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Political myth-busting: what does it mean to be proudly South African?

Pride is a ubiquitous political phenomenon.

Despite the British Writer Samuel Johnson's great assertion that "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel" one of the hallmarks of the current global trend towards nationalism has been demonstrations of nationalistic patriotism that glorifies the respective state. In this piece Cecelia Kok and Dr Jason Werbeloff aim to dispel many of the myths around patriotism with South Africa as the focal point. This piece looks at the rationality of basing patriotism on economic, geographic, political, personal and cultural loyalty in an increasingly globalised world.



Introduction

Donald Trump's US presidential election victory was in part driven by his campaign to 'make America great again'. In essence, this slogan appeals to the notion of American pride. Brexit can also be seen through the prism of pride: pride in 'standing together' and belonging to the European Union on the one hand, or, on the other, pride in the independence and self-sufficiency of Britain. Given that shame is the converse of pride, the former notion also plays a significant part in Brexit: anti-Brexiters believe pro-Brexiters ought to be ashamed of their isolationism and xenophobia. Pro-Brexiters, by contrast, believe shame is the appropriate response for anti-Brexiters who display a condemnable lack of patriotism.

Pride may be understood to be at the heart of war. After Germany's humiliating defeat in World War One, Hitler's appeal to Germans was substantially based on his avowal to restore the country's pride. In addition to war between nations, pride can fuel internal ostracism, violence, or even genocide against designated groups perceived to be a stain on a nation's pride, such as Jews in Germany, the Bosniaks in Serbia or the Tutsi in Rwanda. Pride in one's ethnicity was a central feature in the creation of such strong in- and out-groups that, in the end, led to murder on a mass-scale in each of these countries.¹

Contemporary racial identity politics in South Africa are also deeply rooted in pride and shame. In her widely cited paper, WITS academic Samantha Vice writes that

...while the emotions of guilt, regret and shame are appropriate emotions for white South Africans to feel, shame better captures the identity and phenomenology of the white South African self than the others. Given the present inescapability of white privilege (barring enormous structural and psychological change), and given the peculiarities of the South African situation, it is unlikely that a white South African will be in a situation in which shame is not called for.²

Pride has, through patriotism and nationalism, spurred countless social and political movements. But what exactly does it mean to be proud of your country? What does it mean to be proudly South African?

'Whiteness' theory claims that 'whiteness' is one of the greatest obstacles to black advancement and thus being 'proudly white' would be preposterous. However, blacks, according to such theorists, may quite justifiably be 'proudly black'.

Pride and its converse, shame, are powerful emotions. Pride is at the heart of patriotism (a fervent sense of pride in one's country) and nationalism (an even more extreme sense of pride, often coupled with a sense

of superiority to other countries). Pride has, through patriotism and nationalism, spurred countless social and political movements. But what exactly does it mean to be proud of your country? What does it mean to be proudly South African?

When someone says they're proudly South African, it seems they might feel an allegiance to their country in one or more of the following ways:

- Geographic fondness (e.g. 'I love South Africa because it is beautiful.')
- Economic loyalty (e.g. 'I prefer buying South African products to support our economy.')
- Cultural affinity (e.g. 'I love the culture that we South Africans share.')
- Political affinity (e.g. 'I treasure our Constitutional dispensation and the values informing our society, such as non-racialism, inclusion and tolerance.')
- Fondness for South African people (e.g. 'South Africans are open, friendly people with whom I identify.')

The problem, however, is that when we investigate these five forms of pride, they disintegrate in surprising ways. What seems obvious or clear on the surface quickly becomes difficult to defend when considered carefully.

To 1: Geographic beauty

'I am a proud South African because my country is beautiful.'

While South Africa has many beautiful landscapes, it seems odd to be proud

of or patriotic because of these features. After all, there are other countries that display majestic beauty too. If one is proud of South Africa because it contains Table Mountain, should one not be equally proud (or perhaps more proud) of Nepal because it is home to Mount Everest?

There is a further problem here. Suppose South Africa were to become ugly. Some would say it already has in certain areas. Would this mean that one ought no longer to be proudly South African? It seems that proud South Africans would advocate pride no matter what happened to our verdant landscapes.

Thus, a country's beauty is neither sufficient nor necessary for pride in that country.

To 2: Economic loyalty

'I buy local products to support my country.'

