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Preventing Political Violence: Instincts and Their Vicissitudes

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Abstract. This article describes some of the implications of hypothesizing an aggression instinct for preventing political violence.

Political psychologists seeking to prevent political violence--assuming such a goal is appropriate--often spend considerable time critiquing and combating the viability of a construct of an aggression instinct. The rationale of this rather aggressive stance towards the aggression instinct is that the latter's viability necessarily mitigates against the prevention of political violence. In other words, if there is an instinct for aggression, then political violence cannot be prevented. However, the viability of the latter hypothesis about the implications of the viability of the hypothetical construct of an aggression instinct can be strongly countered. Such countering pertains to the common variants of the construct employed by theorists and practitioners of political psychology.

First, the aggression instinct may connote the appearance of aggressive behavior that is unlearned. If such behavior was learned, political psychologists posit that they could then develop various cognitive, behavioral, and cognitive-behavioral regimens to learn alternative behaviors or at least to unlearn aggressive ones. These regimens might be predicated on the basics of conditioning theories or mediated by data on semiotics. But all is not lost if aggressive behavior is not learned. Such behavior may spontaneously arise based on the presence of various external and internal stimuli. Political psychologists would then have the task of modifying eliciting stimuli or the linkages and phenomena between stimuli and responses.

Second, the aggression instinct may connote the appearance of aggressive behavior that is innate in the sense of being a genetically programmed social behavior or of arising from genetically programmed physical processes. The common response to confronting such a reality is often that genetic causation precludes an anti-aggression intervention. But such does not have to be the case. What is deemed to be genetically programmed still can only occur in some subset of all internal and external environments. And it is towards these environments that political psychologists can develop and launch anti-aggression interventions.

Third, the aggression instinct may connote the appearance of aggressive behavior that is inflexible versus behavior that is flexible. However, this contrast is actually the equivalent of one of the oldest distinctions in personality theory: that between the trait and that which is situationally dependent. Political psychologists can address this variant of the aggression instinct through identifying the parameters of trans-situational consistency and developing and effecting intervention programs as appropriate.

Fourth, the aggression instinct may connote the appearance of aggressive behavior that is inevitable. But when pressed, the theorist behind this inevitability either falls back on one of the three previous connotations or posits a homuncular or spiritual element that defies attempts at falsification. This does not necessarily obviate the ontological validity of these mechanisms or elements but pushes the heart of the matter to a trial of faith that would withstand all epistemological assaults.

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Fifth, all of the previous connotations may still be subject to the self-change efficacies of people who desire a world without political violence.

Thus, political psychologists need to view the aggression instinct as a potential ally, not adversary in the quest to prevent political violence. (See Funes, M.J. (1998). Social responses to political violence in the Basque country: Peace movements and their audience. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 42, 493-510; Leider, R.J. (1998). In the belly of the beast: The vicissitudes of aggression. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 18, 8-20; Lore, R. K., & Schultz, L. A. (1993). Control of human aggression: A comparative perspective. *American Psychologist*, 48, 16-25; Nordstrom, C. (1998). Deadly myths of aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 24, 147-159; Stone, M.H. (1991). Aggression, rage, and the "destructive instinct," reconsidered from a psychobiological point of view. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 19, 507-529; Van de Vliert, E., Schwartz, S. H., Huismans, S. E., Hofstede, G., & Daan, S. (1999). Temperature, cultural masculinity, and domestic political violence: A cross-national study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 30, 291-314; Winter, D.G. (2000). Power, sex, and violence: A psychological reconstruction of the 20th century and an intellectual agenda for political psychology. *Political Psychology*, 21, 383-404.) (Keywords: Aggression Instinct, Political Violence.)