# Cosmopolitanism and boredom

**Bruce Robbins**

'In the course of my life', Joseph De Maistre famously observed, 'I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians; I even know, thanks to Montesquieu, that one can be a Persian; but man I have never met.' De Maistre's genteel snubbing of 'man' is still remembered often, and usually with satisfaction. But the propriety of this snub has never seemed so open to doubt. Even if one could assume, with De Maistre, that the abstract universal 'man' is vague and ungraspable, recent history has made it difficult to pretend that this abstraction can be neatly opposed to particular nationalities, assumed to be palpable and real. Those Frenchmen De Maistre has seen with his own eyes: are we sure they weren't Alsatians or Occitanians of uncertain allegiance and identity? Could it be that his Russians were not really Russians at all, but Ukrainians or Georgians, Chechens or Abkhazians whose day of national recognition had not yet arrived – and would arrive only to be contested in turn? Nationality, it would appear, is also an artifice, a fragile historical generalization rather than a given fact of nature. And precisely because France and Russia must be acknowledged to be abstractions, it is harder and harder to avoid at least a nodding acquaintance with 'man,' who is nothing but a more unruly, less institutionally grounded abstraction.

This devious line of argument expresses some of my ambivalence about Martha Nussbaum's essay 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism' and the essays gathered around it in *For Love of Country*.* In part because of my own discomfort with the universal 'man', I did not set out with overwhelming sympathy for Nussbaum's cosmopolitan project, the project of educating people into a primary allegiance to what she calls 'the worldwide community of human beings'. According to this Stoic and Kantian ideal, there could be only one cosmopolitanism, one 'world citizenship', for there is only one 'worldwide community of human beings'. Paradoxically, then, Nussbaum could only defend the rest against the West by means of an unrepentant reassertion of Western philosophical universalism.

I warmed somewhat to Nussbaum's argument, however, for two reasons. The first was a sense of sneaky incoherence in positions that, like De Maistre's, base their counter-appeal on the unquestionable self-evidence of the particular. After all, it is not just an abstract, universal 'man', but very particular groups of non-citizens who can be treated as if they were not there, and are still treated as if they were not there, because of a code of intellectual courtesy that prides itself on recognizing only particulars. A second reason for putting my doubts on hold was seeing what massive hostility that argument provoked, how much more unwilling I was to join her attackers – and, last but not least, how disquietingly the arguments of her attackers echoed the epistemological modesty of the American cultural Left itself. Most of the essays in *For Love of Country* are less interesting as critiques of Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism than as instances of an emergent form of American nationalism that becomes visible against it.

To the rest of the world, American nationalism may still seem first and foremost a hypocritical version of idealist universalism. Its primary associations are with the borderless-world globalism, at once capitalist and electronic, that hypes McDonald's and MTV along with free markets and carefully selected human rights. But recently there has been a retrenchment, a circling of the wagons, a scaling-down of American nationalism in the direction of *Realpolitik*. These days there are many American policy-makers and media pundits who no longer bother to pretend that what's good for us is good for the world. With a menacing modesty, they are now content to champion one national interest against all others. The mood is neo-medieval. And the flower of the national clerisy, at least as far as it is represented in this book, seems intent on declaring

* Martha C. Nussbaum with Respondents, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, edited by Josh Cohen, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1996, 151 pp, $15.00, pb., 0 8070 4313 3.

itself unwilling or incompetent to pass judgement on this melee from anywhere outside or above it. With a silent bow in the direction of poststructuralist commonplace, they seem to say that if there is indeed no metalanguage, no metadiscourse, then so much the better for us; this limitation on thought turns out to have unexpected benefits for the world's most powerful nation, which can present itself as just another tiny particular locked in battle with a tyrannical, totalizing universalism. Faced with criticism of their country from the outside, liberal and rightist intellectuals can claim the protection that the cultural Left has accorded to smaller and more vulnerable collectivities.

Unlike, say, Alain Finkielkraut in *The Defeat of the Mind* or David Hollinger in *Postethnic America*, Martha Nussbaum does not set her cosmopolitan ideal against the perceived excesses of atavistic nationalists abroad or academic multiculturalists at home. *For Love of Country* began as an essay in the *Boston Review* in late 1994 that protested against recent statements by Sheldon Hackney, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the philosopher Richard Rorty. Hackney, speaking for the Clinton administration, had recently called for shared values and national unity to counter the threats of excessive pluralism. In a much-debated editorial in the *New York Times* entitled 'The Unpatriotic Academy', Rorty had sternly cautioned the cultural Left to show more deference to 'the emotion of national pride'.

