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Dear Colleague:

In the '50s, when I was a grad student, family and patriotism were at the height of fashion. Margaret Mead, I believe, suggested the diaper as an international flag (this was before people talked of "population explosion") and being Super-American was almost a condition for employment not only in the State Department but in the universities. In the 60s and 70s, the young turned against family (symbolized by the suburban ranch house) and super-patriotism. In the 80s, both family and flag are back: witness the rhetoric of the Democratic and Republican conventions.

Anti-family sentiment in the 60s and 70s was not confined to radical youth. Edmund Leach, in his Reith Lectures for 1968, said: "Far from being the basis of the good society, the family, with its narrow privacy and tawdry secrets, is the source of all our discontents." Senator Dan Quayle, the Republican candidate for Vice-president, has been accused of using family influence to get into the National Guard and thus escape service in Vietnam. Well, I ask, what is wrong with being helped by a member of one's family? After all, what is the family for if not looking after one's own often at the expense of some other person? You can't be for family and then come out against its tendency to look after its own. Because of this moral ambiguity, family, like all things merely human or natural, merits only two cheers. The three cheers at the political conventions make me feel a little uneasy.

Patriotism, traditionally, is tribalism writ large: witness Pericles's funeral oration. I hope we have outgrown that. By contrast, American patriotism in its most original guise is really a sort of a cosmopolitanism writ small: it is a delight in diversity plus the enormous optimism that this diversity points to an enlarged sense of being--of what it is like to see oneself "a multitude" (Whitman).

However, I can also understand the profound appeal of narrow loyalties. An eloquent expression of them is in the following poem by the Australian Mary Gilmore:

I have grown past hate and bitterness,
I see the world as one;
Yet, though I can no longer hate,
My son is still my son.
All men at God's round table sit,
And all men must be fed;
But this loaf in my hand,
This loaf is my son's bread.

Best wishes,

Zi-Fu