



Examining Patriotism and Education

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Defining Patriotism

Most definitions of patriotism include the concept of love for and loyalty towards one's nation. Although patriotism is commonly associated with positive feelings such as unity, unselfishness, and love, it can be argued that patriotism is an unnatural sentiment that creates bias, and is a major cause of war. Furthermore, efforts to include patriotism in schools at any level are essentially indoctrination, not education.

Patriotism as Love of Fellow Citizens

Patriotism implies expressing love for one's fellow citizens. Loving other people makes sense, and is surely beneficial for society as a whole. Such love arises naturally for the individuals that one comes into contact with and works and plays with. A neighborhood, a workplace, a county, a prefecture, a nation and all of humanity benefit from loving, cooperative and altruistic behavior. Patriotism, however, extols the virtues of targeting a particular group of individuals to love. With what logic—and to whose benefit—is it to focus almost exclusively on national unity as opposed to community, state, or global unity?

Citizens of a nation are largely strangers. Nations contain a huge number of individuals with diverse ideas and ways of thinking. Howard Zinn, in *A People's History of the United States*, writes, "Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex."

Patriots of some nations, like Japan, might point to kinship, claiming Japan is "racially pure" and hence "family." However, tracing ancestry back a few more generations, Japanese can find their supposed family is part of a larger family of Koreans, Chinese, Portuguese, and innumerable other races. Keep tracing ancestry and we arrive in Africa and the birth of the human species. There is no logical or biological reason to limit the notion of family to those within national borders.

Thus, a nation is not homogenous. If a person can love hundreds of millions of strangers as patriotism implies, surely it would be better advised to spread that affection and commitment to all of humanity. With patriotism, the feelings of love and unity are always narrowly focused on those within national borders.

Patriotism and Identity

One rationale for patriotism is that humans need to identify with greater entities and ideals, and that internationalism doesn't satisfy that need. Michael McConnell is an academic, author, and defender of patriotism. In his essay *Don't Neglect the Little Platoons* he writes, "Humanity at large—what we share with other humans as rational beings—is too abstract to be a strong focus for affections. Since "the world" has never been the locus of citizenship, a child who is taught to be a 'citizen of the world' is taught to be a citizen of an abstraction."

McConnell, however, fails to acknowledge that to be a citizen of a nation is likewise to be a citizen of an abstraction, with the only concrete evidence of national membership being man-made papers such as passports. Citizens of a nation are artificial constructs; looking at a person, there is no way to know her citizenship. In the case of a "world citizen," however, individuals are members of a natural entity, the earth, and humanity always absolutely identifiable.

Patriotism as Loyalty to National Government

Wikipedia notes that patriots should be willing to sacrifice their lives for the state. Loyalty means to remain faithful despite circumstances. It is oxymoronic at best, and Orwellian doublespeak to cynics, to suggest that autonomous independent-thinking citizens of a so-called free, democratic society should maintain "unswerving allegiance" to its national government. "Unswerving allegiance" amounts to a certain amount of bias and blindness, for the sake of unity narrowly focused within national borders, especially in times of war. In fact, wars rely on the loyalty of citizens. Without this loyalty, it's hard to imagine soldiers killing and risking their lives when their governments demand that the bombs start falling.

The Education Connection

John Taylor Gatto, two-time winner of the New York state *Teacher of the Year* award, traces the history of compulsory schooling to Prussia.

"After Napoleon's army defeated Prussia (Germany) at the battle of Jena in 1806, Fichte (the Prussian philosopher) declared, 'Education should provide the means to destroy free will.' Look what Napoleon had done by banishing sentiment in the interests of nationalism.

Through forced schooling, everyone would learn that “work makes free,” and working for the State, even laying down one’s life to its commands, was the greatest *freedom* of all. Here in the genius of semantic redefinition lay the power to cloud men’s minds...”

Thus, Prussia laid the foundations for the illusion that the state is a powerful father figure, necessarily worthy of the loyalty of its citizens. From its inception, public school education was not envisioned as a way to cultivate the human spirit, but as a way to make the individual loyal to the nation. Gatto describes how public schools are designed to break an individual’s independence, by making pupils obey the dictates of bells, follow a fragmented curriculum and have their worth defined—judged—externally via grades. Youth who don’t conform to the dictates of the system get branded rebellious, receive poor grades, or simply flunk out. Beyond these systematic means of bending the student’s will to the demands of the state, there are overt expressions of love which most schoolchildren the world over are expected to express. In the United States, a supposed champion of freedom and critical thinking, children routinely recite, “I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

The U.S. Pledge of Allegiance

Few people question whether having children promise their loyalty to the national government has a place in public schools. In *Examining the Pledge of Allegiance*, Leisa Martin discusses the history of the pledge and mentions a few controversies regarding it, but never raises the point of whether this sort of indoctrination belongs in schools at all. She mentions that in 1925 thirty-five Mennonite children refused to salute the flag because “they felt taking up arms and taking other peoples’ lives to defend the U.S. was against their religious beliefs.” Her words “to defend the U.S.” should be phrased “to fight in wars,” especially since American soldiers have fought solely on foreign soil for over 100 years. Martin also notes that originally the pledge was said with a stiff arm salute, not unlike the Nazi salute. Schools dropped this during World War II. Martin does offer some facts troubling to critics of the Pledge. Since 911, seventeen U.S. states have enacted new pledge laws, and 35 states mandated that the Pledge be recited daily during school. Unfortunately, this clinging to old ways of patriotism and indoctrination is not limited to the United States. Japan has recently made similar moves of its own.

Education for Patriotism in Japan

In Japan, where patriotism was discouraged after World War II, pressure is building to make school children more patriotic. In August 1999, a law instituted the *Hinomaru* rising sun flag as the official flag of Japan and *Kimigayo* (*His Majesty’s Reign*) as the official national anthem. Both were and are potent symbols of Japan’s pre-war militarization and invasions of neighboring countries. Moreover, Japan’s *Fundamental Law of Education*, which had called for “nurturing truth, peace, and justice” was revised. Then prime minister Shinzo Abe and his allies passed a bill that demanded schools instill “a love of one’s country” in children. Some critics of the new law saw shades of an 1890 edict that decreed children must recite stanzas of patriotic praise before the portrait of the Emperor. That same year, in 1999, a Hiroshima principle, caught between teachers who refused to stand for the *Kimigayo* during school ceremonies and pressure from the school board who demanded that they do so, committed suicide.

Tokyo teachers have suffered the brunt of punishment. Tokyo Governor Ishihara, who has suggested Japan bomb North Korea and calls Japan’s peace constitution “nonsense”, has pressed school boards to force teachers to stand. Those who refuse have been suspended without pay, transferred to distant schools, not allowed home-room duties, and abused by students. One teacher, Kimiko Nezu, has taken the school board to court and won. The board has appealed to the Japanese supreme court. A verdict is expected in 2010.

Few educators would deny the value of independent thinking. The problem is deeper than any single act of indoctrination. More important are the ways people carve up the world into “us” and “them”; learn to view international problems through the lens of national identity; the extent young adults feel compelled to conform to the dominant culture of their society; and the tendency for young men and women to agree to become soldiers who follow orders and even kill strangers on the order of their commander. Educators have a responsibility to deeply consider these issues and the meaning and implications of patriotism.

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