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DECENTERING STRUGGLE: TRAUMATIZING CENTRAL AMERICANS

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This essay demonstrates the ways in which Central American subjects during the last three decades have been centered by changing discourses on violence. From violence entextualized as intrinsic to the eschatological history of the people, to the violence as an autonomous process, that creates entire populations of traumatized. Within this entextualizing trauma is seen as the normal reaction to violence and the ability of social groups and individuals to act has been silenced while agency is transferred to the entities of psycho-social support: The psycho-social interventions combine individualizing and totalizing techniques through which entire populations are placed at the margins of society, living lives in which their emotional state is monitored by humanitarian agencies and interventions designed according to registered levels of well-being and the prevalence of psychological trauma in the general population. By entextualizing violence as an autonomous process, which generates trauma that trough feed-back effects may reproduce themselves over several generations, we have arrived at a theoretical model of life at the margins, which is ill equipped to explain the ways in which violence, everyday life and the exercise of power are articulated in post-colonial societies in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

1. Violence, discourse and the centering of subjects

During the past decade, thinking within the development community has undergone a profound transformation. Issues of violent crime, international conflict, civil war, state collapse and their attendant psycho-social sequelae and economic and political consequences and effects are displacing concerns about socio-economic inequality and poverty. This change manifests itself in a host of different dimensions which under one heading has been identified as the emergence of the development-security complex (Duffield 2001).

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In this essay I will explore one specific aspect of this process of displacement and transformation. I want to discuss the ways in which acts of violence are entextualized (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 59-88), that is how acts of violence are placed within texts, hence how meaning is ascribed to them (Rønsbo 2004). The specific question I want to pursue is: In which ways have political violence perpetrated during the 1980's been entextualized by NGOs and other non-state actors from around 1980 to the present? A comprehensive analysis of this question would require substantial work. In the current essay I will therefore limit myself to the documentation of the ways in which it presents itself in the Central American section of the archives of the Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims (RCT),[1] and to this material I add more recent works on the psycho-social effects of political violence in Central America.

What I hope to demonstrate is that we have registered a move from entextualizing violence by eschatological histories on how people and communities fight for national liberation through armed struggle, towards political violence entextualized within medical or psychological discourses that describe the consequences and sequelae of war as a reduction of resources and capacities, as the loss of meaning, shared values and purpose.[2] Within this discursive formation, violence in general and violent conflict in particular is seen as a threat to public as well as individual health and well-being. Violence generates trauma (physical and psychological) in everyday life, hence it constitutes a vector of risk to be calculated on the basis of risk behavior, exposure to violent events and socio-economic marginalization. This way etiologies are developed, risks calculated and psycho-social interventions developed. Within these analytical spaces violence appears to be an autonomous and self-governing process which over time creates and sustains its own conditions of existence through intergenerational, intra-household and intra-communal transference of trauma. Only through psycho-social interventions regulating the modes of behavior at the level of individuals and groups can conditions be created under which post-conflict societies can be healed and stabilized.

The transformation in the idioms that entextualize violence from a national eschatological history of popular liberation in which violence was

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1 RCT is a Danish health and human rights NGO that has worked with the rehabilitation of torture survivors in Denmark for over 20 years, the last 7 years through an expanding network of international partners.

2 Events of a violent nature lead to a reduction of »human capacity« understood as »physical and mental health«, »knowledge and skills«, »to a disruption of the *social ecology* of a community, where relations between families and peeers change, or where religious and civic organisations cease to function«. Finally, it leads to a »disruption of *culture* and values of communities« »where [...] shared meanings are disrupted, reference points are lost, a sense of right and wrong is undermined and behaviour loses its purpose.« (Strang 2003).

intrinsic to violence as a non-transmissible disease is, I believe, one of the important moves through which security and development are merged so as to constitute the new aid paradigm (Duffield 2001).

