

# **We can't change the past, but we can change the future.**

*by Pat Patfoort*

## **I. Escalations of violence**

There are actually (unfortunately) many escalations of violence in the world. **Violence escalates as a result of the Major-minor way of thinking and acting**, which is widely spread in the world and is particularly strong throughout the North-Western (<sup>1</sup>) mentality. This escalation arises from the fact that each party involved in a conflict tries to get out of the minor-position and into the Major-position, thereby putting the adversary in the minor-position. And then of course things start again, and again, and again.

There are many ways to put oneself in the Major-position (see fig.1). One can use so-called "invisible" means, either nonverbal (gesture, facial expression, attitude, look in the eyes, smile) or verbal (calling names, insulting, humiliating, giving negative criticism, ordering, backbiting). One can also use "visible" means : striking with parts of the body (fist, foot, spit), common objects (stone, fork, bottle, tool), or weapons (guns, knives, bombs).

There are **4 important principles in the Major-minor system**:

- 1) The "only minor sensitivity" principle;**
- 2) The "consequence" principle, with the reverse principle : the "provoking aggression" principle;**
- 3) The "no comparison" principle;**
- 4) The "big illusion" principle.**

### **1) First principle: the "only minor sensitivity":**

**People are (much more) conscious of when and how they find themselves in the minor-position than when and how they are in the Major-position.**

When we are in the minor-position we feel hurt, humiliated, neglected, not appreciated, excluded, put down, etc. When we are in the Major-position, it's the other one who feels hurt, humiliated, neglected, excluded, put down. Then either we don't know it, or we don't hear it, we don't give attention to it, or because we don't have the same experience we are not able to empathise enough to be aware of it.

Or we feel disturbed, we may be afraid to have to change our habits or goals. And therefore we find ways not to have to listen to or be confronted by the other. Perhaps we minimize it.

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<sup>1</sup> : This word refers to the Western civilization and the dominant North.

To illustrate:

A couple is going to celebrate their 50 years of marriage the next Sunday. They invited their four children with their spouses and children to celebrate this together in a fancy restaurant. All live quite close to one another. Two days before the celebration, on Friday evening, one of their sons, a man of forty years old, calls his parents to tell them he won't be able to come : his mother-in-law just committed suicide the day before. It's his mother who answers the phone. She feels awfully disappointed thinking she won't have her four children around her for this celebration, particularly because she organized everything so as to have everyone together for the celebration, just before she and her husband leave two days afterwards for a long trip abroad. She wouldn't mind not having her daughter-in-law there, because they don't get along very well. And not to have the children coming wouldn't be bad for her either, as they are from the former marriage of her daughter-in-law. But it is very important for her to have her own four children around her for this celebration.

Quite soon mother and son start blaming and criticizing one another on the phone: "How could you not come to our 50 year anniversary celebration?! You know how important this is to me! I can understand if she is not coming. But you can come by yourself! Without her! Just for a couple of hours!"

"But I have to take care of the children!"

"But can't she take care of her children herself just for a couple of hours?! Is taking care of her children more important to you than coming to my celebration?!"

"But Mom, you don't understand how difficult this situation is for her and for the children!! Their grand-mother killed herself!! Her mother killed herself!! Can you imagine how they feel?! I need to be with them! They need me in these circumstances!"

"And what about me then?! I need you too!! But they are more important to you than your own mother! You only think of yourself! You are selfish! It's only once in our life we have our golden anniversary celebration, and..."

"Mom!!!!" the son interrupts yelling "You never listen to me! You never did! You never listen and take care of anyone else! You always only think of yourself! You never..." and he slams down the telephone.

Both feel quite powerless and sad. Each feels angry at the other. Both only can think how frightful their own situation is, and how the other hurt them! How fiery and aggressive the other one was! Noone thinks how he himself or she herself hurt the other one, and how bad the other one is feeling. And these two are mother and son...

