

WAR IS NOT IN OUR BIOLOGY:
A DECADE OF THE SEVILLE STATEMENT ON VIOLENCE

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Abstract: Since 1986 when it was written by 20 international specialists, the Seville Statement on Violence has been disseminated and used in educational systems and programs throughout the world. The Statement rejects in scientific terms the commonly-held belief that war is inherent in human nature and therefore inevitable. Many issues raised by the Statement are still under investigation and debate. These include the origins of xenophobia, the historical origins and significance of the male monopoly on warfare, the social and cultural origins of violence and the methodology of non-violence as an alternative to violent social change. Regarding the latter, evidence is presented that an important challenge is to teach the dissociation of violence from anger against injustice.

Key words: human nature, anger, justice, non-violence, justice

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**WAR IS NOT IN OUR BIOLOGY:
A DECADE OF THE SEVILLE STATEMENT**

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Since the Seville Statement on Violence was drafted by 20 international specialists in 1986, it has become a normative instrument used by professional, educational and peace organizations around the world to reply to those who believe that war is in our biology and therefore inevitable. Given that this belief is still very prevalent - shared by about half of all young people in the world - it is a question which arises quite often and which has important consequences.¹

It has been shown that young people who believe war is biologically determined are much less likely to engage in activity for peace. In the one quantitative study of the question, the ratio of activity was seven to one as a function of the person's belief. Even when other factors such as the beliefs of family and friends are controlled by partial correlation techniques, this relationship between belief and action is highly significant.²

The Seville Statement was inspired by the UNESCO Statements on Race (1950, 1951, 1964, 1967, 1978)³ and drafted at a conference convened in Seville in 1986 under the auspices of the International Society for Research on Aggression and the Spanish National Commission of UNESCO. The specialists who drafted the Statement came from all relevant scientific disciplines and all parts of the world. They challenged a number of

alleged biological findings which had been used by some to justify violence and war and which often produced an atmosphere of pessimism.⁴

In particular, the Seville Statement challenged claims that war is part of human nature as inherited from animal ancestors and inscribed in the genetic code and structure of the brain. The challenge was based on a collection and analysis of data on these subjects presented by two eminent researchers who were among the signatories, John Paul Scott (animal behaviour) and Benson Ginsburg (behaviour genetics).⁵ The full statement is published here as an appendix.

In conclusion it was stated that humanity can be freed from pessimism engendered by biological determinism and empowered to make the transformation of society from war to peace. It was indicated that these tasks are mainly institutional and collective, but also depend upon the consciousness of individual participants for whom pessimism and optimism are crucial factors.

Since 1986 there has been an extensive process of dissemination of the statement, including translations into over 30 languages and several hundred publications in many forms, including scientific journals. A number of major scientific bodies have either formally endorsed or publicized the Statement. This includes the American Associations of Psychology, of Anthropology, and of Sociology. Much of this activity was reported in the Seville Statement Newsletter which was published three times a year beginning from 1986 to 1993 and disseminated widely around the world.

The message of the Seville Statement has been used extensively in educational systems and programs at all levels ranging from secondary schools to universities and adult education. Many peace activists have reported that it is especially useful in their

teaching and organizational activities. To date, however, it appears that there has not been any systematic analysis of the effectiveness of the educational use of the Statement and related materials, although there is a precedent in studies of the effectiveness of UNESCO materials developed to educate young people about the Statements on Race.⁶

Many issues raised by the Seville Statement on Violence are still very much under investigation and debate. Rather than closing off debate, the Statement recognizes the need for further research. Its preamble states that "science is a human cultural product which cannot be definitive or all encompassing". This acknowledges that our scientific knowledge at any one point in time is still tentative and needs to be continually tested against new hypotheses and information.

Debate is sometimes complicated by confusion among different levels of analysis⁷. At the one extreme are biological factors which change very slowly over time, usually over many generations, while at the other extreme are social and cultural factors which can change quite rapidly, even within a single generation. And within the latter, it is important to distinguish attitudes and actions at the level of large social groups, even states, from those of individual and small group interactions. If these different levels are confused, debates can be fruitless and frustrating.

One important question, not addressed by the Statement, concerns the origins of nationalism, ethnocentrism and xenophobia. While war may not be in our genes, some argue that genetics predisposes us to the formation of enemy images⁸. Others argue that this phenomenon is the product of social conditioning. It has been claimed that an innate tendency to form enemy images is proved by the existence of a period towards the end of the first year of life when infants begin to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar

faces and express fear of the latter. It is pointed out by others, however, that later in childhood and early adolescence there is a special interest and fascination in strangers which could be used equally to argue the opposite case. There is no doubt that the phenomenon of enemy images is very widespread and that it often seems difficult to understand its origin from a rational perspective, leaving open the tendency to view it as a reflection of biological factors.

