

Flag, Fetish and Illusory Community

Friday 4 May 2012, by [OLLMAN Bertell](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2012).

Contents

- [The State, Alienation and \(...\)](#)
- [Patriotism and the Rise of \(...\)](#)
- [What Do We Do About It?](#)

PATRIOTISM IS USUALLY understood as “love of country.” With the help of Marx’s theories of the state and of alienation, we explore what is meant by “love” and “country” in this definition. By viewing society as a contradictory relation between a social community, based on the cooperation required by the existing division of labor, and an illusory community dominated by the interests of the ruling economic class, it will become apparent that the “country” which patriots love (the social community) is not the country they actually live in (the illusory community).

The “love of country” that patriots feel is akin to a yearning for the solidarity and mutual concern that exists within the social community, but has no place in the illusory one. Patriotic symbols, particularly the flag, enable the Government of the illusory community to redirect these sentiments into support for the regime’s political agenda.

Crucial to this effort is the dual character of these symbols as both symbols and fetishes: The alienated human powers employed in the creation of these entities come to be viewed as the latter’s own natural qualities, to which the very people from whom they came must now respond.

The Government’s privileged position as the “voice” of the fetish (the official interpreter of what it means and/or calls for on any occasion) derives from its perceived legitimacy as the supreme organ of the social community. But when — as at the present moment in the United States — this legitimacy has waned, patriotic fetishes are forced to do the double work of supporting the Government’s exclusive control over them, as well as the specific uses to which this control is put.

Is this too great a load for these fetishes to bear?

In the Crimean War, an English officer misinterpreted an order and directed a cavalry charge against a heavily fortified Russian position that led to the slaughter of the entire company of six hundred men. Rather than fault the officer or question the sense of the soldiers who unquestioningly committed suicide, the poet Tennyson famously wrote:

*Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the Valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.*

The message is clear: in war, patriotism consists in following orders without considering whether they are right or wrong, or even if they make any sense. “Love of country” becomes unquestioning

obedience to the country's government. George Bernard Shaw once compared this attitude to "my mother, drunk or sober," which the philosopher John Sommerville rightly amended to "my mother's lawyer, drunk or sober," since the existing government is not the country but only an agent currently acting in its name.

Taken together, Tennyson, Shaw and Sommerville offer a neat summary of what patriotism is and the more critical doubts it raises. But the mystery of patriotism — what drives it, where does it come from, and how does it work? — continues to elude us. To unravel this mystery, which seems to become more clouded with each new patriotic outburst, is the aim of our essay.

The State, Alienation and Patriotism

Why was the biggest Governmental assault on the American Bill of Rights in the last 200 years packaged as the "USA PATRIOT Act," and why is the favorite rebuke directed against those who criticize it is that they/we are unpatriotic? Do I need to tell you that this "patriotism" is particularly dangerous to the Left, because it both isolates and confuses us?

Outbursts of patriotism, such as occurred after 9/11, also put us on a collision course with the very people we want most to influence, since workers are often the most enthusiastic patriots. It also leads to the easy dismissal of our criticisms and can even threaten our jobs, friendships and personal security.

Some have even suggested that patriotism among workers in the United States and other capitalist countries was the main psychological barrier to socialist revolution in the 20th century. If this is an exaggeration, it is not a very big one. Obviously, we need to understand "love of country" much better than we do.

Marxist theories of the state and of alienation have something to teach us about the nature of patriotism. There are, of course, at least two other Marxist-inspired approaches pertaining to this subject. One passes through the study of the nation, its history and culture, and the peculiar identity it provides to those who live (or lived) in it. The other treats patriotism as ideology, and examines where it distorts reality and how such distortions serve ruling-class interests.

While both of these approaches cast important light on our subject, I believe that Marx's theories of the state and of alienation offer the most fruitful approach.

The main focus of Marx's theory of the state is on the relation between the ruling economic class and the political means it uses, directly or indirectly, to rule. For grasping patriotism, however, another less known and much less used aspect of this theory merits our attention: Marx's view of the state as an illusory community.

Marx posits that we all belong to two overlapping communities. The first is the social community, which derives from the initial division of labor that assigns people different tasks and makes a certain amount of cooperation necessary if everyone's basic needs are to be satisfied. Most people have a general, if vague, understanding of their interdependence in this community and appreciation for what others contribute to their well-being.

