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Is War in Our Nature?

What Is Right and What Is Wrong about the Seville Statement on Violence

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Abstract
The Seville Statement on Violence rejected the view that violence and war were in any way rooted in human nature and proclaimed that they were merely a cultural artifact. This paper points out both the valid and invalid parts of the statement. It concludes that the potential for both war and peace is embedded in us. The human behavioral toolkit comprises a number of major tools, respectively geared for violent conflict, peaceful competition, or cooperation, depending on people's assessment of what will serve them best in any given circumstance. Conflict is only one tool—the hammer—in our diverse behavioral toolkit. However, all three behavioral strategies are not purely learned cultural forms. This naive nature/nurture dichotomy overlooks the heavy and complex biological machinery that is necessary for the working of each of them and the interplay between them. They are all very close under our skin and readily activated because they have all been very handy during our long evolutionary past. At the same time, they are variably calibrated to particular conditions through social learning, which means that their relative use may fluctuate widely. Thus, state authority has tilted the menu of human choices in the direction of the peaceful options in the domestic arena, and changing economic, social, and political conditions may be generating a similar effect in the international arena.

Keywords The Seville statement · UNESCO · Warfare · Conflict · Nature/nurture · Peace

As the 2017 conference on "Warfare, Environment, Social Inequality, and Pro-Sociality" (WESIPS) took place in Seville, I thought it was only appropriate to open it with a discussion of what was right and what was wrong about the Seville Statement on Violence.[1] The Seville Statement (1986) was issued under the auspices of UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, by an

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international group of scientists and scholars from various fields, some of them quite eminent. It was published during the heyday of Rousseauism, the view that the aboriginal human past, before the advent of agriculture and the state, was nonviolent and peaceful. This view dominated anthropology and culture in general during that time and was itself a reaction against earlier scholarly theories and popular books, such as those by Ardrey (1966), Lorenz (1966), and Morris (1967), which presented war as unique to humans, a primary drive rooted in human nature and erupting irresistibly. Thus, the statement rejected the view that violence and war were in any way rooted in human nature and proclaimed that they were merely a cultural artifact.

Rousseauism was soon to come under heavy criticism, beginning with the publication of Keely's, *War before Civilization* (1996). Others have contributed to this critique (Gat 1999, 2000, 2006, 2015, 2017; Guilaine and Zammit 2005; LeBlanc with Register 2003; Wrangham, Wilson and Muller 2006). I hope that I have been able to show that the last-ditch attempts to defend a very lean version of Rousseauism—made in the past decade or two by a few anthropologists, most conspicuously and aggressively by Fry (2006, 2013; Fry and Söderberg 2013)—has no basis in reality, and, I am afraid, is often based on a falsification of the evidence (Gat 2015, 2017).

In the context of the reaction against Rousseauism, the Seville Statement has been criticized as an example of false-consciousness and the subordination of scholarly integrity to an ideological cause, noble as it may be (e.g., Beroldi 1994; Manson and Wrangham 1987; Pinker 1997). While this criticism is fully justified, I take this opportunity to point out both the valid and invalid parts of the statement. In doing so, I hope to clarify why people actually fight; whether fighting is in human nature, and in what sense; and, consequently, whether violence and war can be eliminated or, more realistically, drastically reduced.

Because the biological underpinning of war and peace has been the subject of much confusion and a heated controversy—among neurobiologists, ethologists, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists and others—it is in great need of clarification. And the root of the confusion is this: People habitually assume that if widespread deadly violence has always been with us, it must be a primary, "irresistible" biological drive that is nearly impossible to suppress. Many find in this conclusion sufficient reason to object to the idea that human fighting is as old as our species, whereas others regard it as compelling evidence that war is inevitable.[2] However, both sides are wrong. Contrary to fashionable 1960s notions, traced back to Freud's latter-day theorizing about a death drive or instinct, *thanatos* (Freud 1920, 1923, 1930, 1933a, b), violence is not a primary drive that requires release, like hunger or sex. The Swiss or Swedes, for example, who have not fought another country for two centuries, show no special signs of deprivation on this account. But try to deny them food for more than a few hours, or sex, say, for more than a few days, and see what will happen. The same lack of symptoms of violence deprivation and the same thought experiment applies, I assume, to everyone.

