

Article II

Zero-sum or Positive-sum: Group vs. Self-pride

We humans have divided ourselves into groups throughout history and around the world. Good start – we could better raise families, hunt, protect from animals, divide responsibilities, specialize, do big projects, etc. Families, tribes, city-states, empires, etc. evolved independently in larger and larger units. Problem is, groups can cooperate to be either constructive or destructive.

Early on in our collective history groups fought over women, territory, slaves, or plunder. Cooperation was weaponized to seek revenge, assuage greed, gain status or dominance, and so on. The counterproductive “game” that evolved was insiders against outsiders, us vs. them. We’ve played this hateful, costly, deadly addictive game for eons.

Tribal raids, classist feudal serfdom, caste and apartheid systems, mercantilist colonialism and slavery, imperial empire-building are a few of the iterations of groupism that have plagued humanity from time immemorial. Each of these cultural or organizational systems and their modus operandi were based upon a socially dysfunctional zero-sum mindset.

The zero-sum mindset contends that we start with a finite pie. My goal is to grab the biggest piece I can get. I win; you lose.

Winners have been conquerors, kings, emperors, moguls of industry, slave owners, Brahmins, upper classes of all ethnic or racial groups, and so on. Losers have been the slaves,

serfs, Untouchable and lower classes, and other stigmatized racial, gender, morphological, religious or ethnic groups. Losers have also been dead and wounded warriors, refugees, unjustly incarcerated, executed, and genocidally massacred, to name just a few such groups.

How can we break up this horrendously unjust zero-sum game? Heightened morality? Sure. Absolutely. But we’ve tried that with just a modicum of success. Yes, let’s keep trying, and do it better. However, we need more help here. First off, let’s smash the myth that the pie is finite. Our group herd instincts perpetuate that zero-sum myth. The zero-sum fallacy begins with the nature the game. When I want more of the pie, and you want more of the pie, we inevitably fight over it. We spend time, energy, maybe lives, and, in the end, the spoiled pie is now smaller than before.

Kings, slave owners, moguls, and upper classes intent upon preserving and expanding their greedy-sized pie slice are missing the bigger picture. Billions of slaves, oppressed women and children, subsistence-paid workers, stigmatized or genocidally exterminated minorities -- to put it crassly to those zero-sum proponents -- are precious assets who can expand that pie exponentially.

The end of slavery with now educated former slaves did not devastate the economy, or the US, or the South. Instead, today is a much wealthier place than in 1865. Abolishment of disabling foot-binding in China thus allowing women more independence and ability to work did not impoverish, but rather enriched China.

Zero-sum nationalistic mercantilist-colonialist greed brought us World War II, but its end did not impoverish Europe; it rather freed Europe and the world from perpetual wars, death and active impoverishment to maintain their big pie slice. Outlawing Indian untouchable castes designation, as partially effective as it has been, has allowed some ancestrally Untouchables to rise as important contributors to the Indian society and economy. In short, the zero-sum-conceived finite pie need not be finite.

The hope for the future is that our cooperative, positive-sum mindset will prevail. The same finite earth on which we all live has become immeasurably wealthier, healthier, longer-lived than ever before. We have found that cooperating across borders and across races and ethnicities can benefit both sides of borders, each richer and better off than before.

All well and good, you may say, “but the wealthy and privileged classes, races, religions, and gender still rule, oppress, and sap the wealth from the rest of us. *They* are the ones that need to recognize their short-sightedness.” So we need to help them and ourselves benefit from this positive-sum thinking. A step in the right direction has been our prioritization (imperfect though it may be) of COVID inoculation for the weak, sick, elderly, even poor, usually at the end of the line. Scholarships for less privileged, sliding-scale subsidies for childcare, foreign aid all help the larger society and its prosperity and welfare. These are positive-sum investments that bring returns in multiples of investment. This is a powerful argument that we need to keep making to our children, students, media, legislators, and decision makers.

What else can we do? Let’s look at this group-think phenomenon that is non-discriminatory. Almost all of us are afflicted. We as individuals have become hijacked by our respective groups – religion, nation, race, ethnicity, sports team,

etc. We become over dependent on them for our self-identity and self-esteem. We grasp for that comforting part of our history – that great empire somewhere in our history. Or we may be captured by that current, recent, or distant time of persecution or victimization.

