Terror, terrorism and recognition

Terror, terrorizmus és elismerés

Jô Gondar, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychology, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro
jogondar@uol.com.br

Abstract

In this paper, I intend to discuss the notions of terror and terrorism from a psychoanalytical perspective. With Freud, we can question the idea of splitting the world: they and we, reason and brutal violence, barbarians and civilized. This does not mean putting on the same basket the many degrees of violence, leveling the extreme acts and those mediated by words. It means to denounce the pretension of speaking about "them" without questioning "us".

With Ferenczi, we can notice that what terrifies someone is not physical violence, but the fact that his suffering may not be recognized. The notion of denial or disbelief can be understood as a denied recognition, thus spread to the social field. It indicates that power relations have mean subjective effects when they involve humiliation, shame and, mainly, deficits of recognition. An articulation of Ferenczi's and philosopher Axel Honneth's ideas allow us to understand denial as a political and social problem. The Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama locates the deficits of recognition on the root of radical Islamism derangement, associating them to the martyr's industry of jihadism.
Understanding the circulation of the affects in terror situations is an important contribution of psychoanalysis, both to create non violent answers to the aggressions as to recognize the collective responsibility in the terror and terrorism situations.

Keywords terror, terrorism, recognition, denial, Sandor Ferenczi.

Kulcsszavak: terrorizmus, terrorizmus, elismerés, tagadás, Ferenczi Sándor.

There are two situations in which one can be witness. Witness may be the person who observes the scene from the outside; but it also can be the one who has experienced an event directly and can give testimony about it. Referring to terror and terrorism, the analyst occupies both positions. As a citizen, he experiences the effects of terrorism in culture and politics, but on the other hand he can observe and analyze what happens based on the theoretical tools of psychoanalysis. The same goes for terror: in the clinic, the analyst witnesses the suffering of his patients; however, he does that using and working through his own affections. This game between immersion and distance, implication and reserve is part of our profession. We play it not only in our clinical work, but also in our reflection on culture and its horrors.

In this paper, I intend to discuss the issues of terror and terrorism by articulating some ideas of Ferenczi to those of the German philosopher Axel Honneth. This link will allow us to work with the notion of subjective recognition in a psychoanalytical approach, which is also social and political. This perspective is enriched by the analysis of jihadist terrorism carried out by Fethi Benslama, a psychoanalyst from a country of Muslim culture. With this triple articulation (Ferenczi/Honneth/Benslama) I try to construct an

understanding of terror and terrorism that escapes from the clichés and the presupposition of a hierarchy of cultures or ways of being.

First, it is important to distinguish between the two terms: terror is an affect, while terrorism is a political category. The analyst can be witness to both, although under different ways.

Terrorism: a matter of convenience

Let's see terrorism first. It is a word we use as if it were clear by itself; however, there is no consensus on it. When an individual or a small group kills or terrorizes ordinary people in the name of a political cause, he can be seen as a terrorist or a hero of resistance, depending on the side or the moment. In France, for example, those who opposed Vichy's government collaboration with the Nazis, were considered terrorists at that time. Today they are proud of their accomplishment.

In Brazil, in Uruguay and in South Africa, political activists who have been considered terrorists over the seventies and eighties, became later Joint Chiefs of staff - Dilma Rousseff, Pepe Mujica, Nelson Mandela - and no one bothered to conduct a study about their mental functioning. In the nineties, the US State Department included Nelson Mandela's ANC as a terrorist group, while in the following decade he would be honored as a hero. The lack of consensus on the use of the word also applies to situations in which violence is exercised by the state. It's not always easy to distinguish when it comes to war, when it comes to military action, and when it comes to State terrorism. It is interesting here to remember the question made by Shankar Vedantam, a journalist from the W*ashington Post:* "If the civilian deaths by sub-state groups is terrorism, why is the death of civilians by the states merely collateral damage?" (Vedantam, 2003, p. 12) What we see therefore is that what is called terrorism changes according to political interests. It is what we may call a convenience definition, a designation that varies all the time, having only one constant element: terrorism is always on the other side.

