Political Violence and War as Causes of Psychosocial Trauma in El Salvador

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Summary

Faced with the image that El Salvador offers the US government as "an incipient democracy," several daily events in the most basic social relations show a very different reality: that of a country at civil war. From a psychosocial perspective, the Salvadoran war can be defined by three characteristics: (a) the social polarization, intentionally sought by rival groups; (b) the institutionalized lie, that with time eventually reaches new levels; and (c) violence, which has gone from being predominantly repressive to being mainly warlike, with the consequent militarization of the country. This warlike situation produces a psychosocial trauma, that is, the traumatic crystallization in people and groups of dehumanized social relations. Polarization tends to be somatized, institutionalized lies precipitate serious identity problems and violence leads to the mind itself becoming militarized. Hence the urgency to undertake the psychosocial task of depolarization, de-ideologization and demilitarization of the country.

1. Two images of El Salvador

According to the US government, El Salvador represents a better example of the Latin American "new democracies" that have emerged during the last decade, particularly in the Central American area, where Nicaragua would be the only exception. This fact would also reflect the success of Reagan's foreign policy in Latin America. To prove his assertion about El Salvador, the following data is used:

(a) The Salvadoran government was elected in a free election, according to a democratic constitution.
(b) There is growing respect for the human rights of the population in the country. According to the US government, 80 percent of violations to those rights that still occur is caused by the rebels.
(c) The Salvadoran army has become increasingly professional, submitting itself to civil power.
(d) Although there are still some problems, for example, regarding the fulfillment of the population's basic needs, or the effective operation of the justice system, to a large extent these must be attributed to the situation created by the Marxist-Leninist groups that practice violent terrorism with the support of Cuba and Nicaragua.

Unfortunately, this image of the country is a very typical ideological elaboration of the Reagan administration, but that reflects little or nothing the real situation of El Salvador. A government's democratic character does not depend or, at least not only, on the way it is elected, but on the forces that each day determine its performance. And a verifiable fact is that when it comes to defining the fundamental policies of El Salvador, the ghosts of the United States "national security" count more than the most basic needs of the Salvadoran people. That Duarte's government has some significant control over the Armed Forces of El Salvador is something that no Salvadoran has in mind, and this is simply as a result of the daily experience of who is really in charge. Finally, attributing the main human rights violations to the rebels does not exempt the government from its share of responsibility. Furthermore, that judgment constitutes a gross distortion of the data, more suitable of a "psychological war" campaign than of an objective analysis of the events.

What, then, is the reality of El Salvador? Let us examine a series of daily events that directly concern the area of the so-called mental health, but that in their concrete terms reveal a very different reality from that offered by the spokesmen of the Reagan administration.

1. The department of Chalatenango, in the north of the country, is one of the most conflictive areas, over which FMLN insurgents exercise practical control for a good part of the year. A small population in this department is hardly inhabited by a few tens of very poor peasant families, composed of a few adult men, the elderly, women and children; there are no young people. Periodically, the Armed Forces launches military operations that affect this small town, including bombings, mortar attacks, minefields, searches and destruction of homes and crops. Every time an operation starts, the population shelters in their little houses, seized by a series of psychosomatic symptoms: generalized tremor of the body, muscle "lassitude", diarrhea. Since the beginning of the war an elderly couple has opted to hide in a "tatu" (a cave like hiding structure) or refuge every time an operative takes place or when the Armed Forces approach. The result has been that the mere announcement of an operation produces in the man what the whole town knows as "the pain:" a violent intestinal cramp, an overwhelming headache and a generalized lethargy, making him unable to even walk.

In a small study with 250 people of all ages, conducted recently at the San José Calle Real shelter, located on the outskirts of San Salvador, (36% of the refugees there), it was found that the presence of the army in the vicinity of the shelter was enough for 87 percent of them to experience tremor, 75 percent felt tachycardia and 64 percent were invaded by a generalized body tremor (ACISAM (Mental Health Training and Research Association), 1988, pp. 12-13).

2. Usulután is another area in the southeast of the country, with two distinct regions: one a Coastal rich cotton producer, and another more mountainous, with large coffee farms. The FMLN has a permanent presence there, and the Armed Forces carry out continuous counter-insurgency operations. A series of surveys found that the government soldiers systematically practice the sexual abuse of young peasant women living in the area. As indicated by one of them, to avoid the continuous massive
violations, the "most clever ones" (their term) have to resort to becoming protected by some soldier or officer, prostituting with them and asking to be protected from others. Of course, this data does not enter into the human rights statistics of the US embassy in San Salvador. But, according to available information, it constitutes a common practice of the members of the Armed Forces and not of the FMLN.

