

Chicago Area Christ College Alumni Reading Groups, Spring 2003

Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism Spring 2003 Christ College Alumni Reading Groups

Patriotism may not be the last resort of scoundrels, as Samuel Johnson would have it, but it is clearly a problematic term and growing more so the closer we get to war with Iraq. At a time when “patriot” describes both missiles and acts of Congress, the idea of patriotism risks being identified simply with support of the current administration.

What is a patriotic act? Under what circumstances does allegiance to a nation that is built on ideals of freedom require us to give up that freedom? And how can we tell when we’ve gone too far in suspending civil liberties and legal rights? Patriotism implies a privileging of state over other tribal affiliations. At its worst, it smacks of nationalism; at its best, it unifies diverse people, supplying “a sense of shared national identity”¹ that is essential to political debate.

The title of this course comes from an essay by Martha Nussbaum, which will serve as our first reading in January. To what do we owe our primary allegiance, nation or world? Nussbaum argues that “patriotic pride is both morally dangerous and, ultimately, subversive of some of the worthy goals patriotism sets out to serve—for example, . . . justice and equality.” Cosmopolitan education, she claims, would not only foster better understanding of what it means to be an American; it would also result in a real dialogue about global inequity, the interdependence of nations, and the social, political, and ecological costs of an American living standard that is both supported and emulated outside our borders.

In February, we take a closer look at questions about allegiance and fidelity, using *Julius Caesar* as our primary text. “[I]t is not that I loved Caesar less, but Rome more,” says Brutus in Act III of the play, justifying his part in Caesar’s murder as an act necessary to secure the Republic and the liberty of its citizens. Chicago-area reading groups will have an opportunity to see the Chicago Shakespeare Company’s production of *Julius Caesar* at a date to be determined by each group. Groups meeting in other cities might want to view a filmed adaptation of the play.

This is followed in March by Ann Patchett’s *Bel Canto*, a novel that tests Nussbaum’s cosmopolitan vision by fictionalizing the events of the 1996 hostage crisis at the Japanese Embassy in Lima, Peru. Patchett wonders if it might be possible for people from different countries and cultures, languages and socio-economic backgrounds, to find friendship and be moved to real compassion for one another once national identity is subordinated to survival. If so, what draws them together? Outside Patchett’s microcosm, is it possible to be both patriot and world citizen?

¹ Richard Rorty, *New York Times*, 13 February 1994.

The course concludes with Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, which tells the story of Vietnam vet and anti-war activist Ron Kovic. Although we will surely find ourselves linking patriotism and war throughout our four-month discussion, this movie makes the connection explicit. Indeed, it is arguably Kovic's patriotism that resulted in his being thrown out of the 1972 Republican national convention—a much different kind of patriotism than that which led him to enlist in the Marines at age 18, but patriotism nonetheless.

Texts:

Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism" (please download and read before the first meeting: www.phil.uga.edu/faculty/wolf/nussbaum1.htm)

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (any edition)

Ann Patchett, *Bel Canto*

Oliver Stone, dir., *Born on the Fourth of July*