I have pointed out that an analysis of enemy images needs to be carried out in the light of specific historical contexts. For example, under certain conditions, it may be dangerous to question the origins of an enemy image because it will be interpreted by others as an indication that you sympathize with the enemy and are a potential traitor⁹. In such situations, deprived of any possibility for open discussion and rational explanation, one may get the impression that the origin of the enemy image is somehow “innate”.

Another question concerns the origins of the fact that men, rather than women, are usually the actors in warfare and other socially-organized violence. How much is this biologically rather than socially determined? At least one critic has attacked the Seville Statement for failing to recognize that “practically everyone who has studied this problem argues that, among mammals, the males are far more prone to aggressive behavior than females.”¹⁰ I have presented evidence elsewhere which show that it is a myth that male animals are more aggressive on balance than females, a myth which derives from a projection onto animals of our human social condition.¹¹ A debate on this subject was initiated in the Seville Statement Newsletter by representatives of the Association for Women in Psychology who argued that if the violence of men against women derives

from socially learning, then we should put a priority on changing the way we educate and raise young men¹².

The Seville Statement limits itself to saying that biological factors *are not* the immediate causes of war and other social violence, and does not indicate what *are* these causes, which are presumed to be social and cultural. In 1992 UNESCO convened a follow-up meeting to the Seville Statement to consider these issues, and the results of that meeting have recently been published by UNESCO.¹³ The meeting recommended to UNESCO that violence be considered broadly, not only in terms of military violence, but also in terms of structural and cultural violence. It suggested that attention be devoted to the analysis of the creation and dissemination of enemy images. It also recommended that special consideration be given to the effects of violence in the mass media, to the promotion of international understanding in textbooks, and to the consolidation of progress in conflict resolution.

Since 1994, the analysis and transformation of structural and cultural violence, as well as overt violence, have become central concerns of UNESCO's Culture of Peace Programme. These figure in both aspects of the Programme, its national culture of peace programmes and its global projects. National culture of peace programmes established in El Salvador, Mozambique and Burundi and being established in a number of other countries are based on the social psychology finding that violence is best overcome by engaging former enemies in cooperative action for shared goals.¹⁴ These programmes will be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in preventing violence.

Education is the key modality in the transformation to a culture of peace. Among the global projects of the Culture of Peace Programme is the promotion of a culture of

peace and non-violence in educational institutions. A priority in this project is being placed on schools in zones of violence, both in urban areas of the North and in areas of post-conflict reconstruction in the South¹⁵.

The culture of peace educational project is based on the belief that there is an effective methodology of non-violence which can be taught and which can enable people to transform the beliefs, behaviours and institutions of the culture of war and violence into a culture of peace. This methodology must be based on traditions of conflict resolution which exist in every culture and on certain universal principles which have been worked out in practice in social movements for peace and justice.

In working out the methodology of active non-violence, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela and others have shown that anger, rather than being a negative force, can be harnessed in the form of moral indignation into the primary motivating force of social movements for peace and justice. To quote Martin Luther King Jr., “the supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force.” Similarly, in awarding Rigoberta Menchu the Nobel Prize for Peace, the Chairman of the Prize Committee recognized her as an outstanding example of someone who had resisted brutality and violence and acted with the “driving force” of “moral indignation.”

Thus, priority should be given in the pedagogy for a culture of peace to the dissociation of anger and violence. Because anger is so often misunderstood, there needs to be intensive and careful scientific study of this process.¹⁶ In this regard, it may be useful to study the evolutionary transformation of anger from its animal origins to its human manifestations¹⁷. While in animals, the emotion homologous to anger is

stimulated by the attributes of another animal (for example, the odor of one unfamiliar male perceived by another), in humans anger is stimulated by the actions of another person and is more frequent among people who are already familiar with each other. Also, while in animals the response corresponding to anger is often violent, in humans it is more likely to be a verbal rather than a physical response. While this verbal response may be destructive, it is even more frequently constructive, as one demands that the other change behavior to be more just. Finally, unique in humans, there is the capacity to collectivize anger and demand reform and justice not only by individuals but also by social institutions.

Research on anger by social psychologists has shown that its occurrence in humans is related intrinsically to the sense of justice. According to a recent definitive study of angry episodes¹⁸, subjects report that 87% of all events which make them angry are actions committed by another person which are “unjustified” or “potentially avoidable.” Even when describing their own actions which made others angry, subjects admitted that they were at least half of the time unjustifiable or potentially avoidable.

