

PYCHOSOCIAL AFTER-EFFECTS OF POLITICAL CONFLICTS: SOME REFLECTIONS

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Introduction

During the 20th century in various countries of Latin America, clamor for dignified working conditions, fair salaries, and other basic rights often was regarded by government officials as illegitimate and illegal, considering them against law and order. During the cold war, community and political organizations that advocated proposals beyond economic demands, signaling the need for societal structural change, were discredited as subversives. Frequently, governments proscribed such organizations and ordered them to disband on account of alleged ties to *international Communism*, even though they might not have any connection whatsoever to international political movements. The intensification of social demands and the growth of political movements that advocated change were viewed as political threats. In the latter half of the 20th century, coup d'états throughout Latin America installed military regimes and dictatorships that broke up these movements, redefining political models as well as social, political and economic relations within the countries. On the short and medium terms, social differences and inequality exacerbated while local conflicts arose from the particular diversity of each country. Violence, aimed at the countries' own citizens, was utilized in an effort to limit and control such movements, regardless of whether or not they were actually armed conflicts. Dictatorships and regimes founded under the guise of protecting national security had *cataclysmic effect*, altering social and political projection to give preeminence to a drastic economic-social model, with no regard for the violence required to institute such changes.¹

Declassified State Department and CIA secret documents about Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, and other countries leave no doubt that the United States clearly had involvement in military coups and anti-subversive interventions. Revolutionary Latin American movements were deemed a threat to U.S interests and national security. In this context, military regimes implanted to put things back in order "... *had underlying ideological inspiration. The repressive policies that steered State terrorism must be*

¹ Vidal, Hernán, *Cultura Nacional Chilena, crítica literaria y derechos humanos. (National Chilean Culture. Literary Critics and Human Rights)* Minneapolis. Universidad of Minnesota. 1989.

understood as the perverse expression, the dark side of the total recasting of the political, social and economic order.”²

This essay describes psychosocial consequences that have been studied and documented primarily in research drawn from clinical work conducted with individuals, families and groups. It has been observed the erosion of trust in institutions and human beings; erosion of the sense of belonging to society itself in their own country, and fear as an element that is always latent in social relationships, in addition to devaluation of life by some defined as “enemies” in a political context.

Consequences of conflict on persons

Torture and the utilization of the power to kill exercised against individuals and groups defined as enemies were pervasive practices that produced fear as after-effects, not only for victims and their immediate circles but also in society as a whole. Frequently, in situations legally defined as states of constitutional exception such as state of siege or state of war, governments conducted illegal arrests, abducted people, raided homes, summarily executed persons on the spot, raped women and girls, looted and robbed houses, workplaces and businesses, all of which they justified in name of national defense and internal security. A range of consequences arose, particularly in villages and rural communities where military occupations produced armed confrontation and various forms of violence in different countries. Many families and in some cases entire communities were forced to flee, leaving behind their lives, history, homes, and property including animal and agricultural plots, when people in rural areas were affected. Millions of people became displaced in this manner in Peru, Guatemala as well as Colombia, where armed conflict is still alive. In these and other countries, repression forced countless numbers of people into exile. Beyond the borders of Latin America, we find similar situations in many countries of Africa in recent decades as well as other countries around the world affected by prolonged high or low intensity armed conflict.

² Jiménez, Juan Pablo, “No es el país que queremos: Modernización y malestar en la sociedad chilena. Una mirada psicoanalítica” (It is not the country that we want. Modernization and discontents in Chilean Society. A psychoanalytical view” in *Revista Persona y Sociedad*. Universidad Alberto Hurtado. Instituto Latinoamericano de Doctrina y Estudios Sociales. ILADES Volumen XV, N° 3, 2001.

Extreme experiences of violence nearly always brought traumatic consequences for individuals and their families. They also directly affected the coexistence of peoples and communities. Political violence generated fear, unraveled day-to-day life, and forced people to make decisions that implied losing everything of one's own and familiar in order to save their lives and if possible try to precariously start all over again in another place. Or else they lived with the hope of being able to eventually return to the place where they had built their lives, even though the wait might extend over the course of years, making return unviable. Experiences such as these affected the lives of people and their families, particularly their capability to function psychologically and socially. Children suffered the most devastating effects because parents, under such circumstances, had scant ability to protect and care for their children, accentuating the perception of vulnerability and defenselessness of children and adults.

