

When Does Repression Become Political? the Use of the Language of Trauma in the Context of Violence and Anxiety

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In the history of psychoanalytical thought, anxiety is described as a form of fear that lacks an object of reference.¹ Anxious individuals live in a condition of free-floating danger, always acting as though their actions could trigger apocalyptic scenarios, but never capable of describing the source of their affliction. Anxiety is fear that cannot be pinned down, an all-pervasive and all-encompassing fear that has removed itself so far away from any specific object (see introduction) to the point of becoming unfathomable. As a general condition of indiscriminate fear, anxiety leaves people breathing heavily and experiencing palpitations without any apparent danger, paralyses them by the sight of different patterns on the pavement,² makes them afraid of walking into shops.³ In the post-11 September World, where individuals are supposed “to say something if they see something”⁴ this condition of free-floating fear has been turned on its head, challenged against the signs of anxiety themselves: we start to breath heavily and experience palpitations by the sight of others breathing heavily and experiencing palpitations, although no objective event or reason has trigger this “hysterical” cycle. For Freud, such incomprehensible phobias were associated to a link between a *traumatic origin* and a *process of unconscious repression*. Be it a pre-puberty sexual encounter⁵

¹ Sigmund Freud, “Part Three: General Theory of the Neuroses. XXV: Fear and Anxiety” in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920 [1917]).

² Ibid.

³ Sigmund Freud, “The Hysterical Proton Pseudos” in *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. 1*, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud. (London: Vintage Classics, 2001 [1895]).

⁴ The phrase “if you see something, say something” refers to the anti-terrorist campaign inaugurated by the US Department of Homeland Security in 2010. For more information see Homeland Security. “If You See Something, Say Something”, <https://www.dhs.gov/see-something-say-something/about-campaign>.

⁵ This refers to one of Freud’s most famous patients, Emma Eckstein. Emma’s hysteria expressed itself as a very peculiar fear of walking into shops by herself, which she explained as the consequence of a specific event in her childhood, when two shop assistants laughed at her childish clothes. Feeling embarrassed by the situation, Emma ran away from the precinct and developed her pattern of anxious behaviour. Nevertheless, Freud rejected Emma’s explanation of her affliction as a senseless theory. If what she said made any sense (the connection between laughter and her clothes) then the hysteric affliction would invariably attack her whether she was “by herself” or not. Supposing Emma would still be wearing clothes whenever she walking into a shop, her fear of being laughed at would manifest itself. Besides, as a grown-up person, she would hardly wear the same childish outfits that once triggered her “trauma”. Based on an enigmatic and seemingly disconnected fact – that Emma recalled being sexually aroused by the sight of one of the shop assistants – Freud creates another explanation. In fact Emma had been abused by a shopkeeper, even before the episode she recalled actually happened. It was the suppressed memory of this abuse that generated the seemingly *incomprehensible* neurosis.

or a “severe mechanical shock”,⁶ there was a point in time where the stability of someone’s mind was crushed by the violence of an unexpected or incomprehensible event (the terrorist attack that inaugurated the 2000s being the obvious reference here). The anxious behaviour – that is, the all-encompassing fear that we cannot understand – is what follows from the mental suppression of this original violence (the sexual abuse or the shock).

It is not hard to understand why the anxiety-metaphor has a strong appeal to students and researchers of Global Politics, especially in the fields of Human Rights and Security Studies. For a discipline that struggles to explain the seemingly incomprehensible, almost pathological repetition of wanton violence that haunted the last two centuries (e.g. wars, insurgencies, terror, crimes against humanity), a return to the psychoanalytical language provides an interesting solution. It offers an explanation in which trauma, violence and finally political repression are all inextricably connected by the dynamics of the human psyche. Violence thus becomes a question of subjective processes. The suggestion being that *political repression* – understood as the suppression or obliteration of social and political dissent – is, after all, *not unlike unconscious repression* – understood as the psychological suppression of a reality that is too painful or incomprehensible for the mind. All these complex political events described above become symptoms (sic) of repressed traumas (previous instances of violence – the shocks – or libidinal drives – the desires) re-enacted time and time again. Žižek’s analysis of the terrorist attack to the World Trade Center and the Oklahoma City Bombings through the logics of “resentment” provides a clear explanation of this approach. According to Žižek, these instances of terrorism can be read as a direct consequence of envy; of the terrorists’ own feeling of inferiority towards those being terrorised (their western victims). Incapable of experiencing the same pleasures offered by a hedonistic, materialistic western life, the terrorist then desires to destroy the Other’s capacity for enjoyment. In this abstract and superficial logic – Žižek does not provide a single empirical example of the cases mentioned – political violence is nothing but the translation of a symptom, of “hatred pure and simple”.⁷ Only by “working through” this traumatic hatred, that is, by finding their source, ascribing them meaning and remembering the past in a coherent narrative, we can overcome their heritage of pathological violence.

