



COVER SHEET

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CAN HISTORY TEACH US PEACE?

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Abstract

The idea that we can learn from history is a recurring one and this essay examines dialectically the arguments for and against the proposition that history can teach us peace. Eight objections to the proposition that we can teach peace through history are discussed: 1) the problem that history implies a social inevitability, 2) the difficulty in ascribing moral or ethical responsibility in historical explanation, 3) the reliance on counterfactual history in attempting to teach peace through history, 4) the war-centred nature of history, 5) the violence-centred nature of history, 6) the depersonalized construction of war in history, 7) the past-centred nature of history, 8) the problem of despair. The conclusion to this essay is that the teaching of peace is possible, although one does need to be mindful of the limitations to such a project and to have a deliberately open view of the future. [This Abstract did not appear in the published version of the article].

Essay

Sometimes articulated by historians, but more often by philosophers and educators, there's a recurring idea that we can learn from history, as problematic as this may well be. Thus it is said that we study history to learn from history. Indeed it can be argued that individuals would not bother to write history if it had no implicit didactic purpose. Since history tends to be the history of violence, statements about learning from history generally imply that we can somehow learn to be more peaceful. But teaching and learning peace through teaching history has many problems. Using a dialectical method, we can outline a series of arguments against teaching peace through history, and the responses to those arguments. This will help us to understand what's required to effectively educate for peace.

A first objection against peace education through teaching history stems from either actual or perceived historical inevitability. Within the teaching of history it is difficult to avoid a certain fatalism that suggests that because wars have happened in human history, therefore they will always happen. War becomes inevitable. Of course, historical inevitability is very much something the mind constructs. Within every moment there is the existential reality of the open future. But any discussion of causation tends to imply that history could have taken no other course than the one it did. In other words, the message of history can be taken as extremely negative and fatalistic: that war and wars are inevitable.

Short of providing a detailed analysis of historical inevitability, we can at least examine the integral notion of time as a constructed phenomenon. The reality of experiencing the "now" is something each one of us knows instinctively: we intuitively know that as individuals we can and do make authentic decisions. This also

holds true for history. Thus, notwithstanding the illusion or pretext that at any time there are no alternatives to violence, it is possible to assert that at any time actors can opt for peaceful and non-violent alternatives to violence, even if only in incremental ways.

Of course, asserting the alternatives to both war and structural violence constitutes one of the major themes in peace research. The corollary is that at any time in past history these peaceful and non-violent alternatives also existed, and that the violence that occurred in the past was therefore not inevitable. No war is inevitable. Interestingly, a belief in war's inevitability can be identified as a crucial cause of war itself, since it engenders the mentality of the pre-emptive strike. The inevitability belief functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Against this, the existence of alternatives to violence must be asserted. [441/442]

A second argument against teaching peace through history centres on the difficulty of ascribing moral or ethical responsibility in historical explanation. This can be described as a more general sociological or psychological problem, although it finds a focus in historical explanation. The problem is this: whenever we give a historical explanation we tend to absolve the individuals involved of any moral responsibility for their actions. War therefore becomes something that simply happens: it is supposedly caused by a set of circumstances, rather than by the actions of individuals and groups at a particular time. The problem is summed up neatly in the aphorism, *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* - to understand all is to forgive all. The view that nobody is responsible for war is also reflected in the rhetoric of tragedy and catastrophe that so often describes both the origins and course of war. Tragedy and catastrophe are metaphors of events outside human control, and the implication is that war is somehow fated or divine, rather than having human origins. Similarly, those engaging in war regularly claim there was no alternative besides engaging in war. The implication is that circumstances have dictated a course of action, and they are not responsible.

How does one react to this problem of historical explanation? One response is that historical explanation (and indeed sociological and psychological explanation) only describes predispositions or receptive circumstances for events to occur. Thus in making historical explanations we need to show the limits of applying causation to any problem or event: ultimately the reason for a person deciding to take a particular action is that he or she decided to take that decision. This also applies on a collective scale. It may well be that we can assign a range of causative factors that encourage a particular country's leadership to opt for war, but ultimately the choice of war results from a decision by that country's leadership. Even when a country is supposedly the non-aggressor, the leadership of the country invaded usually has made decisions that have encouraged the invasion. Even where there is no contributory culpability, the invaded nation's leadership still has the option of practicing non-violent resistance. In most cases in the 20th century, invaded countries have opted for violent resistance. War making is more than a matter of circumstances - it is a matter of choice. Moreover, not only does war making involve decision making by leaders but also by citizens of the country, since people have the capacity to dissent. It's true that within totalitarian societies, exercising the right of dissent may require extraordinary courage and organization, but if the power of government rests upon the consent of the governed, then war making also rests upon the consent of the individual. Thus, within

a war-making exercise, the citizens of a country are exercising, by consent, a moral and historical decision to support the war.