Some countries formed "truth" commissions that investigated what happened to the victims and proposed reparations as a means to bring closure to the conflict. These commissions issued reports that expose the facts about the occurrences in the nation's history to understand the consequences for victims, although the narratives about events that took place and what happened to victims has been limited. Such initiatives faced a complex challenge in exposing the truth about the conflict (and about the past) and attempting to evoke reflection on the impact on both the personal and collective levels. Equally complex have been endeavors to identify the unsettling effect of violence on individual lives as well as the cultural foundations on which those persons and their families have developed their lives.

Two examples discussed below – Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Chile's Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture – illustrate efforts at characterizing the effects on the social and psychosocial levels, as well as the impact of violence.

Peru's Truth and Reconciliation Commission report stated in the chapter on psychosocial effects as follows:

Violence added cruelty, terror and destruction to situations of poverty, abandonment and marginalization of many peoples. The imprint of unjust living conditions compounded the effects of violence. We cannot speak merely of the "after-effects of violence" without taking into account the complex history that produced that violence, with no regard for the specific

*ways of facing and living with these effects. Violence leaves an imprint that can be understood only from an outlook formed by a range of perspectives. (...) deep suffering, both physical and emotional, such as feelings of insecurity, desertion, and powerlessness, and in some cases, a lasting disorder in the psychic organization. A decisive factor of the traumatic characteristics of these experiences was the imposition of silence: victims were warned not to speak about what had happened. Fear also induced silence, and so the traumatic experience remained encapsulated, incapable of working through either personally or collectively. Some effects of violence appeared at the very moment of impact, while others remained latent, surfacing much later. The consequences tend to have a lasting impact and are present in the mental representations that people have today of themselves, society, democracy and possibilities of mutual coexistence.*³

In its chapter on psychosocial consequences, Chile's Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture ascertained that the use of violence against people in detention set off a cycle of terror, precisely because of the lack of guarantees or possibilities for defending oneself. The report stated:

*... [Detention] causes a great impact on people directly affected and those who witnessed such situations. Verbal abuse of unarmed persons was commonplace. The unleashing of undue force brought a feeling of defenselessness, vulnerability, desertion, and uncertainty. Distress and fear expanded upon realizing that there was no place to lodge a complaint about the outrage and arbitrariness, not even to recover or obtain indemnification for belongings, machinery, and work implements destroyed ...*⁴.

As these reports infer, violence primarily affected groups that authorities of the country at those moments, had labeled "the enemy." In some countries this condition

³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Final Report Lima CVR 2003. Third part: Las secuelas de la violencia www.cverdad.org.pe/ifinal/pdf

⁴ Commission on Political Imprisonment Torture, Chapter VIII. Consecuencias de la Prisión Política y la Tortura www.comisiontortura.cl/

applied to political parties, labor unions, or religious groups, guerrilla organizations, and especially the indigenous population that lived in the communities and regions where such groups were located. In some countries the situations of conflict affected significant numbers of the civilian population, labeled enemies not only due to their political or ideological choices, but also for their condition as peasants, indigenous or poor, powerless people. The effects are differentiated on social and political aspects of society, depending on the regime's characteristics, mechanisms of repression, and ideological justifications contrived. In this context, the reports produced by the various truth commissions comprise a collective narrative about the conflict in a specific society, confirming that violence left its imprint on victims and on society, and that governmental policy must acknowledge and address these effects.

Depending on political factors specific to each country, governmental acknowledgement of the consequences of political repression has been confined to certain classes of victims, mainly those who died. Commonly, it is argued that the sheer numbers of victims preclude inclusion of everyone, that the magnitude of the problem would be unmanageable, and that it is impossible to indemnify everyone affected by violence. Such reasons have been wielded especially concerning the millions of displaced people, noting that it is impossible to restore their previous living conditions or propose adequate reparations measures for those groups. However, in various countries victims have come together as organized groups and have gained greater attention regarding the situation that affects them, although the development of reparations policies is still a slow, and unsatisfactory process for most, if not all.

