

## Teresa Corio

*Author's note: I chose the topic of the flag and patriotism because it has been thrown at me numerous times. Whenever I speak to people about my political beliefs, I usually get labeled as unpatriotic. However, I believe that to be patriotic is to be able to love your country without being ethnocentric.*

### Patriotic Fallacies

What has six white stripes, seven red strips, and a blue box in the left-hand corner with 50 white stars in it? If it took you longer than two seconds to figure that out, you are a disgrace to "the land of the free, and the home of the brave." If you think I'm serious, I'm not, although I would dare to say that there might be some American citizens who would be a little appalled. In America, the American flag is a symbol representing freedom, democracy, equality, and unity. Well, it is supposed to be, anyway. Sometimes I find that a little hard to believe when the same people paying homage to the flag walk around cheating and beating their fellow citizens.

After the September 11th attacks, I was accused numerous times in my high school for not plastering the flag all over my body. Day after day, people decorated themselves in flags; these were the same people that never once took a second to glance at the flag in the front of our school months before the attack. These were also the same people that used to make fun of the pledge of allegiance, stating how ridiculous it was to have to recite that in grade school. Their enthusiasm towards the flag faltered after about two months. Maybe all the flags got lost or stolen, but these people respected the flag too highly to just forget about it, right? As I was being labeled unpatriotic, I remember thinking, "I never thought about the flag before, why should I start worshipping it now?" I did think it was horrible that thousands of people died in New York. I also think it is horrible that people die every year in unsanitary factories overseas, factories owned by the good old U.S.A. I think it is heart wrenching to think of all the millions of animals that die every year so people can have face wash, nail polish, deodorant, hairspray, and the many other products that are "necessary" for human survival. There are so many issues that make me sad, and I have never decided to wear a flag in remembrance of these tragedies. To me the flag is a hollow symbol, representing American pride only when "American" blood has been shed.

As I was reading an anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth magazine, I came across two drawings that I felt display my emotions about the flag and what it is used for. One of the drawings goes along with an essay entitled "The Respectable Mob." This essay was written in 1914, after Reitman, Emma Goldman's tour manager, had arrived in San Diego. They were traveling around the country, speaking out in defense of free speech for the American people. Mother Earth magazine was made by a group of anarchists for the liberal movement in America. It was a sort of news source, but it also included many opinions. The audience was not expected to be average citizens, so it did not have a huge impact on society. But, for a liberal paper, it had a fairly broad outreach. This was probably the most effective media outlet, as other periodicals would not have accepted such radical expressions.

You could say that the general topic of Ben Reitman's satirical essay, "The Respectable Mob," is patriotism. One point that is put forth is the hypocrisy of the supposed patriots that abused him. The men that had kidnapped Reitman did so because he had come with the intent of influencing their town. It could be said that the businessmen who snatched Reitman did so to protect their town. If that were so, then these patriotic men were protecting their town from a man encouraging the American people to fight for their right to freedom of speech. At the time this essay was written, many people were being arrested for stating their opinions on controversial subjects, such as birth control, workers' rights, war, and others. Goldman and Reitman had just come to San Diego to tell the citizens to stand up for the rights that the constitution granted them, and they were viewed as unpatriotic. Can you see a little irony? There is also some irony in the fact that the men who attacked Reitman under cover of night were what most would consider average, or maybe even above average, citizens during the day. These were men who attended church; they owned property; they were classy white men with respectable careers. Underneath their sugarcoated masks, they were violent and unreasonable. They demanded that Reitman kiss the flag; they threatened that if he didn't comply, they would stuff it down his throat. These respectable, patriotic men wanted to force another man to follow their beliefs. They were going to cram a symbol that is supposed to represent freedom down someone's throat, taking away his freedom to breathe. They were forcing their ideology on him. Reitman says, "Twenty-five years ago I was thrilled when I took part on a chorus which sang, 'Oh the Star Spangled Banner, long may it wave.' Now when I hear those songs I want to weep; to me they are a hollow mockery – covering all the sins and crimes of a cowardly nation. I was taught to loathe my native flag, not by Anarchists, or by ignorant foreigners, but by law-abiding, respectable businessmen" (272). The type of men that violated Reitman were the men that influenced him to disregard the flag. By cramming the flag down his throat, they basically made him puke it into the toilet.

