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## **WHY A STATEMENT ON VIOLENCE? VIOLENCE CAN BE PSYCHOBIOLOGICALLY TAMED**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Seville Statement on Violence (SSV) was originated by a launched UN-Committee of the International Society for Research on Aggression (ISRA) in the late seventies of the past century. Its final product, elaborated by more than twenty scholars from different scientific disciplines and from all continents, was presented in 1986 at the VI *Coloquio Internacional sobre Cerebro y Agresión* (CICA) in Seville. Three years later, it was endorsed by the 25<sup>th</sup> General Conference of UNESCO in Paris. Its main message was that violence, and consequently war too, are avoidable and aggressiveness can be tamed. The present article comments what were the main reasons which urged to elaborate it, and some difficulties found on the way.

### **Key words:**

Seville Statement, aggression, violence, peace

### **1. Introduction**

The Seville Statement on Violence (SSV), elaborated in the early 1980s by scientists from all the world and from many different disciplines, scholars from different scientific disciplines and from all continents, was presented in Seville in 1986,

endorsed by the 25<sup>th</sup> General Conference of UNESCO in 1989, and successfully followed by the creation of the UNESCO's Culture for Peace Programme (1994), as well as the subsequent Decade of Science for Peace.

In plain words, its main message is that, far from falling into the psychological trap of believing that people cannot change and that peace is therefore impossible<sup>1</sup>, violence can be avoidable, making clear that there is nothing in biology that stands in the way of achieving peace and making a world without war (see: Adams<sup>2</sup>, Ramirez<sup>3</sup>). Even more, violence is useless: "Violence destroys; it is not useful at all", as Pope Benedict XVI stated during his visit in Lebanon (14 September 2012).

Aggressiveness can be psychobiologically tamed and, consequently, biology makes it possible to end violence and the suffering it causes. We need not accept human aggression as a fate. As the Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz pointed out, "we shall not improve our chances of counteracting [intra-specific aggression] if we accept it as something metaphysical and inevitable, but on the other hand, we shall perhaps succeed in finding remedies if we investigate the chain of its natural causation"<sup>4</sup>.

Far from condemning humanity to war, thus, war is not in our genes, as stated very expressively by Eibl-Eibesfeldt<sup>5</sup>. We can therefore happily join the Beatles (or more specifically John Lennon and Yoko Ono), and sing with them that "War is over, if you want it" (1969).

## 2. Statment

As covener of the Statement, I am going to make a short historical comment on its genesis: which were the main reasons which urged us to elaborate the SSV, which difficulties we found on the way, and how we finally achieved this first "scientific step" towards peace.

For a psychobiologist who studies brain mechanisms supposed to be involved in aggressive behavior, conceptual as well as ethical problems arise from the fact

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<sup>1</sup> P. Tyler, *Fortress Israel: The Inside Story of the Military Elite Who Run the Country – And Why They Can't Make Peace*, Farrar–Straus–Giroux 2012.

<sup>2</sup> D. Adams, *The Seville Statement of Violence: Preparing the Ground for the Constructing of Peace*, Paris 1991.

<sup>3</sup> J.M. Ramirez, *Aggression: Causes and Functions*, "Hiroshima Forum for Psychology" 1996, No. 17, pp. 21–37.

<sup>4</sup> K. Lorenz, *Das sogenannte Böse. Zur Naturgeschichte der Aggression*, Wien 1963.

