

Patriotism: A Love Story

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Abstract:

In this article, the author offers a critical examination of the concept of patriotism from the perspective of the college experience. Drawing on examples from popular culture and current campus events, the essay advances the belief that organizational critique and social activism should be embraced as strong examples of patriotism and commitment whether on campus, in a company, or in society at large. The development of conscious, critical thinkers and committed moral agents of change is an important goal of the higher education institution.

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Patriotism: A Love Story

I recently rented the film by Michael Moore (2009), "Capitalism: A Love Story." What I most love about Moore is his consistent show of patriotism for our country. Yes, I said patriotism. He consistently does the difficult work of loving our country enough to criticize it in hopes of making it better. His films consistently touch on the need for everyday people to exercise their democratic rights. As a college professor, I am constantly working to energize this generation of young adults to engage the principles of active citizenship. And so, I could not help but to think about college students as I watched. The movie brought up memories of student protest from this time last year. Fall 2009, like many fall semesters was filled with the energy of the start of a new school year--energy fueled by expectation. I am referring to the expectation for schools, universities, and communities to live their values. In my local area, college students at Howard University and brave youth from area high schools in Maryland were all demanding change. Having worked in the past on the other side of campus, within administration, I know how easy it is for administrators to see these students as agitators...to see protest as a problem. It is actually a solution...a wake-up call. And I'd argue that those students that dare to protest are showing more school spirit than those that simply attend every football game, wear paraphernalia, and yell their love for their school with all of their might.

In a broad sense, I am concerned that our country raises citizens that are not taught how to be critical thinkers—to question, to learn, to criticize the status quo. As a citizen, I love my country like a mother loves a child. You love your child so much that you don't want to see her do wrong and so you discipline and correct every wrong turn. We correct our children out of love. So why don't we see people that take that same approach towards their country, on their campus, or in their high school as being true patriots? Instead, we define patriotism through kind and pleasant words rather than strong and bold action. In a broad sense, we groom students to play a very docile, silent, and inactive role in school. Good students are ones that do not "talk too much" or "act out." And in recent years, Zero Tolerance policies have shown that there are potentially long and hard consequences for those students that are labeled a "troubled" (Echols, 2010). All students with a challenging spirit and an inquisitive nature may find conflict with the social rules of conformity present in education. But, African American male students have particularly felt the weight of educational cultural norms that privilege silence, obedience, and system agreement. In his article, "The Trouble with Black Boys: The Role and Influence of Environmental and Cultural Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males," Pedro Noguera (2002) offers the following situation as an example of how schools often push students to conform:

A recent experience at a high school in the Bay Area illustrates how the interplay of these two socializing forces - peer groups and school sorting practices - can play out for individual students. I was approached by a Black

male student who needed assistance with a paper on Huckleberry Finn that he was writing for his 11th grade English class. After reading what he had written, I asked why he had not discussed the plight of Jim, the runaway slave who is one of the central characters of the novel. The student informed me that his teacher had instructed the class to focus on the plot and not to get into issues about race, since according to the teacher, that was not the main point of the story. He explained that two students in the class, both Black males, had objected to the use of the word "nigger" throughout the novel and had been told by the teacher that if they insisted on making it an issue they would have to leave the course. Both of these students opted to leave the course even though it meant they would have to take another course that did not meet the college preparatory requirements. The student I was helping explained that since he needed the class he would just "tell the teacher what he wanted to hear (<http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/er/pntroub1.html>).

Though not the sole cause of attrition, this tendency to punish students that challenge classroom practices and to reward silence and conformity is just one of the many issues that contribute to the alarming drop out and suspension rates of young black men. The negative relationship between black males and school systems is an issue that has been steadily growing over the last 20 years. In Garibaldi's (1992) study of the New Orleans public school system, he found that although Black male youth only represented 43% of the educational community, they accounted for 58% of the non-promotions, 65% of the suspensions, 80% of the expulsions, and 45% of the dropouts. In 2010, The Schott Foundation published, *Yes We Can, The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males*, revealing a national graduate rate of only 47% for African American male high school students. The following is shared in the report's conclusion:

The American educational system is systemically failing Black males. Out of the 48 states reporting, Black males are the least likely to graduate from high school in 33 states, Black and Latino males are tied for the least likely in four states, with Latino males being the least likely in an additional four states. To add insult to injury, Black male students are punished more severely for similar infractions than their White peers...They are more frequently inappropriately removed from the general education classroom due to misclassifications by the Special Education policies and practices of schools and districts (p.37).

