
THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Citizens of the World, Unite?

A Survey of Recent Articles

Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel," Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said, and 20th-century American liberals have been quick to agree. Indeed, liberals of a more utopian cast at times have gone one huge step further: they have tried to shed *all* patriotism and to embrace, in one guise or another, all humankind. Not many Americans have joined them in this, but the dream dies hard. In a special issue of *Boston Review* (Oct.–Nov. 1994), Martha Nussbaum, a noted professor of philosophy, classics, and comparative literature at Brown University, makes a case for world citizenship—and 29 other thinkers kick her argument around.

"[An] emphasis on patriotic pride is both morally dangerous and, ultimately, subversive of some of the worthy goals patriotism sets out to serve—for example, the goal of national unity in devotion to worthy moral ideals of justice and equality," Nussbaum proclaims. In place of patriotism, she proposes to put "cosmopolitanism," which would ask Americans to pledge primary allegiance to all of humanity. Students in this country should be taught that while they "happen to be situated" in the United States, "they are above all citizens of a world of human beings."

Citing the ancient Greek Cynic philosopher Diogenes (who declared himself "a citizen of the world"), Nussbaum says that he knew "that the invitation to think as a world citizen was, in a sense, an invitation to be an exile from the comfort of patriotism and its easy sentiments, to see our own ways of life from the point of view of justice and the good. The accident of where one is born is just that, an accident; any human being might have been born in any nation. Recognizing this, his Stoic successors held, we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings. We should recognize humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral

capacity, our first allegiance and respect."

Nussbaum is responding, in part, to an op-ed essay in the *New York Times* (Feb. 13, 1994) by philosopher Richard Rorty of the University of Virginia. Most Americans, he notes, "take pride in being citizens of a self-invented, self-reforming, enduring constitutional democracy. We think of the United States as having glorious—if tarnished—national traditions." But the American Left, found mainly in academia, "is unpatriotic," he asserts. "In the name of 'the politics of difference,' it refuses to rejoice in the country it inhabits. It repudiates the idea of a national identity, and the emotion of national pride." It favors "multiculturalism," instead of traditional American pluralism.

Rorty believes that, for all its faults, the Left is doing "a great deal of good for people who have gotten a raw deal in our society." Nevertheless, he says, it is painting itself into a corner. "An unpatriotic Left has never achieved anything. A Left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on that country's politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt."

Nussbaum is unpersuaded. Patriotism, she

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says, "is very close to jingoism, and I'm afraid I don't see in Rorty's argument any proposal for coping with this very obvious danger."

Commenting in the same issue of *Boston Review*, Harvey C. Mansfield, a political scientist at Harvard University, says that despite Nussbaum's eminence as a professor of philosophy, "when it comes to politics, she's a girl scout. Indeed, she has less useful acquaintance with American politics than a schoolchild of either sex who has recently been exposed to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—unless, thanks to the foolish cosmopolitanism she encourages, these items are no longer in the curriculum."

Mansfield agrees with Nussbaum that Rorty's "groundless patriotism" could be perverted into jingoism, but asks why she excludes the possibility of a "reasonable" patriotism: "Why does she ignore the liberalism and the constitutionalism of the country in which she lives?"

Some other *Boston Review* thinkers have kind words for Nussbaum's idealism and eloquence, but—in what could be taken as a sign of widespread realism among liberal intellectuals today—very few accept her main argument.

Leo Marx, an emeritus professor of American cultural history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, observes that Nussbaum "seems to regard American nationhood as indistinguishable from other routine embodiments of nationalism. But the originating concept of the American republic was exceptional in at least two respects." The United States, he says, "was founded on precisely defined political principles." And these were selected "for their putatively universal moral and rational validity. Whatever the record of actual American practices since 1776, the fact is that this nation initially was—and in principle remains—dedicated to an Enlightenment brand of cosmopolitanism." Hence, he points out, Nussbaum, as an American citizen, can be both patriotic and cosmopolitan.

Yet how far can the bonds of obligation and loyalty be stretched? asks Harvard sociologist Nathan Glazer. In some ways, he notes, "they can encompass all men and women. Do we not sense, though, whatever the inadequacy of our principled ethical arguments, that we owe more to our family members than to others? The

greater closeness of bonds to one's country and countrymen need not mean denigration and disrespect for others." Of course, Americans should learn more about other countries and do have moral obligations to the rest of humanity. "But," Glazer adds, "there is a meaning to boundaries, in personal life and in political life, as well as a practical utility."

"I am not a citizen of the world, as [Nussbaum] would like me to be," declares political philosopher Michael Walzer, author of *Spheres of Justice* (1984). "I am not even aware that there is a world such that one could be a citizen of it." While Nussbaum is quick to perceive "the chauvinist possibilities" of Rorty's patriotism, Walzer observes, she seems blind to cosmopolitanism's "obvious dangers."

"The crimes of the 20th century have been committed alternately, as it were, by perverted patriots and perverted cosmopolitans," he writes. "If fascism represents the first of these perversions, communism, in its Leninist and Maoist versions, represents the second. Isn't this repressive communism a child of universalizing enlightenment? Doesn't it teach an anti-nationalist ethic, identifying our primary allegiance (the class limitation, 'workers of the world,' was thought to be temporary and instrumental) much as Nussbaum does?"

Precisely because powerful economic and technological forces are moving the planet closer to cosmopolitanism, the noted historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., points out, the appeal of patriotism is growing stronger, as people "seek refuge from threatening global currents beyond their control and understanding."

Extreme patriotism is evil—but patriotism need not be extreme, notes Stephen Nathanson, a professor of philosophy at Northeastern University and one of 15 additional commentators who respond to Nussbaum in *Boston Review* (Feb.–March 1995). It is possible to love one's country, he says, "without hating other countries, being an enthusiast about war, limiting one's concerns to one's own country, or believing in mindless obedience and support."

"In an ideal world," Arthur Schlesinger observes, "Martha Nussbaum's generous and enlightened appeal would be exactly right. But we must deal with the world we have."