

*Finding Peace from the Culture-History War: A
Historiographical Message for the Times*

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This paper is a shorten, academic, version of the first section of a discussion essay for The Philosophy Café, Brisbane, Australia. Here we avoid the problem of searching out a definition for the culture-history war, only to re-debate the war. In each country the term will mean something slightly different, and, in Australia, it is sufficient to point to the phrase, '[John] Howard's [Prime Minister 1996-2007] History Wars.' The purpose here is to look for ways to peace, meaningful peace, and will use the recent American context to discuss the historiographical challenge through reference to two articles in *The Atlantic*, and then proceeds to a philosophic-historiographic argument.

Danielle Allen [2021: online] in *The Atlantic* said in her opening remark, on the vexed topic of the culture-history war –as a series of 'battles' it recently played out in Washington D.C., United States of America:

Things were getting bad even before the 2016 election, but somehow, within just a few years, they have gotten worse. In an environment of intense partisan warfare, each side believes it has a claim to lead the nation based on its own set of values.

That is a good start to the definition of the state of cultural-history war globally. There is much more to say, but, at the core, it is an ethos of intense partition conflict which metaphors warfare. *The Atlantic* is still a conservative journal, but it is now being criticised by many agitators in the social media world, trying to normalise or mainstream what is anti-intellectualism, as originally described by Richard Hofstadter (1962). Allen's article is entitled, "The Road From Serfdom", which is paying to homage to Friedrich Hayek, and a liberal-left critic would

disagree with Hayek but agree with Allen that the alt-right is in danger of creating that serfdom Hayek feared coming from the Left. Whether a critic agree or disagree on the technical points, there is cross-ideological support for the principles Allen offers across the political sides of a democratic institution.

Adam Serwer's article (2021: online), in the same issue of *The Atlantic*, is uncomfortable for mainstream conservatives but a necessary historical corrective for the current state of warfare. Serwer's exact point is "William Howard Taft and a succession of other Republican presidents privileged restoring relations with the South over protecting black Americans' rights." Serwer's wider point is that the politics of civility has become defined as "I can do what I want and you can shut up." His alternative definition of civility relates Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. Serwer's stated:

In his "Letter From Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. famously lamented the "white moderate" who "prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." He also acknowledged the importance of tension to achieving justice. "I have earnestly opposed violent tension," King wrote, "but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth." Americans should not fear that form of tension. They should fear its absence.

This insight is what is meant in the Black Lives Matter slogan, "No Justice, No Peace". However, slogans and social media memes are no substitute for understanding the intellectual schema. If there is no desire to dig deeper into knowledge – philosophy and history broadly-speaking and with much detail – then the misunderstanding that comes from such a lack of education will perpetuate a destructive warrior culture.

The Left spectrum is 'equally' to blame in a fair overview. The scholar hesitates to say 'equally' since the arguments of 'whataboutism' is 'cherry-picked'. However, outside of more polite circles, liberal-left critics, or British-type socialists, are being mentally tortured by those social media agitators who see themselves as left-wing defenders of the ideological/political faith, and they include once respected academics and former teachers. The 'reasonable Left' is also speaking out, in the same way as conservative theorists for intelligent republicanism.

The damaging polemic debates are on both sides. We have seen how the liberal Process theologian David Ray Griffin lost himself to the 9/11 conspiracy movement. I offer a personal testimony to a torturous four-hour argument with an eminent left-wing Australian social historian and his fan club on social media. The former academic friend's final words were [in part]:

Every time you use it [the term, 'conspiracy theories'] you align yourself with the CIA...I

am very familiar with this process [defending conspiracy theories in relation to modern medicine and health policy] having studied the propaganda of the frontier and the propaganda of World War I in great depth.

The fallacies here are the theory of ‘origins-determine-auto outcomes’ and not comparing like-with-like. The propaganda of racial and world wars *and* anti-vaxxer attacks on modern medicine and health policy is not cognitively equal for a fair comparison.

There is a major problem that the mainstream Left and Right can agree upon, but in that consensus is the central problem that the terms of ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ have become misunderstood and entangled in the polemics. The historical analysis of American politics is uncomfortable for those outside of the United States, and, academically, it is contentious and has shown its limits. Indeed, the globalisation thesis of 1990s has moved debates on. Nevertheless, the historical-philosophical paradigm of the United States as *the* leader of the free world remains, for good or bad...or ugly.

Journalism does not make the mark as the intellectual history does. There is the moderating commentary of better journalists, but often the analysis keeps missing the bigger picture for the capacity to educate people on their own belief systems. What is missing is to see why persons become so wrong in their judgements on the political environment. The judgements become wrong without the educative capacity. A journalistic phrase like, “America has always teetered on the edge of collapse” (Grant, 2021), does not make sense at the depth of the intellectual history. The historiography is true as only as the narrative of “maelstrom”, a violent whirlpool of disorder, is true; but being overplayed, with good or bad intent (either way), it is false. What then happens is the naïve shock and outrage (on both sides) cycles in an exaggerated alarm, as seen in the storming of the American Congress building in Washington D.C. in January 2021, and its aftermath.

There is a claim for there being a perpetual culture war, but the claim is half-true. There is a culture war but where there are ‘hidden’ figures who are perpetuating the alarm. This is not a conspiracy theory. There is a certain ideological conservatism in recent journalistic reactions to the mayhem, and the problem is not more than that. There is a tendency to blame uncomfortable agendas from the Left, back to “1968”. The misunderstanding is that the agendas also had certain conservative roots. It is important to understand one’s own self-hidden ideology and stop erroneously using the term as the problem for ‘the other’. So-called conservatives do not understand conservatism, in the same way that progressivists do not understand progressivism.

In the recent decades (say, back to 1990), there has been astute historical analysis of what has gone wrong in the Republican Party and formulated a different republicanism (Pet-

tit, 1997). There has also been recent astute criticism of the liberal university meritocracy policies which has contributed to the major problem (Sandel, 2020). Furthermore, there has been contemporised analysis of why the American culture has contributed to such a global polemic condition (Jacoby, 2008). A journalist or a social media reader does not need to choose between any of these sociological or historical sociology theses. Each, and all, theses would tell what the set of problems are in the larger scoping, and some ways out.

The concept is the historiography not driven by journalistic drama but attempts to untangle the logic. This historiographer finds Hegel's concept of worldview helpful, but by taking out Hegel's mechanical style of logicism. This does not lead to endorsing any worldview, but it is desiring that persons do not remain content in their cognitive bubble.

There are two processes here. The first is to show that persons often misunderstand our own arguments. It is not that that we do not understand our own thoughts, but in putting together the arguments as a view of the world we get entangled in a certain logic, a logic which we believe is our own tradition. Unfortunately, we have a population poorly read on the intellectual history of the subscribed tradition.

Secondly, to show that the dangerous arguments are not merely dangerous delusions. Certainly, delusions are part of the problem, but they are delusions built from faulty views of the world, i.e. worldviews. This is true now with the ult-right and the 'radical' left in their conspiracy theories. The theories do not come from nowhere, they come from a desire to see a particular order in the world, and that desire, with the poor capacity to deal – the opposite of what is called critical thinking – with ideas – what is truly referred to as intellectual – produces 'crazy' worldviews.

A scholar can accept the hobbesian point that there will always be those who control the agenda, whether for peace or war, as the leviathan permits it, but, as with Locke, we, as individuals, have a certain power to control the agenda for benefit of the social contract. A regulated democrat state is better than tyranny – in whatever form. If the intellectual history of politics were taught on various platforms and schools, we could untangle the conflict, and, while we all still disagree, the warfare would not be necessary nor desired.

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