The company 'Proudly SA' owns various logos based on the South African national flag as well as the trademarked phrase, 'Proudly South African'. 'Proudly SA' charges businesses up to R100 000 a year in membership fees.³ On its website, Proudly SA claims that by buying local, one is making 'personal and organisational contributions to economic growth and prosperity in South Africa, thereby increasing employment opportunities and reinforcing national pride.'⁴ Whilst this may hold intuitive appeal for many, it is widely accepted that open economies eager to trade, such as the Netherlands, are more successful at poverty reduction and job creation than closed economies, such as North Korea.⁵ Buying local encourages a closed economy.

Controversially, in his electoral campaign Trump stated that he wanted car manufacturers to manufacture for Americans in America - as opposed to in Mexico - and threatened sizeable taxation for companies manufacturing outside the United States. Such measures were meant to boost the US economy. However, experts argue that relocating manufacturers to America would in fact harm the local economy. Rather, opening the US economy to trade with other countries would lead to more local job creation in the vehicle manufacturing sector.⁶

In conclusion, economic pride ironically seems to bring about negative consequences for one's country, and so does not seem to be the sort of stance one should adopt.

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To 3: Cultural identity

'When I'm with friends of all races at a braai enjoying pap and wors, drinking a castle and watching the Springboks beat the All Blacks, that's when I am a proud South African.'

Many South Africans feel that when they take part in what are considered to be prototypically South African cultural activities, they experience a sense of pride in doing so. However, what exactly are these distinctive South African cultural activities?

South Africa is home to a plethora of cultures and subcultures from which flow diverse activities and practices – Cape Malay culture is quite different from Zulu culture which is again different from Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish culture. Thus, can one make sense of being proud of 'South African culture'? Enjoying a braai and

watching rugby may be one group's prototypical cultural practice, but it seems many other groups may not identify strongly with this at all.

Given that it is impossible to find a cultural practice around which all South Africans can unite, it seems strange to hold that South African pride is based upon central and discernibly 'South African' cultural practices.

To 4: Political pride

'I am proud of South Africa for overcoming its fraught Apartheid past and for the Constitutional values it espouses as a nation.'

Our Constitution's founding provisions declare that South Africa is founded, at least partly, on the values of 'non-racialism and non-sexism'.⁷ But does the nation of South Africa embrace these values?

The following three examples illustrate South Africa's vibrant racialism:

- (i) President Jacob Zuma, the 'first' citizen of the country who is elected by the African National Congress, the party that enjoys the biggest share of South African votes, frequently dismisses his critics as 'racists' and blames 'White Monopoly Capital' for South Africa's ills – a catchy buzzword to distract from his failures and shift blame to a particular racial group.
- (ii) Whether one is filling out an insurance claim or applying for a job, South Africans are continually confronted with the request to identify their race, even though there is no biological marker necessary or sufficient for race.⁸

We are therefore far from the ideal of judging individuals 'on the content of their character' as opposed to 'the colour of their skin' (Martin Luther King Jr), and thus still far from a non-racial society.

Given that Apartheid is considered repugnant for its racial classification of citizens and our Constitution explicitly espouses non-racialism, it seems strange indeed to continue this practice. Do we use the pencil test? Do we self-classify? Can we be 'incorrect' about our self-classification? Is one's race 'societally determined'? What does this mean? Whatever dubious methods are used, South Africa's omnipresent racial classification is inconsistent with non-racialism

as espoused by our Constitution.

- (iii) Through calls for the fundamentally racially-driven agenda of 'decolonisation' or the silencing of whites in virtue of their 'white privilege', South Africans are drifting further and further from our non-racial Constitution.

When well-founded criticism is dismissed on the basis of race by a country's first citizen, when race is a crucial element in applying for a job, and when social movements demand that learning material be selected on the basis of an author's race, it is quite clear that this country has not embraced the value of non-racialism. We are therefore far from the ideal of judging individuals 'on the content of their character' as opposed to 'the colour of their skin' (Martin Luther King Jr), and thus still far from a non-racial society.