As appealing as they might be, both the anxiety-metaphor and the language of trauma that accompanies it, have consequences for social scientific research. My objective in this chapters is to present an initial inquiry into these consequences, opening a pathway for critique that questions the assumptions and the positionality of analyses of violence in terms of the relationship between trauma and anxiety. In other words, this is a first attempt at investigating the position from which the anxiety-metaphor emanates; who is behind it and who does it serve as a scientific discourse. In the following pages I present a clear and concise explanation of what I define as the language of trauma, or trauma talk: this psychoanalytically inclined theorisation of *political violence* in terms of a Freudian theory of *unconscious repression* and a Derridian theory of

⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*, ed. Adam Phillips. (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1920]), pp. 50.

⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. (London: Profile Books, 2009), pp. 78.

representation. Most specifically, I am interested in how trauma talk situates the problematic of experiencing violent events, such as wars, terrorist attacks, genocides and gross violations of human rights, in relation to plethora of different forms of violence. And my tentative conclusion for future research points to the problems of this approach and the focus on the difficulties of *bearing witness*. More specifically, I suggest that by posing violence as an *essentially incomprehensible occurrence* – as the language of trauma often does – speaks more of the analyst’s position in relation to violence than of the phenomenon itself.

In the first section, I trace the concept of trauma back to its origins in the medical literature and describe its development into a socio-political category of analysis throughout the twentieth century. Primarily, I centre on the most widely recognisable exponents of the language of trauma, Cathy Caruth, the literary theorist commonly referenced by trauma theorists in Global Studies. I then move on to describe Caruth’s conceptualisation of the traumatic as a moment that evades comprehension, and in the second and third sections, investigate the Freudian and Derridian bases of her work. First, I explain how violence enters the discursive space of trauma talk in between the functions of unconscious repression and the dynamics of representation. How, through a derridian-freudian reading, violence is understood as emanating from the processes of exclusion intrinsic in the way human beings make sense of their surroundings. Then, I follow on to explain how this psychoanalytical-philosophical definition of violence connects the idea of political repression with the subjective dynamics of unconscious repression, and what conclusions it could lead to in the study of violent events. Finally, I present a series of questions addressed to researcher who wish to adopt this appealing, but nonetheless problematic approach, based on the extrapolation of the language of trauma to its extreme logic, whereby every single individual is a possible perpetrator.

The Language of Trauma

The concept of trauma originally refers to the medical literature. It is supposed to mean a rupture produced on the body (a wound) by an external factor (a shock),⁸ like a concussion capable of breaking the bones or tearing the flesh of human beings. Over the years, the concept was progressively relocated into more abstract meanings applicable to the most diverse fields (ranging from social psychology and literary criticism to transitional justice⁹ and, finally, security studies¹⁰). This process began in the early stages of

⁸ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); "Remembering Relationality: Trauma Time and Politics," in *Memory, Trauma and World Politics: Reflections on the Relationship between Past and Present*, ed. Duncan Bell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000); Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008). Jeffrey Alexander. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

⁹ Claire Moon, "Healing Past Violence: Traumatic Assumptions and Therapeutic Interventions in War and Reconciliation," *Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 1 (2009); David Mendeloff, "Trauma and Vengeance: Assessing the Psychological and Emotional Effects of Post-Conflict Justice," *Human Rights Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2009). Marita Eastmond and Johanna Selimovic. "Silence as Possibility in Postwar Everyday Life." *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6, no. 3 (2012).

¹⁰ Kate Schick, "Acting out and Working Through: Trauma and (in)Security," *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 4 (2011); Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte, *Memory and Trauma in International Relations* (Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2013). Emma Hutchison and Roland Bleiker, "Emotional Reconciliation: Reconstituting

psychoanalytical thought – when Pierre Janet, and later, Freud¹¹ analysed trauma as an abstract wound that ruptured the stability of the mind – and was intensified in the late twentieth century. From the 1980s onwards, and especially after the political mobilisation of veterans of the Vietnam War,¹² trauma became one of the trendiest concepts within the humanities and the social sciences. The traumatic became virtually applicable to any form of experience and capable of explaining any form of violence or violation.

In this long transition to the social context, and via a metaphorical transposition of its medicalised meaning, trauma became associated with the *breakdown of the faculty of understanding*. The one responsible for theorising and disseminating a wider idea of trauma in the 1990s was Cathy Caruth, a literary theorist based at Yale University. Caruth's writings were not exactly extensive – her main works consisted of one book and two introductory articles on an edited volume – but they presented a powerful idea. Through a Freudian and Derridean analysis of the unconscious and cognitive/representational practices, Caruth defined “trauma”, or the “traumatic” as “the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge – that cannot [...] become a matter of 'intelligence’”.¹³ She defined trauma as the outcome of an experience of ultimate loss of control imposed on the mind – or consciousness – by an untamed reality that disturbs it, that is, that refuses to fit into any previous frames of knowledge. The rupture caused by Caruth's trauma is not a rupture of the flesh, but of the process via which subjects attribute meaning to the reality they experience. It presents a loss of control over how reality is understood, severing the fundamental distinctions used by individuals to make sense of their surroundings.

