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Fostering Democratic Patriotism through Critical Pedagogy

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Fostering Democratic Patriotism through Critical Pedagogy

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank Gabriel Reich for his helpful feedback on this paper.

Fostering Democratic Patriotism through Critical Pedagogy

Hillary Parkhouse

When I was a high school US history teacher in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City, I sometimes wondered about the relationship between patriotism and critique of one's nation. Specifically, I questioned just how critical students could be without becoming disaffected toward the United States. I tried to be honest with my students about the nation's mixed record of democracy—how the country was founded on ideals of equality and yet stole land from Native Americans, kidnapped millions of Africans as part of a massive system of chattel slavery, and denied the vote to women until 1920. But I wondered if these realities, paired with enduring inequalities, would make students want to dissociate themselves from this country and participation in political life.

I had one student who made me think that perhaps the inverse was true: that the more students understood American failures to promote equality, the more motivated they would be to engage in fighting for it. He was the son of Nigerian immigrants. In ninth grade, he threw ketchup packets at his global history teacher, skipped class, and was regularly suspended. But in 11th grade English class, he read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and became a different student, seemingly overnight. He adopted a serious demeanor, wore a tie to school each day, and became a leader in class discussions. In reading about the injustices that drove Malcolm X to lead a movement for Black civil rights, this student saw a reason not for despair but for pursuing education so that he too could contribute to that movement. From that moment on, I wondered whether it was in fact impossible for schools to develop the type of citizens needed to protect and improve our democracy *unless* students were taught to be critical of the nation's flaws.

Much history instruction in American schools, as in other countries, seeks to unify the populace and instill pride through establishing a collectively shared narrative (Helmsing, 2014). In the case of the United States, the narrative is a story of progress toward ever-expanding equality and liberty for all (VanSledright, 2008). Critique of the nation is often seen as a threat to national unity (Finn, 2003) and thus a threat to the well-being of the country. During times of national crisis, such as in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, this fear of critique becomes amplified (Westheimer, 2011).

A more recent example of such fear is the backlash against National Football League players who kneeled for the national anthem in protest of institutionalized racism. While the players and their supporters argued that those actions were taken precisely to defend the American foundational principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, critics accused the players of disrespecting our flag and troops (Friedersdorf, 2017). When President Trump joined the critics, he legitimized an authoritarian form of patriotism and the repression of critique. With a president who is modeling those positions, we might expect growing support for the belief that critique of the nation undermines its indivisibility and threatens its future. But does it? The answer to this question should shape how we design citizenship education

experiences for our students; to find it, we need to know more about how students' attitudes toward the nation are affected in classrooms where candid critique is common.

To date, there has been little research in this area (Chua & Sim, 2017). This paper draws on a study of critical US history teaching to explore the question: Do students who recognize problems with the narrative of ever-expanding progress feel less patriotic as a result? Westheimer (2011) reminds us that the answer to such a question depends on which type of patriotism—authoritarian or democratic—is meant. Given that authoritarian patriotism is unhealthy for democracy and that democratic patriotism is necessary for it (Westheimer, 2011), this paper specifically explores students' expressions of democratic patriotism.

Using data from student interviews and classroom observations, I argue that critique originating in democratic values not only does *not* erode patriotism, but actually strengthens it. In particular, such critique strengthens the kind of democratic patriotism we in the United States need in our current context of political polarization and authoritarian leadership. In the conclusion, I elaborate on why such critique-informed patriotism is as crucial as ever.

Do We Want Students to Be Patriotic?

This is a question with which I have wrestled, having studied postcolonialism, critical race theory, border pedagogy, and other perspectives that seek to challenge neo- and internal colonialism, entrenched racism, and narrow conceptions of citizenship that have excluded so many living in the United States. While feeling a strong sense of concern for fellow Americans, I have struggled to feel such a connection to the nation-state itself, wondering whether our allegiance might be better oriented toward all human beings, since commitment to one group seemed to confer a different (higher) status on that group than on others. Indeed, patriotism can easily be viewed as opposing multicultural understanding, tolerance, and internationalism (see, for example, Young & Sharifzadeh, 2003).

