

PROUD FOR WHAT

What's the Problem with Patriotism?

*God and Country sold you out,
And fed you scapegoats for your doubts
—Cursed, “God and Country”*

The appearance of Patriot Prayer and Proud Boys is not an anomaly. These groups are not aberrations or mere flare-ups of the worst excesses of a system that we might bring back into balance or repair. They are not manifestations of an otherwise good or healthy allegiance to the State gone wrong: Their project, worldview, and practices are totally consonant with the entire arc of the history of this continent's colonization, with the patriarchal, genocidal and slavery-based entity known as “America.” The successions of administrations steering this ship may swing from conservative to liberal, from more dictatorial to more democratic, from right to left and back again... but this dance of politics is done in order to conceal the fact that *the whole enterprise is rotten to its core.*

It was the westward expansion of the English-speaking peoples across the “North American” continent that provided one of the most salient inspirations to the young Adolf Hitler and the burgeoning Nazi movement. It was in the US Midwest and in California that white-coated functionaries pioneered the science of eugenics, providing the template for the racial doctrines and programs of Germany's National Socialists. Brutal repression and toxic social control has been woven into the tapestry of the United States from the start. Its whole spectrum of politically acceptable positions and ideas has been painted with the broad strokes of Whiteness (that American monument to the art of governance), established on firm foundations of irreconcilable anti-indigeneity and anti-Blackness, among others. As pointed out by the authors of *Dixie Be Damned*, it's even true that the best friend of racism in this country has most often been democracy, not fascism.

Allegedly “radical” and hate-based groups like Patriot Prayer and the Proud Boys are quite at home in this continuum. Rather than a fringe, they really represent both the germ and the conclusion

of American culture, with its perpetually juvenile and awe-struck worship of ill-gotten gains and unearned wealth and power, with its settler arrogance and oblivion, with its apparent disdain for vulnerability and openness, and its veneration of caprice and contempt, a “hardness” that is counterfeit, lived vicariously in nearly every instance through a supposedly great leader.

The obvious insecurity, entitlement, and resentment worn on the face of every Patriot and every Proud Boy are the seeds that—with the right effort at cultivation—grow, generation after generation, into an immense fiction, a kind of mass hallucination of a very specific content. The illusion is intentionally maintained by statesmen and capitalists for its usefulness: your love for the land you stand upon is disfigured by borders, imaginary lines drawn around “countries” on a map by avaricious conquerors and their agents, while at the same time your regard for your neighbor or your fellow human is refracted through the lenses of “race” and “culture,” obscuring all chance for understanding and goodwill across place, time, and circumstance.

At the tender age of 15 or 16 years old, some of us witnessed the collapse of the twin towers on our now-ubiquitous classroom televisions and knew, even then, that a fate just as grisly was being continually doled out, year after year, to untold tens of thousands of people all over the world at the hands of the United States and its proxies, its architects of the world trade holocaust, its little Eichmanns. Some of us, on the other hand, flew little American flags and vowed that if what we were called to do was throw grenades disguised to look like water bottles to attract little brown children in the wake of our tank patrols and blow them to bits in Afghanistan or Iraq, well, then that's what we would do. It's what the leaders demanded, after all.

This particular “we” and this particular “us” of patriotic self-identification with

fatherland in fact hides so many yawning chasms. Standing on the far shore of one of these gaps—opposite of the those among our peers who cowered at each new bogeyman and vowed to be tough on “terrorism,” on “crime,” on “drugs,” and increasingly (once again) on “communism”—stood a motley rabble of the wayward, unwanted children of Generation 9/11. In what seems like another lifetime, we once imagined that George W. Bush represented the absolute nadir of American imperial arrogance, stupidity, and bellicosity. We were wrong. The liberals were wrong (again) too. Now grown, we know that the surges of racist terror under George W. Bush and those of our present figurehead are not the unfortunate, nearly-inconceivable but momentary setbacks on the forward march of Progress, but are among the eternally recurrent themes of a nightmare vessel which will never stop until it is actively decommissioned, or finally breaks down of its own accord and slowly rusts away.

Patriotism shifts our gaze away from the quality of our own experiences, from our own directly-lived social and ecological relations, from the hierarchy or exploitation which pass untroubled in our own lives only by being continually mystified, naturalized, re-consecrated or valorized. The occasional and contingent conflict we can imagine arising between real individuals of flesh and blood, pitted now and then against one another in an otherwise substantially free existence, has been replaced by the constant, alienated, and massified slaughter between nation-states, and, within those nation-states, by the domination of a particular few classes over all the others.

Patriotism is a circus tent erected over a mass grave. But it's not only the chauvinistic or jingoistic expression of these ideas which plays havoc with our perceptions, our interests, our lives.

What About Nationalism?

Indeed, that was an apt and true reply which was given to Alexander the Great by a pirate who had been seized. For when that king had asked the man what he meant by keeping hostile possession of the sea, he answered with bold pride, "What do you mean by seizing the whole earth; because I do it with a petty ship, I am called a robber, while you who does it with a great fleet are styled emperor."