<sup>5</sup> I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, *The Biology of Peace and War*, London 1979.

that research dealing with brain-behaviour relationships is both a research endeavour like any other and one that clearly differs from many others. It differs in that the data obtained, the interpretation given and the generalized conception of brain-behaviour relationships that is derived from them, contribute to shape our vision of man, his “nature”, his being and his evolution. Conversely, this vision of ourselves, of our supposed “nature”, is bound to somehow orient – unconsciously, or more deliberately – the way in which we construct the conceptual framework within which we elaborate our working hypotheses and how we interpret the results obtained when verifying them. It matters all the more to be fully aware of these reciprocal relationships between personal convictions and actual scientific endeavour since our basic interest lies in a deeper understanding of the biological determinants of our own personality and behaviour, even though our experimental analysis is carried out – for obvious ethical reasons – on the brain of some animal species. The true weight and the real influence of our personal convictions clearly appear when, on the basis of one and the same array of available facts, but, admittedly, with selective emphasis put on some of them, some feel entitled to deliver, with regard to human aggression and violence, a “message” of necessity and fate, while others are led to deliver one of freedom, responsibility, and hope (for more precise questions related to this topic as well as many relevant individual features fruitfully subjected to psychobiological investigation (see: Karli<sup>6</sup>, Ramirez<sup>7</sup>).

Some people say that war and violence cannot be ended because they are part of our biology, in the same way that they used to justify slavery and racial or sexist domination by claiming that they were biological and inevitable. In the same way that they were wrong in these latter justifications, it is also scientifically incorrect that peace is not possible. Therefore, we, scholars dedicated to research on aggression, thought that it was our responsibility as scientists to speak out on the basis of the latest information, although aware that conclusions in science are never final. The elaboration of a document stating the scientific state of art on the field of human aggression and violence would give a needed message of hope to humankind, as opposed to the myth that it was something naturally inevitable.

The obstacles found in our attempts, however, illustrate the extent to which ideological preconceptions often interfere with an actual scientific endeavour. I want to mention briefly some events objectively revealing.

In the late seventies of the last century, the International Society for Research on Aggression (ISRA) decided to launch a UN-Committee that, among other goals,

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<sup>6</sup> P. Karli, *Opening words*, XII World ISRA Meeting, Strasbourg 1996, 26/8/96.

<sup>7</sup> J.M. Ramirez, *Human Aggression. A Multiphaceted Phenomenon*, Madrid 2003.

would aim at organizing a series of symposia under the auspices of UNESCO. It was hoped that these symposia would eventually lead towards a UNESCO statement on human violence, following the example of what had previously been achieved by UNESCO with regard to the notion of the “human race”. A provisional programme was drafted and submitted to UNESCO. Both, our Swiss colleague Pierre de Sénarclens and Mr M’Bow, at that time head of the Division for Human Rights and Peace and director-general of UNESCO, respectively, responded in a most favourable and encouraging way. But then, highly polemical discussions took place within UNESCO concerning our proposal, to the extent that Pierre de Sénarclens resigned from his UNESCO position (he went back to Lausanne to resume his teaching of political sciences) and M’Bow sent a second letter telling the President of ISRA that the proposed topic was too “touchy” to be dealt with under the auspices of UNESCO. Some time later, Carlos Chagas, at that time President of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, invited us to draft a motivated proposal for a Symposium devoted to “the biological and sociocultural determinants of human violence”. We soon heard from him that the Pope had read the proposal, that he fully approved of both its structure and general spirit, and that he encouraged us to proceed. But then, after a long silence, we learned that the Pontifical Academy had come to the same conclusion that the UNESCO: apparently it was not timely to deal with the determinants of violence.

However, instead of giving up, we – scientists from very different disciplines – kept discussing freely, openly about it. The main question we wanted to answer was whether modern natural and social sciences knew of any biological factors that were an insurmountable or serious obstacle to the goal of world peace... We exchanged the latest information about animal behavior, psychology, brain research, genetics and other related sciences. Finally, a draft was elaborated and sent to all of us for its study. Then, around twenty of us met in Seville and La Rabida. And after one week of practical seclusion – very proper given that we were in a monastery, just from where Columbus started his discovering trip to the New World – the final Statement on Violence was born. It was May of 1986, the International Year of Peace. Afterwards it has been endorsed and published by many scientific organizations around the world, and the very UNESCO, by decision of its General Conference at its 25<sup>th</sup> session (Paris, 16/11/1989), endorsed it and ordered its dissemination.

