

# An Attack on Patriotism by matthew cook

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Patriotism has been defined in terms of “loyalty to a particular nation which only those possessing that particular nation can exhibit”[1] In the following paragraphs I intend to show weaknesses in patriotism, to show how it is potentially very harmful (even if not taken to the aggressive extremes of nationalism) and to also offer globalism as an alternative. I will use the term ‘country’ solely to mean the abstract state and instead will use ‘land’ or similar words to denote the terra firma that they sit on. I will be using Great Britain as my main example however it is very easy to see how this theme can be applied to any country, especially the United States as it is such a new nation.

Over time, as tectonic plates shifted and animals evolved, we have an earth shifting from one vast continent called Pangaea to a world resembling roughly what it is today. Homo-sapiens have inhabited the chunk of land known as Great Britain for tens of thousands of years and early members of homo genus have been found from 500,000 years ago. These first inhabitants are believed to have crossed from the European mainland across a land bridge and as recently as 8000 years ago Britain was joined “by a strip of low marsh to what is now Denmark and the Netherlands.”[2]

During the Iron Age, Britain was conquered by the Roman Empire and held as Britannia for 500 years and shortly after this there was also a Germanic invasion of Britain. In the 10th century an arbitrary line was drawn around this island and “all the English kingdoms were unified under one ruler as the kingdom of England.”[2] Thus patriotism could technically begin.

## Interpretation I

Yet, as a devotion to one’s country, patriotism cannot acknowledge the history of the land *before* it became the country it is today; that would be something more like a devotion to a particular piece of land (that this ‘country’ just happens to reside on). For example, a patriot of Great Britain would not be able to include the Roman Empire’s presence on this land as *history* of their country as this pre-dates the creation of ‘Great Britain.’ If patriotism did include this then it would have to include everything that happened on this land even when it was part of Pangaea.

A similar consequence is that if Britain ever invaded a country although this new land would technically be part of Britain, as it is different land, patriotism according to this view would not be able to recognise it as such. If it did and that country became part of Britain, patriotism would have to include the history of this new land as part of Britain *before* it even became a part of Britain.

Finally, a contradictory upshot of this view is that patriotism would have to posit that if Britain were ever conquered by nation X, then although this chunk of land is now country X, it is *also* still Great Britain. This is clearly a contradiction – one country cannot be two countries.

## Interpretation II

Therefore, having shown this view to be inconsistent, the alternative is that patriotism is an abstract concept that simply reveres the existence of a certain state wherever it is – a “regard founded upon a particular historical association between the person exhibiting the regard and the relevant person, institution or group.”[1] However, seeing as countries are arbitrary lines drawn on the earth, and that our place of birth is entirely random, it seems irrational that these two random concepts can form patriotism. Rather, patriotism seems irrational due to the fact that it is produced from two contingent social facts. Heralding particular achievements of people born in one’s own nation above those of others seems an odd attitude when the only association between the patriot and others is due to these chance social facts.

Treating the country solely as the community within it, one stance which may not seem irrational may arise from a sense that the patriot's nation's morals are preferable to any other nations. If every other nation believed it was fine to kill others and the patriot's nation as community didn't, it would be easy to see how patriotism would arise with regards to morals. However, morals are entirely subjective therefore the patriot cannot take the high road and call his country morally superior as there is no objective scale upon which to refer to. (To discuss this in detail would unfortunately take me too far outside the scope of this essay.)

And, as Alasdair Macintyre points out, we are on a world of scarce essential resources which are unevenly distributed so when conflict arises "the standpoint of impersonal morality requires an allocation of goods such that each individual person counts for one and no more than one, while the patriotic standpoint requires that I strive to further the interests of my community and you strive to further those of yours" [3] We can see here that "patriotism entails a willingness to go to war on one's community's behalf" [3] whereas the non-patriot would attempt to allocate the goods equally regardless of any social factors. The non-patriot in this instance is supporting the role of globalism.

### **Globalism as an Answer**

I now offer an alternative to patriotism which I believe is neither irrational nor harmful. As I have mentioned, we inhabit a world of scarce resources which are unevenly distributed and therefore no country can claim autarky. Given this, it is clear how patriotism could lead to conflict when scarcity in one country arises. This may not seem like a problem for the patriot if they are willing to go to war however this, besides from being seen by most humans as 'morally' wrong, would not be in the country's best interest. As resources are so randomly distributed the patriot's country would most likely end up embargoed by other nations and not have access to the resources they used to get from this nation. War and conflict again would be the only solution.

Once we understand this, it is apparent how an equal allocation of all global resources is ultimately beneficial to every nation and every human. We should place the interests of the entire world above those of individual nations. Once we recognise that all humans are equal, disregard arbitrary social factors (which we ourselves have given an existence to [i]) and celebrate merits and achievements of all mankind then I believe that we, as inhabitants of this earth, would be globally happier.

### **A Defence of Cultural Identity**

It has been raised that an attack on patriotism seems to also attack people proud of their cultural identity and that my proposed solution of globalism could be seen as an attack on the benefit of differences in cultures.

The earth is inhabited by many different cultures which make this world such an interesting place and by positing globalism it does not change this. It should be noted that I am only ever talking about globalism – putting the interests of humankind above those of individual nations - not globalisation. Eliminating patriotism does not eliminate differences in culture or cultural identity, just the idea that one is intrinsically better than the other simply because one happens to be born into it.

One topic which we must tread carefully on is the issue of people being 'proud' of their cultural identity. If by proud we mean favours one's own heritage and cultural identity above others then this is much like patriotism. However 'proud' could also mean simply that one is happy with their identity or feels privileged to have been born into a certain nation. In this usage the notion of privilege, although not usually, is associated with a sense of humility randomness that patriotism lacks.

Therefore, an attack on patriotism is *not* an attack on cultural identity, only an attack on people thinking that their culture or cultural identity is better than others’.

### **References**

- [1] Macintyre, A. *Is Patriotism a Virtue?* Section I
- [2] Wikipedia – Great Britain
- [3] Macintyre, A. *Is Patriotism a Virtue?* Section II

### **Further Reading**

- [i] Searle on the Construction of Social Reality

### **Notes**

Please feel free to let me know of any comments or criticisms and I will re-publish this with updated responses.