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What Does It Mean to Love One's Country?

Michael Parenti

As a guest on radio talk shows, I have criticized aspects of U.S. foreign policy. On one such occasion, an irate listener called to ask me, “Don’t you love your country?” Here was someone who saw fit to question my patriotism because I questioned the policies of U.S. leaders. The caller was manifesting a common symptom of what might be called “superpatriotism,” the tendency to place nationalistic pride and supremacy above every other public and ethical consideration, and the readiness to follow national leaders uncritically in their dealings with other countries, especially confrontations involving the use of U.S. military force and violence.

Whether or not this superpatriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels, as Dr. Johnson might say, it is a highly emotive force used by political leaders and ordinary citizens to discourage critical public discourse and muffle democratic protest. It is time the superpatriots explained what their brand of patriotism is all about. What, for instance, do they mean when they say they love their country? Do they love every street and lane, every hill and vale? There are many and varied beautiful natural sites within the United States that one might love. Yet most Americans have had direct exposure only to relatively few parts of their nation’s vast expanse.

And what of all the natural beauty in other countries, the geographical and geological wonders found throughout the world? Would I be less a patriot if I am forced to conclude that there are parts of Ireland and New Zealand that are just as beautiful—if not more so—than the wondrous sights of the Pacific Northwest region? Would I be considered wanting in love for my country if I felt Paris to be more captivating than San Francisco, or the Piazza Navona in Rome more charming than the Rockefeller Center in New York?

If we love our country, do we love even the ugly parts of it? Do we celebrate and take pride in the urban and suburban blight, the crime-ridden drug-infested neighborhoods, the hungry homeless huddled in urine-stained doorways, the many beggars on the streets of certain cities, the shanty towns and encampments under the freeways, the enormous gap between the obscenely rich and the desperately poor, the breath-choking fumes from congested traffic, the toxic dumps and strip-mined wastelands, the widespread contamination of ground water, the rivers and bays turned into open sewers, the looted and eroded forests, and other such dispiriting things?

Perhaps love of country means loving the American “people.” But the people

of this nation are a vast aggregate of widely diverse ethnic, religious, and class groups. And even the most gregarious among us know only a tiny portion of the total population. In any case, the more bigoted superpatriots feel no love at all for certain ethnic elements among us and for the many others whose lifestyles or beliefs they detest.

It might be that we can “love” whole peoples in the abstract because we feel some common attachment for being all one nationality, that is, all Americans. But what is so particularly lovable about Americans? We may say we love Americans because they are a particularly nice people, so human, decent, and friendly. But then it is their “humanity” we are appreciating, not their American-ness as such. In any case, quite a few Americans are not particularly nice people, not so decent and friendly. Among the Americans I am not too enamored of are ruthless profiteers, corporate swindlers, corrupt and self-serving leaders, bigots, sexists, violent criminals, and rabid superpatriots.

Perhaps our superpatriots love America for its history? One would doubt it, since there is so much about our country’s history and culture that is unknown to them: the struggle for free speech that has continued from the eighteenth century to this day; the fierce and bloody fights for the right to collective bargaining and decent wages and work conditions; the historic struggles for extending the franchise to all citizens, including women and those without property, for the abolition of slavery, for civil rights, and for an end to racial segregation and hate crimes; for free public education, public health, environmental and consumer protections, and occupational safety; for a progressive income tax, an end to wars of aggression, and a host of other vital peace and justice issues.

Here certainly is a history that can make one feel proud of one’s country and love the valiant people who have battled for political and economic democracy. The odd thing about most superpatriots is how ignorant they are of most of this history, especially since so little of it is taught in the schools. Too bad. It would add more substance to their love of country.

Also largely untaught is the terrible side of our history. If we must love our country, we need to settle the question: what is there to love about the extermination of Native American nations which extended over four centuries and the theft of millions of acres of their lands; the brutal systematic enslavement of African peoples; the stealing of half of Mexico; the grabbing of Hawaii, Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines; and the wars of aggression against Mexico, Central America, Canada, Spain, the Philippines, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Yugoslavia, and others.

Should we love our country for its culture? Certainly there is American music and jazz and baseball and all those other nice things that Ken Burns documents. We have had no Shakespeare or Dante, but we can be proud of our playwrights and poets, and our art and opera, our museums and symphony orchestras, our libraries and universities. Yet, as far as I can tell, the superpatriots evince relatively little interest in these things. If anything, such arts sometimes come under fire or are subjected to budget cutbacks by the superpatriots, who prefer

to invest treasure in a humongous military budget. The superpatriots take no particular pride in Athens; they are too busy building Sparta.