As for the effects of anger, contrary to common opinion, they are far more often positive than negative. In the study cited above, episodes of anger are rated as having positive results on balance 75% of the time if you are the angry party and 67% if you are the target of another’s anger. In the latter case, the most frequent perceptions were: 1) you realized your own faults; 2) you realized your own strengths; 3) your relationship with the angry person was strengthened; 4) you gained respect for the angry person. The latter two perceptions show the role of anger in the process of developing social relationships.

While the classic studies on anger are confined to angry episodes among individuals, it is well known that anger may be shared collectively and that it may be directed against institutions as well as individuals.¹⁹ I have found in studying the autobiographies of famous peace activists that the ability to express and to share anger against injustice is a key aspect of their consciousness development.²⁰

Since work for peace is intrinsically linked to the struggle for justice, it may turn out that our biological predisposition to anger is more essential for peace than for war. In fact, as the Seville Statement points out, participation in modern war is less dependent on emotional factors than on cognitive factors. In modern war there is an institutional use of obedience, suggestibility and idealism, social skills such as language, and rational considerations such as cost-calculation, planning, and information processing.

In summary, the teaching of non-violence, which is at the heart of the culture of peace project, should be based on the dissociation of anger and violence and the realization of the positive potential for the channeling of anger into constructive change. This learning can be an important component of the contribution by educational systems, both formal and non-formal, to the transformation needed from a culture of war to a culture of peace.

NOTES

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 3. UNESCO. Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice. Paris: UNESCO, 1979.
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 6. Saenger G. The effectiveness of the UNESCO pamphlet series on race. *Intl Social Science Bulletin* 1954; 6 (3): 2-16.
 7. Groebel J, Hinde R. *Aggression and War: Their Biological and Social Bases*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
 8. Debate on this issue may be found in Seville Statement Newsletters of January 1993 (7.2) and August 1993 (8.1) with reference or excerpts from the following publications: Smith B. Nationalism, ethnocentrism and the new world order. *J Humanistic Psychol* 1992; 32 (4); Sagan C, Druyan A. *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*. New York: Random House, 1992; and Bischof N. A systems approach toward the functional connections of attachment and fear. *Child Development* 1975; 46: 801-817 (cited by S Hopf).
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 10. Somit A. Review essay: Humans, chimps, and Bonobos: the biological bases of aggression, war, and peacemaking. *J Conflict Resolution* 1990; 34: 553-582.
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12. In their letter published in the Seville Statement Newsletters of December 1991, the representatives of the Association for Women in Psychology pointed to the pervasiveness of violence by men against women and called for closer examination of gender socialization and the values it inculcates in both females and males. They proposed the following addition to the Seville Statement: "The socialization process in almost all human cultures selectively reinforces aggressive behavior in males and discourages it in females. The celebration of violence as a mark of masculinity is an important cultural perpetuator of both war in the public sphere and interpersonal violence in the private sphere."
13. Wiberg H (ed.). *Peace and War: Social and Cultural Aspects*. Warsaw: Bel Corp, 1995
14. Lacayo Parajon F, Lourenço M, Adams D. The UNESCO Culture of Peace Programme in El Salvador: An initial report. *Intl J Peace Studies* 1996; 1(2):1-20. This work is based on the principles developed by the scientific research of Sherif and extended by others. See especially Sherif M, Superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict: An experimental evaluation. In: Worchel S, Austin WG (eds.) *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*. Monterey Cal: Brooks/Cole, 1979.
15. Guidelines for a plan of action for the UNESCO Interregional Project for Culture of Peace and Non-violence in Educational Institutions were elaborated at an International Forum on Education for Non-Violence hosted by the Foundation Pro Dignitate in Sintra, Portugal, 20-22 May 1996. They are available from UNESCO Culture of Peace Programme, 7 place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris, France.
16. The misunderstanding of anger as an emotion may not be an accidental phenomenon. According to one study of the treatment of anger in America, it was accepted as a potentially useful emotion in the early revolutionary days of the country - in line with the anger of the Old Testament prophets and that of Jesus against the money-changers. But with the coming of industrial strife in the United States during the 19th Century, child-rearing practices were changed to emphasis the suppression of anger. See Stearns CZ, Stearns P. *The Struggle for Emotional Control in America's History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
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18. Averill JR. Studies on anger and aggression: Implications for theories of emotion. *Amer Psychologist* 1983, 38: 1145-1160; Averill JR. *Anger and Aggression: An Essay on Emotion*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982.

19. In the studies by Averill mentioned above, episodes of anger against groups or institutions were excluded from the data analysis, as the study was focussed on interpersonal relations.

20. Adams D. Psychology for Peace Activists. New Haven: Advocate Press, 1987, 1995.