

NARCISSISTIC SUFFERING-BORNE SUBJECTIVITY WITHIN A CULTURE TEEMING WITH THE TRIVIALITY OF EVIL

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ABSTRACT.

Within the context of historicity, subjectivity needs to be placed in the stage of civilization in which it is being built so that it may be wholly understood. This is especially true in the representation of human practice embedded in the cultural movement (cultural ethos). Complicity in the relationship between subjectivity and culture (Adorno) requires that subjectivity in this dialectic mode would bear a certain type of social organization. At present people are under a deep escalation of injustice and social exclusion propagated by the violence of high competition, feigned by 'hero cult' (Caniato, 2000). Individualism thrusts people towards subjective culpability (Freud, *El malestar en la cultura*) and subservience to the status quo. Although it is built on hierarchy, possible inclusion occurs within the consuming context. This is precisely the point in which the standardization of individuals takes place (cultural industry) in the shape of real 'death masks' (Adorno). Carlos Drummond de Andrade's poem 'Eu etiqueta' (I label) remarkably shows the truly bad effects of alluring 'idealizing' appeals that integrate the narcissistic image of a style of life which pervades predominant identifying models (Lowen, 1993). Psychic and social suffering structures itself as subjective impotence, apathy and conformity (Dejours, 2000). The "triviality of evil" (H. Arendt, 2000) imposes itself as high reaching tolerance and great worthiness, albeit with minimal survival.

Key words: cultural industry; triviality of evil; narcissistic suffering.

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An ethical and political approach of human suffering

My love is precious to me and I do not have the right to give it without any true reason. It imposes on me certain duties that I need comply even with great sacrifice. If I love someone, he should be worth it under any circumstance. [...] He is worthy of my love if he is like me in many aspects, to the point that loving him I love myself; he is worthy if he is more perfect than I am, since loving him means loving my own ideals; I would love him as if he were the son of my friend: if something happens to him, my friend's suffering will be mine and I ought to share it. On the other hand, if he is an unknown person and if his qualities fail to appeal to me, it would be very difficult to love him. It would even be unjust to love him since my friends appreciate my love as a demonstration of preference and it would be strange to put them on the same plane with a stranger (Freud, 1981, p. 3044).

The above enunciation may be understood as a type of clinical concern within the process of subject construction in so far as it is crisscrossed by the vicissitudes of inhabiting a certain social order under whose aegis the production of knowledge is organized.

When one perceives that the fragmentation of theory and of psychological practice in distinct areas is still extant within the construction of the history of Psychology in Brazil, when the privatization-prison in psychological knowledge is institutionalized, when such compartmentalization is sanctioned in professional specialties, I would rather identify myself with those few clinical psychologists that deal with the problem of subjectivity in a contextual way. Or rather, from a Freudian-Marxist understanding of man as a highly social being.

Human suffering will be approached from the vantage point of Freud's *El Malestar em la Cultura* (1981), which identifies contemporary sores experienced by subjects in their approach to culture. Culture is actually analyzed from certain aspects of the social constitution under which subjectivities are profoundly affected. In fact, they are more or less subtle expressions of social violence. As a result harm become rife when violence is internalized by the subjects (unconscious feeling of culpability) and as such administers the individuals' relation modes. Further, we will analyze the mediation between subjectivity and culture based on the concept of cultural industry given by Adorno (1985). By

penetrating into the inner world of the subjects, we may detect the subjective processes triggered by the internalization of society's violence-loaded ideologies and their function in maintaining an authoritarian status quo.

Our analysis takes us into an in-depth study to understand subjectivity ridden by social violence, a theme I have developed in my doctoral thesis entitled "Unacknowledged History: Violence and Citizenship from a Psycho-Political Approach" (1995). The subjects were former political prisoners from the 1964-1984 Military Dictatorship in Brazil. Social violence leading towards human suffering has been the theme of several institutional research monographs (PIBIC), supported by the National Council for Research (CNPq). Research article "Psycho-social matrixes of present day human suffering" (2002) by Michele Aparecida de Castro, a Psychology undergraduate, has been supervised by the present author. The communication "Time for the spectacle of perversity: the imprisonment of subjectivity in reality shows" read by undergraduate Laura Hauser and doctoral candidate Regina Perez Christofolli Abeche, at the Third Latin American Meeting of the State of Psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires in November 2002, is also worth mentioning.

