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# Patriotism, History and the Legitimate Aims of American Education

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## Abstract

*This article argues that while an attachment to one's country is both natural and even partially justifiable, cultivating loyal patriotism in schools is untenable insofar as it conflicts with the legitimate aims of education. These aims include the epistemological competence necessary for ascertaining important truths germane to the various disciplines; the cultivation of critical thinking skills (i.e. the ability to even-handedly consider counterfactual evidence); and developing the capacity for economic self-reliance. The author argues that loyal patriotism may result in a myopic understanding of history, an unhealthy attitude of superiority relative to other cultures, and a coerced sense of attachment to one's homeland.*

Keywords: patriotism, history, legitimacy, partiality, loyalty, coercion.

To rebel against the American government is the greatest crime, because almost by definition the United States represents liberty and cannot be tyrannical.<sup>1</sup>

All liberal democracies face a tension between fostering citizenship and a degree of social cohesion, and fostering critical thinking skills and allowing dissent. These matters come to a head in debates over patriotic education. To give this essay some focus, however, I will cast the argument in terms of the debate in the United States (but certainly sources and examples from Europe, Australia and elsewhere could be adumbrated). That caveat aside, and apart from the legitimate functions they serve, American public schools and the history textbooks they use aid in the cultivation of an uncritical patriotic disposition (M. Nash, 2005; Raphael, 2004; Brighthouse, 2003; G. Nash *et al.*, 2000; Fullinwider, 1996; Loewen, 1995). Uncritical patriotism lends itself to a false sense of history and its corollary, a troubling loyalty to current political leadership and its policies; this is particularly true during times of national crisis when the demonization of those against whom national policy is set is likely to occur (M. Nash, 2005; Zembylas & Boler, 2002; Apple, 2002). This uncritical patriotic disposition, what I will call *loyal patriotism*, countenances a view of the United States—in its past and present—that reflects only its most conservative (read, self-preserving) tendencies and too commonly asks that students consider only American ‘blessings’ and not its many scourges.

In this essay I shall argue that while an attachment to one's country is both natural and even partially justifiable, cultivating loyal patriotism in schools is untenable insofar as it conflicts with the legitimate aims of education. These include the epistemological competence necessary for ascertaining important truths germane to the various disciplines; the cultivation of critical thinking skills (i.e. the ability to even-handedly consider counterfactual evidence); and developing the capacity for economic self-reliance. On the contrary, the cultivation of loyal patriotism is likely to promote:

- A myopic understanding both of one's national history as well as its contemporary role in a globalized society;
- An unhealthy attitude of superiority relative to other cultures and polities;
- A coerced (rather than freely given) sense of attachment to one's homeland.

While there are real perils in promoting patriotism in schools, here are at least two reasons why I will venture to defend a variant I call *critical patriotism*. First, we are unlikely to see a realistic diminution of patriotic activity in American schools, and second and more importantly, I will show that having special attachments to one's homeland may not spoil one's capacity to think critically about those attachments. However, unlike the loyal patriot, the critical patriot will embrace what is wonderful about one's homeland on the understanding that its ideals extend to all citizens irrespective of one's color, sexual orientation, creed or political affiliation. Where it is sensibly allowed, critical patriotism will foster the capacity to express dissent and moral outrage, and this arises from the fact that citizens may sometimes feel the best ideals of American democracy are being betrayed if not effectively undermined. Moreover, critical patriotism will consider the welfare of those outside of one's borders and understand one's role as citizen in ways not confined by national borders or geopolitical expediency.

In what follows I will define patriotism and offer examples of patriotic attachment in American schools. I will then broadly outline the civic purposes of American education and provide a brief history of the rise of patriotism in American schools. Next I will show that history comes to us constructed and argue that this in itself is no cause for alarm so long as intentional distortions and half-truths are not the result. Following this I will consider whether certain loyalties may justifiably be shown to one's compatriots and examine world citizenship as a more expansive understanding of patriotism. Finally, I argue that insofar as children develop a patriotic disposition, they must do so through non-coercive means.

### **What is Patriotism?**

Patriotism means many things to many people. For some, it is indistinguishable from nationalism (i.e. a singular identification with the nation state and its leadership), and may require a ready defense of a nation's honor, whether in word or in deed. For example, in the first instance a patriot may extol the memory of those who fought and died for the homeland, and in the second instance a patriot may

take up arms either to honor the memory of those who went before or to ensure the possibility of future freedom. The fact remains, however, that patriotism is only nebulously defined in school curricula; it is at best connected to ‘symbolic acts’ related to reverence for the flag. In at least one study (M. Nash, 2005, p. 234) it was found that the emotional resonance of patriotism among pre-service teachers (expressed with visceral language such as loyalty, respect and pride) had little coherence with factual knowledge.

I wish to define patriotism as a special affinity one has toward her homeland (or, adopted homeland) that fosters a deep psychological attachment and pride. This attachment and/or pride may manifest itself in many ways (e.g. it may lend itself to ethnocentrism though it need not), but it is likely to encourage one to view her homeland as an inherently more desirable place to live relative to other places. Patriotism just as often inspires a profound emotional response in individuals who extol their country’s founding principles, its anthems that proclaim its virtues, and its (usually long dead) civic leaders whose examples are believed to embody important ideals (Finn, 2006; Ravitch, 2006). Yet patriotism is not merely an emotion; indeed, to the extent that s/he identifies with a particular place and its history, however flawed that history is, the patriot is summoned to act. This action arises from a sense of duty to protect the honor, integrity and safety of one’s compatriots, and may be informed by well-reasoned principles.

### **Pluralism and the Civic Purposes of Education**

Deciding whether or not to educate for patriotism is particularly vexing because patriotic messages are at times difficult to distinguish from one of the historic core purposes of liberal education, *viz.*, to cultivate a civic capacity about the society one inhabits. This includes, but is not limited to, informing citizens about the function of their government and encouraging participation in the political process (e.g. voting). Indeed, one of the purposes of education is also to enable a proficient understanding of political institutions, its competing social and political interests, and the procedures necessary for advancing a particular agenda or mobilizing for change.