German jurist Carl Schmitt, a Nazi sympathizer, used to say that politics' fundamental criterion was the friend-enemy distinction (1932, p. 26). However, psychoanalysis' criterion – and here we enter the analyst's function as a witness of terrorism – paces in the opposite direction. Rather than asking ourselves who is friend and who is foe, we ask what our enemy can reveal about us. In *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) Freud writes that if we want to know an individual or group, it is not enough to listen to what he says or accepts about himself; it is also necessary to know what he rejects. The reason we reject something or someone – by repression, segregation, projection or prejudice – is narcissistic and, therefore speaks about us. To maintain a good image, individual or collective, individuals, groups, and even Nations exclude everything that could tarnish the image they intend to build about themselves, for themselves and for others.

Our work, as analysts, goes against these defensive procedures. We cannot content ourselves with the division of the world into two parts: them and us, reason and gross violence, civilized and barbarians. Civilization is not exempt of barbarism. In fact, it starts with barbarism. Freud writes in *Why war?* (1933, p. 199)*:*

Right is the might of a community. It is still violence (…) works by the same methods and pursues the same objectives. The only real difference lies in the fact that what prevails is not more violence from an individual, but that of a community.

At this point, Freud would agree with the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who says*: "There was never a monument of culture that is not a monument of barbarism"* (Benjamin, 1940, p. 225).

It is appropriate here to remember that the word terrorism as its methods and techniques are born together with the French Revolution. The term was coined there, as a reference to the Great Terror, that is, the mass murder led by Robespierre. In 1794, Robespierre himself justifies the use of terror by democratic States:

Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible: it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a special principle as it is the consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most urgent needs. (Robespierre, 1794)

So, terrorism is born as state practice, and was present in the emergence of modern democracies.

What is the function of the analyst as a witness of terrorism? We must not, indeed, place on the same basket the many degrees of violence, considering extreme acts equal to violence mediated by word. I believe that our task is another: denounce the arrogance of those who want to talk about "them" without the "we" in question. Taking the unconscious and instincts into account does not lead us to the realm where everything is allowed, but places everyone – including us – in a shaky ground in which we try to always see our part in the events that affect us.

Every terrorist, anywhere in the world, claims he is responding in self-defense to a previous terrorism. This is, according to Jacques Derrida, the conviction of each of them. It's as if to say:

I'm resorting to terrorism as a last alternative, because the other is more terrorist than I; I'm defending myself, fighting back; the real terrorist, the worst, is the one who deprived every other way to react, and it is unfair that the first attacker appears now as a victim. (Derrida, 2003, p. 117).

This circuit can be endless and our purpose here is not to decide who would be the worst terrorist. The question is not quantitative. What we care about, as psychoanalysts, are the qualities or the intensity of the emotions involved, and the psychic effects arising out of these affections. Now, although not always the counterattack to a terrorist act is due to a previous terrorist doing, we can say that, invariably the terrorist reacts to an experience of terror that still stands, for him, present and unbearable. The terrorist is, above all, a terrified individual. This allows us to investigate more widely the subjective field, which is our area of greatest expertise. As once said by Jacques Derrida, no one can become an analyst without having experienced, at some point, the affect of terror.

Terror and denial

What is terror? What is the difference between terror and other close affects, such as fear or anxiety? Freud proposes precise definitions for these affects. We feel fear in face of defined danger, a precise object, while anxiety refers to an undetermined danger, to which we need to prepare ourselves for, even without knowing where it's coming from. Terror, however, is the affect we feel when a sudden danger befalls us, without us being prepared for it (Freud, 1920). Anxiety is an affect of threshold: we feel a foot into the abyss and, therefore, we can protect ourselves from the fall. But terror, or fright, is a surprise and a submersion. It is what we feel when we suffer from trauma or, in other terms, it is what we feel when we drop into the abyss without any protection.

