The Diversities of Patriotism in the Contemporary World

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At the start of the twenty-first century, patriotism is undeniably flourishing in some places and contexts. It comes in a variety of forms and slogans in many contemporary states, whether appropriated and promoted by public institutions or defended and supported by mobilized societies. Patriotism is to be understood as affection for and a feeling of belonging to one’s country. Its persistence is generally attributed to its role in maintaining national group cohesion on behalf of the state to the degree that it encourages respect for civic obligations within society. In the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, patriotism was fueled by admonitions to defend the national territory in the case of military conflict and was also central to processes of national construction, where it supplied the collective imaginary with positive material with which to identify. Patriotism assigned an important place to the army and military symbols and generally presupposed the idea of self-sacrifice. Though it certainly has not disappeared, as the events in Ukraine and Russia in 2014 and 2015 testify, liberal globalization has in recent decades partly superseded this traditional and heavily militarized version of patriotism by calling into question the relevance of the nation-state framework. In so doing, it has caused it to resurface in new forms. Behind the apparent unity of the concept of patriotism—a term always used in the singular as if it only referred to a single reality—various forms of living together have developed that call into question the many forms of contemporary modernity. The idea of bringing together several contributions to address the diversity of contemporary social practices and representations of patriotism was born of this
observation, itself drawn from a joint project regarding ‘everyday practices in Russia’. The discussions that first began in this research framework gradually led us to broaden our examination to encompass other terrains. We will thus examine the contemporary realities of patriotism in various geographical and political zones. In the case studies gathered here, whether they concern Canada (T. Raney), Turkey (S. Kaya), Russia (M. Désert) or China (J.L. Rocca), patriotism constitutes a legitimate reference for the rulers and society alike. That being the case, what social practices accompany it? And what does it mean to be a patriot in each of these countries? To respond to these questions, we offer a sociology of “patriotism from below”. This allows us to show that the manner in which patriotism is understood and experienced in the various societies under consideration varies so greatly from one context to the next that it is preferable to speak of “patriotisms” in the plural. Far from relegating patriotism to the traditional forms of attachment to the national soil, what's more, our findings set it firmly in the dynamic of contemporary societies. Patriotism is shaped by liberalism, the market, consumption and all sorts of individual aspirations and forms of collective identity associated with modernity. Finally, the plurality of patriotisms fuels relations with the state and politics alike.

The Diversity of Patriotisms from Below: Approaches and Practices

The scholarship on patriotism generally conceives of it at the highest level of generality as a characteristic encompassing the social and political practices of a state. As Tracey Raney underscores in her contribution, “most political science research on patriotism sees it as being used and sometimes even incited by states to encourage identification with the national group in the aim of constructing a cohesive political community.” In order to inculcate this feeling of attachment to the homeland, whatever its nature, states possess a variety of symbolic resources linking past with present: traditions, narratives, mythologies and national symbols. Patriotic policies may assume an authoritarian dimension but they may also draw upon non-state civic rituals, thereby contributing to the construction of a public space that emphasizes concord. Patriotism may therefore be a matter of tradition but also a constitutional project for, as Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, citizenship and national identity are increasingly seen as separate notions. In a recent book, Maurizio Viroli appeals to “civic virtue”, the expression of the

1. From 2008 to 2010, “The Figures of Everyday Patriotism in Russia Today”, an international scientific cooperation project (PICS) sponsored by the CNRS with financial assistance from RGNF (the Russian Foundation for Social Science Research), brought together the following scholars: Alexis Berelowitch, Françoise Daucé, Myriam Désert, Caroline Dufy, Marlène Laruelle, Anne Le Huérou, Kathy Rousselet, Svetlana Barsukova, Elena Filippova, Oksana Karpenko. See, in particular, Françoise Daucé, Myriam Désert, Marlène Laruelle, Anne Le Huérou, Kathy Rousselet, “Les usages pratiques du patriotisme en Russie”, Questions de recherche, June 2010 (http://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/qdr32.pdf) and “Patriotism from Below in Russia”, a special issue of Europe Asia Studies, no. 67, 1, January 2015.
“republican ideal of love for one’s country”. In France, an interesting illustration of this might be found in the republican march that took place on 11 January 2015 in the aftermath of the attack(s) against Charlie Hebdo. From a non-state perspective, a number of recent studies have taken a sociological approach to patriotism in order to reveal its everyday aspect. These studies are convergent with Michael Billig’s approach to “banal nationalism” and the recent work it has inspired in France. These notions of banal nationalism and patriotism are reminiscent of the “very ordinary culture” evoked by Michel de Certeau in order to throw light on the structures of society via the analysis of everyday life. This sociology of patriotism reveals the forms of “patriotism from below” that can develop independently or alongside of their state-sponsored counterparts. Drawing upon qualitative studies, it casts light on individual attitudes described as patriotic and sets them in the context of individuals’ other social activities. Patriotism thus takes on the aspect of a “tool kit” from which actors draw different references in constructing their strategy of action.

