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*Best traditions patriotism*  
 A commentary on Miller,  
 Wingo and Ben-Porath

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ABSTRACT

Ben-Porath sees patriotism as involving attachment to fellow citizens as part of a shared fate community. Wingo places shared values at the center of patriotism. Miller argues that political ties to fellow nationals stemming from participation in imposing laws and policies on them will also generate obligations to non-nationals (especially the poor of many other nations). But he sees patriotism as involving a deeper love of one's nation that carries with it epistemic and moral distortions of the actual operations of one's nation, and for this reason rejects patriotism. I propose an alternative conception of patriotism (though consistent with Ben-Porath's and Wingo's) whose content is the 'best traditions' of one's nation (liberty, equality, appropriate separation of powers, for example). This does not require expecting one's nation actually to live up to those traditions at any given time, thus protecting against wish-induced distortions of the historical and contemporary record. Best traditions patriotism would enable teachers to be patriotic without supporting a given current regime, and would support critical thinking and other educationally beneficial goals. Wingo fails to recognize how universal values can be combined with particularistic understandings. Ben-Porath fails to provide strong enough democratic conditions on the nation to support her view that patriotism is generally a virtue.

KEYWORDS *best traditions, national unity, patriotism, shared fate, universality and particularity*

ARE RICHARD MILLER, Ajume Wingo and Sigal Ben-Porath all talking about the same thing when they discuss patriotism? Yes and no. Ben-Porath has perhaps the most fully articulated conception: patriotism is a felt bond with one's compatriots based on a sense of shared fate as fellow citizens dedicated to the

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nation as a shared project. This captures the sense of attachment both to the nation as a corporate entity and also to one's fellow nationals. Both Miller and Wingo might accept this definition – Miller says something like it at one point – but there are some not insignificant differences of emphasis. Wingo sees attachment to specific *values* (democracy, freedom and so on) as central to patriotism and to national identity, at least in the American case. Perhaps values *are* somehow always implicated in the sense of attachment to the nation, but on Ben-Porath's view they do not have to be, and Ben-Porath seems to me right on this point; and even when values *are* present, the sense of commitment to values does not by itself capture the 'shared fate community' element central to patriotism.

MILLER AND ARGUMENTS FOR OBLIGATIONS  
TO NON-NATIONALS

The contrast between Ben-Porath and Miller is particularly instructive. Miller argues that because American political institutions function, in the context of dominant American power, to privilege American interests at the expense of a good deal of the rest of the world, American patriotism is morally objectionable and should be abandoned. What is the basis for this concern for the good of the rest of the world? Miller argues that it can be a consideration that is often used to ground patriotism – our participation in creating laws that are imposed on others. We do this with fellow nationals; but, Miller rightly argues, we also have such political, or political/economic, ties to nationals in other lands, with whom Americans are bound in an ever more globalized world. And because those ties work to the benefit of Americans and the detriment of those others, the 'argument from political ties' in this context should lead to a jettisoning of patriotism, and a sacrifice of American privilege in the interests of the poor of the world.

This may sound a bit like using Ben-Porath's pro-patriotism argument in the service of an argument for jettisoning patriotism. But it isn't. For the kinds of political tie that bind Americans to, say, poor Bangladeshis, are of a very different character than those that bind them to one another. Ben-Porath sees the latter ties as linked to a sense of shared fate in a national project. Merely participating in imposing laws on others (Miller's idea) does not require this sense of shared fate, and the sense of a felt connection as fellow members of a shared fate community is generally absent between the American and the Bangladeshi. There are really two quite different kinds of political bond in the two cases and the one that Ben-Porath foregrounds can not be used directly as an argument for the other.

