

**Deception and fear in politically oppressive contexts:
Its trickle-down effect on families**

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ABSTRACT

The mystified reality, restricted options and inherent risks of living in countries under a repressive political regime translate into survival tactics that reduce the reliance on social support, into semantic and cognitive restrictions and alternative codes, and into silences that translate into symptoms. While this is the case for the average citizen, it is even more pronounced in individuals and families directly touched by the repressive apparatus. These processes are discussed and two clinical examples are provided to illustrate them.

In 1971, while I was still living and practicing psychotherapy in Buenos Aires –Argentina ruled then by still another military government that toppled still another legitimately elected president---, I received a call from a young woman requesting a consultation. There was something unusual in that call: she wanted to be sure that I would see her even if she wouldn't give me her name or phone number. Due to the political context of the time, that request clued me quite clearly that she belonged to some underground anti-governmental organization. A benign possibility was that she was a member of a student organizations turned underground because of the interdiction against students' political groups and the increasing repressive acts by the police. But it could have also meant that she was herself associated with a group preparing itself for urban guerilla, or even that she was an undercover police operative. Intrigued, I accepted her conditions, and offered her an appointment (It should be noted that all this happened while the political violence in

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Argentina was escalating but six years before the so-called “dirty war” was unleashed that claimed over 30,000 civilian victims.)

At the appointed time, in came a woman in her mid-twenties, middle class, friendly and rather sweet, who again explained to me that she wasn't going to be able to talk about many things or give certain details about her life, that it would be for very few sessions, and that she would pay for each consultation in cash and not check. Once I agreed again with her conditions, she proceeded to explain the reason for the consultation. She was living with her boyfriend, a young man of her same age, a relation she described as loving and harmonious, with the exception of one nagging problem: she was anorgasmic. Exploring more in detail the situation, she described that, while aroused during foreplay and at the initiation of the sexual act, at a given moment she would be distracted by any noise, be they street noises or even the sounds of their bed, squeaking under their acrobatics, and would each time “lose track” of her otherwise peaking process, to their frustration and disappointment.

I commented that the experience of orgasm is paradigmatically one in which all the information of the external world disappears overwhelmed by the surge of the internal sensations, while, on the contrary, being hyper-alert fitted the context of what seems to be the risks of her current life, as I inferred from all her areas of omission. I added that, while I had some possible suggestions for the problem, I didn't want to place her at risk by lowering her guard –an inductive if not paradoxical move to increase her interest in my pending proposition. She insisted in wanting to do something about it. I then told her that I hoped that she would not consider my suggestion too wild for her, or for her boyfriend for the matter—to whom she was not supposed to share this recommendation: next time she was engaged in sex, she should get in

touch with her own sensations and do something she hadn't been doing until then: moan her pleasure during sex. She found the idea very funny, but, after thinking about it, agreed to put it to trial. Needless to say, my own rather straight logic was that, were she able to follow the suggestion, her own moaning would not only drown other noises but constitute in itself an added erotogenic curtain².

At the next consultation, a week later, she quite shyly informed me that the experiment had worked: she had "tested the method a number of times" that week, always successfully. I responded by praising her capacity to carry it on, and then proceeded revisiting other themes opened in the prior interview, exploring cautiously –retaining the same vague, ambiguous language, that she used to talk about those themes— how much at risk she felt she was. While carefully wording her statements, she was quite open: risks were mounting. She described her group as a university student's organization involved in anti- (military) government propaganda, and her main responsibilities as throwing political pamphlets from the upper balcony of large movie theaters. But she also knew that some of her friends, who had been involved in more risky acts –such as throwing a smoke bomb in a Court-, had been detained, and she was afraid that she or her boyfriend would be pushed by the group to do more risky things. She even mentioned that she had been told that the time had come for her to receive training in how to handle a gun, which made her quite scared. I asked her whether she discussed her fears with her boyfriend. She stated that she was afraid of appearing as a coward in his eyes, but agreed that it was nonsense, and that she should be open with him about it. Even further, perhaps her openness would give him permission to be open with her about his own feelings about it. I explored