I have gained some clarity in this struggle through studying the work of the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who has wrestled with the same question. In her essay, "Toward a Globally Sensitive Patriotism," she described her shift away from her earlier endorsement of cosmopolitanism and its prioritizing of responsibility to all humanity over all other obligations. She came to believe that this perspective is in contradiction to people's psychological inclination to prioritize our families and those closest to us and that we should "accept the constraints of some strong duties to humanity, and then ask ourselves how far we are entitled to devote ourselves to the particular people and places whom we love" (Nussbaum, 2008, p. 79). She believed that the largest unit that can possibly represent the interests of individuals, and be accountable to them, is probably the nation. Therefore, on both psychological and pragmatic grounds, patriotism—at least in certain forms—may be justified.

I now find myself largely in agreement with Nussbaum (2008), particularly after having learned more about the strong influence that intuitions have over moral reasoning. Having as much concern for people who live far away as for those who live nearby is noble and worthwhile, but many people whose

moral foundations emphasize group loyalty may view attempts to ignore human “groupishness” with suspicion (Haidt, 2012). The push to replace patriotism with cosmopolitanism may thereby contribute to polarization between those who prioritize caring for people everywhere (who tend to be on the political left) and those who prioritize loyalty to one’s group (who tend to be on the political right) (Haidt, 2012). Polarization within the United States, in fact, is another large contributor to the shift in my own beliefs about patriotism. As increasing polarization threatens American democracy (Duncan & Murnane, 2014), I am realizing, more than ever, the consequences of neglecting national cohesion. Having once renounced allegiance to a country that is so far from achieving its democratic ideals, I now believe some allegiance is necessary for maintaining peace and being able to continue to pursue those ideals.

Defining patriotism.

One perennial problem with debates over patriotism is that people often use very different definitions of it. In “Is Patriotism a Mistake?,” political theorist George Kateb (2000) easily dismissed patriotism as dangerous because he defined it as a readiness “to die and kill for one’s country” (p. 906). This radical form of patriotism is rooted in violence and in a subordination of the well-being of foreigners. However, Nussbaum (2013) frames patriotism around internal cooperation as opposed to external competition, defining it as “a willingness to live together and face adversities for the sake of common goals” (p. 210).

Given the plethora of definitions of patriotism, some scholars have proposed frameworks that can help distinguish its various forms. These include blind vs. constructive patriotism (Schatz, Staub, & Lavine, 1999), loyal vs. critical patriotism (Merry, 2009), and authoritarian vs. democratic patriotism (Westheimer, 2011). There are subtle distinctions among them, but in general blind, loyal, and authoritarian forms of patriotism are characterized by unquestioning allegiance to one’s country and condemnation of any criticism of it, while constructive, critical, and democratic forms of patriotism promote questioning and criticism in the interest of advancing one’s country’s ideals.

Forms of patriotism that encourage questioning have been critiqued for focusing solely on the relationship between citizens and the state, at the expense of considering citizens’ relationships with one another (Peterson, 2012). As Busey and Walker (2017) argued, some of these forms—specifically democratic patriotism—have historically failed to apply to Black people and have “ignored how citizenship is mediated through race” (p. 461). The authors developed a framework of Black critical patriotism that forefronts personhood over liberal democracy and that includes Black physical resistance, Black political thought, and Black intellectualism as its tenets (Busey & Walker, 2017).

Mindful of Busey and Walker’s (2017) critique, I work here cautiously with the construct of democratic patriotism, as I feel it can encompass critique, questioning, and appreciation for the specific democratic values of justice, equity, and freedom as well as a concern for one’s fellow citizens (Westheimer, 2011). From my perspective, this concern does not need to be greater than concern for people in other countries; however, it is perhaps the strongest motivator available for ensuring that one’s own nation upholds values

of justice, equity, and freedom. I believe democratic patriotism can also encompass particular attention to the concerns of disempowered groups as part of an effort to place persons, rather than liberal ideologies, at the core (Busey & Walker, 2017). If we define patriotism in this way, then the answer to the question, “Do we even want students to be patriotic?” seems to me to be a clear “Yes.”