The affect privileged by Freud was anxiety. When he refers to terror he speaks by the negative, pointing that which anxiety tries to avoid: "There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against terror" (Freud, 1920, p. 12-13). In psychoanalysis, it was Ferenczi who dedicated himself to describe terror in details, investigating its genesis, its modes of expression, and its consequences for subjectivity.

Ferenczi calls terror a psychic commotion. Describes it as a state of shock or paralysis caused by subjective annihilation. It involves, as Ferenczi says, "the inhibition of every kind of mental activity and a state of complete passivity devoid any resistance". (Ferenczi, 1931a, p. 239). In other words, the individual experiences the destruction of his sense of self, of his ability to resist, act and think - anyway, of all possibilities of defending himself in face of the other. Although it is an intense affection, psychic commotion provokes anesthesia in the one who experiences it. This anesthesia is due to the destruction of bonds that

structure the psychic apparatus and provide cohesiveness to the self. The self splits, fragments itself, loses its own form, and accepts any form that is given, "like a sack of flour" (Ferenczi, 1931a).

It is for this reason that one who experiences a state of terror tends to identify with the aggressor, and this aggressor begins to dominate and shape the self of the victim. It is important to remember that it is not possible to subscribe an experience like this in the psyche. It is not possible to create any representation for the trauma that would have caused the psychic commotion; the individual can only repeat compulsively the trauma, intending to work through and get rid of it.

But what causes terror? This is Ferenczi's most original contribution. Psychic commotion is not caused by the physical violence that happens in the first moment, but by the fact that, in a second moment, the suffering of the one who experiences the violence is not recognized. When an adult tells a child that was abused, for example, that nothing happened, it's either lying or fantasizing, it makes the child lose confidence in its own perception, feeling that her affections and herself as a subject has no importance. This is what Ferenczi calls *Verleugnung*, which can be translated by denial or disbelief. *Verleugnung* is not only a matter of words. Someone who suffers from a denial feels confused about words, facts, his own existence and affections. As Ferenczi says: "The worst way of dealing with such situations is to deny their existence, to assert that nothing has happened and that nothing is hurting [someone]… These are the kinds of treatment which make the trauma pathogenic" (Ferenczi, 1931b, p. 138). So, what causes terror is a denied recognition about feelings, suffering, subjectivity.

Ferenczi built this way of understanding terror from family stories involving an abused child (1933). However, this model does not highlight characters, but relationships. Relationships of power, of dependency, of devaluation, of disrespect; in short, political relations, to the same extent that affections such as vulnerability, ambivalence, humiliation and shame can be considered political affections, as proposes Homi Bhabha (1994). In this sense, disbelief is a notion important to understand both individual and collective terrors. Denial and disbelief provokes the subject to lose confidence not only in the other, but also in himself and on the testimony of his senses. This is why he tends to incorporate the perspective of the aggressor. This sudden destruction of confidence - in the world and in himself - is also what Jean Améry highlights in the experience of torture: "Confidence in humanity, shaken by the first slap in the face, demolished by torture, is no longer regained (1995, p. 61). It is also what sociologist Kai Erikson (1991), who created the notion of *collective trauma*, noted in survivors of catastrophes, when responsibility for such disasters were denied by the agents that caused them:

The experience of trauma, at its worst, can mean not only a loss of confidence in the self, but a loss of confidence in the surrounding tissue of family and community, in the structures of human governments, in the larger logics by which human kind lives, in the ways of nature itself (Erikson, 1991, p. 198).

Honneth and denied recognition

The destruction of confidence in the self and in the world shows how much the credit or discredit of someone are linked to his possibility of being recognized by those around him. Every individual has the vital need to be seen, heard, approved, and respected by the people who are surround, and this kind of recognition can be understood as a fundamental need. The non-recognition of his existence, his ways of being and feeling, including the integrity of his body, his tastes, his sexual orientation and his beliefs, can be lived as a subjective annihilation.

Thus, denial or disbelief, while a non-validation of the subjects' perceptions and affections, may be understood as a denied recognition. In this case, the denial and disbelief of a subject ceases to be regarded as a private matter and becomes an issue of collective and public spheres.