² I also thought at the time that, if this symptom happened to function as a smoke curtain (i.e., a displacement) that was distracting her from other concerns –such as the risks she was exposed to–, then the elimination of the symptom would force her to deal with those concerns.

whether she had any open possibility of quitting if she wanted, and she described complex issues of loyalties to the group that made her refrain from doing so. Allowing herself some new spiral of introspection, she described her own inner state as one of living in an unreal world, almost in limbo, isolated from many of her own feelings and many of those friends who knew her from before. I explored what was her connection with her own family of origin. She said that she had very little contact with her parents –who lived in another city--, as she did not want to compromise them with her activities. In fact, she had only rote conversations with them, as her life, beyond her studies at the university and a very part time job in a bookstore, was consumed by her militancy, a fact unknown by her parents. Throughout that delicate interaction I mused in turn --without taking sides or making suggestions-- about the difficult conflict between loyalties and reasonable fear, as well as the thin boundaries between ambiguity and deception and between betrayal to one or another equally valuable group of people –her family and her friends.

At the end of this second interview she expressed warmly her appreciation for the success of that very brief and focal treatment and for the many other themes “that she needed to talk about, and didn't have with whom to do it”, and said that she would request another appointment if any other pressing problem would appear in her future. She never did call again. I left the country less than a year later.

Since then more than once I thought of that young, bright lady, wondering, tenderly and without much optimism, whether she survived the long period of escalating violence that trapped so many people and took so many young lives in Argentina.³

³ My emphasis throughout this article on political repressive processes in Argentina, Chile, and Rwanda doesn't entail any assumption that violence against the civilian population of so many other countries –Brazil, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, Uruguay, Cambodia, Thailand/Ache, and most of those in the Islamic world and in Africa-- has been less dramatic in

In countries under the mantle of political oppression, fear and deception trickles down into a world of in the daily life of citizens, be they ideologically aligned with the regime in vogue or not.

To start with, politically oppressive regimes define in a mystified way their repressive policies. Censorship, curfews, proscription of meetings, abductions, torture, imprisonment, surveillance, disappearances and other violence against individuals and against collectives are relabeled as “pacification moves,” “efforts to reestablish order and reduce violence,” acts done “for the citizen’s own good” or “to assure their wellbeing,” justified as “a needed response to subversive’s violence,” et cetera (Sluzki, 1993.) Denunciation of suspicious neighbors or friends, or even of family members, is encouraged as a “patriotic duty.” These mystifications, it should be noted, are not only at the service of deceiving the population but also accomplishes the important function of cognitive shift for the perpetrators themselves, as they allow them to relabel for themselves their most heinous acts as justified at the service of the common good, while their opposition are classified as “sub-humans.”⁴

A gruesome example of the latter is the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which 800,000 Tutsis men, women and children as well as occasional Tutsi-friendly Hutus were hacked down with machetes or killed by grenades

the past thirty years. It is due simply to the fact that I have more personal experience and ties with these countries.

⁴ “Pseudospeciation” (a term proposed by Erikson, 1966, cited by Volkan, 1997), this rhetoric insulation of one’s own ethnic group, clan or political group as human, while defining other groups as subhuman, is frequently adopted by totalitarian regimes and extremist groups as a method to increase intra-group emotional bonding as well as free from guilt those who attack the “others.” Jews were depicted by the Nazi and and by centuries of prior antisemitic rhetoric as demons (Keen, 1986) or as a disease to the human race (Naimark, 2001); Tutsis, by the Hutu government radio preceeding the 1994 genocide, as cockroaches or snakes (Dallaire, 2003); Japanese, by the US posters and movies during WWII, as rats or bats (Keen, 1986); Gypsies, also by the Nazis, as a genetically inferior nuisance (Duna, 1985); et cetera.

tossed through windows of churches and other sites where the victims had taken refuge. This 90 day carnage, conducted by Hutu military and civilians, was instigated by the Hutu-based government and their media -- while the rest of the world looked in the other direction—with the argument that the Tutsis were planning to eliminate the Hutu population; hence, it was the Hutus' patriotic duty to cleans the country from those “dangerous cockroaches” (Dallaire, 2003). This rhetoric has echoes the relentless propaganda of the Nazi regime in Germany, and by the discourses of their leaders, that defined the Jews as sub-humans and the real enemy of the order of the state—building on centuries of virulent anti-Semitism (Goldhagen, 1996)--, while the Holocaust was being planned and carried out.

