In defense of a reasonable patriotism

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Introduction

It is an honor to be asked to deliver the Dahrendorf Memorial Lecture on the topic of "Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism, and Democracy." In my remarks, I will defend what I term a "reasonable patriotism," and I will argue that separate and distinct political communities are the only sites in which decent and—especially—democratic politics can be enacted.

I begin with some conceptual clarifications.

Cosmopolitanism is a creed that gives primary allegiance to the community of human beings as such, without regard to distinctions of birth, belief, or political boundaries. The antithesis of cosmopolitanism is *particularism*, in which one's primary allegiance is to a group or subset of human beings with shared characteristics. There are different forms of particularism reflecting the varying objects of primary allegiance—communities of co-religionists (the Muslim *ummah*), ethnicity, and shared citizenship, among others.

Patriotism denotes a special attachment to a particular political community, although not necessary to its existing form of government. *Nationalism*, with which patriotism is often confused, stands for a very different phenomenon—the fusion, actual or aspirational, between shared ethnicity and state sovereignty. The nation-state, then, is a community is which an ethnic group is politically dominant and sets the terms of communal life.

Now to our topic. We gather today under a cloud. Throughout the West, nationalist forces—many tinged with xenophobia, ethnic prejudice, and religious bigotry—are on the rise. The recent Hungarian election featured nakedly anti-Semitic rhetoric not heard in Europe since the 1940s. Citizens are being invited to discard unifying civic principles in favor of divisive and exclusionary particularism.

It is tempting to respond by rejecting particularism root and branch and pinning our hopes on purely civic principles—to embrace, that is, what Jurgen Habermas has called "constitutional patriotism." But matters are not, and cannot be, so simple.

The United States is often seen as the birthplace and exemplar of a civic order. You are or become an American, it is said, not because of religion or ethnicity but because you affirm, and are prepared to defend, the community's basic principles and institutions. "All men are created equal." "We the People." What could be clearer?

And yet, the very document that famously holds certain truths to be self-evident begins by invoking a concept that is far from self-evident—namely, a distinct people that is may dissolve the political bands that have connected it to another people and to assume a "separate and equal standing" among the nations of the earth to which it is entitled by nothing less than "the laws of nature and of nature's God." The equality and independence of peoples is grounded in the same sources as the rights of individuals.

But what is a people, and what separates it from others? As it happens, John Jay, the least known of the three authors of the Federalist, went the farthest toward answering this question. In Federalist 2 he wrote that "Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people--a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established their general liberty and independence."

This description of the American people was only partly true at the time. It did not apply to African Americans, not to mention Catholics and those many denizens of the colonies for whom German was the language of daily life. It is much less true today. Nonetheless, it calls for reflection.

We can read Jay to be suggesting that certain commonalities foster the identity and unity of a people and that the absence of these commonalities complicates this task. Religious differences can be divisive, especially when they are linked to controversial idea about government, as Catholicism was until the middle of the past century and Islam is today. The absence of a shared language makes it more likely that linguistic sub-communities will think of themselves as separate peoples, as was the case throughout much of Canada's history and remains the case in Belgium today. Conversely, participation in shared struggle can forge popular unity and foster civic equality.

It is no accident, I suggest, that the strands of universality and particularity are braided through the history of American peoplehood, as they are I suspect, for political communities throughout the West. Nor is it an accident that during periods of stress—security threats and demographic change, for example—the latent tension between these strands often reemerges. A reasonable patriotism gives particularity its due without allowing the passions of particularism to drown out the voice of broader civic principles.

There is a difference between cosmopolitanism and universalism. We speak of some principles as universal, meaning that they apply everywhere. But the enjoyment of these principles requires institutions of enforcement, most often situated within particular political communities. In this vein, the US Declaration of Independence attributes certain rights to all human beings but adds immediately that securing these rights requires the establishment of governments. Note the plural: not only will there be a multiplicity of governments, but they may assume a variety of forms, all legitimate as long as they defend rights and rest on the consent of the governed.

As you can see, there is no contradiction, at least at the level of principle, between universal principles of right and patriotic attachment to particular communities. For many Americans and Europeans, in fact, their country's willingness to defend universal principles intensifies their patriotic pride. Universality denotes the range in which our principles apply; it has nothing to do with the scope of our primary allegiance.

By contrast, there is a contradiction between patriotism and cosmopolitanism. You cannot be simultaneously a citizen of the world and of a particular country, at least in the sense that we must often choose between giving pride of place to humanity as a whole as opposed to some subset of humanity.

