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### Frederick Douglass and the Patriotic Imperative

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### Frederick Douglass and the Patriotic Imperative

The boom of an explosion echoes in a crowd's collective chest as the aroma of sizzling flesh wafts through the air. There is fire and fanfare for miles, filling the night sky with flashes of heat and billowing smoke. The sights, sounds, and scents of this cacophonous celebration ring foul in the hearts of the oppressed but sing sweetly to the ears of the patriot. This is Independence Day in America. Although celebrations like this one take place across the country annually, many argue that America has left patriotism behind in a modern era of globalization. These claims are often met with the assertion that it should remain a thing of the past. However, the truth of the matter is that America has lost sight of what patriotism is and where it belongs. In order to regasp this concept, the country should reflect on the patriots of the past that formed our freedoms today, one of which includes the famous black orator, Frederick Douglass. After examining the full scope of patriotism in Frederick Douglass's speech "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July," it must be concluded that American patriotism's reinvention from the superficial, idolatrous patriotism of the white man into a morally apt, justice-seeking fervor that pays homage to the black patriot is imperative.

Patriotism, as it is understood today, has become mistakenly merged with nationalism. In the minds of the public and media, patriots are supposed to exhibit undying loyalty and dedication to their country. This sentiment is better aligned with nationalism, a concept that I would argue should ideally be distinct from patriotism. Patriotism is most simply defined as a

"love for one's country" (Brighthouse 547), while nationalism rather refers to loyalty to one's country that reigns supreme over global concerns or those within the country (Kohn). Therefore, while the execution of the two concepts may ultimately seem similar from the outside, the foundation of each concept is different, leading to varied execution thereof. When the two become akin to each other, it often leads to what is called *idolatrous patriotism*. While the mere presence of idolatrous patriotism may not seem detrimental, the implementation of it through action can lead to devastating consequences. It is thus the active application of patriotism that presents the slippery slope between using patriotism as justification for oppression and using it productively as fuel for justice. This disparity is well-described by Harry Brighthouse, who puts patriotism as it exists in America today into two categories: that which is based on idolatrous love versus that which is based on morally apt love. Patriotism built upon idolatrous love is characterized by an ill-informed and irrational love of one's country. Those that develop this kind of attachment often refuse to acknowledge their own country's atrocities, in turn using their unbattered pride as means to defend any injustice they might commit against marginalized groups in their community or other countries, ultimately marking these actions up to have been in the name of advancing or maintaining their homeland. This faulty patriotism is often bred by the indoctrination of children to love their country unconditionally from a young age, leading to later disillusionment when the reality of historical circumstances is brought to light. Reactions to this contrary information include developing either an insecure love or one built upon deliberate ignorance. The detriment here is self-evident. In addition to his comments about idolatrous patriotism in general, Brighthouse makes the important disclaimer that "a xenophobic patriotism must be idolatrous; so must one that identifies the good of the nation with that of some particular social class... or religious sect" (550). Thus, he implies patriotism based on either of those

conditions is invalid and should not be regarded as patriotism at all, but rather be recognized as pure prejudice. However, patriotism does not have to be this sort of ideological blunder. It can rather be based upon one's morally apt love for their country. Those who develop this deep, morally apt love can cultivate positive change within their country to nurture it and contribute to its ultimate improvement through the way of reform, justice, and maintenance. Brighthouse concludes, and I would agree, that this latter form of patriotism is undoubtedly the most productive for society and social justice and should replace the former as the only valid patriotism.

Harry Boyte regards this superior morally apt patriotism to be well illustrated by the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, a movement to which Frederick Douglass's impact provided much momentum. African Americans of the movement fought for their people to be integrated and accepted into society, making themselves personally intimate with their country so that they might achieve a final and meaningful citizenship that was robbed from their ancestors by slavery. Boyte sees the movement as an outstanding execution of patriotism, insisting that they loved America so much that they labored and fought for justice within it rather than seeking freedom elsewhere. While they did feel a sort of loyalty for the nation due to it being constructed upon the labor of their relatives, this was translated into a challenging patriotism maintained by "a constantly questioned, historically aware, emotionally complex identification with and responsibility for America" (Boyte 23). Boyte argues that this is what patriotism ought to look like in the present day among all citizens. While I agree with Boyte that this complex identification with America led to the passion necessary to execute the Civil Rights Movement, I have to disagree with his decision to label this as patriotism. I believe the choice to do so is ultimately tone-deaf and disregards the trials and tribulations of black lives in that time.