This is by no means to reject Miller's argument about Americans' politically based obligations to Bangladeshis. His view is quite compelling against the familiar view that we have such obligations but they are based purely on common humanity, not on specific political ties. Miller is quite right to remind us that Americans benefit in all sorts of ways from complex connections, through transnational economic and political practices and institutions, to the poor of other lands; and such ties can be a further, and distinct, source of obligations (beyond those of common humanity) to non-nationals elsewhere. The argument rests on the idea that if our decisions have an impact on others, and we benefit from that impact, then we have some moral responsibility to those others.

Miller eventually rejects the view of patriotism as special obligations founded on political ties. He thinks that it fails to capture the deeper attachment to nation expressed in the idea of *love* for one's country. It is this deeper attachment that generates moral and epistemic deficiencies that he sees as endemic to patriotism: wishful thinking, not seeing – or forgetting – the depredations perpetrated by one's nation on others, and thinking that one's nation's political institutions can be a force for good to a much greater degree than they actually can. Although Miller does not think that love for one's country is absolutely *incompatible* with clear-sightedness about its actual operations in the world, he thinks a much better hope lies in the abandonment of patriotism altogether, at least for Americans, and he cites internationalist movements such as the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization demonstrations as a hopeful sign in this direction.

#### 'BEST TRADITIONS' PATRIOTISM

Yet Miller is worried about the educational implications of this view, since he thinks that teaching anti-patriotism in American public schools will not sit well with most American parents. I think his overpessimistic account of patriotism causes him more education-related difficulties than are necessary, and that a combination of Wingo's value-based view and Ben-Porath's shared fate view can supply a conception of patriotism that would not cause such severe difficulties for teachers. Let me call this alternative view of patriotism the 'best traditions' view. On this view the patriot aligns herself with what she regards as the best traditions of her nation; these are what she sees her nation as 'standing for'. These traditions will be expressed as values, such as the ones Wingo emphasizes – democracy, freedom and so on – and the patriot will be able to point to certain historical, symbolic and institutional forms that express those values. (Here I am drawing on Wingo's excellent treatment of historical

monuments and national symbols and traditions in his book *Veil Politics* (Wingo, 2003.) The best traditions patriot feels a sense of shared fate with her fellow nationals, as in Ben-Porath's conception, and hopes that this national community will be able to live up to its best traditions. Such a conception would, for example, have allowed the patriot to join the anti-war movement in the Vietnam era *as a patriot*, rather than, as Miller implies as the only viable possibility, as an internationalist or cosmopolitan *anti-patriot*. The best traditions patriot could think that the US stands for freedom and human rights, and that the then current policy in Vietnam violated those values. Indeed, it could be argued that, for all its successes, the anti-war movement would have been much more successful if it had been perceived by the American populace as expressing a form of patriotism rather than a rejection of it.

The best traditions view need not claim, as Miller's patriots are required to do, that the traditions with which she identifies are the actual historically and institutionally dominant traditions of her nation. She can recognize quite clearly that these best traditions are a lesser strand in that history. She can recognize, as Rogers Smith documents so powerfully in his book *Civic Ideals* (Smith, 1997), that strong traditions in American history and life are quite *anti-democratic*. She can think, regarding any particular regime of the moment, that it is almost entirely bad and acting contrary to those best traditions. Nevertheless, it is those traditions that provide the content of her sense of shared fate and value with which she identifies her nation, and that provide the content of her love of country. If so, she need not be surprised by, self-denying of, or blind to the bad that her nation engages in; indeed, she may well expect that bad, regretfully, and set herself to act against it as best she can, in the name of what she sees as its better traditions.

This is not to deny the *descriptive* accuracy of Miller's view. I think that most Americans who call themselves patriots do in fact have the epistemic and moral deficiencies that Miller points to. (And there is the further problem that many people think of themselves as 'best traditions' patriots, but the traditions they think are the best are not so.) But he makes a stronger claim, by implication, that there is no conceptually and psychically stable form of patriotism that avoids these pitfalls. It is this claim that seems incorrect to me, for best traditions patriotism is such a possibility.