This idea of trauma, and its relation with the notion of incomprehensibility, is well expressed in Van Der Kolk and Van Der Har's analyses of Irène, a famous patient of Pierre Janet who suffered from a post-traumatic disorder. Irène's malady was caused by the loss of her mother, a victim of tuberculosis. With an absent and alcoholic father, twenty-three-year-old Irène had had to practically take care of her moribund mother by herself, working hard to sustain her family living in that delicate and precarious situation. When death finally came, she was totally exhausted, having “hardly slept for sixty consecutive nights”,¹⁴ which led to a complete breakdown. Instead of making the proper funeral arrangements, a traumatised Irène treated the corpse as though it were still “alive”. She normally spoke with the cadaver, kept medicating it, and struggled to put the lifeless mass back in place again whenever it was knocked over. Irène was finally

Identity and Community after Trauma.” *European Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 3 (2008). Emma Hutchison, “Trauma and the Politics of Emotions: Constituting Identity, Security and Community after the Bali Bombing.” *International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2010).

¹¹ Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Karen Brounéus, “The Trauma of Truth Telling: Effects of Witnessing in the Rwandan Gacaca Courts on Psychological Health” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 3 (2010).

¹² Ian Hacking, “Memoro-Politics, Trauma and the Soul.” *History of the Human Sciences* 7, no. 2 (1994).

¹³ Cathy Caruth, “Recapturing the Past: Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 153.

¹⁴ Bessel Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” *ibid.*, pp. 161.

admitted to Janet's workplace, the Pitié-Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, after a close aunt, who was unaware of her sister's death, became suspicious of her niece's behaviour.¹⁵

Irène's disorder was explained by Janet as the result of the denial of her mother's death,¹⁶ which Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart take as the direct fruit of her inability to comprehend the situation. Although the event seems perfectly understandable to any outsider – a terminal death from tuberculosis in the early twentieth century is not exactly unintelligible – the traumatic always departs from the subjective level of experience. It must be understood from the perspective of the individual to which a situation appears as incomprehensible, and hence, acquires a traumatic nature. In this sense Janet's patient perfectly fits into Caruth's description of trauma. By the time her mother died, a young, exhausted and impotent "Irène was unable to grasp the reality of this event".¹⁷

The idea of incomprehensibility has been a recurrent trope during the twentieth century, always associated with naturally induced, or artificially created, traumatic events. In fact, Caruth's concept of social or cultural trauma reproduces the themes underlying classic responses to the violent tragedies of our age. For instance, the Nazi programme for the extermination of the European Jewry (the Holocaust or *Shoah*) was and continues to be described by the likes of Arendt,¹⁸ Adorno¹⁹, and more recently Agamben²⁰ as an utterly incomprehensible occurrence and a testimony to the unbridgeable contradictions of human existence. This perspective was synthesised by French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann in a very clear point. For Lanzmann, it is enough to ask the question "why have the Jews been killed? – for the question to reveal right away its obscenity".²¹ In his perspective, there remains an inevitable gap between any attempt to logically explain the outcome of the Holocaust, be it economic, psychological or structural causes, and its dreadful result, the physical destruction of six million human beings. It is not surprising that such an incomprehensible event was imprinted on the global "western" imaginary²² as "the epoch's inaugural historical trauma".²³

Survivors and witnesses of other tragedies often refer to this loss of control, this difficulty in understanding the reasons for, or the causes of, the violence they experienced as constitutive of their own trauma. Testimonies of victims of state terror – the systematic practices of arbitrary detentions and torture – regularly

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," 161; Ruth Leys, *Trauma: A Genealogy*. (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma," pp. 161.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973), pp. 459.

¹⁹ Theodor Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" in *Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective*, ed. Geoffrey Harman, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

²⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

²¹ Claude Lanzmann and Cathy Caruth, "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 204.

²² Dominick LaCapra, "Revisiting the Historians' Debate: Mourning and Genocide," *History and Memory* 9, no. 1 (1997); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996); Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²³ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*. (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2008).

express a difficulty in describing the violations they endured in a way that does justice to their suffering.²⁴ In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Judith Barnes, a reporter from The New York Times transcribed the testimony of those who were close by the Twin Towers the very moment they sunk down. If anything, those reports corroborate Caruth's description of the incomprehensible traumatic event, and its dimension of the unspeakable:

I was walking by the Winter Garden, and then there was this huge noise. Then there was all this paper falling around me. The building just sank down on itself, and tilted over. Then it all turned black; the smoke was all around me, you couldn't see at all.

*I thought it was an earthquake or a bomb. We were all panicking; we didn't know what to do.*²⁵

More recently, columnist Natalie Nougayrède clearly expressed the sense of awe with which French and global audiences were struck after the coordinated terror attacks in Paris on 15 November 2015: "how could this happen?"²⁶ A huge noise, paper everywhere, a dark smoke that engulfs the observer, a big question mark. The immediate reaction is to look for something that at least minimally resembles the ongoing experience. But the exercise is futile; previous knowledge fails the observer the moment they are struck by the traumatic. With the lack of knowledge, the incapacity of attributing meaning (a bomb, an earthquake) to what the subject experiences, comes the mind's loss of control and the terror of being left without guidance. They panic, because for not knowing what is happening they are left guideless, with no control over what to do. According to Caruth, a traumatic experience casts a particularly perverse curse on survivors: the burden of bearing witness to something they could not, and never will, fully understand. In more literal terms, the burden of not having understood the experience that they, as survivors, are supposed and expected to recount.

