

On patriotism

How can that patriotism, which leads to countless sufferings, both physical and emotional, be necessary and good-willing? Answering this question is inescapable.

Lev Tolstoy, 'Patriotism or Peace'

To begin with, I would like to make clear that I am going to try to keep from discussing nationalism. These two terms are often used synonymously, although to my mind they are different and have different connotations even in those cases where they could be, under some circumstances, be used synonymously. When I write about patriotism, I have the 'defensive nationalism' in mind; when I think about nationalism, then it's the 'offensive patriotism'. I think that Orwell has captured the essential difference between these two terms quite well:

Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally. Nationalism, on the other hand, is inseparable from the desire for power.

One of the articles I have used as the basis of my argument, namely Goldman's, seems essentially to be talking about nationalism – with all the references to military spending and aggressiveness. On the other hand, it presents quite a few interesting thoughts that can be applied to the milder version of not-necessarily-evil patriotism.

What's wrong with patriotism, then? It seems to be a natural human feeling, respect for one's country and the willingness to stand up and defend it, both verbally and physically, if the need be. Would not one do the same for one's family or close friends? Would one not be thought of as a coward, when leaving one's closest people to arbitrariness or not defending them from wrong-doings of others? Would those close to you not do the same for you or would your country not defend you when needed?

Stirner considers everyone to be egoists. When you act, you are doing it for selfish reasons. Even if your act does some good for others, it is still a selfish act because you do not actually do it for the sake of others, but for the sake of yourself – to feel yourself satisfied, to be wanted, admired, or served. Would patriotism leave any room for egoism or does it even have to? Stirner seems to advise us to embrace egoism as it is something essential to man. He is not alone – Tolstoy writes:

Egoism – that is a natural feeling the man is born with, patriotism on the other hand is a feeling unnatural, artificially embossed on him.

I will try to explain, how and why patriotism is 'unnatural' and why it is essentially 'bad'.

Is patriotism universal?

It is not important where you are born – it is expected of you to be a patriot of that country. It might not be the best place in the world or even close to that, but that's just your luck or the lack of it. In the context of State and one as its citizen, patriotism is encouraged. Different countries have different means – and surely it depends on the size of the country and the funding available for this 'National PR campaign' that propaganda clearly is.

Quite interesting is the fact that although there is hard to find a country (a State) that does not glorify patriotism, the substance of that specific patriotism in a specific country is incompatible with any other patriotism in any other country. The Americans are patriots of the United States of America; the English are patriots of England and the Scottish of Scotland and so on. So yes, the principle of patriotism can be universally applied. On the other hand, the patriotic aspirations of different countries are usually at conflict. Can the soldiers on different sides in any battle be both patriots in their minds and if yes, then how is it that they fight each other? Do they not share the same beliefs – and isn't ideology the main force behind any war?

Let's try to find the roots of patriotism and perhaps this can lead us to the answer. Darwin has held a position that natural selection has enforced kin altruism on people, loyalty to the group and selfless actions. Is it possible at all – Stirner would most probably say 'No'. It might be possible, though, that during thousands and thousands of years, the principle of kin altruism has gown on people and it is now an inseparable part of their nature, but can this be applied to the institution of State? Is your neighbour, living in a house next to you in a quiet suburb also your next of kin? It might be the case, if different countries were in fact separated by iron fences, as Goldman describes it, and inside the fence there would be a genetically 'pure' group of people, but the evolutionary approach can hardly be applied in the modern world, even less so in extremely diverse ethnical populations such as the US. As an American citizen you could swear on your life that when needed, you will not hesitate to storm into a burning house to save your children, but would you with the same confidence promise to save your neighbour, an Italian-American, who is a descendant of people who immigrated to your country just a bare three hundred years later that your ancestors? Or what if your modern 'next of kin' is an illegal immigrant still looking for work and draining the social system of your beloved country?

To me it seems that evolution can not be 'blamed' for creating patriotism – but what can?

Who needs patriotism?

