

THE MORALITY OF PATRIOTISM

di

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Abstract

Donatella Rinaldi affronta il tema del patriottismo cercando di scorgere i nessi profondi che lo legano alla morale. Dopo aver cercato di dare una definizione di patriottismo – secondo le teorie di Weber, Durkheim e MacIntyre – Rinaldi esamina le ragioni di coloro che ritengono il patriottismo intrinsecamente contrario alla morale liberale in confronto anche con il contributo di Nones (Pro et contra). Soltanto la riscoperta di una morale radicata nella storia delle singole comunità nazionali può offrire la chiave per restituire al patriottismo il proprio significato morale.

Before the 9/11 attack at the Twin Towers the debate about patriotism was almost confined to the "Ivory Tower" of intellectual and academic discussion and what was left of the once highly revered idea of love and dedication to your own nation up to death were the parades on the street of national anniversaries and the cheering crowds at the final football World Championship.

What is that had relegated the engine of change in history to such trivial role? Nones in his essay gives detailed reasons behind the shift in attitude towards the ideal of patriotism by analyzing it in its different features. I found his analysis compelling but for the sake of simplification and coherence, in this brief essay I intend to demonstrate what is that most of all undermined the once noble idea of nation turning it into a mistake, a hangover from the past to be neglected or even, to a certain extent and in the most radical views, a dangerous, immoral vice. After the identification of the guilty part, I'll argue the wrongs of the anti-patriotic movement ending up with my thesis of the good and morality of patriotism.

WHAT IS PATRIOTISM ?

Political and moral philosophers along with political theorists have been struggling for centuries to determine the nature of patriotism.

Their central task has been to make available for rational scrutiny the convictions that make one a patriot especially when the beliefs on which the conviction is grounded are utterly controversial (Cohen, J. [1996] "For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism" Harvard University Press).

When to account for the nature of a particular concept is matter of high contention, the best way to come up with a definition of that very concept is through counterarguments, namely what that particular conception is not.

Despite a quite common misinterpretation, patriotism is not made of assertions touting one's nation as *the* nation, the great champion of an unrivalled moral idea. This is usually the narrative employed by politicians as a populist attempt to strike a chord in the broader audience of their electorate (Gordon Brown Conference Speech in 2007 when he said that the British People were the best peoples of all and deserved to be put first when it came to employment ending with the catchphrase "British jobs for British workers"), but some illustrious thinkers the like of Max Weber and Durkheim have fallen into the same temptation. Max Weber during the First World War appealed for a strong support of the German Empire because it was "culturally" superior to the other enemy combatants whereas Durkheim, on his part, was asking to fight for France which was the main cause of the civilization the world at the time knew. During the Cold War Western Americanized good values of free enterprise were always compared to the evil of tyrannical communism in an attempt to extol Western Atlantic nations against the Eastern "Iron Curtain".

Against all the odds, these utterances were not and are not patriotism because the primary object of regard is not the nation but a particular ideal; freedom in the Cold War period, culture or civilization in Weber and Durkheim thought. The ideal of liberty or urbanity can be upheld and made one's own irrespective of nationality or citizenship.

A superficial understanding of patriotism may be conclusive of the fact that love for your own country is mindless loyalty. Nothing is more distant from the truth. The high regard we have for our nation is motivated by its merits, historical achievements, its being singled out in particular circumstances. This may account for the national pride inherent in the victory of a sport competition or the unbridled joy that comes from historical breakthroughs, like the election of the first Black American President after years of racial hate for the American nation in November 2009.

Another common misconception about patriotism is its "contractual" nature. According to this view loyalty to the nation is only an act of retribution against the benefits we have received from that very nation in our individual lives. Yet, again, this view is not conducive to the truth. Nones in his conclusion points out that love for our country should be compared to the love for our nearest and dearest and the comparison squarely fits in.

MacIntyre argues that loyalty stems from *"a particular action-generating regard for particular persons, institutions or groups founded upon a particular historical relationship of association between the person exhibiting the regard and the relevant person (my spouse), institutions (my country) (MacIntyre,A. [2004] "Is Patriotism a Virtue", Global Ethics: Seminal Essays : 119-120)*

To conclude, we have learned that patriotism should have as its main concern and object of regard the nation, that love for the country is constantly nurtured by the merits and things done well by that very country and that love towards the nation has an unconditional nature and no relation to the legal concept of requital for the benefits received.

FROM VIRTUE TO VICE: THE REASON BEHIND THE DEMOLITION OF PATRIOTISM.

After establishing the nature of patriotism we should try to understand why from noble virtue it has been transformed into dangerous vice.

