

Acts of Violence and their Reverberations*

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The author deals with a very challenging subject: the mental state of a couple compelled to confess under torture during the last Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985). This case is presented from the point of view of the therapist—a viewpoint which is informed by second order cybernetics. I describe the way I as therapist resonated with the problems of this couple, my way of intervening, and the way in which my intervention resonated in the patients, allowing a shift in perceptions. Finally, I identify some difficulties in repairing the social network destroyed by the dictatorship.

Language which we all share and which is creative, is not neutral, nor does it pretend to be; the human voice is neither an echo nor does it sound for the sake of sounding (Galeano, 1994: 5).

In this century, a crucial shift has taken place in our understanding of human relationships. We now know that being human means that we cannot gain access to a reality independent of the observer and of his/her observation. According to second order cybernetics, we therapists are participant observers whose position lies at the interface between our being and what comes as an input to our senses. Between each family or couple and each therapist is a unique bridge which joins them and also brings with it the risk of mutually reinforcing one another's worldviews. This typically human interplay between what we share and what we do not share is central to therapeutic work. Knowing this, we can discover new meanings.

Some time ago, I began writing a story about my Russian family. That made me question myself, and find out about the Russian Revolution, Stalinism, etc. I realised I had to take my time in doing so, because there was much which had been silenced and what I started finding out was painful. I needed to do it little by little, very gently. To take everything at a time would have been absolutely unbearable.

I read an interview given by two 'officers' of FUSNA (torture centre during the dictatorship) which was published in the Uruguayan magazine *Posdata*. The interview reported several cases of people who 'squealed' (gave information). I thought to myself, 'I wish these people could have started a new life somewhere else'. This revived in me old fears, and memories of the terror and torture in the dark days of the dictatorship.

We have no guaranteed right to tell, hear and know the truth about such acts of violence. Dictatorships impose terror with impunity. There is no room in them for what appears to be different, which is felt as a threat and therefore must be repressed or destroyed for the safety of the system. Since the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985) collapsed, we have lived in a democratic system under the rule of law, but these stories about suffering under the dictatorship have not been restored to the heart of the society. Even though the truths are known, they remain unspoken, hidden. We do not forget but we do not think about the subject either.

Inés calls me to request couple therapy. She is separated from her husband. One of my patients has given her my telephone number. On the day Inés and her ex-husband Nicolás have arranged to come, they cancel the appointment. Ten days later, Nicolás calls me and says:

'I'm Inés' ex-husband. I am calling you to arrange an appointment.'

Nicolás arrives a few minutes early. It is already night, my last session of the day. Inés arrives with tears in her eyes. They sit down apart, facing each other. The room seems crowded.

Inés: When I told my brother I was going to start couple therapy, he asked me who the therapist was. He told me that you went into exile. So did I.

I'm going to say the reason why I came here. I'm worried about my two children, Lucía and Eduardo. Lucía is seven years old and doesn't know about some of the things we went through here, in Uruguay. Eduardo is twenty-three years old; he went with me into exile. I've been in prison and so has Nicolás. I turned informer.

Nicolás: Me too.

Inés: I felt like shit afterwards, but not so much when I knew that he had also become an informer. We were arrested and sent to the same torture centre. Eduardo was two years old when we were caught. A woman soldier asked me: 'What do we do with him?' I asked for a telephone directory, looked up the address of some relatives, and asked her to send him there. And they did. He could have been another missing person.

All three of them could have been missing persons ...

'Squeal' and 'inform' are expressions which accuse, judge. But we must not resort to the same kind of punishment the aggressors resorted to. So, instead of

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'squeal', or 'inform', we suggest that clients say they were 'compelled to confess under torture'.

Gil says (1990: 6):

In order to achieve submission and psychic destruction, the torture system seeks to produce a body that aches in its most minute parts. The aim is to turn the tortured person into a machine and to use this as an example in order to reinforce the lessons of fear to people in general. Confession is not the aim. Confession is proof that they have succeeded in remodelling another individual. Now, he/she is at the mercy of the torturer's purposes. But, even those who confessed were not able to be remade.

Galeano (1994: 5) says:

The last days of the military dictatorships in Argentina and Uruguay were already passing. We had had fear for breakfast, fear for lunch, and at dinner, fear too, but they had not succeeded in turning us into people like them.

I was feeling deeply moved as I listened to Inés. These issues overwhelm us, invade us, transcend us. At first, we react with our heart, with our gut. When a violent social context bursts into the consulting room, it prevents us from thinking. Life, dignity, human rights are at stake. We find difficulty in pulling ourselves together when all we want is to get out, to know nothing further. When the social context is the same for clients and therapist, it produces the same fears, anxieties and worries in each. Those are the Superimposed Worlds (Puget, 1991: 8). In these situations, the therapist is suddenly and traumatically led to think about his/her own situation and concerns as a social being, since s/he shares the same social context as the client. So, the client tells his/her experience during the dictatorship (which they both went through) and the therapist thinks about him/herself and his/her own experience, suffering a moment of confusion between his/her feelings and those of the client.

There is insufficient psychic distance and time for the therapist to recognise what s/he and the client have in common, how s/he and the client are different. The therapist is *involved*. Neutrality is not possible. What is the role and place of the therapist here? How does theory translate itself into practice in this case? Theories are not enough. The therapeutic task is to restore a sort of flow in order that the client's experience can be re-framed.

Panic is right there in the room. The effects of torture are brought back by the words the clients use.

We have to respect their silence, they need their own time to pull themselves together, to talk, to think. It has taken Inés and Nicolás twenty-five years to think about the possibility of couple therapy.