These ordinary patriotic practices take various forms. In discussions of patriotism, the army and military service tend to come most immediately to mind. This is the case in Turkey, where military service plays an important role in the theoretical training in patriotism and where an internal war pitting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) against the Turkish armed forces has since 1984 contributed to putting patriotism to the test. In Canada, in a context marked by the country’s participation in the war in Afghanistan, the population has mobilized itself to restore the Canadian Army and its war heroes as symbols of the nation. While these two examples illustrate the vitality of traditional patriotism, the performance of military service is not necessarily the only manifestation of patriotism. It takes other paths in China, for example: the rapidly expanding urban bourgeoisie has called for the state to institute a return to tradition via the restoration of traditional festivals, which are now public holidays. In the Russian case, patriotism has recently taken a warlike turn. However, a broad range of practices identified as “patriotic” yet far removed from traditional patriotism are also to be observed there. Moreover, these practices are often less about stoking feelings of national belonging than they are about advancing other objectives, “from the pragmatic concerns of professional career to the search for a source of personal inspiration, 

prospects for enrichment and the pleasure to be had in acting together with one’s friends and loved ones”.8

As these various incarnations of patriotism show, the form it takes depends upon the relationship that individuals have over time constructed with the community. Anthropologists underscore the important role played by historical heritage in the manner in which one claims to be patriotic.9 Nor should one under-estimate the influence of religion, even if the place it occupies can vary greatly from one national context to the next: in Russia, the church is an historic ally of the homeland; in Turkey, where religion is a source of national cohesion, it is used to present military service as “a sacred duty”, as Sümbül Kaya shows in her article in this issue on patriotic sentiment among conscripts. Moreover, patriotism can impose itself in various ways in state discourse and practice depending on the degree to which a given country is (or is not) multicultural. In China—a multi-ethnic country—official discourse simultaneously insists on the plurality of the peoples united within the national territory and identification with its land. All territorial assertions draw upon history, which is supposed to justify claims to a more or less eternal “homeland”. In Russia, patriotism plays upon a Russian nation conceived in either ethnic or civic terms, whereas in Canada multiculturalism seems to have long kept its distance from patriotism. Both the context and the historic construction of the state thus influence the manner in which patriotism acts on collective identities and the capacity of individuals to grasp this complex notion and put it into practice.

The ease with which patriotism may be distinguished from nationalism depends on the context. There are moments and places where the frontiers between nationalism and patriotism are easy to identify. And then there are others where these frontiers are less apparent. As Jean-Louis Rocca points out in the case of China, the linguistic ambiguities of Chinese are themselves a source of conceptual fuzziness. Indeed, two words can be translated as “nation”: guojia, which also means state, and minzu, which signifies people or ethnic group. In this context, patriotism is defined in official pronouncements as “ardent love and profound affection for a national territory (guojia) and the people (minzu) to which one belongs in the broad sense as well as identification with moral values and a culture.”10 Nationalism, for its part, is the consciousness of the identity of a nation/people (minzu) in the ethnic sense of the term and a feeling of superiority relative to other nations/peoples. In Russia, the distinction between patriotism


9. On the basis of research on Nagorno-Karabakh, Nona Shahnazarian and Ulrike Ziemer show that being a patriot may mean “feeling like a responsible member of a small community loyal to one’s little homeland” but also “belonging to a great nation—the Armenian nation—given the belief of Armenians in the world in a great homeland and their respect for a shared national history”. Nona Shahnazarian, Ulrike Ziemer “Young Soldiers’ Tales of War in Nagorno-Karabakh”, Europe-Asia Studies, 64 (9), November 2012, pp. 1676–1677.