The current of thought that is mainly (even though unwillingly) responsible for these days poor regard of patriotism is universalistic or cosmopolitan liberalism (Barry, B. [1989] "Democracy, Power and Justice" Oxford, Clarendon; Erskine, T. [2008] "Embedded Cosmopolitanism: Duties to Strangers and Enemies in a World of 'Dislocated Communities'"). Liberal moralists argue that patriotism is a vice because its nature makes it incompatible with morality. Morality is seen by these thinkers as an impersonal, neutral and objective judgement that ought not be affected by personal interests, affections or individual social standing. The moral agent abstracts himself from the contingency of social and emotional partiality whereas the patriot exhibits peculiar devotion to the contingencies of the place of birth, motherhood and fatherhood, ancestry and so on as decisive issues when it comes to perform virtuous actions. This striking discordance between commitment and neutrality is made less evident by those liberal thinkers who concede that morality and patriotism are compatible if the particularistic exercise of an action in the name of the country is kept within the borders universal morality imposes. The problem with this apparently reasonable standpoint is that it ends up to enervate the patriotic ideal. In the complexities of events unfolding in our "globalised" actual life it comes a point in which, if we don't want to run the risk of rendering patriotism an empty slogan, the incompatibility with universal moral liberalism cannot be avoided.

A typical example most often given is the circumstance of scarcity of natural resources. From the standpoint of the impersonal moral agent goods should be allocated irrespective of the "weight" and status of each particular individual. Each and every person counts for no more than one.

Under a patriotic conception what should be done at times of economic hardship is to put the interests of the community one belongs to first and occasionally even go to war to conquer new lands and improve the economy of the country which is undergoing a lack of natural resources.

Another example can be drawn from the theoretical account of liberalism. In a simplistic and general way liberals are more willing than others to allow different communities in one country to choose their right way to live, but when this particular way of life is in contrast with the inner constituents - whether ethical, social or political - of that society and that country, how can the conflict be resolved ? Can a radical Islamist be left free to believe that the most deserving action that paves the way to heaven is blowing himself up in an act of extreme sacrifice with the aim to defeat the enemies of the Prophet by massacring thousands of them? Liberalism, with reservations and punctuations, is forced to admit that hypothetically he or she can, because even the most appalling act can be justified if this is the outcome of the best life one has chosen when free from constrictions. The partisan vision of a patriot, on the other hand, may come to a different conclusion and stop the suicide bomber in his or her intent to strike by using the multilayered common sense that is part of his or her community way of life and without appealing to human rights and universal values whose most likely outcome is a fruitless decisional stalemate.

These examples have shown that the partial compromise of liberal moralists who want to make compatible particular and universal by fitting the particular under the universal leaves us with no solution as far as the contradiction between patriotism and liberal morality is concerned.

Patriotism has been deemed immoral in the most recent intellectual debate because the idea of liberal morality has imposed itself as the only acceptable definition of what is moral. This idea of morality consists of various components : first that it is constituted by rules to which any rational person would under certain ideal conditions give assent; second that moral rules are neutral between rival interests and competing sets of beliefs about the best way to live since morality itself is not expression of any particular interests; third that in moral evaluations each individual counts for himself or herself and no more; and fourth that the moral agent has a unique standpoint regardless his or her many social, political or natural allegiances.

Given this account of morality is easy to see why patriotism has been turned into a vice from the moral virtue it once was. The overall point is that, in spite of its illustrious tradition, what we have analysed is just one of the many possible ways of conceiving morality.

My intent in the next paragraph is to debate an alternative understanding of morality which retrieves the value of patriotism and makes it once more an outstanding virtue.

WHY PATRIOTISM IS MORAL.

In some account of morality it is utterly relevant to know the root of the self inclusive of whereabouts and family background in order to assess moral commitment. Communitarian thinkers (Walzer, M. [1994] "Thick and Thin : Moral Argument at Home and Abroad", Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press) are adamant that the morality we acquire is learned from and through the life of the community we live in (the "thin" of moral argument, according to Walzer, which is the maximum meaning of morality). The set of moral rules distinctive of a particular community arises from the way in which its members in the past responded to a set of events whose main feature was that their being utterly problematic led to question or reformulate the traditional rules these individuals employed to act morally. In spite of the rearrangement to a specific circumstance, the starting point of moral action is obedience to rules intrinsic to that particular society and its institutions (i.e. regard for the elderly is different seen among various communities. In Mediterranean countries the tendency is to look after the elderly in the cosiness of the family house and even though the price to be paid is to jeopardize the career of the women in the nuclear family, who are usually the carers, the high regard for the elderly in those communities deems as immoral to let them live in well equipped hospices. In English speaking countries where women emancipation is stronger, the choice about tending to the old and the sick is left to the individual. The choice of pursuing a career and let the old parents leave in a care home is morally justifiable.) The renewed morality is nonetheless a highly specific morality, contingent upon the traditions and customs of the institutions of a particular community.

Liberal thinkers object that this conception of morality is misconstrued. The full comprehension of what is moral comes only when rules framed in terms of particular institutions are understood as application of more general moral rules. The genuine moral agent must progress and free himself from social particularity and adopt a standpoint devoid of social particularity.

