

The Fragility of Patriotism

M. Victoria Costa
Illinois State University

Simon Keller has attacked the common idea that patriotism is a civic virtue.¹ Against this idea, Keller argues that patriotism is unavoidably associated with a disposition to self-deception or bad faith. Patriots are loyal to their country and their loyalty, he claims, is explained by two facts. First, it is their country. Second, they take it to have some valuable characteristics that make it worthy of loyalty. These characteristics must be significant and representative of the core features of the country: for example, having a history of a certain kind, standing for certain values, or being founded on certain principles.² Whether the country actually has these qualities will always be open to challenge by new evidence and new points of view. Keller holds that patriots are likely to ignore or dismiss the significance of these challenges when they arise, so as to be able to maintain their loyalty unaffected. According to Keller, this tendency to selective assessment of the evidence about one's country's real qualities is an unavoidable feature of patriotism. Moreover, it is a vice: a form of bad faith.

Eamonn Callan acknowledges that bad faith is often a consequence of patriotism, as well as of other important loyalties we may have.³ Callan's goal is therefore relatively modest. He wants to show that patriotic loyalty does not unavoidably involve bad faith. One example that Callan presents in his essay seems to me a clear counterexample to Keller, though, somewhat surprisingly, Callan does not present it in this way. It is the story of Anthony Hecht, a World War II veteran who witnessed his compatriots slaughtering innocent civilians and then denying their wrongdoing afterwards with lame excuses. Hecht's reaction was moral horror and the loss of any feeling of patriotic solidarity with them. Hecht did not succumb to bad faith when confronted with the wrongdoing of fellow soldiers. Rather, he revised his previous ideas about what his country stood for, and gave up his patriotic feelings. This example, therefore, shows that significant evidence can sometimes undermine belief in the good qualities of one's country, and can also lead to the loss of patriotism. In such cases, of which Hecht's is an example, the lost patriotism seems to have been a patriotism without bad faith. Keller might be tempted to say that if someone gives up her patriotism so easily, then she was not particularly patriotic in the first place. But this response is too quick. Hecht certainly seemed like a real patriot. He was willing to fight and die for his country. And he experienced the loss of his patriotism as something very significant. It took the experience of war and the massacre of innocents to make him change his assessment of his compatriots and his country. So it seems possible that some people are genuinely and deeply patriotic until they encounter evidence that compels them to revise their beliefs. These people do not suffer from bad faith.⁴

Of course, we should admit that the sort of patriots just described might have false beliefs about the good qualities of their country. But even when they have such

false beliefs these beliefs need not be the result of indulging in bad faith. Perhaps they were taught false stories by people they trust — their teachers and parents — but retain the capacity to reassess them later on when they mature and learn more about the world. One question worth asking here is what should be taken as a sufficient indication of bad faith. That is, what counts as sufficient to show that someone is guilty of culpable misinterpretation of the information available? It cannot simply be that when we find some evidence against our beliefs we fail to reassess those beliefs and change them in a totally impartial way. After all, we do not have a disposition to change our level of confidence in many things we think we know merely because new data or arguments emerge that apparently contradict our beliefs. A reasonable response to such data is often to find some way to interpret it in light of pre-existing beliefs. This “strategy of accommodation” is indispensable in maintaining a coherent picture of the world. If this amounts to being biased it seems to affect many sorts of inquiry, including scientific inquiry. So I do not think that Keller can so easily dismiss the case of Hecht as something very unusual, which does not affect his general claim about the link between patriotism and bad faith. Many people might be pushed to abandon their patriotism in circumstances like Hecht’s. It is true that many people might not be pushed in the same way by lesser evidence. But failure to revise one’s attitudes in these less extreme cases is not enough to warrant the attribution of bad faith. In order to warrant such a conclusion, we need to know that this strategy of accommodation has been overused, so that they discard genuinely compelling evidence; that is, that the strategy is working to systematically prevent revisions of their views, almost no matter what.