Educators also have good reasons to promote civic aims that involve a socio-deliberative engagement *vis-à-vis* the public good. This involves the cultivation of various types of virtues, knowledge and skills necessary for social cooperation. The civic purposes of education include fostering the capacity to evaluate different points of view that others may deem central to a good life. This can be done by encouraging students to weigh comparative evidence and make reasonable inferences about that evidence. Such an approach calls for mutual respect. Should this mutual respect be lacking, citizens will be ineffective in deciding matters affecting their common future if they hold to very different visions of the good. Indeed, an education that principally seeks to engender loyalty to a sectarian creed or cultural way of life is seen as politically irrelevant and inappropriate to the task of a liberal education.

Yet an education for a civic capacity does not present only a univocal or static reading of the past or the present. In fact, most liberals will argue that a homogeneous school environment will fail to properly prepare a child for living in a

pluralistic society where different ideas—some of them public, some private—about the good are entertained. This is one of the dangers loyal patriotism poses. Thus in a schooling atmosphere that wittingly or unwittingly promotes uniformity, realistic options for other ways of imagining the good are denied its pupils. Yet, the civic capacity can easily accommodate the demands of pluralism in a liberal society.

Pluralism is simply the condition of multiple value systems inhabiting the same political space. All societies encounter pluralism to some degree; some actively suppress it, while others welcome it. Western liberal democracies aim to accommodate pluralism to a greater degree than non-democratic societies. Yet this does not mean that liberal democracies consistently implement policies that accommodate all value systems. Insofar as the nation-state model continues to prevail, certain cultural norms, customs and institutions persist in being privileged over others. My point is simply that pluralism is a necessary element to schooling inasmuch as a less than uniform school culture is more likely to foster tolerance towards others whose views differ (Merry, 2007a).

The fact that schools teach for civic awareness, however, only describes what they do and not why they do it. We may wish to ask, for instance, whether schools ought to be in the business of cultivating civic awareness in the first place. Many parents, after all, argue that it does not fall to the State to educate children for loyalties that may conflict with other values and/or beliefs. This reasoning lies behind many parents' decision to homeschool their children or to place them in private schools.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some feel that civic education supplants the valuing of diversity many have reason to prize, including the right *not* to be politically engaged. To the degree that civic aims conflict with other interests parents have reason to value, there is sufficient warrant to question whether schools *ought* to be doing so. However, I am willing to suspend judgment on this important matter and argue from *de facto* educational realities. Thus educating for civic awareness and communal responsibility seems both wise and necessary if we are serious about fairness and equal opportunity but also social stability. This latter point is not without its difficulties, however, and I will return to it later.

### **The Ascendancy of Patriotism in American Schools**

The effort to promote patriotism in American schools has its historical roots in citizenship training aimed at protecting republican government in the antebellum period. Kaestle (1983) describes how a potent ideology involving Protestantism, republican civic virtues and capitalism combined to win broad appeal among middle-class white Americans in the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1880s, the school-house flag movement was visibly active in hundreds of public schools. Many educators believed that the flag could galvanize nationalist sentiment by incorporating daily exposure and ritual into the public schools. Indeed, the flag would serve as 'an emotional rallying point' (O'Leary, 1999, p. 177) for America's school children. Why this concern over a need for patriotism? First, the nation nearly had been rent asunder by the Civil War and much of the enthusiasm for a unified American identity had simply waned. Concerted efforts were made to reverse this

malaise, and by the 1890s, several influences were at work. A hugely popular national newspaper, *Youth's Companion*, also helped to spread the schoolhouse flag movement and inspire patriotic sentiment. Finally, it fell to Francis Bellamy, who also worked for the *Youth's Companion*, to help spread patriotic ideas by writing the nation's Pledge of Allegiance.<sup>3</sup> Bellamy knew that children would seldom reflect upon the words themselves but he recognized the power of rite and ritual in fostering loyalty to the nation, not unlike the catechetical methods used by religious educators.

By 1900, Charles Skinner, the New York state superintendent, published a 350 page book entitled, *Manual of Patriotism*. He disagreed with the National Education Association (NEA) that patriotism ought only to grow from rational roots; rather, he stressed a variety of emotive means for cultivating patriotic attachment for schoolchildren, including poems, songs, and flag rituals (O'Leary, 1999, p. 187).<sup>4</sup> All of this was occurring during a time when the United States was flexing its new imperial muscle at home through World Fair Expositions in Chicago (1893), Buffalo (1901), St. Louis (1904) and abroad, through its acquisition (from Spain) and colonization of the Philippines<sup>5</sup> and its myriad invasions throughout the Americas.

Other causes help us to explain the rise of patriotism. Certainly the ineluctable tide of non-Protestant immigration to the United States in the second half of the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries engendered a growing tide of nativism and intolerance. Indeed, the darker side to this optimistic vision of Bellamy's was the oftentimes racist import of 'liberty and justice for all,' i.e. the social exclusion, *inter alia*, of southern and eastern European immigrants, Native Americans and African Americans. In most schools, strong prohibitions were imposed against the use of non-English languages and non-Protestant customs. Ellwood Cubberly's notorious remark in 1909 is typical of the age:

Our task is to break up these groups or settlements, to assimilate and amalgamate these people as a part of our American race, and to implant in their children so far as can be done, the Anglo-Saxon conception of righteousness, law and order, and popular government, and to awaken in them a reverence for our democratic institutions and for those things in our national life which we as a people hold to be of abiding worth.

Cubberly's acerbic comments merely make explicit the American Exceptionalism doctrines that were to dominate the 20<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in the anti-socialist/communist invectives typical of McCarthyism in the early 1950s. Heightened suspicions during the Cold War would lead to the insertion of the phrase, 'under God' to the Pledge in 1954. Exceptionalism is the idea that the United States, in some intrinsic way, stands apart from, or above, the broader concerns of the world owing to the unique 'calling' of America's founding and leadership.<sup>6</sup>

Today patriotism can be found in American schools in a variety of forms. For starters, there is the Pledge of Allegiance. While its recitation is not required<sup>7</sup>, and in many school districts listening to the National Anthem may stand in, tacit pressure to place one's hand over heart and say the Pledge is great.<sup>8</sup> Further, all public schools fly American flags on their school grounds, and a large percentage

of teachers also have flags or pictures of the president somewhere in the classroom. Most schools (particularly high schools) have school government and student councils, which intentionally reflect the specific offices of government on a state and federal level. Most high schools teach civics classes, in which attention is given to the functions of American government and the duties and responsibilities citizens may have.