## **2) Second principle: the "consequence":**

**Most of the time, when people put themselves in a Major-position, this is the consequence of their having earlier been in a minor-position.**

When a party puts himself or herself in a Major-position -that is, behaves in an

aggressive, attacking, humiliating, dominating way towards someone else-, most of the time this is the consequence of the first party's having earlier been put in a minor-position, either by the present adversary -then it's an escalation- or by someone else - then it's a chain of violence (see fig.1). It can have happened just before or a long time ago. And the way one was put in a minor-position earlier can be completely different from the way one now puts oneself in a Major-position. So putting oneself in a Major-position often demonstrates that one has felt put in a minor-position earlier.

**The reverse of this "consequence" principle is the "provoking aggression" principle:** There are situations where people are putting others in the minor-position, and where they don't hear, don't give attention to signals of those others who feel bad being put in a minor-position and who thus want to get out of this position. Then often those newly put in the minor-position strive to get in their turn into the Major-position towards the ones they felt put down by. They thus will behave in an aggressive way towards the first ones, will attack them, will take revenge, will retaliate. So the first ones have in some way -often unconsciously- provoked the aggression against themselves.

### **3) Third principle: the "no comparison":**

**All ways people can feel put in the minor-position and can put others in the minor-position, all hurt, but aren't comparable, either in quantity or in time.**

The M-m or Major-minor model for analysing conflicts makes clear there are many ways one can feel put in a minor-position or can put another in the minor-position, and that they all hurt. But it is impossible to compare the different minor-positions with one another, or the different ways used to put someone in the minor-position. So it is impossible to conclude in an absolute way that one way is worse, more painful or more damaging than another one. They all hurt, destroy, damage. And how much will depend of each person, each situation. It depends of the characteristics of the person involved, the values of the person feeling in the minor-position, his/her culture, history, education, sensibility, etc.

*Consider the case of an escalation between two individuals : the first one humiliates and ridicules the second one in public, the second one physically hits the first one in private. Which hurts the most?*

*Or the case of a man 60 years old, an only child, who has been abused, who has felt humiliated and destroyed psychologically by both his parents every day of his life since his birth (with many witnesses during all those years), and still everyday when he visits his parents at the elderly home. Then suddenly, after 60 years, he kills both his parents with a gun. It's horrible, this son who kills his parents. But it also has been horrible how this son has been ill-treated during his whole life by his parents. Which was the more abominable act : the son being abused and humiliated for all those years, or that elderly couple being shot with a gun by their son? Which act has caused more pain? Which is the more dreadful?*

*Or a population group that has been oppressed for decades, that had so little to eat that children and adults died or lived miserably for their whole life, while the*

*upper-class had far too much. When the oppressed finally, after all those years, find ways to kill some of their "oppressors," they also express their anger by torturing some of them. Both facts are horrible, aren't they? It is not possible to conclude one is better or worse than the other one, right?*

In all these examples, it is impossible to say what is worse, who is hurt more : everyone is hurt, all parties are suffering. And the ways people are put in minor-positions are horrifying in both directions.

In fact we don't need to compare. It's enough to establish that each is suffering. Each feels put in a minor-position.

**We have to unlearn the need always to compare everything.** There just are things which can't be compared, we don't need to compare, we shouldn't compare. We can't put everything in ciphers and numbers. Sometimes we, North-Westerners, have to learn to think without ciphers and numbers. We shall have to be able to think and say : "The one is suffering. And the other is suffering. The ways used by the first one are hurting. And the ways used by the second one are hurting. And we don't have to determine who's more hurt, which way used is the most hurtful." We shall have to learn to think and speak like that.

In most cases each side will try to prove that his/her minor-position is more severe than the one on the other side. And that the harmful ways the other one is using are worse than one's own ways. But this is an attempt to try to put the other once more in the minor-position. This is a way of attacking, of putting the other one down, to get oneself out of one's own minor-position, to try to put oneself in the Major-position again.

#### **4) Fourth principle: the "big illusion":**

**When escalations last for a long time, the reason for that is usually that EACH side has the illusion that THEY will be the final winners of the escalation, that THEY will be the ones who will be in the very last Major-position.**

As long as both sides keep this illusion, the escalation will continue. It is clear that if either side in advance would know for sure that at the end they will be the losers, they wouldn't continue to participate in the escalation.