Luckhurst explains this transition from a medicalised idea of trauma to a social understanding in which the traumatic represents a failure of comprehension as a symptom of modernity. It is in the age defined by the contraction of space and time (the invention of the railway system) and the contradictions of development and horror that the widespread production of anxiety and uncertainty push trauma to the forefront of social and political life. Incomprehensibility appears as the main product of a time when "all that is solid melts into air",²⁷ when the breath-taking achievements of the industrial revolution are followed by the dreadful consequences of capitalist exploitation and the rule of "reason" coexists with the horrendous "final solution". It is easy to see how Caruth's definition provides an appealing theoretical framework with which to read the heritage from the violent events of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. The horror of trauma – or, as it were, its inherent violence – refers to the fact that it exposes the volatility and precariousness of existence,

²⁴ Priscila Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*. (New York: Routledge 2011).

²⁵ Juliane Barnes, "Horror, Alarm and Chaos Grip Downtown Manhattan," <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/11/national/11CND-SCENE.html>.

²⁶ Natalie Nougayrède, "Paris attacks leave France in trauma, fearing for the future" <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/14/paris-attacks-leave-france-in-trauma-fearing-for-the-future>

²⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Vintage, 2010 [1948]), pp. 25.

piecing through a fictitious façade of security, quietude and wholesomeness.²⁸ As modern subjects, always relying on the illusion of rational control over the world, this open and crude precariousness appears as ultimately horrific. And this dynamic operates from the most individualised atomistic level of experience to the grand collective events. In Irène's case, the traumatic accounted for her passivity and inability to react to her mother's death and to interfere with fate. In the collective tragedies of the Holocaust, the "Dirty Wars" of the Global South, and the terrorist attacks in the Global North, the "traumatic" exposed a series of unbearable truths usually concealed by the veil of normalcy: the barbarism in the heartland of civilisation²⁹, the terror of inexplicable disappearances, and the fragility of the World's safest places.

Violence between Representation and Repression

The transposition of Caruth's idea of the traumatic as an event that evades comprehension into the realm of political violence, and most specifically political repression, might seem as an appealing move. In fact, several scholars in the human rights and security studies literature have already taken the idea on board, producing an incipient body of knowledge about the effects of trauma and insecurity (see note 2 and 3). Notwithstanding, speaking of violence via the tropes associated to the traumatic – such as incomprehensibility, the unspeakable, and most of all, the mechanism of repression – has serious and seriously overlooked consequences. To understand these consequences, it is worthwhile returning to Caruth's main theoretical influences: Derrida's account on representation and the Freudian theory of dreams.

Derrida reads the tradition of "western" philosophy, and most specifically of "western" metaphysics as a mode of reasoning based on a logocentric premise - from the Greek word *λόγος* (logos) meaning, among other things, both "reason" and "speech". Very succinctly, the term logocentrism refers to the essential privilege of *presence* over *absence*, which from Plato to Husserl has been produced and re-produced by western philosophers.³⁰ Such a hierarchy, described in the easily identifiable formula presence/absence and all its derivative dichotomies, defines the central core of philosophical reasoning. It is the core of the "metaphysics of presence" thereby human beings make sense of the world surrounding them.

Derrida's idea of metaphysics of presence is easily understood *vis-a-vis* one common instance of logocentrism: the favouring of the *act of speech* over *the act of writing*, also known as the tradition of phonocentrism.³¹ It is proper to common sense to see the act of speaking as a much more efficient way of controlling the outcomes of communication. Anyone would acknowledge a face-to-face interaction as the

²⁸ Jenny Edkins, "Ground Zero: Reflections on Trauma, in/Distinction and Response," *Journal for Cultural Research* 8, no. 3 (2004).

²⁹ Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1996); Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); *Positions* (London; New York: Continuum, 2004).

³¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

best possible means of dialogue, especially when it comes to explaining the meaning of statements to an addressee in a regular conversation. Partaking in a face-to-face interaction means that the speaker – the one conveying information – is *present*, and hence capable of amending minor misunderstandings about the message they intend to pass on. On the other hand, for the phonocentric tradition, the lonely act of reading constitutes the extreme opposite of a face-to-face interaction. Done in the *absence* of the writer, reading presents a dangerous form of representation, prone to error and misappropriations.

This apparently obvious reasoning relies on a theory of representation for which the representational act (in this case writing) is seen as the reproduction of an original presence (in this case the intended message of the writer). For the logocentric logic based on a metaphysics of presence, representation works, in fact, as a reproduction: the re-presentation of a pure and clearly identifiable intention, that is, what the conveyer of information “wanted to say”³² through their spoken or written words. Based on this assumed function of representational practices, this rationale creates a hierarchy between different modes of representation ranked as to how “perfectly” they reproduce an individual’s “wanting to say”. For instance, writing comes last. It is a dangerous form of representation because written words merely reproduce the presence – the meaning – of spoken ones and, as such, they can be easily misunderstood. As mentioned, speaking is a reasonably good form of communication, because the speaker is present during the interaction and can correct their addressee whenever deemed necessary. They can explain the right meaning of what they said. But, in an ideal world, some form of telepathy or paranormal exchange would be the optimum form of communication. Obviously, stressing the logocentric logic to the maximum, the best way to ensure comprehension is to be granted direct access to each other’s minds. This way we can all see, crystal-clear and without any mediation, what we all really want to say.