Beyond our nation's ignorance of our non-racial Constitution, there are many other examples of widespread and gravely unconstitutional behavior, much of it displayed by the very individuals tasked with protecting our supreme law. Threats to free speech, property rights, freedom of information, and separation of powers enshrined in our Constitution emanate from the executive in the form of,

respectively, the Hate Speech bill, the Investment bill, the Expropriation bill (or calls for ‘radical economic transformation’) and undue ministerial interference in crucial independent organisations such as the police oversight body (the Independent Police Investigative Directorate) and the corruption-fighting unit of the Hawks. If the very people entrusted to safeguard our Constitution, democratically elected into power, are often those attempting to undermine it, can one confidently claim that South Africa is a Constitution-loving nation? The answer would appear to be: no.

Finally, even if it were the case that South Africa was a well-functioning democracy which had broadly embraced the values enshrined in its Constitution, is this something in virtue of which individuals could or ought to be proudly *South African*? One might rejoice in our constitutionalism (and what it means for oneself and for others lucky enough to live in such a country) and one might be politically active so as to uphold and defend such a dispensation, but a sense of pride seems odd. A liberal constitutional democracy, after all, is not exclusive to South Africa – there are various well-consolidated democracies that espouse positive values. Thus, like geographic beauty, this seems an odd feature in virtue of which to be specifically proudly *South African*.

Not only have foreigners been greeted with hostility by South Africans, they are subject to notoriously difficult immigration procedures, leaving many individuals – in particular refugees from other African nations – vulnerable and open to exploitation.

To 5: South African personality traits

‘I am proudly South African because South Africans are friendly, open, warm and tolerant people.’

South Africa has infamously high crime rates with roughly 50 people killed and 150 sexual offences committed daily (unreported offences are likely to increase the latter number).⁹ It is also a country which has made world headlines for its horrific xenophobic violence. The murder of Mozambican national, Ernesto Nhamuave, who was stoned and subsequently burned alive, became emblematic of South Africa’s brutal xenophobia.

In light of the above, it seems odd to claim that South Africa is a warm, open, friendly and tolerant country. Paradoxically, it should be noted that those perpetrating gruesome xenophobic acts may well be doing so in the name of national pride!

Not only have foreigners been greeted with hostility by South Africans, they are subject to notoriously difficult immigration procedures, leaving many individuals – in particular refugees from other African nations – vulnerable and open to exploitation.¹⁰ South Africa’s unwelcoming stance is even reflected in the letter of the law in light of, for example, the new visa regulations.¹¹

And again, even if it were the case that South Africans were, on the whole, open, tolerant and friendly, is this something in virtue of which to be proudly *South African*, since there are other countries whose populations also exhibit such characteristics?

Two proud objections

We have argued that some of the features of which South Africans are proud (geographic beauty, constitutionalism, and friendliness) are not exclusively South African features – other countries possess them too. Given this, it seems odd to use those features to ground pride in *South Africa* specifically.

The proud South African, however, may object. She may argue that individuals often feel pride, legitimately so, about some feature or accomplishment even if other individuals possess that feature or have achieved that accomplishment too. For example, a student may be proud of the A+ she received in her business management course even though others received the same mark. The proud South African might argue that, analogously, even if there are other countries that exhibit the same positive features that South Africa possesses, we can still be proud that South Africa possesses them.

Now, consider the case of the proud South African. She has no discernible control over whether the country is beautiful, constitutional, or friendly. It seems inappropriate, therefore, for her to feel pride in respect of her entire country because of such features.

Consider, however, exactly what is involved in achieving an A+ on the business management course. The proud student has bought textbooks, and spent time attending lectures, studying and clarifying examination material. She has earned her mark. That is, she has exercised *control* over factors that caused her success.

Now, consider the case of the proud South African. She has no discernible control over whether the country is beautiful, constitutional, or friendly. It seems inappropriate, therefore, for her to feel pride in respect of her entire country because of such features.

The proud South African may exclaim that this is untrue. She planted a vegetable patch and picked up litter, she voted to support a democratic state, and she fed victims of xenophobic violence. In so doing, she may proudly argue that she has contributed to, and thus in some sense controlled, the country's positive features; in light of this she claims she is proudly South African.