A third argument against peace education through history centres on counterfactual history. This is in many ways related to the problem of historical inevitability and the problems associated with a doctrine of historical inevitability for encouraging peace making. If, from a peace perspective, one asserts that war and structural violence are not historical inevitabilities, that history is not pre-determined, then one is forced to suggest that at any stage in history there are (were) alternatives available to those involved in the process of history. In other words, there are (were) alternatives to conflict. This tends to involve what [442/443] is known as counterfactual history, that is, history-that-did-not-happen, or, more precisely, history-that-could-have-happened. Counterfactual history envisages alternative futures from the way events did take place.

Historians are hesitant in accepting the validity of counterfactual history, but the strongest denunciation of the possibility of counterfactual history comes from those within the realist tradition in international relations theory. Perhaps we do need to take seriously the possibility of imaging or imagining possible alternative courses to past history, especially peaceful courses for past history. Counterfactual history can indeed be argued to be the opposite of the monistic and deterministic outlook of historical inevitability: if we contend that war is or was not necessary or inevitable, then it is quite valid to examine what “could have happened” if individuals had acted differently.

Moreover, much historical peace research and historical writing seems to contain an implied counterfactual history, without this being identified as such. Thus when we point out the consequences of the lack of international conferencing in July 1914 we are implicitly suggesting that with international conferencing a completely different course of events could have followed in August 1914. Those who write about the failure of the Disarmament Conference of 1932 seem to imply that the world war that erupted years later would not have been possible, at least not in the destructive form it did take, if the Conference had been successful. Those who argue the efficacy of non-violent resistance to Nazism seem also to be implicitly suggesting that if such non-violent resistance had been more widespread, then a totally different course of events could have taken place in the 1930s and 1940s. Critics may well argue that such counterfactuals are endless, although this is precisely the point. The possibilities for peace in history have been endless, just as our opportunities are now endless to work for and create peace.

A fourth argument against peace education through history is the war-centred nature of history. Given the role of war in forming and mobilizing society, the war-centred nature of historical analysis is something we should expect, but the problem for teaching peace through history is that one constantly focuses upon war. History tends to be organized around conflict, be this conflict between individual rulers or, in the recent modern era, between collectivities. Even in socialist versions of history, war remains a central organizing paradigm, although in this instance in the form of class warlike. To some extent more recent historians have attempted to balance such a state-centric view by creating social histories, concentrating on the experience of the common people. Even with such a history-from-below approach, it is still difficult to

completely avoid the dominant image of war as a mobilizing and socializing force. It may be that we no longer define history through battles as such, although we still tend to define history as being pre-war, inter-war, and post-war eras, and so forth. It is difficult to avoid war as the defining characteristic of history.

What is the solution to the problem of war-centred history? We should acknowledge that war has been crucial in forming human society. Who we are very much reflects the role of war in modern history, but the positive aspects of war, namely organizational and technological development, are due not to war's [443/444] intrinsic nature but rather to the commitment war engenders amongst individuals. In other words, given the political will, the organizational and technological development during wartime or amidst the threat of war could well be achieved within a peaceful society. Further responses to the war-centred nature of history include emphasizing that war is not inevitable; that is, that at any stage there were alternatives to war, and indeed there are alternatives today. In addition, we can emphasize the experience of common people during times of war, and the individual pain and suffering they endure.

