

PSYCHOANALYTIC INSTITUTE OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

SHOCK AND AWE CONFERENCE

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I am very grateful to Karen and Susanne for inviting me to share with you my views on the impact of the social “shock and awe” of our tumultuous times. Responding to their request, I will present here my experiences and thoughts, as a psychoanalyst, concerning the bloody dictatorship that ruled Argentina from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s.

Until recently, when reflecting on the effects of social trauma US researchers and practitioners looked to countries that, like mine, had suffered authoritarianism and genocide. The September 11th attack, however, forced them to look inward. This tragedy confronted US psychoanalysts with a new problem. In addition, the wars and its consequences, the severe economic crisis have added to the feeling of shock and awe.

I am thankful to have been given the chance to engage in a dialogue with you at the centerstage.

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Psychoanalysis has never been oblivious to the socio-historical reality that surrounds it – quite the opposite. Nonetheless, social catastrophes challenge psychoanalytic theory and also put in check practice itself. At the same time, theoretically rigid approaches to such matters also put our discipline in check. The challenge lies neither in the difficulty to diagnose and treat severely ill patients, nor in the nature of their pathology. Rather, it is posed by the ways in which analysands are affected by a loss of the sense of safety usually provided by the social sphere.

We find ourselves having to respond to the demands of subjects who are facing de-historicizing traumatic situations caused by a threat to, or the actual rupture of, their social ties. These subjects experience anxiety arising from the convulsion of identities and projects, from psychic emptiness, and from hopelessness. De-historicizing social factors comprise a range of “violences” (plural) of wide-ranging intensity that do not necessarily constitute traumatic experiences. Such violences go from moderate forms of oppression, which may seem to go unnoticed, to extreme terror. Having advanced these basic premises, I will present a) a brief survey of what happened with psychoanalysis, psychoanalysts, and analysands in Latin America under authoritarian regimes; b) a mode of psychic functioning induced by terror; and c) an account of the pain and suffering caused by social trauma.

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In March 1976 Argentina suffered a gory military coup that instituted terror as a method for control and domination. Even though the dictatorship

targeted those citizens whose ideologies challenged its own, the tactic it adopted was spreading panic among the entire population so as to multiply the shock-and-awe effect. Terror methodology took several guises – prolonged clandestine prison, torture, murder, threats – but its utmost expression was the figure of the “disappeared.” The estimated number for Argentina is 30,000.

The history of psychoanalysis and psychoanalysts in Argentina is inextricably tied to the social and political history of terror under the dictatorship for several reasons. First, analysts and patients were immersed in the same social circumstances, and therefore practitioners faced some difficulties at first. We lacked the necessary distance to understand our patients’ material. Second, the dictatorship’s repressive policies were based on a double bind – committing a crime and negating it. Finally, and not a minor obstacle, psychoanalytic theory proved to be not enough to tackle this situation.

A large part of the population was subjected to panic. For others, constraints acted as creative stimuli. Some psychoanalysts concerned themselves with the sociopolitical situation from the perspective of their own discipline, producing interesting revisions and new developments.

In the social field, the creation of human rights organizations was essential; they became an invaluable support for the victims, their relatives, and the general population as well.

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New ways of being unavoidably demand that we conceive of subjects as *socio-historical beings*. From this broadened perspective, subjects are the product of a subjectivation process that takes place in specific *socio-historical conditions*. We might say that subjects are instituted on the basis of both their *individual* (familial) and their *social* realities. (J. Puget, 1995) Law, money, work, and safety are referents that contribute to the construction of social subjectivity. This way of understanding the subject necessarily leads us to expand the view of the Freudian “civilization and its discontents,” and deepens our understanding of *social trauma*. I define social trauma as *the experience of extreme helplessness resulting from violence of great magnitude inflicted upon subjects in a situation of social defenselessness*.

The destruction of the social and legal orders exposes the ego to the risk of devastation, and therefore to a demanding and exhausting additional work. The ego must fill in the social void with its own devices. In some cases, subjects have the ability to develop their own psychic resources. Yet when the traumatic cause has a predominantly social origin, the normalization of the social order is indispensable. It constitutes a necessary condition to restore subjectivizing bonds. Only thus will the articulation between individual experience and the social, cultural, and symbolic order be restored. As French analyst P. Aulagnier claims, every socio-cultural space must respect the basic conditions necessary for subjectivation. Political regimes that apply control methodologies aimed at destroying the values inherent to the human condition bear a de-subjectivating potential.

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I would like to describe two situations that might be placed at both ends of the social violence spectrum. First I will focus on the mourning for the disappeared. Then I will reproduce and discuss a personal account of the suffering caused by social trauma, and its evolution in connection with socio-political developments.