It is, however, my proposal that we understand these efforts to regulate violent behavior as highly volatile and contingent combinations of what has been called disciplinary, tutelary and security techniques (Rajali 1994), the telos of these being the management and control of violence as it erupts at the exterior and interior margins of capitalist society.[3] Discourses that entextualize violent events in theoretical narratives of cause and effect, transference and feed-back, produce violent behavior as a phenomenon, which can be prevented through psycho-social interventions, and in as much as this attests to the ways in which marginalization as well as centering takes place in the 21st century, such interventions are important to understand.

Vanessa Pupavac (2002) has forwarded the argument that such interventions constitute a global form of »therapeutic governance«, and while I am sympathetic towards her reading of psycho-social interventions in post-conflict society (e.g. ex-Yugoslavia), I would like to present a more nuanced picture. Reflecting on the Central American material which I present in the following, it appears to me that the apparent stability of the therapeutic complex – as this is captured and represented by the concept of governance – should not be overestimated. Despite the presence of international and national development and emergency organisations since the early 1980's, Central American NGOs have demonstrated a remarkable resilience towards embracing the discourse on violence, trauma and the need for psycho-social interventions. Such resilience can be explained by a variety of factors, most notably the grassroot nature of many development NGOs and the lack of trained therapists. Hence, »therapeutic governance« to the extent that such a global mode of governance exists, does not impose itself in regional settings without mediating agents, and we therefore need to pay more attention to these agents, such as organic intellectuals, as well as the ways in which dominant as well as subordinate groups and the state apparatuses have been organized.

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3 »[T]oday […] the capitalistic-democratic plan to eliminate the poor not only reproduces inside itself the people of the excluded but also turns all the populations of the Third World into naked life« (Agamben: 3.4). It is this concept of naked life, »life in a state of nature […] defined only by its being unconditionally exposed to a death threat (the limitless right of everybody over everything)« (ibid.: 4.5) that I take to denote violence as an autonomous process. But according to Agamben, it is important to realize that »naked life« is a political project. It is in order to understand the regional history of this political project that I have analyzed the emergence of the discourse of psycho-social interventions in post-conflict societies.

2. Psycho-social interventions in Central America

Any kind of work that questions humanitarian practices and their non-subjective intentionalities and logics will inevitably be questioned as to what alternatives it then proposes. As a sort of practitioner, I am well aware of this logic, and the current essay tries to reflect this position. What enticed me to think about these issues were my recollections of a total absence of psycho-social interventions during and immediately after the civil war that took place in El Salvador from 1980 to 1992. In trying to validate my impression, I consulted the 1992 UNDP index of almost 200 NGOs that were active in El Salvador that year.[4] Of these organizations only 8 worked with programs that can be characterized as psycho-social, and of these only one organization used the term in its mission statement, while the mission statements of two other organizations described work similar to that of psycho-social interventions (UNDP, 1992). On this background we can safely assume that while psycho-social projects and interventions poured into ex-Yugoslavia during the early 1990's,[5] the Central American republics displayed an astonishing level of resilience to this mode of intervention well into the 1990's, or did they? Acceptance of – versus resilience to – may not be the best ways in which to discuss the complex ways in which the notions of trauma as a capillary technique of power has reorganized the ways in which development organizations represent violence in Central America. In order to understand the ways in which the current thinking about trauma and violence reorganize interventions, we need to pay close attention the writings and interventions undertaken by NGOs. Allow me to demonstrate. In 2002 a female observer wrote:

> *The emotional reparation linked to the dignification of the victims has no space within the public institutions.* (Herrera, 2001: 4)

The statement is made by Morena Herrera and is drawn from a paper in which she reflects upon the effects of wartime experiences and post-war reconstruction on male and female FMLN combatants. She writes as a representative of a Salvadoran NGO that works with gender issues, and in the paper she details the numerous ways in which the Peace Accords of 1992 failed to take into account the group of female combatants, a group she states, made up 30% of the guerrilla force and 60% of its support base. Herrera's paper is written in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of

4 See UNDP (1992) for a list of the themes worked by organizations in El Salvador.

5 It is beyond the purpose of this paper to reference the extensive literature on psycho-social interventions in the Balkans as well as Rwanda. See Pupavac (2002) for a critical review.

the Peace Accords. It details the numerous ways in which the war-time experiences of female combatants »impacted on feminine subjectivity«, changing notions of motherhood, sexuality and the meanings ascribed to gendered work in the maintenance of households in the war zones. But the paper also addresses the politics of transition, peace-making, reparation and rehabilitation of trauma, as the above quote demonstrates, and in this case dignity appears to be a core quality of state interventions.