As another example among many, in Chile, immediately after the CIA-supported military coup led by General Pinochet, while torture and killing of thousands of dissidents was taking place openly at a soccer stadium turned concentration camp and secretly in precincts and military barracks, the well-informed main newspaper was occupied in lauding the military, avoiding any mention of the stadium events, of disappearances, of violence by the military (“Informe Retting,” 1991.) In sum, mass media in repressive regimes will characteristically echo and repeat those relabeling messages and contribute to downplay any dissonance, reinforcing the mystification and the impunity of the perpetrators and the fear of the population.

While it could be argue that what are perpetrators and accomplices for ones are heroes for others, at this societal level of analysis the parameters and observables are up to a point rather unambiguous: perpetrators, victims, accomplices, and mystifying messages –. However, the description thickens when the focus is shifted to the level of the family

as a sub-system when immersed in a society exposed to the messages and actd of a repressive regime.

To start with, repressive procedures such as abductions are not only enveloped in the deceptive mantle of mystifying messages, as mentioned above, but also are accompanied by an additional forceful injunction that not only is in itself deceptive but also carries on an instructing to deceive: As a routine, while kidnapping their victims, generally at gunpoint and generally at night, the military/police commandos would inform those who happened to witness the procedure --family members, if the kidnapping took place at home, or study or work companions, if it took place at a college, or at factory, office or hospital—that, if the disappearance becomes known, if the witnesses talk to anybody, the victim would never reappear, However, if they keep silence, they may see him or her alive again. That injunction not only precluded consulting with a lawyer or going to the media or even denouncing it to the police (a futile paradox, as the police participated in those procedures) but established a social perimeter of silence around the disappearance. In many cases families created elaborated fictions that the person was still at home or work, by means of turning on the light periodically at their room, or explaining to neighbors that the disappeared was vacationing. Even more frequently, the family withdrawing from any social contact so as to reduce the chances that somebody else would realize the absence of the disappeared.

A crazy-making added level of deception: In those cases in which a person would be kidnapped from the place of work or from the street, and later also in those taken from their homes, if family members or friends would go to police precincts to inquire the whereabouts of the

disappeared, they were routinely informed that the police lacked any information about them, and that either there must be in error (“perhaps he is with friends”) or that the victim may have been kidnapped “by subversives.” If they would go to military quarters with the same question – even some barracks that later were known to have been torture and killing centers--, whomever the family gained access to would deny any knowledge, and recommend that the family denounces the case to the police, and that they should have patience because “those cases usually resolve themselves.” In sum, people taken in by those military groups would appear to have simply vanished, and all the socially established resources –the agencies in charge of maintaining the order, such as the police or the military-- with deny any knowledge of the procedure or of the disappeared (1986, “Nunca Mas”).

The State-sponsored deception characteristic of repressive regimes trickles down through society, encroaches upon itself in tighter webs of lies and silence that immobilize families, freezing them, and isolating them from the fluid interaction with the rest of the social world, forcing them to live a life alienated from their social context.

To illustrate this degree of complexity, I will summarize the content and process of a family consultation I provided in Argentina in the late 70s, during a period in which that country was governed by a military junta that orchestrated a regime in which near 30,000 person “disappeared”, i.e., were taken from their home or work or in the street by military or police teams in civilian clothing never to reappear again, while the government denied any information about them (this interview was analyzed and its political context detailed in Sluzki 1990, and Sluzki, 1997a.)

