



ACADEMIA ENGELBERG

Engelberg, 15th of October 2009

Academia Engelberg: 8th Dialogue on Science – Violence in Human Society

“Violence generates counter-violence”

Violence in human society affects us on a daily basis. Are there any specific characteristics that criminal perpetrators have? Or could any of us become a mass murderer for whom killing can turn into a job within just a few weeks and can be carried out as any other profession?

With an abstract of the evolution history, Prof. Kurt R. Spillmann started the Engelberg conference of the Academia Engelberg Foundation with more than 130 participants from 10 nations. Spillmann defended the theory according to which the most important development of a human being occurs in early childhood. Prof. Josef Reichholf from the University of Munich examined the question of why two species of primates which show close similarity to mankind bear important differences when it comes to aggressive behavior. According to him, the difference originates from the food supply. Sufficient food seems to make species more peaceful. Professor Gerhard Roth, University of Bremen, referred in his presentation to the relationship between the brain region which is responsible for face recognition and empathy, and increased outbursts of violence. Human beings with a poorly developed amygdala have problems in discerning anxious from aggressive facial expressions. As a fatal consequence of this, such people react with impulsive-reactive violence to anxious people. Professor Andreas Hamburger, University of Kassel, went one step further and mentioned that human beings can be perceived as a threat due to distorted perception and might become victims.

Theories put to test

The focus of the conference lies on the Intergenerational dialogue. Young students of the Swiss Study Foundation and future scientists from Youth Encounter on Sustainability YES presented their reflections regarding the presentations. The two speakers did not always agree on the stage. Matthias Jenny, for example, questioned whether science – which operates mainly with causal terms – can capture the intentional and normative features of human violence. And Stéphan Beljean even took up the cudgels for a sociological analysis of violence with his reflections. Violence shall not be considered as a characteristic of individuals, but of groups or even societies, he claimed. The subsequent discussions on common and opposite views showed how complex the causes for violence are.

**Violence in Columbia and Kenya**

Conflicts are natural. Each of us suffers from conflicts with oneself. But they rarely turn into violence. The interpretations of violence by Philip M. Osano and Fabio Segura in their respective countries of origin showed that violence can have a completely different meaning in countries such as Colombia or Kenya. For Europeans, structural violence means that girls are not allowed to go to school or certain ethnical groups do not have access to health care. In Columbia, people do not have money to send their children to school or go to a doctor. This is what structural violence means to them. But also cultural violence has very different meanings. For us, cultural violence is related to movies or video games with scenes drenched in blood. Cultural violence in Kenya consists in female genital mutilation of the Massai. Philip M. Osano and Fabio Segura concluded their presentation with the statement that society as a whole has to change in order to break violent structures. Both are members of Youth Encounter on Sustainability YES. The student organization was founded by the following group in the year 2002: Alliance for Global Sustainability, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, ETH Zurich, University of Tokyo and Chalmers University in Sweden. Over 1'000 alumni from more than 100 countries are members of the organization and are involved in sustainable environmental projects.

Bridge between science and society

Fundamental scientific findings are likely to meet strong reservations and encounter mistrust among the general public. The Academia Engelberg Foundation contributes its share to the creation of a new foundation of trust through interdisciplinary dialogue between the scientific community and the general public. Every autumn, personalities from science, industry, culture, politics and society meet in Engelberg, Switzerland. www.academia-engelberg.ch / Video transmission of the congress at www.academia-engelberg.org.

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Images, this press release and further information on the conference are freely available at http://www.academia-engelberg.ch/2009_1.php5

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