In addition to these, however, one may point to competitive school sports, which play a crucial role in fostering 'school spirit'. This type of patriotism is not directed at political institutions per se, but the forms it takes are strikingly patriotic in expression and coincide well with the aims of loyal patriotism. Pep rallies, school newspapers, banners and advertising of various kinds also promote intense loyalties to one's *own* school in much the same way as patriotism writ large tends to foster an exclusive attachment to one's homeland. American schools also promote patriotism through various forms of media: Weekly Readers, countless newspapers, magazines, television (including Channel One for thousands of American school children) and Internet sources that often provide a pro-American point of view. Of course, *how* a teacher uses media—particularly a range of media perspectives—may aid in attenuating uncritical patriotic perspectives. Finally, history textbooks seem especially susceptible to patriotic tendencies.

### **History as Construction**

As a scholarly exercise, history serves many purposes and this seems reasonable and necessary. First, however, it is important that a truthful account be given. This account may be biased and will most certainly be limited in perspective. Nevertheless, if the study of history has a singular aim it is to recount the events of the past as faithfully as one can. This is important because the *telos* of education 'is surely truth, its regulative ideals those of critical reason' (Archard, 1999, p. 166). Second, we ought to be particularly concerned about the *ends* to which the knowledge disseminated and committed to memory serve. We shall want to know not only the facts but also whose story these facts relate and whose, accordingly, they do not. A truthful historical portrait will doubtless include stories of those who did infinitely more to shape the course of history than many whose contributions have either been exaggerated or whose contributions did more to oppress others than seemingly relevant 'facts' reflect. Third, we shall want to learn from history both the immediate causes and effects pertinent to the account rendered but also the effects of those views on our own place and time insofar as these connections can reliably be made.

Yet in a very real sense history—perhaps especially in school classroom textbooks—is *constructed*, which is to say that conflicting accounts and happenings derived from retrievable memoir, census data, church records, correspondence and previous historical writing is sifted and selected. The composite accounts and images that result reflect the interpretive frameworks of the authors. This is not to say that recorded history is manufactured. My point is simply that the history one reads may tell us as much about the authors writing it as the history its authors endeavor to recount. Unsurprisingly, much of Western history reflects a white, male and socially privileged point of view.

Now of course the organization of *any* information, whether in textbooks, magazines, television news, documentary, scientific experiment, or anywhere else for that matter, is unavoidably and inevitably incomplete. The construction of history, i.e. a giving an account of what actually happened in a particular time and place, involves a complex process of selection, interpretation and editing. What gets included or excluded is often a matter of discreet and not-so-discreet editorial decisions. Some of these decisions are determined by space limitations, others by a lack of accurate or reliable information, and still others by the ideological interests of censors or the profit motives of publishing houses. Yet even the most accurate—dare I say, ‘objective’—accounts, those that scrupulously consider cause and effect and the less-than-tidy pronouncements of moral blame, remain inescapably flawed and incomplete. New evidence comes to light; testimony is overturned; and the far-reaching effects of decisions once relegated to obscurity wield new strength.

History textbooks for school children are particularly vulnerable to criticism here, for with the control of a particular narrative—systematized by textbook companies and adopted by state and local boards of education—comes the ability to influence the thinking of an entire generation, and maybe several. School history textbooks are also liable to the degree that the authors promote an uncritical view of a nation’s history, particularly its misdeeds toward and exclusion of particular groups. Perhaps this is why history needs so badly to include the voices of the dispossessed inasmuch as it is feasible to do so. The inclusion of their voices is likely to help us gauge whether splendid ideals have only been held out for the few and the privileged, while systematically being denied to other groups of people, including gays and lesbians, women, immigrants, and people of color.

### **Patriotic History<sup>9</sup>**

History textbooks used in American schools promote a patriotism that is not always easy to detect. In order to encourage identification with the homeland, the patriotic tendency may be as subtle as the use of pronouns such as ‘we’ or ‘us’ (Raphael, 2004, p. 5; Brighouse, 2003, p. 158). Nevertheless, concerning written material, there are a number of views about what ought or ought not to be taught to schoolchildren. One is simply to continue doing what elementary and high school textbooks have done for decades, *viz.*, to offer a moralizing history, one that commends an array of heroes to us. Proponents of this view argue that children need to have trust in their country’s leaders, and furthermore need to be inspired by the examples of those who have gone before. Accordingly, the nation’s leaders, except in the most egregious cases, are to reflect the nobler qualities of human character. Where character flaws or serious moral failings exist, they are likely to be downplayed or edited out altogether if it is believed that they might impugn a more favorable image. Such fictionalized and infallible renderings suggest that extraordinary feats do not come from ordinary persons, though this augurs poorly for real life examples to emulate.

Many reasons can be given explaining why the teaching of history has often been used to cultivate patriotic virtue. One reason is because historians often do their work in service to a national entity. This truism seems lost on Diane Ravitch, who



has opined, ‘Historians, like writers of fiction, must be able to write what they know, based on evidence and scholarship, without fear of the censor and without deference to political, religious, ethnic or gender sensitivities’ (2003, p. 49). On the face of it, this seems straightforward and commonsensical. However, there is too much naïve optimism in her claim for it ignores the fact that most American history textbooks have downplayed if not denied the cultural and economic contributions of various minority groups. Further, even where historians aim to distance themselves from nationalist agendas, the lens through which they filter their knowledge is already constructed by narratives that unavoidably situate them.

It is well known, for instance, that different histories were written for schools in the North from those written in the South during Reconstruction and for decades afterward. Revisionist histories of the Civil War, then, would inevitably reflect the interests of different constituencies. Southerners were especially concerned that they pass along a history of which they could be proud, and a mythology of eulogized war heroes, undaunted and gallant, supplanted the shame of a decimated economy and the cruel ironies of states’ rights borne on the backs of slaves. This revisionism was not limited to the South, however, and both Northern and Southern perspectives came to embrace an assumed racism.<sup>10</sup> W. E. B. DuBois would come to characterize this type of historical writing as ‘lies agreed upon.’