Of course, even if there is a clear "winner" at the end, this one will have been placed many times in a minor-position before that (during the escalation). That's why people usually say that in a war all parties involved are losers : they all have been many times in the minor-position. But there is even more : the end of the escalation is usually not a real "end" but only a temporary one, an interruption of the escalation. When the "losers" will be ready for it -this even can be a next generation-, they will put themselves again in the Major-position, and there the escalation will start again.

## II. Escalations in the actual world

There are actually many escalations of violence in the world. But let us focus on two of them : the one between the US and it's "enemies", and the one between Israelis and Palestinians.

### 1) The escalation between the US and it's "enemies" :

Who are the enemies of the "Americans"<sup>(2)</sup>? The ones who feel put in the minor-position by them. These are the ones who "hate" them. What are the reasons some people outside the US feel put in a minor-position by the US?

- Many people have the feeling that for decades the US has tried to impose, outside it's borders - particularly in the Southern part of the planet- it's "world-order" which often wasn't respecting freedom at all, while the US presented it's own system as an exemplary democracy, with it's constitutional principles of equality and tolerance. In other words, many people outside the US have the feeling that the US presents itself as the good one, the example to follow, but doesn't act like that in practice. That's what often is called "the American arrogance".
- Millions of people in the world have suffered or have seen their loved ones dying or disappearing as a consequence of US-interventions or US financial or military support building this "world-order."
- Another part of what is called "the American arrogance" is that "Americans" are often considered as "people who tell others what to do but who don't do it themselves". So for instance on Dec 29, 2001, President Bush told Pakistan and India to remain calm and to negotiate, while the US then already had thrown a huge pile of bombs on Afghanistan for several months and had repeatedly refused to negotiate.
- "Americans think they are the police of the world. They think they can do everything they want in the whole world, exactly as they want." <sup>(3)</sup>
- "The Western media created and maintained stereotypes like the Judeo-Christian faction which claims itself democratic in opposition to the Muslim barbarism."
- "We often are considered as primitive, barbarous, uncivilized, and they call themselves civilized."

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<sup>2</sup> : When I use the words "America" and "Americans" here, I write them with quotation marks, because I use them as these words so often are used : to indicate the US and US-people. But we of course all know that the real America is much bigger than the US, is a whole continent. This use of language could already be one of the ways the US and the US-people are putting themselves in a Major-position.

Another reason to use quotation marks is that when the words "America" and "Americans" are used, ALL people living in the US are pointed at with these words. Whereas in the US there is a government, there are people supporting the government, but there are also people not supporting their government and even disagreeing with it and trying to make it change and fighting against it.

<sup>3</sup> : On Sept 11, 2001, I was in Africa. Here I quote some of what I heard and read there.

- The idea of "Americans" of being invulnerable themselves as opposed to the rest of the world being vulnerable. So the thoughts of "How could this happen to us?!" or "How did they dare to do this to us?!", while it seems normal/acceptable tragedies happen to others in the world, in which case it's only "How sad..."
- The attitude of "Americans" at the Conference in Kyoto (Spring 2001), being the most polluting nation on the planet -with all the catastrophic consequences of this for our single planet-, but refusing to take serious measures to reduce their pollution. This in contrast with the rest of the world that undertook to work on reducing their part of pollution and it's destructive effects on the planet.
- Expressions like the following ones from President Bush during the war in Afghanistan : "We'll smoke them out.", "These are evil people", "Our cause is just", "They get to meet my conditions. And when I said no negotiations, I meant no negotiations.". These expressions put the US in the Major-position : the human (vs animal), the good one, the right one, the boss.
- The fact that after the war in Afghanistan, the "American" Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld declared "Americans" taken as prisoners should be considered as "war-prisoners" and so be protected by the Geneva Convention, whereas opponents taken as prisoners should be considered "only" as lawless fighters, and so not be protected by the Convention.
- Last but not least, the Northern-Western culture, led by the US, is invading and dominating everywhere in the world even to the level of families, essentially through TV, making it difficult to honor and preserve other cultures.