The best traditions view enables teachers to teach a form of patriotism that avoids, for the most part, Miller's practical worries. (Whether they *should* do so is a question I can not engage in these remarks.) Students can explore which traditions should count as the 'best' ones; indeed, other conceptions of patriotism that have a less strongly critical edge can be presented as well, and this is entirely in line with Miller's suggestion that critical thinking tools for evaluating American conduct be taught.

At the end of his article, Wingo presents a view of American patriotism that he claims avoids jingoism and, he implies more generally, excessive parochialism. That view is presented as an interpretation of what Americans mean when they go in for language that seems to make empirical claims about the unique worth of the US – that it is the last great hope of mankind, that it is uniquely devoted to the values of fair play and equality, freedom and democracy, and so forth. Wingo says that we should not take these claims at face value; their adherents are not really saying that they hold the affirmative belief that, if one compares the historical record of different nations in respect to these values, one will find that the US is more dedicated to them. Before turning to Wingo's interpretation of these kinds of statement let me say that I am not sure that he is correct to say that they are not meant literally. I have the impression, for example from some of my students, that many people genuinely believe in what is often referred to as 'American exceptionalism'. They genuinely believe that the US is uniquely devoted to this or that positive value. I do not think that their holding of this belief is generally very well grounded in evidence that they have gathered, or on sound and warranted authority. But I think they do hold such beliefs nevertheless. This is in line with Miller's view of things – American patriots hold false empirical beliefs about American history and institutions – and contrary to Wingo's.

But whether Wingo is correct in his claim on this score, I think his interpretation of what Americans are saying in making these claims is of independent interest and is consistent with, though not identical to, what I have called the 'best traditions' view. What he is saying is that these statements should be seen as expressions of what Americans value as part of their national identity. That is, they see their investment in democracy, freedom and equality as part of their identity as Americans. Earlier in the article, Wingo provides an interesting and striking way of thinking about that investment as part of a national identity. It is that Americans care about those ideals because of the distinctive historical path the country took to arrive at them, or, as I would gloss this, that the attachment to those values is deeply intertwined with the specifics of American history – with the War of Independence, the Civil War, the Civil Rights movement, and so forth. All this shapes both the way that Americans *understand* the values of freedom, democracy and equality, and so forth, and their *attachment* and *investment* in these values.

I would note that Wingo implies that this account is true only for Americans. He sometimes seems to be trying to show that the American form of patriotism has no parallel for other nations. This particular aspect or form of American

exceptionalism seems to me extremely implausible. Surely France and Nigeria, for example, also have their own historically embedded understandings of values that they also associate with their own national identity, and, indeed, some of those values are the very same ones that Wingo says that Americans hold – freedom and democracy for example, and, in the case of France, *égalité*.

If Wingo is right about the historical embeddedness of understandings of values in national contexts, and I think he may be, this raises some fairly substantial questions for the development of cosmopolitan values and sentiments. It will not be easy to abandon values connected with patriotism, or at least with national identity, and to adopt an entirely new set of internationalist values, because many of those values – equality, justice, democracy – are very connected with one's national identity and some are the very same values understood as part of national identity.

On the other hand, Wingo's account does suggest a different route to cosmopolitanism, or at least to transnational concerns – namely to seek to align the conduct of one's nation with national values that have international significance. In December 2005, the US Congress passed a ban on torture that illustrates this point. The bill forbids the use of torture and degrading treatment of prisoners by American personnel. Its proponents argued for it in part on the grounds that it is contrary to American values to use torture. That is, in my terminology, it is contrary to the best American values to use torture, although in fact the use of torture has become somewhat common practice under the Bush administration.

In his discussion of this historical particularity and embeddedness, Wingo says that Americans care about these values 'not because they are universal ideals', *but* because of the historical particularity. This formulation seems unfortunate to me. Why not say that they care about them *as* universal values *as well as* because of their historical particularity? There is no contradiction between these, a point made in a quote from Michael McConnell that Wingo cites. This seems to me a 'both ... and' rather than an 'either ... or' situation – both as universal values applicable to all and as national values.