In short, violations of individual rights, in almost every country, are committed in the name of the nation's common good ("for the fatherland"), a rationale that generally is put forth as ideological justification both during and after the conflict. The justification divides society by defining national common good within antagonistic and contradictory parameters, with no concern for the cost these decisions represent for segments of society, especially for people directly affected by repressive policies. Consequently, it is important to note that observable psychosocial consequences do not always ensue from a conflict's specific logic. Rather, they arise from the individual's cumulative history of violence as well as previous experiences of exclusion, which the conflict reinforces.

In many countries, violence destroyed basic trust between persons, within communities, and in governmental institutions (political, armed forces, judiciary and

others). Frequently, social networks were dismantled, leaving the family as the only place of refuge and security. When conflict divided families and they experienced the corrosive effect of mistrust and polarization, people's sense of security was shattered. Natural family loyalties became exposed to the conflict as well as the loss and destruction of the very foundation of personal safety, deepening the perception of isolation and abandonment.

Therefore, it may be said that the most significant consequence for societies affected by this type of conflict has been the existence of thousands of victims, either of State terrorism or violent actions of organized political groups, although the latter remains a controversial matter of debate. Societies have to deal with the political effect and also with the particular consequences of each of the victims.

Submission and political control: the after-effects of fear

All forms of repressive violence, particularly various forms of torture, express a kind of social relationship that seeks the submission of people, families, groups and communities by instilling fear of pain and death. Not always did repressors need to set up secret detention centers. In many cases, brutal beatings, abuse, sexual abuse of men and women in any place, arbitrary and public executions, and looting sufficed to instill terror without firing a single shot.⁵ Forms of torture and mistreatment have been perfected over the course of centuries since the workings of the Inquisition, widely employed against enemies of the State during that era, and in recent decades scientifically reinstated, updated, and incorporated as part of military and police training.⁶ Since the torment that Christian martyrs endured in the early centuries of the Roman Empire up to our days, different forms of repression have been employed for ideological, religious and political reasons against "enemies" of the forces in power. The enemies of the empire, Christianity, fatherland, or the people have been defined according to each conflict's particular circumstances but all share a negation of the essential worth of the human condition. This view has resulted in the subjection of persons declared non-human - and therefore State enemies - to extreme cruelty, either imposed by law or arbitrarily exercised by officials, with no concern for legality or

⁵ Omang, Joanne, *The CIA'S Nicaragua Manual. Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare*. National Staff Reporter of the Washington Post. New York. Random House, 1985.

⁶ Lemov, Rebecca, *World as Laboratory: Experiments with Mice, Mazes, and Men*. Hill and Wang N.Y: 2006; McCoy Alfred W. *A question of Torture. CIA Interrogation from the cold war to the war on terror*. Henry Holt and Company NY: 2006.

possible judicial prosecution. It led to the recent abuse of the Abu Ghraib prisoners in Iraq, and was prevalent in Latin America during the 20th century, and even earlier, as such practices date farther back than we customarily recognize.⁷

Although political justification for repression points to the condition of *enemy*, as identified with specific political groups, the scope of repressive policies nearly always has been diffuse so that many, if not most, people feel threatened and vulnerable. Precisely, the broad political threat is what generated terror and was perceived as a threat of death in the literal sense, although it also represented a threat against everything that formed identity and emotions that sustained each person. Now that the conflict is over, what remains of that fear among victims? What remains of that fear in society? Has fear been overcome with the passage of time in a political context perceived as safer? Or has it dissipated as a result of political actions during the transition process towards a present and future democracy? Or has it not disappeared completely but the behavior we observe cannot be attributed to the persistence of fear?

