

*Panel: Social and cultural trauma*

*Reminders of past events affecting people and everyday lives of our societies*

**Trauma effects in Latin America**

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First of all, I want to thank to all the organizers for giving us the possibility to meet each other in this wonderful place and to dialogue about this topic. I also want to apologize for my English and the difficulty that I will surely face developing some ideas that are already quite complex to explain, even in my own mother tongue. So, I will do my best effort. Thank you and sorry.

The topic proposed for this panel was the trans-generational transmission of trauma in Latin America. Professionally, the question about human suffering and what the “normal” is after violent processes, has guided my professional choices. I started working professionally with victims of the dictatorship in Argentina, especially with survivors, 10 years ago. I obtain the degree in psychology and I did my master's and PhD in anthropology of political violence. Since 2008 I'm working in a memory center placed in a former concentration camp called “La Perla”<sup>1</sup> (Córdoba), with survivors. But to be honest, the problem of trauma, generations and transmission is moving for me in a biographical way. Being –in a certain sense- “victim” and “survivor” of the political repression in my country<sup>2</sup>, being activist of an organization called H.I.J.O.S (it means “child”, is an abbreviation of Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence), whose name reminds directly to the generational topic; my thoughts about these dimensions are –necessarily- traversed by my own experience.

Thus, I will take these “sources” and I'll try to transform them in tools to analyze the meaning of these topics. Before starting, I need to make another clarification. Latin America is a big continent, and the countries in it are big and many too. Many of them never had dictatorships, and even among the countries which had political repression,

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<sup>1</sup> La Perla was the main clandestine center of extermination in the province of Córdoba. It functioned between 1976 and 1978 under the command of the III Corp of Army. During that period almost 2500 people were kidnapped and confined there. Most of them still missing.

<sup>2</sup> My mother was killed by the Army on July 1976 in Tucuman, when I was 9 months. My father reached to run away and survive hidden during 9 years. I was kidnapped by a cop who participated in the police operation where my mother was killed. My grand parents recovered me 3 months later. In 1997, I joined H.I.J.O.S. and I still participating in this organization until today. In 2011, the responsible of the killing of my mother were condemned to life imprisonment in a public trial.

the strategies to face and deal with mass Human Rights violations where multiple and diverse. So, I will approach the problem from the easiest option for me –also because is the only one that I know in depth-: the Argentinean case. From this vantage point, I will try to propose some comparisons with other countries, especially with Peru.

So, I want to pose three questions which will guide my presentation. First, I want to discuss the adequacy of some concepts as trauma to think about the suffering and damage caused by mass crimes. I mean: how do we understand the notions of trans-generational, of transmission, and trauma at large? Can we apply this concept to all the levels of understanding of suffering? Second, I want to bring this discussion to another level, putting in context the meaning of these terms and asking precisely which is the role of (political, social, cultural and historical) contexts in producing or reproducing trauma? Finally, a question about the strategies to deal with suffering: are they individual or social? What is the role of the social context in providing tools for sense making after a traumatic situation?

I will organize my statement in two or three topics: a) some reflections about trauma as concept, b) the need to put these concepts in (socially informed) contexts. Finally: the characteristics of transmission of traumatic experiences from one generation to another. And, again, the contextual, by which I mean: the role of moral judgment and formal justice processes in dealing with trauma and suffering.

### **About traumas and its contexts**

¿What is trauma? ¿In which symptoms do it manifest? ¿What is the relationship between trauma and memory?

From a psychological approach, trauma is the product of a damage that harms and leaves some traces and scars in the psyche. The symptoms are distress, impossibility to remember and talk about the situation that originated the trauma, and repetition of the painful situation in other acts or instances. These phenomenological evidences are notorious in people who were victimized, but ¿Can the term be extrapolated from individual psychology to the social field? ¿Can we talk about *social trauma* or should we think of trauma as an individual dimension of suffering, pluralize the term and talk about *traumas*?

I prefer to think about a plurality of trauma. I mean: *one* situation, a framing moment, a collective situation which produced *many* sufferings and traumas. Then, I think, what

these traumas mean depend on the ways in which violence stroked people and their possibilities to deal with it.

Let's begin from the context. In Argentina the analogy of the start of political repression with a blow (golpe de Estado, coup d'état) is suggestive. A slogan, in the '90s said: "The 'golpe' (coup, blow) struck all of us, and still hurts". But "el golpe" struck in different ways and hurt differently, too. Political repression has in Argentina (and I dare to affirm that for all the Southern Cone's dictatorships) certain characteristics which are central to understand the phenomena of trauma, the borders of the concept of damage, and the ways to deal with it in this context.