Her discourse is interesting because it draws to our attention the fact that as we speak about the logics of therapeutic governance (Pupavac, 2002) or the security-development complex (Duffield 2001), it is worthwhile to remember that logics of this order never manifest themselves unmediated. Herrera's discourse demonstrates this. The early section of the paper contains statements such as the following:

> *The past and present history of Central America is marked by innumerable inequalities and disasters that feed on and provoke an intensification in the high levels of poverty among the majority of the population [...].*(Herrera 2002: 2)

> *Despite being the smallest country in Central America, it is one that has the highest rate of violence not only in Latin America, but the entire world. This is the reality after more than ten years of war and a long history of insurrections, the basic causes of which were: unjust distribution of land, high level of absolute poverty produced by enormous social inequality, lack of spaces of expression for the population and repressive practices used in response to demands for a change.* (Herrera, 2002: 2)

Violence, be it criminal or political, is placed within a discourse of struggles and understood as the precipitate of social inequality.

But as the psycho-social intervention has become a mainstream component in post-conflict interventions, retrospective needs are being voiced, not within the discourse of eschatological history, but within that of psycho-social assistance:

> *Ten years of political transition, of post-war and multiple reconstructions demonstrates the persistent lack of politics and programs that work with the social and emotional reparation of men and women.* (Herrera 2002: 2)

And she continues ...

> *... thousands of persons still do not live in peace, cannot sleep, cannot regain the trust in their surroundings, after so many years of violence*

> *and lies. They do not know how to behave themselves without the use of violence because they have not learned otherwise and because the only thing which has given any results are the guidelines for violent interaction.* (Ibid.)

I choose this fragment of text because it articulates the kinds of issues that Papuvac has identified as 'therapeutic governance' of refugees, and Duffield as 'security in the borderlands'. The traumatized populations continue to display violence due to their trauma and lack of learning. This is the target group for the psycho-social and psycho-educational interventions.

I have, quite consciously, opened with fragments from a text caught in contradictory entextualizations, one that calls for therapy of the poor, while it simultaneously denounces the social forces that have shaped such therapeutic needs. This way Herrera's text is lodged between, and at the same time within, the two discourses.

3. The discourse on violence in the early 1980's

Sitting with leaflets, 20 years old or more, that speak across two decades is as intriguing as locating documents from the 16th century in small Andean communities, yet it is different. These are mass produced for the purpose of global circulation and consumption, and after 20 years they continue to serve that purpose. In one pamphlet Ríos Mont has just been toppled in a military coup on 8. August 1983, yet repression continues under Mejía Victores, and the Comité Guatemalteco de familiares de detenidos-desaparecidos writes:

> *All of the affected population, thousands of workers, farmers, Christians, students, professionals, all sectors of society ... An entire people bleeding and we who search for them, die in life for them.*
>
> *Nevertheless, a hopeful light shines in front of our eyes: it is the confidence in our strength. It is the strength of the sadness of the thousand of hearts that we have united in order to reorganize the Committee of family members of detained disappeared ... Today, transforming this grief into struggle, we lift up our voices to be heard everywhere. (Comité Guatemalteco de familiares de detenidos-desaparecidos, n.d.)*

The above quotes are indicative of the structure I am trying to evoke. It is a discourse in which the sadness of violence is linked to the hope for a better future.