To complement this data, it should be added that, in a survey conducted in February 1988, when peasants were asked what they thought were the causes of the war, 59.1 percent of the interviewees, who so far had expressed themselves with great spontaneity, became frightened and responded that they did not know about that (IUDOP (Public Opinion University Institute), 1988). Even when they were pointed to the obvious traces of war -burnt-out crops, houses with bullet marks or bombs-they insisted on their ignorance and that it happened "when they were not there." Certainly, if fear has diminished in the last few years among the population of the metropolitan area of San Salvador, it remains a dominant reminder among the peasantry, even those who live in less conflictive areas of the country.

3. Increasingly, massacres of civilians are carried out by soldiers on permit or ex-soldiers who throw grenades at a private house, inside a bus or in the middle of a dance. It is not uncommon for the perpetrators to be drunk when doing so. The reasons are usually jealousy or a desire to assert their power or "authority." Only in the last week of February 1988, the press reported no less than four cases of this kind.

4. In an investigation carried out between April and May 1987, which attempted to reproduce studies carried out in the United States on the formation of the concept of social class (see Leahy, 1983), more than 200 children of various ages and belonging to different social sectors were interviewed. One of the questions that was asked was: "What would have to happen so that there were no poor people?" Several of the interviewees, belonging to high socioeconomic sectors, gave the following answer: "To kill them all." Of course, this can be interpreted in several ways, and the Study is still not concluded. But in none of the studies developed in the United States these types of responses were obtained.

It should not be forgotten that some sectors of Salvadoran society still consider the elimination of "all subversives" in the manner of 1932 as a solution to the civil war, in order to "win in this way" -or, at least, as affirmed by them- "Another fifty years of peace."

These four facts are sufficient - the psychosomatic symptoms in the face of military operatives, the massive rape of peasant women, the disarray of criminal violence by soldiers or officers and the almost murderous configuration of the infantile mind - to prove that the reality of El Salvador is very different from that presented by the official reports of the US government. Three features can be useful to define that specific reality: its growing impoverishment, the legitimacy of an authority above the law and the continuity of the civil war.

(a) Above all, more than a poor society it is an impoverished one, not only divided, but violently torn, in which the most basic human rights of the majority are structurally and systematically denied. There is no reference here to rights such as freedom of the press or freedom of worship, which seem to greatly concern the US government in regards to Cuba or Nicaragua; the reference is to the much more fundamental right to preserve life, to have enough to eat, to have a place to live, a job in which to become fulfilled as a human being, a school where you can educate your children. What use is it to the Salvadoran peasant that the government does not censor the newspapers, if they cannot read them, as they are illiterate, nor do they have the money to buy them or, above all, is their hunger and pain, their suffering and longing reflected in them?

(b) For the majority of Salvadorans, the Government Armed Forces continue to be the representation of a frightening and abusive power, an arbitrary and omnipotent "authority", expression of an organized system at the service of the needs of a minority of ten or fifteen percent of the population. It is not a matter of denying the partial improvements experienced by the Salvadoran army, both in its technical performance and in its relations with the civilian population. However, the armed forces in El Salvador remain as an institution above the law, and whether or not it respects the rights of the people, is left to the arbitrary whim of its trade interests and, what is worse, to the narrow understanding of each particulate situation by the local official and even the simple soldier, constituted as "authority."
(c) The war that has been raging the country for eight years, and which American military advisors estimate can continue for six more, is producing a systematic destruction of the Salvadoran population. Obviously, a very fundamental part of this destruction is the number of victims: it is estimated that, already in recent years, there are nearly seventy thousand deaths due to the conflict. It is difficult to offer an accurate number of those wounded, although it is known that in every war confrontation, there are usually no less than three wounded per death. However, what we want to emphasize here is not so much the bodily destruction but the psychosocial damage. And, as seen in the examples presented, the impact of the Salvadoran war ranges from the physical deterioration that appears by way of psychosomatic symptoms, to the aberrant criminalization in the child's mind, through the disruption of social relations subjected to the abuse and violence of those who have the power in their hands.