The production of repression and suffering as necropolitics were unequally administered by the state (and I'm drawing here from Mbembe's words). For this reason, the fact of "being affected" by the repression, was built and demarked as a characteristic of a specific group called: "terrorists" first, "directly affected" after, and finally -when the judiciary way to deal with the past started to dominate the interpretations about the dictatorship-: "victims". Also, even if there was a strong effort to name this period as a war, this case is very different from it. Wars affect the whole of society, the sense of time is changed or broken.

In Argentina, the quotidian wasn't interrupted by general violence but was selectively broken. There were no bombings or destroyed cities. There were no corps massively spread on the streets. Repression showed only a little bit (the kidnapping) and kept the rest hidden, producing a sinister effect. The sense of the normal course of life was dramatically broken for people who experimented their own disappearance or the disappearance of a loved one. While some people were missing, life continued with normality for many others. Even for a big part of the population, the period was especially safe and prosperous.

In short, the situation created an abysm between those for whom "something happened" and those for whom "nothing happened". The affected groups weren't small or a minority, but were intentionally separated from the rest of society by the mistrust, silence and fear created by the repressive politics and practices of the state. These groups remained isolated.

For the families of the victims, the capture of a member, and the absence of corps precluded mourning within the canons proscribed by society, religion and culture (Durkheim 2003). Life, uncertainty and death coexisted with diffuse limits. "They are

and they aren't at the same time”, said the dictator Videla when asked about the missing people at the time.

Characteristics of trauma, in this case, stress the individual and collective side of the problem. For many years, also the memories were divided in two polar sides: one, where people say that they never knew what was going on, that they never saw or, if they saw and knew, they justified it saying “there must be a reason...”. From the people who became victims of the regime, not only the loss was the painful, but also the solitude and the lack of social understanding and solidarity. They remember that period always with the same sentences: “Nobody knew us anymore.” “Nobody, neither our families, helped us anymore.” “They crossed the street to avoid greeting us. We were like the pest, the leprosy”. Most of the times, the characteristics of trauma, are closely related with this social impossibility to integrate the victims and deal collectively with their suffering.

So, is the traumatic just the torture, the disappearance of a love one, or also the reaction of the social context in face of those experiences? From my point of view, the kind of wound produced didn't depend only on the kind of damage inflicted, but the resources that groups (starting from families to other groups as human rights associations which were early conformed) provided to face the trauma and to change the frame of interpretation in the society at large.

Considering the already said, in my daily work with survivors the notion of trauma has been very useful for understanding and dealing with their individual suffering. Survivors of the concentration camps in Argentina started to transmit their experiences, specifically testifying, very early. But it was very hard because they were deeply stigmatized and talking about their experiences was a solitary process. They carried a heavy social condemnation: if so many people were killed, why were they still alive? They had (and still have) to give reasons for a survival that was inexplicable even for them. To be able to talk and find some relief, they had to search for the words to name this unprecedented and unimaginable experience, and turn it listenable to “normal people”.

When I started to work with them, I had to learn the meaning of silence. Silences were louder than words. With time, I also understood that silences are not only about trauma<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> As Elizabeth Jelin say, “By bringing into play a horror that has not been worked through subjectively, pain and its physical marks may impede the construction of a testimonial narrative. Traumatic suffering may deprive the victim of the resource of language. (...) But the ‘others’, those who listen, may also find

Political violence subdued the victims to situations that were embarrassing and cruel. The victims didn't choose that, but it broke their sense of moral continuity. How to talk with dignity about situations that were deeply humiliating? What is the impact on their identities when they assume their experiences and talk about them facing the look of others? Is talking about those situations, always, for all people, liberating as psychoanalytic theory suggest?

Sometimes, that which we name as trauma because it manifests as silence is a more complex phenomena: the wounded identity caused by the broken of *civilizing agreements*, generates in the person many moral emotions, especially shame and guilty (Elias 2001). The problem, more than strictly psychological, is how to come back from an inverted universe, where the rules learned during the course of your social life don't apply anymore.

The "unspeakable", thus, doesn't refer to a strict impossibility to talk, but a strategic silence to avoid the painful remembering or a moral judgment. The impossibility, most of the times, is not to talk about; but to find "loving and caring" frames of listening, as Carlos -a survivor- said to me.