These questions have no easy or satisfactory answers. Moreover, in some places fear and insecurity due to political repression and State violence appear to have given way to fear of violence and insecurity in the streets from common crime. Various voices call for a return to former repressive mechanisms to ensure citizen safety. Yet it is not easy to discern if common crime is actually on the rise or if more denunciations are lodged than before. Violent crime may be a reaction fueled by frustration stemming from poverty, unemployment, and different forms of exclusion and discrimination or it may be associated with increased consumption of drugs. Perhaps in some places it results from the demobilization of former combatants and greater civilian access to weapons. Then, there are always people who disseminate the belief that the situation results from eased repression and lax police response. In nearly every Latin American nation, the press has attributed the rise in crime statistics to new democratic officials who fail to impose law and order, calling for greater police deployment, as well as greater political repression. Such positions and opinions reveal the persistence of an authoritarian mindset that fosters and justifies political repression as an optimum

⁷ The use of pain at the service of submission, terror and political control was instrumental during significant periods of world history that few remember today. Human beings would tremble in fear at the mere pronouncement of these names which personified the institutionalization of pain: the Inquisition or Tribunal of the Holy Office, especially in Seville; the “Conserjería” of Paris; Saladero Prison of Madrid; the Tower of London; Siberia’s Mines; Barcelona prisons, among others, were institutions and places where thousands of human beings were made to suffer until death as a mechanism of power. See: Sociedad Literaria *Prisiones de Europa*, (Europe Prisons) Barcelona, 1863. Tomos I y II.

method for dealing with the consequences of conflicts and conflicts themselves. In addition, one has to wonder whether impunity regarding human rights violation crimes through amnesties accorded at the beginning of the transition period, affects the rule of law and perception of citizen security, by the existence of a great number of agents who are free and have never been charged in the murder and torture of fellow citizens.

On the clinical level, one defensive response to the perception of political threat identified as life threatening is the attempt to avoid drawing attention, to avoid being noticed or “seen.” Similar to mimetism, this defense mechanism has been described as the *installation of ambiguity*. In some species mimetism is a defensive reaction, characterized by modification of appearance in order to blend into the surrounding environment so as to avoid identification and attack by predators.⁹ It is a defense mechanism observable in different settings. To understand how it is established and how it functions, one must bear in mind that at birth all human beings have a given social context - society, family, mother and those who fulfill the maternal and sheltering role. Since no one can choose the circumstances of one’s existence and belonging, certain conditions tend to be perceived as *normal*. Perception of social and family reality as normal, immutable dimensions can extend to the social and political conditions in which one lives. Silvia Amati observed that some patients who had experienced situations of extreme mistreatment and violence lived them as a given, obvious and normal, as if the person does not know or cannot imagine a different way of living than the lot one was born into. This explains why it is possible to grow accustomed to intolerable situations.

In such situations persons experience a diminished sense of catastrophe; thus, catastrophe is lived as if normal and the individual’s total reality. The person loses the notion of abnormality and takes pains to try to restore or maintain a private daily existence that recovers a kind of normality as a factor in personal safety. This dimension offers a reply to the question of how it is possible to live during a war, bombings, in prison, in secret torture centers or in dictatorship. Yet, the installation of ambiguity is a defensive process that includes other dimensions. Amati states: “*I consider ambiguity to be a characteristic or potential tonality of psychological phenomenon associated with the individual’s particular position in the world, a state of mind in which commitment to*

⁹ Amati Silvia “La interpretación en el transubjetivo: reflexiones sobre la ambigüedad y los espacios psíquicos”.(The interpretation of the transubjetivo: reflections on ambguity and psychic spaces) Congreso Internacional de Psicoanálisis, Santiago, Manuscrito, 1999.

others and to the context are prime. It results in adaptation to culture, to ways of doing things, to habits in the social context and to the emotional climate that arises from interpersonal and transpersonal relationships."¹⁰ From the onset of catastrophe, the installation of ambiguity allows the individual to adapt and survive, but also requires restricting reactions to what happens.