Although I see Wingo's value-based and history-sensitive patriotism as a valuable contribution to the patriotism debate, Wingo's actual argument does not seem to me to engage to a significant degree with Miller's cosmopolitan challenge. (This is also true of Ben-Porath, for whom the challenge raised by patriotism is not cosmopolitanism but the validating of internal dissent, openness and democracy.) Wingo shows that patriotic capital can be used for worthy ends, as Frederick Douglass, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln used it against slavery, and Martin Luther King against racial segregation. He is correct to say that these American worthies appealed to universal values in these struggles. However, there is a substantial gap between such an appeal and adopting an

internationalist or cosmopolitan commitment. It is a perfectly familiar feature of some forms of patriotism to hold noble ideals that one applies within one's nation while being little concerned with the realization of such ideals elsewhere.

We should distinguish here between two different understandings of 'universal values'. One is a value whose validity is not regarded as limited to a specific context (e.g. a national one) but as valid generally. The other is a value that is affirmatively applied to all human beings – for example, to persons in countries other than one's own. Wingo's argument applies to the first kind of universality – values held to be valid in all contexts. But the challenge of cosmopolitanism, Miller's challenge, is how to reconcile a particularistic concern with one's fellow nationals with the second form of 'universal values', one applying equally to all persons. I might add that this challenge applies equally to 'best traditions' patriotism. Best traditions patriotism is also couched in terms of universal values in the first sense; but it involves no specific commitment to apply those values beyond national borders.

#### BEN-PORATH AND NATIONAL UNITY IN WARTIME

Let me end with a final, unrelated point about Ben-Porath's argument. A concern unique to her article is the worry that a weakening of patriotism will lead to an insufficient sense of national unity in wartime, and will make one's nation vulnerable to the enemy. In the American context, to the extent that this nation is actually vulnerable to serious attack, there seems little worry that the nation would be capable of uniting in the required defense. Perhaps there are two different things that can be meant by 'wartime': actual attack by a foreign power (including non-state agents such as Al Qaeda) on the nation's soil, and the deployment of the nation's troops in hostilities outside national borders. In the latter sense, the US is 'at war' in Iraq, and in Afghanistan. But the US is not in a wartime situation in the first sense, of being under attack or its national security being genuinely threatened. Ben-Porath's worry about national unity does not seem applicable to the US. But the worry might very well be applicable to Israel, for example. If so, Ben-Porath's discussion here raises important issues that are not dealt with in the patriotism literature with which I am familiar. Yet I wonder what Ben-Porath would make of 'refuseniks' – members of the Israeli Defense forces who refuse to serve on the West Bank, saying that they would die to defend their country, but that they do not regard posting in the West Bank as serving that purpose. Here Israelis themselves are making the distinction about being 'at war' just noted, and drawing a quite consequential moral line between the two meanings.

Perhaps Ben-Porath is not concerned only about national unity when one's nation is actually under attack, but also when its troops are deployed elsewhere.



But then I think she will have to give more weight than she does to a distinction between just and unjust wars. While she is right to be concerned about not shutting down dissenting voices in wartime – a civil liberties concern – it is not clear that national unity in the face of an unjust war is a good in the first place. This points to what I think is an ambiguity or ambivalence in Ben-Porath's article. She is critical of Gutmann and other liberal or democratic patriots for setting a democratic condition on the moral validity of patriotism as national shared fate unity; yet she often recognizes the dangers of non-democratic forms of patriotism (that is, patriotism toward non-democratic national entities). Unless she is willing to bite the bullet and say that patriotism is not a virtue at all unless the polity in question satisfies certain liberal democratic conditions, I am not sure we should follow her to the view that patriotism in general is a virtue.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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