Nussbaum, a distinguished classical scholar, could hardly be mistaken for one of those mythical multiculturalists who supposedly refuse to teach the Greeks. Indeed, her counterattack has nothing either multi- or cultural about it. No multiculturalist could have written, as she does, that '[t]he accident of where one was born is just that, an accident.' For the cultural Left, the culture one is born and raised in could hardly be deemed accidental. Whatever controversy may exist over when cultural diversity should matter, or how and how much, there is widespread agreement that in one way or other it does matter. But for Nussbaum, culture has nothing to do with 'moral worth', hence it is 'morally irrelevant'. Her demand is not that greater reverence be paid to the diversity of cultures. What she wants is respect for a universal ethical standard.

Nussbaum thus resembles the cultural Left only in that she too insists on obligations and commitments that do not stop short at the borders of the nation. But those obligations and commitments may provide an ultimately more significant marker of current political alignments than the usual clashes of philosophical position, including that between Kantian and communitarian political philosophies. At any rate, the refusal to recognize foreign obligations and commitments certainly gathers up her critics into a sudden and coherent collectivity.

It is quite a show. With few exceptions, liberals and conservatives join in a shockingly smooth bipartisan consensus against this or, it seems, any challenge to the American nation. Michael Walzer, forgetting what Stalin did to those he called cosmopolitans, tries to tar cosmopolitanism with the brush of Stalinism. Foreigners can't be granted the moral rights of fellow citizens, says Nathan Glazer. Otherwise, we would be forced to allow an unlimited number of Third World refugees into the USA. (This is a neat bit of illogic, on a par with believing that socialism means having to share your toothbrush.) Our boat is full. But cosmopolitanism itself is empty. According to Robert Pinsky, who not coincidentally has just been named our new Poet Laureate, cosmopolitanism is as empty of affect and constituency as Esperanto. Cosmopolitanism is 'a view of the world that would be true only if people were not driven by emotions'.

Emotions are among the many local particulars that the respondents, following De Maistre's lead, throw in the face of Nussbaum's fidelity to 'man'. Benjamin Barber argues that to 'bypass' the local is to end up 'nowhere', in mere 'abstraction and disembodiment'. For Gertrude Himmelfarb, cosmopolitanism 'obscures and even denies … the givens of life: parents, ancestors, family, race, religion, heritage, history, culture, tradition, community – and nationality'. Many of the arguments in the book follow the curve of this last sentence. The local, intimate 'givens' lined up before the dash – 'parents, ancestors, family, race, religion', and so on – are identified with the term after the dash – 'nationality' – so as to lend to the nation their warmth, inevitability, inviolability. Only the dash itself hints at an unbridgeable difference in scale and kind. Religion and nation-state, it is implied, are both local. Since religion deserves protection from state interference, it becomes an apparent argument for sheltering the US state itself, suddenly radiant with borrowed divinity, from any critique of its behaviour toward non-citizens.

It is customary to see the American academy as a sanctuary of secular intellectuals sheltered from the often eccentric religiosity of the American majority. To judge from these responses, however, it would seem that academic opinion on US nationalism – or the absence of acknowledgement that such nationalism exists – reflects with uncanny exactness the petulant sensitivity of the sectarian believer. There is more than

one irony in this. Multiculturalism is often charged with an uncritical celebration of cultural givenness. But one finds a much cruder celebration of cultural givenness here, among writers who are mainly vehement opponents of multiculturalism, than in multiculturalism itself, where a shared interest in diversity tends to force at least some relativizing of everyone's given culture.

Nussbaum's own favoured image for how local givens relate to concern for humanity is concentric circles. Borrowed from the Stoics, this image minimizes conflict between humanity and the local, urging us merely to make the outermost circle (humanity as a whole) more and more like the inmost circle (self and family). Yet it does suggest, however gently, the need for an educative progress from narrower to broader loyalties. This is already too much of an either/or for most of the respondents. They insist, rightly enough, that larger loyalties need not preclude or replace smaller loyalties: 'We will not love those distant from us more by loving those close to us less.' (Of course, as Charles Taylor observes, Americans have not thus far displayed abundant love toward those closest to them: 'the widespread opposition to extremely modest national health care proposals in the United States doesn't seem to indicate that contemporary Americans suffer from too great a mutual commitment.') It is absurd to think that most of us can or should spend our time trying to fight free of our nations or local entanglements. Nussbaum herself notes that the local deserves priority in at least one ethical sense: it's in your power to affect it more directly, for example as a parent. Mrs Jellyby, the character in *Bleak House* who neglects her children in favour of what Dickens calls 'telescopic philanthropy', remains an object lesson. Her eyes 'had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off', as Michael Sandel reminds us in his case against cosmopolitanism. 'As if … they could see nothing nearer than Africa.' But let us pause to note that in his frequently less familial moods, Dickens himself could be considered a practitioner of telescopic philanthropy. And his Mr Vholes in the same novel, the Chancery lawyer who endlessly reminds everyone that he both has and is a father, offers an opposite but equally instructive lesson in how tender solicitude for one's family can stand in the way of reform. Dickens sums up Vholes' position like this: 'Make man-eating unlawful, and you starve the Vholeses!'