This formulation assumes what some would contest—that the phrase "citizen of the world" has a discernible meaning. In a much-discussed speech, British Prime Minister Theresa May declared that "If you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere." On the surface, this is obviously true, because there is no global entity to be a citizen <u>of</u>. But if we dig a bit deeper, the matter becomes more complicated.

For example, we can observe many kinds of cosmopolitan groups—scientists and mathematicians, for example, whose quest for truth depends of principles of evidence and reason that take no account of political boundaries. As the son of a scientist, I have vivid memories of conferences in which hundreds of colleagues (the term itself is revealing) gathered—it didn't really matter where—to discuss their latest experiments, wherever they were conducted, on fully common ground. Similarly, I suspect we have all heard of the organization "Doctors without Borders," which rests on the principle that neither human need nor medical responsibility respects national boundaries.

There is a form of cosmopolitanism, finally, that may be observed among some government officials—the belief that it is their duty to maximize human wellbeing, regardless of the nationality of those who stand to benefit. This global utilitarianism, defended by philosophers such as Peter Singer, shaped the thinking of some officials who successfully urged then-Prime Minister Tony Blair to throw open Britain's immigration gates after the EU expansion of 2004, without

availing himself of the extended phase-in period that the terms of accession permitted. As subsequent events showed, there is a tension between global utilitarianism and the expectation that leaders will give priority to the interests of their own citizens. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a political community in which the belief in the legitimacy of collective self-preference does not hold sway—which is not to say that most citizens attach a weight of zero to the interests of human beings beyond the borders of their community, or that they should do so. Self-preference is one thing, moral obtuseness another.

There is a distinction, on which I need not dwell at length, between liberal and populist democracy. Of late, we have heard much about a "democracy deficit" in the European Union and throughout the West. Unelected bureaucrats and experts, it is alleged, are making decisions over the head and against the will of the people. Populist democrats endorse this complaint, at least in principle, because they believe that all decisions should ultimately be subject to the people's judgment. The referendum is the purest expression of this conception of democracy.

Liberal democracy, by contrast, distinguishes between decisions that the popular majorities should make, either directly or through their elected representatives, and issues involving rights, which should not be subject to majority will. The defense of fundamental rights and liberties is not evidence of a democracy deficit no matter how intensely popular majorities may resent it. Along with independent civil society, institutions such as constitutional courts give life to democracy, so understood. It is this conception of democracy on which I rely in the remainder of my remarks.

How patriotism can be reasonable

The philosopher Simon Keller argues at length against the proposition that patriotism is "a character trait that the ideal person would possess," at least if one's conception of the good or virtuous human being includes a propensity to form and act upon justified belief rather than distorted judgments and illusions. The core of Keller's thesis is that patriotic attachment leads patriots to deny unflattering truths about their country's conduct, hence to maintain their attachment in "bad faith." Patriotism should yield to truth, in short, but it doesn't.

Keller has put his finger on a dangerous tendency, one that I suspect most of us can feel within ourselves. It is often hard to acknowledge that one's country has erred, perhaps even committed hideous crimes. Sometimes monsters masquerade as patriots and manipulate patriotic sentiments to serve their own ends.

But just as patriots can go astray, they can also acknowledge their mistakes and do their best to make reparations for them. No one ever accused Ronald Reagan of being deficient in patriotism, but he was the president who formally

apologized to Japanese-Americans on behalf of the country for their unjust internment during World War Two.

In classic Aristotelian fashion, patriotism can be seen as a mean between two extremes—blinding zeal for one's country at one end of the continuum, culpable indifference or outright hostility at the other. Or, if you prefer, we can see patriotism as a sentiment that needs principled regulation. Carl Schurz, who left Germany for the United States after the failed 1848 revolution, became a Union general during the Civil War and then a U.S. senator. Attacked on the Senate floor as too willing to criticize his adopted country, Schurz replied, "My country, right or wrong: if right, to be kept right; if wrong, to be set right." This is the voice of the reasonable patriot.

Patriotism does not mean blind fidelity, no matter what. It means, rather, caring enough about one's country to try to correct it when it goes astray and, when that is not possible, making a difficult choice. A number of non-Jewish German patriots left their country in the 1930s because they could not stand what Hitler was doing to their Jewish fellow-citizens, did not want to be complicit, and hoped to ally themselves with external forces that might eventually bring down Hitler's evil regime.

In sum: I can believe that my country has made serious mistakes that must be acknowledged and corrected without ceasing to be a patriot. I can believe that my country's political institutions are evil and need wholesale replacement without ceasing to be a patriot. I can believe that other objects of regard (my conscience, or God) on occasion outrank my country without ceasing to be a patriot. The fact that zealous patriotism can have terrible consequences does not mean that reasonable and moderate patriotism does so.

