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Where Were You Born, Bruce Springsteen, and What Does It Matter?

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Your origin in space and time makes all the difference to what you are, and what you can become. Great poets and songwriters have long built their bright visions of what is, and what can be, upon the cold facts of location and context. Where were you born?

We know that Bruce Springsteen was born in the U.S.A. More precisely, in Long Branch, New Jersey, on September 23rd, 1949. The Boss traveled a long way from that place. Let us be transported into the past so we can see where he arrived: still in the U.S.A., achieving amazing fame in his home country. His song "Born in the U.S.A." was born on June 4th, 1984 when the album of the same name was released. Springsteen's evocative lyrics launched him into new territory—where was he headed?

Things really started moving fast. The tour buses were waiting. Three weeks later, on June 25th, Patti Scialfa was hired as a backup singer and joined the tour just in time for its opening date at the St. Paul Civic Center in Minnesota on June 29th. The album reached Number One on the Billboard chart on July 7th, a day when the tour was traveling through Ohio for a concert at Richfield Coliseum in Cleveland. Before arriving in East Rutherford, New Jersey, for a home stand of ten shows in early August, the tour had played in Chicago and Detroit, where the blue-collar message resonated with fans old and new.

Word was getting out that this tour was something different. Springsteen and the band didn't need to be told. They could see which song whipped up the audience into the greatest frenzy. The anthem song was obvious, so "Born In The U.S.A." moved up the set list, dramatically starting each New Jersey

concert during mid-August. An immense American flag. The pounding drum kicks in the beat. Bruce Springsteen in leather and jeans, bandanna around his neck, a black headband holding back his hair, his fist hammering the sky. Over the crashing of the music, what could be heard? Something about middle-American troubles and muddled Vietnam regrets. No vagueness about the refrain, though, when Springsteen explains where he was born with manly patriotic pride. The crowd, chanting along with gusto, always seemed to sympathize and understand where this tough-looking singer was coming from.

A real American phenomenon was evident during that summer of 1984. When Springsteen hit the nation's capital on August 25th, playing at the Capital Centre near Washington, D.C., the mainstream media really began to pay attention. Morning news shows and radio talk shows scrambled for something to say. This was Ronald Reagan's morning in America, and the Republican Reagan was running for re-election against Democrat Walter Mondale. Media pundit George Will, a voice of conservatism and informal advisor to Reagan, went to a concert and came away impressed. The tour had moved on to Philadelphia by September 13th, when Will's column in the *Washington Post* proclaimed his witness to "A Yankee Doodle Springsteen." Here were traditional American values cheerfully proclaimed, Will explained, even if he couldn't pin down Springsteen's politics.

Tipped off, Reagan politicos asked if the song could be used for the campaign, but Springsteen refused. Reagan's speechwriters were undeterred. While the tour was headed to Pittsburgh, Reagan's stump speech in Hammonton, New Jersey, on September 19th, included new words: "America's future rests in a thousand dreams inside your hearts; it rests in the message of hope in songs so many young Americans admire: New Jersey's own Bruce Springsteen. And helping you make those dreams come true is what this job of mine is all about."

A week later, as the Born in the U.S.A. tour finished up its eastern leg in Buffalo and headed to the west coast, Mondale said that *his* campaign had Springsteen's endorsement. Springsteen had to deny that, as well—he wasn't ready to be used as a political tool. But what was Springsteen trying to say about America, and who was taking his carefully composed lyrics seriously? Where could Springsteen be located on the cultural landscape?

By mid-December, the single had reached its peak of Number 9 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, and the tour went south for shows in Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia. The hastily assembled video was put on the air for the MTV generation, who saw concert footage of Springsteen and the E Street Band interlaced with working class scenes of celebration and disappointment, of unkempt Vietnam vets and neat cemeteries. And that huge flag at the video's start and finish. The video's scenes accurately imitated the images conjured up by the song's lyrics. Yet this video, like the staccato chorus of "Born in the U.S.A.," may have simplified the poet's message too much. It was too easy for the media and the pundits to categorize Springsteen now. Forget that dark and complicated album *Nebraska*. Such a huge flag! The huge crowds, now waving their own flags. The masses couldn't be smart enough to penetrate into the lyrics, so why should the media bother?