It is not by chance that a democratic image is portrayed about El Salvador, even though the reality is drastically different. Part of the problem is about ideological concealment, an essential component to justify the continuation of what, for the Reagan government, is no more than a simple "low intensity conflict," but for the Salvadoran people it constitutes a war that, after being deprived of their national sovereignty threatens to destroy their identity and even their historical viability. For this reason, it is convenient to examine the conflict itself more closely.

2. The Salvadoran war

Every war is a way to resolve a conflict between groups and is characterized by the use of violence, intended to destroy or dominate a rival. Psychology studies on war predominantly tend to focus in two areas: one area works towards the efficiency of military actions, by studying the most effective ways of organizing and operating, or by directly contributing elements that assist in the war effort (the so-called "psychological warfare"); the other area concentrates on the psychological sequelae of war and is oriented towards prevention and treatment.

However, there is one aspect of war of great importance that must be analyzed by social psychology: that is its defining character of the social whole. Due to its own dynamics, a war tends to become the most encompassing phenomenon in a country's reality, the dominant process to which other social, economic, political and cultural processes have to be overpowered by, and which, directly or indirectly, affects all members of a society.

That same absorbing character of war can lead to ignoring the differential ways it affects groups and individuals: what for some represents ruin is for others a great business, and for certain groups, it puts them on the brink of death whilst for others, it opens the possibility of a new life. One is the war that the peasants have to suffer in their own flesh, and a very different one is the one the bourgeois industrialist views in his television screen. In El Salvador, those who go to the battlefield are predominantly the poor, the offspring of the peasants and of the urban marginalized, not the offspring of the boss or the professional.

In 1984, from a psychosocial perspective the Salvadoran civil war was characterized by three fundamental traits. (1) violence, which steers the best resources of each contestant towards the destruction of the rival; (2) social polarization, that is, the displacement of groups towards opposite ends, with the consequent hardening of their respective ideological positions and pressure on the various social instances to align with "us" or "them;" and (3) the institutional lie that goes from distorting the aim of the institutions to the ideological concealment of the social reality (Martín-Baró, 1984).

In essence, this psychosocial characterization of the Salvadoran war continues to be valid in 1988, which in itself is already a deplorable fact. Nevertheless, it is convenient to examine the modalities that these characteristics of the Salvadoran civil war have been adopting as a consequence of the prolongation of the war alone.

2.1. Social Polarization

The 1984 analysis showed that the degree of social polarization of the Salvadoran population had reached a ceiling, and that significant signs of depolarization were observed, that is to say that there were conscious efforts by some groups and sectors to dealign themselves from both contenders (Martín-Baró, 1984, page 507). The processes of polarization and depolarization are not uniform or mechanical, but are more closely related to the advance of military activity and to the
evolution of the political situation. In this regard, since 1984 several important processes have been observed. Perhaps the most significant is the resurgence of the mass movement, with clear sympathies towards the FMLN's stance. However, the conscious effort to polarize and encourage popular organizations to shift from the demands of better work conditions towards a more conscious political, radical and even violent position, has resulted in a new decline of the movement. The ones who have parted are those who do not feel with the strength to enter into such dynamic, or fear a repetition of the repressive terrorism of 1981-1982. On the government's side, the Armed Forces have launched several counterinsurgency plans, and one of its essential components is the so-called "psychological warfare." These plans have expressly sought to win "the minds and hearts" of the civilian population, in order to constitute them as the main obstacle against the rebels, who are depicted as vulgar terrorists and enemies of the people.

Each of the parts has made a concerted and conscious effort, not only to maintain social polarization, but to deepen and extend it. In order to achieve this goal, both contenders have tried to emphasize elements of antagonism, rather than elements of possible agreement, and have exploited as much as possible the sources of resentment and inter-group hatred. Both have presented each other as the incarnation of evil, as "the enemy" to be eliminated. This aspect is more contradictory in government propaganda than in the FMLN, both because of its magnitude and intensity, which is incomparably greater, and due to the violence it inflicts on language. Thus, the message conveyed under the slogan "united to rebuild," a name given to the most ambitious counterinsurgency campaign of the Armed Forces in the last two years, clearly said "disunited to destroy," or, "united against each other to get rid of them."

