



## Does Rhetoric Lead to Violence?

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I have been away from Secular Outpost for about six months due to a very heavy teaching schedule and publishing commitments. However, recent events compel me to come back and say some things.

The morning of 10/31/18 on NPR's 1A program with Joshua Johnson they were discussing the question of whether overheated rhetoric can lead to violent attacks, as with the recent pipe bomb mailings and the massacre at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. This last incident was especially painful to me since I used to live very near the Squirrel Hill neighborhood where the shooting took place. I frequently walked through the area when I was a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh.

Obviously, much of the discussion centered on the inflammatory rhetoric issuing from Donald Trump and right-wing media and websites. When we are told that the caravan of migrants from Central America is an "invasion" of gangsters and terrorists and that the "invasion" is being funded by George Soros, who is Jewish, is it surprising that these malicious and hateful lies would be believed by violent anti-Semites who might then act on such beliefs? In general, does not the promulgation of hateful words spur hateful action? Surely everyone knows that this is so, right?

Not actually. On 1A they had someone from the libertarian Cato Institute who also writes for Reason Magazine (Note: When you call your publication "Reason," I cannot help but suspect a bit of defensiveness, as if you are protesting too much). This person (sorry, I did not catch his name) argued that rhetoric does not incite violence and, further, that if we say that it does, we will soon be led to advocate censorship and the banning of "dangerous" speech.

So, there are two claims here, first, the factual claim that inflammatory rhetoric does not cause violent actions, and, second, that, even if it does, it is dangerous to discuss the connection because we thereby easily segue into recommendations of censorship. Does rhetoric cause violence? If it does, should we censor it?

As for the first question, human actions are always complexly caused and conditioned, so it is misleading to speak of a single factor as the cause of an action. On the other hand, it seems more than plausible that there might be persons already motivated by pathological hatreds and irrational beliefs who might be prompted to violent action by rhetoric that encourages, permits, or extenuates such actions. There are always unhinged losers who are prone to obsessive fears and hatreds and who entertain violent fantasies about killing their supposed enemies. In our

society, many of these people are heavily armed, often with military-style weapons—machines that efficiently kill large numbers of people in a short time. In an atmosphere of overheated and divisive rhetoric, surely it is unsurprising that hateful actions sometimes follow hateful words.

This much I take to be common sense, but can we move beyond common sense? Is there scientific evidence? Indeed there is. In his enlightening and entertaining primer of neuroscience, *The Brain: The Story of You*, David Eagleman shows that we now have an understanding of what goes on in the brain when empathy shuts off and dehumanization occurs. Historically, genocides have always been preceded by dehumanization. Nazi propaganda portrayed Jews as, literally, vermin. As the movie *Hotel Rwanda* showed, prior to the massacres of 1994, before Tutsis were massacred by Hutus, Hutu media depicted Tutsis as “cockroaches.” You step on cockroaches. The pattern of dehumanization preceding slaughter has repeated again and again.

Eagleman notes that there is a portion of the brain called the “medial prefrontal cortex” (mPFC) that is activated when we interact with or think about human beings, but is deactivated when we are thinking about mere objects. Unfortunately, the activation of the mPFC can be inhibited in various ways. Eagleman says that propaganda that demonizes others can cause us to see them as objects and not as human beings. Experiments show that people respond with less empathy to depictions of injury to members of “outgroups” that they have learned to dislike. Other experiments indicate that identifying someone as a homeless person or drug addict (people allegedly responsible for their own misfortunes) can decrease the activation of the mPFC and lead to the perception of these others as less than human beings. Neurosurgeon Itzhak Fried identifies what he calls “Syndrome E,” a pattern of diminished emotional reactivity that permits repetitive acts of violence.

The upshot is that we are now developing an understanding of genocide in terms of neuroscience. We are learning how the brain can be manipulated to switch off empathy and switch on the process of dehumanization. That poisonous rhetoric and propaganda can be causal factors leading to genocide now has the support of science and not just common sense. It appears, then, both reckless and irresponsible to dismiss or deny the likelihood that calumny, especially emanating from persons in positions of prestige and power, like the president of the United States, can promote violence.

Supposing, then, that words can lead to violence, should we censor? Of course, we recognize that there is such a thing as inciting to riot, and such actions are rightly punishable by law. What, though, about incitements that are less explicit? Should we shut up the disseminators of hate and division? Should they be subject to prosecution as they are even in some liberal countries?

As I said in a previous post, I am a free-speech fundamentalist. I see no plausible set of demarcation criteria that are sufficiently precise to exclude worthless speech while protecting speech that is merely controversial. For instance, what criteria would ban Milo Yiannopoulos while permitting Jordan Peterson? Or should Jordan Peterson be forbidden too? If so, how do we prevent our de facto rule from becoming “Forbid everyone with whom I have strong disagreements?” If that is our rule, then who is allowed to speak will simply be a matter of who has the power of proscription. Those congenial to those who wield such power are permitted and those uncongenial are not. I think something important will be lost if that becomes our practice.

There appears, then, to be no choice but to let the asses bray in public venues. Then use your freedom of speech to show that they are indeed asses.