> *The repressive army has intensified its large offensives for the extermination of the people, it has continued destroying the harvests, the fruit plantations – not only destroying the crops of the refugees, but also the wild fruits – so that the humble people die or turn themselves into their hands.* (Ibid.)

These are emotions and feelings of loss and pain entextualized by narratives of eschatological history, the struggle of the people for liberty against the inhumane repression of the army. I think we should be explicit about the fact that while such entextualizations highlight agency and the resources engendered by violent conflict, they also leave out specific experiences and silence alternative discourses. People suffer from repression, from extermination, they die in life, but the idioms through which Salvadorean, Nicaraguan and Guatemalan rural communities talked about and lived through violence is never represented. Conspicuously absent is for example *susto*, a local category of affliction and illness. People grief within eschatological history and therefore continue to fight. It is hardly surprising that subsequent observers have criticized these eschatological interpretations of violence and pain for silencing the opposition to armed struggle within communities, for silencing feelings of betrayal, shame and guilt as well as celebrating the unnecessary loss of life (Stoll 1993; Bourgois 2001: 5-34).

But one should not analyze discourse only in terms of its referential content. Discourses such as the ones above were pivotal in the creation of a political pressure that brought the genocidal practices of the Guatemalan state to an end, and they did more than that.

4. The emergence of a medical discourse on trauma and violence

Discourses such as the above quoted also provided a basis for the intervention of the legal and medical disciplines that within their specific fields of observation labored to describe the events and effects in a language that separated the single events from the history of the people.

According to such an analysis by Contreras (1983: 1):

> *We try to analyze the problem from the perspective of its effects on interaction in the family, in the social, psychological, economic, legal, psychic and somatic areas of the effects of torture, but with a view to both the short- and long-term consequences.*

The quote stems from a text, which was probably collected during a 1983 mission by RCT staff in Central America and Mexico. It was written by L. Oswaldo Enríquez Contreras, Regional Co-ordinator, Subcommission

of Costa Rica, Commission for Human Rights of Guatemala. The paper runs over 12 typed legal sized sheets, and for various reasons I find it intriguing.

Consider the usage of the term 'desaparecido' (disappeared) in the following quote (ibid.: 4):

> *The supposedly disappeared are tortured in order to create a climate of intimidation and terror.* (Ibid.: 1)

The disappeared are only supposedly disappeared, and the crime in relation to disappearance is the torture that the disappeared are exposed to. It is only later that the notion of 'desaparecido' acquires its current semantic content that of a dead unaccounted for, while living persons are tortured.

Compared with later trauma literature, the paper displays a variety of other interesting features. Like the subsequent literature it divides victims into two categories: One is the direct victim, the person who has disappeared and has been tortured; the other is the indirect victim, and in this latter group not only 'family members', but also 'friends' are included!

Friends are a key category in everyday life, and this category has been almost completely erased from the current literature on the effects of political violence, although in many cases it constitutes as important an emotional relation as that of family, it appears in this text as an intrusion of the everyday. In fact when did friendships disappear from the field of conflict-generated trauma? That I think is an interesting question, one linked to the formation of a discourse on traumatization entangled with international humanitarian law, a legal discourse in which 'the friend', this significant other in everyday relationships, does not occur.

The paper also details knowledge about the effects of torture on the victim, and it states, quite on the contrary to what is stated in current trauma literature, that:

> *How and in what ways the terror, the humiliation, the loss of dignity and the physical suffering of the victim is marked is something which cannot be generalized.* (Ibid.: 6-7)

The distance to the position taken in current descriptions of trauma generated by political violence is substantial. Let me just quote one author:

> *It is hard to imagine how such consequences of GRV [gender-related-violence, my note] could not result in psychological traumatization.* (Leslie 2000: 64)

Hence:

> *... efforts must be made to heal women so that they have both the motivation and the capacity to participate in these [conflict resolution and peacemaking] activities.* (Ibid.: 66)

Now curative interventions precede agency and self-reliance. Let us contrast such a view with a text produced in 1983 by Angela Delli Sante. She writes a longer paper on the situation of Guatemalan refugees in Southern Mexico (pp. 4-5):

