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Madhu Suri Prakash

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Patriotism? No Thanks!

Madhu Suri Prakash

Patriotic fever reigned supreme in my son's fifth grade classroom in the public elementary school he had attended since kindergarten. It was in a middle-sized university town in the United States.

Framed photos of each student flouting the flag with patriotic pride announced his teacher's curriculum and pedagogy. Mrs. ABZ's message, at least as experienced by my son and me, was "Do or die!" You either subscribe to her patriotic philosophy of education, or you die as a legitimate and valued member of the class.

The school principal accepted that this was unpalatable, undemocratic, inappropriate, unjust and mis-educative – to say the least. But she lacked the power to control it. She thus offered the "best" third option: moving my son to the second elementary school she administered, a few blocks away.

"Unjust!" my confident son protested in moral outrage. "Why should I leave my school? I get good grades. The principal should require Mrs. ABZ to move instead."

Unwilling to be frightened into silence, my son and I collaborated on a required homework project, drawing upon Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (1996) and Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (1980). In response, ABZ screamed without restraint, viciously attacking our unpatriotic assignment.

The next morning my son awoke, psychologically beaten down and broken – unrecognizable. Always enthused about his elementary school, but now still lying in bed, he tearfully announced: "I don't want to go to school." Like refugees, we carried our belongings to the alternative elementary school under the principal's jurisdiction. Shame for succumbing to patriotic bullying sat sickeningly in our bellies.

Children were subjected to the microcosm of ABZ's patriotic fervor for the next decade. It opened the door of our understanding to the macrocosm of patriotism across the world—waging war, violence, death and destruction on "the otherness of the other."

This episode was only one instance of the dislocations that have framed my life. I have lived in three nation-states – USA, Mexico, and India—despite my deep desire to stay rooted in familiar, communal soil.

My son's story compelled me to remember his ancestors' fears and flight from the patriotism creating Pakistan and India in 1947. Before my birth, my people—Sikhs and Punjabis—were brutally wrenched from their lands and their communities as part of the modern promise of building free nation-states.

Like millions of others, I was systematically educated to be ignorant of the convoluted plots and machinations that manufactured India, Pakistan and other modern nation-states.

For a long time, having become a citizen of a democratic nation-state, I assumed that I had escaped the abject wretchedness of being a refugee. Today, I am suffering the consequences of playing this con game of ignorance under the cover of patriotism.

From New Delhi, India—my original home—I sought to flee from all modes of environmental and social violence: the “price of progress”; the price the “underdeveloped” were forced to pay at the end of World War II, when colonialism got a new lease on life in the newly manufactured “independent nation-states”; the price paid by common women and men who were seldom allowed to affirm their real preferences.

From Cuernavaca, Mexico—an alternative home I sought—I fled the violence of a country where it is no longer possible to draw a line between the world of organized crime and the nation-state’s institutional world.

Patriotism, for me?

When I am offered today the gift of belonging to a democratic nation-state, under the condition of praying the patriotic pledge of allegiance, I am forced to take a step back and reflect on what it means.

The modern nation-state and modern education were simultaneously conceived with and for patriotism. John Amos Comenius is rightly considered the father of modern education. The Czechs see him as a symbol of the Czech nation. His idea to teach everybody everything cannot be separated from his patriotism. He was 56 years old when the Westphalia treaties, creating the modern nation-state, were signed. He struggled for many years, patriotically, to give the Czechs an independent nation-state. The best tool to achieve it: modern education, compulsory learning.

The idea of democracy was born in Greece and took its modern form in the United States. Both were societies with slaves; racist and misogynous. The democratic nation-state, the political form of capitalism, is a patriarchal design modeled on racist and sexist patriotism. This political design was imposed, never spontaneously born among peoples.

Patriotism is inseparable from military establishments waging wars ceaselessly across the globe. Patriotic narratives inculcated from womb to tomb remain central to creating and sustaining all kinds of divisions separating “us” from “them.” Instead of that violent path, I have been looking for and finding alternatives of authentic self-governance that escape the farce of modern democracies. People by the millions, transmogrified into disposable human beings by globalized capital, are growing alternatives organically.

As Gustavo Esteva and I discuss in *Grassroots Postmodernism* (2014), and as numerous other authors in *Yes!* magazine and other places argue, many of these alternatives begin with food, with the separation of corporatized nation-states from our bellies/mouths/intestinal tracts. The Food Sovereignty movement—organized by Via Campesina, the biggest peasant grassroots collective in the world—and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture) all across the earth inspire millions of eaters like me and you every single day—or, more accurately, several times a day. Eaters are moved to join forces with their community farmers to celebrate the pleasures of eating healthful, tasteful, and justice- and eco-centered foods. This ensures that nation-states and their corporate backers have less power to sicken eaters—us—with pesticides, herbicides, GMOs and other toxins that destroy soils, air, water and the entire web of life.

Such acts of affection and care are revolutionary, down to earth. They are a celebration of people's power. They are initiatives of common people over nation-state and corporate tyrannies. They are entwined with seeking alternatives to mainstream, modern education by creating their own pathways to learning-teaching in freedom. They are grounded in common sense: common women and men rooting autonomy, self-governance and transparent self-determination on the local, human scale.

References

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Madhu Suri Prakash is Professor Emerita at Penn State University. Her labors of love include: Friendship Garden through organic contagion; honoring wild diversity in living, teaching and learning, along the lines of Unitierra (Mexico), Bija Vidyapeeth, Bhoomi College (India) and Via Campesina universities; healing damaged multicultural rainbow coalitions across the earth and transforming lawnsapes into foodscapes. She celebrates *YES! Powerful Ideas, Practical Actions* as contributing editor and the *International Journal of Illich Studies* as Co-Editor.