A fifth and related objection to the teaching of peace through history is the violence-centred nature of history. Just as violence tends to be an object of fascination within fiction, so too violence tends to be a focus of attention within history. Co-operation and a peaceful life tend to be regarded as unremarkable, whereas violence and cruelty stand out. Of course, there are good reasons to try to learn from the dramatic failures experienced by human societies in the past, and from the recourse to collective violence. But we should beware against this leading to a voyeuristic and vicarious enjoyment, a *Schadenfreude*, from concentrating so much on violence and even the horrific in history. It is as if we can participate in a war in the safety of an armchair, cinema, or seminar room, without the danger of actual physical injury, and thereby reassure and comfort ourselves that no matter how mundane or disappointing our lives might be, at least we are safe. History can serve as a form of de-actualizing war.

It is difficult to deal with violence in history simply, given the role of violence in defining both the nation-state and the current global economic divisions. It is sometimes difficult to avoid the conclusion that history is a discipline that concentrates upon violence, both in the sense that violence compels individuals to write, and that violence compels us to attempt to make sense of what has happened. It is violence that most readily forms a theme for history. Peace writer Coleman McCarthy refers to history being in effect not peace but violence studies, and goes so far as to suggest that World Wars should be renamed World Slaughter One and World Slaughter Two. Elaine Scarry has suggested that our descriptions of violence, and thus by implication our historical descriptions, are essentially fictive, due to the traumatic nature of doing otherwise.

On one level one can respond by concentrating on the elements of cooperation and non-violence within modern history. Certainly much evidence in the world history of the past decade would support the efficacy of non-violence and peaceful co-operation in achieving enduring change. Perhaps also, as is implied within the writings of McCarthy and Scarry, we should be more truthful in describing the violence within historical narrative.

On a deeper psychological level, however, we should acknowledge our fascination

with death and violence. As Erasmus noted, *Dolce bellum inexpertis*— war is sweet to those who have not experienced it. Why is this so? One explanation is that war does present a unique crucible wherein human character is tested. William Shakespeare seems to have known this well, and within his work one often finds war and battle depicted as the arena wherein the drama of good versus evil is played out. Another explanation is that our fascination with the horrific and the violent paradoxically reflects our inner fears of such violence: [444/445] experiencing war and violence through either film or literature is one way of engaging our fears directly without really being hurt. It is a vicarious involvement in war. If this is the case, then the important point is to identify and recognize the process, and to realize that humankind is essentially pacific by nature, despite our fascination with violence. Indeed it is precisely because we are by nature pacific beings which makes violence both newsworthy and history-worthy.

A sixth argument against peace education through the teaching of history is the way war tends to be constructed in historical analysis. It is difficult to avoid the implicit metaphor in historical narrative that war is a large-scale chess game, rather than an activity involving human lives. Wars tend to be described as personal contests between nations, between armies, between regiments, between military commanders, and at times, even between world leaders. Those who construct historical narratives generally know the more obvious instances of “anthropomorphic error;” that is, treating non-human entities as if they were human beings. But it is much more difficult to avoid the “anthropomorphic effect;” that is, describing the actors in wars in a way that creates an illusion that they are merely enlarged sporting contests.

Of course, the irony of the anthropomorphic effect is that war is thereby de-humanized. On one level it may be true to describe a particular battle as one armoured division moving in a particular direction, and this advance being countered by an opposing armoured division, but this mode of description obscures the human reality of war. What is crucial is what is not being described: the individual human beings who are killed or maimed due to what is happening, or indeed the fear experienced by such individuals, which will often mark the rest of their lives. In addition, what also tends not to be described is the impact upon civilians within war zones.

One approach to portraying the reality of war (and indeed of structural violence) is to refer to the war deaths involved. Peace research has often centred on just an approach, but one could also argue that this empirical approach is part of the problem, for reciting numbers of those killed in conflict (or who have starved due to structural inequities) tends not only to numb sensitivity but also to re-enforce the sense that individual life is not important. Thus, we read of near to a million battle-deaths in the struggle over Verdun in 1916, and the natural tendency is to infer that a thousand or even a hundred battle-deaths elsewhere is somehow less significant. The implicit tendency within the war narrative is to diminish the importance of the individual and the death of the individual. This stands in contrast with an ethos of non-violence, which emphasizes that each individual is valuable and worthy, and thus every unnecessary death by actual or structural violence is significant.