The problem with this liberal argument is its abstractness. The good towards which a moral choice is oriented is more likely to be found in the good pertaining the particular peoples of one's community than in the multifaceted universal ideals of toleration, freedom, justice. What justifies abiding to a set of moral rules are the rules of morality as framed in the community where one lives.

No allegiance to a group or community means to be relegated in a limbo of moral irrelevance (Kymlicka, W. [2006] "Multicultural Citizenship" Oxford University Press). Moreover, it is undeniable that moral agency is a daunting task for human beings whose immediate desires and edonistic appetites put them in the difficult position of struggling endlessly in order not to fall into temptation and back off. Individual moral weaknesses are counteracted by the collective morality of those around me. "No man is an island", according to poet John Donne, and this adage is undeniable in its truth if we think of our morality as reinforced within a community. Our morality arises from the way others regard us, from what we owe to them as well as from the way in which the others regard themselves. In this way the social ties of a known community become the prerequisite for morality and patriotism and its components are given the status of central virtue.

CONTEMPORARY MORAL LIBERALISM.

A good political theorist should always justify the rationale of his thinking against contrasting arguments and though I am reluctant to include myself among political thinkers and more prone to the definition of "apprentice" among scholars of political theory, this is what I intend to do in this final paragraph.

Why we should reject the liberal idea that patriotism is a vice ? What are the wrongs of this argument ?

The supreme good in the liberal idea is the process of emancipation, the acquisition of Berlin's negative freedom from external and internal constraints. Social constraints are by definition the strongest of all and their critique and subsequent replacement is conceived as the essential motor of change against the status quo. From this standpoint the unconditional loyalty that patriotism at times requires is not acceptable since it rules out the sorely needed criticism that is harbinger of transformation. The liberal critique against patriotism consists of accusation of conservatism and irrationality. Is there anything more irrational than the patriotic refusal of questioning long held beliefs grounded in the particular of the community and instead accepting them irrespective of their intrinsic rationality ? For the liberals there is certainly nothing more irrational than that. But is this what really a patriot does ? A patriot is keen on exempting from any critique the nation as a foundational project whose roots are anchored in a more or less distant past in which a moral distinctive community claiming political autonomy through the articulation of its social and political institutions was given life, but the same doesn't hold true for those who detain power in that particular nation.

It is a patriotic duty to fight against those political leaders who have betrayed the original foundational project, since a patriotic allegiance is contingent upon the leader devotion to further the national project instead of hindering it. Patriotism is thus a means of change, the junction between the past that conferred a distinctive moral identity and the future well-being of that original project.

There are countless examples of patriots without an identified power or government. In the Italian movement for independence and unity in the seventeenth century, historical figures like Garibaldi fought for the idea of Italy even before an Italian government existed. Many others are the examples of patriotic dissidents within the nation that fought for the country against its government (Orange Revolution in Ukraine against Russia backed new Prime Minister in 2005; the most recent Green Revolution against the oppressive Iranian regime).

I have sufficiently showed that the accusation of conservatism launched by liberalism against patriotism is utterly unfair, as patriotic ideals have mostly been behind the greatest changes in history.

The most difficult moral dilemma that patriotism has to face is when the support for the original project of the nation one belongs to clashes with what is in the best interest of mankind. In Nazi Germany to devote to the national original project meant committing to the most appalling atrocities humanity had ever experienced. Can patriotism go as far as to support concentration camps ? The more reasonable answer to this problematic question is that rational thinking can provide the ground for repudiating morally unacceptable features of the country actual institutions and life. Inner morality acquired through universal values that stems from religious or not religious ethics may limit what can be done in the name of the nation. That said, universal values appear to make their comeback at the expense of the particular and this is what makes patriotism a double-edged sword whose latent moral danger has always to be taken into account. Yet, liberalism and its impartial morality doesn't provide us with better reasons to avoid the above mentioned moral dilemma. Liberalism has still to further the analysis about the mysterious force that forges our allegiance to the standards of impartiality and makes us reject personal interest centred decisions. The strength of reciprocity in the discourse of moral understanding has left no room for the appeal to impersonal rationality as the trigger of moral agency. The danger posed by liberalism is represented by its frenzy to break down long held social ties left to the destructive energy of rational criticism.

For this reason I accept the fact that liberalism and patriotism will always be at odd one with the other.

The United States are the paradigmatic example of this troubled coexistence: on the one hand the liberal idea of religious freedom that let religious communities to pray and preach without constraints and on the other hand the typical American patriotism that engages in the ideal of the American Constitution all those who live in the American soil, and founds its morality on the American ideal of morality.

Contemporary moral patriotism is the ideal that turns armed forces in men and women who are prepared to sacrifice their own lives for the sake and safety of the country whose love and devotion share with others. We shouldn't let liberal moral impartiality turn them into sceptics men and women whose willingness to fight for their country is contingent upon their own individual evaluation of the rightness and wrongness of the cause of war which is grounded on impartial standards irrespective of the interests of their own community.

The path from impartiality to passivity and avoidance of obligation is a danger we come across with if we don't give patriotism its proper place.