Obviously establishing that peace is psychobiologically possible is a first necessary step – peace must begin in the mind of each person with the belief that it is possible – but it is not enough. A second important step has to come, giving some suggestions about where and how to find the peace we scientists are looking for.

### 3. Challenges

The challenge is to counteract the prevailing culture of violence, which has pervaded so many societies, and to transform it into a culture of peace. Within this universal and transdisciplinary task for constructing peace, scientists have a specific role to play. How to contribute towards this transformation? Let me offer a couple of suggestions, without the pretension of being comprehensive.

First, we have to understand the problem and its possible solutions: to know what is aggression, violence and war, and what peace really means in its deepest meaning, as well as what their interacting biological and cultural factors are.

Second, we should emphasize the potential value of education to provide a major contribution to the control of aggression, in the prevention of violence and in the achievement of peace, stressing the importance of a comprehensive and global education with a transdisciplinary approach. This task is especially important during the early critical periods of development. We should convince the society about the benefits of investing adequate resources in such extensive educative efforts, instead of limiting its resorts to control aggression and to solve conflicts by means of threats or punishment.

A third scope is to find permanently shift attitudes, values and behaviour in order to promote peace and social justice, and the non-violent resolution of conflict and security through a transdisciplinary approach. This requires cooperation at all levels, everyone working together for peace and reconciliation.

While problems are relatively obvious – even if you are not in direct contact with aggression, you often can be indirectly affected – effective resolutions are not. They depend on understanding problems. A most effective means of understanding them is its systematical study, utilizing scientific techniques. For example, in our case, with a greater knowledge of the many causes of aggression, we can develop an appreciation of the possibilities for controlling it, as well as an understanding of some of the reasons why we have failed to effectively control it in the past, such as a lack of its appropriate definition and measurement (see: Ramirez<sup>8</sup>).

For example, in our case, with a greater knowledge of the many causes and kinds of aggression, we can develop an appreciation of the possibilities for controlling it, as well as an understanding of some of the reasons why we have failed

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<sup>8</sup> J.M. Ramirez, *Aggression* [in:] *Encyclopedia of Comparative Psychology*, G. Greenberg, M.M. Haraway (eds.), New York 1997, pp. 649–658.

to effectively control it in the past, such as lack of an appropriate definition and measurement (Ramirez<sup>9</sup>).

Here, I will just state that biology and environment taken separately are never causes of anything in an organism's development. The human brain should no longer be considered as a generator of possible – or, even less, inevitably occurring – aggressive behaviour (with improper emphasis on some humoral factor or even a single gene thought to be specifically implicated), but rather as the mediator of a dialogue which may take on an aggressive form for reasons that can only be truly clarified through joint interdisciplinary efforts. Biology is the foundation of all behaviour only in the same way that bricks and paper are the foundations of all (traditional) libraries, but the content of the library, whilst being printed on paper, is not otherwise dependant on the bricks and paper.

Biology is the means by which information is accumulated and transmitted both in day-to-day interactions between people (in brain), the generation to generation transmission of adaptations right up to speciation information (the genome). But it is the interaction with the environment that steers these changes. It is just as true, then, to say that the environment is the foundation of the content of behaviour and that the interaction between the environment and the phenotype determines which behaviours will be selected, i.e. reinforced. Behaviour, then, is the selection of what can be done (the phenotype) from what is available (the environment, including conspecifics) with the ultimate goal of maximum survival of current and future generations. In humans, survival of non-physical elements may be treated highly or higher than the physical: one's reputation, legacy, knowledge, religion, people, country, political belief, and so on may be the object of behaviour over and above one's physical survival, inheritance and legacy (see: Robert Karl Stonjek<sup>10</sup>). In other words, organisms are open systems in more ways than one. Behavior is controlled not only by biological characteristics, mainly of the brain and nervous system, but also in large part by external events surrounding and impinging upon that brain and nervous system. Human beings possess biological structures conducive to use of language, true, but without a "linguistic environment" those structures would not function.