At a deeper level one can argue that the description of war and structural violence should be more ethnographic and less statistical. Unfortunately even this narrative or ethnographic approach to war has problems. It is easy for the life histories of

individual combatants (and non-combatants) to become hagiography, either consciously or unconsciously, in that the undoubted self-sacrifice of the individuals involved in times of war become a model for emulation. The theme of heroic self-sacrifice is, after all, one of the themes of both military history and social history in wartime, and a theme that is constantly replayed in war [445/446] memorials. War becomes, subtly, the arena wherein the individual and the nation are tested, and thereby, subtly, something to be desired.

How should we respond on a pedagogical level? The answer seems to be this: we should not deny the altruism of those involved in wars, as is constantly re-enforced in war narratives. But we should also elucidate what Reinhold Niebuhr called the “paradox of patriotism.” That is, in wartime, conduct that might, on an individual level, be quite noble and altruistic—namely, a patriotic willingness to sacrifice oneself to protect family and kinfolk—turns out on the social level to be destructive and evil—namely, the willingness to kill others against whom the individual has no real grievance. In other words, pedagogically, we should be working towards an understanding of the structural dynamics of nationalism and the nation-state within any historical narrative.

A seventh problem with peace education through the teaching of history is that history is axiomatically past-oriented, whereas the focus in peace and peace research tends to be future-oriented. Indeed, peace education often emphasizes the importance of imagining and imaging the future, or of visualizing the sort of world we would like to have in the future. Of course, one might well argue that we could proceed from the past error to the present and future alternatives. Nevertheless, the futuristic and utopian nature of peace and peace education does not sit comfortably with a discipline that emphasizes the past. This tension might be resolved by recognizing history’s limitations. As important as the past is, it is not as crucial as the present in which we live, and the future that is open to us.

This notwithstanding, our understanding of the present, and how we interpret the events around us, is clearly framed by our understanding of the past. For example, since 1945, Western leaders have routinely used the Munich analogy, which suggests that military action is needed to avoid repeating the failure of the European democracies to deal with Adolf Hitler in 1938. The analogy has been used to justify Western military engagements in Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and most recently, the bombing of Serbia. Historically, this is a flawed analogy since it assumes that the only firm response to aggression is a military one. The analogy also ignores the events that preceded the appeasement at Munich, but the continuing use of the analogy does underscore the power of historical understanding.

Of course, the radical constructivist perspective on history claims that the past exists only within our imagination. This view stresses the importance of the historical imagination, of formulating a particular perspective on the past, and of understanding historical interpretation as a mythogenic exercise. But for the historical myths we create, we must ask whether they reinforce a future that is open or closed. Do our myths create the possibility of a peaceful future and the creative resolution of tension, or do they promise only endless destruction? As the creators of our myths, the decision lies very much with us.

The eighth problem of peace education through history is despair. When one examines either the progress of peace advocacy or the individual and collective attempts to avoid violence, the historical record may well encourage hopelessness. The narrative of history is arguably quite horrific, involving a cycle of violence and genocide, enclosed within repeated hopes and plans for peace. [446/447] When we consider the horrors of the past, it makes it difficult to imagine a more positive future. *Why* focus on history if this will be the only result? Shouldn't peace education instead encourage a more hopeful vision?

Much depends on what we mean by history and the historical record. On one level, there is already a forgotten or underdeveloped narrative that emphasizes a history of love and nurturing, joy and fulfilment. It is a narrative of the common people. In contrast, most conventional historiography emphasizes nation-states and statecraft, and therefore conflict and violence. In other words we need to look at other histories.

On the other hand, we must also confront our despair. In Jungian terms, we must examine our own dark natures. In recent times, advocates of intrapersonal peace theory, such as Joanna Macy, have begun to confront despair, and reject the superficial optimism that undergirds popular culture. Only when we truly examine the horrors of recent modern history, in the real and not the imagined past, can we develop the passionate conviction that they should not be repeated in the future.

How then can we summarize what we require to educate for peace through the teaching of history? We need to understand importance but also the limitations of history for promoting peace education. We need a utopian approach to history, one that recognizes both the openness of history and the openness of our own experience. According to Patrick Slattery we need an eschatological curriculum, that is, an open-ended view of human history. The future is open, and each of us has the opportunity (and responsibility) to help forge a more humane and pacific future. If as educators or historians, we can say that each moment is open and free, then we can also suggest that peace is more than a noble hope but rather a realizable objective for the future.

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