Yet historians in a more general sense must largely be held to account for the stories they tell and the ways in which they have told them. Critics (Raphael, 2004; G. Nash, 1995; Loewen, 1995; Fullinwider, 1995) have indicted historians for their shameless distortions, their conscious bending of recorded events in order to further the concerns of the majority through a selective truth telling, one that clearly served the interests of those in power. The American creed was *e pluribus unum*, though its history too often recorded only the perspectives of a powerful few. What remains, then, is a rather hegemonic narrative, sanctioned by schools and the textbooks they use, which serve the interests of the same group of people it served decades ago. These narratives inform the hidden curriculum, and in the words of Frederick Erickson, involve:

... routine actions and unexamined beliefs [in school culture] that are consonant with the cultural system of meaning and ontology within which it makes sense to take certain actions, entirely without malevolent intent, that nonetheless systematically limit the life chances of members of stigmatized groups. (Erickson, 1987, p. 352)

Textbooks are also notoriously slow in reflecting changes in the broader culture, and this can partly be explained by the role that private textbook companies play in managing content. In the United States, history textbooks come courtesy of for-profit textbook companies. And of course textbook companies—precisely *because* they are for-profit—are keen to satisfy the constituencies that adopt and purchase their products (Delfattore, 1999). When conservative censors expend vast amounts of energy attempting to quell depictions of the United States or its leaders in anything but a pro-patriot light, or when textbook companies build their expanded narratives on those that have gone before, the *status quo* is entrenched. In a word,

*commerce* tells us much about what gets into textbooks and what does not.<sup>11</sup> American history textbooks have more *content* than ever before, and more stories are certainly told than before. Still, textbook companies, anxious to minimize risk, make very few changes that may raise the ire of critics. David Tyack explains:

It has been easier to add those ubiquitous sidebars to the master narrative than to rethink it, easier to incorporate new content into a safe and profitable formula than to create new accounts. American history textbooks are enormous—888 pages, on average—in part because publishers seek to neutralize or anticipate criticisms by adding topics. The result is often not comprehensive coverage but a bloated book devoid of style or coherence. (Tyack, 2003, p. 60)

The upshot of this is simply that critical perspectives, *viz.*, those that challenge the time-honored point of view, are difficult to come by. Textbooks also have played no small part in perpetuating half-truths and perspectives that clearly favor a ‘good guy’ approach to representing domestic and foreign policy. Listen to James Loewen:

High school American history textbooks do not, of course, adopt or even hint at the American colossus view. Unfortunately, they also omit the realpolitik approach. Instead, they take a strikingly different tack. They see our policies as part of a morality play in which the United States typically acts on behalf of human rights, democracy, and ‘the American way’. When Americans have done wrong, according to this view, it has been because others misunderstood us, or perhaps because we misunderstood the situation. But always our motives were good. This approach might be called the ‘international good guy’ view. (Loewen, 1995, pp. 210–211)

The loyal patriotic approach depicted in the foregoing quote is mitigated, I believe, by at least two things. First, teachers and students are not passive dupes in this process. Many are well aware of these one-sided tendencies and many are especially guarded about arguments that seem stacked in favor of one perspective without giving another one a fair hearing. Second, in the forty years since the Civil Rights Act, textbook depictions of American atrocities (e.g. Japanese American internment camps, Jim Crow segregation, displacement and genocide of Native American peoples, etc.) have fortunately become far more accurate.<sup>12</sup>

Where there continues to be a worrying trend, however, is the general lack of more critical examinations concerning the attitudes and beliefs that lay behind centuries of oppression and mistreatment of under-represented groups. Put more sharply, there remains a virtual absence of discussion on the ideological and theological underpinnings of white Christian racist superiority and the legacy of discrimination from which the American nation is still recovering. Desperately needed in American history textbooks is a critical analysis concerning the long term socioeconomic effects of an oppressive regime that systematically privileged generations of white Americans. What we now call white privilege—whether through the accumulation of wealth, consistent access to better schools and health care, or the acceptance of White as

the ideal typology against which all others were to be compared—tells us a lot about who many Americans were, to be sure, but also who many are, and how many continue to think, today.

Consider a departure from the standard textbook approach, one that regards the historical record from a deeply skeptical perspective. This is a ‘warts and all’ history, one that chronicles the American nation’s myriad wayward moments and gazes upon its ignoble past, particularly as evidenced by presidents and other iconic political figures. Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* (2004) is illustrative of such an approach. Beginning with the earliest conquests of the New World, Zinn marches through American history with unabashed keenness to uncover the varied foibles and misguided crusades of America’s leaders. *People’s History* certainly encourages moral outrage at America’s hypocrisies and failings,<sup>13</sup> yet Zinn’s book is not, as neo-conservatives might allege, proof of his ‘hate for America’. Rather, he is pained at the United States’ consistent failure to practice what it so often preaches to others. Zinn’s activist approach would sit well with Frederick Douglass, who wrote, ‘he is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins.’ Indeed, moral outrage<sup>14</sup> is one worthy patriotic aim, as Eamonn Callan observes:

[I]f the very point of American democracy is the pursuit of justice, the greater its failures in that regard the greater will be the revulsion of the [patriot], irrespective of the citizenship of those who endure justice. (Callan, 1999, p. 198)

But, many will wonder, will not the nation balkanize under the weight of such censure? Will such unsparing criticism not fail to inspire confidence in the noble ideals necessary for political stability and progress? Perhaps. Yet Zinn’s book shows us the real moral peril that is incurred when the lives of innocents are seen as expendable because their deaths remain in service to a dignified ideal. He understandably worries that a patriotism only for one’s own country is doomed to see others as less than human, even deserving of annihilation, if it serves the purpose of furthering America’s ‘greatness’. To be sure, Zinn’s is a critical patriotism *in extremis*, one that stresses our common humanity.<sup>15</sup> More than this, however, Zinn’s book—already used by many American high school teachers as supplementary material—offers a corrective to the distortions of American history that our school textbooks continually purvey by refusing to showcase dissenting views, including those of organized labor, women, and ethnic and religious minorities.