Amati states, "*The mimetic aspect of ambiguity impels obfuscation and indifference and protects the rest of the personality that appears encapsulated and distant. The most mature functions can be recovered by repeatedly working through the trauma as conditions of life diversify (as occurs in therapy).*"¹¹ It is not difficult to identify such behavior in groups and families in reaction to the disaster. The toned-down reaction to painful events and new losses appears to be a way of easing the impact of more pain. Not only do most people tend to behave in this way; it also is seen as a "normal" response or "way of being" for a group, a family or a community. This form of self-protection may be associated with chronic fear, which is a contradiction in terms, since fear, like anxiety, is a specific response to a perceived threat. Chronic fear is no longer a specific reaction to concrete situations and becomes practically a permanent state in the daily lives not only of the people directly affected by repression but of anyone else who perceives themselves to be threatened.¹²

In systemic terms, it can be stated that all facets of inter-social life are stricken by the consequences of the conflict. In all likelihood, fear is expressed in different ways or may appear to be a private rather than social matter, precisely because of the intangible but real quality in social relationships, even though the conflict is formally over.

These elements converge in the post-conflict period but we know very little about its specific importance and its relationship to elements that can be termed "consequence" of the conflict. Fear tends to remain intact when it has not been possible to attain certainty that the threats have disappeared completely. In this sense, the threat is not only of another coup or political repression but also stems from the lack of reasonable guarantees that you will not be subject to arbitrary arrest, beaten, and tortured by State agents, and the assurance of due process rights at all times.

¹⁰ Ibid: P.3.

¹¹ Ibid: P.4.

¹² Lira, Elizabeth and Maria Isabel Castillo *Psicología de la amenaza política y del miedo* (Psychology of Political Threat and Fear) Santiago, ILAS CESOC Ediciones Chile América, 1991.

The fatherland patria (and the cause for the fatherland) that *one loves more than one's own life*

The notion of belonging to your own country becomes a fact of life in childhood. Different types of group relationships that foster the feel and verify that sense of belonging reinforce this idea, and, therefore, define and materialize the relationship to the nation, even though it may be only a symbolic relationship. A whole cast of players reinforce this role: the school, the soccer team, the community, work group, the neighborhood, the extended family, the political party, the business and the religious community. The “we” of each group becomes part of a larger “we” that is symbolically verified upon meeting others who we recognize as members of the same community by the way of speaking, emotional resonance evoked by certain symbols, certain celebrations and national holidays (independence day or religious observations), or identification with a soccer team in the national play-off championships, among other examples, that allow us to recognize ourselves in the other, as confirmation of this membership, at times so concrete and yet intangible.

Persecution and political repression (particularly State terrorism) can rupture the notion of belonging and damage the feeling of being safe “at home.” Yet this notion could be questioned as a distorted perception. How can the poor, the excluded, segregated and marginalized possibly feel “at home? How can a soccer match make us feel (the illusion of) identification with a team that represents “us” because it represents our country, even though our country has treated us as pariahs? Even though the ways of “feeling at home” may vary greatly, the notion of belonging only becomes conscious when it is questioned, when those who don’t belong are specifically defined and singled out as everyone else’s enemies, and bearers of a stigmatized condition. During the Inquisition, Jews, Muslims, and practitioners of witchcraft occupied this class of non-membership in society, as well as other groups viewed as not belonging, which was synonymous with “non-human” in many cases. In recent times in Latin America, Communists, anarchists, catechists or union members were considered enemies. In other words, concern for social justice, collective interests and community concerns could transform a peaceful political activist into a dangerous enemy that had to be rooted out and exterminated, upon definition as not belonging and therefore an enemy of the national community.

Political repression and war are waged in name of values and signifiers always associated with the national common good. Repressors claimed to defend the fatherland. Advocates of change fought for a different, *better* society and their social change proposals were conceived in name of the common good, seen as a morally and psychologically just and urgent action. This conviction motivated them to put their lives on the line for what they believed in and endowed their lives with meaning. The other side defended the fatherland, also understood as a shared vision, and viewed revolutionaries (and everyone they classified as such) as a threat to the existence of that vision of nation. Therefore, repression and persecution were justified precisely in name of that fatherland, understanding persecution as necessary, as a “just war.” The resulting political polarization was almost inevitable, as were the disparate political opinions.