Like Mr Vholes, Nussbaum's respondents treat local attachments as peremptory and absolute. Neither cannibalism nor the Court of Chancery shall be outlawed, they imply, if such measures mean that their loved ones will eat one morsel less. Walzer writes: 'My allegiances, like my relationships, start at the center.' Starting at the centre, Walzer gives us no reason to believe that his allegiances will go any distance away from that centre. Michael McConnell quotes Edmund Burke: 'to love the little platoon we belong to in society is … the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind.' McConnell does not address the question of whether we do in fact proceed in that direction, or proceed far enough. The actual platoons, companies, and battalions that America has sent out into the world give some cause to wonder.

Amy Gutmann argues in a similar vein that 'asking us to choose between being, above all, citizens of our own society or, above all, citizens of the world' is 'morally misguided and politically dangerous'. But if choosing is not always called for, could one not at least acknowledge that sometimes it may be? Along with the necessity of choice, Gutmann and most of the others throw out even its hypothetical possibility. Thus they refuse to confront the real core of Nussbaum's case, which is simply that loyalty to one's nation can and sometimes

does contradict the manifest demands of justice as seen from any extra-national perspective, even a sub-universalistic one. They acknowledge no moral or political leverage against the profound rootedness of caring first and always for our own.

Many of the respondents balk at being asked to treat strangers as lovingly as they would treat their own family or friends. One can see their point. As Elaine Scarry argues, it is quite possible that the confusion of strangers with friends is both unnecessary and a mistake. You don't have to pull off the neat trick of relating to the world's distant peoples with full imaginative and emotional intensity in order to lobby for better policies with respect to their wellbeing. And feeling obliged to try may lead you to neglect the legal machinery of the state, with which cosmopolitans must be glad to cooperate when they can, as well as NGOs operating in the politically ambiguous but increasingly material domain of international civil society. A third alternative would involve thinking of distant strangers neither as objects of loving concern nor as objects of policy, but as interlocutors with whom one must enter into dialogue, common participants in a transnational public sphere whose goal would be coordinated action. This path might seem a very mild and unthreatening extension of existing belief in participatory democracy. But the theorists of American democracy represented here decline to venture down it. 'American patriotism', Benjamin Barber asserts defiantly, is 'itself the counter to the very evils Nussbaum associates with American patriotism.'

Barber's patriotism, like the constitutional patriotism of Habermas, resembles that antidote to ethnic nationalism that Michael Ignatieff and others have called civic nationalism: 'the only guarantee that ethnic groups will live side by side in peace is shared loyalty to a state.' This remains the crucial concept allowing Americans (and a few deluded others, such as Elie Kedourie) to deny that there is nationalism in the USA at all. But respect for the constitution unfortunately guarantees very little. Quiet and constitutional rather than ethnic or tribal, American nationalism arguably has been and remains one of the world's most dangerous.

Whatever might be said on behalf of constitutional patriotism, it is of little use to non-citizens and non-residents, especially those who are touched by US power without living on US soil. Even the most judicious interpretation of the constitution will not make it protect those who stand outside it. Internally, constitutional patriotism may calm things down, shielding the status quo against bloody outbreaks of ethnic violence. But it cannot speak to the desperate need to change the status quo that is Nussbaum's point of departure. In order to get the haves mobilized behind a significant transfer of resources to the have-nots, you would need more than even a cosmopolitan extension of decorous constitutionalism. You would need something like religious fervour.

The true opposite of such fervour is not constitutionalism, however, but boredom. On the defensive from the outset, Nussbaum rejects again and again the charge that cosmopolitanism is as 'boringly flat' as it may seem. But this is a point that could be made more aggressively. Nussbaum could have said that boredom and indifference name the truth not about cosmopolitanism, but about nationalism. For in countries like the USA, at least, nationalism may do the most damage today not by its racist and xenophobic enthusiasms, real as these are, but rather because it encourages inertia, compassion fatigue, a normalizing of our all-too-human satedness with the demands of the distant, even when distant events are nothing but the sensational result of routine domestic policy. Strangely enough, many of Nussbaum's respondents seem to agree with her implication that the single largest cause of the world's curable unhappiness today is global capitalism. (More concerned with ethics than with politics, Nussbaum herself is a bit vague on this point.) Indeed, they engage her in a spirited game of more-anti-capitalist-than-thou. They accuse her of naively ignoring the complicities between her cosmopolitan ethics and 'the market-driven globalism currently being promoted by transnational corporations and banks'. Or, more damningly still, they treat her cosmopolitanism as if it were simply global capital's official line.