Their so-called patriotism was based on means of survival, not a love for this country that had done them great harm. That does not necessarily mean that there was no patriotism present in the movement, and Boyte's illustration is still relevant in what it should mean for today, but it should be recognized that the desire to be permitted quality of life in a country should not be twisted into a love for country. This risks the implication that America was ultimately not at fault since it was good enough for even oppressed people to love it in the first place.

More than 100 years prior to the American Civil Rights Movement, former slave and forefather to the abolitionist effort Frederick Douglass addressed American patriotism's implications for those it oppresses in his speech, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?" delivered in Rochester, New York on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852. While Douglass largely criticizes patriotism in his address, he also interestingly weaponizes it against his likely patriotic audience to support his effort to humanize African Americans. Speaking just twenty-four hours after countless celebrations of America, Douglass knew that "at a time like [his], scorching irony, not convincing argument, [was] needed" (Douglass 1239). He took the idolatrous patriotism of his white audience and flipped it on its head in an effort of his own morally apt patriotism. Patricia Bizzell explains how Douglass used demonstrations of his own patriotism in his speech to appeal to his audience. She argues that by demonstrating a detailed knowledge of early American history and culture through referencing the country's foundational documents, religious allusions, and other culturally significant literature, he establishes credibility and a sort of kinship with his white audience. He is then able to recognize the sweet sentiment they might hold for their own patriotic holiday, drawing them in with apparent empathy before confronting them with the truth that "the sunlight that brought healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me" (Douglass 1236). The contrasting way he presents this grave fact is so jarring that the

audience had to be crushed by its burden. The only way the celebration of holidays like the Fourth of July can be rooted in productive patriotism is for Americans to be proactively fighting for justice in their government and caring enough to know the truth. As mentioned, Douglass recognizes patriotism's legitimacy, declaring that the love of a country could warm the coldest of hearts. More importantly, he reminds his audience of that crucial condition that this love can only bring joy to the free American, asking, "Who so stolid and selfish, that would not give his voice to swell the hallelujahs of a nation's jubilee when the chains of servitude had been torn from his limbs?" (Douglass 1236). Patriotism itself is valid, but the slaves and disenfranchised black people of the time did not get the privilege to express patriotism in the traditional sense. To force a slave to join in the festivities would have been "inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony" (Douglass 1237). How could black people love a country that did not love them back? Douglass makes this distinction between himself and his white audience but still joins them in the responsibility he assigned to act, asserting that for anybody to forget "the mournful wail of millions" of slaves is to commit "treason most scandalous and shocking" (Douglass 1237). He consolidates betraying the country with betraying his race, sparking the internal conflict in the hearts of even the most sincere patriots. For they had to realize Douglass's consolidation applied to their actions, too: to betray the people whom they had oppressed for so long would be to betray the country that had brought them great prosperity. Even though the American people had abandoned Douglass's race, Douglass refused to abandon America. He would not let them ignore the cries of his people.

I would therefore argue that Douglass's speech redefines patriotism not as the idolatrous patriotism of his audience, but as a morally apt patriotism that is indeed love for his country, however a tough and constructive love. He loved America and his people too much to let such

injustice run rampant and bring such unbearable misery and suffering to millions, but productively executing this love meant putting himself in danger by standing firm in his fight to dismantle an egregious institution even though it was born and bred in his own country. Expressing patriotism through this kind of passionate, educated dedication to justice is what ultimately needs to replace the nationalist-type ignorant patriotism that some would like to revive today. While those like Boyte would argue patriotism was mobilized in the recent past for justice in the Civil Rights movement, the post-Civil Rights political landscape has lost sight of how to properly execute such mobilization regardless of the claim's accuracy. "For its advocates, patriotism is central to American democracy... [and] a valuable spur to concerted political action aimed at... advancing social justice," thus I can recognize it is imperative to keep patriotism alive, but it must be done so in a way that mirrors Frederick Douglass and other black patriots (Burkey and Zamalin 371). Douglass reminds us that slaves and former slaves did not get the privilege of being taught to love their country. The land in which they resided was barely offered to them as a homeland, but they still developed a love for their country and strove to bring justice to black Americans. With his sort of genuine, well-informed patriotism as the goal, the American education system needs to be transformed to educate children about the full scope of America's history, atrocities and all, without immediately coming to America's defense. Just as the black patriot was presented a heinous country to defend, so all present and future citizens of America should be presented with an objective profile of the country and given the choice of whether or not it is worth loving and advancing.

