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Maladies of Silence: a Socio-Psychoanalytic View

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In these times, clinical psychoanalysis is challenged by an enormous task, to leap the chasm from silence to language(1). Having said this, we realize that this applies to more than the confines of our consultation rooms; in fact it applies to the alarming social circumstances in which we all live. Addiction, violence, depression, psychosomatic illness, and narcissistic disturbances, those disorders which we would classify as “maladies of silence”, constitute a problem of such great dimension that they are not only the principal component of our clinical psychoanalytic efforts, but also present as some of the most pressing public health problems confronting humanity today.

This shocking increase in diseases of silence makes it necessary, in our opinion, to add to our duties as clinical psychoanalysts, the task of considering the influence of the social and political forces on the mental health of our patients and our society. That is to say, we cannot propose solutions to the suffering of the soul without proposing the transformation of reality. This alteration of the world can be mediated by political action, by the arts, or by other forms of revolutionary creative potential. In other words, modern clinical practice cannot avoid the collective dimension.

Now, more than at any other time during our one-hundred-plus years of psychoanalytic history, is the transformation of the world a fundamental component of the alleviation of mental suffering. We might go so far as to say that you have to be really crazy not to be depressed, paranoid, or at least somatizing the psychic suffering of our times. We have to be really crazy to stand reality without some kind of addiction. Among such addictions we can include drugs, chemical as well as financial: alcohol, gluttony, addictions to tobacco or caffeine, financial speculation, workaholism, internet surfing, gambling, religion or idiosyncratic avocations, among many others. If we break down the word “addiction” as some colleagues have suggested, it separates into two roots: “a” (Greek “without”) and “diction” (Latin “said”) or “without expression.” The immediate demands of addiction make us think of it as a condition in which there is an absence of deliberate expression or of conscious thought. It is a malady of silence. The addict fills the void of silence in his mouth with other things. He gives up expression, confusing it with his drugs, using drugs as the answer to a world in which perverse laws apply to some and not others. When governments, and even parents, say one thing and do another, they betray their language and sow the deadly silence which is the harvest of the addicted person.

Another great plague linked to these silent times of our lives is violence. Among the many types of violence upon which we might comment, is the urban violence which haunts the streets of our

cities. Urban violence robs us, minute by minute, of our right to public space. I believe we realize that we have already lost our streets. Day by day the lattice-work of the luxurious prisons of the upper classes multiplies along our sidewalks; while the lower classes sink deeper daily into the incarceration of their misery. Juvenile delinquents, under the auspices of organized crime, collude with the authorities, and have become the masters of public property and all who pass through it. Public property, to say it in neo-liberal parlance, has become “privatized.” In other words, we have allowed a good chunk of our freedom to be expropriated. Violence is the conduit through which language is shattered. In this way, expression is the first victim of violence. It succumbs to the compulsive repetition of the criminal act which forms the nidus of violence in the matrix of all human narcissism. The violence which frightens us all has the face of terror, fills the pits of our stomachs and desiccates our mouths with fear, renders us mute, fills us to bursting with silence. Violence is the end of expression.

The kind of violence which engenders silence emanates from souls incapable of perceiving the other. The other is that person who exists outside of the mask we habitually place upon the face of our neighbor. The other has been criminally eliminated, “disappeared,” and no one has been charged with his disappearance. Neo-liberal violence has rendered millions of people unemployed. Some authors have written of the unemployed as the new “*desaparecidos*” and with good reason. The unemployed person has been separated from the world, excluded from history by being deprived of one of the most elemental rights: the right to work.

Before leaving the topic of violence, I would like to talk about the violence which is not an illness, one which emerges from silence by finding symbolic expression: this is the violence of liberation. This kind of violence seeks the transformation of the world: partaking of hope and building the future. It is a creative act, one which does not deny its connections with the narcissistic matrix, but succeeds in superseding action, and finds effective expressive language. It builds discourse which we have heretofore never heard. This violence is revolutionary in that it carries a new message, and its magic is in its shared nature. It happens in what we shall call “collective space.” When people succeed in freeing themselves from their narcissistic prisons, and can stand the chaos of differences with their neighbors, they find themselves with those neighbors in the collective space. This is the home of solidarity, of expression, of history, and of the future. The dissolution of the collective space, which is the goal of neo-conservatism, is the end of history and the death of symbolic expression.

The silence of violence begets another evil: the violence of silence.

The violence of silence is the portal of the darkest night, silence of silence, “the open wound” of the soul. This malady is melancholia, whose modern name, as poor a name as any in modern discourse, is “depression.” This illness is that of the living dead. The depressed person makes a catacombs of his body. Therein reside the “disappeared ones” the murder victims, the unburied dead. In other words, the melancholic offers his insides as a shelter for the victims of violence. These living dead keep watch in their innermost being over a true mausoleum. They long for a

time in which it might be possible to write the history which was erased with impunity by the criminals. The complaints of the depressed are the scriptures waiting to be written. The pain of the melancholic is expression robbed of history: it is the memory of the vanquished.