The storyline seemed obvious: Springsteen has decided to go to any extreme as the popular poet-demagogue, speaking up for the dumb and down-and-out. Plenty of other musicians, from rock and pop stars to country and western crooners, had their own laments for the suffering working class. But none of them draped and clothed their visual image with the American flag like the Boss. This was new—and not to be seen again until more tough-looking white men, sporting cowboy hats this time, crooning glorifications of an Iraq war almost twenty years later. But the motif is the same: what better to put the fight back into a bruised and dazed citizen than prideful patriotism? The war eagle and the flag is flying, so chin up! Just the mid-1980s way of warming up the lower and middle classes during the frosts of a prolonged Cold War and an endless wage freeze. Crystal clarity in a song: working class values is American. Pride in testosterone strength is where the U.S.A. is at. If you were born in the U.S.A., like the Boss, you knew your identity. At least that's what many people thought was going on with this song. But could Springsteen really be pinned down so easily?

Identity Politics

Suffering can help to create identity, just as much as place of birth. The white working class, swept up into the conservative revolt of the Reagan revolution, was certainly suffering. Union

jobs were disappearing faster than the industrial factories, while stagflation stole away real earning power. But the white working class was hardly the first segment of America to suffer. African Americans knew all about suffering, as did other ethnic groups. And women too, also recently integrated into the man's world. The list could go on and on.

The many social movements of the 1950s and 1960s treated the suffering of disenfranchised and neglected subgroups with the medicine of pride in one's identity. This was not identity as an individual, not old-fashioned rugged American individualism. In the post-war turbulence of big corporate America, no one could stand alone anymore. The type of identity offered by that era's social consciousness was the identity of the group, the salving balm of sameness. Unions understand the power of identity. So do church denominations, and civil rights leaders. So do politicians.

Too many politicians achieve power by dividing the country. If a politician can forge a unity for a sub-group, and convince that sub-group to make him their champion in a fight against other sub-groups, clinging to office election after election is much easier. To many cynical or lazy eyes, Springsteen appeared to be speaking for the white working class. Many politicians thought they had found an ally. But no one who carefully listened to this musician's albums should have reached that conclusion. Springsteen, drawing on his vast appreciation for rock 'n' roll's roots in the traditions of blues and country, located himself midstream, trying to articulate the shared experiences of the entire Vietnam generation. Allusions and echoes of great artistic predecessors, black and white, permeate "Born in the U.S.A." The song's video is faithful to that integration effort, showing men and women of multiple races sharing a common fate. Whatever your ethnic or gender origin, your birth in the U.S.A. at a certain time and place throws you onto the nation's stage for a performance together with the rest of your cohort. Whatever your specific role in that drama, you are all transformed by your common experience. Is your generation going to experience triumph, like the "Greatest Generation," Tom Brokaw's moniker for the group who fought World War Two, and thereafter feel a solidarity of confidence? Is your generation going to experience defeat, like the people represented in Springsteen's "Born in

the U.S.A" narrative? Suffering can forge a identity no less powerful than triumph.

The politics of suffering can arouse vast energies and organize mass movements. If democracy does anything well, it opens the opportunity for transforming suffering into hope and then possibly into action. But the suffering must be identified as a common factor. People have to look past differences to see the shared suffering. Poets can direct people where to look, by supplying the images for the head and heart to focus on. Poetic songwriters, forced to compress their verse into four and a half minutes, snap together intense and unforgettable images.