Teaching with and for Critique

If we want students to be patriotic, then how can schools teach democratic patriotism? Kahne and Middaugh’s (2011) survey of 2,366 California high school seniors found both encouraging and troubling patterns in the current levels of democratic patriotism among this group. One encouraging finding was that 69% agreed with the statement, “If you love America, you should notice its problems and work to correct them” (Kahne & Middaugh, 2011, p. 97). However, 43% of respondents agreed with the statement, “It is un-American to criticize this country” (Kahne & Middaugh, 2011, p. 98).

What sorts of schooling experiences might increase the likelihood that students reject such blind patriotism? Critical pedagogy is a form of education that places students’ lives at the center of learning experiences and, through dialogic relations with the teacher, helps students understand systems of power and the root causes of social inequities (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; Freire, 1970/2008; McLaren, 1989). Many social studies scholars have documented critical pedagogies that cultivate students’ critical consciousness of the United States’ mixed record of democracy and equality (Blevins & Salinas, 2012; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Howard, 2004; Parkhouse, 2018). King and Brown (2014) described how Black history can be taught through connections to students’ contemporary realities and the Black Diaspora, as well as through counternarratives to mainstream depictions of periods such as the years of the Civil Rights movement. Stovall (2006) cultivated students’ critical consciousness through analysis of hip-hop lyrics, and Martell (2013) did so through discussions of how conceptions of race have changed over time.

Like these last three studies, most classroom-based research on critical history pedagogy has focused on students’ understandings of racism and racial justice (Epstein & Gist, 2015; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Howard, 2004). I located only one study that explicitly examined the intersections of critical pedagogy and patriotism. Chua and Sim (2017) investigated two teachers in Singapore who encouraged critical patriotism by asking students to identify the groups that are disadvantaged by particular national policies. They also asked students to consider incongruities between messages produced by the government and those created by other groups, in order to avoid “indoctrinating students with shaky truths or painting over problems that plague society” (Chua & Sim, 2017, p. 9). However, the study did not examine students’ responses to this teaching approach or how students’ conceptions of patriotism may have changed as a result of it.

Ms. Ray's¹ Critical Classroom

I will now provide evidence from one classroom to show how critical pedagogy in a US history class may contribute to students' democratic patriotism. In the spring of 2015, Ms. Ray taught 11th-grade US history in a Title I public high school in a midsize city in the Southeast. Demographic information about her school and the class I observed is given in Table 1.

School and Classroom Demographics

Ms. Ray's school	400 students 76% female, 24% male 61% Black, 20% Latinx, 9% White, 6% Asian, 3% other ² 55% of students received their free or reduced-price lunch in 2013
Ms. Ray's fourth period class	28 students 22 females; 6 males 22 Black, 3 Latina, 3 White

I observed Ms. Ray's 90-minute, fourth-period US history class for ten weeks. I also interviewed her twice formally and interviewed her informally after each observation; collected instructional materials; and interviewed seven of her students about their opinions of the United States, patriotism, and citizenship.

A young, White woman with bachelors' degrees in history and women's studies, Ms. Ray prioritizes helping students make sense of the inequities they have experienced related to race, gender, class, sexuality, ability status, immigration status, and language. She loves teaching history because of the opportunities it provides for showing the roots of contemporary social conditions. Even more importantly for her, US history offers countless examples of oppressed peoples fighting for freedom, equality, and justice. So while she speaks candidly with students about contemporary racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, she always pairs these conversations with examples of resistance, in an attempt to instill hope rather than disillusionment or cynicism. She centers her curriculum around these examples in order to convey the message that wherever there is oppression, there is collective struggle against it, and that wherever there is collective struggle for equality and justice, there is a shared commitment to—and hope for—democracy.

Like many history teachers, Ms. Ray teaches about organized resistance when the class studies social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including the women's rights, African American civil rights, Chicano, American Indian, free speech, and Black Power movements. However, she is intentional in surfacing the struggles for equality within every period in US history. For instance, during the unit on World War II, Ms. Ray explains that by threatening to hold a march on Washington, A. Philip Randolph succeeded in convincing Franklin D. Roosevelt to ban wartime employment discrimination; Roosevelt knew that such a march would reveal the United States' hypocrisy in fighting for democracy around the world while denying it to African Americans at home.