A note on this is in order. Political “disappearances” became a common practice in Argentina during the military junta’s regime. Families lacked any resource, as most of the judges had been appointed de facto by the military themselves, and the few exceptions were immobilized by their own fear of being “disappeared.” Any habeas corpus process was frozen by the simple denial by the authorities that they had any information about the victims’ whereabouts. The media were either co-opted by the regime or silence by the fear of reporters and newspaper owners for their own lives. The only voice of protest became the daily presence at Plaza de Mayo, the plaza located in front of the presidential palace, of a growing group of women –mothers and grandmothers of disappeared. They would congregate in total silence, carrying large photos of their “desaparecidos” relatives, and slowly march around the monument located at the center of that plaza. These women were harassed by the police, and they would return the next day. Some were arrested, and some even in turn “disappeared,” but the rest would congregate again the following day. They were labeled by the occasional official communiqués “The crazy women of Plaza de Mayo,” but they became known nationwide as the “Mothers of Plaza de Mayo”. Their courageous daily presence became one of the factors that eroded the standing of the military junta.

The practice of political “disappearances” is currently carried out by repressive regimes worldwide: potential or real members of the opposition are kidnapped at gunpoint by military/paramilitary groups, their families are intimidated and intimidated for silence with promises of return if they comply, and the victims taken to torture centers and then killed, while all the time the authorities deny any knowledge of their whereabouts. In Argentina, as a gory example, after the fall of that junta it

was revealed that detainees had been taken to one of the over 300 newly established torture centers and concentration camps, and most of them –an estimated 30,000-- killed, their bodies either buried in unmarked common graves, dissolved tanks full of quicklime, or thrown (frequently drugged but alive) by the thousands from Navy airplanes into the ocean on one of their many "death flights" ("Nunca Mas," 1986; Marchak, 1999; Verbitsky, 1996). In all, it was a prime –while far from unique—example of "state terrorism."

The interview that I will discuss took place in the offices of a HMO family-oriented mental health clinic, where this family was referred because of the depressed and avoidant-hostile behavior in a 7-year old boy. The family member who requested the appointment by phone was informed that the whole family was expected to participate in the initial consultation, a routine intake procedure for that center. The caller clarified, rather hesitantly, that she was the aunt of the boy and of his 9-year old sister, even though the children considered her their mother, and that her brother, in turn an uncle of the children, was considered by them as the father, and that that the children lived with her and their grandmother. This ambiguous description, in the context of that political period, hinted much more: the receptionist had little doubt that this family was one in which there were *desaparecidos*. She wisely rephrased the request: she was expected to come to the initial consultation with all those who were close family.

I happened to be in Argentina for a couple of weeks and was scheduled to visit that clinic in order to provide some clinical consultations and training. In that context I was invited to conduct this potentially challenging initial consultation: it was predicted that the interview was

going to contain "hot" political issues –themes that were beginning to emerge in some clinical settings and were very unsettling for therapist immersed in the culture of that repressive context. The interview –as other interviews I would conduct—would be observed by the professional staff of the clinic behind a one-way mirror –a discussing about family dynamics and clinical methods would follow.

In due time, I greeted the family at the waiting room. They introduced themselves to me:⁵ the two children - a very lively 9 year-old girl and a subdued 7-year old boy -, their grandmother, and three of her offspring. Two of them introduced themselves as the children's aunt and uncle, "but the kids call us mommy and daddy." "And, doctor," added the grandmother, "these two have done everything for the children since they were very little." The third was also an uncle of the children, a merchant ship sailor in town between trips, delayed due to some medical treatment. I invited them to pass into the interview room, but the aunt delayed me, signaling that she wanted to talk privately with me. I made again a motion inviting her to pass to the office, and she argued in low voice, "But, doctor, it is because of the kids. . ." I answered, with a similar voice, "Ma'am, whatever it is, the kids probably know. But you don't have to talk about anything that you don't feel comfortable talking about." And again I invited her to enter the interview room, which she did.

I started by requesting again their authorization that the interview be observed behind a one-way mirror by a small team of professionals (they had been previously informed by phone about that possibility.) I reassured them again that, if they would prefer otherwise, the

⁵ The narrative of the interview contains some intentional distortions for purposes of preserving the anonymity of this family.

consultation would take place just the same. I also invited them to visit at that or any time the room behind the one-way mirror, and to be introduced to the members of the team (which, in fact they did at the end of the interview). While an ironic microcosmic reproduction of a panoptic (Foucault, 1977) surveillance state, the explicit nature of the process “normalized” it.

