

Journal of Organisational Transformation and Social Change Volume 6 Number 2

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Editorial. English language. doi: 10.1386/jots.6.2.81/2

Editorial: Aggression and terrorism

AQ1 **J. Martin Ramirez** *Harvard University*

The articles presented in this special issue were all given at the International Conference on Interdisciplinary Analyses of Aggression and Terrorism, held jointly under the scientific organizations of the CICA (Coloquios Internacionales sobre Cerebro y Agresión) and the STR (Society for Terrorism Research), in Miraflores de la Sierra (Madrid, Spain) from 27 to 30 September 2007. Seventy-five papers were presented by about 100 scientists from 27 countries of all the five continents.

This special issue brings together a rather eclectic selection of the different scientific presentations, covering a wide range of topics, presented by leading thinkers in quite different scientific disciplines – neurosciences, social and clinical psychology, law, and political sciences, in the hope of providing a flavour of the multidisciplinary approach characteristic of the Conference.

The thread that unites these apparently different subjects in a quite appropriate manner for a journal focused on problems of complexity and change in society? All of them deepen our understanding of the different ways of coping with complicated social problems related to aggression and terrorism coupled with the general understanding that peace would benefit everybody. Together with this, is the awareness that the more positive resolutions found, the better prepared societies will be in achieving world peace.

The background of the first article has to be found in the Seville Statement on Violence endorsed by UNESCO (1986) – Ramirez was its convener and one its signatories – saying that biological factors are not the immediate causes of war and social violence; their causes are not hard-wired in totality. A lot of complex behavior may seem at first to run off consistently and repeatedly in the same way on different occasions, but this may be largely the result of the surrounding context being repeatedly invariant and the required ‘learning’ being quick or hidden from an observer. This does not preclude, however, the existence of a biological predisposition to anger and aggression. Even more, insofar as work for peace is linked to the struggle for justice, aggression could also have a major protective or defensive function whenever an individual is genuinely threatened or attacked. Anger can also be channelled into a constructive means of social change, from a culture of war to a culture of peace. This explains the importance of approaches like Ramirez’s article in this issue attempting to improve the understanding of the nature of aggression, focusing on

its functional classification, and offering a more conceptual clarity and a categorization as parsimonious as possible.

Pavlah and Andreu focus on sex-linked differences in the various aggression categories analyzed in the previous article, using biological, evolutionary and social role models. More specifically, they take up the themes of sex-specific effects stressing the growing utility of analyzing these behaviours from a multidimensional approach, and taking into account the larger sociocultural context. They propose to explore sex differences based on the folk theory of aggression: if we could understand what aggression really is in people's minds, we would be able to analyze more precisely its critical role in the development of social competence and of the self-regulation of social behaviour. A better understanding of sex-specific differences in aggression over time, would thus, doubtless help in understanding the social changes.

The apparent contradiction between security and freedom has become one of the platitudes of political debate. Criminal procedure is supposed to create a secure society without sacrificing our civil liberties at the same time. But today's crime policy debate lies in the tension between legal guarantees and effectiveness. It has been said that criminal law is a form of violence, not only because of what it punishes, but also because of the way it does, imposed by a despotic system, the police authorities. The failures of imprisonment have not been because of its severity, but it is inefficiency regarding social rehabilitation. This lack of efficiency can be palliated through the use of alternative systems, such as Otero's proposal of using electronic surveillance of offenders in the penitentiary context. Rather than imprisonment, Otero argued that these alternative systems will not only enable an effective solution to the problem of overcrowded prisons, but will also mitigate the harmful effects of prison and human rights restrictions on offenders in danger of relapsing without depriving them of their own freedom nor sacrificing the security of the general public. Moreover, this instrument may help to carry out certain sentences in a cheaper, more comfortable and more effective manner, representing a method of preventing future aggressions as well as facilitating the re-socialization of criminals.

Motyl, Rothschild and Pyszczynski analyze inter-group conflict through the lens of the terror management theory, providing a psychological analysis of the functions of culture and why cultural differences often lead to lethal conflict. This theory explains how belief systems can breed animosity and hostility towards those who do not share one's beliefs, increasing aggressive actions against those who do not share a similar worldview.

On a more encouraging perspective, a subtle activation of a sense of 'common humanity' and holding similar compassionate values among people may be effective in reducing inter-group violence when existential issues are salient. Providing hope for breaking the cycle of violence could ameliorate conflict situations. The fact that few broad theoretical perspectives have been offered to explain the underlying causes for the eruption of conflict, this article is rendered timely and potentially important. There is

in particular a core combination of two themes: what leads to violence and what leads to peace. It is not very common to attempt a discussion that includes these two complementary facets. Research provides support that converges with historical analyses, suggesting that many of the same psychological mechanisms that lead terrorists to take aggressive actions may also motivate extreme counter-terrorist policies creating massive amounts of collateral damage. This collateral damage from violent counter-terrorist measures often intensifies the cycle of violence by assisting terrorists in recruiting support. Recent research that provides hope for breaking the cycle of violence is also presented.

Finally, Pilat, a Senior Advisor in the US Los Alamos National Laboratory, thinks out aloud on a topic of utmost importance – the causes of terrorism, providing an analytic framework for evaluating the possible causes and factors associated with the risk of terrorism in their complex, multifaceted relations, and identifying what can be known about causation and assessing the implications for counterterrorism. Given that understandings of both the threat of and responses to terrorism are affected by divergent views, which reflect philosophical, religious, political and other differences, Pilat stresses that international cooperation is essential for success in the international terrorism, such as the so-called ‘war on terror’. If such cooperation is to be forthcoming, it will require that differences over responses, driven by divergent views of causes, will have to be resolved. And the best hope of doing so is to build policies and actions to combat the terrorists while ameliorating the conditions that create support for terrorism.

In the end, aggression and violence in general and a specific kind of them in particular – terrorism – are also good examples of the interesting times of change and transformation that we live in. A better and more holistic understanding of how to cope with them, as the multidisciplinary approach presented in this volume has tried to show, can be a contribution towards a future of peace within a better social environment.

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