HEROES, PATRIOTIC EDUCATION, AND THE SHADOWS OF HISTORY

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The idea that children need to be exposed to stories of patriotic heroes has again surfaced in recent legislative activity surrounding education. Often, this impulse aligns with a conservative, moralizing vision of teaching history: the flaws of past historical figures should be minimized for the purposes of national pride and traditional virtues. When nations have experienced moral catastrophe, however, this impulse runs counter to the need to teach for historical truth. In this paper, I examine the link between heroes, historical truth, and patriotic education. For initial inspiration, I turn to a vision of patriotic heroism suggested by writer and historian Anne Applebaum in her analysis of Soviet oppression. After examining both the value of patriotism and the contested role of national heroes in constructing patriotism, I conclude that certain forms of patriotism can make a positive contribution to civic identity and that identification with national heroes will be an unavoidable feature of such an identity. Furthermore, Applebaum's emphasis on "heroes of resistance" allows us to balance the need for such heroes with the need to teach for historical truth.

HEROES OF RESISTANCE

When one thinks of the moral catastrophes of the last century, examples come flooding easily to mind: Auschwitz and the horrors of Nazi Germany, the Killing Fields under Pol Pot, the Great Leap Forward under Mao, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and so forth. Among the most gruesome are the terrors perpetuated under the Soviet regime, particularly under Stalin: The Red Terror, the Holodomor, mass deportations and executions, and, of course, the Gulag—all of which together have been estimated to have killed between 10-20 million people. The Gulag was not a system of death camps, like the world witnessed in Nazi Germany. It was instead a network of work camps of mindboggling brutality. These camps directly killed about three million people, and indirectly lead to the death and suffering of countless more. Anne Applebaum's Pulitzer Prize willing book, *Gulag: A History*, catalogues a tiny fraction of the tragic stories from the Gulag.

In one of the last chapters of the book, Applebaum turns to the subject of historical memory. She notes that there is little desire to contemplate the Gulag in contemporary Russia and little effort to record or remember the events that transpired there. There are very few monuments or museums. There have been no trials, even for the most notorious participants. There have been no truth and reconciliation commissions, no government inquiries, no hearings, and no apologies. There has been, in short, no attempt to remember the Gulag.

Applebaum argues that the consequences of this hole in collective memory have been destructive to Russia as well as its neighboring countries.

Perhaps most interesting from the perspective of education, there has also been a forgetfulness of what could be potential national heroes. These are the heroes of resistance, those that fought back against injustice. Applebaum writes:

> The incredibly rich body of Russian survivors' literature—tales of people whose humanity triumphed over the horrifying conditions of the Soviet concentration camps—should be better read, better known, more frequently quoted. If schoolchildren knew these heroes and their stories better, they would find something to be proud of even in Russia's Soviet past, aside from imperial and military triumphs.[1]

Some examples of such heroes Applebaum cites are those who opposed Stalin (students like Susanna Pechora, Victor Bulgakov and Anatoly Zhigulin), those who led camp rebellions, and other dissidents (Sakharov and Orlov) imprisoned by the later Soviet regime. The heroism of such people is largely lost to the footnotes of historical monographs. They play no role in Russian education or in the construction of Russian identity. Applebaum argues that this leaves the Russian civic identity impoverished and constricted. Ignoring the dark, in effect, makes it impossible to see the light. The lack of such engagement might explain what some have claimed to be a Russian "loyal passivity" in the face of oppression and injustice, or the large-scale depoliticization of its citizens.[2]

Such insights from abroad should lead us to consider national identities in the U.S. historical context. After all, the US has had its own share of moral darkness, and it is a history that the American public has not fully reckoned with. Even modest attempts to expose students to the problematic side of American history have recently come under fire. The recent movement to outlaw "divisive concepts" is partly aimed at preventing the teaching of America's racist past. Missouri Senator Josh Hawley, for example, in his proposed "Love America Act," argues for effectively banning critical history. In supporting this federal legislation, he writes:

> We cannot afford for our children to lose faith in the noble ideals this country was founded on. We have to make sure that our children understand what makes this country great, the ideals of hope and promise our Founding Fathers fought for, and the love of country that unites us all.[3]

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[1] Anne Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2003), 573.