Delimitating this assertion to our topic, an adequate control of aggression is certainly a reality in innumerable discrete settings, and it is not an unrealistic goal for a society. Since there is no one factor that overwhelmingly produces aggression,

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<sup>9</sup> J.M. Ramirez, *The Nature of Violence. Its Reduction Is in Our Grasp* [in:] *Violence. Some Alternatives*, J.M. Ramirez (ed.), Madrid 1994.

<sup>10</sup> R.K. Stonjek, [www.evolutionary-psychology.yahooogroups](http://www.evolutionary-psychology.yahooogroups), 2012.

what we need is a comprehensive approach, integrating different perspectives on violence, with an appreciation for the various objectively supported contributions of biology, learning mechanisms, social experiences, and, what is more important, their dynamic integration.

Our purpose has to be to begin the process of integrating the various domains of science that are studying the development of aggression and peace, in an attempt to use science to guide society in its efforts to prevent and control harmful aggression. Basic scientists, within their experimental settings, may have the luxury of separating the biology of aggression from its psychosocial and environmental context with questions arising within their isolated domains. But, if we want to reach the ultimate goal of application of scientific information in the real world, we can never separate them. There is a constant and circular interaction. As Craig Ferris likes to say, “development is 100% environment and 100% heredity”, in a dynamic interaction<sup>11</sup>.

#### 4. Peace and value

This brings me to the next major feature. If we want to achieve peace, we first need to know what peace really means in its deepest meaning. According to Paul VI, the new name of peace is “development” because, if we understand as peace the harmonic whole of all what people need, personally and socially, for their happiness, development is a very good way for achieving it. Development embraces dimensions so distinct and integrated as culture, economy, education, politics, and promotion of the weakest, as well as a profound respect for human dignity and human life, and of the environment in which we live...

An optimal approach towards peace, therefore, would be to prevent the problems of violence and war with a political, cultural and economical intervention, alleviating poverty and other social conditions that breed these problems (Ramirez<sup>12</sup>). A true peace thus has to be supported by a real development of the humanity subordinating all goods and technical resources to the human dignity, with a more just distribution of the world’s resources within and between societies. The only sure foundation on which to lay a better welfare state, a happier society and

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<sup>11</sup> C.F. Ferris, T. Grisso, *Understanding Aggressive Behavior in Children*, New York 1996.

<sup>12</sup> J.M. Ramirez, *Poverty as a Deterioration of Human Rights: Poverty Can Physically Impair Brain through Stress*, 58th Pugwash International Conference on Justice, Peace and Nuclear Disarmament, The Hague, The Netherlands, 2009, pp. 17–20.

a more pleasant life is a real development of humanity subordinating all goods and technical resources to human dignity. Therefore, peace = development + justice.

And, since we would like to live in a permanent state of peace and well being, we have to lay down solid foundations to make peace education available (Ramirez<sup>13</sup>). One way to contribute towards the transformation of a culture of war into a culture of peace is to permanently shift attitudes, values and behaviour in order to promote peace and social justice, and the non-violent resolution of conflict and security through a transdisciplinary approach. This primary scope, which is the aim of the UNESCO's Culture of Peace Programme (1994), requires cooperation at all levels, everyone working together for peace and reconciliation.

Education becomes a preventative measure that recognises the value of human life and is less conducive to aggression, informing individuals and caregivers about how to deal with the causes of aggression and with its control (e.g. by reducing wealth differentials, emphasizing achievement rather than competitiveness, reducing the availability of weapons and removing other triggers for aggression) (Hinde, Nelson & Wrangham<sup>14</sup>). Starting with pre- and postnatal healthcare, it would progress through the raising and formal education of children, and continue into adult social settings. Besides the formal education, one needs to learn how to deal with emotion, how to transform anger and fear into love and compassion, how to communicate positively with others... and become happy.