To close this topic, I'll conclude that *limit situations*<sup>4</sup> (Pollak 2006), and in consequence the characteristics of trauma depend -to some extent- of the socio-historical contexts at hand and the possibilities they offer to deal with and make sense of the traumatic experiences. While pain is, according to Le Breton (1999), a universal sensation; suffering -that is, the meaning that pain finally has- is socio-historically framed. This, finally, gives particular characteristics and draws up the limits of trauma. I propose we need to understand how pain and suffering are produced in different contexts, for different genders, social classes, ethnic groups, generations. And the meanings they re-acquire in regards to some symbolic frameworks with universal significance as the notion of Human Rights.

## Legacies

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limits in their ability to comprehend that which is embodied in the corporal or subjective space of the sufferer." (Jelin 2003:74).

<sup>4</sup> I take the concept from the Austrian sociologist Michel Pollak who analyzes the experiences lived at the Nazis concentration camps and the ways in which the survivors deal with the experience. The author designates limit situation to experiences for which we didn't had been prepared, socialized, initiated. Those situations which force people to implement unprecedented strategies and which, due to its extreme characteristics, are good to understand situations that normally are veiled by de naturalized sense of world.

A few days ago, I was invited to participate in a discussion forum about violence in Peru and the concept of victim. The book to be discussed is titled “The ones who surrendered. About the gift of forgiving” by the Peruvian historian José Carlos Agüero. But, just starting, to read became hard.

I didn't know anything about Agüero, only his professional background, linked to a group of historians who work on Sendero Luminoso/ Shinning Path, and violence in Peru. And that was the shock. I was expecting an academic book and I found it. But it is one based on the early memories of the author himself: the child of a couple of militants of Shinning Path who were executed extra judiciary by the state. In the first page (after quoting one of my favorite poems by Roberto Juarroz about silence), the author says:

“You learn to live with the shame. To have a family which, for a part of society, is tainted by crimes, which is a *terrorist* family, is a material reality, as a chair, a table or a poem. Shame is being learned, lived in different ways. When you are a child, things are easier but also more hurtful (...) ¿Where are your parents? ¿In what do they work? These are not hard questions, there are not formulated in bad faith, but disturb and hurt, in a modest way.

“(…) Shame wasn't evident, there weren't red faces or sweaty hands or taunts. There was a feeling of being inferior which stained the days. You can't say the truth. And not being able to say the truth is something that diminishes your nobleness. ‘My parents are in prison.’ ‘My parents had been detained.’ ‘My parents are hidden.’ ‘My parents are dead.’ Explanations impossible to offer but that had brought relief. (...) Shame is not a feeling. It's something real. A reasonable mechanism. For that reason you can avoid it. (...) This shame doesn't need to be activated. It takes part of any thing you do and of the way in which you connect with the others. It has built itself for years. With any lie, silence, secret, with any excuse. With any tale or in the long moments of solitude.”

End of citation. Silence. Agüero continues with other topics. Betrayal. Guilt. Accountability. Stigma. All in first person.

Mirrors. I remember my own childhood. Silent and ashamed. I pretended certain normality at school. I avoided the question about my parents' old age (because they were in fact my grand parents). I pretended that the only one explanation about my

“real” parents was not an absurd. I believed the version. I convinced myself for necessity more than conviction: “my mother died in a car accident, my father is gone on a trip. He is in Peru, some day he will return”. In my imagination, Peru was a distant place, a faraway kingdom of sorts... But princesses or kings didn't live there, only monsters that didn't let my father come back to be with me. The tragedy of Agüero and my own tragedy converged in an imaginary place. Nightmares.

When I grew a little, I dared to ask. “Mom, what's the meaning of my name?”. “Your name honors Mariano Pujadas, he was a peer of your parents who was killed by the military, but don't say this to others” answered my grandmother, transformed in mother by force. No more questions, no more answers. “Just the enough”, always. Then, a tacit silence. To wear the marks of a secret identity. To live my name in divided ways: it was dangerous to reveal it to the world, but I was secretly proud of it.

As Agüero narrates in his book, you learn to live with secrets and ghosts. You never speak about them, because when you talk you put yourself at risk. All of us, the children of the victims, grew up listening some disturbing sentences: “it was a war, and your parents lost”, “they have done something to deserve what happened to them”, “your mother had a daughter. He didn't though about it? She didn't love you”... and we were unable to reply. Because the problem wasn't the verification of the fact: my mother was a guerrilla's member and she was killed. The problem was to make sense of the senseless of the accusation. “She have done something” was enough and satisfying for others, but not for me. It brought calm to people who were witness of the macabre scene of a young woman who was shouted with her baby in her arms and were able to justify it. But not for me, it didn't brought answers or relief, only impotence and sorrow.