[2] Sarah Jones, "'Russia Is Completely Depoliticized:' A Sociologist from Moscow Explains how the Nation Learned to Deny Reality," *New York Magazine* (April 7, 2022): https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/04/sociologist-greg-yudin-how-russia-learned-to-deny-reality.html.

[3] Jessica Chasmar and Andrew Murray, "Sen. Hawley introduces anti-CRT Love America Act to teach patriotism in schools," FOX News (July 26, 2021): https://www.foxnews.com/politics/sen-hawley-introduces-love-america-act?cmpid=fb_fnc.

According to this position, national unity demands a sanitized history. The necessary feelings of national attachment, the love of country, and the proper admiration for the Founding Fathers, cannot survive sustained critical examination. Thus, that examination needs to be curtained through force of law. Under this legislation, schools using texts or lesson plans that deal with white supremacy, racism, and Critical Race Theory would be prevented from receiving federal funds. According to this view, we need to choose between critical approaches to history and patriotic attachment.

PATRIOTISM AND CIVIC IDENTITY

This contemporary conservative position assumes that patriotism is desirable, and it links these feelings to a proper regard for national heroes. Each premise here is contested. To be exact, the specific points of controversy are over (1) the desirability of patriotic sentiment in civic life, (2) the link between historical truth and patriotic sentiments, and (3) the relationship between civic identity and national heroes. The conservative position, echoed by Senator Hawley, elevates patriotism (defined in terms of loving one's country) as the primary goal of history education. The centrality of developing patriotism then drives the educational agenda and, accordingly, education becomes less concerned about unveiling the darker truths of history. A proper stance toward traditional national heroes is part of what it means to develop the proper patriotic sentiments. Respecting heroes, for people like Hawley, serves as a sort of test of patriotism. For others, the narratives surrounding such heroes provide a pattern for civic action (think of the famous myth of a young George Washington admitting to chopping down the cherry tree and how this was used to exemplify the value of honesty).

The contemporary conservative position, while perhaps distasteful to many, is somewhat mirrored in political philosophy by liberal theorists like William Galston. Galston writes:

> Rigorous historical research will almost certainly vindicate complex "revisionist" accounts of key figures in American history. Civic education requires a nobler, moralizing history: a pantheon of heroes who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worthy object of emulation. It is unrealistic to believe that more than a few adult citizens of liberal societies will ever move beyond the kind of civic commitment engendered by such a philosophy.[4]

The critical search for truth, for Galston, is simply not necessary and can even be counterproductive when it comes to the basic civic education of most citizens. What citizens need is an emotional impetus to do their basic civic duties, and patriotism is that driving emotion. Heroes are an important part of this emotional motivation, and they constitute a pattern for the civic engagement. Constructing

[4] William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 244.

this pantheon of heroes trumps historical truth or revisionist complexity. A "Socratic" education based in critical inquiry will find multiple flaws with these national heroes, diminishing their ability to motivate and model proper political action.