As a matter of fact, Derrida argues, the logocentric logic must assume that individuals are fully aware of their intentions, that they have a translucent relationship with their own minds. This is to say that “western” philosophy only sees representation as a possibility because it presupposes that the speaker, any speaker, know exactly what they “want to say”. The metaphysical logic presupposes that, deep within our minds, in soliloquy (when we speak to ourselves) the meaning of an idea is immediately present. And by doing so, metaphysics poses *consciousness as the ultimate source of truth and meaning*. According to this rationale, representation (or re-presentation) is a straight-forward possible, albeit imperfect, action. It might not be as good as telepathy, but it still delivers the job.

It is in this sense that the traumatic is conceptualised as “a crisis of representation, of history and truth”.³³ For the abstract idea of trauma as a blow to the mind and a rupture of the faculty of understanding, traumatic events are situations that interrupt one’s mind’s immediacy towards oneself. The traumatic event occurs when the re-presentation of a “wanting to say”, the purity of an original description of a violent event, completely breaks down. In other words, the violence of trauma refers to a movement of separation, a blow

³² Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

³³ Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*. (Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 5.

whereby the subject is separated from itself. This is where both Derrida's and Caruth's works heavily draw on Freud, and his equally powerful suggestion that, contrary to common sense, that one does not always know what one "wants to say".

In his later years, Freud elaborated at length a scientific theory of dreams interpretation known for its deep description of the structure of the unconscious.³⁴ His commendable effort was based on a threefold hypothesis. First, Freud envisioned that the fantasies that constitute dreams could indeed be interpreted, a fact latter emphasised by Lacan's return to Freud and his description of the unconscious as a book. He believed there was a hidden meaning behind multiple oneiric imaginations. Second, departing from traditional accounts that saw dreams as omens foretelling the future, Freud's science assumed that the object of dreaming had an inextricable relationship with the past, more specifically, with his patients' past experiences. Finally, and following his clinical observations, Freud believed that dreams possessed, or were caused by, an unconscious mechanism defined by its wish-fulfilling functions.

Freudian theory elucidates the idea of a subject that is, for every practical purpose, separated from itself. It interests us here because it poses a counterpart to the logocentric idea of subjective immediacy. In the course of his clinical practice, Freud encountered a recurrent problem. His patients, including Freud himself, were often not automatically aware of the meaning of a given dream. Instead of presenting themselves automatically to the consciousness of the dreamer, dreams were never clear, but were rather fantastically distorted, hiding what Freud believed was the *raison d'être* of the dream itself. Hence, he presented the work of the interpreter as an indirect excavation, as an attempt to try to get access to the hidden meaning behind the misleading oneiric deliria. Moreover, it is this process of self-concealing that Freud identifies as one of the primary mechanisms of repression: the full meaning of dreams – that is, what the fantasies "wanted to say" – was effectively concealed from the dreamer due to a process of unconscious repression. In an effort to preserve the healthy structure of the mind from excessive external stimuli, the unconscious repressed ones' "undesired ideas":³⁵ wishes that were too painful, too shameful, and too traumatic to immediately appear to oneself. It is worthwhile looking at one of Freud's examples:

A father had been watching day and night beside the sickbed of his child. After the child died, he retired to rest in an adjoining room, but left the door ajar so that he could look from his room into the next, where the child's body lay surrounded by tall candles. An old man, who had been installed as a watcher, sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After sleeping for a few hours the father dreamed that the child was standing by his bed, clasping his arm and crying reproachfully: 'Father, don't you see that I am burning?' The father woke up and noticed a bright light coming from the adjoining room. Rushing in, he found that the old man had fallen asleep, and the sheets and one arm of the beloved body were burnt by a fallen candle.³⁶

This dream – the "burning child" – is used by Freud as an extreme case of the wish-fulfilling theory. What is interesting about the dream is the interplay between the father's wish, the violent reality, and the function

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997 [1899]).

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1997 [1899]), pp.16

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 353

of unconscious repression. Freud reckons that the dream of the burning child is incited by the gloom of light that comes from a candle in the adjoining room where his child's cadaver lays. But the sensory stimulus that would have made an anxiously caring father wake up immediately to protect his boy, instead triggers a dream, prolonging the father's sleep. The wish, that here appears through the fantasy of a walking and talking child, is nothing more than the father's wish that his boy was still alive. The postponement of waking and the continuation of sleep serve the wish-fulfilling purpose to "elaborate the external sensory stimulus [the candle light] [...] they weave it into a dream in order to rob it of any claims it might make as a reminder of the outer world."³⁷

Here lies the most powerfully political suggestion of Freud's work. To explain this self-act of repression – in which case it is an uncomfortable and painful reality that becomes repressed – he resorted to the metaphor of *political censorship*. Freud sees in the unconscious processes that create the dream work and break with the immediacy of the mind a dynamic much similar to that of the "Russian censorship [...] which allows only those foreign journals which have had certain passages blacked out to fall into the hands of the readers to be protected".³⁸ He considered it fruitful to explain *psychological repression at the level of the individual* through a metaphorical analysis of *political repression at the level of the state*. According to his view, anxious individuals are capable of repressing undesirable realities in a much similar way as authoritarian states were capable of repressing undesirable truths.³⁹ This simple and apparently harmless comparison is very illustrative of the problems inherent in current uses of the language of trauma in the realm of political affairs.