Inés: At one point, they put pressure on me by saying that my little son was in one of the rooms next door. They also left at the door the list of those who had 'squealed'. After being in prison, I went into exile and that is where the second part of my torment started. I was accused of having been an informer, which made my political organisation isolate me completely. There was only one person who helped me, and that person is now on the verge of suicide or psychiatric hospitalisation.

I wonder what would it be like to be burdened by such a story.

In Uruguay, the therapeutic environment appears to be the only possible space where such a couple can talk about and work on what has happened. In the aftermath of torture there is a social 'black hole', which ethically involves us and makes us responsible. A totally abusive human situation, deliberately created by the torturers, affects our basic certainties. It ruptures our sense of belonging to humankind. We would rather not feel that those who do such things belong to our species. We feel guilty and responsible because we are all implicated. We cannot avoid knowing that a perverted relational setting has made the violation of human rights possible. It is not pleasant to admit to the evil side of our human nature. But it seems necessary to recognise our potential for evil. Recognising or identifying with the victims is simple, but it is not pleasant to think that given a certain process, you or I could be the violent ones, the violators, the torturers. The potential for evil is within each one of us. We shall never know what we would be capable of doing when faced with a life-or-death situation and/or in order to save our own lives.

Nicolás: Inés went through more than I did. She went through more in exile than I went through in prison. When I was in prison, I was ignored by the other prisoners because I had 'squealed'. I'd also like to say why I came here. I'd like to see whether there is something we can do about our relationship. I still love Inés. I care about the kids.

It seems trivial to talk about the children or the couple's relationship.

Inés: We met each other before all this happened. We've had problems in our relationship since then.

Therapist: How did you meet? What was it that you liked about each other?

Nicolás: Inés was beautiful.

Inés: I admired everything about Nicolás. I think that before we were caught, we made a very good couple. Both of us together gave things to Eduardo, but we haven't been able to do that for Lucía. We haven't had sex for a long time. In exile I had another relationship. I think that he and Eduardo were my only reasons for going on living. But that was while I thought that Nicolás was either going to leave prison or had died. When the dictatorship collapsed, which was something I wasn't expecting, I came back without thinking very much about it. Now I have a new relationship, but I'm not happy either. I think that my relationship with Nicolás can't be salvaged. Nicolás is a manipulator, every time he feels he is losing me, he does something to try to keep me, but I feel he doesn't love me, and I've been very much alone. Last year, I tried to kill myself and he wasn't there. Now, we've been separated for a few months.

Nicolás: I haven't been telling the whole truth, I thought I had come here to clarify the status of our separation. We are not married and we wouldn't like to appear in court.

They do not want to get involved with the law. How could they trust in a legal system which was warped and could be warped again?

Inés: I'm very bitter too. We've done a lot of harm to each other.

The family structure as well as the structure of the couple's relationship have been most vulnerable to this sort of violence. The life of this couple, like the lives of all those who have gone through a similar experience, has been definitively altered by torture and prison. They will never be the same, nor will their relationship be as it used to be. One might ask, is the problem to *rebuild* this relationship, or to *build* it?

The therapeutic task is to help the clients see how *unnatural* are the memories of violence and the torturer, who is always present like a ghost among them. They idealise their pre-dictatorship relationship as genuine, complete and unique, but it has turned into a distressing, mutually violent relationship. They cannot feel good, either together or apart. Therapeutic work should contribute to the knowledge of truth, and to the creation of fairer and less destructive relationships among human beings.

Galeano (1994: 5) says:

Indeed, no matter how hurt and violated one might be, one can always find contemporaries in any period of time and fellow countrymen at any place of the world. And every time such a thing happens, and while it lasts, one is lucky enough to feel that one is *something* in the infinite loneliness of the universe, something more than a ludicrous particle of dust, something more than a brief tiny moment.

I read to the clients the paper you are now reading since they wanted to know about it. While I was reading it, Inés was crying quietly. They both listened in a silence filled with emotion. I also felt moved as I read. It was like showing a side of myself which was unknown to them, even though they were involved in it. When I finished reading, they spoke:

Inés: I feel as if something has been restored to me. There's a place here for me.

Nicolás: I had never thought that what I had gone through was hard. I used to think that much worse happened to others than to myself. But the truth is that I spent the best years of my youth in prison.

Inés: This is the answer I was looking for in therapy. You are brave to say that theories are not enough.

Nicolás: I was stuck in one way of seeing my situation. It is

astonishing to see myself through the eyes of an observer who tells me that what I went through was hard.

One person cannot possibly give an account of all the lasting damage done by a dictatorship when it destroys our symbolic worldview. But if we add one plus one, one name and another and then another one, we start to mend the tattered social network and we open a space in which we can speak these silenced truths, so that they can resound. In this case, as a therapist, I offered myself as a bridge to allow what has been unsayable in the presence of others to return to where it belongs, that is, to the public domain.

It is a way of making public the grief, which had remained a private secret. A collective effort is needed in order to close these social 'black holes'. In the field of mental health care, we see cure as the possibility of undoing the process of trauma, so that people can get on with their lives. But, as regards the public domain, we might have to think about a way of keeping our memory of torture and manipulation always fresh and complete, in order to prevent these tragedies from taking place again.

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*Into exile with only a few shirts,
Some gold coin and the necessary papers ...*

The protagonist in Robert Graves' poem 'The Cloak' (*Robert Graves: Poems Selected by Himself*, Penguin, 1957) certainly had no time to notify anyone of his change of address before he left home. Let's hope you have the time to **check the Inside Front Cover for Blackwell's address, so that you can advise them, and go on getting the ANZJFT.**