On the other side of the debate are those who reject the desirability of patriotism in civic life. Harry Brighouse finds little moral justification for patriotism. He defines a patriot as a person who "feels a special sense of identification with his compatriots" and who may also feel a special moral obligation to them.[5] Brighouse finds that carving out a special moral status for those who happen to live in the same political boundaries, and perhaps placing them above others, is morally unjustified. He also finds that, while patriotism may indeed foster solidarity and acts of good citizenship, it also causes, or at least has been historically associated with, serious social problems like racism, xenophobia, and censorship. While arguing that these downsides provide schools with little positive justification for teaching patriotism, he also warns of certain dangers associated with patriotic education. Any feelings of patriotic attachment that have been engineered and manufactured in schools, rather than flowing from students' own conclusions, will necessarily be illegitimate. He argues that an education aimed at constructing patriotism will always be tempted to willfully misrepresent history, distorting the academic subject matter. The patriotic project will necessarily shy away from certain historical facts (for example, that Woodrow Wilson was a committed racist) and misrepresent historical causation (the power of slaveholders in shaping fundamental documents like the Constitution). Contra Galston, Brighouse thinks we should value historical truth in schools more than forming sentimental national attachment. Brighouse does not specifically address projects of national heroification, but he would likely be skeptical of the whole idea based on his rejection of the larger patriotic project. One wonders, though, whether Brighouse's definition of patriotism is overly constricted. Might other forms of patriotism fare better?

Martha Nussbaum, moving away from her previous position against patriotic education, argues that there is a form of patriotic education that is compatible with justice. The love generated by specific national attachments, when harnessed appropriately, beats the "watery motivations" that are based on abstract principles of justice.[6] The form of patriotism she endorses is one that "repudiates orthodoxy and coercive pressure and celebrates liberties of speech and conscience."[7] Nussbaum has several suggestions for how to teach patriotism in schools. She mentions starting with a love of country since children must "first care about the nation and its history" to be "good dissenters in or critics of a nation."[8] At the same time, they must be taught a "love of historical truth, and of

[5] Harry Brighouse, *On Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 101.
[6] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Teaching Patriotism: Love and Critical Freedom," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 79, no. 1 (2012): 231-232.
[7] Nussbaum, "Teaching Patriotism," 230.
[8] Nussbaum, 245.

the nation as it really is."[9] She criticizes those who fear that national love will be undermined by historical truth: "But really, what they are saying is that the human heart can't stand reality, that lovers can't stand the real bodies of those they love."[10] While poetic, I think this statement is far too glib. National darkness is not the same as a crooked nose or love handles. There are centuries of oppression to contend with, including mass murder and all manner of inflicted misery, hypocrisy, and heartbreak. A clearer statement is needed for how love of country can coexist with historical tragedy than what Nussbaum offers.

Eamon Callan adds some nuance here. First, he defends the need for patriotic sentiments. We must recognize, Callan says, the "historically embedded patterns of political thought" and reject the idea that abstract principles of justice are sufficient motivation for many citizens.[11] There might be abstract reasons for civic actions, but it takes more than good reasons alone to make most people care about justice. Most people do not undertake political risks for abstract reasons alone; rather, they do so because those reasons have come to deeply resonate on an emotional level. This resonance, Callan says, comes from how the principles of justice connect to our own life stories and traditions. The example Callan uses here, namely, a nineteenth-century abolitionist, Theodore Parker, being inspired by his revolutionary forebearers, indicates that he partly has in mind the power of civic role models and the inspiration that can be taken from heroes of the past. An overly critical approach destroys the motivational power of civic exemplars—their flaws are exposed and their hypocrisies revealed. At the same time, Callan criticizes Galston's type of patriotic education that is overly sentimental and ignores historical truth in elevating its pantheon. Such an education impairs civic self-knowledge and constricts the political imagination as citizens ignore places where their nation—and their heroes—could have been better.

This facing-up to historical truth, however, seems to leave little room for national heroes when national histories are crowded with injustice. In response to this worry, Callan argues that we can have a patriotic history education without "bad faith"—without, in other words, ignoring the truths of history. The first key is to focus on patriotism as concern for the wellbeing of a community (rather than, say, the glorification of a state).[12] The second is that we should possess a certain emotional generosity to the past, allowing human beings to be flawed.[13] The third is that citizens may focus on "what is best" in a community, and its heroes, rather than on what is dominant.[14] This all seems