The level of social polarization that is found today in the country - beyond conjunctural moments, as are the electoral periods - is less than that which occurred in the first years of the civil war. Somehow, fatigue and reason, the disappointment with the military solution, the demands of everyday coexistence, added to international pressure and the emergence of tainted options, have been opening political spaces, that some have tried to take advantage of to build bridges and draw new horizons. In any case, the amount of resources devoted to keeping social polarization alive points to the growing resistance of the Salvadoran people to seek a solution to the conflict through military means, even though it may adopt forms such as inhibition or skepticism, that are not always socially or personally constructive.

But, even though the level of social polarization has tended to diminish and there is a popular resistance deaf to any effort to further radicalize the conflict, the campaigns to polarize keep the country in an environment of tension that is not only warlike, but also psychosocial: the facts are ideologized, people are demonized, the use of those same political spaces that the evolution of the conflict has forced to open are criminalized. All of which leads to an apparent bogging down of social confrontation, and to making it harder to establish areas for the interaction of the various social groups with a view to achieve common interest objectives. That is why the Duarte government encountered a serious problem when it was forced to comply with the Esquipulas II agreements against its main source of power, the United States, and with the open reticence of the Armed Forces. In fact, he had no recourse but to resort to the record of formalistic compliance, which served more as a justification to continue the war than as a step towards peace.

2.2. The institutionalized lie

The systematic concealment of reality continues to be one of the fundamental characteristics of the Salvadoran war, and it takes several forms:

(a) First of all, it is about creating an official version of events, an "official story," which ignores crucial aspects of reality, distorts, invents and even falsifies others. This official story is imposed via an intense and very aggressive propaganda display, which is supported even by putting at stake the entire clout of the highest official positions. Thus, for example, the President of the Republic became a public sponsor of the version that sought to incriminate the FMLN for the murder of Herbert Anaya Sanabria, president of the non-government Human Rights Commission.

(b) When, for any circumstance, facts appear in the public light that directly contradict the "official story", a "sanitary cord" is laid out around them, a circle of silence that relegates them to
a quick disremembering or to the past, presumably surmounted by the evolution of events. The continuous human rights violations from members of the Armed Forces obviously enter in this atmosphere of concealed silence.

(c) The public expression of reality, the condemnation of human rights violations and, above all, the unmasking of the official story and of the institutionalized lie, are deemed "subversive" activities - and in fact they are, as they subvert the lie established by the order at hand. This leads to the paradox that anyone who dares to name reality or to denounce abuses becomes, at the least, a criminal at the hands of the justice system. What matters is not whether the facts referred to are true or not, which is always denied a priori, what is important is that they are named. The realities are not what matter, what matters are the images. Thus, for example, when Monsignor Rosa Chávez, auxiliary bishop of San Salvador denounced members of the First Infantry Brigade as the perpetrators of a triple murder, with all the characteristics of a "death squad," he was immediately criminalized by the highest civil and military authorities. The bishop had to prove his "innocence," he was the accused, and it didn’t seem to matter much whether the denounced fact was true or not.

(d) An additional component of the lies is the degree of corruption that has progressively and rapidly permeated the various state agencies and the new Christian Democratic officials. Of course, this does not represent a historical novelty in a Salvadoran government; what is new is that corruption has so invaded the members of a party that, until that moment, had behaved relatively honestly and whose moralizing and presumably Christian-inspired discourse is the furthestmost to one of the uses of public resources for private means. The overwhelming contrast between political discourse and the actual behavior of Christian Democrat members in power establishes a new level of deceit and lies, more so as it occurs in circumstances of extreme poverty and hardship for the majority of Salvadoran people. The most favorable judgment heard today about the corruption of the Christian Democratic rulers is that it does not differ from that of governments prior to 1979 - precisely the governments whose actions contributed to precipitate the civil war.

As a significant contradiction happening within the framework of this environment of institutionalized lying, is that a series of television news programs appear in El Salvador that enjoy and make effective use of a remarkable freedom. In El Salvador there are currently no less than four news programs ("Al Día," "Telepressa," "El Noticiero" and "TCS noticias") as well as a series of programs linked to them that offer the public information nearer to the facts than those of the "official story". They also allow for the opportunity to hear opinions and judgments from all kinds of people, without excluding those most critical about the process. Though it is not necessary to analyze this here, it bears the question: How and why has this been possible? Whilst until recently, radio stations and opposition newspapers were dynamited and, FMLN stations continue to be systematically interfered with. This does not mean that there are no official or para-official pressures on these programs, or that there are no concerted efforts to assimilate or co-opt them for the benefit of the system established. In fact, together with the advent of these programs, a Ministry of Culture and Communications was also established, clearly oriented towards a "psychological warfare" and to counteract any possible breach in the "official story."

