

Does patriotism do more damage than good? Discuss.

By Naina Sidhu

'Patriotism is the virtue of the vicious'. Convictive as it is, Oscar Wilde's interpretation of patriotism may not align with the patriot of the 21st century. What does the modern patriot look like? The patriot of today would perhaps advertise their pride through the draping of coloured cloth, feeding a flag of two yards through a window facing the main road, every four years in accordance with the World Cup. The patriot's child may discordantly but nonetheless, passionately recite the lyrics of 'God Save the Queen', shoulder-to-shoulder with their peers in a humid, tightly-packed school hall on the Queen's Jubilee. These vignettes do not indicate the so-called viciousness that Wilde speaks of but instead provokes nostalgia for childhood and a yearning for the heightened sense of community, most tangible every four years. The indulging in these practices is an integral part of western life, woven into our culture and embraced with familiarity. There is no doubt that patriotism can induce and strengthen attachment to a unit bound together by the common denominator of nationality. That is, of course, only in healthy dosages.

The bare suggestion that one's country is a source of reverence could be construed as egotistical, a supplement to vanity. From early on, the infusion of patriotism in our daily rituals has left a residual effect, therefore from early on, we have been subject to an instilled and continued state of ignorance. A state of ignorance that entails disregarding the vices of a country, insidious or blatant so as to bask in its so-called glory and celebrate its virtues without experiencing tinges of guilt sourced from such an absurd root of pride. As Arthur Schopenhauer wrote in 'The World as Will and Representation', 'if a man is proud of his own nation, it argues that he has no qualities of his own which a person can be proud'. Schopenhauer suggests a level of meritlessness apparent in all patriots, insinuating that all practitioners of the ideology are lacking in character. One could say that patriotism functions by condoning the distasteful history of a country, therefore stunting development of the individuals and the nation they collectively form. This indoctrination of ignorance which has spanned generations is arguably the most damaging effect of patriotism as it holds the deadly attribute of endurance against time and opposition.

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Patriotism can not exist without being interpreted as a subdued extension of nationalism so any endorsement of it could be viewed as celebration of a warped ideology. By sympathising with patriotic sentiment, one becomes more susceptible to nationalist concepts. With the accelerating growth of Internet usage, nationalists are supplied with an alarming abundance of platforms, allowing them to extend the reach of their venomous messages to wider audiences. Though a distinction can be made between nationalism and patriotism, it is vital to note the effect of the latter and what it has the potential to degenerate to.

However it could be argued that patriotism is serviceable to members of a society, holding the potential to inspire and unite. By supporting a sports team or honouring a nation's acclaimed singer, patriotism links together the varied citizens of a country, connecting them over a shared source of pride. This common ground can breed gratitude and appreciation for the society that facilitated the growth of such distinguished, enigmatic individuals. That being said, if there are only a few individuals in a nation who warrant such a high degree of praise, wouldn't their sparsity betray the very foundations of patriotism? Wouldn't the individuals being finite and numbered be proof that they are exceptions to the country's citizens and not representative of the country as a whole? The concept appears paradoxical and illogical, rendering it foolish but ultimately benign.

Like any other ideology, patriotism generates a steady stream of opposition and subsequent cultural change. Take for example, the revolutionary punk movement of the 1960s and 1970s that served as a vessel for the pent-up anti-conformist sentiment directed towards all forms of seemingly reactionary institutions such as the monarchy, the government and by implication, patriotism. The punk movement, fueled by frustration birthed some of the most foundational contributions to art and culture such as rock groups, The Clash and the Sex Pistols. Punk demonstrated one of the earliest defiances to mainstream culture, continuing and sustaining the generational pattern of rejecting societal ideals and subverting them. It is absurd to attribute the root of a monumental movement to the effects of patriotism but it certainly may have incentivised people to mobilise. Whether this is a direct effect of the ideology is up to debate but a distinct correlation could be made between the effects of an ideology and the response.

Perhaps, the most sinister consequence of patriotism is its heralding the detrimental effect of military endorsement, perhaps manifested best in the 'Lord Kitchener Wants You' posters of the First World War, feeding on citizens' invisible obligation to fulfil their patriotic fate of fighting for their country. It

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could be argued that patriotism and devotion to one's country are devices used to navigate the public towards the acceptance and glorification of war. It expedites the tolerance of war, presenting its contrasting opinion of pacifism as 'unpatriotic'. By labelling opposition as 'unpatriotic', it incites the gradual but palpable shunning of freedom of speech. The Espionage Act of 1917 which was enacted in response to citizens opposing America's involvement in the First World War is a clear example. Though the act's initial purpose was to criminalise spreading false reports that would interfere with the United States' armed forces, it was extended by the Sedition Act of 1918 which prohibited 'any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States.' This barred the citizens' right to hold and display anti-war sentiment, establishing a clear dichotomy between citizens and the freedom of speech, a most damaging consequence of patriotism.

To conclude, it is difficult to determine whether the effects of patriotism lean more towards affecting change or paying homage to an outdated set of ideals. Celebrating the culture and food of one's country is by no means an exercise of nationalism. It is vital to note that being a patriot comes with much more ease if one's ancestors descend from that country. A person of colour living in England may enjoy the food, the music and the culture but the question may persist, 'What is there to be proud of?'. And this question is perfectly valid given the long-lasting ramifications of the British Empire. Perhaps, the only step forward is to evade a state of patriotism but instead adopt its sense of collectivism; work together towards a more equitable and beneficial future for everyone. It is through the distortion of seemingly harmless concepts like patriotism that nationalism emerges as a damaging force. And it is from this result that patriotism truly becomes the virtue of the vicious.