Is "Born in the U.S.A" trying to help forge an identity of suffering? The song's narrative captures plenty of suffering, as recounted by a man who was born with nothing and has been kicked around from the very start. No surprise that he gets into a little hometown trouble. Crime is always to be found in a dead end town. Judges often offered military service instead of jail, so off to Vietnam he goes, to kill the hated "yellow man." His only luck is that he gets to come home, but what does he come home to? His hometown is even more dead to him. The refinery won't explain why he can't be hired. His Veterans Administration bureaucrat doesn't want to have to explain why either. Plenty of Americans apparently have enough hate left over from Vietnam to spend on him now too. The only love in the song is the love between his unlucky dead brother and a Saigon woman, and he can see that love in his treasured picture of them. He can't see any future for them, and he can't see any future for himself. No one will talk to him now. Trapped between the cold penitentiary and the burning refinery, he knows that he has nowhere to go. His origin entirely decides his true identity, and then it seals his fate.

Unlike many other Springsteen songs, pregnant with hope and the possibility of redemption, "Born in the U.S.A." ends with hopelessness. This song's America has been delivered to a tragic dead end. No escape down a highway to some better place—this man is born to an early grave. He may have thought he was born to run, but now he's reached the end of the road, right where he started. This song's dramatic images are about more than suffering. This song is about a kind of living death. That's what it is like for this man to be born in the U.S.A. And that is what the song's video ultimately fails to convey. Who'd want to

identify with the hopelessly living dead? Possibly the bleakest and most despairing tune to climb the heights of the hits charts in modern American music, "Born in the U.S.A." is not just another protest song. It arrives too late to be a protest song about the Vietnam War, and too late to be a protest song about the demise of the blue collar union job. The working class doesn't matter anymore, but no one wants to talk about it. It's just too late to be born in the U.S.A.

Few people grasped the full extent of the irony. Sure, it was silly for Reagan to try to attach himself to the weight of the working class blues, since his fast-rising conservative movement sought the demise of unions and deep cuts to social programs that kept the heads of the poor just above turbulent waters. And it was just as silly for liberals to make the opposite mistake of supposing that Springsteen's song held out hope for progressivism either. "Born in the U.S.A" is about the common suffering of the Vietnam generation, yanked from the ranks of the working class, caught in a terrible crossfire of two wars, home and abroad. The jungle war and the class war get jumbled together in the song's images. There are no answers as to why the ultimately misguided and profitless foreign war could be relevant to the interests of the working class in America. The humiliating defeat across the Pacific Ocean, as overloaded helicopters flew away from Vietnam cities, was followed by the humiliating defeat across America's blue collar towns, as factory jobs fled out the country. And there are no answers either for why the working class must bear the brunt of capitalism's unsteady globalization. How ironic that a song about defeat and depression generated such optimism and pride in so many fans.

In "Born in the U.S.A" there just isn't any hope for an America that has already pretty much gone and died. If there is an America that this song celebrates, it is located only in the past. Maybe you can sympathize and identify with the Americans located in that singular cultural place. What sort of mood does this song put you in?

Patriotic Nationalism

Most people bellowing out the refrain of "Born in the U.S.A." at the Boss's rock concerts aren't feeling defeat, humiliation, or despair. Their chant feels cathartic, releasing the built-up energy

created by the tension between the militaristic music and the sad narrative, just as Springsteen intended. What is not clear is whether Springsteen intended for the audience's reaction to be mostly celebratory. His fans needed to direct their erupting energies towards something, anything—and there was that huge flag. Very convenient. More than a few skeptical observers concluded that all that passionate patriotism must be just heated emotion without any real substance. An empty patriotism, having no real answers about what actually makes America great or what could be done to make it better, seems just cheap and easy.

The entire irony of this song's refrain is only revealed upon realizing that passionate nationalism is nothing to be proud of. What does it matter now that you were born in the U.S.A.? According to the song's lyrics, you're just going to die like the man trapped in the song. If you are seeking an identity here, you will only find a hopeless identity, the identity of all those marching together in lock-step towards an early grave. Not much in the song's deflating words to construct a positive identity or to energize a real movement of concrete political activism. But the concert and video images are another story, inflating idealized visions of national unity. The flag flying high represents the national life, still vibrant with pride. If you only focus on the proud refrain, and ignore the shameful reality down on the ground, "Born in the U.S.A." will serve as a new national anthem. Yet we must ask, is this airy and empty pride, attached to no reality but just a symbol, really good for anything? What does it really matter?