Even though Hecht seems to present a counterexample to Keller’s primary thesis, his story does not provide the kind of counterexample Callan is looking for. In particular, Hecht’s patriotism avoids bad faith only at the cost of being highly fragile. It may shatter under the impact of unpleasant truths. Patriotic dispositions that would be easily undermined if confronted with the realities of the beloved country are unlikely to produce much good for very long. Callan wants to defend the possibility of a more robust form of patriotism: one that is guided by a sense of justice that does not involve self-deception, but that nevertheless does not easily end in despair and inaction. Part of his strategy consists in distinguishing between (a) the state-centric account of patriotism, in which patriotic feelings are directed at the political institutions of one’s country, and (b) the community-centric account of patriotism, in which patriotic feelings are directed at the people as an intergenerational community. This distinction allows Callan to say that a patriot like Zarah Ghahramani can love her country — that is, the imagined community of people she identifies with and hopes could flourish in the future — while being fully aware of the cruelty and injustice of its current government. As long as she can retain the hope for a better future for her people, she can keep the disposition to fight against the injustices committed by an existing government that fails to represent her true country.

I have some doubts about Callan’s strategy. In many real life cases there is not such a neat distinction between the political institutions of a country and its people. Many governments that are patriarchal, homophobic, racist, intolerant, or unjust in

other ways manage to gather the active support of a significant number of their people, and this support helps the government to stay in power and carry out its policies. In such cases a patriot's effort to change the government must to a certain extent also include an effort to change the people and their political culture. Callan argues that it is reasonable to assume that any particular people have as much ability to create and sustain just political institutions as any other people, and that this capacity for justice is the basis for a reasonable hope that justice can be achieved in the future. But understood in this way the capacity for justice seems to be a formal capacity — like Immanuel Kant's capacity for autonomy — and it does not really ground a reasonable hope that social institutions can be changed for better in the near future. Nor does it seem likely to motivate political action by itself. In some contexts certain social and political advances can realistically be made; in others, they cannot. Practical hope for such advances will, therefore, be more or less reasonable, depending on the particular circumstances. The patriot with a sense of justice and a more or less accurate understanding of the current state of her country needs something more than a mere hope that something good will come out of her people if her patriotism is to count as a virtue. Under very hostile circumstances, the maintenance of this hope seems like another instance of bad faith: a refusal to accept the harsh realities about one's country. Moreover, this ungrounded hope may cloud one's judgment about available practical alternatives.

To conclude, I tend to agree with Keller that patriotism is too often sustained by bad faith. This is one of the reasons why I would not advocate patriotic forms of civic education; they seem to have many liabilities.⁵ However, against Keller, I would hold that there are probably instances of virtuous patriotism without bad faith. This is Callan's point. But I think that I probably oppose Callan, since it seems plausible to me that such patriotism must unavoidably be fragile if it is going to continue to be virtuous. Callan tries to remove the fragility by suggesting that the country with which the patriot identifies may be a community that only exists in the patriot's imagination, as happens in the story of Ghahramani. But patriotism without bad faith cannot be grounded on a wholly imaginary view of the country and its people — even if we grant that its basic orientation is towards building a better future — and it cannot avoid assessing its present conditions. Patriotism cannot consist in an unconditional loyalty that is proof against any possible circumstance. A virtuous patriotism that supports the construction of more just institutions requires a capacity to make adequate evaluations of present circumstances and to determine which future alternatives are realistic. It is precisely this capacity that makes virtuous patriotism fragile: there are no guarantees that the patriot with a sense of justice will not at some point become so disappointed by what she finds that she is compelled to give up her patriotic loyalty.

1. See Simon Keller, *The Limits of Loyalty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 52–93.

2. *Ibid.*, 82.

3. For two excellent related discussions of patriotism and its liabilities to moral error see Eamonn Callan, "Love, Idolatry, and Patriotism," *Social Theory and Practice* 32, no. 4 (2006): 525–46; and Eamonn

Callan, "The Better Angels of Our Nature: Patriotism and Dirty Hands," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2010): 249–70.

4. Callan has suggested to me that Keller might respond by claiming that Hecht still suffered from bad faith, in the sense that he has a disposition to self-deception, but that this disposition was simply overwhelmed by the counterevidence in these extreme and tragic circumstances. The problem with this strategy is that it seems to make the claim that patriots suffer from bad faith irrefutable: no matter what they do and no matter whether they reasonably change their minds when confronted with significant information or arguments, Keller could always claim that there was some bad faith deep inside.

5. I argue against patriotic civic education in M. Victoria Costa, *Rawls, Citizenship, and Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 91–106. Also see Harry Brighouse, "Should We Teach Patriotic History?" in *Education and Citizenship in Liberal–Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities*, eds. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 157–75.