

Remembering Antigone

How the actual turbulent situation in Turkey might affect our work as psychoanalysts? This is a question that we are asked more and more frequently in our encounters with colleagues from different parts of the world. I will try to address the question with a few sentences. It is of course difficult and misleading, if not illusory, to pretend that we can draw generalizations about clinical experiences of all psychoanalysts, regardless the analytic situation specific to each cure. Yet there are sufficient social cues that are conflicting with the basic assumptions of psychoanalysis, through which we can draw a picture of the difficulties involving our daily work with our patients in that social distress context. I wish to emphasize two of those basic assumptions, namely the vital importance of “transitional spaces” as described by Winnicott and the need to complete a proper and decent mourning process, which is of crucial importance for a healthy psychic functioning, needless to say that this is also a fundamental human right.

My attempts at writing this short comment met with obstacles, for a longtime, which I was unable to determine whether they were internal or external. The things going on were not only worrying or alarming but also everything was changing at an unprecedented pace, so that it was almost impossible to circumscribe a more or less meaningful picture of what was going on. In fact this is the most accurate and straightforward description our actual situation: Every morning we are waking up to a new constraint, a new governmental decision, or a catastrophe, which marks our internal and external world. Neighborhoods are demolished and reconstructed with no environmental or humanitarian concern. In a short space of time, in less than six months, we lived the pain of several massacres done by ISIS suicide bombers; we had parliament elections twice; the peace process between Turkish and Kurdish entities rapidly deteriorated to finally come to an end; a prominent Kurdish figure, Tahir Elçi, had been assassinated in a suspicious armed conflagration; state forces started systematically attacking parts of the southeastern Kurdish cities, despite the risks that civilians be in the line of fire... I don't even mention the pain of watching thousands of Syrian refugees entering the country, sleeping in public places or dying in Turkish shores while they were trying to reach western countries via Greece.

Those conditions generate anxiety, and erode the meaning of the future, education, social life, public space, or citizenship... But first and foremost they destroy the transitional space, and constrain people to stick to a barren reality. Consequently they corrode psychic space and capacities.

In Istanbul the destruction of the transitional space had become visible and had been accelerated with the physical destruction of a public space, Gezi Park, which led to mass protests in May-June 2013, and manifestations had been suppressed with a non-proportional power. Very significantly this part of the city used to harbor our most important cultural center, the home of the national opera, ballet, and theatre, and which has been closed on the pretext of a court trial and seemingly has been

used since, as a provisional police warehouse. The square, which is surrounded by the park and the cultural center, once the most vivacious part of the city, is now a ghostly square. It is like a reflection of the growing barren reality cloud over the country that circumvents any transitional space. I feel that the shadow of this ghostly place falls on our consulting rooms.

On the other hand, we witnessed recently an infliction submitted to people by authorities, through insulting dead bodies and not letting people bury their dead relatives, in the southeastern cities where Kurdish population are being under blockade. Thus, sometimes it may be difficult to give free rein to one's capacity of reverie, or to permit oneself to creatively, playfully listen to the patients' free associations, when images of unburied bodies circulate around, or are sometimes also verbally brought in the consulting room; because they bring along a too much real, morbid and bitter reality.

This insult and pain inflicted both to dead people and their relatives reminds me the story of the ancient tragedy figure of Sophocles, Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, whose two brothers Eteocles and Polyneices, die in the civil war fighting each other. Creon, who grasps the throne after Oedipus, sanctifies Eteocles with holy rites, while he humiliates Polyneices, through banishing the burial of his dead body. Antigone risks her life for taking her brother's dead body away from the battlefield and for burying it.

Belgian poet, novelist and psychoanalyst Henry Bauchau describes Antigone's despair in his impressive novel *Antigone*, in a passage where he makes her beg for a piece of bread. Antigone is ashamed, and her feeble voice remains unheard. Then she unleashes a cry and a lamentation, which calls not only for bread but also releases from her an intense psychic pain over her brothers, her city and her impossible mourning. This cry, we heard it from several mouths during last months, in the Kurdish part of population. Also we heard it, two years ago from a Ezidi deputy, who cried for help, in the Irakian Assembly, for her people who were being massacred by ISIS.

Such as Antigone's disturbing voice that we can still hear through centuries, those cries of distress certainly haunt us, whether we pay attention to them or not, whether we respect them or we deny them. They are suspended in our consulting rooms and resonate in the inner world of both patients and analysts. Such a crude reality is difficult to elaborate, and I believe that we all work now, to varying extents against this steady background of nameless dreads, anxiety, distress, and shame.

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