

Should the University of Wisconsin Teach Patriotism?

The events of the 21st century have had a disastrous effect on the American spirit, and we now stand incredibly divided (Brennan). Many are coming up empty in their search for any sort of national pride, forgetting that the institutions of the United States were once made to embody modern liberal ideals. These citizens show disdain, while others have become radical in their unwavering support. I argue that—despite our current tumultuous state—the conception of democracy embraced by the founding fathers can still be an object of pride. Through the careful action of the University of Wisconsin and other public institutions, we might rekindle a shared patriotic belief that, in the words of Condoleezza Rice, “[what] really unites us, is not ethnicity, or nationality or religion. It is an idea, and what an idea it is—that you can come from humble circumstances and do great things.” This paper serves as an exploration of patriotism in using the tools of modern political philosophy, suggesting that the University should reject radical loyalty and facilitate critical thinking. The University’s support of this will unify students and promote progress, fulfilling its motto: Together Forward.

The argument of the citizens who have given our government steady, uncritical loyalty is best described in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Hobbes’ political writings were motivated by a fear of instability, claiming that any government is better than none. He argues that men are in a constant battle for honor and dignity (Hobbes, 138), and that citizens should show the utmost respect to the government. While there is some utility in giving up certain freedoms in exchange for the protection and services provided by the government, the loyalty that Hobbes proposes is

extreme. As Craig Calhoun writes, “Hobbes’ arguments were challenged almost immediately by others who, despite their predominant liberalism, appear in retrospect to anticipate nineteenth-century ethnic nationalism” (Calhoun). It is this ethnic nationalism that George Orwell came to describe as “old-fashioned British jingoism”, defined as an extreme form of patriotism or nationalism characterized by, “identifying oneself with a single nation or unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognizing no other duty than its interests” (Orwell), and Calhoun’s revelation seems to suggest that Hobbes may have created it. Nationalism has certainly proven to be terrible; the British Empire that followed Hobbes serves as an example. Instead of embracing a patriotism that is based on the sake of government itself, students should adopt one that is based on strong democratic ideals.

In contrast to Hobbes’ resolute patriotism, John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* posits a social contract that allows citizens to be in constant assessment of its leaders. Locke’s philosophy suggests that the majority’s consent should always determine who is to rule. This idea has remained popular in Western politics because it stands in the way of tyranny. Whenever the government acts outside the bounds of its authority, as established by the people, Locke says, “the people have a right to act as supreme, and continue the legislative in themselves; or erect a new form, or under the old form place it in new hands, as they think good” (Locke, 124). Locke’s structure of government—with checks and balances of power—protects citizens from injustice as well (Locke, 65). These ideas were such a strong contribution to Western political thought that they were adopted by the United States. For instance, The Declaration of Independence says that, “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”, which directly parallels Locke’s

argument that, “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions” (Locke, 9). The similarities between these statements suggest that Locke’s ideas are more quintessentially American than Hobbes’, making these democratic principles a reasonable source of pride.

The University should not persuade students to love their country, since those lessons may produce a Hobbesian loyalty that constitutes an uncritical form of patriotism. Instead, the University should teach the modern democratic ideals that inspired the founding fathers. These ideals have produced the American dream that Rice speaks of, and they are what unify this country most. Also, society has clearly progressed from its inception, so the evolution of Western political thought should be taught. Different perspectives throughout history offer good arguments for how society should be constructed, and many accounts are well-supported for their time. Comparing these arguments with our state of affairs will allow students to determine if and how we have deviated from the best path forward. Finally, the University has a duty to teach its students to be critical of the United States. An unbiased account of it and its history should be taught, giving students the ability to evaluate America’s contribution to the world. This education will give students the tools to determine what American ideals they individually can be proud of, and what ideals are problematic enough to change.

In the words of Immanuel Kant, a patriotic attitude is to think of your country as a “maternal womb” and that it is something that you must leave to your descendants as a “treasured pledge” (Kant, 73). In other words, American patriotism needs to be something that all citizens can take ownership in. That which we can own—what we leave to our descendants—are the progressive democratic ideals that our country was founded on. Public institutions like the University of Wisconsin should not teach patriotism, since no citizen should unquestionably support their

country. The sentiment of patriotism may be realized as a secondary affect of what I advocate the University should educate us on. If any patriotism develops, it will be the kind that is productive. A patriotic America may only be restored when all citizens are taught to criticize the worst of our nation and acknowledge the best, since it is the only thing that we can collectively own.

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