This rather pervasive style of romantic anti-capitalism is worth pausing over. It looks very much like the dominant, academically respectable form that American nationalism is coming to assume. One distinctive feature is that capitalism is attacked only or primarily when it can be identified with the global. Capitalism is treated as if it came from somewhere else, as if Americans derived no benefit from it – as if, rather than being penetrated and to a large extent even defined by many decades of capitalist development, American society and American nationalism were among its pitiable victims. Again and again, the case against cosmopolitanism is framed as a call to renew 'our various intact moral communities', to defend vestigial enclaves against an outside seen as chill and inhospitable. By refusing to acknowledge that these warm insides are heated and provisioned by that cold outside, they allow the consequences of capitalism to disappear from the national sense of responsibility.

McDonald's and the IMF could not ask for better protection from ethical scrutiny.

A second distinctive feature of this supposed anti-capitalism is that economic suffering registers only or primarily when it can be blamed on the globalists. One example among many is the demagogic description of cosmopolitanism as 'the village of the liberal managerial class'. Class is indeed an issue well worth raising here. But if they are so interested, why do her respondents want nothing to do with Nussbaum's numbers, the relative and absolute indicators of one population's wealth and another's desperate, almost unfathomable misery? If life expectancy is 78.2 years in Sweden and 39 in Sierra Leone – with recent events in Sierra Leone, I'm sure the figures are now even worse – then 'we are all going to have to do some tough thinking', as Nussbaum says, 'about the luck of birth and the morality of transfers of wealth from richer to poorer nations'. Who among her respondents talks about transfers of wealth? Who offers to explain why such ideas are aborted in the richer nations before they can even be proposed, victims of an ethical ennui or paralysis that is perhaps the truest face of nationalism in the so-called developed world?

Almost no one concedes any connection between the unbearably unequal distribution of the world's resources and the future shape of American society. Only a few (Richard Falk, Amartya Sen, Immanuel Wallerstein) enter critically and constructively into Nussbaum's project by extending it beyond the domain of the ethical. No one at all, including Nussbaum herself, invokes or even questions the hypothesis that the riches of the West were and are produced by the active underdeveloping of those areas of the world that are now the poorest, and that the demand for redistribution is thus not a plea for benevolent humanitarianism but merely for restitution.

At this point one has to note the limits of staking hopes for change, as Nussbaum does, on moral reasoning directed to the free individual conscience. For a rich country like the USA, despite its glaring and increasing inequalities, more equitable redistribution on a global scale would certainly entail some sacrifice in living standards, some willingness to postpone or dilute self-interest, even for ordinary or (as we say) 'middle class' people. In the USA, then, Nussbaum's high-minded universalism may prove a paradoxically necessary way of getting down to the grassroots, where 'fairness' and the moral autonomy of the individual are influential notions. Soysal argues that European states 'have expanded their comprehensive welfare apparatuses to guestworkers and their families. However, there is nothing inherent about the logic of the welfare state that would dictate the incorporation of foreigners into its system of privileges' (p. 138). They are compelled to seek closure, exclusion…

Perhaps Nussbaum's high moral line can be seen, rhetorically, as an oblique but practical means of addressing unnamed social collectivities. Still, one would like to know more about the collectivities – domestic or transnational, given or elective – that might be capable of translating her moral universalism into a historical force. Nussbaum is uninterested in this question, even when such collectivities are transnational rather than domestic and thus potential vehicles for or embodiments of cosmopolitan ideas like her own. And she is uninterested in negotiating the messy, soiling compromises between the normative and the descriptive that would inevitably follow from engagement with them. The only agent that can sustain the unblemished purity of the normative is, of course, 'man'. Nussbaum's love for this large and clumsy figure of Enlightenment is understandable. But there is an argument to be made that this is a moment for transnational politics to turn from Kant to Hegel – that is, from the purity of the normative to the impurity of the already existing, to plural cosmopolitanisms that are non-European and non-elitist, if also sometimes ineligible. These lesser abstractions – ethnic minorities, diasporas, religions, worker solidarity movements, feminist and ecological organizations, and even (why not?) sovereign states – may attract equally passionate feelings toward cosmopolitan aims without the same pretension to absolute universality. No less transnational than humanity, one can only hope that these actually existing cosmopolitanisms will be more politically effectual. For the times, as Nussbaum reminds us, are desperate.

One does not require Nussbaum's prolonged acquaintance with classical Greece in order to feel that a great and tragic conflict of loyalties is brewing around 'the limits of patriotism', perhaps even a transnational equivalent of the conflict between family and polis that generated the Antigone. When and if national and cosmopolitan values reach this intensity of confrontation, extreme passions will be thrown up (perhaps cathartic ones) out of the very distance and dispersal of the global system. The result may be an answer to George Steiner's old challenge: proof that the modern era can indeed produce high tragedy. In any event, the spectacle will not be boring.