

ADDRESSING TOXIC
NATIONALISM WITH
ADDAMS AND BALCH

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As was made clear in the U.S. Capitol attacks on January 6, 2021, the U.S. is struggling once again with the forces of what Jane Addams called "super-nationalism," an aggressive nationalism that masquerades as patriotism. She warned that the "social consequences" of nationalism are "amazingly disastrous."¹ If we weren't taking far-right nationalism seriously before, the real-time insurrection on our screens that day on made us face it. Patriotic sentiments and the flag had become symbols of subversive violence. In the aftermath, many of us have felt powerless to address this nationalist aggression, culturally and with friends and family.

Nationalism as used here is an exaggerated, radical patriotism, an often-blind loyalty that puts adherence to one vision of the nation above other moral claims. Its "us" vs. "them" mentality positions a particular religion, race, or culture as essential to the vision of nationhood. Recent

¹ Jane Addams "The Social Deterrent of Our National Self-Righteousness: With Correctives Suggested by the Courageous Life of William Penn." *Jane Addams's Writings on Peace. Vol.4.* (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1932/2003), 347.

exclusionary nationalist policies resulted in withdrawals from international treaties, pacts, and organizations while creating opposition to immigration and free trade.

While the violence of this radical nationalism felt unprecedented to many Americans, waves of extreme nationalism occurred throughout the twentieth century. Pragmatists Jane Addams (1860-1935) and Emily Greene Balch (1867-1961) were among those that warned of the dangers of nationalism and the conformity of thought that accompanies it. Addams and Balch were colleagues and international pacifist leaders; each received the Nobel Peace Prize, Addams in 1931 and Balch in 1946. They both dedicated their lives to political and social change, Addams through Hull House and social work and Balch through economic reform.² They understood the cultural fears that often precipitate nationalism. As an antidote, each urged an intentional openness to multiple pluralist perspectives,

² Balch founded a settlement house in 1892 but returned to academia as a professor at Wellesley from 1896–1918. She was an international advocate for peace after 1918, first working as the International Secretary-Treasurer of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She wrote or edited six books, contributed chapters to half a dozen more, wrote eight influential pamphlets, and published over 120 articles.

engaging in the work of empathetic understanding and participating in shared cross-cultural practical projects.

Fear/Uncertainty as a Precondition of Nationalism

Nationalism often manifests as protective responses to perceived threats, such as from terrorism, loss of jobs, immigration, and, in 2020, from the pandemic. Trump stoked those fears with stories of imminent waves of migration, casting refugees and immigrants as threats to the nation.

In her early writing, Addams saw nationalism in historical evolutionary terms as a continuation of tribalism. Early tribalism, she thought, had evolved into patriotism, which she hoped would lead to a humanitarian form of nationalism. Addams said she experienced nationalism in Europe in the 1880s as a "generous" and creative force that was unifying diverse peoples.³ Decades later, after seeing how nationalism contributed to the punitive conditions of the Treaty of Versailles, she said that rather than evolving,

³ Jane Addams, *Peace and Bread in Time of War*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1922/2002), 99.

nationalism had devolved into an "authoritarian imposition of power" that "denounced as heretics all who differed." Instead of being a creative force, nationalism had come to demand unqualified obedience to a nation that "existed for it for its own ends of growth and power." She identified different types of "overstimulated" nationalism: the "hyper-nationalism" of suppressed people, the "imperialistic nationalism" of colonial empires, and the "revolutionary type" of nationalism in Russia.⁴

In 1934, Addams added "economic nationalism," which equated business interests with the nation's interests.⁵ Balch also described how global capitalism, "the rule of the business super-man," was being advanced in the guise of nationalism and imperialism.⁶ The Great Depression only accentuated anti-immigration sentiments. In the 1930s, Balch worried about the fear generated by anti-immigration nationalists, and she worked diligently to

⁴ Addams, *Peace and Bread*, 98-101.

⁵ "Exaggerated Nationalism and International Comity" in *Jane Addams's Writing on Peace*. (1934, 2003), 357.

⁶ "Economic Imperialism with Special Reference to the United States," In *Beyond Nationalism: The Social Thought of Emily Greene Balch*, ed. Mercedes M. Randall. (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1972), 144.

oppose U.S. limitations on refugee admission as Nazism was taking control in Germany.