2.3. Violence

As it is known, military violence in the Salvadoran war has two features: on the one hand, that of an open military confrontation, independent from any greater or lesser conventionalism. On the other hand, that of covert paramilitary repression, directed not only against combatants but against all those sectors or groups of the population that support or sympathize with the insurgents, or who are suspected to support or sympathize with them.

At the beginning, the Salvadoran war was characterized by a minimum of open military actions and a maximum of undercover ones. The "death squads" and not the battalions were the main instruments the government had to remain in power in the face of popular and revolutionary unrest. However, due to the prolongation of the war and the demands of the US-promoted project for El Salvador, this has been reversed and, while military confrontations have become
of paramount importance, repression has been relegated to a less relevant level. It is a continuously aired fact by the US government, that there has been a significant reduction in the number of people tortured, murdered or "disappeared" attributable to government forces. Much more questionable is the assertion that the FMLN's human rights violations have been increasing and that most of the violations that occur today in El Salvador are caused by them. In any case, two factual statements are pertinent here: (a) the number of dead and wounded victims in the military confrontation is currently much higher than that of victims of repression; (b) the number of victims of repression has been reduced, but it is still higher than it was before the war and which was condemned as unacceptable by various international organizations.

This change in the war’s direction has dragged a parallel phenomenon in the social order: it has gone from an order maintained by state terrorism to a militarized order. In El Salvador there has been a militarization of the society and of collective life, both in the areas controlled by the government and the FMLN -without attempting to deny the clear differences that exist between the two cases.

The militarization of the social order means at least two things: (a) military officers tend to occupy the majority of key posts in the institutional order; (b) the military instance becomes the criterion for the validity and even the possibility of any activity. In other words, it is difficult to develop any activity or enterprise of any importance in the country that doesn’t first need the institutional endorsement of the Armed Forces or the personal sponsorship of a member of the military. The openly exercised vigilance by the military around production centers, or the control they establish over the various communication systems is not but the most visible expression of their growing power over the functioning of Salvadoran society.

3. Psychosocial trauma

If human beings are historical products, it is understandable to think that this particular war history in El Salvador will have to impact in some way on its inhabitants. It is not necessary to assume some of the traditional psychological views on the basics of personality to understand that the prolongation of the civil war must have an important impact on the Salvadorans way of being and acting. It is this impact that here is regarded as psychosocial trauma.

3.1. Character of the psychosocial trauma of war

Etymologically, trauma means wound. In psychology, trauma is usually used to refer to an experience that affects the person in such a way that it marks them, namely that it leaves a permanent residue. If the term trauma is used, it is because it is understood that this residue is negative, that it is a wound, in so many words, an unfavorable remnant for the person's life.

In general, the particular hurt left on a specific person by a difficult or exceptional experience is described as psychic trauma -the death of a loved one, a situation of particular tension or suffering, a painfully frustrating event-. Thus, for example, a child who sees his parents die in an accident or in a fire. Sometimes, in a more analogous sense, the term social trauma is used to refer to in what way some historical process may have affected an entire population. For example, this would be the case of the German and the Jewish people after the termed "final solution" experience.

Here, the unusual term psychosocial trauma is used to emphasize the essentially dialectical character of the injury caused by a prolonged lived experience of war, like the one in El Salvador. This does not mean that there is a uniform or common effect for the entire population, or that the experience of war can be presumed to have some mechanical impact on people. Precisely, if we talk about the dialectical character of psychosocial trauma it is in order to emphasize that the injury or affectation will depend on each individual’s lived experience, which is conditioned by their social extraction, by their degree of participation in the conflict, as well as other characteristics of their personality and experience (see Martín-Baró, 1984, pp. 509-511). The suffering brought on by war can even offer some people the opportunity to grow humanly. The public conduct of someone like the martyred archbishop of San Salvador, Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, paradigmatically show the growth of the person as the persecutions and attacks against him intensified. Archbishop Romero is nothing more than the best-known example of many other Salvadorans who have, due to the war, found the opportunity to develop exceptional human virtues of pure altruism and caring love.
But when talking about psychosocial trauma we also want to highlight other two aspects, which tend to often be forgotten: (a) that the injury that affects people has been socially produced, that is, its roots are not found in the individual, but in their society, and (b) that their very nature is sustained and maintained in the relationship between the individual and society, through various institutional, group and even individual intercessions. This has obvious and important consequences when determining what must be done to overcome these traumas.