National pride can matter. It can matter greatly. Patriotism is usually viewed as the "quick and dirty" means of uniting people, according to twentieth-century liberalism. Liberal theory, in the United States and in England, has been powerfully shaped by Europe's convulsions through two horrible world wars. Passionate nationalism was precisely the method of Germany's leaders for energizing and controlling its population. Strikingly similar to past centuries of bloodshed powered by religious and ethnic strife, twentieth-century hatreds were born in the pride of identity, national identity this time. Is patriotic nationalism good for any country? That depends on the kind of country one wants to have. Germany became obsessed with its perceived weakness, in the face of threatening neighbors. The devastating

defeat of World War One, and the resulting economic collapse, delivered a severe blow to German self-esteem and drove the German people towards a collective paranoia. Adolf Hitler's stunning rise to power through democratic elections cannot be fully explained without accounting for this fertile soil which eagerly received his patriotic rhetoric about the destiny of the "Aryan race." Hitler's dictatorship used every quick and dirty means of capitalizing on the poverty and demoralization of the German people. What really is the German nation? It must simply be the German people, the *Volk*, united by blood and suffering and destiny. Origin matters, especially if it becomes an obsession.

One of the most strident and forceful intellectuals who diagnosed national pride as the carrier of hatred was Carl Schmitt (1888–1985). During the 1920s, this German professor of law and politics drew attention for his claim that real democracy was not constitutional democracy. Constitutions distribute political power too thinly among citizens; constitutions create a forum for too much parliamentary debate that goes nowhere; constitutions place too much restraint on the sovereign's power for doing the country's necessary business. Genuine democracy happens for Schmitt when there is an identity of rulers and ruled, as *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (1923) claims. What is that identity like? No representative deliberative body should get between the sovereign executive power and the good of the people: Germany needs a popular dictator. Throughout the 1930s, Schmitt applauded Hitler's rise to power through elections that gave the Nazi party its life, Hitler's ensuing dominance over Germany's Reichstag legislature, and his subsequent suspension of the constitution. Schmitt especially appreciated how Germany's new dictator justified his suspension of the constitution by declaring a state of national emergency that only the executive office could deal with. In Schmitt's political theory, the modern nation-state survives only by constantly living in the state of emergency, in a state of war. A war needs an enemy—an internal enemy or a foreign enemy. Where do you find an enemy?

Well, finding the enemy is the dictator's problem. Arousing enough hatred for the enemy, so that the dictator's war and state of emergency gains mass approval, is also the dictator's problem. National pride is an obvious solution. Suffering peoples,

despairing peoples, can be fertile soils for the seeds of anger, hatred, and violence. Schmitt was convinced that he had discerned the emotional fuel for national pride. Now you have all the ingredients for totalitarian fascism: supreme power for a beloved dictator who promises to lead the fight against the nation's common enemy. To achieve national unity, Schmitt demands not just national identity, but its logical extreme, national uniformity. In his books Schmitt keeps talking about democracy, but only in his perverse sense. *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* anticipates the German fever of ethnic cleansing and genocide when he says, "Democracy requires, therefore, first homogeneity and second—if the occasion arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity." How could Schmitt really be talking about democracy? Fear of the heterogeneous—the xenophobic fear of anything different—is no longer democracy.

During the 1930s, Schmitt gave up all pretext of describing how democracy should work, defining politics and government in terms very far from democracy's original meaning. Just as the Nazi party was really gaining momentum, Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* (second edition, 1932) announced that "the political" boils down to "the distinction between *friend* and *enemy*." Your friends are all of your fellow citizens who are just like you, while the enemy is anyone else whose differences threaten your inclusive group. The point of politics, for Schmitt, is not to prevent war, but to deal with it practically, since it is inevitable. There is nothing in Schmitt's political theory designed to reduce or prevent hatred and war. Government can only manage it, for the good of the country, which means that the sovereign power must correctly identify the enemy and strenuously lead the war effort. Since countries only hold together as unified political states during times of war, politics is about nothing but constant war. If an internal civil war successfully exterminates the enemy within, then an external war must be fought as well, so the government is always in power and the country stays united. But how could this be the fate of democracy? Friends of democracy around the world watched with horror as the meaning of democracy was so brazenly perverted beyond all recognition.