There is also an emotional side to this experience, the feeling of deep satisfaction and inner security that accompanies most forms of cooperation and membership in a community that treats helping others and being helped by them as matters of course.

Marx calls the second community to which we all belong the “illusory community.” It contains the same people and involves the same interdependence — that’s why it is a community. But here one class holds economic and political power and uses it to present its distinctive class interests as the general interests (or, as we now say, the “national interests”) or what is good for everyone. This is why it is an “illusory” community — a society that seems to belong to everyone and to be concerned with all who contribute to it, but really belongs to its ruling class and is only concerned with them and those whose help they rely on to rule.

Here the real interdependence, which continues to exist, gets shaped into various social, economic and political rules and institutions that privilege the special interests of this class. For these rules to be followed and the institutions that embody them to work efficiently, however, the ruling class needs to construct an ideology that hides and/or defends its special privileges, making use of those very sentiments of solidarity and mutual concern that its own organization of society has dismissed as irrelevant.

Throughout class history, but especially under capitalism, patriotism — whether under this or some other label — has always stood at the center of this ideology. Marx’s notion of “illusory community” extends to the alienated activities that produce (and continue to reproduce) it, as well as its contradictory relation to the social community, as essential parts of what the “illusory community” is.

But how can the ruling class evoke beliefs and emotions associated with the social community from a populace whose daily lives are ordered by the illusory community? How can the rulers do this without revealing their own narrow class interests? And how can the populace give vent to beliefs and feelings, rooted in social connectedness, without threatening the very structures that squelch social solidarity?

While patriotism is an amalgam of beliefs and emotions, the latter deserve to be treated first. Most patriotic ideas, after all, are largely rationalizations for feelings, and many patriots seem willing to act on these feelings in the absence of any serious attempt to make sense of them. The Americanism Commander of the Wisconsin American Legion (yes, there is such an office), for example, once assured me that even though he didn’t know what the “American way of life” was, I should have no doubt about his willingness to die for it.

What is the key emotion that triggers such patriotic reactions? In my opinion it’s not “love,” as ordinarily understood, and not pride or anger or fear or hatred, though all of these are present to different degrees and in various combinations, depending on the individual and the occasion or provocation. Underpinning all these feelings, providing the emotional fuel as it were for the entire process, is the drive for social connectedness, for community, the need to belong to a group in which one counts and for which one counts (or thinks one does), and the pleasure we get when this need is satisfied.

Patriotism feels good, something most radicals — including this one — have had a difficult time coming to terms with. Things that feel good, generally, are those that serve a basic need that is not being met. Think of how good we feel when our pressing needs for food or sex are satisfied. I believe something very similar applies to patriotism, but the need in this case is not for patriotism as such but for something else that in present circumstances is best satisfied — if only in a partial and distorted manner — by patriotism.

At issue are the genuine human needs for fellowship and recognition that come from our membership in the human species, as well as a historically conditioned social need for solidarity that arises out of our experience of cooperation in the social community. In a life where people are

constantly in competition with one another, however, where sharing and showing mutual concern are usually penalized and even ridiculed — in short, in the illusory community — there are few occasions to express feelings of fellowship.

Hence, almost any opportunity for collective display is greedily taken up — praying together in church, or cheering together at sporting events, or singing and swaying together at concerts, or marching together in parades. There is a great hunger for community here, one that people's current lives as workers, students, consumers and citizens — even with the addition of religion, mass spectator sports, music, dance and parades — does not and cannot satisfy, but that patriotism can and, in its peculiar way, does.

Patriotism offers people the opportunity to vent their deepest communal emotions in all venues, twenty-four hours a day, in a socially acceptable, indeed socially praiseworthy way. For the emotionally hungry, this is heady fare. It is experienced as very pleasurable, and returning to the table again and again for more is hard to resist.

The human drive for recognition plays a similar role. This is not simply a matter of wanting others to know that we exist, but of respecting who we are and what we do. When that happens, we feel pride, but when it doesn't we feel empty and even humiliated. But given the lives most people lead in our society, how often do they feel pride? How often do they feel humiliated? Patriotism helps satisfy this drive for recognition by substituting the country to which we belong for the individual, and the pride evoked by the country's achievements (real or imagined) for the absence of pride in ourselves.

To prolong the pleasure they get from such recognition, people may be ready to make all sorts of personal sacrifices. When President Kennedy famously said to his fellow Americans, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country," he was tapping into this sentiment. As a mode that privileges feeling over thinking, patriotism also allows people to lose themselves in the moment, to "surrender" to their emotions and stop thinking altogether in lives full of problems with no easy solutions.