10. Xinhuanet.com, 5 May 2008 (consulted 8 June 2012).
The Diversities of Patriotism in the Contemporary World — V

and nationalism has also been the object of many academic and political debates. These have often reflected normative positions but are also dependent upon the particular point of view that is adopted. Western scholarship often explains the Putin regime’s actions abroad and at home by reference to its “nationalism”, which often implies a judgment of value and underlying policy choices. The relationship between the two concepts is a complex issue. Scholars who work on democratic contexts agree that, in contrast to nationalism, patriotism is a feeling above all and that it considerably precedes the creation of the state. “For a number of scholars, a key difference between patriotism and nationalism is that the former does not demand a political expression. Individuals can be patriotic without being nationalistic. While patriotism results from the feelings of the individual directed toward the group, nationalism results from the feelings of the group directed toward the state.”¹¹ A “positively” defined form of patriotism, consisting in love of the homeland, is also often distinguished from nationalism, which is said to entail a “negative” content since it is directed against another state.

While most work on patriotism is sociopsychological in nature and the quantitative approach is broadly favored within comparative studies, the contributions gathered here tend to show the heuristic value of another comparative method, one based on a reflection on the historicity of societies and a qualitative sociology of the phenomena under investigation. These studies also make room for various emotions—in particular, the feelings of love, pride, commitment and loyalty that accompany patriotic engagement. Patriotic action owes as much to feeling as it does to reason. The remarks of the Turkish staff officer quoted by Sümbül Kaya testify to this twofold aspect: “Patriotism is built on a love of country that is at once a reasonable loyalty and an emotional bond.”¹²

Patriotism, Liberal Globalization and the Relationship to the State

Depending on the context, patriotism can provide a constitutive component of liberal modernity or supply a refuge against both it and globalization. On the basis of a quantitative study of 63 countries, Gal Ariely¹³ has shown the complex relations between globalization and national identity. “Higher levels of globalization are related negatively to patriotism, willingness to fight for one’s country and ethnic national identity. […] But the analysis also shows that high levels of national identification and nationalism are not related to a country’s level of globalization. The spread of globalization does not reduce people’s identification with their

¹². Extract from annual address delivered by Chief of Turkish General Staff İlker Başbuğ to the Military Academy, 14 April 2009.
national group or their view of their country as better than other countries.” In many cases, the transformations provoked by the neoliberal evolution of societies at the planetary level have particularly fueled patriotic emotions. If these emotions are particularly intense in the contemporary world, it is because they are often expressed in reaction to what are seen as worrisome social and international trends. In China, the “patriotic fever” that has taken hold of Chinese society is combined with the development of a vacation economy. The new Chinese patriotism is organized more around the demands of a consumer society than around those of a “conquering China”. But the restoration of traditional festivals is clearly part of a phenomenon of opposition to Westernization and globalization (specifically, opposition to such Western festivals as Saint-Valentine’s Day). In Canada, “the Canadian state’s post-war national policy tools (e.g. Medicare, multiculturalism and foreign policy) have given way to an increasingly neo-liberal and securitized Canadian state […] the withdrawal of the Canadian state in areas of social and foreign policy traditionally tied to Canadian nationhood and heightened concerns about global security and terrorism may have inadvertently combined to provide an ideal context” (T. Raney). In Russia in 2014-15, the exacerbation of patriotism that has accompanied the crisis in Ukraine has been fueled (at least at the discursive level) by many elements besides military rhetoric, with discourse emphasizing a patriotic awakening in defense of social, moral and cultural evolutions originating in a supposedly decadent West. These various situations show the diverse forms that patriotic mobilization takes faced with the equally diverse concerns provoked by globalization and neoliberalism.