If we find that glorious past, we may feel superior. This superiority syndrome is toxic. It may lead to societal conflict, violence, or war. If we turn out on top, it may lead to oppression of others and to a classist, racist, inequitable society. A race-centric superiority syndrome led to massacres of indigenous peoples in the Americas, to enslavement of millions of Africans, to Nazi extermination of millions of Jews, Gypsies, and mentally ill, and deadly attempts to dominate the Western world. That Euro-centricity is engrained in our school curricula, textbooks, media, political and judicial systems, and cultural attitudes.



Zero Sum War Games

Or as victim, we many feel resigned, frustrated, indignant, outraged, or combative. We may blame ourselves for our plight or just as dysfunctionally disarm ourselves by loading all of the causality on others. Such emotions are quite understandable. However, they are in part based upon our self-created self-identity as well as that powerful identity that a group-centric society relentlessly imposes upon us.

That latter societally-imposed identity is not ours unless we surrender to it. We can combat that identity forcefully by supplanting that

stigmatized identity by switching our self-generated identity. Healthy pride *in oneself* must be *self-determined*. Its foundation can grow from one's determination, stick-to-itiveness, survival skills, interpersonal skills, cross-cultural skills, communication skills, thinking skills. Such skills are unassailable by others. They are dependent on no group's success or failure, good or evil historically or currently – and over which we as individuals have minimal if any control. Self-pride diffuses the need for divisive zero-sum, circle-the-wagons, us-against-them mindsets with unintended consequences. Development of and recognition of our own skills makes us truly independent individuals with an assurance that we can accomplish what we want despite the odds.



This strategy does not imply dropping our guard, surrendering, or becoming submissive. Rather, paradoxically, such rock-solid pride in ourselves can empower minority groups. It enables clear-eyed leadership freed from group-think and empowered by perceptive understanding of ourselves and others. Any minority understanding its past and current plight with objective, analytical eyes rather than gut reactions becomes empowered.

At the same time, with our new self-confidence, we must understand other minorities or temporary majorities with our now new empirical, analytical mindset. Understanding ourselves, others, and our historical similarities -- profoundly and empirically -- we have now become equals, no longer a minority, with any other group, together part of a larger human race. We are no longer superior or inferior. We are instead part of a family, perhaps squabbling, but now each of us with a *self-confidence* divorced from a group-reliance – a group whose history or present character we need not tout, defend, or compare. We may now realize that our group is not so circumscribed or alone, but we are brothers and sisters with many peoples with similar plights.

We have just diffused much of the tribal groupism that divides us. We are now many steps closer to our goal of *all* humans on our planet realizing that our progress and our future is dependent on our cooperation as equals in a world in which we all take a deliberate and active role in helping each other reach our highest potential of self-fulfillment. We have opened a path to work together as equals, as brothers and sisters. We no longer need to futilely work against each other in a zero-sum manner. We are now cognizant, empowered, and capable to exponentially expand the size of that heretofore finite pie with a positive-sum strategy to mushroom the wealth and welfare of humankind.



HOW TO BUILD BRIDGES OF CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING BY PETER PORR

This article is part of an 8 part series by Peter Porr that can be downloaded as an e-book.

<https://se-asiacenter.org/index.php/healing-illinois/>



As part of a statewide effort the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) has awarded a grant to South-East Asia Center (SEAC) to share ideas and provide actionable steps that individuals and organizations can implement for the purpose of promoting better racial understanding amongst diverse community groups.

Through a series of email messages directed to faith leaders, political leaders, educators, and social service providers SEAC will share thought provoking insights designed to discourage zero-sum thinking and instead encourage a deeper understanding of cultural relations that focuses on our commonalities.

In addition to the eight action oriented messages, SEAC will host two one hour online webinars presented by the center's founder Peter Porr aimed at challenging assumptions, offering cross-cultural insights, and explaining how we unwittingly go wrong in our approach to intercultural interactions.

About the Author Peter Porr



Peter Porr holds degrees in education (Michigan State University), sociology of education (New York University), as well as four

years of doctoral politics of education (University of Chicago). He has trained teachers in Chicago and has taught in classrooms that range from a preschool in Harlem to a college in Viet Nam. As founding executive director of South-East Asia Center, Mr. Porr has served a multi-cultural clientele for some 40 years. Many of whom were historical arch-enemies in their native lands. He is currently an educational and administrative consultant to SEAC while working on a book that examines how education can contribute to world peace.

Mr. Porr had real-life cross-cultural conflicts in his own family that included strict Catholic maternal grandparents and strict Lutheran paternal grandparents who refused to attend his own parents' wedding. As a German-American gentile growing up shortly after World War II in a predominantly Jewish New York suburb, Peter felt that he was the outsider and learning that being a minority, no matter the circumstances is an experience that imprints one's soul forever – for better or worse.