On the other hand, the fact that violence is not a primary drive does not mean that we are not hardwired for it. Studies on "warless" pre-state societies usually intend to prove that warfare, being neither primordial nor natural to humankind, was probably a late, and in any case wholly contingent, cultural phenomenon. Margaret Mead's framing of

[2] The former error seems to be the motivation for Fry's works. Unfortunately, the latter position is at least implied by leading evolutionist biologist E. O. Wilson (2012).

the problem: "Warfare Is Only an Invention – Not a Biological Necessity" (1940), is the mother of all mistakes. It expresses the widespread assumption that violence must be either a primary drive or entirely learned, whereas in reality, its potential is deeply ingrained in us as a *means* or *tool*, ever ready to be employed. People can **cooperate, compete peacefully, or use violence** to achieve their objectives, depending on what they believe will serve them best in any given circumstance. In cooperation, the parties combine efforts, in principle because the synergic outcome of their efforts divided among them promises greater benefit to each of them than their independent efforts might. In competition, each party strives to outdo the other in order to achieve a desired good by employing whatever means they have at their disposal except direct action against the other. Competition runs parallel. By contrast, in a conflict, direct action against the competitor is taken in order to eliminate it or lessen its ability to engage in the competition (Simmel 1955).

Cooperation, competition, and conflict are the three fundamental forms of social interaction (in addition to avoidance, or zero interaction). People have always had all three options to choose from, and they have always assessed the situation to decide which option, or combination of them, seemed the most promising. Indeed, hunter-gatherer societies have elaborate procedures of conflict resolution, especially within their groups, precisely *because* conflict, often violent, is an ever-present and often occurring threat. People are well equipped biologically for pursuing any of the above behavioral strategies, with conflict being only one tool, albeit a major one—the hammer—in our diverse behavioral toolkit. Furthermore, *Homo sapiens* is a social species, whose local and regional groups—universally and uniquely bound together by ties of both kinship and shared cultural codes, including language and customs—cooperate within themselves in a variety of group activities, including fighting. Group fighting is often pursued for the attainment of collective goods, above all hunting territory and other scarce sources of food, as well as reproduction opportunities.

Thus, neither a late invention nor a compulsive inevitability independent of conditions, group fighting is part of our evolution-shaped behavioral menu. It is in this sense that *both* war and peace are "in our genes," which accounts for their widely fluctuating prevalence in different sociohistorical contexts. The Seville Statement rightly puts it, in rejection of the view that human biology makes violence and war inescapable: "There is nothing in our neurophysiology that compels us to react violently. . . . We conclude that biology does not condemn humanity to war." However, the statement fell into the opposite fallacy, proclaiming that warfare "is a product of culture" and solemnly prescribing that "*IT IS SCIENTIFICALLY INCORRECT* [emphasis in the original] to say that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature." The statement carelessly concluded: "Violence is neither in our evolutionary legacy nor in our genes."

In reality, the potential for *both* war and peace is imbedded in us. Although activated interchangeably and conjointly in response to the overall environmental and sociocultural conditions, all three behavioral strategies—violent conflict, peaceful competition, and cooperation—are not *purely* learned cultural forms. This naive nature/nurture dichotomy overlooks the heavy and complex biological machinery that is necessary for the working of each of these behavioral strategies and the interplay between them. Certainly, these deep, evolution-shaped patterns are variably calibrated to particular conditions through social learning. However, the reason why they are all there, very close under our skin and readily activated, is that they were all very handy during our

long evolutionary history. They all proved highly useful and advantageous, thereby becoming part and parcel of our biological equipment.

A number of scholars who have dealt with the question in fact express the view that human societies have always been Janus-faced, interchangeably resorting to both peace and violent conflict. According to Walker (2001:590): "Everywhere we probe into the history of our species we find evidence of a similar pattern of behavior: People have always been capable of both kindness and extreme cruelty." Burch (2005), documenting the Alaskan Eskimos' highly belligerent record, also devotes one part of his book to their peaceful interactions. Robert Kelly (2013:158, 165) writes: "To summarize so far, it is not useful to ask whether hunter-gatherers (inclusive of egalitarian and nonegalitarian types) are peaceful or warlike: we find evidence for both among them." He adds: "Aggression appears in many species, suggesting that it has a long evolutionary history. . . . It is part of our behavioral repertoire, and at times served us well." Boehm (2013:333) similarly rejects the view "that there should be an either-or choice between setting up friendly, cooperative relations with neighbors, as opposed to fighting with them." Both took place, interchangeably, with the same and with different neighbors. Based on his survey of 49 simple hunter-gatherer societies, Boehm (2013:334, also 327, 333) writes: "The finding here is that intergroup conflict and external peacekeeping would both seem to have been prominent in human political life, back to at least 45,000 BP and probably earlier."