Thus, much depends on where the boundaries between in-group and out-group are perceived to lie. Given the genetic uniformity of the human species, there is no biological justification for feelings of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, based on an inexistent in-group superiority. It is possible and praiseworthy to love one's own culture (patriotism), but we can do it without denigrating others (nationalism). In this way, we can expand the scope of the in-group, providing better education which gives greater emphasis to our common humanity than to cultural differences, thereby continuing to extend the perceived boundaries of the in-group (Hinde, et al<sup>15</sup>).

A very specific point which has to be raised is the in-group versus out-group issue. It is well known that, whereas prosociality is directed primarily towards the group to which the individual belongs, selfishness is much less inhibited towards out-group members. This explains why acts of aggression are shown more readily

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<sup>13</sup> J.M. Ramirez, *The Educational Task of Overcoming Violence* [in:] *Violence. Some Alternatives*, J.M. Ramirez (ed.), Madrid 1994.

<sup>14</sup> R.A. Hinde, R.J. Nelson, R. Wrangham, *War is Not Inevitable: Aggressiveness Can Be Tamed*, unpublished Statement 2010.

<sup>15</sup> R.A. Hinde, R.J. Nelson, R. Wrangham, op.cit.



to strangers and members of other groups than to members of the same group. And its most extreme act, killing, which is morally forbidden in virtually all human societies, except where legitimized by societal consensus, in war is sanctioned and even praised for enemies, because they are portrayed as dangerous and even sub-human by propaganda.

An increased connectedness of peoples around the world inspires a vision of a future in which the common humanity of all peoples will be globally recognised. This attitude matches quite well with what Pope Benedict said in the context of the Middle East conflict during his above mentioned visit to Lebanon: “If we want peace, we have to see in the other a person to be respected and loved” (14 Sept 2012). Expanding the scope of the in-group can be expected to continue to promote increased prosociality. “Instead of Us Versus Them, Us Plus Them” (Pittinsky<sup>16</sup>).

## 5. Conclusions

Finally, I have to remark that this important task of achieving a culture of peace (elsewhere it has been suggested to get through a series of steps, such as peace education, schooling of emotions, and conflict resolution; see: Ramirez<sup>17</sup>) is not an exclusive domain of government, police and other security forces, or any other public institutions or authorities. On the contrary, it demands the participation of the entire society: educational institutions, religious movements, mass media, families, and, last but not least, everybody. Each of us has a specific part of responsibility in this achievement because these tasks also rest upon the consciousness of individual participants for whom pessimism and optimism are crucial factors.

On the occasion of his 1987 visit to Gdańsk, cradle of Solidarity, John Paul II told the youth that “before there is a revolution in the world, it has to be a revolution in our hearts, minds and characters, out of which will come truth, life and justice”<sup>18</sup>. Even if until now we have not had time for peace, the time has come to

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<sup>16</sup> T. Pittinsky, *Us Plus Them: Tapping the Positive Power of Difference*, Cambridge 2012.

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Ramirez, *Moving Toward Peace* [in:] *Conflict, Violence, Terrorism, and their Prevention*, J.M. Ramirez, C. Morrison, A.J. Kendall (eds.), Newcastle 2014, pp. 191–206.

<sup>18</sup> J. Luxmoore, J. Babiuch, *The Vatican and the Red Flag: The Struggle for the Soul of Eastern Europe*, New York 1999, p. 214.

take on the commitment to heal our society, the world, and ourselves by the power of truth, life and justice, especially through science<sup>19</sup>.

I am aware that this is really difficult to apply into our mind and hearts, and that patience must become a habit that will help us deal with life more “peacefully”. But with the confidence of knowing that peace is possible, we will be able to influence our surroundings positively and making the world better, even it is indeed a hard task. And, in order to achieve it, we should never forget that we must learn to develop inner peace within our minds. Finishing with the same words of the *Seville Statement of Violence*<sup>20</sup>, just as “wars begin in the minds of men, peace also begins in our minds. The same species who invented war is capable of inventing peace.” The responsibility, thus, lies with each of us!

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