—St. Augustine, City of God

Patriotism (from the same etymological root as *patriarchy*) is only the name given to each particular, popular iteration of *nationalism*, that ideological doctrine which from the 18th century until today has played an indispensable role in wrecking utter devastation over the face of the earth several times over. The nominally liberatory idea that *a nation should govern itself free from outside interference* is a sleight of hand undertaken to mask the great farce of governance *in and of itself*.

In other words, self-determination for the nation-state, however democratic, is subjection for the individual. It necessarily spells servitude and subordination for any living, breathing community that one might hope to liberate. It is a guarantee that the other-than-human inhabitants of the world (known in civilized parlance as "natural resources") will be consigned to rapacious consumption and totalitarian management, and that the land itself will know the lashes of the omniscient whimsy of a mega-machine that has slipped the moorings of any human scale or agency. This is the case no matter what color flag is flown by the administrators and wise leaders of the Nation.

Put another way, nationalism is the ideological gloss that allows a Patriot or a Proud Boy to believe they are truly fighting for their own interests when they are fighting primarily for a well-oiled apparatus of systematized death and control, for a boss or a bureaucrat, for a general or a police force, for a class of developers, gentry, or managers, for the maintenance of an abstract idea or role with which they are taught to identify, or, as we now see, for an utterly effete and comically inept rich-man-rapist-turned-president who can somehow still be painted as the picture of domineering masculinity as well as as an "outsider" to the world of power and politics, an image erected by well-paid technicians for the passive consumption of hordes of timid spectators.

As alluded to above, nationalism re-casts the conflict between classes—between those placed higher on the ladder of hierarchy and those con-

signed to positions below—as a struggle instead between different nations or peoples, these latter being conceived as monolithic identity blocks (and this is ultimately as true for nationalism's left-wing, "revolutionary" iterations as for its right-wing, "imperialist" forms). It is this critical change in perspective or theoretical register that gives rise (to risk a played-out Orwellian reference) to a mindset which quite literally posits that War is Peace, Ignorance is Strength, and Slavery is Freedom.

Indeed, for the Patriot as for the Proud Boy, up is down, servitude is agency, and substantial reciprocity between equals is symptomatic of a sickness. How else could they delude themselves that licking the boots of an ICE officer or of border patrol is the act of a free person? How else could the lords of this world mobilize entire armies of average people to kill "foreigners" who occupy an essentially similar position in the social relations of their own lands? How else to sell the idea that migrants, and not capitalists, are responsible for the economy which crushes or deprives you?

Nationalism is a prime example of pure ideology: abstract notions and stereotyped entities replace the potential for an ensemble of dynamic and materially-established affinities with one's true comrades and co-conspirators. This substitution is matched by a host of concomitant moralistic truisms about "the People" and "this country" which replace all critical thought.

The nation-state is an un-living monster, a Leviathan. Its wheels and tentacles, its voracious maw, are animated only with the energy extracted from truly living beings, compelled to yield their creativity and their dreams once drawn into its circuitry.

Nationalism is a coat of armor, a mask that, worn for too long, bonds with the flesh of the wearer; any attempt at removal takes off strips of skin with it. The wearer recoils and, hiding his burning-hot humiliation, gives up his effort at removal, denying the pain felt at submission, or else projecting it onto some dehumanized enemy or another, of which there is a never-ending supply on offer to meet the demand.

In denial—in concealed shock, fear,

shame, horror, or revulsion—the Patriot signs up for tours of duty, or he pretends that he would if it came down to it. He derides the safe spaces of his adversaries while hiding behind armies and droves of his usual natural ally: the police.

He cruises the night or stalks into the next room of his house for a victim, to blow off his steam in all the ways prescribed by his Party, his People. He goes to work. He buys what's on offer. He snitches and collaborates. He changes channels.

He goes back to sleep.

“*And these crimes are committed in broad daylight, after being plotted in the corridors of the government, under the influence of a clique, [...] while shouting over the rooftops: The people are sovereign, The Nation is sovereign, and under the buzzwords of patronage – Glory, Honor, Homeland, as if there were several homelands between all beings living on the same planet.*

No! The anarchists have but one party, and that is humanity.

It is also in the name of civilization that exist these distant expeditions where thousands of men are killed with a savage ferocity. It is in the name of civilization that we plunder, that we burn, that we massacre an entire people who demand nothing [more] than to live peacefully in their homes. And these crimes are committed with impunity because the law doesn't cover this type of theft and armed robbery, au contraire: We award medals to those who have led all this carnage, medals to the mercenaries who have taken part, in memory of their good deeds, and these unconscious ones are proud to wear this insignia which is nothing but a diploma of assassination.

But on the other hand, the law severely punishes the worker to whom society refuses the right to exist and who has the courage to take what is necessary which he lacks, where there is superfluous amounts. Oh! And then this one is treated like a thief, brought before the court and finally returns to end his days in prison.

Voilà! The logic of our current society.”

—The defense speech of Clément Duval, french anarchist and criminal.