

ONCE AGAIN, “THE SERPENT’S EGG”?

Cláudio Laks Eizirik - SPPA

Observatório Psicanalítico - FEBRAPSI

*Essays on social, cultural, and political events in Brazil and the world.
May 2020.*

In March 2018, after attending the European Congress of Psychoanalysis in Warsaw, where the topic of the Holocaust was bravely tackled from the human and psychoanalytic point of view, we went to Cracow and spent a day in Auschwitz.

Nothing that is read, heard, or seen in films, documentaries, and series can be compared to what happens in this visit to the largest open-view cemetery in Europe. Everything in Auschwitz is horrible: its entrance gates with the creepy and perverse phrase “Work sets you free”, the lines of visitors reminding the line of prisoners at their deaths’ path, the gloomy brick buildings, each scenario of human degradation and human evil, the gas chambers, the wooden sheds, the oppressive silence, the mechanical reports by the guides, the photos and films of people minutes before being transformed in ashes, and above all, the cold, so intense that no clothes are enough: the cold of death.

For Hanna Arendt (2005), who identified “the banality of evil”, “the concentration and extermination camps of the totalitarian regimes serve as laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism- that everything is possible - is being verified. The camps are not only for the extermination and degradation of human beings: they also serve to the terrible experience of eliminating spontaneity as the expression of human behavior and transforming human personality into an ordinary thing”.

André Green (1988) highlights that the cold and cruel monster of destructiveness joins the more traditional figures of evil: it is well known that evil is insensitive to someone’s else pain; it ignores the suffering of others, and on the contrary, it feeds it, therefore showing its narcissistic roots. Green regards the Holocaust as the most complete form of evil as it corresponds to an evil that is born from the de-objectalization due to the death instinct. Therefore, sadism impresses less than the efficacy of its productivity, cruelty seems less terrible than the enthusiasm for order and cleanness in the systematic extermination.

In short, Nazism, and everything and everyone associated with it, is a cruel denial of human values and ethics, two essential pillars of democracy and psychoanalysis.

The former Brazilian Minister of Education, Weintraub, compared a Federal Police operation against some suspects of funding demonstrations against democracy and spreading fake news to the infamous “Crystal Night”.

The Crystal Night was a pogrom organized by the Nazi government against German Jews on November 9 1938, consisting on the destruction, breaking of glasses, burning of shops, synagogues and other establishments with a death toll of more than one thousand people and the incarceration and arrestments of 30,000 in the concentration camps. This event is considered the formal onset of the persecutions culminating in the death of 6 million of Jews and millions of other people by the Nazi regime.

Shortly after the minister's manifestation, Brazilian and international Jewish entities and authorities vehemently protested against such a comparison, which offends the memory and tragedy of millions of people during the Holocaust. In my view and for many other Brazilians, who have a minimum of historical notion, ethics, and decency, this use of episodes of such magnitude in a search of justification for criminal actions by people or institutions is an unacceptable indignity.

Several government officials have spoken out or used Nazism. The examples range from the unbelievable to pure and simple lying: saying that Nazism is a leftist movement (Ernesto Araújo, Bolsonaro, 2018), using excerpts from Goebbels' speeches, with Wagner's music on the background (Roberto Alvim, 2020), comparing the use of social distancing as prevention of contamination by the coronavirus with concentration camps (Ernesto Araújo, 2020), use of the infamous motto "Work sets you free" (SECOM, 2020), among others. These facts can be seen as an expression of Nazi and fascist inspiration for the current government.

At dawn on Sunday, May 31, a group of people in black clothes, horror movie masks and torches protested in front of the Federal Supreme Court. Sunday morning, riding a horse, Jair Bolsonaro participates in an act that calls for military intervention in the Supreme Court.

Next day, the Dean of the Supreme Court, Minister Celso de Mello, compared what was happening in Brazil from to Hitler's Germany and saying that the "Bolsonaristas" wanted to establish an abject dictatorship. The Dean alluded to Ingmar Bergman's film, "The Serpent's Egg" (1977), which portrayed the period previous to Nazism in Germany.

Adorno (2015), in his essays on social psychology and psychoanalysis, examined some aspects of the fascist propaganda, highlighting that it is usually personalized, glorifying action, religion, and patriotism, offering to the masses the fulfillment of their desires and, mainly, despite all its misguided logic and fantastic distortions, being something consciously planned and organized. The fascist agitator, says Adorno, is usually an accomplished salesman of his or her psychological flaws, aiming at an unconscious identification of his or her followers. It is typical of fascist demagogues to boast that they were athletic heroes in their youth. The typical fascist leaders are often called hysterics, but the fact is that they act vicariously for their disturbed listeners, in doing and saying what they would like to do and say, but are unable or dare not to do so. Hitler, says Adorno, was accepted not despite his cheap peculiarities, his false intonation, and his antics, but precisely because of them.

Lastly, he highlightst the notion that destructiveness and aggressiveness are a psychological foundation of the fascist spirit. Their programs are abstract and vague, their satisfactions are spurious and illusory because the promise expressed by fascist oratory is nothing more than their own destructiveness.

This is a time of darkness and concern in Brazil, and also in other counties. In my opinion, all these series of allusions to Nazism, as well as the succession of violent demonstrations, insolent aggressions against journalists and the press, threats to the Congress, to the Supreme Court, to governors and mayors, alongside the most absolute indifference to the tragic reality of the pandemic that threatens us all, shows a striking resemblance to the characteristics described by Adorno on how fascist regimes act, and to the appropriate manifest of Minister Celso de Mello.

We are living a double and terrible threat. On the one hand, the horror of Covid-19, and the government's demobilization of the ministry that tackled it bravely, and the attacks on governors and mayors who struggle with the resources they have. On the other, the virus of fascism, which shamelessly shows more, every day, its sinister and threatening face to democracy.

There is a growing national mobilization, by all available means, and above political differences, to defend our democracy and our institutions. This is the moment, as it is being emphasized by leading Brazilian cultural, scientific and professional institutions, as well as a growing amount of scientists and people from different fields, among them many distinguished psychoanalysts, when we all must raise our voices in defense of the human and ethical values that are being ostensibly threatened, without which we run the risk of reliving the horrors of Fascism.