

Cutting the Chains of Global Violence

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Gregory Bateson, one of the most perceptive and insightful anthropologists of the past century, pondered the nature of the ‘schismogenetic chain’—the sinister circle of human conflicts. Once entangled and locked in that vicious circle of challenge and response, the antagonists excite, prod, and spur each other into acts of frantic militancy, ever more militancy and ever more dogged and passionate militancy. Militancy acquires its own momentum and feeds on its own fury, each successive act of hostility providing all the reason that the next act would need; as time goes on, the original cause of antagonism counts ever less and may well be forgotten—conflict develops just because it develops. . . .

There are two kinds of ‘schismogenetic chains.’

One is ‘complementary.’ First, one person or a group forces another person or group to do something that it dislikes and would not do unless coerced. Then, having learned the hard lesson of the wrong-doer’s hostile intentions and superior power, the frightened victims manifest their meekness and declare obedience hoping to avoid another blow. The sight of their docility, however, only beefs up the arrogance of the oppressor—and the next blow is yet more painful than the first. That makes the victims yet more submissive, and emboldens their tormentors yet further. . . . You can imagine the rest of the story. Blows and pains will succeed each other with increasing speed, gaining in force with each step. Unless the chain is broken, only the total destruction of the victims will bring it to its end.

The other is the ‘symmetrical’ chain. Here, both sides play the same game. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, blow for blow. . . . Offence can be only repaid with offending the offender. ‘Whatever you do, I’d do as well, only with yet greater passion and severity.’ Exchange of blows turns into a competition—into ruthlessness, mercilessness, cruelty.

Both sides believe that the more hardhearted and bloodthirsty their acts are, the greater the chance that the adversary will think twice before risking another blow and in the end will throw in the towel. And both sides believe that toning down or weakening their responses (not to mention abstaining from a response altogether) will only encourage the adversary to deliver yet more humiliating blows. You can imagine the rest of the story. . . . With such beliefs, the chances of breaking the chain are virtually nil. Only the mutual destruction of the adversaries or their total exhaustion will may bring the chain to its end.

No good prospects exist for humanity as long as these two vicious chains are in operation. . . . One rather wonders how the human species, equipped with such disastrous inclinations, has survived until now. But it did survive. So alongside the dangers, there must be hope. There must be a way of cutting schismogenetic chains short, mustn't there?

At the very beginning of a long, convoluted, and turbulent European history, that question has been asked—in the 'Oresteian Trilogy' of Aeschylus' dramas. In one play, encouraged by the chorus ("to shed blood for blood shed, evil for evil is no impiety!"), Electra orphaned, her father murdered by her mother's lover, seeks vengeance and calls her brother Orestes to kill the killers: "let those who killed taste death for death. . . . My curse to match their curse, wickedness for wickedness." The chorus is delighted: "let hatred get hatred in turn, let murderous blow meet blow that murdered"; "the gods ordain that blood by murder shed cries from the ground for blood to flow again." Another massacre follows—closing one account of unrepaid wrongs only to open another. At the end of the play, the confused and broken-hearted chorus cries: "When shall the ancestral curse relent, and sink to rest, its fury spent?" There is no one left to answer. . . . It is only in the next part of the Trilogy that the answer is forthcoming, from Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom: "Fair trial, fair judgment, ended in an even vote, which brings to you neither dishonour nor defeat. Then quench your anger: let no indignation rain pestilence on our soil, corroding every seed till the whole land is sterile desert."

Note that through more than two millennia of subsequent history, Athena's verdict was obeyed. On countless occasions it was disregarded, on many violated. And yet it hovered above Europe's history as a painful reproach of conscience whenever Athena's advice was not followed. Slowly, not without deviations

and retreats, the trail from the rule of vengeance to the rule of law and justice, as the way of breaking the shackles of schismogenetic chains, was blazed. 'Fair trial, fair judgment,' one that 'brings neither dishonour nor defeat' and so allows the adversaries to put aside their grudges and live together in peace, cutting short the otherwise infinite chain of retaliation and revenge.

'Fair trial, fair judgment' means the rule of law—an equal law to all, a non-partisan and uncorrupt law. People tend to live in peace and refrain from resorting to violence when they can address their complaints and grudges to a power whose incorruptibility and fairness they can trust. But on our fast and chaotically globalizing planet such a power is conspicuous only by its absence. . . . Such power is present inside the boundaries of politically sovereign states—but the most painful damage, targeted or 'collateral,' is delivered nowadays from that 'outer space' outside all boundaries, from that 'no-man's land,' Wild West-style land, where there is no 'right' without 'might'; only the stronger sit in judgment, and only the weaker are punished for their deeds. In our globalizing world, power no longer resides with politics. Coercive power—economic and military—has broken its political shackles and roams free over the planetary space, while politics that could bridle its antics (and which did attempt to bridle them, with some success, inside the boundaries of nation-states) stays local as before.

In such a world, no one and nowhere can feel safe or secure. Once more, schismogenetic chains take hold of human fate. They are *global* now; they wrap the planet around, and render the cutting tools developed over the centuries sorely inadequate for the task. Once more, the present-day Electras call on their brothers to avenge the wrongs they suffered and redress the injustice done to their near and dear, because they seek in vain the powers that could assure fair trials and judgments. The heavenly voice of Athena still waits, hopefully yet vainly, to be heard on the globalized earth.

Unrestrained competition in violence (ever more exorbitant and outrageous violence) feeds on the same world disorder upon which an unrestrained competition in profits (ever more exorbitant and outrageous profits) thrives, adding yet more chaos to the disorderly planet. Allegedly engaged in a war of attrition, the two competitions are close allies; both have vested interests in the perpetuation of planetary disorder without which they would not last long, and both resent the prospect of political control and the rule of law, the advent of which would not allow their survival.

On a globalizing planet, none of the two planet-wide schismogenetic chains can be cut locally. There are no local solutions to globally rooted problems. The causes of survival and justice, often at loggerheads in the past, now point in the same direction, call for similar strategies, and tend to converge into one; and that unified cause cannot be pursued, let alone fulfilled, locally and by only local efforts. Global problems require global solutions. On a globalizing planet, human problems can be only tackled and resolved by solidary humanity.