Classical liberalism since the mid-1700s has always meant unity from diversity, not unity from eliminating diversity. America's Founding Fathers envisioned a democracy proud to

welcome all immigrants who wanted to join the American journey. Since this country's origins, conservatives and liberals may have disagreed over how much assimilation and conformity should be expected of immigrants, but they all pretty much agreed that once immigrants are in the U.S. legally, the Constitution protects their rights and liberties. Modern liberal theory embraces both the conservative and liberal, because this foundational political theory is about protecting the individual's rights and freedoms from other citizens and from the government, something that liberals and conservatives alike agree about. Not everyone has wanted to be liberal in this broad sense, of course. Indeed America has seen its share of fringe fanatics of hate calling for deportation or genocide for people who don't look like them, or talk like them, or dress like them, or pray like them. There was plenty of that sort of politics of hatred throughout the nineteenth century. But early twentieth-century liberals (again, encompassing both "Republican" and "Democrat" thinkers) supposed that no modern state would ever again be tempted to wield national pride and national unity as a lethal weapon. Those liberals thought wrong. Schmitt and other Nazi cheerleaders signaled the green light for the paranoid hatred of Hitler's politics of national pride. Hitler told the German people exactly why they should be proud to be Germans, who was to blame for their suffering, who they were supposed to hate, and the people listened and saluted back with adoration. The dark angry side of passionate nationalism cast a long shadow across Europe, and then lit the fires of genocide and war.

Ever since World War Two, liberals have shuddered with worry: does democracy, no matter how favorable its origins, always end up getting trapped down this dead-end of tragedy? What can prevent that sort of fate? Some political thinkers didn't see the big problem. Didn't America successfully fight those wars without resorting to angry patriotism? Well, there was a tremendous amount of patriotism, and plenty of wartime propaganda shaping and directing that patriotism. German Americans were the special target of much of the hatred that such patriotism spawned. There is nothing special about being an American that makes a person immune to the perverse power of patriotism's ability to arouse hate for an enemy. Are Americans, simply because they are born in the U.S.A., really

any different from the Germans? Could Schmitt's tactics of political warfare apply universally, for all peoples and countries?

Does It Still Matter Where You Were Born?

People who reflected on the aftermath of two World Wars wondered if the German experience was a special strange case, or instead revealed something about universal human nature. It was hard not to notice that many dozens of countries throughout the twentieth century experienced the rise of dictators following a similar recipe for mixing together nationalistic patriotism, xenophobic hatred, and endless war. Accordingly, much of twentieth-century liberal theory veered away from patriotism and nationalism. Attempting to stay true to the ideals of democracy, and its protection of individuals despite their differences, liberals decided that where you are born should not matter very much. Do your rights really depend on the fact that you happened to have been born in a particular country? Do only Americans have rights that deserve respect and protection? If rights are universal, and if you deserve to have them protected regardless of where you were born, then politics is ultimately not about nations or nationalism.

Democracy cannot be about pride in one's own country, then, either—if you admire democracy, if you want democracy to spread around the world, then nationalistic patriotism is a poor vehicle to transport this kind of politics. Ultimately, the proliferation of proud nations, facing off against each other in a global game of competition and survival, is antithetical to democracy and must surrender to democracy. What democracy needs instead of divisive patriotism is a unifying cosmopolitanism: a world in which people think of themselves first and foremost as citizens of the world, and not merely citizens of some particular country. In cosmopolitan liberal theory, people may vote locally, but they should think globally. It really shouldn't matter to people that they were born in the U.S.A., or anywhere else. If people were more concerned about what is good for people globally, instead of simply what is best for one's own country, then countries would stop trying to dominate and control each other. Dictators would no longer be able to arouse passionate hatreds in the masses, and could no longer justify their extraordinary powers for fighting needless wars. Some liberal

cosmopolitans imagine a future world where countries surrendered their authority to a global government designed to protect global rights. Other liberal cosmopolitans are satisfied with visions of international federations of democracies which merge their powers into an overwhelming force for peace and justice. There is even a version of this liberal cosmopolitanism which casts America as the lone superpower shouldering the entire burden of promoting democracy around the world.