A critic might argue that Zinn’s idea of history is combative and not at all conducive to a neutral or objective account more becoming a historian’s craft. Yet such an understanding of history is implausible for at least two reasons. First, I have already argued that *all* history is constructed and interpreted. Even the most careful selection and sequential arrangement of facts will be both guilty of omission and susceptible of certain inferences more than others. Second, it is highly questionable whether a history of detached scholarship can be reconciled with the civic purposes of public education I outlined earlier. History textbooks are written with those civic purposes in mind; therefore, inasmuch as schools serve a civic function,

we can expect textbooks to aid teachers—entrusted with this responsibility—in steering discussions about historical events in ways that are educative to the students reading them. In short, history textbooks exemplify what a ‘usable past’ means.

### Partialities and Loyalties

Even allowing for legitimate ‘uses’ of history (e.g. to educate students about the dastardly effects of certain national policies), we do not escape the quandary of partiality that seems to implicate patriotic history. What should one make of the charge that patriotism encourages an unhealthy type of partiality, one that evinces favoritism in ways that militate against the welfare of others either (a) within one’s homeland (e.g. toward ethnic minorities), or (b) outside of the borders as it were (e.g., foreign nationals)? There is something to this criticism and it raises the question as to whether any moral significance ought to apply where seemingly arbitrary borders occur. Consider the thought experiment Plato envisions in *The Republic*, where he calls for a kind of statewide guardianship for infants who are assigned wet nurses and care providers out of deference to the broader interests of the *polis*. Plato’s view is broadly interpreted to be a state-centered agenda both because loyalties and affections one may have for family members are disallowed (because this is a sign of weakness), but also because such a scheme serves the interests of the ruling class, the philosopher rulers.

Plato’s ideas grate against our time-honored traditions of intimacy and camaraderie and the preferences that emanate from them. Simply put, we *favor* some over others, and often this is with those with whom we share a common bloodline, religion, voluntary association, language or citizenship, and often in that order. This sense of connectedness and the attendant attachments one may have to her fellow citizens or compatriots is a perfectly natural human sentiment, one that most of us feel at one time or another, and it often is sensible to act upon motivations deriving from these attachments. The more I identify with someone else—and this is likely to be someone who shares my language, culture, or citizenship—one may speak of what Samuel Scheffler calls ‘presumptively decisive reasons for action’ owing to the quality of the relationship one has with another. Though there is bound to be something controversial about these partial claims, such relationships will usually be those with recognizably ‘socially salient connections’ (Scheffler, 1997, pp. 196–198; Cf. Mason, 1997).

Therefore, strong *prima facie* reasons can easily be found for allowing certain kinds of partiality to thrive. In families, for example, bonds of affection typically arise from a nurturing relationship which, at least in the early years, is defined by a high degree of dependency. From these bonds of affection reciprocal trust and commitment typically develops. Participants in these said bonds of affection demonstrate concern for one another in ways that they often do not for others (though there is nothing in this arrangement prohibiting it); similarly, expectations that one’s family members do likewise is implicitly understood. When there is an absence of affection and concern, or when family members fail to minimally demonstrate compassion—indeed, where there is harm or neglect—there is warrant

for disappointment, frustration and even moral outrage. This outrage either arises from (1) a lack of demonstrable evidence for, or (2) in reaction to a violation of, those qualities one comes to reasonably expect from family members. Harm and neglect, however they are qualified or defined, constitute defensible reasons for moral outrage, and suggest that the bonds of affection for which families ought to be commended, have in some significant sense been compromised or disregarded. Family members, then, respond to one another not only from a way of belonging but also from a sense of mutual responsibility. Particularly during calamitous times and moments of profound interpersonal crisis, the very substance of family bonds is oftentimes tested in ways previously unimagined.

When exterior forces threaten to disrupt family cohesion, its members predictably cling to one another by whatever threads bind them together. In much the same way, compatriots, buffeted by real or imagined attack, bind together not from a relational bond but from a circumscribed identity that importantly identifies one *as* a Swede, a Ugandan or a New Zealander. Indeed, patriots are loyal to their homeland and fellow citizens in much the same way that grown children (in most cases) are, or ought to be, loyal to their parents. Whatever the disagreements, whatever the flaws, *this* mother and *this* father are one's parents and not some other set of parents. It is in this way that a patriot identifies with *her* country, precisely because it *is* her country. The obligations we have to one another, as family members or compatriots, correspond closely to the loyalties we typically feel, and these involve vested interests and actions that derive their efficacy from bonds of kinship. Consequently, the various ways in which group co-members (of families, voluntary associations, religious communions or nationalities) are inclined to help each other is altogether unexceptional. Indeed, it is hard to imagine loyalties and responsibilities *without* partiality.

*Impartiality* is of course commendable in some circumstances, particularly when favoritism will lead to decidedly harmful consequences. Conflict mediators and jury members need to show impartiality in order to reach a peaceful resolution for both parties or so that justice may be served. When partiality for one's own child, for instance, leads to injustices for other children (e.g. hoarding important resources or defending certain practices that deprive others of equal opportunity) we have reason to worry. Moreover, patriotic partiality that sanctions a distorted historical record, one that, say, whitewashes the direct role of the federal government in displacing and slaughtering tens of thousands of American Indians or which downplays the state sanctioned discrimination against women and individuals or groups of color, is a completely indefensible form of partiality.

Of course the analogies of family loyalties to patriotic ones are imprecise. The adage 'blood is thicker than water' is not so well worn as to be meaningless. Yet, justifiably or not, individuals who withdraw from family obligations and responsibilities, say, to care for an ailing parent, are usually viewed with scorn. This is because they are seen as having *special obligations* to their family members not only by virtue of their blood relation but also owing to the putative quality of the relationship. Proximity to or distance from that parent in no way obviates the reasons one otherwise has to act in ways appropriate to that familial bond (see

Herman, 2002). However, notwithstanding the goods to come of our familial and social bonds, including those we share with compatriots, we still have reason to be concerned with the *means* by which said bonds develop. To the extent that coercion can be detected in fostering bonds of affection and corresponding loyalties there are strong grounds for impugning their legitimacy. In other words, we will have reason to question their being freely offered and reciprocated.