The most well-known ways the enemies of the "Americans" put themselves in the Major-position are of course terrorist acts of all kinds, with which they try to take revenge, they retaliate to get themselves out of the minor-position they have been feeling, sometimes for a long long time. The longer and the more they have been in the minor-position, and so have internalized their anger, the more energy they have accumulated, the bigger and the more terrifying their terrorist act will be. Other ways they put themselves in the Major-position are all kinds of threats, humiliating ways of talking about and acting towards North-Westerners, thoughts and feelings of superiority, etc.

In this escalation, between the US and it's enemies, the first principle of "only minor sensitivity" is very clear. Regardless of whether we are listening to the "Americans" or to "the enemies", we hear only or mostly about the great injustices by which they have been put in the minor-position. They ridicule, minimize or justify the ways opponents claim they have been put in a minor-position.

The second principle of "consequence" is also very present in this escalation. Everytime a terrorist action has put the US in a minor-position, the US has taken retaliatory measures against someone, not necessarily always the ones who put the US in a minor-position. And in the other direction, every terrorist attack will be "explained" by some behaviour of the US which put some people in a minor-position. A difference between both directions is that usually the retaliatory acts of the US are closer in time to the situations in which they were put in a minor-position than the ones of their

enemies. Perhaps the US tries in this way to make the connection between their suffering and their retaliatory action more clear.

The reverse of the second principle, the "provoking aggression" principle, means that each time either the "Americans" or the terrorists put themselves in a Major-position, they are provoking the retaliation of the other against themselves. When now "Americans" wonder "Why do they hate us?", they should be aware that the answer to this question in the future is how they now put themselves in a Major-position towards others in the world. This means that by such acts they are feeding terrorist actions against themselves, they are signing their own sentence.

Then the third principle of "no comparison". This is a delicate one, because of the emotions involved. For people who are outside, who are neutral third parties, or for the people having been involved but looking at the situation later on, when their feelings are less high, the concrete filling in of this principle is obvious. This principle means that it is impossible to distinguish between more and less painful ways, authorized and forbidden ones, good and bad ones, legal and illegal, civilized and barbarian. No way to put oneself in a Major-position is better than other ones, is more justified, is more human. They all hurt. It's not because some ways have been classified inside the official concept of "war", like tanks and bombers, that they are better and more acceptable than others like kamikaze-terrorist actions. Both are ways people use to try to get out of their minor-positions. They both can hurt severely. And you can't compare them, to know what's hurting the most, what's most awful, most horrifying, most abominable. They all are.

Finally, the fourth principle of the "big illusion". It is clear the "Americans" actually think of eliminating all "terrorists", everywhere in the world. And they think of starting war against any people in the world they think could be supporting terrorist organizations. They think they can win this war. But at the other side there are many "terrorists" ready to go to their deaths to gain victory, and the population groups supporting them also can't imagine being defeated. So both sides have the illusion that THEY will finally be the winner...It clearly is impossible both can be in the very last Major-position...How long will they both continue to have that illusion? What all needs to happen before they start to doubt it?

## **2) The escalation between Israëlis and Palestinians :**

It is a very long time that Israëlis and Palestinians have been locked in an escalation with one another, each side using the means they have. Israëlis use mostly military violence, occupation, extension of settlements. And Palestinians use "civilian" material like stones and sticks, and also terrorist actions, particularly kamikaze-terrorist actions. Each is blaming the other one for the ways they use.

The first principle, of "only minor sensitivity", is, just like in the escalation between the US and it's enemies, very clear here too. Each side -the Palestinians and the Israëlis, each with its own allies- is only thinking of, talking about, showing on TV and describing in the papers all the minor-positions only they themselves have been put in

by the other, and never the minor-positions they put the other one in. Often they even contradict the casualties, the hurt and the suffering the other side mentions they have, that is they try to minimize or negate it. So each side doesn't feel listened to by the other side, what is putting each even more in a minor-position.

The second principle of "consequence" is also quite clear here in this escalation: every day brings a retaliation in one direction for a former retaliation in the opposite direction the day before.