No matter which version of cosmopolitanism one may subscribe to, it only works if the problem of diversity, pluralism, and multiculturalism is finally resolved. Obviously, cosmopolitanism would not solve this problem by promoting assimilation and homogeneity, like Schmitt. Citizens should be respected for their differences, not for how well they conform to some identity. Should cosmopolitanism therefore celebrate the uniqueness of each individual, the individual who is, after all, the bearer of rights? Traditional liberal theory took that individualistic approach, arguing that the government must only seek to protect individual rights and must be blind to pluralism—all of the ethnic, religious, gender, and other differences that make us individuals. Individual rights must be the same for everyone. But doesn't this approach sound like a confusing paradox? After all, the primary reason why people have been so worried about their *rights* is because they have been treated as *wrongs*: their ethnic or religious or gender identities have been disrespected by their fellow citizens and by their country. Liberalism started out as a dignified philosophical argument for individual rights, but has evolved as a continual series of ugly street fights for group dignity and group civil rights. If modern liberal theory was supposed to evolve into cosmopolitanism, to avoid the democratic trap of prideful patriotism, it instead got derailed into the divisive politics of pluralism.

Take, for example, the emergence of multiculturalism in the 1980s. Multiculturalism in theory relies on traditional liberalism's respect for individuals as individuals, but multiculturalism in practice depends on novel group identities forged in a common struggle for group rights. What makes people so energized with anger that they are willing to take to the streets in protest? Not their identity as mere individuals—it is instead their identity as a member of a victimized sub-group. The dramatic and powerful energy built up and released by "Born in the U.S.A." can

spotlight the formation of a victimized sub-group, precisely according to the script of multiculturalism. And so the politics of multiculturalism seemed to automatically apply: now that you are identified as a member of the victimized sub-group, you know what to do. You know your friends—you know, the people who are also victims of the same mistreatment you have suffered. And you know the enemy—you know, those people who are happily benefiting from your mistreatment. No common ground here, just winners and losers, both looking to the government for help. The government can either preserve the status quo or enforce a new legal order. There is no neutral third option—either way, the government takes a side in this battle. In the multicultural wars, the grim logic of Schmitt's politics of friend and enemy makes sense of the situation. If we permit multiculturalism to be our guide, liberal democracy was never really about an impartial and fair government seeking the peaceful compromises that advance the good of the entire country. That's all empty rhetoric. Politics can only be about winners and losers, with each citizen's very life at stake.

Schmitt anticipated, largely by accident, where the multiculturalism trend could be headed. If your sub-group can't get satisfaction from the government, you don't lie down and take it. Starting a rebellion or a civil war can win respect. Maybe your sub-group can secede to form a new independent country. Say, to an American this is starting to sound familiar. How was the U.S.A. born? Right—Englishman versus Englishman in a war of rebellion. And how was it reborn in the fires of a second civil war? Yes, that episode in democracy cannot be forgotten either. Maybe Schmitt's political theory applies to the history of democracy as well as its future. Has anyone else become convinced that liberalism has to resolve the problem of multiculturalism? Distinguished American historian and political philosopher Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. regarded the multicultural wars as the death-march of democracy towards destruction. His 1990 book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* argues that the only way to avoid the fractious wars of each sub-group against the rest is to demand assimilation to a common culture, with a homogeneous identity as an American first and nothing else second. If you are born (or naturalized) in the U.S.A., Schlesinger says, then you had better stop seeking some special privilege or special treatment for your sub-group. If

everyone is obsessed with what is best for his or her sub-group, no one is looking out for what is best for the entire country. Being born in the U.S.A. means that your primary identity is being American. Unless this principle is the guiding principle of politics, critics of multiculturalism concluded, there is no way for democratic politics to do what is best for the U.S.A.