It must be noted that the reference to patriotism is polysemous and allows one to express a diverse array of relations to the rulers and the state as well as to the nation, other people, the family and the world. In its own way, each contribution to this special issue addresses a particular relationship to institutionalized patriotism. All demonstrate the existence of an ordinary patriotism that, whatever the political context, does not necessarily correspond to the versions offered by the state. This patriotism can express and manifest itself via an avowed allegiance to the state, a “game” that introduces a more or less significant distance or even an opposition that refuses to legitimate the state as a “body certifying patriotism”.

There exists a form of “patriotism against the state” that reflects the split between the government and society as well as the capacity of individuals to produce an autonomous definition of patriotism.

The Turkish case is the most consensual of the four examples presented in this special issue. The question of patriotism, it is true, is addressed by means of the most emblematic institution: the army. The threefold fidelity imposed upon soldiers in regards to the nation, the state and the homeland, which the vast majority of

them appropriate, reflects a high degree of unity that leaves little leeway in one’s relationship to the state.

The example of Canada illustrates the idea according to which patriotism, conceived as a sociocultural phenomenon, “is not always the exclusive purview of states and state actors but can emerge from the citizens themselves” (T. Raney).

Along the “Highway of Heroes”, the popular displays of homage that greeted the convoys repatriating the bodies of soldiers who died in Afghanistan challenged the foundations upon which the state had constructed contemporary Canadian identity. They reintroduced military values and, in so doing, contributing to constructing a new institutional patriotism.

In the Chinese case described by Jean-Louis Rocca, the regime’s “rediscovery” of traditional festivals in the context of a crisis of governmental legitimacy has contributed to the construction of a consensus between state and society. Indeed, groups that are usually hostile to expressions of Chinese nationalism and state action in general (folklore specialists, intellectuals, the media) eagerly adopted an initiative that allowed “symbols of national identity to be constructed” in a way that even integrated minorities. In this case, the relationship between state and society works because the state was able to seize upon a social demand and give it form.

Like the research carried out in Russia over the past few years, Myriam Désert’s contribution shows the very diverse manner in which Russian society has taken up the patriotism that the state constructed and proposed in the early 2000s and subsequently generalized to many areas of public life, in particular via a number of patriotic programs. As she underscores, “the awareness of belonging to a nation—a given historic construction—is rooted in the relationship to a concrete state.” This relationship, however, is not always one of loyalty. Patriotism can be opportunistically seized upon as a mere “brand” to be exploited by various actors for non-patriotic ends. Although the patriotic admonishment “from above” is strong, the manner in which this admonishment is appropriated by the society often differs from what is demanded by the state. Some even speak out against it. In *The Patriotism of Despair*, Serguei Oushakine describes communities marked by loss and finding refuge in a patriotism far removed from that of the state. The situation is nevertheless rapidly evolving. Since the start of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine in spring 2014, Russian patriotism in its various incarnations seems to be crystalizing and intensifying around a version that joins the state and a majority of public opinion in overwhelming support for the idea of a Russia that asserts its power by designating internal and external enemies who threaten


the nation’s vital interests (i.e., the challenge posed by Western ambitions to Ukraine’s place in the Russian sphere of influence, the need to protect Russian-speaking populations that feel threatened in several eastern regions, etc.). A very heterogenous collection of social and political forces have now come together in the service of a government-sponsored project of territorial expansion (marked by the annexation of the Crimea).

The shared reference to patriotism in many contemporary societies has had an impact on the transformation of their political spaces. The Turkish and Russian cases thus show the effects of substituting patriotism for pluralism and political competition. Because it introduces a very personal relationship between the individual and the homeland while simultaneously seeking to impose a consensus, patriotic engagement limits the possibilities of alternative expression in a non-pluralist context in which the public emergence of a critique of state patriotism seems impossible (at the risk of being accused of treachery, immorality or venality). In authoritarian contexts, patriotism undoubtedly has a more important political dimension than in democratic societies. But this does not mean a purely top-down dynamics. As these articles show, society is not a passive recipient of the authorities’ ideological narratives and participates in a complex manner in shaping the agenda or reorienting it towards specific goals. In contexts marked by suspicion towards the liberal and democratic order, patriotic engagements raise the question of the construction of authoritarian political systems and the future of political pluralism.