### **Democracy, Social Stability and Coercion**

The education of children is not merely the business of the parents or the local community; indeed, the broader society has an interest in the education of its citizenry. Given the condition of pluralism, the need for public education stems from the important interests of society and its members concerning the social stability, economic prosperity and democratic function of learning. Why democratic? Education needs to be democratic so that pupils come to learn in an environment that gives considerable weight not only to their willing participation but their own intellectual contributions as well (Merry, 2007a).

Likewise, some measure of social stability is a reasonable political good. The freedom to dissent may regress into anarchy and anomie if not balanced by a core of central ideals or beliefs shared by a critical mass of citizens. Indeed, many feel that the approach I am advocating for will reduce the evocative power of heroes that loyal patriotism tells us are worthy of emulation. This is certainly Arthur Schlesinger's fear:

If we now repudiate the quite marvelous inheritance that history bestows on us, we invite the fragmentation of the national community into a quarrelsome spatter of enclaves, ghettos, tribes. The bonds of cohesion in our society are sufficiently fragile, or so it seems to me, that it makes no sense to strain them by encouraging and exalting cultural and linguistic apartheid. (Schlesinger, 1992, pp. 137–138)<sup>16</sup>

Yet social stability cannot be bought for a price that is destructive to the very substance of what it means to have a political system and a way of life worth having in the first place. Indeed, disallowing the State to promote its interests through schools will only weaken its stability if we understand stability to mean masses of people who uncritically embrace ideals via dubious instrumental means.

The means by which consent is garnered is extremely important, for in soliciting the willing participation of its members, there is legitimacy. Legitimacy is important because outcomes without it are coerced; further, independent thinking and autonomy are unable to blossom in its absence. Education must, therefore, foster independent thinking and a capacity for rational evaluation that enables one to weigh different and potentially competing claims. This *deliberative process* guides the civic aim of education, which is to seek out the public good (Merry, 2007a). Yet the considerations that bear upon the public good, as I have attempted to show, are decidedly *not* limited to those whose effects will benefit only one's compatriots. (These interests may, however, coincide.) Rather, the public good must be expansive enough to consider the welfare of non-citizens, too. The public good can easily

accommodate critical patriotism, provided it is informed, reflective and freely given, and not, coerced.

Avoidance of coercion is not always possible, nor is it always desirable. For example, we willingly accept a fair amount of coercion where children are concerned provided one has their best interests in mind. Coercion of children is in fact necessary in many cases in order to ensure their protection and safety but also because children are not fully autonomous, i.e. they generally lack the satisfactory level of rationality and emotional maturity that, rightly or wrongly, we associate with adults. In short, children are rarely held *fully* accountable (certainly not in the eyes of the law) for the choices that they make (see Merry, 2007*b*). States also coerce citizens, specifically in order to compel obedience to laws through inducements or penalties of various kinds. Examples include coercion to pay taxes, attend school, serve on juries, and wear seat belts. Yet, despite what libertarians may think, each of these can be justified by appealing to a certain conception of a well-functioning society that aims to serve the public good. Other forms of state coercion are subtler and favor some groups more than others (e.g. official languages or recognized holidays).

Perhaps this is where the difficulty with loyal patriotism and the State truly lies. For with patriotism it is particularly worrying that an instrument of the State, *viz.*, public schools and the means they use (e.g. textbooks, patriotic rituals), ought to play an active part in promoting its interests. This is especially true, knowing that states also resort to secrecy and deception in order to further their political aims. And, Garry Wills writes, 'once mistakes or crimes are committed, the urgency to conceal them becomes even more intense. Secrecy has an inner dynamic of inevitable growth. The more you have of it, the more you need' (1999, p. 315). Thus, considering how unlikely it is that states will do any differently—for self-preservation lies at the heart of statecraft—it seems wholly unwise to cede authority to the State so that it might promote loyalty to itself via the patriotic aims and effects of public schools. This is so for at least two reasons.

First, loyalty to the State is not one of the legitimate aims of education. Developing a capacity for reasoning, critical thinking and economic self-reliance is. A robust citizenship is not pusillanimous, and this means that the State will also value the capacity for and the exercise of dissent. Indeed, civil disobedience and conscientious objection are both perfectly valid ways of expressing citizenship. This does not mean that it is the proper role of educators to encourage disagreement with the government as an end in itself. But neither is it the proper role of educators to encourage *assent* to the aims of government via loyal—read uncritical, unreflective—patriotic practices. For the State to engage in the cultivation of assent to its own patriotic purposes, it places its own self-serving interests in conflict with those children have reason to value, *viz.*, their own autonomy.

Second, the deliberate aim of cultivating patriotism in school children lessens the possibility for *freely offered* consent (Brighouse, 2003). Far more preferable than a coerced patriotism is an autonomous agent who is able to offer her consent when she has well-informed reasons to do so. With these reasons one may come to embrace the sort of critical patriotism I have described in the foregoing pages, but one also may not. Either way, given the patriotic slant of history textbooks in American

schools, teachers will need to be particularly vigilant, encouraging critical reflection on the material students read. And while this places an additional burden on teachers, it seems necessary that multiple historical and media perspectives are needed to help facilitate desirable outcomes.

### World Citizenship

Given the trappings of loyal patriotism, it might seem desirable to advocate for a kind of 'world citizenship', an allegiance as it were not to one national context but to the wider human community. In some ways this approach resembles the Kantian categorical imperative, *viz.*, act only in such a way that you would apply your moral principle to others in all places elsewhere, and treat others only as an end in themselves. Put another way, in whatever one does and however one thinks, educators would do well to encourage their students to give ethical consideration to all people irrespective of their nationality. This is because each person possesses intrinsic value and is equally deserving of dignity and moral consideration, regardless of where they were born, which language they speak, or which culture, social class or sexual preference they may have.

Thus, a teacher keen to promote 'world citizenship' may encourage not only critical reflection upon the American Constitution; she may also encourage close attention to the UN Declaration on Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions, or even a comparative consideration of judicial precedent in other nation states.<sup>17</sup> This approach demonstrates a concern for more than the integrity of a national reputation precisely because loyalty to the homeland is not the overriding concern. Indeed, this wider understanding of citizenship calls out for social justice that transcends political expediency and presidential prerogatives. A critical patriotism will not be inconsistent with such a studied approach. Rather, it remains both *critical* precisely because it allows for dissent, and *patriotic* inasmuch as it embraces love of justice in the name of a country's acclaimed ideals.