The method that Reitman used to display his points was very effective. He puts forth his story in an uncensored way, telling about the different tortures he was put through. He is pretty blunt about what happened to him, which makes it easy for the reader to empathize with him. When a reader has sympathy for a writer, it is more likely that the reader will agree with the point the writer is trying to make. If the reader has sympathy for Reitman, he or she will most likely feel anger or disgust for the men who attacked him, dismissing their reasoning or lack of it. The story includes satire, which might make it seem more real to the reader. Reitman refers to his antagonists as all-around nice guys. At one point, he mentions that they are respectful to women, and they are good religious citizens. Through his sarcasm you can assume he is mocking their ignorance, or at least showing his contempt for them.

The cover of the San Diego edition of *Mother Earth* shows a man lying strapped to the ground, while another man stands above him and pushes a flag down his throat. At the bottom of the picture the words "Patriotism in Action" stand out in bold. This was the picture that was meant to accompany Ben Reitman's article. The man shoving the flag down another man's throat is in a suit. He looks like one of the businessmen that were described in Reitman's article, and the picture is displaying the cruelty of the businessmen Reitman encountered. Even if you had not read the article before seeing the picture, you could see that the flag is being used as a weapon or punishment. According to many, the flag is a representation of patriotism; if someone is using the flag to hurt another, that is saying his image of patriotism is not love for a country, but power over others. However, the image is not as effective as the essay. It is dramatic, but not concise. In the essay, the author explains his points in a thorough way, but the picture doesn't really use symbols, and it is not self-explanatory. This picture could be taken many different ways, and without the article to accompany it, it could be severely misinterpreted.

A third media example is a drawing of an American flag by the artist Man Ray. The stripes are made up of two men in prison outfits, the box in the left-hand corner has soldiers killing each other, and the stars are made up of bullets. The pole holding the flag is a crucifix. The picture shows what is underneath the flag; by this, I mean that it is showing what people who praise the flag often try to ignore: that America isn't perfect, that things could and should be changed. Instead of accepting the fact that America has flaws, they smile and wave the flag. They accuse anyone who dares to speak out for change in America of being unpatriotic. The flag is the symbol of freedom, democracy, justice, unity, yet so many people are oppressed in America. We send off soldiers to go fight wars to protect our country, then we abuse our fellow citizens. We worship Jesus, yet we kill and enslave and degrade and imprison. The picture captures all of the ignorance, the hypocrisy, the emptiness of the use of the flag.

Man Ray used symbols to create the image of the flag. The crucifix shows the religion that American chooses to accept as its national religion. Even though there are many other religions in America, they do not all get nationally recognized to the extent that Christianity does. The prisoners stand for the freedom that was taken away. The flag is supposed to be for freedom, but the people honoring it are denying others their freedom. The war scene in the upper left-hand corner symbolizes the blood that we shed for everything we don't have. The symbols could almost stand for death. The image is powerful and moving. Unfortunately, I think the people who this message should be screaming out to wouldn't understand it.

Emma Goldman once spoke of patriotism:

Who is the real patriot, or rather what is the kind of patriotism that we represent? The kind of patriotism we represent is the kind of patriotism which loves America with open eyes. Our relation to America is the same as the relation of a man who loves a woman, who is enchanted by her beauty and yet cannot be blind to her defects. And so I wish to state here in my own behalf and in behalf of hundreds of thousands whom you decry and state to be anti-patriotic, that we love America, we love her riches, we love her mountains and her forests and above all we love the people who have produced her wealth and riches, who have created all her beauty, we love the dreamers and philosophers and the thinkers who are giving America liberty. But that must not make us blind to the social faults of America. (qtd. in Drinnon 240-241)

This was a rebuttal to the many Americans who told people fighting for revolution that they were unpatriotic. This clarifies that patriotism in itself is not bad. It is wonderful to love your country, as long as you recognize flaws and try to change them.

The flag is a symbol of insecurity. It is a symbol that people use to justify the wrongdoings of America. That is why I choose to shy away from it. The flag may not have always been used as a shield, but today that is all I see it used for. People started to worship the flag so much, they forgot its original meaning. Patriotism is not about wearing a flag, it is about loving your country and wanting it to be a good place. It is about remembering our history, and not forgetting that action is okay. It is about being happy and free and equal. It isn't demonizing to practice civil disobedience; that is how our country was founded. It is not patriotic to shove any form of patriotism down another human's throat.