It is expected that the dialectic tension between subjectivity and culture will be highlighted. Likewise it is expected that the subjectivity approach based on the psychoanalytic concepts of projective and introjective identifications and on the Freudian sentiment of unconscious culpability through the interference of internalized social violence would be clarified in the forthcoming discussion. The present author shuns all dogmatic pretension and bad faith in the attribution of immanence to actual statements on the death instinct which will not be dealt with in a naturalized and non-contextualized way (Freud, S., *El Malestar de la Cultura*, 1981).

Subjectivity-culture dialectics in the comprehension of internalized social violence

Within the process in understanding human suffering/happiness, I would like to base myself on a growing number of psychoanalysts that study the relational and social perspective of human beings. René Kaës (1991) states:

When Freud rightly displaced an emphasis on fantasy, he did not abandon the concept of the historicity of events and their fate in the psychic life. [...] [On the contrary, the omission of history by psychoanalysts] will transform the analyst into an ACCOMPLICE of a second murder. This occurs when the historical scene is coupled to the fantasy scene without a correct identification of the psychic and social matrix of violence (pp. 140-141).

My insertion within the psycho-politics of Adorno's Critical Theory lies in my effort and concern to subvert this schism in the human being. Actually the human being is intrinsically one. My research, my concern, my theoretical systematization ought to be understood within the context of my formation as a psychologist. From the time of my graduation I have been receiving psychoanalytic updating that has undergone important ruptures and reorganizations from the point of view of clinical and academic practice. I have also been extremely aware of and receptive to day-to-day experience, which reveals doubts that require promptness and discriminatory reflections.

I am therefore more concerned in the understanding of subjectivity and in searching the subjects' inner living rather than in a simple rational explanation of their lives. If there exists a rationality to be search at the individuals' subjective plane, it is certainly neither the rationality of conscious and voluntary acts nor that of premeditated acts. I am searching those activities which, although originating from the subjects, are determined not merely by deliberate acts of the conscience but are subjected to the unconscious's motivation. They are also the object of interference of society's irrational ideologies, of cultural habits and mores of an authoritarian, violent, excluding and unjust society. Iray Carone (1991) says:

Political Psychology is derived from the premise that subjectivity and society, as historical polarities, are mutually reciprocal. If one polarity is separated from the other, the understanding of the political process fails, since the subject and the object are mutually mediated. If the dialectic tension in the analysis of facts and political processes is maintained, there is no risk in psychologizing or objectifying them by economical categories (p. 113).

The concept of cultural industry as described by Adorno (1985) and the revision of Psychoanalysis undertaken by himself and by other members of the Frankfurt School in *Teoría Crítica del Sujeto* (1986) taught me that

besides being a founding process of conscience and not simply something install in it, ideology works at the unconscious level, in the true meaning of the word. It does not merely hide data of every day reality but represses them, and prepares them to return to the conscience, even though under ideological shapes. In these conditions the development of conscience through a reflexive contact with reality is always a painful process, as civilization is from the Freudian point of view. The process is difficult to be borne by people whose personality structure has been formed to reproduce heteronymy and to escape from any effort to face different and new challenges (Cohn, apud Caniato, 1995, p. 253).

Pondering on the above statements, I would like to cite the doctrine formulated by Iray Carone (1991):

Ideologies are determined in society; the subject's ideological systems (opinions, attitudes and values) are organized by irrational motivations whose organization forms more or less stable psychic structures. Ideology as a social phenomenon and internalization and fixation in the subject's personality structure are two distinct things. The so-called 'ideological options' of the subject has a reasoning which reason fails to acknowledge (...) (p. 115).

On the other hand, I am aware that human existence is constructed for the historical task (a praxis based on commitment and duty) of building life in society with an aim at individual and collective happiness. It is man's vocation to be a subject, protecting himself and others by institutions that would harbor him and harbor those different from the self, while avoiding in the best possible way suffering and psychosocial illness (Freud, *El Malestar en la Cultura*, 1981).

