strong "creedal" components in other patriotisms, as in those of the Latin American countries, and most notably (an important commonality) of the Soviet Union. All the same, American patriotism is characterized by a peculiar linkage with a highly articulate political ideology, and it is indeed assumed that every American will not only love his country but owe allegiance to its official ideology. This, of course, has led to the peculiar notion of "un-American" beliefs. Contrary to current liberal opinion it is a notion present from the beginnings of the American republic: A Tory believer in the divine right of kings was as much beyond the ideologically acceptable pale (even if the term "un-American" was not used then) as, say, a believer in the redemptive goal of socialist revolution later on in the history of the Republic. It follows that any ethical valuation of American

patriotism, at least on this level, will hinge on an assessment of the value and continuing viability of this specific ideology. American patriotism will be plausible to those who affirm the basic propositions of the "American creed"; it will be repudiated by those to whom the "creed" has come to appear as a form of false consciousness. (*Mutatis mutandis*, the same holds for Soviet patriotism—a point of as much interest to Ukrainians or Uzbeks as to American blacks or Chicanos.)

It is all the more important to stress that even American patriotism is not exhausted by these ideological abstractions. What is more, if it were, one could only predict a dim future for it: Few people can live by abstractions for very long. Again, a useful question to ask in this connection is what an American will miss abroad. The answer will invariably bring into view a particular cluster of American experiences and realities—from the particularities of the American language and of American comic sensibilities (how many Englishmen laugh at American jokes?) to the sights of a drugstore, the sounds of a high-school band and the taste of hamburgers. It is out of such stuff that any subjectively real patriotism is fashioned—and it is a serious error of understanding to denigrate this. By comparison with these vivid realities the abstractions of the "American creed" are rather pallid in most people's minds. An interesting question would concern the extent to which the "creed" has actually penetrated this level of everyday realities. One may think here of the ingrained egalitarianism of American manners, or of the exuberant surrealism of American humor. In that case, what the American misses abroad will at least implicitly contain certain elements of the "creed." Still, it is safe to assume that he will only rarely miss such overt expressions of the "creed" as recitations of the Oath of Allegiance or Fourth of July festivities.

The concrete realities of much of what we think of today as "the American way of life" would, in all likelihood, survive a demise of the present political system. In all likelihood there would be high-school bands in the American People's Republic, and subjects of the Principality of Brooklyn would eat hamburgers, even if jokes became more ironic in the former and manners more deferential in the latter (bowing from the waist in Flatbush?). There would, in that case, be considerable continuity in the concrete contents of American patriotism (as there has been in the case of Russian patriotism following the establishment of the Communist state). It remains true, however, that the survival of the American political system is intricately linked with the further course and character of American patriotism. More specifically, American democracy will be vital to the degree its basic propositions are linked to the patriotism inspired by the concrete experiences of American life. American democracy

will be in bad shape on the day when most Americans are content to have the hamburgers without the "creed."

It is likely that we are nowhere near this point today. But the denigration of patriotism in important milieus of American intellectual and academic life today is dangerous nonetheless. Intellectuals and academics, of course, are far less important in society than they think. Nevertheless, they occupy positions in which reality is defined for large numbers of other people. Even if most of these people are suspicious of the intellectuals' definitions of reality, there are political consequences to the ensuing vacuum of legitimations. Put differently, in a very basic way, many American intellectuals have been eating the hamburgers while denigrating the "creed," and this is not only morally ambiguous (by all indications, they continue to enjoy the repast) but politically unhealthy. A revitalization of patriotism, and its relegitimation by the intellectual leadership, is very important for the future viability of American democracy. To say this does not in itself prejudice the particular political coloration of such a resurgent patriotism. In principle, it could occur at just about any point in the political spectrum. It could well be "left" as well as liberal (indeed, it is already remarkable to what extent ideas and movements deemed as being "on the left" all over the world are of American origin). It could also be conservative or "on the right." One of the measures of the crisis of patriotism in intellectual circles today is that only the last of these possibilities seems plausible to many in those circles. It goes without saying that such a realignment of the symbols of patriotic sentiment cannot happen overnight. It requires political as well as intellectual leadership, and one hardly needs to add that the political leadership with which the American republic has been blessed in recent years has done little toward that end, despite its unrestrained exhibition of patriotic symbolism.

The "American creed" has been very largely the creation of political liberalism. This is a *Weltanschauung* that has to its credit impressive humane achievements, and the defensiveness of liberals in the face of their "left" critics over the last few years has little justification in the record. (I should add that I say this without being a member of the liberal camp myself; I continue to be emphatically and unapologetically conservative in my own basic political stance.) Any fair critique of liberalism should begin with an acknowledgment of its achievements in the sphere of human values and freedoms.

When it comes to the topic under discussion here, though, liberalism has always suffered from an excessive emphasis on abstract patriotism as against the concrete manifestations of communal patriotism. This is a tendency that goes right back to the roots

of liberalism in Enlightenment thought; in some ways it is *the* Achilles heel of liberal political thought. This has made liberals peculiarly blind to the communal solidarities and particularisms on which, as we suggested earlier, the abstract edifice of modern institutions must necessarily rest. Without giving up their fundamental convictions, liberals should be able to cultivate a new sensitivity to the concrete communities that give meaning and a sense of being at home to most human beings—the realities of family, church, neighborhood, and ethnic group, to mention but the cardinal ones. It may be hoped that the black movement has given some useful lessons in this regard to its white liberal supporters. Also, liberals should be able to become more positively aware of the human values embodied in the concrete everyday experiences of social life. Put differently, they should be capable of overcoming the caricature of “Middle America” in their own minds. Perhaps the fiasco of the McGovern campaign has had some educational impact in this area (if it has not, the major blame attaches to Richard Nixon).

American society, as any other modern society, is an order of highly abstract institutions. These are legitimated by ideas that, most of the time, are quite remote from the everyday experiences of people—from the loyalties and emotions of concrete patriotic sentiment. For this reason it is of very great importance that there be *mediating structures*—mediating, that is, between the abstractions of the political system and the concrete lives of individuals. Public policy should vigorously protect these structures where they exist (for example, it should be public policy to foster the family and the neighborhood), and where they do not exist or have disappeared it should be a public concern to invent and bring into being new structures that can fulfill this mediating role. If this necessity is truly understood, what emerges is a quite new political program. It will be a program that cuts diagonally across the present



ideological boundaries, a program neither “left” nor “right” in the conventional sense. The elaboration of its details could be one of the most exciting enterprises in the coming period of American history .