The interview proper⁶ retained a subdued tone but was intense and extremely moving for all, family, interviewer and observers. At the very beginning of the interview the girl noticed the microphone (transmitting our voices to the observation room) and with insistence called it to the attention of the grandmother, clearly –and responsibly—signaling a potential risk of breach of privacy. In fact, that allowed me to repeat once again the description of the setting, defined as training/supervision of professionals, and invited them to visit then, or at any moment, the observation room. The interview proceeded from then on comfortably. In it, the “secret” of the disappearance of both parents of the children proved to be known to both adults and children: even the 9 years-old girl, in a heart wrenching matter-of-fact style, described her recall of the episode when, three years before, a military group entered their house violently at night with portable machine-guns and took her mother in an unmarked police car –their father was taken by force from his workplace. Another theme that, according to the family, was at the root of the boy's depression and misbehavior was also openly discussed: uncle-daddy had announced that he was planning to become engaged to be married. The boy, in turn, expressed openly his fear that if his “daddy” would get married he would no longer be able to be considered his son. An

⁶ A richer description of the political context of this interview can be found in Sluzki, 1997a. A detailed transcription of this interview can be found in turn in Sluzki, 1990.

emotional exchange between child and uncle followed that assertion, in which the uncle assured him of his permanent love and role. A third theme discussed in the interview was the multiple somatic disorders that had plagued all members of this family since the disappearance of the biological parents of the children⁷. I tied that abundance of somatic expressions to the despair derived from lacking recourse and the increasingly untenable policy of keeping the secret of their “desaparecidos”, including the mythical assumption - openly challenged during the session - that, if they would not mention the issue, the disappeared would reappear alive, as they had been told during the abductions. The dilemma or ambiguity of whether their missing loved ones were alive or dead – to talk about that possibility was like breaking a taboo--and the difference in their life between “knowing and not knowing,” was openly explored. As mentioned, the climate of the session was extremely intense while subdued, warm and supportive, and profoundly moving. No politically “hot” subject was left untouched, braking gently but relentlessly through the barrier of the highly ambiguous language which characterized most conversations in Argentina during that period of political repression. As the consultation was ending I invited into the office the colleague that had been assigned to continue working with them, who until then was observing the interview through the one-way screen together with her colleagues, and introduced her to the family. Finally, I accompanied the family to the observation room to meet the group of professionals behind the one-way mirror.

⁷ Grandmother had high blood pressure unresponsive to medications, aunt/mommy complained of a duodenal ulcers and was probably abusing alcohol, the girl described frequent gastroenteric malaise, the boy was vissibly deprese
d, and the “other” uncle had been involved in a work-related accident that resulted in multiple bone fractures in his left arm and forearm. Only uncle/daddy did not express any complaint.

After the family left, a period of discussion between myself and the observing therapists followed, in which we analyzed the interview, we discussed the predicament of the family and possible next steps in their support. Equally if not more important, we discussed the unavoidable cognitive and emotional binds of being a therapist in a country in which those repressive process have been in place for years and suggested ways of beginning to restore their freedom to think, to feel, and to talk about these issues with individual and family patients who have been victims of those same context-generated restrictions.

What was revealed in subsequent sessions with this family was the pervasive effect of the repression and the deception trap, and the severity of the isolation of this family vis-a-vis the community. For instance, the family had chosen to take the children to an elementary school far away from their house, so as to minimize the possibility that other families who had children in that school interacted with them after school. Of course, aunt/mommy or uncle/daddy, who defined themselves as the children's parents in front of the school authorities, always took the kids to school and picked them up, but avoided any socialization with other parents. School mates of both children were never invited to their house, in order to minimize the possibility that the reality of this family's composition be detected. In fact, the children would neither go to other neighborhood children's house nor had other children coming to theirs to play. They seldom if ever went to playgrounds: they played in their apartment. The social isolation of the children –beyond the contact with children at school proper, and the contact with the immediate family-- was astonishing, and provided an additional understanding of the enormous threat that the uncle/father's impending wedding entailed for the boy: the child was in fear of loosing not only a father-like figure but also one of the few inhabitants of his sparse social world.