Doubtlessly such a perspective is founded on utopic ethical principles since the historical development of human relationship tends towards the escalation of social violence (Bauman, 1998) and the displacement of man from human community (Arendt, 1978). The sciences, especially Psychology, have indeed failed in their promise to bring happiness to man (Sawaia, 1995).

Tribute to psychic immanence, or the ostrich's vantage view (Caniato, 1999), is prevalent in the theory and practice of Clinical psychology. It actually hinders professional people to cooperate with their clients in understanding life's disruptive and perverse conditions. The latter are thus maintained paralyzed and

impotent for efficacious defensive and transforming activities in the wake of helplessness, poverty and mutilating oppression to which one and all are exposed.

This is not the appropriate time to deepen our analysis on such an epistemological matrix. It is however proper to remark that, besides psychic intimacy and its development in isolation, in the negation of otherness and in the impossibility of exchange between different individuals (Mendolowics, 2001), this perspective is enlightened and crisscrossed by theorizations accumulated by different areas in psychological productions (Figueiredo, 1995). It has brought forth practices concerning serious ethical and political implications already identified by Political Psychology and by psychoanalysts (Vianna, 1994). Interventions coupled to theorizations which neglect the identification and the analysis of the socially disruptive elements in the structuring of subjectivities (Adorno, 1986a; Guinsberg, 2001) deepen more and more the concrete conditions of the human mode of living. This happens without the requirement of psychosocial integrity being identified so that people could exercise their role as historical subjects and corroborate in the changes within cultural institutions and within social organizations that would make the preservation of human life feasible (Mariotti, 2000). There is no doubt whatsoever that capital is the supreme lord of contemporary society (Carone, 1991).

With the above statements in the background, it is sufficient to mention how the psychologists' ingenuous or intentional contribution is being appropriated and placed at the service of mass culture. Mass culture has become the place where oppressive and excluding social relationships occur in contemporary globalized society (Matin & Schumann, 1999). Devaluation of human life is constantly on the increase by the fetishism of mass consumption (Sennett, 2001) that benefits from a misuse of technology. It is also justified by an alienating fatalism attributed to oppressed peoples, as Martín Baró (1987;1989) has foreseen.

No shame is experienced in the employment of psychological science at the service of culpability and criminalization of individuals, groups or even peoples (Dejours, 2000; Caniato, 2000) to justify and legitimate the extermination of large sections of humanity driven towards exclusion and misery (Baumann, 1999) or destroyed by spectacular displays of bombs, missiles and other weapons of mass destruction (Chomsky, 2002). Mass media highlights and legitimates shamelessly and under the guise of technological morality (Baumann, 1998) these acts as a

proof of good prevailing over evil. It even puts brethren into the mortal fray with the indifference and the consent of many with regard to the crude barbarianism that extends itself beyond the screen. Novel moral values are thus established and pervade human life while these savage acts are understood to be normal within social living.

In fact, war activities do not cause any commotion or indignation anymore. There is rather a great indifference towards the offenders and the offended alike. These highly trivialized acts continue to spawn horror, even in an unconscious way, within human relations. Horror actually installs itself in the subjectivity of people who become accomplices of such disruptive actions.

The Holocaust and barbarianism persist in more and more invisible forms of violence (Dejours, 1999) and embody themselves in cruelty-bearing social practices – the culture of suffering (Ulloa, 2001a) – from which trade unions and revolutionary leftist groups are not exempted. In fact, many authors, including Frei Beto (2002), have warned us about this. We may end this brutality-laden paragraph with a poetic verse by psychoanalyst Ulloa (2001b), that says: “Cruelty is caused by the failure of another factor, a cultural factor, namely, tenderness (p. 1).