In this case of escalation the third principle of "no comparison" is of course also applicable. That means that here again no one should try to compare the means used by both sides, the feelings of hurt and fear and suffering of each. What can be said is that the means EACH uses are painful and hurting for the other, from both sides often in horrifying ways. What can be said is that BOTH are afraid, and BOTH have feelings of pain, and BOTH feel threatened. For different reasons, because of different facts, in different periods of time. The ways the two sides feel afraid and suffer and feel threatened can't be compared. To say that one or the other is suffering more than the other, or is threatened more or is more afraid, is a nonsense. It is impossible to compare those feelings of both sides. If we try to do this comparison, we only emphasize once more the Major-minor imbalance between the two. All we can say that is very real, is that both are suffering, afraid and feeling threatened. BOTH.

Finally the principle of "big illusion": Years ago, before the Oslo agreements, I worked with a group of Palestinians. I remember one of them said so wisely : "As long as both Israelis and Palestinians continue to be under the delusion that THEY will finally be the ones capturing the very last Major-position, that long the war will go on..." This was about 10 years ago... The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a one in which the principle of "big illusion" is illustrated very well, in a awful and dramatic way...

### **3) The overlapping of both escalations :**

Because of who are the major participants in both escalations, they overlap and reinforce one another. In some circumstances this overlapping has been very clear, like as in the case of the Conference against Racism in Durban in 2001.



### **III. How "America", and Europe, can learn from Africa**

How is it possible to get out of war, to make the shift from war towards peace, from violence towards nonviolence? Escalations seem to be so hopelessly endless and fatal. How can we get out of them?

They happen because each side everytime again wants to get out of its minor-position. This is absolutely understandable. But it is not the fact each side wants to get out of its minor-position which builds the escalation, which makes the problem. It's THE WAY it is believed that this must happen, namely by putting oneself in the Major-position. So both sides should be able to get out of their minor-position WITHOUT putting themselves into a Major-position.

Therefore we need to shift from the Major-minor model towards another model in which it is possible for each side to get out of its minor-position WITHOUT putting itself in a Major-position. This is the Equivalency-model (see fig.2).

How can we shift from the Major-minor model into the Equivalency model, from the left to the right column? How is it possible to give justice to people entangled in an escalation like the apparently eternal one between Israëlis and Palestinians, in a way which is putting neither once more in a minor-position, as happens with the retributive approach?

In opposition to retributive justice there is restorative justice. An interesting and beautiful illustration of this kind of justice has been given by the activity of the Truth Commission, set up to establish justice after Apartheid in South Africa, and this under the presidency of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The fact that I mention this example doesn't mean it took place in a perfect way. And it also doesn't mean that if Israëlis and Palestinians, or the "Americans" and their enemies, would want to use restorative justice they should do THE SAME as was done through the Truth Commission in South Africa. It only means this case is an illustration of this kind of justice. And there aren't so many wellknown illustrations of it yet in situations as big as was the one in South Africa which was handled by the Truth Commission. In each case, people will have to develop their own way of putting in practice restorative justice, the Equivalency Model.

Fig.3 shows the general diagram of how Equivalency may be put into practice. It can help us have some ideas of how a process of restorative justice could look in dealing with our actual conflicts in the world, like as for instance, the Israëli-Palestinian one linked to the WTC-Afghanistan issue.

The process could, for instance, be called the "Truth-plan", a fusion of the two names "Truth Commission" and "Marshall Plan" (which was designed to make a new start after WWII). The parties in the nucleus would be Israëlis and Palestinians facing one another, "Americans" and spokes-people of their opponents. But around this nucleus there would be many other parties joining the process at different stages of the process, parties having had a contribution at some point in the one or another of the principal parties' feeling put in a minor-position.

It would be very important that all parties could express to their opponent how they feel and have been feeling put in minor-positions in the past, not only by each

specified opponent, but eventually also by other people. So they should be able to express their pain, their sufferings, their sorrows, their fears, their confusions. Also, it is very important that they would REALLY feel heard and respected in what they express. To make this possible, most probably neutral third parties would be needed, to facilitate and make possible nonviolent communication, that is a non-offensive, non-aggressive, respectful one. It also would be useful, after one party would have expressed its feelings, the opponent would reflect -that means : repeat with their own words or means- the expressed feelings.