Patriotism was of certain use in the barbaric times, Tolstoy believes. Now that the time of ultimate conquests is over, is there still need for patriotism?

According to him, we can speak about good and bad patriotism. Modern, humane society does not want to talk about warfare and conquest, to which the 'bad' patriotism is useful, but more of keeping what is one's own – and that can only be done using the same tools as during the conquest: violence and killings. The inescapable consequence of patriotism is – war.

Do we want to have wars – I know I don't and to be honest, I don't know anyone who does. Still, we do have an army in Estonia and we do spend considerable amount of money on buying military equipment for our State. 'It's for protection,' they say. Protection from whom? The barbaric tribes? It needs a considerable amount of patriotism for a person to take a gun and defend it's country, even more so when the country is small and the army as well, but to connect peace (what most of us want) and patriotism (which some us feel) is quite impossible – the same way it is not possible to go skating and stay at home at the same time, to use Tolstoy's example.

So it seems that patriotism is needed by the State, that's how is it understandable why the State encourages it and also spends some funds on propaganda to water the soil for patriotism to grow on. But is it the abstract notion of 'State' that needs patriotism or is there something or someone behind it all?

I will not go into details about how the majority of people are lead by the minority, the most power-hungry and ambitious bunch. I will also not discuss whether it is good or bad that there are so few to rule. What I will do is to point out Tolstoy's remarks on egoism's connections with patriotism, which can perhaps explain the State's need for patriots. He says:

The egoism of persons is awful, but the egoists of private life are not armed, they do not consider it to be good to prepare for or to use guns against their competitors; the egoism of persons is being controlled by the State and the public opinion. [...] and what is most important, that public opinion which condemns any kind of violence by a person approves any kind of acquisition of something that belongs to others to grow the possessions of one's country under the name of patriotism.

There is nothing or no one to control the actions of a State – all those congresses, etc. are nonsense – so the State is a perfect umbrella for those hungry for power but not in position to 'get away with it' otherwise.

Patriotism is slavery and those in power are the slave keepers. They are in need of patriotism to make their dreams come true - and they are afraid of nothing to keep this modern form of slavery alive.

The mortification of a man

Would any man wilfully give up his right to think for himself and to act for his own good? It does not make sense, but a large number of men have the 'willingness to kill and be killed for trivial reasons' (B. Russell).

For me there seems no other way of explanation than the natural weakness of the human mind. Be it the need to belong to a group, to feel oneself useful or any other human trait, it is still a weakness. How else can the allegiance to the flag be explained? You are expected, as a true patriot, to give up your brother, your blood and flesh, when he's accused of treason. Would you?

Human values are redefined in the State, as Stirner explains. The State is the True Man. The real human value is to be a citizen of the State – in which case it is more than natural to expect a full allegiance. You are what the State says you are.

You are put into a uniform and your superior will be one with a higher rank. Sure you don't mind doing his laundry, because you are a patriot – and everything you do to please a higher ranking officer is for the good of the State, the State you so dearly love.

Ah, but is patriotism for everyone? Surely not. Let's take a look at where the money for 'military entertainment' comes – is it the rich that give the most or is it the poor, the labour?

The rich are cosmopolitans – they are at home in any country they want to. They do not think of foolish things like patriotism or something as idiotic as putting the State's interests above your own. They can benefit, of course, from patriotism, but in any case they are the receivers, not the givers. To be even blunter – they do not need something as absurd as patriotism to define their lives.

Is there any escape. Stirner recommends being a man – not to realize the ideal of a man, but to present oneself, the individual – as he puts it. Easier said than done, I presume.

Tolstoy writes that to destroy warfare, patriotism has to be destroyed – and for that the evil of patriotism has to be understood. It is probably not an option to change the values of a grown up man, but it is possible to change the system that creates those men. Tolstoy recommends changing the way schools educate our children to eradicate the patriotic ideals and to eliminate the need for constant arming and counter-arming. 'Nowadays it does not unite,' he says about patriotism, 'but separates'.

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Monday, 15 May 2006

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