In the miserliness age (Mariotti, 2000) the dichotomization of men between the good and the terror-spreading evil others (terrorists) becomes world wide and hide the financial motivations, now turned into a fetish, to justify war acts. In fact, the former are the true terrorists who legitimate themselves by calling themselves defenders and protectors of humanity (Chomsky, 2002). On the other hand, collective compliance and the indifference of individuals and groups in the wake of such cruelty between humans are supported by the apathy of all. As everybody knows, apathy is a companion of hate that extends itself stealthily through the social texture. Such relationship is only possible because it is supported by the trivialization of evil (Arendt, 2000). The social valorization of violence is worsened by the permission to destroy, without any qualm of conscience; it is made easier and amplified by the distance factor caused by technology. The social protagonists are exempt from any responsibility from their violent or even lethal acts of violence since they do not directly participate in the effects. Aggressors and victims will stay cool in front of their PC screens until Internet gang fighters invade town space and start direct confrontations. In selected geographical spaces a few individuals

detonate war instruments at the merely click of a keyboard and with perfect precision trigger hundreds of missiles and bombs. When a few soldiers reach the battlefield to fly the flag of victory, dead people abound. International treaties dealing with the protection of civilians during war have been disrespected in the name of “technical error”. Bauman (1998) gives the name ‘technology morality’ the technical facility to amplify and diffuse violence and barbarianism without any social or individual blame. Life in society is being increasingly determined by bureaucratic abstract and hierarchic rules by which authority is emptied and dissolved. Since this type of authority is non-individualized, impunity is admitted as a distributive basis for privileges and sanctions (Baumann, 1998; Caniato, 1999).

The spectacle of perversity on which suffering is built by the imprisonment of subjectivity (Abeche et al. 2002) is not restricted to the media. It must be analyzed within the ideological inversion that trivializes violence and mystifies consumption. With this aim in view, it restricts and confines all. Everybody is actually indiscriminately controlled and punished. The friend/enemy logic is installed; in fact, all are forced to inhabit it. Strategically they enter the stage to show themselves with glamour, stripping themselves of everything (a priori contaminated by suspicion) that is theirs.

This evil ideological inversion destroys solidary communitarian life, now replaced by compliance to malignity, attributed to certain individuals, groups and peoples. It seems that the only haven is to return to the inner forum which is already the seat of internalized brutal violence. What impresses most is that different arrangements of the social danger attributions are not embodied by individuals (Coimbra, 2001) to defend themselves and others in the face of experienced social oppression and violence. Attributions are simply embodied and their true original identities substituted. The subjects fail to identify the real source of danger, threats and social violence when they start fighting against themselves. They are incapable of shunning the indignation that would lead them to repudiate these attributions. They are not daunted by defamation and fail to unite themselves to their peers in collective acts for their psychosocial preservation. They fail to use their aggressiveness to protect their lives and succumb to apathy and conformism because of internalized social violence (Freud – *El Malestar en la Cultura*, 1981). The aggressiveness used for ego strengthening and for the preservation of individual and collective life succumbs to more social repression.

The corrosion of self-inflicting punishment (leading towards the weakening of all desiring, affective and cognitive structure of the subject) is re-introjected in subjectivity. The latter is overburdened by individualizing accusations and responsibilities with regard to all cultural waywardness which have its model in the very ethical and political organization of contemporary society. The social origin of violence against all that is human in man (Caniato & Castro, 2002) lies hidden in culpability (Freud, 1981). Sadomasochist ties are necessarily stimulated and accepted: everything that offends the subject and is cruel to him is accepted. Since the effective identification of the true enemy or aggressor is not processed, citizenship breaks down under such authoritarian perversity. The relation process reminds one of the concept of identification with the aggressor (Freud, 1978), a very common survival strategy in tortured persons threatened by imminent death.

Perversity in the internalization of these social attributes of evil (internalized social violence) is diffuse and antagonistic, especially when the functions of the ego in discriminating the real enemy/aggressor break down. These ideologically perverted representations, moved over to the individuals' inner life and subconscious, pervade the subjects' psychic life, administer his desires, feelings, thoughts and actions to the point of making the subjects cooperators/accomplices of the social cruelty that tortures them.

The repression-maintained destructive power of internalized social violence may take different roads. One may be the externalization of individual or group vandalism through cathartic acts. Individuals revenge themselves because of the violence they have experienced. These acts will give them a temporary relief and the illusion of victory against the oppressor. They also confirm and legitimate the danger attributions previously fixed to these individuals and which will throw them into the grips of the police. Worse still, the application of different forms of more or less overt social coercion against these individuals is justified (Caniato et al., 2003). Another sort of repressed violence occurs when they are forced to bear in silence the vilest types of suffering, whereas indifference to pain is justified under the pretense that they possess higher human attributes (Adorno, 1986a) which are necessary for the conquest of fame and success (Abeche et al., 2002). Such corrosive types of violence do not end within the range of subjective innerness – in the pleasure of licking one's wounds –; rather, these atrocities penetrate in interpersonal links in such a way that the person who is harsh with himself has the

right to be harsh with others. He revenges the pain that he could not demonstrate and which he had to repress. One has to be aware of this type of mechanism; likewise, pain and the ability to bear it should never be rewarded (Adorno, 1986a, p. 39).

