

Disputation CCLI

September 29th, 2022

Dear Peucinians,

“Love your labor” you proudly proclaimed last week, but what of country? Tonight, we consider the *patria* -

RESOLVED: AMERICAN CULTURE OUGHT BE UNIFIED THROUGH PATRIOTISM.

Affirmative: Chief Kondiaronk ‘24

Negative: Alexander Papanikolaou ‘23

Patriotism in our Enlightenment regime is a fickle thing. Indeed, it appears to be a *passion* – a love that exists beyond (or at least outside of) the rational. Yet, Kondiaronk will recast patriotism here to something *deeply rational*. That is, the Affirmative will challenge us to consider the truth of our values. Should we, Americans who have chosen to continue to live in this country, hold its values to be truth, as most conducive to our flourishing, as best? And, assuming we are *living intentionally* and picking regimes that embody dignifying truths, shouldn't we view the American experiment as superior? I'm reminded of Allan Bloom's eloquent defense of prejudice in *The Closing of the American Mind*, a Society favorite. Is believing that your nation's values aren't special or cannot be judged just a form of a most insidious cultural relativism that “destroys both one's own and the good.” One ought not be indifferent in the search for the Good Life – and the Affirmative casts the values proposed by the American Founders to be an encapsulation of it. This prejudice, pride, belief, etc. in these values is a form of patriotism proposed tonight.

It is worth distinguishing between a patriotism from love of soil and that from love of values. Tocqueville differentiates between an instinctive love and a reflective love of country. He elevates a reflective love – one come to after deliberation and consideration of interest – however “less generous, less ardent” to be “more fruitful and more lasting.” This reflective patriotism arises as “man understands the influence that the well-being of the country has on his own; he knows that the law permits him to contribute to producing this well-being, and he interests himself in the prosperity of his country at first as a thing that is useful to him, and afterwards as his own work.” We – Americans, guests (if not citizens) of the township-filled northeast – surely have so much not just to be proud of but also to *benefit* from participation in the American Republic. We boast some of the world's finest educational institutions, a robust and dignified social safety net, remarkable institutional stability, and a leading military.

Yet, patriotism based on interest may not be enough. Kondiaronk looks to our values as *more perfect* embodiments of truths concerning human nature. This, though, is still based on rationality. Heeding Burke's caution that rationality be a scarce resource found in man, le Rat pushes us to a more *religious* and *impassioned* patriotism. Interests – however (mis)calculated) – may be at odds with each other. Further, rational judgements may be overcome by lusting for material, wealth, and glory. One's *patria*, idealized and abstracted, can become the object of

erotic longing. Passion for country (a unified, dignified whole bigger than ourselves) may subvert if not overcome these base(r) passions. It seems there is something to have reverence for our Founding.

Patriotism (even held towards a liberal regime) becomes questionably incompatible when we assert a superiority of our own values. A division, a distinction between friend and enemy arises. Neoconservative longings for regime change (or, rather, evangelization of the American Gospel) come to mind. International institutions tout a coming together – is patriotism inherently at odds with this project?

The Negative sees a unification through and at the nation-state level to be misguided. However religious, however erotically Kondiaronk argues, base self-interest will undermine the political community. Earmarks and pork barrel spending are perhaps evidence of the doomed endeavor towards the ‘national.’ Instead, Mr. Papanikolaou proposes a radical decentralization of identity: a focus on the individual. It is our shared, common humanity that may provide a gateway to unification and peaceful coexistence. A culture of love - rather than power of the state, abstract ideas and principles, and [fancy monuments in far off lands](#) – promises to uphold civilization.

What even is the ‘American’ identify the Affirmative would have us assimilate into? United States history is flawed, to say the least. Slavery, Jim Crow, and colonialism mar any utopian vision the Affirmative may set before us.

Yet, in some ways, it is the *abstract idea* of our American values (and our love of them) that allows us to overcome and aspire to something higher than disappointing episodes in our nation’s history. Yes, it is these values – never the history – that has guided social movements since this country’s founding. Further, if there is no overarching identity or ideal, then how does a state mobilize in times of crisis? What happens to the concept of the political, perhaps no longer held by the state? At the same time, the Affirmative must distinguish itself from a blind nationalism (or must it?) That is, indulging us in our passions, when will we know to stop? What will prevent us from being consumed by them?

It is the unique and peculiar geography of this continent that makes us consider Union. The United States is (or ought be ‘are’?) removed from any meaningful foreign adversary. Collective identity in the national government has provided great security for what would otherwise be middling states of modest size and economic power. Our climates and station are diverse. I, for one, hail from a city surrounded by corn. History is younger there: George Pogue arrived in 1819 not 1620. “McCormick,” “Glick,” and “Lilly” may mean nothing to you – then again, neither do the histories, the culture, the genius loci of your homes to me.

How bizarre, how puzzling, how moving it is, then, that on a hill in Pennsylvania on a hot summer day in 1863 a depleted and exhausted unit from Maine stood fast and charged not for their neighbors from Maine but a shared standard more foreign and abstract than the material acquaintances of one’s home. I suppose tonight we decide if this image be beautiful. Do we commend those 360,222 Union deaths who fought to preserve a collective identity, however forced and challenged? Is there something more than the political issues of their day to their cause?

More fundamentally, we ask tonight how much we should give to the state – our neighbors, each other, our friends. We ask who our friends really may be: should we pretend a distant farmer or banker shares our interest? Or, if they do not, how much ought we sacrifice our individualism for something *higher*? Perhaps this sacrifice of (rational) interest is ennobling. Or maybe Socrates was ugly.

I offer as suggested reading Lincoln’s Lyceum Address, which can be found [here](#). (Perhaps a most predictable prescription). It is a touching (and perhaps convincing) reflection on lawlessness, citizenship, and civil religion. I do hope you’ll find time to read at least portions of it.

Peucinian Society Disputation CCLI
Thursday, September 29th, 7:45pm*
Faculty Room, 3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall**
Business Casual Attire Encouraged***

Sincerely yours,
Abraham Lincoln
PRESIDENT, Peucinian Society

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus

*Members are encouraged to socialize beginning at 7:45; orations will begin promptly at 8:10.

**Like many of the College’s activities and classes, Disputations are held in an inaccessible space, reachable only by stairs. If you would like to attend and this poses a challenge for you, contact the Society President at hredelma@bowdoin.edu

***In the spirit of Machiavelli, members have traditionally “take[n] off [their] clothes of day... [and] put on [their] regal and courtly garments” to demarcate Thursday evenings as a special time to “enter the courts of ancient men.” Interpretation of elevated dress varies widely by identity and culture. While encouraged, it is never required nor expected. Above all else, whatever form it may take, come dressed in garments that allow comfortable participation in a rigorous intellectual conversation amongst friends.