I chose to speak about the peculiarities of the mourning for the disappeared because the practice of kidnapping and disappearance was paradigmatic of the dictatorship's violence, and because studying them allows us to detect *the devastating psychic effects of social vulnerability*.

In 1986, we described in collaboration with Pelento, the disappearances as “a method of ideological repression [that] involved the kidnapping, clandestine detention, and murder of adults, adolescents, and children of varied social, cultural, and political backgrounds. Kidnappings were often gory. The men who carried them out wore either uniforms or civilian clothes, and might or might not identify themselves as members of the security forces. People were taken from their homes, their workplace, or the street. The essential feature of the kidnappings was the utter lack of information regarding both kidnappers and kidnapped. No-one in a position of authority would acknowledge that the kidnappings had taken place, let alone explain them or take responsibility for them.”

The extermination method confronted psychoanalysts with mourning processes whose features defied known descriptions of the working through of mourning. Consequently, in 1986 we decided to call them *special mourning processes*. In “Mourning and Melancholia” Freud states that mourning “is generated under the influence of the *reality test*, which categorically demands separation from the object because the latter no longer exists” (Freud, 1917; emphasis added). I would like to stress here that

according to Freud, confirmation of the loss in *external reality* constitutes the starting point of the psychic mourning process.

The relatives of the disappeared had no direct knowledge of, or adequate information about, the death of their loved ones or its cause. The authorities simply disavowed those deaths. The relatives were thus prevented from conducting a reality test. Neither did they have access to the necessary symbolic structure provided by funerary rituals and customary community practices. When the judgments of attribution and negation are thwarted, uncertainty takes their place. Those who experience the loss cannot find out whether the absence of their loved ones is momentary or irreversible; whether their loved ones are alive or dead. Due to the lack of both symbolic support and factual information, there is a distortion of the matrix imprinted by the *fort-da* that renders experiences of loss and retrieval representable.

There are no words to describe the feelings produced by a death that remains outside the law. The disappeared object adopts a peculiar fantasmatic representation in the psyche – that of a *living dead* who necessarily slips into the field of the uncanny. Consequently, the relatives' psychic functioning is pushed toward traumatic repetition.

As this process is unfolding in the psychic space, in the social sphere, due to authoritarian rule, society cannot perform its containing and protective function. This vacuum in both psychic and social spheres, produces and perpetuates the absence of the necessary elements to work through the loss. Over time, the disappearance of the body and their inability to carry out funerary rituals forces the relatives to tolerate the presence in their minds of the figure of a *dead with no grave*. The mourners are left to

their own devices. A feeling of abysmal helplessness overwhelms them and hinders their acceptance of their loss.

In the context of such a level of intrapsychic and metapsychic (Kaës, 1988) precariousness, the psyche must embark on a complicated process of elaboration of the loss. The necessary condition to avoid psychotic de-structuring depends on the possibility of the subject finding a path toward some form of representability. There can be various results.

a) The process may arise with a predominance of a sense of guilt about the death of the loved one. In such a case, a melancholic elaboration of mourning takes place.

b) The process may arise with a predominance of over certainties. In such a case a paranoid elaboration takes place.

c) The process may achieve representability of the drama in relation to the disappeared, through the unconscious fantasy which fulfills an organizing function. This possibility of representability is what P. Aulagnier calls “*mis en scene*” and beyond that “*mis en sense*”, that means that the mourner attains comprehension of the precise meaning that death has for him. This is the time when the subject arrives at the real sense of the mourning process.

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On the other end of the spectrum are those subjects who were not directly affected by political repression. Nonetheless, repression has left its marks. These are not always acknowledged, either by the subjects themselves or by society. Sometimes they remain hidden. Other times, they are externalized in a character trait or through traumatic symptoms of varied severity that appear over time. Such was the case of María, a woman who

lived on the sidelines of the prevailing socio-political situation. She disavowed the violence that surrounded her because she had succumbed to what Piera Aulagnier defines as a state of “alienation.” Seeking protection, she had adopted a position of “obedience,” which compelled her to yield to the state’s ban on knowing in an illusory attempt to feel safe. Let us listen to her:

“I lived across the street from the ESMA [the Navy’s School of Mechanics] for many years. The ESMA was a natural point of reference for me. When I took a cab, I would use it to direct the driver. When I gave my address to new friends, to be more precise I would tell them, ‘I live across the street from the ESMA.’