Even if this idealistic prescription is implemented and patriotism is successfully redefined and transformed in America, some critics suggest patriotism should instead be thrown out altogether regardless of its reformation status. George Kateb asserts that patriotism is, in fact, an

egregious mistake, but an inevitable one. He argues that it is a grave moral error and often brought on by mental deficiency but is promoted by those that understand it to control people. In his opinion, patriotism is outdated, abandoning many main values of the Enlightenment, including the fierce dislike of group idolatry, which he would argue describes patriotism. So while he recognizes the culmination of patriotism was inevitable, he thinks it now needs to be abandoned. He notes patriotism as the deadliest form of group affiliation. His reasoning is made clear when he defines patriotism as the readiness to die and kill for one's country. However, he goes further in his definition by defining "one's country" as merely an abstraction of cultural memories, sanitized histories, and a kinship of invention, thus asserting that patriotism is the willingness to die and kill for an abstraction. Kateb concludes that while patriotism can be mobilized for a good cause, it is more easily used for an unjust one since he sees it as an excuse to be immoral without a guilty conscience (901-924). While I can agree with his assertions as they relate to the idolatrous patriotism I have already outlined, I would argue that he has mistakenly lumped all patriotism together, ignoring the merit of morally apt patriotism. Those that sympathize with Kateb would agree that patriotism requires its subscribers to sacrifice morality for themselves and those around them. Maxwell Burkey and Alex Zamalin agree that patriotism can no longer be productive and provide an alternative where they argue that patriotism in America needs to be replaced by the African American precedent of "self-examination, prophecy, and rage" (371). They would argue that these three facets counter patriotism in a way that is more conducive to seeking social justice. For example, while patriotism often results in citizens regarding themselves as a larger whole, self-examination calls for them to look within themselves as an individual. It requires white people and other privileged classes to acknowledge their privilege and evaluate their own prejudices in hopes to awaken the



previously morally apathetic. This way injustice breaks down from within because those enacting it must take responsibility and not simply rely on the leaders of their country to “exonerate them from it” (Burkey and Zamalin 387). Burkey and Zamalin’s idea of prophecy calls on American citizens to look forward to the consequences of injustice, instead of focusing on the present unity of patriots and their compatriots. While unity may still be present, they argue that it should not be the crux of a functional society. This allows there to be candid conversations about America’s faults and internal differences without being preoccupied with the threat of disunity. Finally, their prescription of rage is put in place to replace patriotism with a more passionate conviction. The argument here is that the degree of passion that comes from anger is often far more mobilizing and harsher than that which comes from a love like that of patriotism (Burkey and Zamalin 388). While these three facets of African American tradition would bring about much progress if implemented, I would argue that combining them with a morally apt patriotism like that of Frederick Douglass would allow both justice and unity as well as an added fervor for the culmination of such. The balance of patriotism and these three weights of counter patriotism could be the answer to preventing eventual evolution into another age of idolatrous patriotism, keeping citizens in check with their own prejudices, while still allowing healthy love for the country to fuel its progress.

The above perspectives, although varying, confirm that patriotism needs to be reformed to some degree for its productivity to be maintained. I would argue that, like the United States Constitution, it should also be held cautiously with room for amendments and new prescriptions since any one political climate tends to be very transient. Regardless, I believe that in order for Americans to engage in a more productive patriotism in the post-Civil Rights era, it is imperative that the country reflects on the patriotism of Frederick Douglass and his counterparts that have

built the security and freedoms of America as we know it. Expressions of pure patriotism like Douglass's "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July," explicitly show that American patriotism must be reinvented from ill-informed idolatrous patriotism into a morally apt, justice-seeking fervor that pays homage to those that America has oppressed. This includes incorporating black tradition that calls on America to reflect on the past, look forward to the future, and reject apathy of all kinds.

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