Following that line of work, the German philosopher Axel Honneth, of Frankfurt School, tackles the problem of recognition from the situations in which it fails, working with what he calls "forms of denied recognition" (Honneth, 1996). More than inflicting damage to someone, these forms of rejection violate the

integrity of human beings as creatures that need approval and recognition, injuring the positive understanding they may have of themselves and the one they acquire in relation to the other.

Honneth presents three forms of recognition, and therefore three levels where it can fail. The first is the loving level experience with the mother: the denial of this recognition is experienced as violation; the second is the legal plan, in which the denial of recognition is experienced as deprivation of fundamental rights; the third is the cultural plan, in which the denial of recognition is experienced as offense or degradation of lifestyles.

The issues of recognition and his denial lead Honneth to promote an overlap among affective, social, legal, and political fields. In dealing with the first condition of recognition, the field of love - or more specifically, the love relationship with the mother - the philosopher seeks support in a psychoanalyst who stands out for his interest in the primary affective bonds between mother and baby: Donald Winnicott. According to Honneth, what defines the issues of recognition is not the conflict among psychic instances (Freud), or among positions and places (Lacan), but the modes of affective relationship. It is important to note that the notion of recognition for Honneth is very different from the Lacanian conception. The latter is inspired by the dialectic of master and slave, while Honneth's recognition approaches Winnicott's idea of mirror, based on the depth of maternal gaze.

Honneth considers the amorous plan of recognition as a presupposition for the constitution of the subject of rights and, mainly, for the understanding of political claims. These ideas lead him to conclude that what moves political rebellions is not economic or survival interests, but the sense of injustice that comes from experiences of denial of recognition. This sense of injustice would be linked to the subject's emotional experiences that would be in the genesis of violence and political strife.

If we articulate Ferenczi to Honneth, that is, if we consider recognition as the reverse of denial or disbelief, we realize something that was not so clear at first sight: someone who is suffering from a denial of recognition may experience states of terror or psychic commotion. The production of these states does not concern only the subject who suffers, but the entire social environment. It is a production in which everyone is involved. One does not refuse recognition or produce terror without consequences.

Some of them are political.

Terror and Jihad

Recognition is also a theme treated by the Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama when he thinks on the crisis of Islamic culture and its effects among young people. Originating from a Muslim country, Benslama refers to a "human desire for recognition" to explain the success of the industry of martyrs in radical Islamism, which leads young people to destruction and self-destruction as a form of heroism (Benslama, 2005).

According to him, we have had many forms of terrorism in history, but nothing compared to the way it is now practiced in Muslim communities, since at no time did this practice become an industry of voluntary death. He claims that the flourishing of this industry speaks of a deep disorder in the current culture of Islam. This destructive and self-destructive ideal indicates a radical deficit of recognition on all levels. He writes:

It is necessary to ask how, at one point, "dying for" can become attractive to thousands of people. The question must be placed with great responsibility, since it is only possible to appeal to self-sacrifice when a devastating experience for someone is concerned, an experience linked to the consciousness of his own value (Benslama, 2005).

The culture and societies of the Muslim world, says Benslama, fail to protect children and young people from the terror states that make them vulnerable to manipulations of jihadism. Social institutions can no longer preserve the essential narcissism of their members, favoring their self-loathing, inflicting

psychological and moral wounds, devaluing their life and honor. Preservation and respect for human existence become precarious - materially, symbolically, and legally as well.

Torments intensify where there is unhappiness and shame of being. Particularly in the problems of identity: the subject says to himself he is worthless, he has a defect, he is trash. The jihadist offering purposes him an opportunity: salvation by worship, by the emergency exit of glory (Benslama, 2015).

It is these recognition deficits – and not religious belief – that incite young people to jihadism. The recruiters of Holy death present these young people a tangible enemy to channel their aggressive instincts, as well as a promise of sublime dignity and heroism through auto-sacrifice. The glorious ideal is an effective prosthetic for deficit of recognition.