Conformity of Thought and Nationalism

Cultural fears and upheavals should signal a need for creativity and new ideas. Yet, when people feel threatened, the typical cultural response has been an urge for conformity and polarization of differences. Internal critical reflection is squashed. As Addams said in 1900, "our minds become polarized by passing events so that we have a curious tendency to mold our opinions to those of our fellows," and our philosophies "fail us when we need them most."⁷ Addams's warnings about nationalism intensified after WWI. In a talk at Swarthmore College in 1932, she warned of "a spirit of conformity" that resulted in the "the widespread belief that differing opinions may be controlled by force."⁸

⁷ "Commercialism Disguised as Patriotism and Duty" in *Jane Addams's Writing on Peace*. (1900, 2003), 5.

⁸ Addams, "The Social Deterrent of our National Self-Righteousness," in *Jane Addams's Writing on Peace*. (1934, 2003), 343.

In 1934 Balch described the desire for the "happiness of merging self in the community"⁹ as an element of emerging fascism. In the same period, Addams warned of "impatience with differing opinions" and "such a great desire to conform that we really don't think at all."¹⁰ Balch despaired of those who urged blind obedience, even for Americans who "openly maintain... that unthinking obedience is better than action based on individual conscience and thought, that patriotism is synonymous with nationalism, that liberty is dangerous...."¹¹ This desire for conformity makes differences appear dangerous.

Long after Addams's death, Balch continued to call attention to nationalistic dogmatism, particularly during the fear generated by McCarthyism and the Cold War. Balch used her Nobel lecture in 1948 as an opportunity to continue to urge her audience to challenge their personal beliefs and ideas to stimulate a vibrant diversity of thought.¹² As the

⁹ Quoted in Mercedes M Randall, *Improper Bostonian: Emily Greene Balch*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1964).

¹⁰ Addams, "The Philosophy of a New Day," *Jane Addams's Writing on Peace* (1933/2003), 351.

¹¹ From a pamphlet titled "Why Peace and Freedom" Quoted in *Improper Bostonian*, 326.

¹² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1946/balch/lecture/>

Cold War developed, she urged Americans to continue thinking carefully about national policies saying in 1954 that she was "taken by surprise ... most of all by the hostility to thought lest it lead to change."¹³

Radical Empathy and Mutual Work

Toward the end of her 2020 book *Caste*, Isabelle Wilkerson gives us a prescription with which to approach the polarization that results from our racial caste system, a prescription that could also be useful in the divisiveness of radical nationalism. Wilkerson suggests what she calls "radical empathy," which "means putting in the work to educate oneself and listen with a humble heart to understand another's experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel. Radical empathy is not about you, and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your

¹³ Address at a meeting in Kalamazoo, MI, 1954, quoted in Randall, *Improper Bostonian*, 432.

spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it."¹⁴ The empathy Wilkerson is prescribing resonates with the empathetic imagination that Addams continually fostered through her narrative writing.

Radical empathy and narrative imagination can lead to what Addams called "cosmopolitan internationalism," an ethic that embraces concern for the well-being of those outside a country's boundaries as well as within. Addams and Balch believed that one way to develop a pluralistic international understanding could be mutual work on joint projects. Addams had seen this cooperative work modeled in the immigrant experience in the immigrant neighborhoods in Chicago and believed that it could be a potential model of inclusivity. Broadening and reconstructing individual experiences through cooperative efforts could change conflict-oriented nationalistic perceptions. Addams suggested students study abroad,¹⁵ and Balch proposed international teams of young people working together on reconstruction after the war, restoring

¹⁴ Isabel Wilkerson. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. (Random House, 2020), 386.

¹⁵ "Casting out fear" in *Jane Addams's Writings on Peace*, 316-17.

communities while learning cultural communication, in some ways predictive of the Peace Corps.¹⁶

Radical empathy and narrative imagination require one to back away from the fear and negativity that feeds nationalism. During the 1950s Cold War, Balch cautioned Americans against the suspicion and cynicism that prevents rational judgment and leads to a rise in nationalism. She challenged Americans to look beyond their national boundaries to understand other countries and their people, read papers published in foreign countries, and critically examine what the media is feeding us.¹⁷ One imagines that in today's world, Balch would be asking us to read, listen, and discuss outside of our social media bubbles. She and Addams might also be urging us to find ways to work on projects together, even when we disagree on politics.

The pragmatist call for reconstructing our worldview through empathetic understanding and critically examining

¹⁶ "An International Reconstruction Corp" in *Beyond Nationalism*, 178.

¹⁷ "Do We Desire Peace and How Much" in *Beyond Nationalism*, 184. At the end of her life, she more forcefully critiques conformity and those who "prostitute their minds to unreasoning obedience and deliberate acceptance of what they know to be untrue." *Beyond Nationalism* 240.

the messages fed to us can offer the alternative of being world citizens while still valuing the country we live in today.

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