

“This is my Land”. Georges Brassens on Where Woody Guthrie¹ Went Wrong

by Günther Lanier

During winter break while travelling through southern India I was asked by hundreds of people, most of them total strangers, where I come from. Usually as the very first question after the introductory ‘hallo’. Well I don’t know about you, but I mind being put into the little box of what by accident of birth happens to be my nationality. And I ask you: How much information does it convey? How much do they know once they know that I “am” Austrian?

I had a clash with a tourist guide in Madurai’s Meenakshi temple who didn’t like my not hiring him. Our exchange got heated. At the height of it, what he threw at me was: “This is my country” – and he went off to talk to others who shared his ownership of India. Well, convention would agree: as he is Indian it – India – is his country. But if you think of it: even on home ground it does not give him hardly any benefits. He does not have to apply for an extension of his visa once a year – yes. And he has the right to cast his votes in all – from national down to panchayat – elections. He also has duties: theoretically at least, he has to pay taxes. In other countries men have to spend time serving in the army. Etc. But beyond that there is not much difference between the rights and duties of an “owner of a country” and the rights and duties of a total stranger like me. Why do we attach so much importance to nationality?

That brings me to our close-knit community on the hill. I keep being surprised at how many stick to the notion of being “ambassadors” of their respective countries. This is outdated and keeps us from achieving what we have set out to do. Nobody should try and represent his or her country or even be an expert (priority ownership of knowledge) on his or her father- and mother-country. Neighbours in the global village do not hold on to where they come from. What you know best should be what you criticise more than anything else – otherwise how could there be improvement? The questioning of the values and beliefs acquired in our old lives should be our first priority here. That is what we could and should use the great diversity around us for. Then we can develop our faculties for awareness and empathy – and thus be able to start bridging the gaps between races and sexes and classes and religions and nations and haves and havenots.

So here are some of Georges Brassens’ thoughts on the topic of patriotism. These are the words of one of my favourite chansons of his, of course it is a bit eurocentric. Georges Brassens, 1921-1981, is something of a national institution in France. He is even, I was told, taught in school there. The translation is mine. I have substituted the original ‘Sète’ (a small town in southern France which I thought not many of you would know; Brassens was born and died there) by Bombay.

Ballad of those born somewhere

(Georges Brassens)

It is true - they are nice, those little villages,
all these hamlets, all these little market towns
with their castles, their churches, their beaches.
They have but one weak point: they are inhabited,
inhabited by people who look down at all the rest
from the height of their city walls with contempt;
the race of the chauvinists, the cockade bearers,
the happy imbeciles who are from somewhere,

the happy imbeciles who are born somewhere.

Cursed be those children of their fatherland,
skewered once and for all on their belfry be those
who show you their towers their museums their town hall,
make you visit the homeland until you squint.
Whether they come from Paris, from Bombay, from Rome,
from the back of beyond or from Zanzibar,
or even from Myars - they flatter themselves tremendously,
the happy imbeciles who are from somewhere,
the happy imbeciles who are born somewhere.

The sand in which their ostriches snugly burry their heads
is the most delicate you will find anywhere.
And the air that they use to fill their balloons
and their soap bubbles – is divine breath.
And little by little they inflate
until they believe that the droppings
of their wooden horses make everybody jealous;
the happy imbeciles who are from somewhere,
the happy imbeciles who are born somewhere.

It is not a commonplace, the one they know.
From the bottom of their heart they mourn the unlucky ones,
those clumsy ones who did not have the presence of mind
to see the light of day where they come from.
When the alarm is sounded on heir precarious happiness
they come out of their hole to die in the war
against those aliens, all more or less barbarians;
the happy imbeciles who are from somewhere,
the happy imbeciles who are born somewhere.

God: How pleasant it would be on men's earth
if one didn't meet this odd species,
this importunate species that thrives everywhere,
this species of the people of the native soil.

God: How life would be beautiful if only you had not

pulled out of the nothingness all those simpletons
– proof maybe of your non-existence²⁾ –,
the happy imbeciles who are from somewhere,
the happy imbeciles who are born somewhere.

- 1) “This Land is Your Land” is US folk singer Woody Guthrie’s most famous song. No disrespect implied to Woody Guthrie and his song – I very much agree with what he meant by this song of his.
- 2) No disrespect implied and this is also no comment on Global Affairs. But I like the idea: if there was anything to prove the inexistence of God, patriots would come very close to it.