Despite these arguments, it is understandable that morally serious people may continue harbor doubts about the intrinsic value of a sentiment that can yield evil. Even so, it is possible to endorse patriotism as an instrumental good—as necessary to the preservation of political communities whose existence makes the human good possible.

Another well-known philosopher, George Kateb, hesitates to take even this step. Patriotism, he argues, is an intellectual mistake because its object, one's country, is an "abstraction"—that is, a "figment of the imagination." Patriotism is a moral mistake because it requires (and tends to create) enemies, exalts a collective form of self-love, and stands opposed to the only justified morality, which is universalist. Individuals and their rights are fundamental; one's country, he says, is at most a "temporary and contingent stopping point on the way to a federated humanity."

Intellectuals, especially philosophers, should know better, Kateb insists. Their only ultimate commitment should be to Enlightenment-style independence of

mind, not just for themselves, but as an inspiration to all. In this context, "A defense of patriotism is an attack on the Enlightenment." From this standpoint, it is hard to see how civic virtue can be instrumentally good if the end it serves—the maintenance of one's particular political community—is intellectually and morally dubious.

But Kateb is too honest an observer of the human condition to go that far. While the existence of multiple political communities guarantees immoral behavior, government is, he acknowledges, not just a regrettable fact but a moral necessity: "By providing security, government makes possible treating other persons morally (and for their own sake)." It would seem to follow that the beliefs and traits of character that conduce to government's security-providing function are ipso facto instrumentally justified, as civic virtues. That is the basis on which a reasonable patriotism may be defined and defended. Yes, the individual community that makes moral conduct possible is embedded in an international system of multiple competing communities that invites, even requires, immoral behavior. But as Kateb rightly says, rather than positing and acting on a non-existent global community, "One must learn to live with the paradox." As long as we must, there will be a place for patriotism.

One more step, and I reach the end of this strand of my argument. The existence of multiple political communities is not just a fact that moral argument must take into account; it is preferable to the only non-anarchic alternative—a single global state. Dani Rodrik, a politically astute economist, spells out this case. There are many institutional arrangements, none obviously superior to others, for carrying out essential economic, social, and political functions. But some may be better suited than others to particular local circumstances. Groups will strike varying balances between equality and opportunity, stability and dynamism, security and innovation. In the face of Joseph Schumpeter's famous description of capitalist markets as "creative destructive," some groups will embrace the creativity while others shrink from the destruction. All this before we reach divisions of language, history, and religion. Individual countries struggle to contain these differences without repressing them. How likely is it that a single world government could preserve itself without autocracy or worse? Isn't it better to spread, hence mitigate, the threat of tyranny with multiple independent states so that if some go bad, others remain to defend the cause of freedom?

These questions answer themselves. If the human species best organizes and governs itself in multiple communities, and if each community requires devoted citizens to survive and thrive, then patriotism is not the way-station to the universal state. It is a permanent requirement for the realization of goods that human beings can know only in stable and decent polities.

Why impartiality is not always right

One familiar line of objection to patriotism rests on the premise that partiality is always morally suspect because it violates, or at least abridges, universal norms. By treating equals unequally for morally arbitrary reasons, goes the argument, we give too much weight to some claims and too little to others.

Critics note that patriots are devoted to a particular political order because it is their own and "not only" because it is legitimate. That's true, but so what? My son happens to be a fine young man; I cherish him for his warm, caring heart, among many other virtues. I also cherish him above other children because he is my own. Am I committing a moral mistake? I would be if my love for my son led me to regard other children with indifference—for example, if I voted against local property taxes because he is no longer of school age. But it is perfectly possible to love one's own without becoming morally narrow, or unreasonable, let alone irrational.

This is so because a certain degree of partiality is both permissible and justified. Two philosophers' examples will make my point. If I'm sunbathing on a beach and hear two young swimmers—my son and someone else—crying out for help, I should want to rescue both if I can. But suppose I can't. Does anything really think that I'm obligated to flip a coin to decide which one? On what theory of human existence would that be the right or obligatory thing to do?

But now the second example. As I'm walking my son to school, I see a boy in danger of drowning in the local swimming-hole, where he is unwisely playing hooky. Although I'm pretty sure I can rescue him, it will take time to pull him out, dry him off, calm him down, and return him to his parents. In the process, my son will be late for school and miss an exam he has worked hard to prepare for. Does anyone think that this harm would justify me in turning my back on the drowning boy?

These considerations apply not only to individual agents, but also to governments. There are situations in which one country can prevent a great evil in another, and do so at modest cost to itself. In such circumstances, the good that can be done for distant strangers outweighs the burden of doing it. In this vein, Bill Clinton has said that his failure to intervene against the genocide in Rwanda was the most mistake of his presidency.