There is no exaggeration in agreeing with Adorno (1985) (since it may be easily proved) that in mass consumer society subjectivities are being produced in series (standardization). The sovereign individual, emptied of the vital elements of his inner world, projected in the omnipotence/impotence of a god as prosthesis, and extant only in the deceptive discourse of individualism, does not exist (p. 3034). In fact, there is a deliberately produced impossibility so that the individual may not become a unique being (pseudo-individualization). Identification models are fabricated in the wake of a perverse and imposed destructibility. They represent the social values necessary for the maintenance of the status quo. These ideologized representations, filled with meaning and glamour (allurement), are internalized. In fact, they penetrate the core of the subjects' inner world to empty the individual of what is unique and peculiar to him. One's own desire, feelings and thoughts are destroyed under the violating manipulations of the cultural industry. Only a 'death mask' remains (Adorno 1986c, p. 87). In the poetic language of Drummond de Andrade subjectivities are modeled to carry the naming of commodities. Psychic innerness is replaced by the 'I label'.

This boils down to the fact that life is no longer supported, as if in its own locus, in single individuals or in interchanges between them. Individualities and relationships are no longer managed by the inner world of real and unique individuals. Degeneracy pervades the psychic structure of individuals and predominates in all subjects. The latter are no longer vivified by Eros's life-giving force. Fragmented subjects do not curve themselves to idealized libidinous allurements of another human being, even though he is a tyrant, as Freud conceived in *Psicología de las masas* in 1921 (1948). We are all crawling in search of an object in which we will deposit our libidinal investments in the fulfillment of our desires. Dictatorship is the tyranny of commodities that promises a satisfaction which will never be fulfilled. It would be interesting that, supported on non-fulfillment and compulsive search of new pleasure objects, the human being awakes to the narcissistic perversity of direct links with or in replacements of

another human being that individuals displace to commodities. Baumann (1999) has warned:

Consumers should never rest; consequently their capacity is enhanced. They should be kept awake and vigilant. They should be kept continuously exposed to new temptations in an unceasing state of excitement and also in a state of everlasting suspicion and non-satisfaction. The allurements that deviate their attention should confirm their suspicions and promise a way out of the non-satisfaction. Have you not seen all? You haven't seen anything yet! (pp. 92-93).

If the public space for exchange, living together and welcome does not exist, if the only viable citizenship is the citizenship of the subjugation of subjectivities to evil attributes, to vigilance and to more or less covert confinement (Abeche et al., 2002), what can be made out of the private life under such diverse and violating invasive forces in which genital sexual pleasure is no longer possible without the limelight. Or rather, without the presence of other social protagonists, different from the couple concerned, and without the presence of actors in erotic films? And all this is done under the aegis and the pretext of "the production of exciting fantasies!" (Freud, 1981, p. 3044) Suspicion, threats, fear and impotence dominate the subjects' private life. Even thought needs a certain degree of solitude and retirement, as Piera Aulagnier (apud Costa, 1999) states:

the right to keep a secret is the right to think. The meaning of identity mostly derives from our ability to speak to, when to speak and how to speak to people on determined occasions. When thought comes at random and its course is lost, the falling apart of the individuality occurs (p. 17).

What is really under construction is not the uniqueness but the loss of individual identity in the osmotic symbiosis, under the indifference of another and in/through the other, of a regressive non-delimitation of the self and the non-self, of the dissolution of subjects by horror and by the feeling of rejection in a sterile homogenization, of non-belonging and non-differentiation of living of an ethereal embodied in commodities, of singularities exposed to social violence, internalized and transformed into disruptive accusations in culpability. Where is the way out from such a cruel irrational darkness in which human life is immersed within so-called contemporary civilization or barbarianism?

