



PSYCHOANALYSIS AND POLITICS SHARED TRAUMAS – SILENT LOSS, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MOURNING



CALL FOR PAPERS – WINTER SYMPOSIUM IN STOCKHOLM 9th to 11th of MARCH 2012
Venue: Swedish Psychoanalytical Association, Västerlånggatan 60

Mourning can be thought as a private endeavour, so familiar it seems hardly pathological, writes Freud (1917e [1915]). During mourning, the ego withdraws from the world. It re-visits the different aspects of the lost object, approaches it from a series of different angles. Leader (2008) compares this work to the process leading up to the Cubist image resulting from the combination and reshuffling of the conventional image of a person. Thus there is an aspect of mourning that confronts us with fragmentation, of the object mourned and of the experience of mourning. It is pertinent then to question the act, experience and results of mourning in terms of their possible or impossible completions.

Leader suggests that mourning, however private, requires other people; a loss requires recognition, a sense that it has been witnessed and made real. From a different angle, this can be seen to resemble Balint's (1969) claim, drawing on Ferenczi (1928-33) that the trauma is only completed in the third phase, when the adult acts towards the child as if nothing distressing or painful had happened, thus depriving the event that took place of its reality. Trauma is overwhelming in its magnitude (Freud 1895d [1893-95], 1920g, Rabinovich 1990), consists in a shattering of one's experiential world as a safe, stable and predictable place (Stolorow 2007), and it breaks up the unifying thread of temporality – past becomes present, and future loses all meaning other than endless repetition.



The anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer describes how every documented human society has public mourning rituals and makes use of outward signs to inscribe the mourner within a shared, public space, arguing that the decline of public mourning rituals in the West was linked to the mass slaughter of the First World War. The surplus of the dead, and of the bereaved, was so extreme and overwhelming that communal mourning no longer seemed to make sense, leading to the erosion of public mourning rituals in Europe. This decline contrasts with current attempts to commemorate and work through shared traumas. This year has marked the 10th anniversary of September 11th, leading to debates on how this event can be dealt with, other than by demonization and hero-worship. 2011 has also included the terrorist acts performed by a native and referred to as 'Norway's 9/11'. In the latter case conceiving of the event as a wholly alien invasion would seem to require more of an imaginative strain, thus it challenges the typical strategy of scapegoating and poses the question of how to deal with shared trauma differently.

Mourning can be conceived as a social effort that binds communities together. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission can be seen to have performed such work, less about punishing the perpetrators than about recognizing and registering their crimes. Conversely, if we think of how Freud reminds us of our tendency to recoil from any activity that causes pain, how there is 'a revolt in our minds against mourning', we can also conceive of a refusal to mourn as a tie between communities. The Federal Republic of Germany, wrote the Mitscherlichs ([1967] 1975), rather than succumbing to mass melancholia, avoided self-devaluation as a group by breaking all affective bridges to the immediate past; "only a patient whose symptoms cause him suffering greater than the gain he gets from repression is willing to relax, step by step, the interior censorship preventing the return

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This symposium is organised by the NSU, an initiative by the Nordic Ministerial Council, which supports novel and interdisciplinary research collaboration between Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and between these countries and the rest of the world.

to consciousness of what has been denied and forgotten", they stated, "But here we are asking that this therapy be carried out by a society which, at least materially, is on the whole better off than ever before. Therefore, it feels no incentive to expose its interpretation of the recent past to the inconvenient questioning of others". Their formulation is reminiscent of Jaques' (1955) hypothesis that one of the primary elements that bind people into institutionalised association is the motivation to defend against depressive and paranoid anxieties. The aspect of asymmetry with regard to who may speak, appear and become objects of shared mourning, has been further highlighted in Butler's (2004) reflections on the public sphere as "constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown".

"In psychoanalysis lies freedom, or at least the potential for freedom" writes Sklar (2011) in pointing towards the need for reflection on the traumas of European history in analytic thought and practice. The author compares the reconstructed city of Warsaw, recreated so as to have covered up all signs of its near total destruction, to a delusion "applied like a patch over the place where originally a rent had appeared in the ego's relation to the external world" (citing Freud 1924). The collective work of mourning may contribute to the construction of narratives, and to the writing of history. In this sense, memorials, works of art, monuments, public ceremonies or other discursive practices, as long as they are not sentimentalized, exemplify scars or seams on social tissues. Rachel Whiteread's memorial in Vienna faced the problem of how to commemorate the Shoah without seeming to fill in and even compensating for the void left behind. Her solution presented a cast of the spaces between and around books in a full-size library – thus the sculpture is one that seems to display absence, or emptiness, the reintroduction of which was unwanted by parts of the local population, as the resurfacing of a long-repressed memory (Young 2004).

Loss, when conflated with absence is often called to operate in power discourses. The full unity and homogeneity of the body politic is often posited as lost, disrupted or polluted by others (LaCapra, 2001). However, one may argue that this putative unity in fact never existed, it is an absence. It points to the fundamental socio-political problem that Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) describes as *being in common, without common being*. Thus, the conflation of absence and loss can become an alibi for nationalistic discourses, foundational philosophies and fundamentalist ideologies that posit past utopias and paradises lost. This conflation leads to unmournability, for it touches on the sphere of ontological absence, and can provide testimony of melancholic mechanisms operating behind otherwise convincing cultural, social, political or individual agendas.

It is worth questioning, thus, the junctions of the private and the public when it comes to trauma, loss and the work of mourning, for these notions challenge our very notions of the individual and the shared (see also Hopper/Weinberg 2011). To paraphrase Adorno ([1959] 1998): What do we mean by 'working through the past'? How is a shared work of mourning to be understood? With what legitimacy do we consider a particular social or cultural practice to be 'mourning'?

We may also question the nature of historical, political and social events that can or should be conceptualised as losses or as traumas. What happens when we extrapolate the subjective dynamics of loss and of trauma to a collective level, and what are the normative implications of doing so? The dimension of temporality, in terms of *Nachträglichkeit* or *après-coup* (Freud 1918b [1914], Perelberg 2008), may also be worthy of interrogation.

This is an interdisciplinary conference – we invite theoretical contributions and historical, literary or clinical case studies on these and related themes from philosophers, sociologists, psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, literary theorists, historians and others. Perspectives from different psychoanalytic schools will be most welcome. Presentations are expected to take half an hour; another 30 minutes is set aside for discussion. **Please send an abstract of 200 to 300 words to psychoanalysis.politics@gmail.com by December 10th 2011.**

We will respond by, and present a preliminary programme on, December 15th 2011. If you would like to sign up to participate without presenting a paper, please contact us after this date.

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This is a relatively small symposium where active participation is encouraged. Researchers, clinicians, students and others who are interested are invited to attend and present their work in a friendly and enjoyable social atmosphere. A participation fee, which includes two shared dinners, of 1200 NOK/1417 SEK/1157 DKK/€ 155/£ 135/\$ 214//110 LVL/537 LTL, is to be paid before the symposium. Additional information in this regard will be given after your abstract has been accepted or after the conference programme has been finalized.

The organizers would like to thank The Board of the NSU and The Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and British Psychoanalytical Society for their support.

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