> *As for the psychological traumas produced by the degree of torture witnessed, the feeling of loneliness, displacement, loss of loved ones (especially in the case of orphans) as well as, on the part of the women, the fear of sexual abuse or rape, the continual land and air incursions and the threats and massacres of refugees carried out by the Guatemalan armed forces in Mexican territory, these are left almost completely unattended. One of the most impressive cases discussed in Chiapas was that of a three-year-old child who was only able to repeat one word, »'licoptero«, by the time he arrived in Mexico. Fortunately, the child received the attention of a nun who works with refugee children. She explained that after somewhat over three weeks of intensive care and affection from herself and the women in the camp, the child began to speak normally again.*

Like the other text of the early 1980's, we see here how the notion of trauma was already deployed in the early 1980's, and the case mentioned, a child saying 'licoptero', indeed seems to open a space for a psycho-social intervention project targeting the most affected populations such as widows and children. Yet Della Sante proposes quite the opposite:

> *Given these facts, how are we to respond? ...*
> *Obviously, the problem we are confronted with is complex, and therefore, there is no simple solution. The complexity of the situation requires that we respond on various interrelated levels. In the first place, we must find the means to guarantee the physical integrity and to satisfy the immediate basic needs of the refugees. This means that shelter, food and medical care must be provided through direct services. Secondly, we must act in the political arena, directly pressuring the governments of both Mexico and the United States so that refugees will not be deported, and are, indeed, recognized as 'refugees' and not 'illegal aliens'. This would at least grant them right to temporary asylum and freedom of movement, alleviating in this manner many of the psychological pressures, as well as the economic limitations which are being felt. (Ibid.: 23)*

What intrigues me in these early deployments of the term trauma are the following three features: Firstly, trauma cannot be generalized; secondly, trauma (i.e. psychological pressure) can be alleviated through political agency; and finally, secondary trauma is not only a relevant category in relation to the primary unit of reproduction i.e. the family, which accidentally is also the key unit in public health, but also relevant in relation to friends.

In fact during the late 1980's and early 1990's it was not the trauma concept which filled the psycho-social discourse on refugees but quite the opposite. Refugees are described as resourceful agents of change:

> *Many have taken advantage of educational and training opportunities offered primarily by NGOs.*
>
> *800 refugees have participated in training courses for health care workers, and have even developed a refugee-managed, health-oriented self-help organizatio*n (U.S. Committee for Refugees 1993: 8).

Many refugees have also developed impressive organizational skills:

> *Several women's organizations [...] have helped refugee women to challenge limitations imposed on them by traditional indigenous Guatemalan society, and to develop new skills and participate in projects that have helped them achieve greater independence.*
> *Some observers worry that the refugees' organizational skills and new-found assertiveness will land them trouble in Guatemala.* (Ibid.: 8)

A discourse similar to this one developed around Salvadoran refugees living in camps in Honduras. Yet, towards the end of the 1990's the psycho-social trauma discourse begins to seep into the Central American NGOs. Following the monumental task of collecting testimonies on the war, the Archbishop's Office for Human Rights started working on a project of devolution, which included an important element of psycho-social healing and trauma counselling. The project had started in Quiche in 1991 with the development of a manual, but has since 1999 undergone a process of replication in the majority of the war zones of Guatemala. The project describes the situation in these areas in the following words:

> *The patterns of torture and organized violence carried out in Guatemala, provoked individual and collective damage to a great part of the population. Among the individual damages can be mentioned: the psychological disturbances that range from conditions related to unelaborated trauma to psychosomatic illnesses and psychiatric*

> *disorders. It should be mentioned that the proposed intervention does not label the affected population as »mentally ill«, on the contrary the affected population is considered to be normal people reacting in a normal way to a social situation which is totally abnormal.* (Psychosocial Rehabilitation Project for Victims of Torture and Organized Violence in seven war affected Districts (Dioceses) of Guatemala, attended by the Human Rights Office of the Archbishop of Guatemala, 1999: 21)

Here we arrive at one of the great ironies of psycho-social engineering in the borderlands, as Pupavac (2002) argues. Trauma is the norm of the borderland, reproducing the notion of volatile and unstable social orders.