There is also a tragic dimension to patriotism, of course: It is not only about people's willingness to sacrifice on behalf of "country," but about making a connection to those who have already "made the ultimate sacrifice." The community that patriotic people strive to realize then stretches back to include our fallen soldiers, and an attempt is made to identify with their cause and the commitment they are supposed to have brought to it.

Soldiers in time of war offer us an exaggerated form of patriotism, but also represent the ideal form put forward for everyone to emulate in times of peace. Military funerals, memorials and cemeteries all testify to the importance our culture gives to establishing these bonds and to building a popular reflex upon the military model. So patriotism can, on occasion, evoke tears as well as pleasure, but in the absence of any alternative, that too can be satisfying if it provides some relief for the mourners' pain.

From the point of view of the emotions involved, then, patriotism would appear to resemble a simmering volcano with periodic eruptions, some of which are powerful enough to destroy everything in its path. For this to occur, however, requires the help of symbols like the flag, the anthem, the Pledge of Allegiance, various monuments and so on. The symbols arouse patriotism, they promote it, they channel it, they give it a language, traditions, ceremonies. But most important of all, they set out its immediate object — what it is that we are supposed to "love" and for which we must be ready to sacrifice — and it is nothing that the people addressed can actually recognize. All of our real life experiences are missing.

The reason for this should be obvious. No soldier is going to run toward machine gun fire on behalf of the flesh and blood people who live across town from him — too many of whom are the wrong color, go to the wrong church, or speak with the wrong accent. He also doesn't like a great deal about his own actual "way of life" whether at home, in school or at work, none of which is much worth dying or killing for. What is left, then, is a kind of lowest common denominator, what Americans supposedly have in common, a ghostly abstraction that we honor with the name "country."

This is the country at which all our patriotic symbols point. Voided of all specifics regarding who is doing what to whom and why, the country so understood retains all its secrets, and the illusory community remains as mystified and therefore as secure as ever.

On the other hand, the very vagueness of the notion of "country" allows people to conflate it with the social community, and to react to the patriotic symbols put forward by the former as if they were true expressions of the latter. Patriotic symbols can now be the bridge over which the positive emotions generated by the social community pass into actually existing class society.

If my interpretation of patriotism gives so much weight to patriotic symbols, it is because I consider them much more than symbols (representations, signs, or indications). They are also "products," products of alienated political activity. To pursue this point, we must turn to Marx's theory of alienation — for the flag, the anthem and the various monuments would not succeed so well in their symbolic work if they did not also embody some of the powers that people have lost.

The English poet Wordsworth offers one of the best brief summaries of Marx's theory of alienation when he writes, "Things are in the saddle and they ride mankind." Marx was chiefly concerned to demonstrate how this worked in the economic sphere of our lives where, under conditions of capitalism, workers' sale of their labor power leave them without any control over its use and final product.

Then, in a series of metamorphoses or transformations, which arise out of the buying and selling in the market, these products take on forms — value, commodity, capital, money, profit, interest, rent and wage-labor — which hide their origins in alienated productive activity, assuming a mysterious power over the lives of their own creators. This is most evident in the case of money, the exchange form of commodities, or the general means by which value circulates among those who have a legal claim to some part of it.

On one occasion, Marx calls money "the alienated ability of mankind." It is what workers once were but no longer are, what they have lost — essentially, mastery over the world that they have made — in the very process of transferring this power to the various value forms of their product and eventually to money. Now money "talks," money decides, money disposes — all of which is (mis)taken as coming from the nature of money as such — and people, from whom this power came, who are forced to submit.

The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, from whom Marx borrowed the basic structure for his theory of alienation, said something very similar about religion. The believer's religious activities, such as praying, going to church and the like, are seen to create a unique religious product, a god, an other-worldly projection of human qualities — mainly reason, creative power and love — that are used and given up in the very activities designed to serve him.

This god, as the immediate and most general product of alienated religious activity, undergoes a series of metamorphoses which transfer some part of his "divine" qualities to the objects, places and people (crosses, churches, saints, etc.) associated with him. These are then thought to contain the

same powers lost in creating god, and religious people react to them accordingly.

In both the economic and religious realms, then, products of alienated activities are used to mystify and manipulate their own producers as they come under the control of a group of people — whether capitalists in the economy or priests, ministers and rabbis in religion.

