

## The Psychology of Patriotism

**PATRIOTISM can be a force for good or evil.**

**American patriotism, after all, helped defeat fascism; But German patriotism helped create it. Wars of national liberation deploy patriotic fervor to oppose colonial rule; unfortunately, right wing nationalism and ethnic cleansing draw on this same fervor.**

**So--appeals to the transcendent value of the nation-state can be progressive or regressive. But regardless of the purpose to which patriotism is harnessed, all forms of it share similar psychological dynamics. Patriotic symbols such as the “nation” or the “flag” or “The Founding Fathers” all represent the fulfillment of our longings for connectedness and safety.**

**In this sense, the “nation” is a metaphor for a family. Think about it: Families serve the function of providing psychic security and attachment. In patriotism, we are projecting onto ever-expanding forms of social authority the longings *originally* satisfied by parents in childhood. So, for**

**example, it's easy to see the workings of these two needs—the needs for safety and connectedness—in our collective responses to the attack of 9/11 and to the devastation visited on New Orleans and the Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina. In the first instance, after 9/11, people looked to government to provide security and defense, including a muscular retaliation against our enemies. On a symbolic level, we looked to our leaders to provide the protection and strength usually associated with fathers.**

**In the second instance, Hurricane Katrina, people looked to government to provide care and nurturance, a safety net — qualities associated in our culture with mothers. Now, I'm not trying to reduce everything to mommies and daddies. But the workings of the unconscious minds of adults invariably draw from our earliest and most primitive experiences. I would put it this way: Social attitudes and behaviors like patriotism are the products of a complex interplay between the rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, private and public factors. But when patriotic feeling is SO passionate, one simply has to be**

open to seeing how its roots lie deep in our psyches. And that fact contributes to the ways that patriotism is vulnerable—as we’ll see-- to manipulation and exploitation.

So, let’s take a look at how familial patterns can get activated by patriotism. First, some background assumptions: Over 50 years of psychological research have established that human beings have an innate need for attachment and recognition and that when these needs are *frustrated*, the result is usually great mental suffering. I see such suffering every day in my consulting room — families in which parents can’t empathize with their children or each other, or narcissistically use their children, or neglect them altogether. I see children who grow up taking care of others instead of themselves or who retreat from intimacy because of fears of rejection and abandonment. All of these things are either causes or effects of disturbances in attachment.

But developing children don’t only need reliable and empathic attachments, they also need protection. Children are helpless and dependent on their parents in ways that

**lead children to look to their parents for authority, protection and security. Children need people to look up to, to admire--people who will protect and defend them and who will bestow recognition upon them.**

**When parents are protective and reasonable in their exercise of authority, children grow up feeling secure and are able to safely rely on others. When parents *fail* to protect children and exercise their authority in arbitrary, frightening, or inconsistent ways, children grow up with a basic sense of insecurity and difficulty trusting others.**

**So, we all grow up needing empathy and needing security and protection. And just because our families might frustrate these needs, these desires don't go away. We continue to long for recognition and for relationships of mutuality even as we often suffer from loneliness. And we continue to seek security even as we feel unsafe and unprotected.**

**In this context, it's easy to understand the powerful psychic meanings of patriotism. To feel like an "American," to identify with the "United States of America," is to feel at**

**once safe and connected. Patriotism establishes a “we” that satisfies the longings for connectedness and affiliation that are so often frustrated in our private lives. And it offers an image of a strong and fair authority in relationship to which we can feel safe and secure.**

**These powerful satisfactions provided by patriotism become even more compelling when we consider how they are absent in in everyday social life. A great many sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers have written about the ways that our market economy based on an ethos of selfish individualism undermines communities, atomizes social life, alienates work, and tends to make relationships increasingly instrumental. Simply put, our society makes us feel disconnected, alone and unprotected. From David Riesman’s 1950 masterpiece *The Lonely Crowd*, to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1970, to Robert Putnam’s 2001 sensation *Bowling Alone*, social critics have argued that the decline in traditional communities of meaning in contemporary society has had disastrous consequences for the psychological well-being of citizens.**

**Thus. the unfulfilled childhood longings for attachment, recognition, and security that I was describing get further blocked in our everyday lives as citizens and workers. The suffering that results is often unconscious.**

**We are so atomized and socially disconnected that we view our needs for community as foolish. WE grow up cynical about the possibility that things could really be different and so we regard our loneliness and insecurity as if they were our own fault. To use the phrase that Betty Friedan coined to describe the alienation of women in the 1950s, these feelings of loneliness and collective insecurity become “problems with no names.”**