> *Regarding the trauma that is not dealt with, the most common conditions are: fear, a feeling of loss, altered mechanisms of grief, silence, anger, confusion, sorrow, low self-esteem, loss of identity, anxiety, revenge, confusion, distrust, loss of life projects, etc. All such conditions provoked on purpose by the repression plan of the Government and the military during the civil war.* (Ibid.: 21)

And unlike trauma in the early 1980's, this is trauma generalized, yet strangely undefined apart from a set of symptoms, which, however, can be (and are) produced by a variety of factors in a social field characterized by poverty and marginalization. But these effects are no longer private concerns. They affect politics and economy; hence they are legitimate targets of intervention.

> *The community damages are consequences of the individual traumatic process: rupture of social networks, isolation of social movements, division and confrontation within families and communities, fear to participate, distrust, rise of old and new conflicts and social apathy.* (Ibid.: 22)

And it is this which I think marks one of the new issues: the emotional lives of the marginalized southerners have become a concern of security

> *... Guatemalan Red Cross volunteers are continuing to provide psychological support to the affected population, some of whom are still living in temporary shelters. Local health professionals have received guidelines from Red Cross volunteers on how they can continue monitoring the emotional state of the population ... The Guatemalan Red Cross brought drinking water and donated balls, papers, pencils and coloured pens for the children. The community, authorities and other organizations were very positive about the Red Cross intervention and*

endorsed the emotional support activities that had proven, and continued to be, very necessary. The Guatemalan Red Cross is planning further short-term interventions based on health activities, including health assessments and services and continuing psycho-social support. (Ibid.: 22)

5. Conclusions

In this short essay I have tried to demonstrate the ways in which Central American subjects during the last three decades have been centered by changing discourses on violence. From violence entextualized as intrinsic to the eschatological history of the people, to violence as an autonomous process that create entire populations of traumatized persons.

Despite the hegemonic character of the recent discourse on violence, trauma and psycho-social interventions (Pupavac 2002), the history of the recent past, as it has been represented in this essay, suggests that the ways in which violent behavior is entextualized is highly unstable. Rather than understanding the current discourse on violence, trauma and psycho-social interventions as an index of a fully shaped »therapeutic governance«, I propose that we see it as a specific combination of disciplinary, tutelary and security techniques (Rejali 1994). The purpose of these is the management and control of interpersonal violence as a source of insecurity. The entextualization of violent events in theoretical narratives of cause, effect and feed-back produces a violent behavior which on one hand is a vector of risk, while it, on the other hand, is an autonomous, psychological process which can be halted (only?) through curative and preventive interventions of a psycho-social character. Through this historically specific combination of individualzing and totalizing techniques entire populations are placed at the exterior and interior margins of society (Agemben 2000), living lives in which their emotional state is monitored by humanitarian agencies and interventions designed according to registered levels of well-being and the prevalence of psychological trauma in the general population.

Compared with the literature from the early 1980's this marks a radically different way of entextualizing political violence and understanding its effect. The ability of social groups and individuals to act (in the North as well as the South) has been silenced, while agency becomes an attribute of the entity, which provides the necessary psycho-social support to survivors of political violence, reconstituting these as subjects. It would be presumptuous *a priori* to rule out the beneficial effects of such interventions, yet I would like to call to attention the ways in which these effects have been gained at a certain cost. By entextualizing violence as an autonomous process, which generates trauma that through feed-back effects may repro-

duce themselves over several generations, we have arrived at a theoretical model of life at the margins, which is ill-equipped to explain the ways in which violence, everyday life and the exercise of power are articulated in post-colonial societies in latin America, Africa and Asia.

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