3.2. Psychosocial trauma as dehumanization

Joaquin Samayoa (1987, pp. 215) maintains that the cognitive and behavioral changes caused by war bring about a process of dehumanization, understood as the diminishment of four important capacities in humans: (a) their ability to think clearly, (b) their ability to communicate truthfully, (c) their sensitivity to the suffering of others, and (d) their hope.

What are these cognitive and behavioral changes caused by the need to adapt to war that would in turn precipitate the dehumanization of people? Samayoa mentions five: (1) selective neglect and clinging to prejudices, (2) absolutizing, idealization and ideological rigidity, (3) evasive skepticism, (4) paranoid defense, and (5) hatred and a desire for revenge. Nonetheless, when examining how these cognitive and behavioral patterns arise and are configured, Samayoa points out three adaptive or survival dynamics: (a) uncertainty in relation to one's destiny, (b) a lack of purpose and even of meaning in what has to be done, and (c) the need for personal connection or attachment to a group.

From their psychotherapeutic experience in Chile a different line of thought has been developed by the group headed by Elisabeth Lira (1985-1986). According to this group, a situation of state terrorism such as that experienced in Pinochet’s Chile causes a state of fear in people and, although fear is a subjective experience and to a certain extent a private one, "when it occurs simultaneously in thousands of people in a society, it acquires an unsuspected relevance in both, the social and political behavior "(page 51). According to this group of psychologists there are four main psychological characteristics of the processes triggered by fear: (1) a feeling of vulnerability, (2) an exacerbated state of hypervigilance, (3) the sense of impotence or loss of control over one's life, and (4) an alteration in the sense of reality, as it becomes impossible to objectively validate one's own experiences and knowledge.

The formulations of both, Samayoa and the Chilean group are complementary: while in one case the role of the cognitive and behavioral aspects is underlined, in the other the mediation of an emotional element, fear, is emphasized. We find ourselves then with the classic components of psychological analysis: emotion and behavior – that some substitute with volition.

Nevertheless, it is convenient to point out the limitations of both models. In the Chilean case, it is clear that their analysis is limited to sectors of the population that have been the target of Pinochet's repression. Therefore, those sectors of the population favorable to Pinochet would be excluded, who, more than fear, would have frequently experienced satisfaction and security with policies that guaranteed their class rule.

Samayoa's approach is broader and in principle can be applied to all sectors of the population, since they all have to adapt to the new historical circumstances. But such a nuclear role attributed to adaptation is precisely what I find unsatisfactory in this approach. It would seem that groups and people are external to the war situation that they would be forced to adapt. It would be then, on their behalf, a fundamentally responsive and even passive conception in the face of historical realities. And on the contrary, however alienated they may be, the data leads to affirm the essential and active role that groups, and people play as subjects of history. Undoubtedly, for many Salvadorans war is something that is imposed on them. But for many, war is something that they themselves contribute to propitiate and develop and, consequently, their participation in those processes would be misunderstood if viewed from a simply adaptationist stance. Probably, Samayoa does not intend to deny this, but his model bears that limitation or, at least, leaves that ambiguity open.
3.3. Crystallization of social relationships

We believe, from our perspective, that the best way to understand the psychosocial trauma experienced by the inhabitants of El Salvador today, is to conceive it as the crystallization or materialization within people of the social war relations that are experienced in the country. It is not hidden behind this approach the understanding of humans as the product of a peculiar history, which in each case is concretized in the social relations of which the individual is an active and passive part. From this it derives that the nature of the main social relationships will take shape in people. What role each of the psychic elements play - knowledge, attachments, volitions - will have to be examined in each situation, but in principle, all people are affected by the experience of war. From this stance, it follows that each person will be affected according to their particular social location and their specific way of participating in the war processes.

The psychosocial trauma experienced by people then denotes alienating social relationships, which deny the human character of the "enemy" who, as such, is rejected as an interlocutor and is even sought to be destroyed. The affirmation of one's own personality is affected by the dehumanization of the other who in turn, one dialectically constructs through.