By way of conclusion

The intensity and existential significance the social change vision had for their advocates do not have the same resonance today, especially in Latin America’s altered political context and the predominance of the marketplace economy. Some have called the period of social and political struggle, conflicts and repression a “madness” that took possession of nearly everyone. The expression conceals a reduction of politics to subjectivity that can justify not only the idealism but also the terrible crimes, even though it attempts to capture the passionate intensity, in which the “cause” was more important than life itself. But we must remember that political actions involving death and repression are generally well-planned strategies, not unpredictable emotional reactions. For this reason, “madness” is not an adequate metaphor for describing the motivations of these political players. In addition, the idealization of the ideas of the 1960s and 1970s has impeded careful analysis and the capacity to distinguish between legitimate political actions from the ferocious effects of civil wars, subversive violence, and repressive violence committed in name of or in opposition to these causes. However, the most evident consequence of these conflicts is the enormous number of victims, the hundreds of thousands of people killed, forcibly disappeared, tortured, displaced and exiled that societies have attempted to ignore and make invisible.

A second consequence has been how fear and submission has extended to large groups. This result would have been impossible without the theoretic and ideological confluence of those who knew how to use (and manipulate) the emotions, anxieties, fears and passions of groups, organizations and even nations at the service of their

political objectives. Mechanisms of psychological and moral manipulation and seeding fear were perfected so as to control groups and entire peoples through violence exercised over minds, leaving intangible but no less real tracks.

But, how do we come to grips with the meaning of the past and its contradictions when many countries have defined total judicial oblivion to ensure social peace and assign equal standing to the responsibilities and blame of the both sides, even though the “vanquished” pay the highest price in terms of quality of life and personal losses and the problem is declared over, once more in name of the country’s common good? How might we define the idea of belonging to one’s own country today without redefining the incorporation of excluded groups? Traditional concepts of belonging and inclusion have been strongly questioned by the effects of violence, necessitating not only the formal redefinition of citizenship but also its contents and various dimensions, in light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a fundamental reference point.

How do we analyze psychosocial consequences without taking into account the way the conflictive past was and continues to be handled? Post-dictatorship and post-conflict societies debate and define the political (and cultural) treatment of the consequences of the past with its burden of atrocities and crimes. Some are observed to obstinately deny what happened or to justify on the grounds that some people deserved it and “had it coming.” Others still live the present traumatically as if nothing had changed since the events took place: “... *there are times when amnesia prevails, others when dread that it will happen again acts as a paralyzing threat, and still others are nourished by consumerism and euphoria of successful economic policy that foster the illusion within the psychosocial conscience that time will gradually erase the terrible traces left by violence and alleviate victims’ pain.*”¹³

The consequences of conflict and political repression are not easily identifiable if analyzed from a fragmented perspective. These consequences processes lose visibility when disassociated from specific human rights violations (torture, kidnappings and disappearance or others) the subjective and health effects for individuals, families and communities, and the political context. After political conflicts or dictatorships, in the transition to democracy period, when reparation policies (without justice) are enacted with the intention of forgetting the past, responsibilities of State agents for the continuing effect on victims and society are erased, obliging victims once again to live the past political violence as a private matter. Reparations are founded on the need to

¹³ Jiménez, Op. Cit.

identify the links in the chain of consequences, to differentiate between various situations that affect people, communities, and groups, while proposing actions to re-signify the past experiences in order to live and not merely survive.

Often the idea persists that it is better for society (although not for the victims) to close the door to the past, amnesty the perpetrators, and keep on living as if nothing ever happened. But, Court cases tend to restore reality's judgment concerning what happened to the victims by identifying the perpetrators and calling the acts they committed crimes already described in the penal code as such, but which amnesty provisions often leave unpunished. Trials awaken immense political resistance, as impunity had been implicitly guaranteed. Based on that expectation, none of the perpetrators thought they would be brought to trial for an action that, politically and historically, was rarely, if ever, punished in the past in many countries. In other words, when human rights violations are shown to result from political decisions rather than the excesses and arbitrary actions of a few individuals, the chain of responsibilities is restored, thus significantly contributing to understanding the situation of people who were affected as victims of political violence and political repression.

Victims' demands have contributed most to promoting the idea that social peace will be achieved and will depend if agents of the State and their subordinates are brought to trial and punished for the crimes they committed. Victims themselves also have fostered recognition of their rights and the rights of all citizens, including perpetrators.

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