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Patriotism and Dual Citizenship

Patricia Gándara

I am a citizen of two countries—the United States and Mexico—and I have a deep love of both, for different reasons. I believe that being a citizen of two countries allows me to be a partial outsider in each, which perhaps gives me an uncommon perspective on both. I know that there are those who argue that it's impossible to be truly loyal to one country if one is also a citizen of another, and there are those for whom any criticism of one's country is tantamount to treason. I reject both of those positions.

First, I believe that a patriot is a person who loves his or her country and therefore wants it to be the best it is capable of being. The United States has been the leader of the free world for most of the time that the majority of us alive today have existed. This sets a unique standard. I believe this means that we should not only be the best we can be for ourselves, but that we should also set an example for those we would lead. Importantly, to be a good leader, it is essential to know something about those one is leading. In other words, it is helpful to know what makes other countries good, or even best, at some things in order to build on those strengths and perhaps adopt them whenever possible, as well as to lead in a way that acknowledges the strengths of others. This, in my mind, is precisely why promising to “Make America Great Again” is antithetical to true leadership. Making America “great” without helping those we hope to lead also be “great” is the very abandonment of leadership and therefore false patriotism.

I believe that the United States is an amazing country and that it holds a unique set of values that reflect a deep desire for goodness. Americans believe in equity, and this is reflected in a governing constitution that gives anyone born in the country full citizenship, including the vote. And we wrote equality of opportunity into our laws with the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. Americans also believe deeply in second chances, and so we build institutions that are meant to be, at least to some degree, open to everyone (e.g., community colleges where students can redeem a weak academic record and go on to excel in a prestigious university). We have struggled, and not infrequently failed, to live up to these values, but we are also a country with a conscience, and we believe in the right of citizens to demand that the nation live up to its principles.

The United States is also known for its efficiency, and efficiency can be related to opportunity. In an inefficient economy, only the well-off can afford the time and have the levers to make institutions work. The poor cannot. But efficiency also comes with a price. Americans are direct, perhaps to a fault. The Mexican economy is not nearly as efficient, but a Mexican CEO would never begin a conversation without first inquiring for your health and your family. Inefficient use of time? Maybe. But it builds bonds that make cooperative endeavors much more likely and probably leads to fewer conflicts.

One of the things that being a citizen of Mexico has taught me is that a great attribute of the United States is its culture of organizing. The United States is a country of enormous creativity, a “can do” spirit, and an aptitude for organizing. Got a problem in the neighborhood? Organize! Got a government that is abhorrent? Organize! See a need? Organize and donate! Mexico does not have this tradition, and its

absence is deeply felt in civil society. Americans have also developed a tradition of philanthropy that is not so common in other places. Mexico is only just beginning to discover this, but it's not in the Mexican DNA. In the United States there is a tradition of believing that if you manage to become very wealthy, you owe something back. This has allowed the United States to address needs that would otherwise go unmet and to create institutions that have enriched the society.

But there is another way in which Americans are not so generous. We are not as generous in our human interactions as are Mexicans. Step into an elevator in the United States, and if there are other people already in it, I bet you look the other way and don't acknowledge anyone else. That doesn't happen in Mexico. Others will greet you, wish you a good day, say goodbye when you exit. Sit down at a restaurant, and as you order, the table next to you is likely to wish you a pleasant meal. That would almost never happen in the United States. When you are introduced to the friend of someone you know, it is expected that you will greet them with a kiss, and maybe even a little hug. For many Americans these are invasions of personal space. While these may seem like minor cultural differences, I think they also reflect a different sense of humanity. It is, perhaps, a byproduct of American individualism—every person for themselves. I think we could be a better nation if we lived our connections to others more intimately—if we weren't so protective of our “personal space” or so tied to a belief in individual merit.

Along with American “rugged individualism” comes the notion of American exceptionalism—the idea that we Americans are so unique that we can't learn from anyone else. I've heard countless complaints from people in other countries about the absolute lack of knowledge about any place other than the United States that most Americans exhibit. Meanwhile, Mexicans know a great deal about the United States. Newspapers routinely carry stories about US politics and current events, as does television news. Mexicans also know a great deal more than we Americans do about what is happening in the rest of the world. If we were a little less self-absorbed and a little more curious about other countries, we would know that Mexico offers preschool to virtually all of its children by age three and that in the last couple decades, the United States has fallen from first place to 19th among OECD countries in the rate of college completion. Ignorance of these facts—and the failure to examine how and why other countries have achieved these goals—has critical implications for the future of the United States.

Finally, Mexicans have a deeply passionate love of country. It is not about its wealth or power but about its lived culture. In the United States we pride ourselves on being “a nation of immigrants”—of many cultures—but in reality, we often reject those cultures as inferior. This has never been more evident than today, with the closing of our borders. If our love of country were more closely tied to its unique strength—its cultural diversity, which is a source of much creativity—we might be a better and more humane country.

So, what does patriotism mean to me? It means loving two countries for the good things that each offers the world, appreciating the uniqueness of each, and also noticing and calling out the areas that fall short of what each CAN be. Pledging allegiance to two nations allows me to compare the strengths and weaknesses of each and to see the possibilities for both being better nations by learning from each other.



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