The latter use their control — over the various forms of value in one case, and of god-objects in the other — to dictate what are the acceptable ways of dealing with them (using money to buy what one needs, praying with a Bible in church when that proves insufficient, and so on). But directing the manner in which these alienated products can be used also helps shape the alienated activities that are responsible for producing them.

The same pattern of relations that we see above can be found in our political life, where people in their capacity as citizens engage in a variety of alienated political activities in conditions and for ends controlled by others who have different and opposed interests. In the political sphere, the State is the alienated product to which citizens have transferred most of their power — above all, the distinctively human power to organize our lives together, as mutually dependent and cooperating members of society (with all the thinking and feeling that goes into that).

Then, as occurs with value in the economy and with god in religion, these human powers or abilities get metamorphosed into a variety of concrete forms — institutions, constitutions, laws, traditions and symbols (like the flag). Again as in the economic and religious spheres, these forms are used to mystify and manipulate the very people whose alienated activity has given rise to them, because they are under the control of a small group, a political elite in this case, who have interests opposed to theirs. And the most important of these interests is the precisely the reproduction of the conditions that give them their control.

Money, the cross and the flag, then, are all products of alienated activities in different spheres of life, powers that mystify and dominate our existence, in sum “things...in the saddle...[that] ride mankind.” The role that symbols play as the chief mediator between patriotic people and the community makes it appear, over time, that the symbols themselves have the power to dominate whatever it is that they bring together.

Marx refers to the natural (really supernatural) power that people attribute to such things as money, crosses and the flag as “fetishism.” In every case, something that was meant to facilitate our connection to, interpret or make available to us some part of the world that we deem necessary for our existence, has taken on the appearance of a prime mover, and people surrender to what they take to be its will.

Rather than a symbol that points to the country, the flag has come to substitute for the country. A recent letter writer to the New York Times admitted as much when he declared his undying love for “the country and the flag for which it stands.” Again, when the New York Post announced in a front page headline on Iraq, “They Died for the Flag,” the claim was probably and all too sadly true.

If the flag as patriotic symbol reveals something about the country that is so vague and general that people can view it as the social rather than the illusory community, in its role as fetish the flag blocks our view of the country altogether. In reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, for example, what patriot ever pauses to consider its obviously false description of our country as “one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all”? [\[1\]](#)

This oath begins, you will recall, with a pledge of allegiance to the flag; the country “for which it stands” comes afterward. Since the mental and emotional space put aside for the country has already

been filled by the flag, there is hardly anything that could be said about the country that would get our patriot's attention. Few things have frustrated and mystified radical critics more than this indifference (not disagreement, but indifference) to even the most damning facts about the country for which patriots are so willing to sacrifice.

The explanation lies in the essential fetishistic character of the flag and other patriotic symbols. The symbols, however, need to be interpreted. To say what they mean and what they require of us, there must be always a Wizard of Oz calling signals from behind a drawn curtain. The Government, and in the United States especially the President as head of state, are in the best position to be the voice of the flag.

As we know, in class societies the state does not serve everyone equally. Its main efforts are directed to helping the class that rules over the economy reproduce the conditions of its existence as the ruling class. But to do this job well, the state has to appear legitimate in the eyes of most of its citizens, which requires above all else that its consistent bias on behalf of the capitalist ruling class be hidden from view. The flag and other patriotic symbols are crucial to the success of this effort.

In the United States, the main forces that legitimate our capitalist state are the Constitution, the Supreme Court, and democratic elections (with the emphasis on "democratic"). But with the evidence of pro-capitalist bias in the Constitution, the Supreme Court and elections so widespread and easy to find, the Government is in constant danger of losing the legitimacy it needs to function effectively. To forestall such a catastrophe, the Government has become very adept in using our patriotic symbols as fetishes. In delivering all his public speeches standing before a wall of American flags, for example, George W. Bush was not only voicing what this patriotic symbol would have us do but using it to legitimate his own right to speak on its behalf.

Just before the outburst of patriotism that followed the events of 9/11/2001, the American state suffered its greatest loss of legitimacy in the entire history of the Republic. I am thinking not only of the losing candidate being installed as President, but of the highly publicized vote fraud in Florida and the straight political vote in the Supreme Court that sought to whitewash it.