If the war in El Salvador is characterized by social polarization, institutionalized lying and the militarization of social life, we must examine how these three outstanding aspects of social relations become crystallized in people. It is not about looking for a mechanical correspondence that would objectify what are only analytical aspects of a historical reality. On the contrary to see how the specificity of the Salvadoran war makes imprints both on groups and individuals, how it manifests as psychosocial trauma. What follows are some hypotheses that attempt to account for the disorders already encountered, but as working hypotheses, they need to be subjected to empirical verification.

Firstly, we believe that the various forms of somatization constitute the bodily rooting of social polarization. It is not stated that every process of polarization ends up taking root in the organism, or that every psychosomatic disorder must be attributed to the experience of war polarization. What is meant is that the acute experience of polarization can be and is often entrenched in the body. It is no wonder, then, that the groups and people most likely to experience this type of disorder are those who are gripped by the tear of polarization: the inhabitants of places that continually pass from the control of one side to another, or those that are subjected to an intense ideological bombardment by any of the sides and are unable to affirm their own preference. Similarly, those that have to force themselves to assume extreme and rigid positions in favor of their own group. Social derangement relates to the personal and even somatic dislocation that can lead to complex forms of psychotic alienation, observed in some young people from conflicting populations.

Secondly, in various ways, the prevailing climate of lies negatively permeates the foundations of people's identities. First of all, the blurring of reality generates a schizoid dislocation between the subjective experiences and the social life, that doesn’t offer a field to formally validate their own knowledge or, in the best of cases, refers them to an excessively restricted social circle. This difficulty to formally validate generates both, a feeling of insecurity about what is thought and a skepticism regarding the various social and political options. When the lie has to be assumed as a way of life and people are forced to lead a double existence -the case of those who work in clandestine conditions- the problem is aggravated. Not so much because there is no way to formalize and validate one's own experience, but because the need to function on two planes results in an ethical and existential muddle. Many end-up abandoning that heartbreaking lifestyle, which in turn can produce a deflation of their own image and feelings of guilt about their own convictions and, with their old companions in the struggle. Lira and her colleagues have clearly analyzed the identity problems derived from the impossibility to organize life according to one's own political values, when these values are contrary to the established regime (Lira et al., 1985-1986, Weinstein, 1987).

Finally, the militarization of social life can lead to a progressive militarization of the mind. Again, it is not a simple or mechanical effect; but there isn’t much doubt that the almost compulsive violence that takes hold of interpersonal relations, even the most intimate ones, as well as the sociopathic destructiveness that some members or ex-members of the military expose, are intrinsically related to the growing
preponderance of military ways of thinking, feeling and acting in social life. The most serious aspect of this psychosocial militarization occurs when it becomes a normal way of being, transmitted through socialization processes, as in the case of children, who naively affirm that in order to end poverty it is necessary to kill all the poor.

4. Conclusion: the psychosocial task

The indefinite continuance of war supposes the normalization of these dehumanized social relations whose impact on people goes from the somatic injury to the mental structure, weakening their personality as they find themselves unable to authentically affirm their own identity. One cannot understand biological crises without its direct reference to the polarizing tension. And neither can sociopolitical inhibition be understood in the face of a climate of institutionalized lying, and furthermore, ideological stereotyping in the face of the militarization of social life. But, in turn, people who develop within this context will assume as innate the contempt for human life, the law of the strongest as a social criteria and corruption as a way of life, thus precipitating a serious vicious circle which tends to both, objectively and subjectively perpetuate the war.

It isn’t the purpose of this paper to examine the ways in which this problem ought to be tackled. But undoubtedly, individual or group Psychotherapy, understood as a process of psychological intervention is not sufficient. By all means, it is not a question of abandoning, to their own fate, those people who already suffer in their own flesh the alienating ravages of war. What is asserted is that even in the case of the same individuals involved, this effort is insufficient. As long as social relations -structural, group and interpersonal- remain unchanged as they occur today in the country, the particular treatment of its consequences will, at best be incomplete.

In El Salvador, it is necessary to initiate an intense task of depolarization, de-ideologization and demilitarization. In positive terms, it is essential to work to establish a new framework for coexistence, a new "social contract" in the best sense, that allows for a collective interaction without discrepancies becoming a source for mutual annulment; we must work towards a social honesty that can lead us to know the realities before defining them, to accept the facts before interpreting them. Finally, we must strive to educate in reason and not in force, so that coexistence can be based on mutual complementarity to resolve problems, and not in violence so as to impose our own alternative.

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