Where is liberal theory supposed to go now? If the liberal respect for individual rights goes in the direction of cosmopolitanism, then people must suppress their identities as members of some particular sub-group. In the long run, nationalism could get submerged by international democracy. If the liberal respect for individual rights alternatively goes in the direction of multiculturalism, then people become mostly identified with their sub-groups. In the long run, nationalism could get disabled by intercultural struggles. Schmitt and Schlesinger recommend homogeneity—if a country's citizens see themselves as sharing a common culture and sharing a common destiny, then politics works (it works as a fighting weapon for Schmitt, as a peaceful tonic for Schlesinger). Should liberal theory renounce diversity and pluralism, as well as nationalism?

Perhaps it is too soon to surrender the idea that democracy was the kind of politics that could successfully combine pluralism and nationalism. There ought to be something special about being born, no matter who you are, in the U.S.A. Isn't that why so many immigrants have struggled so hard to start new lives and families here? These hard questions should make us step back and reflect on the diverse interpretations of "Born in the U.S.A." and liberal democracy.

Unity Born from Diversity

We have looked at some alternative interpretations of Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." and their implications. We then looked at some alternative interpretations of liberal democracy and their problems. Parallels between these two trains of thought emerged: similarities between the possible meanings of "Born in the U.S.A." and the possible destinies of liberal democracy are now visible. For example, "Born in the U.S.A." can be understood as a plea of sympathy for the suffering and tragic fate of one of America's sub-groups, the Vietnam generation. Similarly, liberal democracy can be understood as driven by vic-

timized sub-groups, each forced to fight for its own identity and survival. From a different angle, we can view "Born in the U.S.A." as a cry of patriotism for the pride and hopeful destiny of the American nation, the "greatest country in the world," as its citizens are wont to remind themselves. Similarly, liberal democracy can be understood as powered by the nationalistic patriotism of all citizens, permitting the democratic process to focus on what is best for the whole country rather than on the narrow agendas of its sub-groups. Alternatively, taking a darker worrisome perspective, we can read into the "Born in the U.S.A." phenomenon a surging tide of angry nationalism that revolves around identifying "us real Americans" against "those un-Americans" in a potentially deadly conflict. Similarly, democracy might reach its full maturation only when the homogeneous majority asserts its rightful dominance over all competition, compelling assimilation or extermination.

We cannot here decide which of these interpretations is correct; in a way, they are all more like inviting questions, rather than definitive answers. And Springsteen was never a poet to give his listeners definitive answers, relieving from them any effort to think for themselves. Like earlier poets of democracy before him, such as Walt Whitman, Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams, and John Lennon, Springsteen throws the burden of figuring out your country back on you. Citizens of democracies, unlike any other type of citizen, are supposed to be able to handle this. If the people are supposed to rule, instead of kings or aristocrats, then they had better be able to figure out their country's problems. Brains count more than brawn when you are part of democracy.

While not much of a poet or songwriter himself, America's greatest philosopher of democracy, John Dewey (1859–1952) celebrated the capacity of Americans to think about their common problems. His greatest book about democracy, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), still stands as the most profound defense of citizen participation in governing. Published at a time of wavering confidence in democracy, thrown in the face of communists and fascists and monarchists and militarists, this book explains how democracy must work if it is ever to succeed. Dewey confronts the problem of pluralism and multiculturalism directly. He declared that the entire point of democratic government, unlike any other form of government,

is intelligently to manage diversity. If it can't manage the inevitable conflicts between a country's sub-groups with peaceful compromises, then democracy deserves to be discarded as useless.

Why isn't assimilation and homogeneity the answer? Because democracy is ultimately supposed to be about freedom from oppression—if you want to enjoy the culture of democracy, you have to embrace the liberty of everyone to live freely. If you instead want the freedom to live your way, and to not have to live with someone else living life quite differently, then that sort of freedom is not democratic and you don't want to live in a democracy. All sorts of alternative non-democratic totalitarianisms and dictatorships can fulfill their promise that you wouldn't have to suffer from diversity under their rule—you can live just with people just like you! Their offer may be tempting, because of the high price each person must pay for democracy: you must eventually compromise, for the good of the whole democracy, with people whose beliefs or fashions or lifestyles turn you off.