Nor can we who prefer Athens be all that enamored with certain aspects of our culture, such as the mind abuse and wasteland of most television offerings, the awful movies with their gratuitous violence and desperate contrivances, the omnipresent and dispiriting commercialism, the boundless corporate greed, the ecological desecration, the racism of the courts and prisons, the glorification of militarism, and the economic injustice. All these things are a part of our society and culture, and they are nothing to cause me to puff myself up and to strut about with national pride as do the superpatriots.

Many superpatriots say they love America because of its freedom. Supposedly, we can say what we like. Here again, the claim should be greeted skeptically or at least carefully qualified. We are not as free as we think. To be too outspoken and too out of step in one's political opinions is often to put one's career in jeopardy—even in a profession like teaching which professes a dedication to academic freedom. The journalists who work for big media conglomerates, and who claim to be untrammelled in their reportage, overlook the fact that they are free to say what they like because their bosses like what they say. On those rare occasions they move a bit beyond the dominant paradigm, they usually feel the tug of the leash.

The major media in the United States (as well as in the other “Western democracies”) are owned by giant corporations and influenced by rich corporate advertisers who seldom, if ever, tolerate any questioning of the existing private profit system or the doings of a U.S. national security state that is dedicated to making the world safe for inequality. The assumptions behind U.S. foreign policy go unexamined and largely uncriticized in news analysis and commentary. Those who have critical views regarding capitalism, class power, and U.S. imperialism do not get an opportunity to reach any mass audience in the United States. Indeed, the very idea of “U.S. imperialism” would sound strange to most Americans—but not to millions of people in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere.

Our superpatriots love “America” not for its geographical and ecological wonders, nor out of any personal attachment to its vast and varied population, nor because of a deep and revealing grasp of its history and culture. What then? Many of them seem to love this country because they believe it is “a land of opportunity.” As in no other country here we can become rich and successful if we have the right stuff, or so it is said. But success for one comes by beating out others for the prize. Individual success is predicated on failure for other individuals. Room at the top is limited to only a relatively select few, mostly those who from birth have been supremely advantaged in family income and social standing.

America has not been a land of opportunity or a success story for the Native Americans (except for a few present-day casino owners), who have had their lands stolen and their populations sadly reduced by death and disease; nor for the slaves of yore, and the sharecroppers and indentured servants; nor for the factory workers who toiled 14-hour days in earlier times, who today still face

life-threatening occupational hazards, and who see their jobs being exported to Third World sweatshops; nor for the farm workers who put in long hours at stoop labor for barely U.S.\$10,000 a year, and the millions of others who are paid poverty-level wages, or who work at joyless dead-end jobs while struggling to keep their heads above water, or who managed to attain an education only to find themselves in hopeless debt from student loans.

Even if this economy does reward those who sally forth with an exceptionally competitive capacity and a directed quotidian energy that allows them to excel over others, what of the rest of us? Is the quality of life to be measured by a society's sound ecology, its human services, arts, education, and social sensibilities? Or by the ability of particularly tireless go-getters and ruthless financial buccaneers to make a killing in the marketplace regardless of the costs to others and to the environment?

As for the economic freedom of the "free market," it is "free" and works best for those who have a lot of money to begin with. The concentration of wealth and power, which is the essence of the capital accumulation process, does not give many of us the opportunity to become rich but rather causes us to become economically dependent, threatened by unemployment, inflation, and want—and obliged to work harder and harder to stay afloat.

And even if it were easy to become a multi-millionaire, what is so great about that? Why should one's ability to make large sums of money be reason to love one's country? What is so admirable about a patriotism that is based on the cash nexus? In any case, there are those of us who do not wish to spend our lives trying to get rich and advantaging ourselves—often at the expense of others—but who want to do work that benefits others and enhances the quality of life for the entire society. Why should we feel patriotic about the rat race?

For many superpatriots "America" is less a complex and abounding historical, cultural, and social reality than it is a simplified ideological abstraction, an emotive symbol represented by other, abstract contentless symbols like the flag, which become the objects of uncritical adulation. For the superpatriot, those who cannot share in this uncritical adulation ought to go live in some other country.

Sooner or later, let us hope, Americans will rediscover—as they have in the past—that they cannot live on flag waving alone. They will begin to drift off into reality. They will confront the economic irrationalities and global aggrandizement of a system that provides them with endless circuses and extravaganzas of superpatriotism, while denying them the bread of prosperity and their birthright as democratic citizens, their right to live in peace with justice.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Parenti, Michael. 1985. *Against Empire*. San Francisco: City Lights.

Parenti, Michael. 1996. *Dirty Truths*. San Francisco: City Lights.

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