The process should work toward having the opponent accept and admit how the other one feels and has been feeling put in a minor-position, and also admit their own contribution to it. So, for instance, Palestinians could express -in a non-attacking way- their difficult feelings about how Israël has been created, and they would hear from not only Israëlis but also many other countries -the Allied countries after WWII- that those feelings are heard, admitted, respected, not judged, not put down or pushed away, and that they admit their contribution to it. This doesn't mean they are "guilty" and will be punished. We shouldn't co-ordinate on the one hand having a contribution to something, and on the other being considered guilty and going to be punished. In the Equivalency-model, these are two completely different things, while in the Major-minor model, they most of the time are identified. In the same way Palestinians would have expressed their difficult feelings about how Israël has been created, how they feel occupied by Israëlis, etc., the Israëlis could express and be heard in their difficult feelings of how they still fear persecution of Jewish people, how they feel threatened as an island in the middle of Arab territory, etc.

There should be no blaming, no accusations, no finger pointing at any one, no lecturing ("You should have...!"), but only expressions of one's own feelings, and one's own admissions of one's own contributions to difficult feelings of the opponent. People can say "sorry" for some of their own contributions, or those of their own country, but they should not be pushed to do so. And, if they say sorry, they are not considered as bad or weak people therefore. The evil is not in the one party or the other, but in the situation and how it has been handled, in the usual system, the Major-minor system. The evil is not at one side or the other, but between both.

One more thing about saying "sorry" : this means to say to the opponent "I'm sorry, I regret you suffered." It doesn't mean : "I'll tell you why I did that, I can justify it." Then, it is a defense of oneself. Saying "sorry" is showing understanding for the other one's pain, and in doing so helping them to get out of their minor-position.

So there would be this exchange of feelings of respective minor-positions, and real open and respectful listening to one another. This is DIALOGUE. And on top of that, own admissions of one's own contributions to the pain of others. There is no right and wrong in all that, no guilty ones, no offenders on one side and victims on the other. In this way, ALL get space to work on getting out of their minor-positions.

But there is more. Through this process there is an immense gathering of all the present grief and needs of all parties. These are the FOUNDATIONS of the conflict. They are all the pieces on which the solution(s) can be built. They offer a new basis.

From their gathering emerge new possibilities.

In fact, the process itself, of going into depth plus communicating in depth plus gathering all the foundations, is already part of the solution. But additionally, it changes the "panorama", it gives new perspectives for what decisions could be taken and what changes could happen. In the Major-minor system only these last ones are usually considered as "solutions".

How this "Truth-plan" should concretely look like is certainly not clear at all yet to me. It is surely quite a lot of work ahead to bring any such process into being.

But what I do know is that we have to move from the Major-minor model to the Equivalency model, from retributive justice to restorative justice. I am aware that the Equivalency model and its applications in these situations can look very strange on first sight, not normal and unrealistic. That is very understandable : it is unknown territory. It is like children who lived for their whole life in war situations, who can't imagine it is possible to live without war. They think that is not normal and unrealistic...

What I think is not realistic is to continue in those escalations. We absolutely have to get out of them, and this as quickly as possible. Too many people already suffered too much because of them. And too many people continue everyday to suffer too much because of them.

All the pain there has been cannot be erased. We can't change the past, even the very last minute. We can't make dead people -Israeli or Palestinian, "American" or Muslim fundamentalist- alive again; we can't put back a leg which has been torn off; we can't give a happy childhood to a teenager who has suffered immensely his or her whole life... We can't change what has happened...

But what we can do is change things from now on, from this very minute. We can decide to continue with escalations and with the Major-minor model and all the suffering and pain. Or we can decide to change our ways of dealing with different viewpoints, to deal with them in an Equivalent way. We surely still need to do a lot of research about Equivalency, find and try things out, discover, create.

We can't change the past. But we can change the future.

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