The "Dictator" inside our Minds?

The appropriation of the language of trauma to describe past experiences of violence has been long criticised for medicalising acts of political resistance, arriving at a simplistic account of "traumatic" events and for creating the conditions for the management and control of populations by the state apparatus, as is argued elsewhere in this volume.⁴⁰ But there is yet another dimension to "trauma talk". A dimension that in its specific conjunction of Freudian, Derridian and Caruthian insights leads to an analysis of violence based on

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 408

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 372

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 53

⁴⁰ Claire Moon, "Narrating the Present : Confessional and Testimonial Truth-Telling," in *Narrating Political Reconciliation: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (Lanham, USA: Lexington Books, 2008); "Healing Past Violence: Traumatic Assumptions and Therapeutic Interventions in War and Reconciliation." *Journal of Human Rights* 8, no. 1 (2009); Michael Humphrey, "Reconciliation and the Therapeutic State." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26, no. 3 (2005). Vanessa Pupavac, "Human security and the rise of global therapeutic governance" *Conflict, Security and Development* 5, no. 2 (2005); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. (New York: Picador, 2003). Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. (New York: Picador, 2009).

an *individualised* and rather abstract idea of *political repression* that is both causes and reinforced by existential anxieties.

Freud's understanding of a shattered subject, always capable of carrying out acts of unconscious repression that alienate themselves from their "own intentions", is at the basis of Derrida's deconstruction of the logocentric order. Derrida uses the Freudian description of the unconscious to illustrate how the *logocentric privilege of presence over absence is arbitrary* and how the notion of a "wanting to say", which conditions the possibility of re-presentation as such, is deceptive. The dream distortions analysed by Freud have no place whatsoever in the logocentric order that claims the mind as the source of meaning and truth. Instead, they seem to point out exactly the opposite; the division between mechanisms of wish-fulfilment and repression within a subject's mind are testimony to the fallacy of logocentrism. In much the same way that an individual's wish is obscured by the almost unintelligible hallucinations of the dream work, every instance of representation – the reproduction of an original "wanting to say" via speaking, writing, and etc. – is based on an *fundamental act of repression*. In clearer terms, Derrida uses Freud to argue that the recounting of an event, the describing of an intention, or the recollection of the past never actually recover an original presence ("wanting to say"). Instead, these instances of representation are repressive-like moments that serve the purpose of concealing the uncomfortable and "traumatic" *absence of any possible origin*.

Much in the same way as the Freudian mind, the Derridian theory of the "event" defines that the meaning of an event is never immediate to itself. It is rather the case that, in its overwhelming immediacy, an event eludes the dynamics of signification and evades the mind's capacity to make sense of its surroundings. This happens because in Derridian thought, meaning is understood as a function of iterability, or repetition and *différance* (difference in both time and space). It possesses a backwards temporality, meaning that the mind can only understand and make sense of something insofar as this something is the expression of a *genre already previously acknowledged*.

The implications of "trauma talk" become particularly clear when it is the violent events themselves that must be represented in their original incomprehensibility. When individuals are called to recount "the memory of the horrors"⁴¹ they bore witness to, their acts of truth-telling are also expected to respect the logics of logocentrism. They are supposed to infuse their stories of pain and sorrow with an original "wanting to say", much in the same way as "writing" does, that puts forth a sense-morale, an objective and truthful account of the past.⁴²

⁴¹ Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 32.

⁴² Idith Zertal, "From the People ' S Hall to the Wailing Wall : A Study in Memory , Fear , and War," *Representations* 69, no. 69 (2000); Patrick Pinkerton, "Resisting Memory: The Politics of Memorialisation in Post-Conflict Northern Ireland," *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 14, no. 1 (2012); Jeffrey K Olick, "Collective Memory : The Two Cultures," *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999); Aletta J. Norval, "Memory, Identity and the (Im)Possibility of Reconciliation: The Work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa," *Constellations* 5, no. 2 (1998).

When discussing 9/11, Derrida points out that this dynamic is precisely what a violent event lacks. Using a very similar trope to Caruth's he argues that events are experiences that come "to surprise and to suspend comprehension: the event is first of all that which I do not [...] comprehend".⁴³ In this sense, an event – a presence in the past – has no intrinsic truth or meaning. On the contrary, to constitute an "event" proper, the occurrence must be defined by the traumatic: the absence of meaning that characterises its pure unintelligibility. And the language of trauma uses these instances when violence is recounted, remembered and commemorated – in other words, represented – as testimonies to the inner limitations of representation and the very problem of bearing witness. This brings us back to the first section, how is it possible to remember or recount an event that evades comprehension and defies the faculties of the mind? Does that not lead witnesses and the survivors to a mere unarticulated repetition of the event itself? Does it not restrict their lives to an acting-out that risks re-traumatising a fragile and already traumatised mind like Irène's?