Critics, however, suggest that attachments to vague notions such as 'the world' lack the substance necessary for attachments in the first place (Miller, 1995; Himmelstam, 1997; McConnell, 1997; Cottingham, 1986). These critics argue that established communities provide us not only with the essential ingredients necessary for a personal identity but also the foundation for mutual trust and a willingness to abide by a set of agreed upon principles. Furthermore, our patriotic attachments are not *sui generis*, for our loyalties and affections for country derive first and foremost from affections closer to home, *viz.*, from communities that provide a 'unifying focus to the moral life' (McConnell, 1997, p. 80; Cf. Walzer, 1988, p. 126).<sup>18</sup> Attempts to foster love or fidelity to abstractions (i.e. 'the human race') are doomed to fail, it is argued, simply because love must be directed toward that which can be viscerally felt, *viz.*, real relationships. These provide the basis, the foundation, for allegiances that grow outward from them. In short, there is simply too much utopianism in a world citizenship and it seems more reasonable to assume that individuals will need something much closer to home with which to identify before constructing patriotic sentiment or reasoning.



Martha Nussbaum, a major proponent of world citizenship, argues that it is perfectly reasonable to align oneself with a particular family, a particular religion, a particular political tradition, etc. 'Politics,' she writes, 'like childcare, will operate more effectively (and certainly, in most cases, with greater sensitivity) if there are favored spheres or attachments' (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 13). It seems reasonable to say that persons will be more capable of respecting, appreciating and embracing different political traditions or cultural accomplishments after they have first acknowledged and embraced their own. No one is ever entirely extricated from cultural constraints, nor should they be. Further, because most of one's life is spent in a particular context, it is to be expected that individuals will acquire a more intimate knowledge of their homeland and take special concern to guard its traditions. In no way is this necessarily at odds with championing freedom and justice for non-citizens and foreign nationals. (This assumes, of course, that one's political tradition(s) is amenable to such favorable interpretation.)

But it does not follow that the critical patriot ought not to look outward from the specific tradition of which she is a part. It is necessary to gradually increase one's awareness of the complexity of problems we face by making comparisons with other cultural or legal norms in order to appreciate different perspectives and approaches to problem-solving. In short, world citizenship works by gradually sensitizing the student to the facts concerning human variety and showing why it is dangerous to assume that one is correct merely because a set of beliefs and values is *familiar*. Nussbaum writes, 'By looking at ourselves through the lens of the other, we come to see what in our practices is local and nonessential [and] what is more broadly or deeply shared,' (ibid., p. 11) and elsewhere, 'a comparative cultural study, by removing the false air of naturalness and inevitability that surrounds our practices, can make our society a more truly reasonable one' (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 55). Of course one may also turn to counter narratives from within the American mosaic; there are numerous counter narratives that question, agitate and challenge the loyal patriotism one finds in the hegemonic narrative.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike world citizenship, loyal patriotism also seems to preach an almost quaint brand of isolationism that has virtually no reality in the world of globalized markets and trade. It is not merely true that our clothes and automobiles are often manufactured throughout the manufacturing world; our very existence is inextricably tied up together with peoples, cultures and economies across the globe. History textbooks that altogether avoid discussing the complicit relationship that multinational corporations and governments enjoy deliver a patently false understanding of the way that nation states function. Again, Loewen notes:

[N]o textbook ever mentions the influence of multinationals on US policy. This is the case not necessarily because textbook authors are afraid of offending multinationals, but because they never discuss *any* influence on US policy. Rather, they present [US] government policies as rational humanitarian responses to trying situations, and they do not seek to penetrate the surface of the government's own explanations of its actions. (Loewen, 1995, p. 214)

Because one can not disentangle the economic or environmental interests of various countries and world citizens, the idea that one ought to be singularly loyal to the interests of one national entity seems impossibly naïve in today's world. Commitments grounded in partiality may indeed supply us with the moral foundation on which to stand as we look outward from those communities. World citizenship may not satisfy all requirements of loyalty and obligation, yet whatever seems 'thin' about world citizenship, there is nothing *inevitably* harmful about it to warrant the disdain some critics display.

## Conclusions

In this essay, I have argued against the deliberate promotion of loyal patriotism in schools because in doing so the State transgresses against the valid aims of education, engages in coercion, and discourages critical thinking and dissent. Liberal democratic states concerned with their legitimacy must encourage critical patriotism in their public schools. I have not argued that patriotism *per se* is unacceptable or that schools ought to erase all attachments from their schedules or operations. Feeling a certain kinship or loyalty to one's schoolmates may be a justifiable form of partiality, and other forms as I have argued, may even be quite harmless. What is to be guarded against are more odious forms of allegiance, particularly those which stir the emotion only to induce servility and uncritical attachment. As Christopher Mitchens notes, 'whatever the high-sounding pretext may be, [the] worst crimes are still committed in the name of the old traditional rubbish: of loyalty to nation or 'order' or leadership or tribe or faith' (Hitchens, 2001, p. 138). Thus to the extent that school organization, curriculum content and design, and classroom instruction fosters and encourages unreflective, non-autonomous assent to the school or indeed to the nation state its curriculum describes, there are reasons to worry.

Curriculum content is particularly relevant here. I have argued that what we learn about important historical figures and events, including what we *don't* learn about them, may encourage the kind of unreflective loyal patriotism I have challenged. Historical inaccuracies—particularly where they are intentional—serve not only to falsify the examples bestowed to us by men and women of clay feet; they also undermine our critical consciousness, which is essential both to the development of autonomy and a healthy democracy. I have also argued that schools should not promote patriotism in any way that does not foster the capacity to dissent, whereby one has both the intellectual capacity and the means by which to question the policies and actions of one's government and its sanctioned view of history.