From my apartment’s windows I could see treetops and blue skies. Farther away were the muddy waters of the River Plate, which at times would look like the sea. I did not dare tell this story for many years because of the horror it aroused in me. I didn’t know how to tell it, and it made me feel very ashamed – I was living so close to torture and death and could surmise it, but couldn’t know it was happening.

It was a true ordeal for me, the torture I had never suffered at the ESMA. I suffered in my dreams and had horrible fantasies, with dismembered people who had been reconstructed like Frankenstein, and men with holes in them, with parts of their bodies missing, with wooden legs. They chased me, killed me, buried me alive... (...) I wanted to get rid of everything; I wanted to tear it out of me like you gut an animal. I couldn’t stand it, and for years the pain was unbearable.

I was finally able to talk about it when I saw the President from my balcony and heard him say that the ESMA would be turned into a Place for Memory. I felt a huge sense of relief”.

The Navy transformed the ESMA into one of the most feared clandestine detention centers. From there left the helicopters that carried living prisoners to be thrown into the river, as part of the military’s “final solution.”

For María, the ESMA had been a signifier of her social subjectivity – a reference point that supplied additional meaning to her sense of belonging (her neighborhood). It was just a spot on a map, a quiet landscape that she could enjoy from her balcony. She remained oblivious to the events that were unfolding there. Neither the vehicles mysteriously entering and exiting the ESMA nor the horrific tales about the events taking place there would arouse María’s suspicion or interest. Many years would pass before she could acknowledge the facts, and by then *la ESMA* had become an uncanny signifier. Then she felt overcome by escalating feelings – first astonishment, then shame, and finally panic created by terrifying obsessions with great traumatic power. Contagion and complicity fantasies tormented her, triggered by her proximity to torture and death. María kept the secret for nearly thirty years.

It is likely that María’s inability to talk stemmed from the feeling that telling her story might confront her with her listeners’ look of horror or, even worse, their glazed over or indifferent look. Only when the opportunity arose to trade the subject position of “accomplice,” in which she had been trapped, for one of “witness” was she able to talk. This shift hinged on the statement, “I saw it,” “I lived it.” Yet above all, it was driven by the

acknowledgement that her testimony might contribute to the reconstruction of Argentina's social history of terror. The President's speech at the ESMA was part of a public policy that asserted the need to restore memory and to put sanctions into effect. A new historical stage was unfolding that facilitated social reparation. New options emerged for those affected by political repression. Those who had started working through their mourning would be able to complete the process. Those who had not been able to begin it, like María, would be able to do so.

Only if a social context of safety and support is restored will those affected by political repression be able to access their memories of extreme trauma in a bearable way. Language must then reach these experiences and render them communicable. Words become a *testimony* validated by listening, and grant signification to experience. They allow patients to historicize their lives in the intimacy of the psychoanalyst office, and construct social history by adding to the social discourse.

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The approach I am suggesting here poses several challenges for analysts:

- Positioning ourselves in an interface between our work as analysts and social events;
- acknowledging the strong dependence of analytic work on socio-historical processes;
- maintaining the appropriateness of our practice by ridding ourselves of a false neutrality;

- recognizing the existence of a unique form of suffering that stems from collective trauma and that has been designated as *social pain*; (S. Bleichmar)
- identifying external dangers – Freud’s realistic dangers – and being able to differentiate them from internal dangers – those originating in the drives and the superego.

To enable analysands to express the specificity of their pain in the session, we must acknowledge the extent and the effects of social violence. Each case generates a particular transference-countertransference relationship that demands our involvement with the particular type of suffering that results from such violence. Sometimes we must respect their silence. Other times we must help them to find the words they do not have, to disentangle hard-to-identify feelings generated by the feared scene. Analysts should neither anticipate nor hastily constrain their understanding of suffering by referring it to the mind and searching for causes in their analysands’ singular history of infantile sexual trauma. Rather, they should try to discover in each case the crossroads where singular and social occurrences meet. Enabling patients to produce a signifying narrative that facilitates the reconstruction of a meaningful experience reconfirms them as human beings. Words become testimony when both analysts and society are able to listen.

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This topic raises relevant questions. I would like to conclude my presentation with some of these questions:

- What happens when our involvement in the patient's suffering is unavoidable? When processing pain is closely linked to the events that implicate analysts themselves, when that processing requires the restoration of the rule of law and of the norms that govern social life?
- To what extent can we withstand accompanying our patients to the scene of absolute degradation to which they were subjected, so that they may reinstate their own *condemning judgment* (in Amati Sas's words), without having our behavior interpreted as taking sides?
- Can we take on these challenges without feeling that we are transgressing the boundaries established by the theory and practice we were taught?

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