This understanding of the "traumatic event", as it were, brings us to a fundamental point. Because an event has no original meaning and because it discloses no "wanting to say", its original and truthful presence can never be reproduced by representational practices, but only artificially produced *through them* and in hindsight. This belated exercise of signification – the *nachträglich* involved in any attempt to produce meaning⁴⁴ - is what connects the *experience of violence* with the drive towards a *psychoanalytical interpretation of repression*. Because the event has no origin and no meaning, its immediacy translated as pure potentiality "calls for a movement of appropriation".⁴⁵ Just like in the dream of the burning child, the absence represented by the child's death calls for the father's dream.

This movement of appropriation seeks, first and foremost, to repress the traumatic in the event. It poses an attempt to attribute meaning, that is, to comprehend and explain an incomprehensible or undesirable situation so as to create an artificial "wanting to say" and to appease the anxiety generated by the complete loss of control. The useless violence of Nazi officials is "explained" as an instance of dehumanisation,⁴⁶ the disappearances in Argentina are blamed on the victims themselves,⁴⁷ the terrorist is described as mentally unstable.⁴⁸ These moments of appropriation trigger a series of dispute over the meaning of violence. Edkins, and most adepts of the language of trauma, emphasises how the outcome of this dispute often undermines – or rather *represses* – the stories of those who experienced violence themselves. How the account of survivors and witnesses of wars, terrorist attacks and other traumatic events "have to be hidden, ignored, or

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 90.

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001).

⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. Giovanna Borradori (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 90.

⁴⁶ Primo Levi, "Useless Violence" in *The Drowned and the Saved*. (London: Abacus, 2012 [1986]).

⁴⁷ Emilio Crenzel, "El Prólogo del Nunca Más y la Teoría de los Dos Demonios: Reflexiones sobre una Representación de La Violencia Política en la Argentina." *Contenciosa* 1 (2013).

⁴⁸ Stéphane Baele, "Are Terrorists 'insane'? A Critical Analysis of Mental Health Categories in Lone Terrorists' Trials." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, no. 2 (2014).

medicalised.”⁴⁹ so that a coherent lesson about what the violent past meant (what it “wanted to say”) can be drawn and disseminated. It is easy to see how this idea of the traumatic unintelligibility (of the unspeakable nature of violence) can also be turned against the victims themselves. As Caruth elucidates the question, any attempts to give meaning to a violently unintelligible event “is always a matter of distortion, a filtering of the original event through *the fictions of traumatic repression*”.⁵⁰ It is through this distortion, via the exclusions and silences that it puts in place, that anxiety-driven acts of *unconscious repression* become acts of *political repression*.

The logic of the argumentation can be more clearly explained. An event is traumatic because it reminds subjects that there is always a form of alterity – always a different side – to any act of truth-telling. Hence, the recounting of an event is indissociated from an act to control its ultimate potentiality. It necessarily entails the silence of opposing interpretation that threatens one’s idea of the event’s “wanting to say”. Representation – just like the dream of the burning child – is not meant to “reproduce a presence”: it is meant to *repress* the absolute and unbearable absence that emanates from our encounter with an unavoidable reality.

According to the language of trauma, it is this intrinsic and unescapable exclusion, caused by our very ability to make sense of our surroundings that turns every human being into two things: a *tacit perpetrator of metaphysical violence* – the violence of excluding other possible interpretations of an event – and a *potential agent of repression*. Repression is here conceptualised as more than an instrumental action employed against political opposition by authoritarian regimes, it is the very condition of understanding of an always already authoritarian form of subjectivity. It is the mechanism of defence upon which the good health and security of the psyche depends; the censorship that creates a façade, protecting consciousness from the outer world. If in *The Interpretation of Dreams* this possibility is posed by the structure of the unconscious – a system originally built to preserve an organism from excessive external stimuli – in Derrida, it rather becomes a consequence of language itself. It is language and the text (or the all-encompassing dynamics of representation) that lie in the source of repression. It is by our very capacity of *dicere* (speaking), by our potentiality to *dictum* (state) that we become somehow *dictatores* (dictators).

If Freud used the concept of political repression to illustrate the processes through which the unconscious represses “inconvenient” truths, the language of trauma does the opposite. It is suggestive, through the concept of the traumatic, that practices of representation, particularly those related to the signification of violent events, inevitably lead to an act of repression. Paraphrasing Freud on the matter, representation can also work as a form of wish-fulfilment: it fulfils one’s wish to be right.

Conclusion

⁴⁹ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 52.

⁵⁰ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 15.