Boehm (2013:327) puts both sides of simple hunter-gatherer societies' behavioral repertoire in a proper perspective: "59 percent of the . . . forager sample has enough lethal intergroup conflict for this to be reported in an ethnography." He adds (2013:330): "With human foragers, negotiations of some type (including truces and peacemaking) are found in more than half of the . . . societies surveyed (59 percent). However . . . formal and effective peacemaking is reported only for a few of the 29 societies."[3] Hunter-gatherers suffered far greater violent mortality rates than state societies not because they lacked well-established and partly successful patterns of conflict resolution. It is just that hunter-gatherers' anarchic condition, the absence of effective coercive authority, limited the effectiveness of these patterns as compared to state societies.

Wars have been fought for the attainment of the same objects of human desire that underlie the human motivational system in general—*only by violent means*, through the use of force. Here I take issue with Pinker's excellent *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011), with whom I am otherwise in much agreement. "Angels" versus "Demons" in the human behavioral system is an allusion to Lincoln's first inaugural address and is largely invoked metaphorically. And yet not entirely, because Pinker points to particular human quests such as dominance or ideology as "demons" with which the blame for war rests. Yet, dominance or ideology, no less than the desire for sex, can just as well be counted on the side of the "angels"—when pursued by peaceful means and for peaceful ends. For example, there have always been peaceful ideologies—such as Buddhism, and, in principle, though all too often not in practice, Christianity—which have exercised a considerable pacifying effect.

Furthermore, the distinctions that Pinker draws between different categories of violence respectively related to the above "demons" are also questionable. He cites

[3] These statistics agree remarkably with Ember's earlier survey of hunter-gatherers (1978).

studies showing that separate parts of the brain may trigger violent behavior, which is true of nearly all behaviors. But this does not mean that all violent behaviors are not subject to, and regulated by, a unified evolutionary calculus originally designed to advance survival and reproduction, the very definition of the evolutionary rationale which Pinker as an evolutionist would surely be the first to accept.

The "problem" of war is not these or other human desires. Rather, violence and war occur when the conflictual behavioral strategy is judged to be more promising than peaceful competition and cooperation for achieving scarce objects of human desire. Both our basic desires *and* the conditions that channel the efforts to fulfil them to the conflictual path are necessary for understanding why war occurs.

Thus, the advent of coercive state authority and state policing has tilted the menu of the human behavioral strategies in the direction of the peaceful options in the domestic arena, affecting a great reduction in the rate of killings—in the form of homicide and blood revenge—within societies. Moreover, changing economic, social, and political conditions have been generating a similar effect in the international arena, most notably where a modern liberal economic and political order prevails and peaceful behavioral options become that much more rewarding than the violent option in achieving unprecedented levels of affluence and comfort (Gat 2006, 2017; Goldstein 2011; Morris 2014; Pinker 2011). It is not that modern war has become more costly compared with earlier times, as many believe—it has not; it is peace that has become more rewarding (Gat 2006, 2017). Thus, countries with (non-oil) GDP per capita higher than $20,000 no longer fight each other, nor experience civil war. The most developed parts of the world, such as Western Europe and North America, have become a zone of peace. Within them war is not even contemplated, or feared—the famous "Security Dilemma" has disappeared—a situation which is unparalleled in history.

We can only hope that, despite the various counterforces active in the world arena—some of them very significant and alarming—this trend will continue to expand in areas of the world that are still far behind in terms of development and affluence, validating the correct half of the Seville Statement. The great merit of the various contributions to this volume, a collection arising from the WESIPS Conferences at Seville in 2015 and 2017, is in demonstrating how far we have advanced during the past thirty years from the naive, nurture-only view of the statement.

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