

# **The Politics of Trauma: The Relevance of Psychosocial Dimensions for Conflict Transformation**

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# Some conflict definitions

- ✿ **Norbert Ropers: Conflicts are an unavoidable side effect of living together in all societies, and are necessary for social change. They are an expression of tensions and incompatibilities between different, mutually dependent parties with regard to their respective needs, interests and values. Such conflicts lead to general social crises and destructive escalation mainly in phases of profound socio-economic change and political transformation; that is when the redistribution between different groups of opportunities and possibilities of participation is at stake**
- ✿ **Karl Marx: The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles**

# Some more conflict definitions

- ✿ **Paul Lederach:** Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships
- ✿ **Laplanche & Pontalis:** In psychoanalysis, one talks of conflict if the subject is confronting contradictory inner demands. Conflict can be manifest (for example, between a desire and a moral demand, or between two contradictory feelings), or latent, and appear in a distorted form in the manifest conflict, or express itself in the appearance of symptoms, behavioural problems, personality disorders, etc. Psychoanalysis considers conflict as being fundamental in human beings, in different forms: conflict between desire and rejection, conflict between the different systems or institutions, conflicts between physical urges, finally the oedipal conflict where contradictory desires are not only confronting each other, but where they resist the prohibition.

# What do these visions of conflict imply?

- ✱ **Conflict is seen as something normal, positive and necessary**
- ✱ **The problem is thus not the conflict but the way it is carried out**
- ✱ **Conflicts are rarely solved but can be transformed**
- ✱ **The aim of working on conflict is to (re)establish conflict capacity**

# Some issues to consider when analyzing/ mapping conflict

- ✿ **Multiple levels: International, National, Community, Individual/ Domestic**
- ✿ **Conflict is not only when war happens**
- ✿ **Conflict has at least two participating parties, but usually more. Differentiating between actors and stake holders might make sense.**
- ✿ **4 Key Conflict Dimensions:**
  - **Political Economy**
  - **Cultural Affiliation**
  - **Political Participation**
  - **Subject/ Subjective**
- ✿ **Projects might try to work around conflict. They always work in the conflict. At their best they consciously work on the conflict.**
- ✿ **Connectors and dividers cannot be simply assimilated to “good” and “bad”**

# What is “psychosocial”?

- ☀ “Psycho” refers to the inner world, to the world of emotions
- ☀ “Social” refers to society, to the world of social relationships
- ☀ “Psychosocial” as a conceptual approach thus focuses on individuals in relationship to their social context. It tries to combine individual and societal dimensions of analysis.
- ☀ Key Issues:
  - Threat ----- Fear
  - Destruction ----- Trauma
  - Loss ----- Grief
- ☀ Key Words: Empowerment / Disempowerment

# Threat and Fear

- ✱ **Fear as a normal self protection mechanism**
- ✱ **Chronic fear as a key feature o conflict and post conflict situations**

# The double genealogy and identity of trauma theory

- ✿ Scientific development on one side and developing societal conflicts on the other side
- ✿ Clinical term on one side and moral category in a given sociopolitical situation on the other side

# Psychoanalytic Developments

- ✿ The original metaphor of the tear between self and reality, the quantitative moment
- ✿ Seduction theory, deferred action (Nachträglichkeit), infantile sexuality
- ✿ Ferenczi's Dilemma
- ✿ Balint, Winnicott, Khan and the development of a relational trauma theory

# Development Processes in Society

- ☀ Train accidents, working accidents, shell shocked soldiers: Victims committing insurance frauds, simulating pain, being cowards
- ☀ The Holocaust as paradigm of trauma theory: The recognition of the victims, testimony, punishing perpetrators, compensations (Wiedergutmachungsleistungen)
- ☀ The Vietnam War and taking morals out of the trauma concept: Victims and Victimizers are traumatized

# Frantz Fanon: The imperial violence and ist psychological power

- ✱ Black skin and white masks: The unavailability of alienated, imperial identity constructions
- ✱ Extreme violence as the key gift of the colonial powers to the colonized people. Civilization in its essence is barbarianism.

# Edward Said : Overlapping territories and entangled histories

- ✿ Empire as a reality in and through culture
- ✿ Understanding of historical processes not only in terms of time but in terms of space:  
The relevance of geography
- ✿ The unavailability of entangled histories
- ✿ The possibility of contra punctual reading of texts