But would we, Westerners, have something to do with the contemporary crisis of Islamic culture? Yes, says Benslama. The West is, in part, agent of the crisis, since the 19th century and still today. Benslama uses the same term as Sartre to discuss the African uprising against the colonizer: the boomerang effect. Today, he says, we have seen the return of the boomerang, but forgot the starting point. Since the landing of Napoleon in Egypt, in 1798, the Muslim world is forced to give in to a project of civilization where it does not recognize itself: passed by the violence of colonialism, by the violence of the post-colonial governments; corruption fed by multinationals and infighting, the alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia, permitting it to finance radical Islamists movements, the dissolution of the Iraqi army, which left half a million soldiers alone, available for the channeling of revenge.

All of this was experienced by Muslim youth as humiliation, a wound in self-respect, and an offense in ways of living. In other words, a refusal in recognition, in Honneth's sense, or denial and disbelief, in Ferenczi's sense. Radical Islam does not create, but captures and manipulates these affections, producing death machines, soldiers willing to lose their lives for their lives to acquire value.

And what is the value of a life?

Now, even though the West has – also – responsibility for the departure of the boomerang, the tactics of fighting back, used by both sides, make this process a never-stopping boomerang. The declaration of War on Terror through repressive mechanisms causes the increase of its repetitive circuit. Repression, both in psychoanalytic and political senses, through War on Terror at all levels - the police one, the economic and the military - ends up to producing and reproducing exactly what it intends to disarm (Derrida, 2003, p. 109).

A possible alternative may come not through the war, but through recognition. Recognizing and promoting conditions for this can be done, rather than discrediting or denying, clearing the conditions of violence, all of these can create possibilities for lives to have meaning, so they can become worthwhile lives. For this recognition to take place, it is necessary to understand how a subject constitutes himself, how his affections work, in which aspects he presents himself helpless and in need of the other. Here lies the importance of psychoanalysis: understanding the subjective constitution is very important, both to create non-violent responses to aggression, and to point the collective responsibility in terror and terrorism situations. Maybe this is our best contribution, as analysts, to witness individual and collective events of our time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AMERY, J. (1995). La torture. *Par delà le crime et le châtiment. Essai pour surmonter l'insurmontable.* Paris: Actes Sud.

BENJAMIN, W. (1940). *On the concept of history*. Classic Books America, 2009.

BHABHA, H. (1994). *The location of culture.* London/New York: Routledge.

BENSLAMA, F. (2005). *Déclaration d'insoumission: à l'usage des musulmans et de ceux qui ne le sont pas.* Paris: Flammarion.

BENSLAMA, F. (2015). Pour les désesperés, l'islamism radical est un produit excitant. *Le monde: Culture et idées.* Available in: http://www/lemonde.fr/idees/

DERRIDA, J. (2003). *Philosophy in a time of terror. Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida.* Chicago: University Chicago Press.

ERIKSON, K. (1991). Notes on trauma and community. *American Imago* 48/4: 455-72.

FERENCZI, S. (1931a). Notes and fragments, In *Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis.* London: Mansfield, 1980.

FERENCZI, S. (1931b). Child analysis in the analysis of adults, In *Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis.* London: Mansfield, 1980.

FERENCZI, S. (1933). Confusion of tongues between the adults and the child, In *Final contributions to the problems and methods of psychoanalysis.* London: Mansfield, 1980.

FREUD, S. (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle. *Standard Edition*, v. 18. London: Hogarth Press.

FREUD, S. (1933). Why war? *Standard Edition*, v. 22. London: Hogarth Press.

FREUD, S. (1939). Moses and monotheism. *Standard Edition*, vol. 23. London: Hogarth Press.

HONNETH, A. (1996). *The struggle for recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts.* Polity Press.

ROBESPIERRE, M. (1794). Justification of the use of terror. Available in: www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/robespierre-terror.html

SCHMITT, C. (1932). *The concept of the political.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

VEDANTAM, S. (2003). When violence masquerades as virtue: a brief history of terrorism, In Varvin, S: Volkan, S. *Violence or dialogue? Psychoanalytic insights on terror and terrorism.* IPA Limited