What's going on is obvious, I think: in ordinary moral consciousness, both partial and impartial claims have weight, the proper balance between which is determined by facts and circumstances. While it is hard (some would say impossible) to reduce this balance to rules, there is at least a shared framework—based on the urgency and importance of conflicting interests—to guide our reflections. As a rule of thumb, we can presume that because human beings tend too much toward partiality, we should be careful to give non-partial claims their due. But that doesn't mean that they should always prevail.

Why patriotism is not so different from other loyalties

Sensing the danger of proving too much, the critics of patriotism draw back from the root-and-branch rejection of partiality. Instead, they try to drive a wedge between patriotism and other forms of attachment.

George Kateb does not offer a generalized critique of partial attachments. Instead, he argues, patriotism represents the wrong kind of partiality, because its object—one's country--is an abstraction, and a misleading one at that. Individuals are real; countries aren't. Individuals are worthy of special attachments in a way that countries are not. That is why he works so hard to drive a wedge between love of parents and love of country.

I disagree. While love of parents and of country are not the same, it does not follow that one's country cannot be a legitimate object of affection. To be sure, a country is not a person, but it begs the question to say that love is properly directed only to persons. It abuses neither speech nor sense to say that I love my house and for that reason would feel sorrow and deprivation if disaster forced me to leave it. (I have had such an experience.) A country is, among other things, a place, a language (one's "mother tongue"), a way of life, and a set of institutions through which collective decisions are made and carried out. One can love these things reasonably, and many do.

Consider immigrants who arrive legally in the US from impoverished and violent lands. Their lives in their new country often are arduous, but they at least enjoy the protection of the laws, the opportunity to advance economically, and the right to participate in choosing their elected officials. Is it unreasonable for them to experience gratitude, affection, and the desire to perform reciprocal service for the country that has given them refuge?

Kateb is clearly right to insist that citizens don't owe their "coming into being" to their country in the way that children owe their existence to their parents. But here again, his conclusion does not follow from his premise. Surely we can love people who are not responsible for our existence: parents love their children, husbands their wives. Besides, refugees may literally owe their continuing existence to countries that offer them sanctuary from violence. Is it less reasonable and proper to love the institutions that save our life than the individuals who give us life?

As another philosopher, Eamonn Callan, has suggested, if patriotism is love of country, then the general features of love are likely to illuminate this instance of it. Among his key points: "love can be admirable when directed to objects whose value is severely compromised and admirable then not despite but because of the compromised value." An example of this is the love of parents for an adult child who has committed a serious crime, a bond that demonstrates the virtues of constancy and loyalty. This does not mean that parents are free to deny the

reality of their child's deeds or to make up bogus excuses for them. To do that would be to surrender both intellectual and moral integrity. But to say that parental love risks crossing the line in these ways is not to say that parents are required to turn their backs on criminals who happen to be their children, or to cease all efforts to reform them. (Nor is it to fault parents who have wrenchingly concluded that they must cut these ties.)

Conclusion: the last full measure of devotion

There is one more objection to my conception of reasonable patriotism: it is irrational to choose a life that puts you at heightened risk of dying for your country. The objector may say that there is nothing worth dying for, a proposition I reject. More often, the suggestion is that even if there are things that warrant the sacrifice of one's life (one's children, for example), one's country is not in this category. Children are concrete and innocent, while countries are abstract ("imagined communities," in Benedict Anderson's phrase) and problematic.

Must a political community be morally unblemished to be worth killing or dying for? The United States was a deeply flawed nation when it went to war after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The servicemen on the Normandy beaches harbored none of the *dulce et decorum est* illusions that led young Englishmen to welcome the outbreak of the first world war; the GIs fought against pure evil in the name of a partial good. They were neither wrong nor deceived to do so, or so I believe. Suppose one's country is attacked and thousands of fellow-citizens die. Is everything done in response an expression of delusion? Not at all: some reactions are necessary and justified; others are excessive and illegitimate. I favored retaliation against the Taliban, which asked some Americans to kill and die for their country. Most Americans agreed, and I think we were right. Attacking those who did not attack us was—and is—another matter altogether.

Lurking behind the critique of patriotism is the longing for an unattainable moral purity in politics. I take my stand with Max Weber, with the ethic of responsibility that embraces the necessary moral costs of maintaining our collective existence—all the more so when our government rests on the consent of the governed. It is only within decent political communities that citizens can hope to practice the ordinary morality we rightly cherish. As long as we have multiple communities, and as long as evil endures, citizens will face choices they would rather avoid, and patriotism will be a necessary virtue.