Yet her contribution, although evidently positive, seems miniscule at best when considering the scope of the entire country. It seems legitimate for our proud South African to be proud of the *specific* vegetable patch she tends, the particular vote she casts, and the specific xenophobic shelter to which she contributes her time. However, pride beyond this, of the entire country in virtue of its beauty, constitutionalism and friendliness, seems misplaced. Her lone vegetable patch does not hold a candle to the magnificence of the Outeniqua mountains. Her vote does not sway the result of the election any more than anyone else's vote. She has played a minimal role (if any at all) in these features, and so, is entitled only to minimal pride. Certainly not the sort of pride required for patriotism and nationalism.

The proud South African may attempt a final objection. She may argue that the correct analogy for pride in one's country is not personal pride, but rather pride in *another, related person's* achievement. For example, a parent may be legitimately proud of her daughter's high mark on the business management course, even if other students on the course also achieved an A+. Perhaps the proud South African feels towards the achievements of South Africa the way a parent feels towards the achievements of her child.

The problem with this model of pride, however, is that while the parent's legitimate pride is rooted in (significant) causal influence over her child's accomplishments, the ordinary citizen does not exercise such comparable influence. The parent raised, fed, educated and supported her child in ways that ultimately provided her with the capacity to perform well in her business management course. The ordinary citizen, however, has exercised no such causal influence over her country.

Perhaps the correct model for the proud South African is a parent who has had little to no contact with her child, but feels proud of her accomplishments nonetheless. For example, the parent who gave away her child at birth, and then proudly collects newspaper clipping of her child's success decades later. However, we might ask whether such a parent is justified in feeling proud of her child? If the parent is proud, it seems the only reason for being so is because she donated half of her child's DNA, and that DNA is somehow causally responsible for the child's success. Yet we think such a link between success and genetics is tenuous at best, and perhaps not even present in the analogous case of the proud South African – the citizen is not the source of the country's 'genetic makeup'. The average South African born today has done little to contribute to the fabric of her society as it has evolved through the generations before her. How then can she be proud of her country at all?

Conclusion

On closer examination, none of the above five ways in which people commonly consider themselves 'proudly South African' seems like a good reason to be proud of South Africa. Thus, none of the above five reasons seems like a good reason to be patriotic or nationalistic.

This piece does not intend to single out South Africa as uniquely worthy of shame (in our view, shame in respect of a country – given that it is the converse of pride, is also inappropriate). It merely probes some common reasons cited for national pride, using South Africa as its example. We argue that that there is a mismatch between the reasons cited for pride, and facts about South Africa. Furthermore, even if the facts changed, an individual's pride in an entire country on the basis of certain positive features would still seem unfitting. Thus, we submit that our arguments can be modified to show why pride or shame in any country is misplaced.

If pride isn't grounded in geographical beauty, economic loyalty, cultural affinity, political affinity, or the personality traits of its citizens, then what exactly is pride in one's country? What grounds this pride, and why should we think it is a rational attitude to adopt?

NOTES

- 1 Volkan, V. 'Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism' (1997)
- 2 Pine, L., 'Education in Nazi Germany' (2010)
- 3 Vice, S., 'How do I live in this strange place?' (2010), p. 332
- 4 <http://www.proudlysa.co.za/business-site/logo-usage.htm>, <http://www.proudlysa.co.za/business-site/how-to-register.htm>
- 5 http://www.proudlysa.co.za/business-site/about_us.htm
- 6 <http://reports.weforum.org/global-enabling-trade-report-2016/key-message-globalization-for-all/>
- 7 <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2017-trump-mexico-auto-jobs/>
- 8 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Ch1 (1) (b)
- 9 See:
 - Michael James, 'Race', Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, (2016)
 - Bryan Sykes, *The Seven Daughters of Eve: The Science That Reveals Our Genetic Ancestry*, New York: W. Norton, (2002)
 - Lynn B. Jorde and Stephen P. Wooding, 'Genetic Variation, Classification and "Race"', *Nature Genetics*, 36, (2004)
- 10 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/south-africa-murder-rate-51-killed-every-day-rise-49-per-cent-a7224176.html>
- 11 <http://www.lhr.org.za/news/2015/state-fails-obligations-refugees>, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2016-06-20-a-bleak-reality-of-migrants-and-their-children-in-south-africa/#.WUggNuuGN0w>
- 12 <http://www.traveller24.com/TravelPlanning/VisaInfo/visa-admin-nightmare-sa-family-torn-apart-after-wife-banned-despite-following-the-rules-20160106>, <http://www.immigrationspecialists.co.za/southafricageneralworkvisa/>