¹ All names of participants are pseudonyms.

² Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number

Ms. Ray is careful to emphasize that ordinary people—not just the famous activists mentioned in textbooks—were also involved in those struggles in important ways. The year I observed Ms. Ray’s class, students did a “Civil Rights Mythbusters” activity in which they used primary source documents to dispel common misconceptions about the movement, including that “Although women did help out a little bit behind the scenes, the most effective organizers and leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were men” and “The Civil Rights Movement was an unplanned, spontaneous uprising of exceptional individuals who acted without organization or premeditated strategy.” Students had already learned that the movement did not begin in the 1950s, but had been underway since Africans were first taken as slaves to the Americas. They then learned that Rosa Parks was not simply a woman who was tired of giving in to discrimination when she refused to give up her seat on a bus, but a trained activist working with the NAACP, and that thousands of “ordinary” college and even high school students contributed to the movement’s success.

One important goal of this lesson was to show students how they could personally contribute to social change, even if they did not have the superhuman-like characteristics of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (Woodson, 2016). In sum, Ms. Ray’s two overarching aims were to help students pair a critique of inequalities with the knowledge of the strategies groups have used to reduce those inequalities and for students to see how they can personally play a role in ongoing and future struggles for justice.

When I asked Ms. Ray if she considered herself patriotic, she answered:

Yeah. Definitely. And definitely from that place of critical love. . . And going hand in hand with love for the U.S. is love for what the U.S.—what I hope the U.S. can be. And will be. And what I want it to be. And want to be a part of it becoming. But to me those two things are so interwoven that it’s hard for me to understand people whose definition of patriotism is unconditional loyalty and praise and support for the government, basically regardless of what it’s doing.

Ms. Ray did not discuss patriotism explicitly in any of the 40 lessons I observed, but students were nevertheless forming opinions about the concept and its relationship to history teaching.

Students’ Critical Attitudes toward the Nation and Patriotism

I interviewed seven students from Ms. Ray’s spring 2015 class: one Latina (Kiara), one young White man (William), four African Americans (Sahirah, Melony, Diamond, and Jamilah), and one young woman of Egyptian and Jamaican descent (Amina).² I asked them questions about their attitudes toward the United States, their definitions of patriotism and citizenship, and whether they would describe themselves and their teacher as patriotic.

Overall, students were openly critical of ways in which the United States does not live up to its democratic ideals, but this did not interfere with their appreciation of the freedoms that the United States does protect nor their commitment to the country. When asked whether they thought the United States protects all citizens equally, all seven students answered “no” or “not entirely.” Many students cited the racism that continued to plague the country, despite the election of the first Black US president, which some people have offered as evidence that the United States had become a postracial society (Rich, 2013).

² All names are pseudonyms.

During the school year that I interviewed the students, protests in Ferguson and Baltimore following police killings of unarmed Black youth inspired nationwide protests calling for attention to institutionalized racism. Ms. Ray paused the curriculum to discuss these events, and students made #BlackLivesMatter posters that hung outside the classroom for the remainder of the school year. Several students mentioned Ferguson, Baltimore, the murder of Trayvon Martin, or police brutality in general in their interviews. However, their awareness of this social injustice did not dissuade them from feeling hope for the United States. Melony, for instance, said “there’s just a lot of police brutality” but added that she could imagine herself becoming an activist working to address this problem. She went on to say, “I don’t think it ruins my pride in the U.S. or anything. It just shows the problems that we face every day.”