**Now, let’s go back to considering patriotism. Our American form of patriotism appeals to national pride, invocations of historical purpose—what is called American Exceptionalism—including symbols of collective unity like the flag or the Constitution,-- And all these things offer us a symbolic resolution of unspoken longings for relatedness and safety. People do their best to get these needs met, even if the pickings are slim and the opportunities meager.**

**Political movements on both the Left and the Right seek to link their partisan agendas to the evocation and satisfaction of these frustrated longings. Linguist George Lakoff, for example, has argued that liberals speak to values arising from a conceptual paradigm that he calls the “nurturant parent” — including the values of empathy and responsibility for others — while conservatives appeal to a mental metaphor involving discipline and self-reliance that he terms the “strict parent.” Think about this for a minute--*Both models seek to address needs for connectedness and security, albeit in radically different ways.***

**The political evocation and articulation of our collective passions and distress is ubiquitous in our public lives. Whether people are marching against abortion or against the war in Iraq, intense emotions — and not simply cognitive beliefs — are on parade.**

**However, while both Left and Right seek to take advantage of the frustrated longings for community and safety, the conservative side has done so more successfully of late. For example, in the post-9/11 climate, conservative**

**and neoconservative ideologues used the need for protection that so many Americans felt to promote dubious justifications for war with Iraq and a massive increase in the police and surveillance powers of the government.**

**Similarly, conservatives have been more successful than liberals in using one other crucial political technique in their attempt to create –and exploit--an experience of community and safety: namely, the evocation of a demeaned “Other.” Conservatives are especially skilled at evoking prejudice. One has only to listen to the racist dog-whistles embedded in Trump’s and his Republican enabler’s warnings about immigration at our southern border to hear a prime example of using images of a Demeaned Other to foster a sense of community. A feeling of we-ness is evoked and solidified by a paranoid discourse that focuses on external threats. “We Americans”—really, “we white Americans”—gives us a deeply satisfying sense of belonging to a special club. But “clubs” are most special when it excludes other people.**



If there are people deemed “bad,” then this helps the in-group feel ‘good.’ If these people on the outside are “dangerous,” then it enables those of us on the inside to feel good, righteous, and safe. Such an us vs. them mentality is at the heart of Trump’s patriotism. And, of course, this process of exclusion and demonization is the essential dynamic behind all forms of ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and homophobia. The feelings of insecurity and disconnectedness that plague us in our personal and social lives can be blamed on the actions of some “other” who is then demeaned and attacked. This is the psychological underpinning and appeal of “America First.”

This process of projection is deliberately used by conservatives to solidify their base. By creating an imaginary “us” and “them,” they can then promise satisfaction of deep and *legitimate* longings for a community safe from both real and illusory threats posed from the outside. The immigrant, terrorist, and gay newlywed for that matter, are used as lightning rods to draw out the collective passions of

**Americans looking to be temporarily relieved of feelings of insecurity and disconnectedness.**

**Ironically, this us/them tactic ultimately serves to undermine a more authentic community that would better meet the psychological needs for connectedness of most individuals. Like a clique of schoolchildren who gain a temporary sense of belonging by demeaning other classmates, Trumpist conservatives, including the Religious Right, promise us a patriotism that offers a temporary and illusory remedy for the symptoms of a societal illness that lies at the heart of the system that they, themselves, promote and defend. But see--such solutions are always transient and require the constant stimulation and reproduction of paranoid mechanisms. Why? Well, because the real reasons that our longings for recognition and safety are continually frustrated are reasons, are causes, that are simply not substantively addressed by the creation of demeaned “others.”**

**Ultimately, I think we have to say this: While the longings that are being satisfied in paranoid ways are, at**

**their heart, healthy, their frustration isn't the fault of the demeaned other, and, thus, a patriotism based on this sort of unconscious logic can't be especially healthy. Ultimately, the frustration of these legitimate needs for security, empathy, and connection is really the result of dysfunctional family systems, the ethos of individualism, the greed of the marketplace, the powerlessness people feel at work, and the violence resulting from discrimination and the deterioration of social safety nets.**

**If this is the real story, then political progressives have a chance, at least, to win hearts and minds, not by erecting an enemy against whom we can all unite, but by appealing to these unmet needs in a healthier way. For example, Progressives could talk about the need for love and empathy in our medical care, in our schools, and even in our government.**

**The psychological needs that drive patriotic fervor are universal. People will always need to be connected and secure. These longings can be gratified in healthy or unhealthy ways. They can be distorted and exploited in the**

**interest of agendas that are immoral, or they can be addressed and gratified in ways that promote the general welfare. Like patriotism itself, the human psyche is intrinsically neither good nor bad.**