Alienating implications of ethical and political neglect in psi practices

When we neglect heteronymous (social) determinations of the subject's pain, suffering and illness, either through ingenuity or through blindness (as a result of the doctrine of neutral scientific politics), we fall into the trap of psychic immanence. We become accomplices with the massacres that civilizing process produces against the demands of the subjects' humaneness. The theoretical and practical refuge in immanence, centered on the belief that the beginning and end of all psychic processes lie in the subjects' inner world (subjectivities become monads closed within themselves and incommunicable among themselves) merely legitimate the destruction of individual and collective life. It also justifies the impossibility of exchange among different factors and maintains the narcissistic displacement towards a socially imposed mode of life (Lowen, 1993) in which intercourse between different alterities becomes impossible. Sennett (1993) denominates tyranny of intimacy the process of the collectivity's destruction, the confinement of psychic life to pure interiority (exacerbated individualism) and the transposition and attachment of human links to impatient libidinous investments towards things.

It is incorrect to think that it is possible to build the happiness of individuals if we maintain such a minimalist perspective that prohibits affective exchange between subjects and the sharing of desires and ideas. Under the tyranny of intimacy they follow logic of the individualism of segregation, solitude, competition, panic, while amorous and solidarity exchanges between human beings are substituted. As Bader (1999) says:

[...] the general happiness is different from pleasure and frolic. The latter consists of contingent immediate emotions that Heller defines as pain, circumscribed to the moment of their occurrence. They are flashes throughout ethical and political suffering, without any change in quality [...]. Everyone is happy when vindications are successful. However not all feel the general happiness. This is only experienced by those who feel the victory as the success of citizenship (solidary, loving and tender living between human beings), as an emancipation of the self and that of others. It is not limited to circumscribed material objects. The

ethical and political happiness is felt *when individualism and corporate action are surpassed and the way is opened for humanity* (p. 105, my italics).

It is fallacious to try to build happiness for and among humans if we fail to change our ideas and practices of what is being-a-unique-individual. The building of a new order in social relations is fallacious if we do not abandon our shared cruel deeds when we consent unconsciously and silently to individualist innerness. The wisdom of Marx and Freud, before whom it is worthwhile bowing, is amalgamated in the concept of man as a dependent and support-requiring being. From this vantage point one may have the courage to think and act so that a new form of being-a-unique-individual is made feasible. The being-a-unique-individual will thus inhabit a world with new organizational laws of community life. In other words, the individual recovers his dignity as subject and the meaning of alterity so that the being-a-citizen is effectively fulfilled. We may say that

the reference to suffering and ethical-political happiness is the denial of narcissistic affectivity at the end of the millennium. It brings us back to the socialist utopia of the beginning of the 19th century. It had the meaning of searching for another type of conflict between reason and emotion, between the individual and the community, between desire and duty. As a guarantee of the link threatened by cold reason, the right to happiness, whose fulfillment supervises the desires and multiple emotions, will become the measuring rod by which one judges a policy that sacrifices the just and highlights the efficient; which sees mortal peril in the multiplicity of human beings and not an unexplored potentiality of non-fulfilled social possibilities (Sawaia, 1999, p. 106 – with quotes from Vanikas, 1997, p. 63).

Undoubtedly the way out of the fragmentation of knowledge, as understood above, is a utopia based on the hope that the inner and compartmentalized dimension of the psychological knowledge-action will be ruptured. In such a change there is no place for almightiness, so familiar to psychologists, nor for impotence of their clients-victims, nor for the maintenance of servility when we search for the valuable intentionality or the ethical recovery of lost totality of the being-a-human in the theorizations and practices of Psychology. We should take into account man's biological determination without curving in a reductional way to important advances in genetics. We require some sort of rebelliousness so that we

may appropriate ourselves with desire, feelings, thoughts and acts of human psychology. Our collaboration will be its reorientation for the 'world of life'. We will cooperate in the recovery of its practice as a historical subject. We will help it in its mission in constructing links with the other-different-from-self. Contemporary narcissistic symbiosis of violent, excluding and unjust social order we live in will be ruptured. We have to be fearless since we know how to face reactions when we ally ourselves to our praxis so that true citizen subjectivity may be recovered (Caniato et al., 2003).

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