Depression as a disorder of silence *par excellence*, is “catatonia”, as regards desire, “anorexia,” as regards the other, “autism.” Depression, known as the “disease of our century,” is a scourge which, on the one hand, lashes humanity, on the other, denounces our incivility. Depression, in obvious form, afflicts 10% of the adult population in the West. This alarming statistic must be surpassed by the masked depressions motivating a high percentage of addictions and many psychosomatic illnesses. In countries such as Spain, for instance, some 50% of general medical consultations are for afflictions caused by an underlying depression.

Narcissistic disturbances, for their part, demonstrate manifestations which support the concept of disorders of silence. These people live in a world of moving mirrors, those which, like a kaleidoscope, give them the perception of a universe made of shards of their own reflections. All of us are in some measure narcissists, and suffer the silence of the disappearance of the other. That is to say, none of us is exempt from having a narcissistic matrix which forms the structure which sustains our ability to express. This narcissistic structure is the cradle of the “criminal tension” so brilliantly described by Hegel in his dialectic, “The Master and the Slave.” This deadly force confronts the sufferer with the disjunction between “you” or “me,” but not both. The narcissistic matrix which harbors our criminal impulses is a world in which only two enter therein, the person and the image of himself which he projects onto his neighbor. This world only appears to contain two, but in reality only contains one: the person and his own image. Narcissism is the imprint which makes us confuse the outside with the inside. This cross-penetration of the outside with the inside is like that which occurs with a Moebius Strip; we find ourselves on first one side, and without realizing what happened, suddenly on the other. We arrive on the outside and the inside by the same route. Is this the end of this logical contradiction which brings us to that mortal compulsion to destroy the other-image? Am I or am I not the one I see? To kill with knowledge is the typical response of the paranoid as we easily recognize the connections between traditional knowledge and paranoia. These connections are clearly described in the works of Foucault.

When that kaleidoscope made of our image-shards meets our own body and not that of another, then the violence of silence conforms to another of these maladies: psychosomatic illness. This passage of language to silence is motivated by the deadly force which emanates from a destroyed discourse. That strange alchemy which transforms the culture, discourse, and language into silence, this violence is the bridge by which we inappropriately bring the sufferings of the soul to the medical consultation room. In this transition, the spirit remains “disappeared” and its trace is the sick body part. The sick body part is, in turn, the lodging of the living dead, of the *desaparecido*; it is the denunciation which is the thunder of silence. Psychosomatic illness is an autoeroticism which returns with claims to colonize suffering flesh; it is the cry of body parts, of pulverized symbols. The number of maladies of silence is increasing minute by minute. The

neo-liberal world-view is the major medium for propagating blind, deaf stupidity on millions of human beings. The short-sighted application of these free-market theories is taking a devastating psychological toll on the world's population. These theories are an attack on the subjectivization(2) of the human being. The development of subjects is the most important and difficult task of any civilization. The current economization of all life's aspects and ambitions is making the human being into an object and not a subject: an object of consumption. The proliferation of kidnapping is the most terrible example of the process of desubjectification, since it is commonly done by gangs under the protection of neo-liberal officials. Kidnapping is the port of entry for barbarism: the twilight of civilization.

Neurosis is a malady of language. It is suffering which brings about expression in a language which others do not understand. The neurotic symptom is a code to be deciphered. To cure neurosis is to help our patients transition from the pain of not being heard to the joy of sharing expression with others. Since its foundation by Sigmund Freud, this has been the task of clinical psychoanalysis. It is at this point that we must interject maladies of silence as the counterpoint to the infirmities of language. Neurosis, that infirmity of expression, could be "grabbed by one paw" by any malady of silence. This could change an analytic process into a "mountain of Sisyphus." In other words, an analysis could be turned into a blind alley if we do not incorporate into our clinical theory an allowance for maladies of silence. In patients with those maladies of silence, we must first produce a neurosis with preparatory work. This will not succeed through the production of a classical transference neurosis—that comes later. Rather, we must first succeed in bringing about passage from silence to symbolism. With this goal in mind, we can be creative in our clinical practice. We must remind ourselves to think of the relationship of the individual to the community. The old love-affair between Freudianism and Marxism, replete as it was with disagreements between men as brilliant as Marcuse, Reich, or Fromm, ought to be revisited. Even if we agree with them that a unified theory is impossible, it appears to us, the modern psychoanalysts, that it is inescapable to avoid social and political considerations in our discussions. Not to do so would be to risk living in the melancholy past, conducting clinics for the treatment of neurosis in which there are no neurotics.

Translator's notes:

- (1) The Spanish word "palabra" is translated here as "language." Its literal denotative meaning is "word." Dr. Salamonovitz has chosen it to stand for creative symbolic expression which brings forth transformation in those who experience it. I therefore translate it in several ways in this text: "language, expression, symbolism, or symbolic expression."

"Palabra" may well carry the same import as the Greek "logos" (λογος). This is translated by New Testament scholars (see Jn 1:1 in any English edition from King James forward) as "word", but could also stand for "reason" or "that which makes sense."

(2) “Subject” in Lacanian terms refers to an individual's experience of himself as a person.

The original article appears at <http://www.cartapsi.org/revista/no10/silencio.html>