No wonder we spontaneously organize into sub-groups of unified identity, Dewey pointed out. The simple sociological explanation for so many voluntary associations and organizations and identity groups that proliferate across the democratic landscape is because people need each other. We group together into communities for common causes, when we can benefit from group effort. All of these co-operative communities—Dewey calls then "publics"—compete with each other for their own particular interests. Think companies, but in the civil sphere, not the economic sphere, where the "business" of democratic living gets done. Now, from this sociological explanation of what democratic culture is like, how does Dewey explain where democratic politics comes in?

Remember how democracy involves (1) liberty; (2) diversity; (3) publics; and (4) competition. Competition can lead to violence, naturally. Here Dewey offers a vision of democracy directly contradictory to Schmitt's. Yes, politics is about managing conflict between competitive sub-groups. But in a real democracy, still ultimately committed to freedom from oppression, that competition cannot be permitted to escalate into actual violence. Any political system that permits inter-group conflict to escalate into violence has completely abandoned its

responsibility to govern, and any democracy that permits intergroup violence has forgotten its duty to protect all citizens from oppression. Democracy must manage conflict peacefully—and every democratic citizen knows this and is committed to this responsibility. Any actual democratic country, of course, may harbor plenty of non-democratic citizens, who would eagerly use violence for partisan goals, or would gladly elect any politician who promised that their particular lifestyle would become the law of the land. Any type of political system reasonably aims to govern a population of citizens who conform to that political type, and so any democracy reasonably wants to govern only democratic citizens. Democratic citizens, regardless of their subgroup identity, simultaneously identify themselves as citizens of a common democracy. That's where the needed cohesiveness is found. Genuinely democratic citizens are capable of (1) respecting the liberty of all citizens; (2) respecting the diversity found across their democratic culture; (3) forming and managing publics that advance their interests; (4) competing with other publics without resorting to oppression or outright violence. The citizens are ready to be members of a democratic community in the wide sense: a "great community" of which each citizen is proud to be a member.

If you see where Dewey is going, the separate pieces of democracy are now easily put together. A democratic citizen will always have a double identity, a double loyalty. Loyalty to one's communal sub-groups, yes; but also loyalty to the idea of democracy itself and to one's country that tries to be a democratic community. Democratic politics is about that difficult compromise. Sure, I can fight for the interests of my sub-group even if that harms many other sub-groups and maybe the good of the country as a whole. But that is not the democratic way. It is always true that sometimes I have to think like a victimized member of a suffering sub-group—I just can't stand by and watch my livelihood and my way of life die a slow death from neglect. But sometimes I have to think like a citizen of the country, too—I must try to imagine a way that my life can change for the better in some way that also contributes to the welfare of many others too, maybe for the good of the whole country.

Democracy as a political system is about seeking smart and creative compromises between conflicting sub-groups so everyone can somehow benefit. But democracy is ultimately about a

personal system of internal thinking inside each citizen's head. The thoughtful citizen has to imagine, personally, a future when his or her own welfare is improved by some larger change in the system that is better for others at the same time. A person who really cares about the country, who is loyal to the country, can try to do that. This is not utopian dreaming – democratic citizens have been doing this for centuries. The social and political progress made by democracies is the cumulative work of millions of ordinary people. As democracies begin to cooperate together for global benefit, a cosmopolitan level of community emerges as well, so that people can feel a loyalty to the global community too.

Yes, you should be proud to be born (or naturalized) in the U.S.A. Your American pride, Dewey tells us, should be properly placed in the ideals of democracy for which this country was born and still lives. Your suffering and struggles and even defeats are an essential part of this American story that we are all helping to tell together. America is a great poem, as Whitman declared; America is a dramatic narrative of all the stories of the American people woven together. If you can sympathize with Springsteen's narrative of a real American experience, your loyalty to the U.S.A. is entirely justified. It matters where you were born, and being born in the U.S.A. is a huge responsibility. Citizens who try to live up that responsibility deserve to be proud Americans.