# Three key problems every trauma theory needs to deal with

- ☀ The relationship between inside and outside
- ☀ Time
- ☀ Context

# The main stupidities of PTSD diagnosis

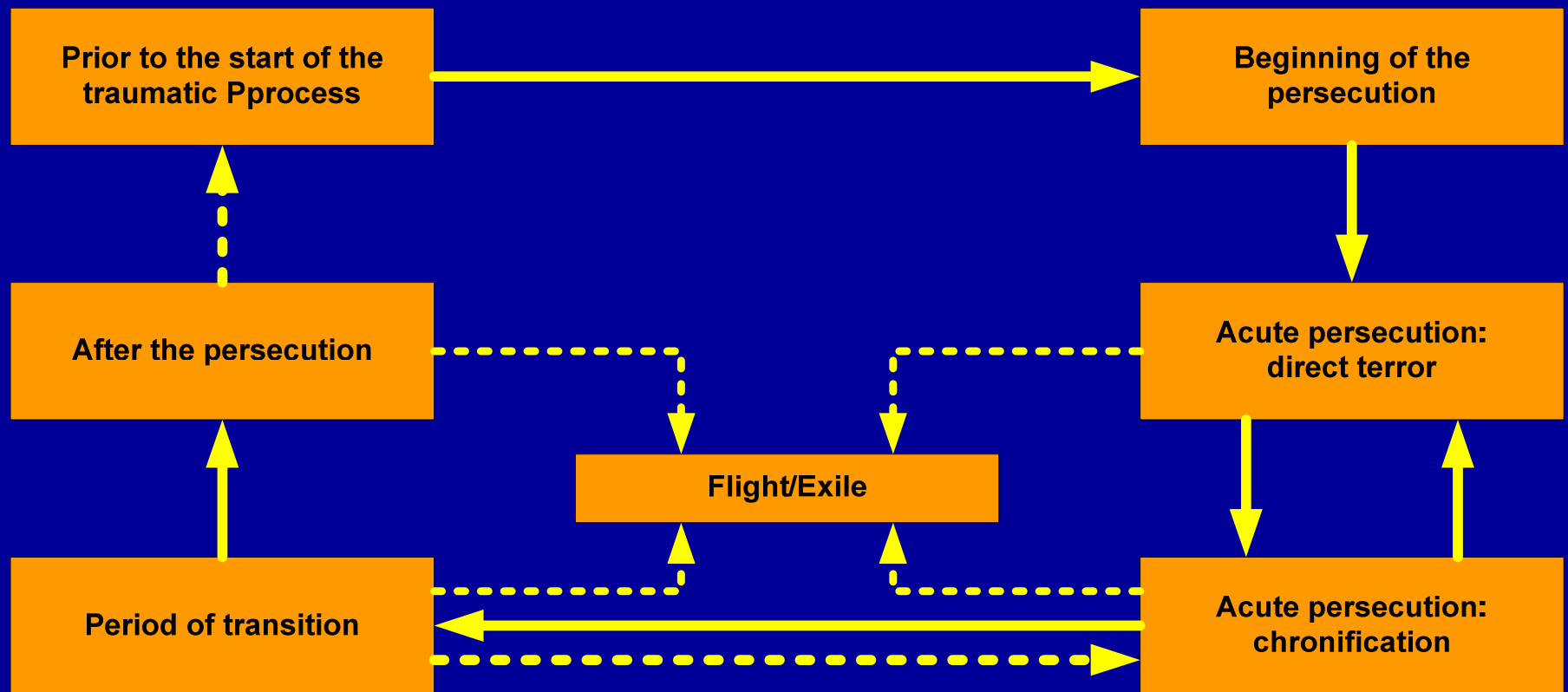
- ✱ "Post", although there is no post in sociopolitical traumatizations
- ✱ "Stress", although trauma is always more than stress, that is destruction
- ✱ "Disorder", although „psychopathologizing“ political reality makes the illness worse
- ✱ Incomplete list of symptoms
- ✱ Individual diagnosis, no possibility to diagnose families or understand so called secondary traumatizations or transgenerational processes
- ✱ Cultural ignorance
- ✱ Time
- ✱ Political ignorance

# PTSD: A post colonial invention

- ✱ Suffering is acknowledged, but depleted of its contents
- ✱ Social processes are recognized as producing illness, but themselves are being ignored/ silenced
- ✱ While on one side possibilities develop to recognize traumatic suffering and deal with it, at the same time culturally specific characteristics are ignored and post colonial power structures are denied
- ✱ History suddenly becomes important but is reduced to a linear stimulus-response reaction
- ✱ Victims and perpetrators are jointly acknowledged as victims

# Sequential Traumatization

A rough framework of traumatic sequences in a given social context – An adaptation of a concept of Hans Keilson



# Relevant Ideas on Trauma in the Context of Man Made Disasters

- ✱ Trauma is a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.
- ✱ Trauma is when memory (individual and social) falls apart.
- ✱ Trauma can only be understood within and in reference to a specific social/cultural/political context.
- ✱ Trauma is cumulative and sequential. In short it is a process of which we can sometimes determine when it starts, but nearly never when it stops.
- ✱ Trauma implies complete psychological breakdown on an individual level, comparable to the experience of death. Nevertheless there is always a social, i.e. collective dimension to trauma, in so far as the social relationships themselves are characterized, by a violent power struggle that includes fear, death and destruction.
- ✱ We have to differentiate between traumatic situations, trauma and trauma symptoms.

# Loss and Grief

- ✱ **The two phases of a grief process**
- ✱ **The relevance of grieving**
- ✱ **Memory, grieving and the future**
- ✱ **Disturbed grief processes**

# The difficulty of combining individual and collective dimensions

- ✱ Although individual and collective dimensions relate to, overlap and imply each other, they somehow never really match up
- ✱ The danger of analogies
- ✱ Chosen trauma as a case in point

# Dealing with psychosocial dimension in ongoing conflict

- ✱ Dealing with threat and fear
- ✱ Understanding dissociation
- ✱ Understanding passivity, hopelessness, “traumatic stupidity”
- ✱ Understanding humiliation and shame
- ✱ Using the difference between acute terror and chronification
- ✱ Facilitating empowerment
- ✱ Dealing with secondary traumatization
- ✱ Security issues
- ✱ Self protection

# Dealing with psychosocial dimensions in post conflict situations

- ✱ Understanding ongoing fear
- ✱ Understanding ongoing trauma
- ✱ Understanding submission and authoritarianism
- ✱ Understanding the limits of reparation
- ✱ The vicissitudes of reconciliation
- ✱ How important are the victims?
- ✱ Justice?
- ✱ Peace and Harmony: Two doubtful perspectives

# The culture of lies

- ✱ The hidden agenda of the donors.
- ✱ The hidden activities of the receivers.
- ✱ Politicians and political abuse.
- ✱ The contradictory wishes of the clients.
- ✱ Bombs, Trauma Centers, Income Generation, Exit Strategies: From war to health to wealth to nothing.
- ✱ “Peace Builders”, “Mediators” and other strange animals
- ✱ The doubtful “Swiss” identity of evaluators.