Race, class, and cultural differences undoubtedly play a role in this dissonance between student and school. But these factors do not excuse bad behavior. Race and problems with the culture of schools do not erase the reality that boys are often socialized to be aggressive and external environments repeatedly fail to correct wrong doing. Shaun Harper, Frank Harris, & Kenechukwu Mmeje (2005) brought attention to this by offering forth a theoretical model to explain the overrepresentation of college men among campus judicial offenders. In the article, they note the many factors that build bad behavior in some young men:

According to Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) and Head (1999), parents and

teachers are more forgiving of behavioral problems among boys and accept the fact that “boys will be boys.” Similarly, Harper (2004) asserts that parents “communicate messages of power, toughness, and competitiveness to their young sons. No father wants his son to grow up being a ‘pussy,’ ‘sissy,’ ‘punk,’ or ‘softy’—terms commonly associated with boys and men who fail to live up to the traditional standards of masculinity” (p. 92). Gilbert and Gilbert also found that interests in combat, wrestling, and active play interferes with male students’ abilities to concentrate in school and take their teachers (who are mostly female) seriously, which often results in classroom disruptions. Interestingly, boys are over four times more likely than girls in K-12 schools to be referred to the principal’s office for disciplinary infractions, suspended, or subjected to corporal punishment (Gregory, 1996; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Despite this, boys are still socialized to believe that they are to be rough, tough, and rugged, even if it means getting into trouble at school (Mac an Ghail, 1996).

Lets be clear, some black men whether in high school or college do “act out.” And as explained in the quote above, seeds of bad behavior often take root outside of the school system. However, later in the article, the authors argue for educational institutions to transform their approach to judicial affairs even when it comes to those students that are guilty of doing wrong. A move from a stiff and procedural judicial process to a more developmental and educational process is suggested (Harper, Harris, & Mmeje, 2005). This recommendation holds strong merit. Even the truly disruptive student needs to be shown a new path. Changing the spirit and tone of school judicial policy and classroom culture could hold potential benefit for everyone involved. Though many students exhibit negative, disrespectful, and disruptive behavior in school, we know that all black boys that are suspended have not “acted out” and all young black men that find themselves permanently outside of the school system are not there because of their lack of skill, bad neighborhoods, uncaring parents, and disruptive behavior. Somewhere in the mix is a failed agreement between the student and school about what constitutes being a “good” student. I know this because I often experience it as a professional of color.

Beyond educator/student interactions, my personal experience in higher education has been one in which even co-workers that proclaim to advocate for social justice education often interpret criticism as confrontation and aggression. Colleagues often paint as a villain the co-worker that is willing to stand up and stand out--to point out the critical problems within the institution, department, or academic program. Rather than recognizing the deep commitment and love that it takes to challenge in an effort to change, colleagues often would rather not deal with the “problem colleague.” And so this is an issue of defining active citizenship within all of the spaces that we occupy...our country, our companies, and our communities. We must begin to appreciate those students that whisper, speak, or scream for educational change. Isn’t there broad agreement that educational reform is needed in this country? So, why does it become problematic when a single student demands this reform on their campus or in their high school classroom? Whether they are

asking us to change our policies on campus hate crimes, to amend student registration procedures, or to widen the lens of our course content, students are demonstrating an outward show of activism. This is indeed how “acting out” should look.

I just recently moved to the DC area. I came from Penn State University where I served as the director of a cultural center named after Paul Robeson, another great activist in history who was persecuted for challenging the politics of the day. Though many people today applaud Paul Robeson as one of the greatest global humanitarians of his time, when he was alive this country applied its full weight to crush him because of his outspoken work and criticism against segregation, lynching, and global oppression in Africa. Attacked as a communist because of his open sympathy for the struggles against oppression of all people, he was eventually called before the House Un-American Committee. At his hearing, Paul Robeson made history as the only person to directly challenge the committee. When asked at the hearing why he didn't just leave the United States and become an ex-patriot, he said boldly and unapologetically:

"My father was a slave and my people died to build this country, and I'm going to stay right here and have a part of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people will drive me from it. Is that clear...you are the non-patriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves (<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440>)."

And of course there is also Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose model of leadership is often praised as being inclusive, peaceful, and accepting. Because of this, his work is relevant to this discussion. Contrary to popular understanding, Dr. King was not the type of man to silently accept the status quo or to engage in uncritical dialogue about his country. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King spoke frankly about the necessity for critical thought and social tension to create social change. He challenged the citizens of our country to become active agents for social justice rather than passive moderates that sustain, through their inaction, the status quo. Making any entity better, whether it is a school, a company, or a country is not achieved through rhetoric that makes us *feel* good, but rather through action and calls to action that inspire us to *do* good. Here is what King (1990) had to say:

"But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth...I have been gravely disappointed with the...moderate...who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice (p.291)."

My hope is that we begin to view patriotism as not being exercised through simplistic statements of blind love and praise or mild mannered actions, but instead through a dedication to doing the hard, challenging, and almost parental work of

rearing and growing, guiding and developing those organizations and institutions that we love. I do believe that the ethic behind being free and open to critically challenge one's country, college, or employer in an effort to make it better and more accountable is something to be encouraged because it illustrates authentic love. We did not give birth to the country we live in, the colleges we attend, or the companies for whom we work, but we have adopted the responsibility to continue to raise each of them (to a higher level). And like any good parent, we must be actively present, engaged, and vocal through every step they take.

Notes

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