[9] Nussbaum, "Teaching Patriotism," 248.
[10] Nussbaum, 249
[11] Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 116.
[12] Eamon Callan, "Patriotism Without Bad Faith," *Philosophy of Education* (2011): 1-8. https://educationjournal.web.illinois.edu/archive/index.php/pes/article/view/3243.pdf.
[13] Callan, *Creating Citizens*, 115.
[14] Callan, 119.

wise. Yet, at the same time, like Nussbaum, Callan does not seem to realize that there comes a point where emotional generosity and historical imagination, and focusing on what is best about something or somebody, seems like a rather desperate and unconvincing project in the face of deeply flawed historical personalities. There may have been good qualities to Woodrow Wilson, someone who was once deemed a sort of national hero, and we can certainly allow for some degree of human frailties, but a man so consumed in racial animosity and hypocritical violence cannot be salvaged no matter the benefit to civic motivation. Different heroes are needed altogether.

FUNCTIONS OF CIVIC EXEMPLARS

Nussbaum, Callan, and Galston are correct in finding a place for patriotism in civic life, and they all recognize a need for civic role models to provide motivation. If anything, they probably underrate the importance. Indeed, such exemplars seem to play an inescapable role in human thought and action, and we could not escape their influence even if that was our inclination.[15] Looking at the basic biology of the brain, for example, it appears that it is geared toward imitation. This is shown on the basic neuronal level with the discovery of what have been called "mirror neurons," neurons that fire both when viewing an action performed by another and when we ourselves do the same action.[16] The human mind is highly responsive to the actions of others. When we see or contemplate other people doing something, we seem to simulate ourselves doing the action at the same time. This seems to "grease" the neural pathways and facilitate both human empathy and imitation of the action on the part of the observer. While the link between observation and action is not completely understood, it at least seems sensible to surround students with images and stories of people promoting the civic good.

Presenting students with examples of human action does several things. As Callan suggests, examples personalize certain abstract principles and draw people into a common story. In some doing, these exemplars seem to say, "This is who we are," and they invite students to be part of a larger, ongoing story. Exemplars also provide a motivating function by making certain actions appear as real possibilities. Human exemplars in this sense serve as a proof of concept: if someone else can act in such a way, then so can I. This is even more important when diverse identities are at play and the match between the example and observer becomes acute: if someone *like me* can act in this way, then so can I. Stories of exemplary actions need to go beyond white, male, canonical heroes. A diverse set of heroes can expand the vision of possibilities.

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[15] For a fuller discussion of the topics of imitation and exemplarity in education see Bryan R. Warnick, *Imitation and Education: A Philosophical Inquiry into Learning by Example* (Ithaca, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

[16] Jonah Lerher, "The Mirror Neuron Revolution: Explaining What Makes Humans Social: Interview with *Marco Iacoboni*," *Scientific American* (2008): https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-mirror-neuron-revolut/.

Examples not only show that action is possible, but they also provide specific patterns for action. They show people what to do, given the story that they are participating in. They show how various civic virtues—bravery, honesty, responsiveness, compassion, empathy—can be enacted in the face of real-world problems. They also show what sorts of problems need to be addressed and how to maneuver in the face of opposition. Students might learn to express civic virtues through, for example, consistent voting, through whistleblowing an injustice, or through sustained acts of civil disobedience. Civic heroes can promote positive patterns of action.

One of the fairly hidden national exemplars that comes to mind here is Charles Hamilton Houston, Dean of Howard Law School and first special counsel to the NAACP.[17] Houston was the primary intellectual force behind the legal strategy that eventually overthrew *Plessy v. Ferguson* and ended legalized segregation of public services. He pushed the doctrine of "separate but equal," formalized in *Plessy*, to its breaking point, showing in courts how separate but equal could never actually be obtained. Educational institutions, schools and universities, became the primary vehicle he used to demonstrate this point, building a series of legal precedents that led to the *Brown* decision in 1954. Houston's dogged determination and work ethic in the cause of justice is notable among those that know his story—he literally worked himself to death seeking equality, refusing to slow down in the face of health problems. Now, however, his story is not widely known, even though his life exemplifies determined work to overcome injustice. Examples like this can serve as models for imitation.

