

PATRIOTISM, LOCAL AND GLOBAL

Charles Blattberg*

I – Patriotism and Nationalism

Of course “patriotism” and “nationalism” are often used as synonyms. But as George Orwell once protested, albeit for reasons different than my own, the two should not be confused.¹ True, both affirm communities of a sort, and so share in the belief that a community requires its members to do more than take a merely instrumental stance towards each other. For the whole that they share must, as the saying goes, be greater than the sum of its parts. Otherwise, they should be said to uphold what economists call a “public” as distinct from a “common” good, which is to say something much more like a dam or a highway than a community. And if there is one thing upon which both patriotism and nationalism agree, it is that, without community, there can be no real countries.

But what kind of community is a country? I want to claim that, despite what we have chosen to call the “United Nations,” countries are best understood as civic rather than national communities, which is to say that they are, above all, communities of citizens. One reason that this must be so is that many countries contain more than one nation within them, this being the sociological reality even when their states fail to recognize it officially. So it would have been better had we called the most encompassing political organisation in the world the “United States” instead, since this would make way for the idea that it is possible for nations to share a single state. Alas, the name appears to have been taken. Then again, “Uniting States” would be still better, for a reason that I shall offer below.

First, however, I want to point out that the tendency to conflate patriotism and nationalism has been at least partly responsible for why

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¹ See Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” in *England, Your England: And Other Essays* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953).

states often fail to recognize all of the nations within their boundaries. In order to counter it, I want to suggest that we conceive of patriotism as concerned, above all, with the civic community as opposed to the national; patriots, in other words, are those driven by a concern for the state as distinct from any of the nations or other forms of community within it. Indeed I want to go further and argue that patriotism and nationalism should be distinguished in at least three ways: historically, conceptually and, especially important for our purposes here, geographically. I begin with history.

To both the American and French revolutionaries, a “patriot” was someone who affirmed self-government and who, because of this, “loved the laws” in Montesquieu famous expression. Republican Rome was the chief model here since it was seen to uphold the ideal of the *vivere civile* or active citizenship, according to which only by participating in the making of the laws could citizens ensure that they would express their common good. The basic idea is that when citizens participate in this way they will follow the laws of their own accord, which is to say because they wish to, because they believe them to be good, not because of the police. And it is only this way, moreover, that a citizenry can be considered truly free. So goes the civic humanist tradition of political thought, and it is one whose historical roots run even deeper than the Roman republic, since they go all the way back to the ancient Greek idea of the *polis*.²

Nationalism is different. For one thing, it is strictly modern, which is why ancient “nations” such as those mentioned in the Bible are today best identified as “religious communities” instead. Charles Taylor gives a succinct account of the rise of the modern nation when he writes:

The causes of modern nationalism are very deep and have to do with the erosion of earlier communities and identifications: the withering away of local community, the decline of religious identifications which often by-passed nationality. Indeed, the very notion of a group identification founded on a relation to the supernatural is strange to many moderns in Atlantic civilization; and the local neighbourhood society cannot have the place it once had. But people need a group identification, and the obvious one to take the place of the earlier

² For more, see J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003, 2nd ed.).

forms is the one that springs to the attention of the speaking animal, namely, nationality based on language.³

It was not long before the call of the modern nation became very loud indeed, so much so that it virtually drowned out that of the civic community. This is why, today, the liberty of the nation, which is in large part a matter of its “self-determination,” tends to predominate over political liberty, which is strictly a matter of the “self-government” of a citizenry. Of course these two terms also tend to be conflated, in particular, by reducing the meaning of the latter to that of the former. We thus need to do otherwise if we are to recognize that the civic community has its own integrity, one distinct from that of the national community. Only this way can we come to appreciate how both the United States and France are, today, multinational states, each containing a majority nation alongside minority ones. Regarding those minority nations, we may refer to the Hawaiians, Puerto Ricans, Hispanics, and African Americans within the U.S. and to the Basque, Breton, Catalan, and Corsican *micronations* of France. All of these must be distinguished from the majority American and French nations, those whose cultures are carried by the English and French languages respectively. The distinction tends to be hidden, however, thanks to the continuing influence of the venerable – and, I want to claim, obsolete – nineteenth century “nation-state” model of what a country is or should be. The blurring of patriotism and nationalism has only prolonged its life.

Conceptually speaking, however, the two should be considered qualitatively different types of doctrines. For patriotism is a political philosophy and nationalism is a political ideology. By political philosophy I mean a very general account of the form or forms of dialogue that people should engage in to respond to their conflicts, different political philosophies advocating different forms of dialogue. “Proceduralist” political philosophers such as utilitarians and Kantian formalists, for example, call on those involved in a political conflict to appeal to a systematic theory of justice for guidance, and this means that they must *plead* before whatever authority is charged with applying it (often, at least in the case of the Kantians, this usually takes the form of a country’s supreme court applying a theory-inspired constitution). There is a question, however, whether this pleading is sufficiently bi-

³ Taylor, “Why Do Nations Have to Become States?” in *Reconciling the Solitudes: Essays on Canadian Federalism and Nationalism*, ed. Guy Laforest (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), p. 42.