

Speech at the panel discussion on "The Struggle against the Death Penalty: Achievements and Setbacks"; Side event to the 60th session of the UN-Commission on Human Rights  
15 April 2004, Geneva, Switzerland

## **Ahmet Altan**

I once wrote in one of my first novels about a leftist young man on his way to execution. The extremely realistic narration of the novel had upset my dad so much that he didn't talk to me for days. He said "one can only write about these things if he feels them; how can you feel so savagely". Although my country is now spared of this shame, many people once were killed by hanging in Turkey.

I grew up in a country with capital punishment, with murders. But the only reason I know about savagery and feel it, is not because I grew up in a country like that. But, because I have traces of savagery in my soul like all the other human beings since we are all part of nature.

Nature has built its perfect and magnificent mechanism on a certain routine where violence and savagery are intertwined. For thousand years, we've been trying to strip ourselves out of this routine cycle of savage by our intelligence, feelings and creativity. I suppose the two basic characteristics distinguishing mankind from all other living beings are his innate conscience and intelligence. Philosophy, art and science are privileges created by our intelligence to save us from the savagery of nature, of which we are a part. With these we educate ourselves. Although we still bear the savagery of a hyena within ourselves, still have the desire to kill and in fact still DO kill frequently, we feel ashamed of this desire and that shame we owe to philosophy, art and science.

Our conscience, on the other hand, is the foundation of justice and law. Our conscience shows us ways to be just. Even though, we still sustain the feeling of rage and the desire to kill in our soul, today a great majority of people on this Earth have learned to be ashamed of this feeling.

Unfortunately, we, human beings who have not been able to fully dissociate themselves from the savages of nature go through an odd paradox. While we individually try to break away from savagery, we are still unable to control the savagery of nation states, which we have created. In truth, this is an outcome of our hypocrisy. While we oppose individual savagery, we support the savagery of states.

Many people would tell you right away that they are against killings and murder but the same people would not oppose states' killing people with the same firmness. They even might believe this is necessary. The savagery of nature materializes most systematically in the existence of states. Wherever the state exists,

there is blood, death and savagery there. With its wars, prisons, police, spies, assassins and torturers, the state is the most obvious representative of savagery in this age.

Nowadays, maybe because we've become aware of our hypocrisy, we strive to pull states out of this savage domain. The universalization of law, the generation of the concept of interdependency and the formation of new "supranational" administrative units, as the European Union, essentially aim to educate states and prevent state savagery. But educating states isn't as easy as educating humans, is it? Like wild animals, states still believe in power and being powerful. They worship their own power and like to display this power at every opportunity. But, regrettably, they take the support they need from the savagery masked within individuals. We, humans, nourish the savagery of states. Ask yourselves why many people in different parts of the world want their own state to be stronger than other states.

Why they shiver with excitement when their anthems are played, why do they watch their flags being raised with passion? What's the difference between all these anthems, flags, borders and the signs left in the forest by a wild animal defining its own territory? I think that's why states kill people, too. Two instances when states kill people unhesitatingly are war and the gallows. Sophisticated people are in conflict with the states they established, particularly on these two issues.

We have difficulty to explain some big states the evilness of war and capital punishment, and how these conflicts with human intelligence and conscience. Because a group of human beings still benefit from 'death' is probably one of the most apparent reason of wars today. The reason for executions, on the other hand, is, I think, that the state realizes its power in the most tangible way by the power to kill and does not want to lose this. In our age, there are still those who support this terrible power.

I know those people would ask "Would you like the killer of your child to live, wouldn't you want him dead?" This is a question to provoke that horrible and violent but still human – feeling of vengeance inside us. Acting upon the savagery instilled in us by nature, of which we are a part, yes, I would like to have vengeance." This is the reply I would give when I give up my intelligence, my mind and my conscience. This becomes the moment, when I get carried away by this feeling, at which I turn into a rhinoceros, like the one in the play of Ionescu.

And we all have actually a rhinoceros-like side within ourselves. But eventually, isn't the saga of humanity an extraordinary struggle to distinguish ourselves from a rhinoceros? Didn't thousands of years go by, washing and trying to be purified in the waters of philosophy, art and science? Will we regress every time we are hurt or enraged? Those who kill must be punished; I don't think anyone objects to that. But we should ask ourselves. Why do we punish those who commit crimes,

who didn't manage to save themselves from the savagery and greediness of nature? What's the purpose of punishment? Do we want to deter them from committing crimes again or do we want to take revenge?

Is our real desire to prove murderers that we are stronger murderers than them? Is that what we mean by justice? Law is mathematics of principles to take the common peace of mankind under guarantee. So, does execution deliver our common peace? Or does it create a hidden or open restlessness in all of our souls by showing that we are still savage? States' perpetration of the murders that we cannot commit ourselves, does not bring us peace, it would only make murder and savagery official. It would make us renounce all that distance we've covered in the journey of mankind. With every murder, we go back millions of years, to the savagery from which we broke through; with every just decision, we return to today and our current level of development. What we are going through right now is an agonizing sequence of steps forward and backward. Human beings have more or less managed to educate themselves and have reached a level where they are ashamed of savagery.

Now it is time to educate states. Today, states that we still need are actually the greatest symbol manifesting that our veiled savagery still exists. I hope one day people will advance enough to live without a state. But until that day arrives, we have to spend serious effort to get rid of our hypocrisy which leads us to condemn individual savagery on the one hand and nurture it through states on the other, and be able to protect human beings from the violence of states. We believe people are more important than anything. But, those who believe there are more important things than humans still listen to the call of the wild.

We take our strength from our intelligence, our conscience, our creativity and the accumulation produced by humanity, philosophy, art and science. They take their strength from savagery implanted by nature inside us. We stand for the future and life. They stand for the past and death. I believe, one day, we will win victory over them and eradicate all kinds of murder. Not because we are stronger than them. But because life is more attractive than death and the future is much stronger than the past.