Neither the authority conferred by democratic elections (based supposedly on the principle of majority rule) nor the Supreme Court (based, supposedly, on the principle of the rule of law) could play its customary role in legitimating the incoming Administration. When we add to this the hundreds of millions of dollars of corporate money used to buy the election and Bush's non-existent qualifications for the job, the new Government probably had less legitimacy, and with it less ability to promote its agenda, than any of its modern predecessors.

Perhaps no Government in our entire history needed an attack on our country so it could play the patriotic card as badly as this one. It came, and, as far as Bush's legitimacy is concerned, just in the nick of time.

Patriotism and the Rise of Capitalism

Having described the nature of patriotism in general and how it actually works, we are now in a position to answer a few of the most frequently asked questions about it:

- What is the relation between capitalism, particularly democratic capitalism, and patriotism?
- Is there more patriotism in the United States than in other capitalist countries, and if so, why?

- Based on this analysis, what political strategies should the Left adopt for dealing with patriotism — particularly, but not only, in the United States?

First, why does patriotism become so much more important under capitalism? The connection of patriotism with capitalism comes through the rise of a centralized state that the rising capitalist class requires to best serve its interests. In replacing older and especially feudal forms of political rule, the new state also overturned the main bases of their legitimation (the divine right of kings, tradition and longevity).

New forms of legitimation had to be found and/or constructed. Shared ethnic, religious, racial or cultural characteristics were used wherever they existed. To these were added, in whatever combination these qualities allowed, a national identity that came from simply living in the territory under the control of a particular state. The purpose of this new identity was twofold: to help people distinguish themselves from those who lived across the national borders, especially when ethnic, religious and racial identities overlapped, and to hide — or trivialize where that wasn't possible — the class divisions and conflicts within each society.

If the first purpose received more overt attention, the second, largely implicit aim has always been more important. Only when class feelings became subordinate to patriotic ones could the interests of the ruling economic class take on the appearance of the national interest, and become a key part of everyone's national identity.

But patriotism also allows democracy to serve as the main legitimating mechanism in the capitalist period. Beside the repression that is a staple of state activity in all class societies, the capitalist state must also help its ruling economic class to accumulate capital and realize value (sell the finished products). Not to do so is to risk the very future of the system.

The striking class bias displayed, particularly in the laws, judicial interpretations and administrative decisions that flesh them out, is too dangerous to the interests that have come out on top to leave unattended. So in coordination with the rest of the consciousness industry, the state does its best to disguise and naturalize this bias — and eventually and most effectively of all, to treat it as something freely chosen by the majority of people in a democratic election. How can one dispute what appears to be the popular will?

Furthermore, the distinctive manner in which the capitalist class extracts the surplus from those who produce all the wealth in our society — through a “free” exchange of labor-power for a wage — puts limits on the use of direct force in obtaining their ends. The philosopher Stanley Moore has noted the tendency that “when exploitation takes the form of exchange, dictatorship takes the form of democracy.”

Workers simply must believe that they are free politically in order for them to believe that they are free economically to accept (or reject) a wage in exchange for their labor-power. With all the economic pressures operating on them, this is only partly true at best, but in the presence of political democracy this is enough for them to view their work relations as legitimate and to produce as much and as efficiently as they do.

Thus, whatever democracy's many positive virtues, and despite all the popular struggles that have helped to bring it to life, the main role of democracy in the capitalist era is to legitimate existing social relations and the state's part in reproducing them.

But if democracy really represents the popular will, how can capitalists be sure that, from their point of view, the people will act “responsibly”? The state's efforts to ensure that no anti-capitalist party

can win only provides further evidence for the partisanship it is trying to hide. Under these circumstances, many on the Left continue to wonder how capitalist parties (in which I include the Social Democrats) that offer voters so much less than they want can keep on winning all the elections.

The answer, I believe, lies less in their programs than in the flag and other patriotic symbols with which these programs come wrapped. Most workers vote against their class interests because they “love” their “country.” Conditioned by their early socialization and urged on by the capitalist media, they feel this as a patriotic duty (and pleasure, alienating though it be). It is in this way that patriotism allows democracy to do what capitalism requires of it.

Second, why is patriotism a seemingly bigger problem in the United States than elsewhere? Why, long before 9/11 and in more-or-less peacetime, have Americans have shown more devotion toward the flag than citizens of other capitalist countries? This, too, calls for an explanation.