I have not argued that students ought to read history simply in order to become political activists. Nor have I advocated for a critical patriotism whose purpose is to promote anti-government libertarianism or anarchism. Common bonds, no matter how fragile and tenuous, are important both for identity formation and political stability and *amor patriae* may very well have a legitimate place in the critical consciousness of any student of history. Nevertheless, patriotism, if it is to be legitimate, must be freely assented to by well-informed individuals.

An abiding skepticism toward one's own government is one possible effect of the position I am defending. Large scale disillusionment with one's government would indeed be a worrying trend, although a coerced, unreflective loyal patriotism nourished by the blithe indifference to important truths seems a worse fate. After all, these truths, notably ones involving the abuse of power by the State, too often remain hidden from public view, and having access to these truths is one of the important aims of education. Teachers may employ what some have called a 'pedagogy of discomfort' (Zembylas & Boler, 2002) in helping their student grapple with more complex meanings of patriotism. It is highly improbable that a capacity for dissent will lead to anarchism and political collapse in liberal democracies. Rather, one is more likely to witness a renewed sense of political commitment that calls for *reform*, and this is entirely consistent with the type of critical patriotism I have defended.<sup>20</sup>

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Notes**

1. Whig social reformer, cited in Nasaw, 1979, p. 42.
2. In no way does this remove the possibility that loyal patriotism will be absent. Indeed, much of American homeschooling and religious schooling is possibly *more* uncritically patriotic.
3. Bellamy, like Walter Rausenbusch, was an advocate of the Social Gospel who believed the government had a greater role to play in combating social and economic inequities.
4. One sees the powerful effects of this approach today when one considers both the titles of most American history textbooks and the patriotic symbols that adorn them (Raphael, 2004; Loewen, 1995).
5. By late 1898, President McKinley had ordered more than 70,000 troops to the Philippines, this despite the claims of independence from the Philippine leaders. The United States would step in to replace Spain as colonizer for another forty years.
6. This is the idea behind the 'City on a Hill' in early colonial thinking, the Puritan belief that somehow America was set apart by God for the suffering righteous fleeing Europe from religious persecution. This idea eventually led to the doctrine of Manifest Destiny.
7. See *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943). Despite this fact, currently twenty-five states require the recitation of the Pledge in public schools.
8. There have been religious and non-religious efforts to have the Pledge removed. Jehovah's Witnesses are one prominent group whose beliefs forbid allegiance to the flag. Other attempts have been made in the courts either to ban the Pledge or to have the words 'under God' struck from the text.
9. I have not undertaken a careful study of various textbook series myself; this work has been scrupulously done by others whose work is liberally cited in this essay. I gratefully build upon their important studies.
10. The ascendancy of black voices on the political landscape following Emancipation meant that 'being American' expanded beyond previously conceived notions and precedents. To be sure, during Reconstruction a renewed call to take up justice and liberty for all reverberated throughout the land. This was to be a very short period indeed. With the election of Rutherford B. Hayes, federal troops (1877) began pulling out of Southern cities and the Republican Party withdrew its support for biracial government. This

period witnessed the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and a steady return of 'states' rights'; in 1892, lynching across the country reached a high water mark; in 1896 the infamous *Plessy* decision, arguing 'separate but equal' segregationism, was handed down by the Supreme Court. See O'Leary, 1999, p. 132.

11. The actual textbook adoption process may entail local or statewide selection procedures, yet most states have no say over what is put into the textbooks themselves.
12. Yet, by and large, the efforts thus far either have inclined toward stereotypes and tokenism or else literally pushed the minority voices to the margins. This has led Lisa Delpit (2002, p. 31) to say, 'People of color are, in general, skeptical of research as a determiner of our fates. Academic research has, after all, found us genetically inferior, culturally deprived, and verbally deficient.'
13. Thus, far from lionizing the memory of Columbus, Zinn exposes Columbus for what he was: a *conquistador* interested mainly in the acquisition of gold and the mass conversion of non-Christian peoples by whatever means necessary. We learn of the genocidal adventures of Columbus and his entourage, and there is little left of the Columbus myth (i.e. he was an intrepid explorer, a great sea farer, the discoverer of America) once Zinn is finished.
14. Michael Walzer makes a similar claim concerning the social critic: 'His fiercest criticism is often aimed at those individuals and groups to whom he feels closest, who are most likely to disappoint him' (1988, p. 22).
15. Many years after his air raids of German and Czechoslovakian villages, Zinn returned to Europe to hear stories from survivors about the devastation those same air raids had on innocent civilians.
16. Schlesinger is no opponent of the study of different cultures and embraces cultural pluralism. He is opposed to the teaching of history as a 'weapon' or in order to promote self esteem. He writes,

Let us by all means teach black history, African history, women's history, Hispanic history, Asian history. But let us teach them as history, not as filiopietistic commemoration. The purpose of history is to promote not group self-esteem, but understanding of the world and the past, dispassionate analysis, judgment, and perspective, respect for divergent cultures and traditions, and unflinching protection for those unifying ideas of tolerance, democracy, and human rights that make free historical inquiry possible. (Schlesinger, 1992, p. 99)

17. This is an argument often made by Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer. Alternatively, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas has argued in several places for what he calls 'constitutional citizenship'.
18. Commenting on the role of the social critic, Walzer writes: 'It's not that one cuts the threads in order to become a critic, but that the force of one's criticism leads one to think about cutting the threads. Criticism will falter and fail, however, if the threads are really cut, for the social critic must have standing among his fellow citizens. He exploits his connections, as it were, or his disconnections. If he hates his fellows and breaks his ties, why should they pay attention to what he says?' (1988, p. 140).
19. One need not look to Alexander Cockburn or Lewis Lapham to criticize the abuses of power for which Rumsfeld and his War Cabinet are responsible on the torture of detainees. As evidence slowly came to light (and as pressure from the European Union mounted), patriots of all sorts expressed moral outrage against the instances of American torture. In these instances, one witnessed massive amounts of bipartisan dissent and unremitting demand for reform.
20. Richard Rorty (1998) compellingly argues that the American Left would do well to learn from its reformist past rather than shun patriotism as the stuff of flag-waving conservatives. I cannot think of a single example where political corruption—even systemic corruption such as in Belgium during the Dutroux affair in the late 1990s or the United States during the Watergate era—led to a groundswell movement to overthrow liberal democracy and replace it with another political system.

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