

11-18-1999

# Democracy, Political Violence, and the Problem of We

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## Recommended Citation

Editor (1999) "Democracy, Political Violence, and the Problem of We," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 19 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol7/iss19/1>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Democracy, Political Violence, and the Problem of We

Author: Editor

Volume: 7

Issue: 19

Date: 1999-11-18

Keywords: Political Violence, Representative Democracy

**Abstract.** This article describes an unsavory aspect of representative democracy that is less explored than most of its putative benefits.

Although we may not be at the end of history, we may be forgiven for surmising that history is now the story of eventual representative democracy. In fact, we are often told that one outstanding virtue of such democracy is its political process that best addresses the continual conflicts engendered by the infinite needs and finite resources of populations--the sine qua non of the political world. The representative democratic process addresses such conflicts so as to mitigate the need for internal and external political violence.

Yet representative democracies may be viewed as enablers of political violence both when individual rights and/or collective rights are viewed by a respective population as sacrosanct. The very process that depends on a knowledgeable and involved citizenry necessarily engenders ingroups and outgroups. What's more, the ingroups (to other ingroups) can become outgroups, while the outgroups (to others within the outgroup) become ingroups. Also, the representative democratic process--even as it seems to inculcate individual responsibility for individual and/or collective rights--also seems to precipitate a narcissism and accompanying sense of entitlement that is associated with a low level of tolerance for a world incompatible with one's desires. As this low level is significantly violated, political action can become ever more exemplified by political violence. Finally, the "we the people" of the representative democracy becomes yet another reified construct impelling political violence when the needs of that "we" are not met. And so the many episodes of political violence that characterize the histories of representative democracies and historical eras that contain democratic aims and aspirations.

The basic psychological problem seems to be that with the "we" of a representative democracy immediately comes the "they" of some other political entity. Effecting a "we" without "they" is the desired political psychological goal--a goal that finds any effective means wanting at present. (See Barbarin, O.A., et al. (1998). Ironic trends in the transition to peace: Criminal violence supplants political violence in terrorizing South African Blacks. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 4, 283-305; Benson, M., & Kugler, J. (1998). Power parity, democracy, and the severity of internal violence. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42, 196-209; DeMause, L. (1990). The gentle revolution: Childhood origins of Soviet and East European democratic movements. *Journal of Psychohistory*, 17, 341-352; Prager, J. (1993). Politics and illusion: A psychoanalytic exploration of nationalism. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, 16, 561-595; Steinfels, P. (November 13, 1999). Themes of a cardinal, a prince, and a philosopher. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>.) (Keywords: Political Violence, Representative Democracy.)