I would place greatest weight on the fact that the United States, unlike most of its competitors, could never rely on a dominant ethnic, religious or racial identity to provide the needed national cohesiveness, although it often tried to do so (our “white nation,” “Judeo-Christian nation,” etc.). This left people’s shared identity as citizens as the only workable basis for uniting them behind the Government, and led to the Government’s outsized dependence on political forms of legitimation.

The U.S. Civil War brought on the first great crisis in national consciousness, when both defeated southerners and newly freed Blacks had great difficulty thinking of themselves as citizens. Taken together with the huge increase in immigration that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th century, particularly from eastern and southern Europe (areas in which many people had begun to think of themselves in class terms and as socialists), it became evident that the state needed to get more directly involved in instilling the sense of national identity on which so much of its own legitimacy depended.

It was during this period, between the Civil War and World War I, that most of our patriotic symbols, rites and traditions were birthed and entrenched in our system of education.

In more recent times, especially after World War II, American patriotism has received a boost from two other features that set this country apart from the rest of the world. The first is the United States’ standing as the richest and most powerful nation in history, which makes it seem that the country/nation/state/Government deserves all the praise we can offer and also gives its citizens the right (and the duty) to take pride in it, and in ourselves as parts of it.

This is not very different from what football fans feel whenever the home team rises to the top of the standings. It is worth recalling too, in this connection, the importance of mass spectator sports in American life.

The second feature that has come to distinguish our polity more and more is the belief that our country, no matter what party is in power, has always been in the forefront of the struggle for democracy, human rights and freedom everywhere. According to the prevailing ideology, these are America’s main exports to the rest of the world — even if the bloody record of U.S. imperialism from the theft of Indian lands forward, and particularly today, presents plenty of evidence to the contrary.

Some of this record even filters through to the media and system of education, only to get written off by most patriots as “liberal propaganda” or, if true, as minor, temporary, the result of a leader’s personal failings, or a necessary step toward some greater human good.

Do American patriots really believe, then, that our “national interests” coincide with what is best for the rest of the world? Leaving our rulers aside, I think most really do, and that this belief provides a major rationale for their behavior. It also allows some patriots to use their universalistic religious beliefs to undergird their narrow national aspirations. The result is a unique mixture of naivete and self-righteousness that true believers misconstrue as idealism, and the world knows as “American patriotism.”

The fact that patriotic symbols, as we saw, are also fetishes suggests what is involved. Who says “fetishism” says “alienation,” and the enormous progress of American capitalism with its accompanying spread of commodification has extended the separation between each individual and his/her activity, product and others to a degree realized nowhere else — and produced the most alienated people in the world.

Despite their affluence (in part because of it), the painful isolation, constant competition, mutual indifference and multiple disempowerment from which so many Americans suffer has given rise to an intense longing for community that nothing in their daily lives can satisfy. There should be no surprise, then, that products of their alienated political activity, such as the flag, which deliver even a pale reflection of the community they have lost, should exercise so much power over them.

What Do We Do About It?

American patriotism/nationalism does not have to remain a mystery. To briefly repeat, the “country” that patriots/nationalists say they love is essentially the social community, and the “love” they feel for it is akin to a yearning for the solidarity and mutual concern that characterizes the social community but has no place in the illusory one.

Using patriotic/nationalist symbols, particularly the flag, the Government of the illusory community is able to redirect these sentiments into support for its legitimacy and political agenda. Crucial to the success of this effort is the dual character of these symbols as both symbols and fetishes.

I asked at the outset: Is this too great a burden for these fetishes to bear?

The answer to this question depends as much on what we do as on the logic of the events unfolding before us.

At the bullseye of our target is the state and the class character of its chief institutions, agents, aims, rulings and effects. After identifying the core emotions found in patriotism/nationalism, we must show how they find expression in the fetishes manipulated by a Government of “the one percent.”

There is also much we can do to trivialize, ridicule, disparage and replace many of the interdependent elements found in patriotism/nationalism in all sorts of venues and particularly the schools. I am under no illusion that today’s Left is in a position to take full advantage of these tactics, nor that this is all we must do in countering the threat of growing patriotism/nationalism, or even that this is our most important task right now. Still, given the importance of this ideology to capitalist class rule in general and to Washington’s version of this rule in particular, anything we can do to weaken its hold on people will repay our efforts a thousand-fold.

Bertell Ollman

P.S.

* Against the Current 158, May/June 2012. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] The “under God” piece was inserted in the 1950s, precisely as the society was becoming more secular — ed.