Finally, exemplification and imitation play important roles in the formation of communities of action. Imitative action draws people closer to each other—this happens even early in life, as parents and infants build relationships by imitating facial expressions and noises. Imitative community-building continues into adolescence and adulthood, as people build communities by following trends and fashions. Social psychologists have found that imitative actions increase people's positive regard for each other—indeed, servers in restaurants who "imitate" their customers received higher tips.[18] To be sure, the communities that such imitative behavior creates can be conservative and civically destructive, for example, by forming mobs that enforce oppressive structures. But they have also been essential to mass movements working for social change. Imitative behavior can be seen across the political spectrum, from collectively wearing Che Guevara T-shirts to using slogans exalting perceived heroic behavior ("Nevertheless, she persisted"). Whether on the level of a small group of activists, or at the level of multi-generational national culture, the formation of communities is an essential part of collective action. Identifying

[17] Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
[18] Rick B van Baaren, Rob W Holland, Bregje Steenaert, and Ad van Knippenberg, "Mimicry for Money: Behavioral Consequences of Imitation," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 39, no. 4 (2003): 393–98.

with heroes and imitating their actions can help individuals feel connected to each other. For all of these reasons, it is important, as Applebaum suggests, that we get these heroes right.

CIVIC EXEMPLARS AND THE DARK TRUTHS OF HISTORY

There were, I suggested, at least three areas of contestation when it comes to heroes and history: (1) the desirability of patriotism, (2) the link between historical truth and patriotism, and (3) the relationship between patriotism and national heroes. Some, like Brighouse, deny the desirability of patriotism. Others, like Galston, affirm patriotism, but deny that it must be compatible with historical truth. Nussbaum and Callan, in contrast, suggest that patriotism (understood correctly) is a significant and desirable moral emotion while also affirming that it must be compatible with historical truth and free from bad faith. Personal identification with the past plays a part of energizing abstract principles of justice and motivating civic action. For both Callan and Nussbaum, identification with heroes is a part of this process, and they both suggest that national identity would be impoverished without them. In addition, I have provided further reasons to support the idea that exemplars play an important part in human action and identity formation. This all aligns with Applebaum's critique of Russian national forgetfulness.

Nussbaum and Callan, however, both offer accounts of history and heroism that sometimes involve looking past grave imperfections in search of national identification. Nussbaum talks of loving through the imperfections, while Callan encourages a historical imagination, generosity, and focusing on "what is best." It is true, of course, that asking for moral perfection will end in disappointment. But within the context of national moral catastrophe, these attempts to look past moral failure can be unconvincing. The context of moral darkness and the stench of hypocrisy undermines their psychological power to inform and inspire. Rather than exercising an unconvincing historical generosity, then, there exists a need to continually find new civic heroes.

Where are we to find such exemplars in light of a critical history, which will necessarily uncover failure and hypocrisy? Can an honest, critical approach to history leave us with appropriate national heroes, or will we be left with a pantheon of selfish, hypocritical, moral cowards rather than worthy objects of emulation? This is where Applebaum's idea becomes particularly helpful: While an honest investigation of the Gulag, she argues, will certainly uncover a great deal of national darkness, it will also uncover stories of those who resisted. These stories can form the basis of a national pride and identification that is compatible with justice. Let us consider the premises of this argument more closely.

1. *Under conditions of national moral catastrophe, there will be people who resist*. This premise is not a logical truth, to be sure: one can imagine situations of great injustice that evoke no moral resistance. Still, as a psychological or sociological generalization, it seems that resistance will regularly accompany the use of abusive power. Indeed, such resistance has accompanied all historical instances of national moral catastrophe that I am aware of.