All these complex arrangements, and extreme isolation they entailed, derived from their wish to “follow the instructions of the military that took them away” and seemed to be at the service of maintaining alive the myth that the disappeared parents of these children may still be alive “somewhere and somehow.” The family was unable to act, frozen in time and evolution.

The paucity of a supportive social network of this family constitute a primer example of the inexorable deterioration that occurs as a result of oppressive regimes' toxic combination of repression and mystification: individuals become isolated within families and families isolated from their social context. The effect of this isolation is extremely damaging at many levels: validation of reality –for which “the other” is crucial—crumbles as actions that may result from alternative validated realities are curtailed; the validating experience of being a resource for others and of others being in turn resources, that is, the soothing sense of “community,” disappears; alienation, in the sociological, Durkheimian sense, settles; quality of life diminishes and actual disease becomes more frequent and severe and lasts longer (cf., among others, Berkman, L.F., 1979 and 1984; Bosworth, H.B. and Schaie, K.W., 1997; Choi, N.G. and Wodarski, J.S., 1996; House, J.; Robbins, C. and Metzger, H., 1982; Hultrantz-Jeppsson, A. and Marklund, K., 1986; Klefbeck, J; Bergerhed, E.; Forsberg, G., 1986 ; Kouzis, A.C. and Eaton, W.W. . 1998; Pilsuk, M. and Hiller Parks, S., 1986; Schoenbach, V; Kaplan, B.H.; Friedman, L.; Kleinbach, D., 1986; Sluzki, C.E., 1997b.)

Another lens that is valuable to show how families who had members disappeared without trace tend to react with a pattern that is, in the short run, adaptive and, in the long run, damaging, is the model of

the “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 1999.)⁸ Paradigmatic examples of “ambiguous loss” include military personnel “missing in action” as well as politically motivated “disappeared.” It may apply also for families of kidnapped children and of adolescents who have absconded from their homes never to be heard of again. In those families, “times freezes:” routines are kept, some time for years, that signal the symbolic presence of the absent and the daily reminder of the hope that she or he will reappear: their bedrooms are kept intact, their place in the dinner table is kept unoccupied, mourning is expressed only occasionally and in solitude, expressions of doubts about the survival of the disappeared is treated as a betrayal, and daily life is somehow arranged so as to keep alive the flame of the hope and the illusion of survival of the disappeared—sometimes against all odds and indicators.

The “magic” of the therapeutic process discussed above started when the silence was broken in this family, when the increasingly irrational beliefs ascribed to the power of silence was questioned, when the rule of silence within the family was challenged and words were said by children and grown-ups that had not been expressed in years, when the future was brought to light as they were challenged—another theme not touched by them at home—whether they thought that their *desaparecidos* were dead or alive, when the best interest of the children and their need to be connected to the world of other children and the tragic nature of their

⁸ This extremely interesting notion can be summarized in a two by two matrix that intersects emotional presence or absence with physical presence or absence of a loved one. Emotional and physical presence is the status of people who are alive and interacting. Emotional and physical absence signals a completed mourning—not that the loss is not felt, but that it doesn’t occupy an inordinate time, space and energy in the family. The other two are cells of ambiguity. One is emotional absence with physical presence, exemplified by the effect on the family of a member suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, or persistent coma, where the subject’s physical presence outlasts their “soul”—so much so that not infrequent family members find themselves asking “When is he/she going to finish dying?”, as they have already mourned the loss of that person qua person as the disease advances. And the other is emotional presence with physical absence, discussed more in detail in the text above.

own social isolation became apparent, when the predicament of this atypical (but not too atypical!) and rather heroic family was de-stigmatized and praised collectively, when the experience of contact with a group of empowering witnesses –the therapist, the clinic, the whole team—began to break their isolation by validating a reality that, painful as it was, allowed them to recapture their social life. In fact, shortly after this interview, the grandmother of the children established contact and became a member of the movement of “Mothers of Plaza de Mayo”, and not long after that so did the aunt... while the children had their first birthday at home in which some school companions and several children from their neighborhood were invited.