When asked if they would describe themselves as patriotic, several of the students were unsure of how they wanted to answer, while others said “a little” (Melony) or “slightly” (Diamond). Part of the hesitation appeared to arise from their uncertainty about whether being patriotic implied a belief in authoritarian or blind patriotism, which is a common view. Sahirah, for instance, defined a patriot as “a person that’s willing to do anything for their country.” When I then asked if she would describe herself as patriotic, she did not answer immediately. Then she replied, “Wow! Umm, can I explain why? I think I can explain it.” She went on:

Ok. Don’t get me wrong. I love the U.S. However, I feel like, like . . . it’s one thing to love your country or to like it highly and [another] to be willing to sacrifice your life for it. I’m not saying it’s wrong, like the people that are risking their lives. I completely appreciate them for that. But, I think that—to a certain extent—the country itself doesn’t really protect its people enough for me to want to go out and put myself in a predicament, should I say. And that’s the only reason I say that. Like I said, if police brutality and other things like that—you’re not ensuring my safety here, so what would make you think I would feel safe outside of here? . . . [F]or instance [with] Trayvon Martin and the other situations, I’ve kind of wondered to myself, “Well is the U.S. really capable of protecting me?” Not just me—anyone, you know? . . . It’s just [that] everyone isn’t really protected, honestly. And because of that I wouldn’t want to risk my life for a country that doesn’t really protect me or my family or friends.

In opening with the statement, “I love the U.S.,” she indicates a positive and particularistic feeling toward the country, even though that feeling does not extend to being willing to die for the United States. Her response implied that if the United States guaranteed freedom and justice equally for people of all races, she might even be willing to risk her life to defend it—a definition of patriotism that goes beyond that articulated by proponents of democratic patriotism.

The remainder of Sahirah’s statement is a clear rejection of blind patriotism; she balanced critique with appreciation for the democratic freedoms that are protected. At another point in our interview, she said:

Here we can actually like voice our opinions and get to stand up for what we believe in, versus in other places, [where] you can’t. It’s just what one person thinks that goes [in other countries]. So I think it’s a privilege to just be somewhere where you’re able to speak for yourself.

She later argued that, in the United States where freedom of speech is protected, people have a moral responsibility to take advantage of this liberty and speak out because that privilege is denied to many across the world.

Students' opinions about the impacts of critical teaching on patriotism.

I asked the students how they would describe Ms. Ray's attitudes toward the United States and whether they thought that teaching history so critically might negatively impact students' feelings toward the country. Amina and I had the following conversation:

Amina: I think [Ms. Ray] is proud to live here. I think she's very patriotic, but she does know that just because you love your country doesn't mean—like if you love something, you can say, you know, "that was wrong" or "this was wrong." She's not one of those people that just blindly follows something. Just because you love it doesn't mean it didn't do something wrong in the past. Or won't do something wrong in the future. But I think just because she loves something doesn't mean that she just blindly follows after it. She can stand up and say something's wrong. I think she definitely loves America.

Me: Do you think standing up and saying something is wrong might cause other students to lose patriotism?

Amina: I don't think so, because actually her class makes me love America more. Because people like her are what make America better. Because if there was nobody in America saying segregation is wrong, we would still be segregated. I would be sitting in the back of the bus or different things like that. Because if she teaches her students to, you know, stand up, or if she teaches her students to look at sexist ads and say, "Oh, that's definitely sexist" when they might've just scrolled through the TV before her class, then I think she's making America a better place. And eventually, if someone isn't patriotic, they will begin to love America because there are people saying, "this is wrong" and then, "we're changing it to fix it and make it better."

This response truly surprised me. Amina not only thought that Ms. Ray's critical pedagogy does not undermine students' patriotism; she thought that such teaching actually enhances patriotism. She was clearly working from a democratic-patriotism stance (rather than from an authoritarian-patriotism position), arguing that loving one's country is what motivates people to try to improve it. Here she made a point that has not been deeply explored in the literature on students' understandings of patriotism: critique may in fact inspire patriotism.

This claim makes sense in conjunction with Rubin's (2007) finding that students from marginalized communities already perceive a disjuncture between the idealized narratives of history and citizenship they hear in school and their lived experiences of discrimination and inequality. Thus, they may have initially been skeptical of curriculum that attempts to instill patriotism through a shared pride in the wonderful equality and opportunity supposedly afforded in the United States. However, when these

students were in classrooms that discussed power and privilege frankly, they were more likely to view inequality as a reason to fight for justice than as a reason to despair (Rubin, 2007). Similarly, Levinson's (2012) research suggests that political participation can actually be bolstered among disenfranchised groups—despite their exclusion from many avenues of power—when they perceive that institutions need improvement and that they have the capacity to contribute to that effort.