This chapter provided an initial, introductory explanation of what I termed “trauma talk”, or the attempt to theorise and explain the phenomena of violence and political repression based on psychoanalytically inclined approaches. Throughout the text, I explained the medicalised origins of the concept of trauma and its transposition to the sociological and political arena in the course of the late twentieth century. Focusing on Caruth’s conceptualisation of trauma as the *breakdown of the faculty of understanding* and expanding on her Freudian and Derridian bases, I described how the language of trauma leads to a depiction of *repression* as one of the foundational stones of human experience. Based either on the structure of the unconscious or on the nature of language itself, for theorists of trauma in the social sciences and the humanities, the fact remains that every single mind carries the potentiality for rejecting realities that disturb their peaceful stability. This is to say, that every single individual faced with an incomprehensible “event” risks perpetrating a form of metaphysical violence whereby opposing interpretations of the event are excluded, ignored, silenced or simply *repressed*. Whereas a deeper critique of “trauma talk” is beyond the scope of this work, the last sections have provided enough elements to elaborate a few concluding remarks.

This first problematic arising from the language of trauma is the idea of *incomprehensibility*. The whole theorisation of trauma as that which evades comprehension relies on the assumption that events, strictly speaking, lack an original meaning. Trauma comes from this disturbing absence posed by an encounter with a reality the mind cannot control – such as death, a tragedy of unfathomable proportions, or the existence of something which disrespects prior knowledge. Aside from the philosophical questions regarding the event itself (how to define something that avoids definition?) a serious appraisal of the language of trauma begs the question: how about occurrences that *are easily understood*? What can trauma theorists say about instances where violence is deployed in a purely intelligible and crudely translucent way? Where violence is neither useless⁵¹ nor related to subjective processes⁵² but operates a logic described by Etienne Balibar as *super objective*, that is, as related to the basis of the capitalist system of excessive exploitation?⁵³ In this first, tentative conclusion it seems that although the triad anxiety-violence-trauma provides interesting ideas to work through a violence that arises out of subjective instances of repression, it lacks the theoretico-practical elements to address more structurally inclined notions of violence.

The second point is an extension of this question, further problematising the concept of violence as seen through the lenses of the traumatic. Almost every work on violence begins by pointing out the overwhelming abundance of things that could be called “violent”.⁵⁴ By emphasising a Derridian idea of *metaphysical violence* trauma talk narrows down the scope of analysis to a violence connected to the exclusionary

⁵¹ Primo Levi, “Useless Violence” in *The Drowned and the Saved*. (London: Abacus, 2012 [1986]).

⁵² Slavoj Žižek. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. (London: Profile Books, 2009).

⁵³ Etienne Balibar, “Violence, Ideality and Cruelty” in *Politics and the Other Scene*. (London; New York: Verso, 2002).

⁵⁴ Giorgio Agamben, Lorenzo Fabbri, and Elisabeth Fay, “On the Limits of Violence.” *Diacritics* 4 (2009); Helen Dexter, “Terrorism and Violence: Another Violence Is Possible?,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 5, no. 1 (2012). Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970); Michel Wieviorka, *Violence: A New Approach* (London: Sage Publication 2009). Randal Collins, *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

dynamics of representation. And by focusing on these dynamics, it risks falling into a Freudian-like, individualizable idea of political repression as interchangeable with the unconscious faculty of self-censorship. We can see this clearly in Žižek's analysis of terrorism as resentment.⁵⁵ To speak of violence via the language of unconscious drives is to make a choice; to decide to shift focus on one interpretation of the phenomenon, associated with the dimension of the *unspeakable*, to the detriment of other possible forms of understandings. This leads us to yet another question: what can we say about situations where the *traumatic has become the normal way of life*? How can we explain human suffering and destruction that is unrelated to subjective anxieties or *exceptional ruptures*, but are rather a normalised part of the society we live in? Take for example the situation in certain favelas in Rio de Janeiro, where in the mid-1990s a working group from the *Medicine sans Frontières* found that 90% of the local population harassed by an uninterrupted "war on drugs" constantly experienced PTSD symptoms.⁵⁶ In this sense it would be interesting to contrast the Freudian description of the wish-fulfilling function of dreams with that of another psychoanalyst, Frantz Fanon. Analysing colonialism as a form of psychopathology that structured the minds of the coloniser towards self-hatred, Fanon described a series of black patients who constantly dreamed of being white.⁵⁷ The question is whether Freud and Fanon were talking about the same phenomenon, or if the violence they described differed profoundly.

The third and final remark refers to an ethical dimension of critique. Are we as social scientists and researchers in the humanities prepared to take the consequences of trauma talk to its full potential? Can we explain *political repression* as deriving from the individual drive of *unconscious repression*? Are we comfortable with the suggestion that behind everyone – even behind survivors of the most horrific violations – there is a potential dictator? On a different and yet related note, can we truly talk about terrorism in a depoliticised and abstract form of resentment? And, in case of a positive answer, is that not in itself a way of changing the conversation; of moving focus away from the *structural dynamics of objective violence* into the individualizable sources of political repression?

⁵⁵ See note 7.

⁵⁶ Nancy Cardia, "Exposição à Violência: seus Efeitos sobre Valores e Crenças em Relação a Violência, Polícia e Direitos Humanos." *Lusotopie*, (2003).

⁵⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. (London: Pluto Press, 2008).