The reasonably uplifting ending of this story, definitely less ambiguous than the one of the reminiscence that begins this article, should not hide the core point of this essay, namely, that the discourse of the repressive apparatus of an oppressive state is habitually enveloped in a mystifying (i.e., deceiving) rhetoric—the control of the media contributing to the homogeneity of the discourse; and it is accompanied by threats of drastic consequences if questioned. Those deceptive practices have the effect of disorganizing the world of those under their influence: By means of proscribing social contact, they have the additional ominous effect of precluding the validation of alternative realities.⁹ All this translates, at a macro level, into a loosening of the social fabric and hampering of its dynamic organizational process (thus reducing threats against the regime, or any organized confrontation.) In turn, at the micro social level of individuals, couples, families, and personal

⁹ The set that includes a negative message, a second negative message contradicting the first one but placed at a different logical level, the proscription from clarification or “meta-communication”, the impossibility to leave the field, all of it pervasive or repeated, was labeled by Bateson et al. (1956) as the “double bind”, a Gordian knot that was proposed to be at the basis of severe psychopathology.

social network, they have the effect of “freeze” time and evolution or, as cognitive psychologists (e.g. Harre, 2002) would state it, of reducing the collective “body of knowledge” and hence diminishing the agentic capacity of individuals –individuals as agents or actors–, reducing their capacity to carry on projects, plans and actions. And the society at large, as a collective participating in a conspiracy of silence, in turn loses progressively its cohesion –fractures into minimal segments-- and reduces its power as a conjoint resource –no collective indignation, no collective solidarity-- for its members¹⁰.

The “Madres de Plaza de Mayo,” described above, constitute a prime example of retention of agency in the midst of repression. Shadows of valiant Gandhian tactics permeated their actions: they were breaking the rules while not breaking them. They were not supposed to talk, and they didn’t talk, they marched in silence while carrying an enlarged photo of their disappeared relative as an unstated demand. They were not allowed to carry on political rallies –narrowly defined as standing in front of the government house--, and they walked around the monument of that plaza. They were forcibly removed and jailed –in a type of public show of force in broad daylight that the government wanted to avoid--, and new ones would appear the following day. Not only were themselves displaying their social role as witnesses of the reality of the existence of the *desaparecidos* –strenuously denied by the government--, but, whenever challenged by the police, those repressive actions were in turn witnessed by the hundreds of people that would criss-cross constantly that centrally-located plaza. The “Madres of Plaza de Mayo” constituted in fact one of the most effective and powerful destabilizing movements that challenged

¹⁰ German society seems to have taken half a century to recover from the nefarious effects of Naziism on its own fabric, to return to its current self-reflective sense of self-respect, worth and efficacy as a collective.

that military regime in Argentina, breaking the silence that preserved the impunity with which that government was operating, their relentless presence ending up affirming their message in the collective consciousness.

The fight against the rule of silencing, the relentless struggle against accepting the definition of reality proposed if not imposed by violent regimes, had many faces throughout recent history. There are tales of heroic people that resist or overcome those imposed restrictions, who either by their own inner resources and resilience (exemplars being people such as Raoul Walembert, Bruno Bettelheim, Viktor Frankl or Nelson Mandela) or by a combination of resilience and a tight support networks (such as Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma or Martin Luther King, Jr. in the U.S., among many others), have been able to retain agency, maintain a constructive and evolving perspective, a supple consensually supported "body of knowledge" and a sense of being responsible actors in their own life in the most dire of circumstances.

Heroes and heroines appear as paradigmatic. However, ultimately, they may be only slightly more heroic of the countless number of persons who, even in the midst of all odds, retain their capacity of sociality, solidarity and action. Perhaps that applies even to people like some Czech friends of mine who, during the worst of the Soviet repression that followed the "velvet revolution" in Prague, retained their sanity and sense of self by meeting every other week to play chamber music, as they have been doing for years. That "subversive" activity, while not actively political, was enough of an act of rebellion to help them recognize themselves, rescue their identity and rescuing sociality in the midst of an effort by the state to dilute the capacity of individuals to consent or dissent, to think on their own, to converse. Perhaps it applies to any person

who retains his or her capacity to think and feel freely while helping others do the same.

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