In sum, students from marginalized groups may be unlikely to demonstrate blind patriotism because their lived realities have exposed them to the shortcomings of US democracy—shortcomings that authoritarian or blind patriots typically deny. However, these students may still appreciate that the degree of freedom of speech and of religion, for instance, guaranteed in the United States is not found in most countries and thus not to be taken for granted. They may be looking for a reason to believe in the nation's potential—to hope that its democratic ideals will one day be achieved—and curriculum that highlights the many groups who have fought for these ideals may provide exactly that. When examples of collective resistance are taught alongside lessons about oppression, students can find reason for critical hope and thus reason for patriotism.

Democratic Critique in a Time of Intensified Blind Patriotism

The years since I observed Ms. Ray's classroom in 2015 have been a trying time for democratic patriotism in the United States. Increasing political polarization in the country is showing no signs of abatement. In fact, the poles appear to be moving farther from one another as partisan news outlets combined with fabricated news stories are essentially creating almost irreconcilable perspectives of the world. One perspective is that the media cannot be trusted because of its liberal bias and that any critique of government actions is therefore just "fake news." Such immediate dismissal of all critique is a dangerous threat to democracy.

Another perspective is that the media is accurately representing a rise in White supremacist movements; government actions that dehumanize transgender people, immigrants, and Muslims, among others; and an abdication of our shared responsibility for caring for the planet. From this perspective, it may be hard to feel democratic patriotism for a country that appears to be flagrantly violating commitments to democracy. Patriotism may even be seen as irrational or indefensible in these contexts. However, as Nussbaum (2013) cautioned:

If people interested in relief of poverty, justice for minorities, democracy, and global justice eschew symbol and rhetoric, fearing all appeals to emotion and imagination as inherently dangerous and irrational, people with less appetizing aims will monopolize these forces, to the detriment of democracy. (p. 256)

Currently, an authoritarian form of patriotism is monopolizing national symbols, just as Nussbaum (2013) warned, and stirring emotions through exploiting fear and appealing to tribalism.

Yet this study shows how critique can inspire the kind of democratic patriotism needed to counterbalance authoritarian forms of patriotism. The students in Ms. Ray's class demonstrated that awareness of institutionalized racism and other barriers to equality not only fails to produce disillusionment or despair among students but has the opposite effect: the more students learned about ongoing struggles for justice, the more they felt personally motivated to join those struggles.

I do not know how the shift in the presidency from Obama to Trump or the amplification of political discord has impacted Ms. Ray's students in the years since I interviewed them. Given their democratic patriotism, I imagine they support protests for racial justice, including kneeling during the national anthem, and I imagine they are frustrated with the number of people who continue to view such protests as antipatriotic and un-American. However, there is evidence that disapproval of the current state of affairs is motivating greater political engagement (Sydell, 2017). Therefore, the trends that are most disturbing may be the very trends that motivate youth to put their democratic commitments to work and become more actively involved. This past spring's March for Our Lives for tighter gun control demonstrates the power of youth when they recognize a problem in current policy and use their democratic right to protest as a means of addressing that problem.

Conclusion

Critique of the United States, without a commitment to the nation and its ideals, can lead to cynicism and disempowerment. Commitment to the United States, without critique, is an acceptance of current inequalities and thus an abandonment of those ideals. Teachers, then, must attend simultaneously to two aims of citizenship education: appreciation for the democratic values of equality, justice, and freedom, and critical analysis of the nation's past and present shortcomings in fully enacting those values. Teachers must also help students see how their participation in addressing these shortcomings is needed. Today's youth are inheriting a country that appears to be tearing apart. Their ability to repair these fissures will depend upon their patriotic commitment both to democratic ideals and to working with compatriots who have diverse ideologies—something their adult counterparts are showing an inability or unwillingness to do. The task of suppressing our political tribalism and human tendency to confirm our own biases is not an easy one. But if students prioritize commitment to a more just nation through honest assessment of its shortcomings (including the current growing political discord), they may be able to reverse the damage this discord is inflicting and put the nation on a course toward greater equality and justice.

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