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# Comments on Political Violence, Peace Activism, and Mythopoeic Historiography

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**Abstract.** This article describes how various conceptions of history can significantly precipitate and nourish political violence--and yield a frustrating agenda for the peace activist.

It is a very mundane notion that beliefs about history can significantly precipitate and nourish political violence. These beliefs often involve assessments of equity, justice, and rights concerning the origins of a people, a great battle, a fall from grace, a discovery of a new or old Eden, or an act of treachery. The substance of these beliefs fuel resentment, anger, and ultimately an intent to right wrongs--violence almost always being a tool of first choice or one remaining in reserve.

Peace activists often confront these beliefs and intrapsychic sequelae as targets meriting modification, reinterpretation, or relabeling. Much as a psychotherapist may embark on a similar endeavor with the substantive historical beliefs of a patient or client, the peace activist can be viewed as seeking the therapeutic goal of historical revisionism--a totalitarianism of the ego with benign consequences.

Besides the peace activist's means-end problem of defending the obtaining of peace through such cognitively violent means, there is a second problem of the relative impacts of historical belief content versus process. This latter problem comprises the reification of content and the discounting of process. Reification of content is exemplified by the peace activist acting as if the mere influence of said content is the royal road to peace. Further peace-compatible inoculations may be necessary to prevent behavioral drift into violence, but the nature of content largely foretells a nature of peace or war. The basic assumption of this content focus is that historical beliefs are discrete and largely static entities with predictable linkages with political violence.

On the other hand, focus on historical belief process yields a more pessimistic perspective on the quest for peace--even as this focus may be more ecologically valid as to historical belief and its putative linkage with political violence. Through this focus, historical beliefs are continually being renegotiated and reformulated. As well, these beliefs are in continuous dynamic interaction with other beliefs and belief constituents. In practical terms, all qualities and characteristics of a belief, its manifold relationships, and contributors to its very existence do not exist for at point of measurement they have already changed. Associated with this nihilistic conception of belief is at least the potential for an autonomous political violence that--once spawned by what no longer exists--runs amok.

In contrast, then, with the common view that conflicting historical belief contents--single correct histories--create politically violent antagonists is the view that the contents are ever-changing via process and that belief as a causal agent in political violence defies measurement. Thus, nobody can learn from history--not because of some learning disorder or the uniqueness of any specific historical moment, but because there are no lessons to learn.

In admirable but doomed quests for peace, the peace activist is confronted, not with some primal hostile or aggressive instinct of the human species, but a cognitive-affective phenomenon that renders information processing and behavior impelling everywhere and nowhere. For the peace activist as for

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other actors in history, the perception of will and causality may be the essence of the mythopoeic. (See Barnes, H.E. (1919). Psychology and history: Some reasons for predicting their more active cooperation in the future. *American Journal of Psychology*, 30, 337-376; Blackman, L.M. (1994). What is doing history? The use of history to understand the constitution of contemporary psychological objects. *Theory and Psychology*, 4, 485-504; Buss, A.R. (1977). In defense of a critical-presentist historiography: The fact-theory relationship and Marx's epistemology. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 13, 252-260; Greer, S. (1997). Nietzsche and social construction: Directions for a postmodern historiography. *Theory and Psychology*, 7, 83-100.) (Keywords: Historiography, Peace, Political Violence.)