“The children of terrorists don't have the right to big mourning manifestations. All, even the dead, take part of a common and obvious secret” Sais Agüero. I cried for exploded balloons, for lost toys, for Heidi, the orphaned girl on the TV cartoons. I cried many times facing these accusations clenching my fists, silent.

When I become older, in high-school, I never spoke about all this, it wasn't necessary. I was the “leftist”, the strange. My “secret” was shouted by my first name, by my choice of clothes, by my body. But I was still in silence, for shame, for fear of to be rejected. I was pretending to be normal. And failing. Definitely failing. Except with him, who was able to listen my story and also my silences. He was a little older than me. He was also “strange”. And he also had a secret. He was able to hug me and say “don't feel ashamed, don't feel guilty, your mother loved you”. To talk with that boy was my first

act to recovering the trust. And the truth. To be able to speak of the true story, to recover the dignity of trusting others.

When I joined H.I.J.O.S, the human rights organization that I still belong to, these dialogues were, fortunately, multiplied. At this point my story and that of Agüero's take different paths. The organization gave me not only the possibility to share my personal tragedy, but also to re-signify it. To make flowers from the sorrows.

Violence is destructive and productive (and I say this without any weight, only as a fact). It produced, performed us as victims and our traumas, but it also produced reaction, organization, renewed senses of justice and struggle. Because, in each individual process we needed also to re-signify, and this implies re-ordering a sense of social responsibility. "Children shouldn't inherit the guilt from their parents. –I quote Agüero, again- It's unfair. But they do. Because justice is just a word that needs to be built into any human contact".

### **Seeking for a conclusion**

I have no definitive conclusion, perhaps even more questions than before. I have developed and tried to support empirically the idea that trauma is not to be understood only as the suffering and the symptoms that repeat themselves in the daily lives of the victims. I propose that trauma also has to do with the presence or absence of groups which contains the victims or, in a broader sense, trauma has to do with the ability of a society to generate the frames that allow for the re-signification of the broken sense of the world that tragedy leaves behind.

But, as suggested along this entire presentation, collectively the problem is even larger. What do we have to do with the perpetrators? How do go ahead together? How to re-fund a society after these crimes? Towards the end of the last section, I mentioned the problem of justice. Beyond the particularities of national contexts, I found many coincidences with the memories and reflections of José Carlos Agüero. Some universal senses of tragedy go through our stories in identical reflexes. But the difference is posed precisely on the issue of justice.

In many countries, the victims' demands for justice (and I want to mean punishment) facing the crimes committed by the state are interpreted as need of revenge, as anger. In another cases, even the indignation is impossible, as in the case related by Agüero and many other. The Argentinean case is different; we reached formal justice and



condemnation. But the similarities with the years of impunity and the strong contrast that supposes to renew the trials in comparison with other contexts, permits to deconstruct some naturalized premises.

Coming back to one or our central questions, I want to include in the discussion another central concept more directly related with trauma and damage: reparation. Many times, in societies that opted for the impunity, the imperative is reparation. But ¿Which is the way in which states and societies have to repair the damage caused by mass crimes? ¿Truth? ¿Money? ¿Monuments? And the list could infinitely continue... also the combinations are infinite ¿How to repair the irreparable? We can't come back many times, give back the years in jail, the impossibility to grow with your family. We can't fix the death. But –regarding the past- we can take the opportunity to think in what way we want to re-order our societies. It means what power relationships we want to transform or perpetuate, what lines we want to trace between right and wrong, forbidden and permitted.

Beyond the historical processes of any country, I think impunity, at individual level, forces the victims to find individual ways to deal with suffering, to choose between reconciliation or revenge, to heal, and/or to put forward their own interpretations of history. At a social level, impunity makes it difficult to establish collective parameters to define what crimes are, Human Rights or even democracy mean, risking the guarantee of non repetition.

Only when all the community reaches to equal itself over the law and understand the condemnation of the criminal acts are clear in ideas and in facts, we can start to have common parameters to talk, even among the former enemies. Because within the frame of these agreements we are equal and can be diverse at the same time.

Thank you.

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