

VIOLENCE HASN'T ALWAYS EXISTED

by Luc Ulmi



According to this Namibian Bochimam Grand-Mother and Grand-Daughter. « There is no such thing as Corporal Punishment where they come from, smacking, or slapping, they just don't exist. » (Getty images)

In the film « The Odyssey of Empathy », both scientists and empathy campaigners come together for an ambitious but simple project: to demonstrate how brutality is not inherent in the human psyche and that change is possible.

There was a time when violence did not exist, this theory is not based on a dream, a fairy-tale or philosophical speculation, more and more commonly, it is expounded by the sciences that study the brain and our psyche, such as anthropology and the biology of evolution. Recent studies show that today's society of violence and competition can easily be substituted with one of empathy and cooperation. Today's knowledge of humankind shows how it is possible to imagine a world without mass genocide, war and brutality, a world where none of these events would be commonplace. So, accompanied by a Doctor, a Psychotherapist and a Cinematographer, Michel Meignant, set out to explore these notions and produced this documentary. A crowdfunding exercise has been put into place in order to complete their mission (see below).

Here follows an interview with two contributors.

Peace in prehistoric times

Violent death inflicted by one human-being onto another first occurred quite late on in the history of humanity and remained rare for quite some time. This is borne out by archaeological evidence. Marylène Patou-Mathis, prehistorian and Research Director of the CNRS (French national research centre) wrote a book on the subject in 2013: War in Prehistory (Published by Editions Odile Jacob). « I was irritated at constantly hearing the same thing – we are violent, it is human nature, it has always been like this –these claims that have no foundation. The scientist in me decided to look for some evidence. As a result, I found that even though violence was rare in Palaeolithic times, it did occur in some circumstances. The first evidence can be found in cannibalism. Whilst this could be a funeral rite, it could also be a ritual whereby a human is sacrificed and subsequently eaten in order to unite a group of people. It could be said that during a cannibalistic meal, everyone takes responsibility for a part of the fatal act. What lead these people to make such a sacrifice was perhaps a reaction to a problem such as a major catastrophe like an epidemic or a famine. They would end up sacrificing something precious, like a member of the group. »

Another common misconception is that primitive violence was always a consequence of one person wanting another's resources or of some other disagreement. « Another common fantasy is that violence is always started by someone trying to

take someone else's possessions. There are several myths of this kind in circulation, they have absolutely no archaeological or anthropological substantiation. Violence towards women, for example, is nothing more than a 19th century myth.

We're not being idealistic here, and we are not from some a parallel universe. We are perfectly grounded in these observations. « One must not confuse violence with aggression. Aggression is an animalistic reflex, a survival instinct. It's a defence mechanism, linked to our predatory ancestors. « Hunter-Gatherers kill animals to live. They too have their rituals, before, during and after a hunt. Every group of hunters has its ritual. »

« They need these rituals in order to kill this person they know, who is as close to them as a sibling – this sibling becomes their prey ».

The absence of violence doesn't mean that there is no conflict though: «Ethnographic evidence collected from traditional tribes such as the Bochimans, or the San tribe, from Southern Africa, (with whom I had the pleasure to live for a while) live with very little violence. When there is an argument, everybody gets together to find a solution. If a solution cannot be found, there is a split and one party leaves with one of the protagonists. »

« So, can we trace prehistoric empathy through archaeology? Yes we can. We can see it in skeletons where they have sustained crippling wounds and congenital malformations. A number of cases have been found, including a Neanderthal found in Shanidar in Irak who had managed to live without a fore-arm for over 40 years. This proves that his people looked after him, didn't reject him or abandon him to die » What do we know about prehistoric attitudes towards children? « We don't have the archaeological wherewithal to understand how Paleolithic children were educated, but when we look at modern hunter-gatherer tribes behave, it is clear that there is no corporal punishment. Smacking and spanking do not exist. »

We also ask ourselves, how it came to be that humanity changed from being peaceful to being violent. « We believe that once people become sedentary, demographics rise. This brings about economic change, the domestication of plants and animals, stocks rise, people have more possessions, and this is even reflected in cave paintings where the elite are depicted as bigger than the others. Without meaning to sound like Rousseau, allow me to draw your attention to these facts » Is there any such thing as a sedentary tribe with no violence? « Yes, so-called small Horticultural societies. The number of members is what counts. »

« Moderate » brutality in education.

There are two types of violence towards children both of which are passed on from generation to generation inflicting a mixture of personal and social harm. Doctor and Psychotherapist, Cornelia Gauthier from Genova, penned several books on the subject. (Have we all been abused? Published by Georg and « Be a Victim? No thanks! Published by Jouvence), she set out to write extensively about these two types of violence, paying particular attention to most mundane: «Abuse is the act of people who were once abused themselves. Most people have inflicted some kind of Corporal Punishment, even without realising it, thinking they are doing the right thing and that it's for the child's own good. » Those seemingly benign threats, the shouting, the smacks, slaps and ignored crying – supposedly all for the benefit of the child, is actually « The foundation of all violence ». By chipping away at a child's capacity for empathy in this way, the seeds will have been sown for the violent adult of the future. Violence thus becomes hereditary. « It's a language learnt from a very early age, as children learn through imitation. « The way a child is brought up becomes, for him, the norm and good in his eyes. »

Some might well suggest that by removing this type of 'gentle violence from a child's education is going to produce a spoilt brat! « We need to move away from this preconceived notion! Nobody is going to let their child run wild, they need limits! In fact, that's exactly what they are looking for. This is one of the greatest misunderstandings between adults and children. Let's just take a closer look at this. « The adult imposes a limit, the child feels secure, and the child will then test this limit to see if it really exists. So, when we say to a child « You mustn't do that », you know full well that the child is going to do it. Then, the adult gets cross and irritated as he feels like he is being disobeyed, when in fact, the child is just looking for confirmation. » So what should we do? « We need to repeat: « No, don't do that», without threats, calmly and firmly. This will have a soothing effect on the child, even if he is frustrated, he will grow up without the emotional baggage generated by Corporal Punishment. »

Another classical preconception happens when « You say to a 2 year old child: «No! Don't touch the remote control. » The child hears the words « remote control », his little brain takes the information on board, but he is not yet neurologically mature enough to link the image with the command not to touch it. So what does he do? He goes to touch it, slowly, whilst looking us straight in the eye! He is not being disobedient, he's just checking. »

Following on from Olivier Maurel (see below), Cornelia Gauthier believes that Corporal Punishment came to be in the wake of settlements. « The number of births rise in 'hunter-gatherer » communities, the consequences are such that the older children are severed early in order to make way for their siblings to be breast-fed. This must have made the older siblings aggressive, who in turn, started to smack their younger brothers and sisters. The natural reaction of the mother is to then smack the older sibling as her breast-feeding hormones make her hyper-aggressive if anyone comes near her new-born baby... This makes a totally plausible case for violence within the family circle.