2. *A critical history will by its nature uncover these stories, bringing them to national consciousness.* This is true. Any complete accounting of a moral catastrophe will document the resistance to that catastrophe, describing that resistance, listing who participated, recording what was done and what the outcome was. Leaving out such stories would make the history incomplete. A complete accounting of the darkness is necessary for the true heroic nature of the action to be appreciated. In this sense, only a truly critical history can show citizens at their best.
3. *These stories will, in general, contain laudable accounts of civic action.* This is true, but complex. Resistance to oppression is, as a general category, a laudable civic action. It reveals civic courage, concern for others, and a concern for justice. There is much to be taken from such examples, and individuals can take pride in being part of a national story that displays such virtues. There are times when such resistance itself may overstep moral boundaries, however, making the heroic identification much more complicated. Often, but not always, that line is lethal violence, particularly when perpetuated against civilians. The Irish Republicans who bombed civilian targets during the "The Troubles" of Northern Ireland overstepped such boundaries, even while having legitimate complaints against British rule.
4. *Therefore, these stories can provide the basis for national heroes even within a context of national moral catastrophe.* Assuming there was a resistance to the oppression, then, and that the resistance was itself within certain moral norms, this seems like a sound argument, and it suggests a potential productive avenue for a history education that is both patriotic and critical.

This type of heroification aligns with Nussbaum's view of heroes as dissenters. It also fits nicely within Callan's framework for an appropriate patriotism and avoids Brighouse's criticism. That is, these actions are specific and focused—resisting the moral evil of political oppression—and are therefore centered on promoting the community good. This is not a matter of moral prioritization, of putting one's national community *above* others, as Brighouse would worry about; it is about resisting evil without one's own community. The historical inquiry is not being sanitized for the sake of civic projects; rather, the honest and critical approach to history is itself generating the objects of appropriate civic attachment. Academic truth is not sacrificed for patriotic ends. And none of this requires that the exemplars are perfect, only that their specific actions to resist oppression are worthy of national pride.

Talking about it in this way, the educational focus seems to be on the heroic *action* as the example to follow rather than the example of heroic *person*. In that sense, it may be deflating to the notion of national heroes, who are embodied examples of a nation's best. Indeed, it is true that the actions of

resistance are probably the appropriate point of emphasis. At the same time, no human action is unconnected from the person who acts. For students to learn the appropriate civic lesson requires some sense of the person doing the heroic action. For example, it seems helpful for students to know that many of the people who resisted oppression were not larger-than-life superheroes, but ordinary, imperfect folks, going about their daily lives. The civic lesson that "resisting oppression is *my* job" is inseparable from the larger life-stories taken as whole. For this reason, the focus should not simply be on actions, but actions within larger narratives: stories not only of the action, but of who acted and why.

Putting it all together, it seems that these types of civic heroes, the heroes of resistance that Applebaum describes, can play a positive role in civic life. Recall the functions of civic exemplars I previously outlined. These stories allow educators to put something in front of students that is both honest and uplifting, being responsive to the inner human impulse to imitate. These stories give students worthy objects of national pride, which often revolve around ordinary people who resisted oppression, thus saying to them, "You too can do this." Because these civic heroes are resisting injustice, they set a pattern for civic work. The invite students to resist injustice and show civic virtues of courage, honesty, compassion, and so forth. They also invite students into traditions and communities of action, connecting them with people they can work with to create a more just world. Focusing on uncovering these resistors shows how we can work within the processes of exemplification and imitation that play such a powerful role in human life.

CONCLUSION

Those politicians, like Senator Hawley, who believe that children would benefit from an emotional connection to their political communities are not entirely misguided—some sort of "love of country," some sort of historically grounded civic identity, might have productive civic consequences. The mistake is believing that this requires rejecting revisionist or critical approaches to history. As Applebaum suggests, these critical approaches might actually serve to reveal the heroes, the heroic resistors, that can foster both a national pride and a grounded civic identity that is compatible with justice. Human beings will unavoidably look for people to imitate. The task of education is to find the right exemplars—people whose actions work toward justice. Critical history does not impede this task, it facilitates it.