

RECONCILIATION, MEMORY AND FORGETTING:
POLITICAL AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS.
THE CASE OF CHILE

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This paper reflects on some questions on political and psychosocial dilemmas of political reconciliation in Chile. In the political transition period in Chile and in most of the Latin American countries there has been much discussion about truth, justice, social reparation, reconciliation, impunity, memory, overcoming memory, and suppressing memory. These are simultaneously political and sociopsychological problems, for individuals and for societies. It has been necessary to integrate in a more explicit way the connections between psychology and politics, between private stories, testimonies, and sociopolitical history.

Introduction

Maria

Maria arrived in Santiago lost even to her. She had lost her memory. Someone sent her to the Vicariate of Solidarity at the end of 1979.

Maria didn't know her name, but she insisted that she be named Maria.

Maria didn't remember if she had children, but she insisted she had many.

Maria didn't remember how she lost her memory. No one knew how to retrieve it for her.

Someone who knew her, told her who she was and spoke to her of the past, of her past, but Maria forgot everything and the history they told her had no meaning to her.

Someone invited her to invent the past that she had forgotten and Maria recounted her own past. She said that some »rich people« in a small town in southern Chile decided that she, and her husband, and three other men were subversives and should die. She was the mayor in the town, named by the president of the republic. But the president was dead. Five men came wearing vampire masks, kidnapped them from the

town jail, and took them on a long rural road to a bridge to be executed. Maria says that every two kilometres there was a clock.

»I had never been there, I had never seen them before in my life, but that night I saw them ... When we arrived at the bridge I stepped forward to tell my husband, »to here life has brought us,« only that. Maria survived the execution but forgot even her name. She wandered by houses and through towns until she came to a church, and listened to a mass given in the name of the detained and disappeared. It was October of 1979. Outside it rained torrentially. She waits for the priest and tells him an incredible story: she has been a disappeared person for six years.

Not many Chileans came back from the shadow of death. There are many who would have liked to lose their memory. There are many who don't know if it had been better to lose their memory, even of their own name, like Maria.

My presentation today refers to some of the political and ethical dilemmas of the political transition in Chile. One of them has been we call »memory and forgetting«, or put another way, the psychological and political strategies to confront a conflictive history.

In the political transition period in most of the Latin American countries there has been much discussion about truth, justice, social reparation, reconciliation, impunity, memory, overcoming memory, and suppressing memory (olvido).

These are simultaneously political and sociopsychological problems, for individuals and for societies. Therefore it has been necessary to integrate in a more explicit way the connections between psychology and politics, between private stories, testimonies, and sociopolitical history.

Some memories of traumatic experiences are extremely vivid and seem impossible for the victim to heal or to forget. In some cases the experience appears as if there was no memory of them. Silence used to be the predominant social reaction to human rights' violations and political threat. From the beginning of the transition period there has been enormous resistance to full disclosure of human rights' violations in Chile, and elsewhere in Latin America.

The memories of extreme, traumatic experiences, of injuries suffered or inflicted, can themselves be traumatic. Recalling such events is painful or at least disturbing. A person who has been wounded tends to block out the memory so as not to renew the pain; the person who has inflicted the wound pushes the memory deep down, to be rid of it, to alleviate the feeling of guilt (Levi, 1989).

The humiliation and pain produced by torture has not been easy to put into words. As difficult as it is to talk about torture privately, it becomes even

more problematic when one tries to talk about it, publicly, because of people's unwillingness to listen to it. At the same time, calling oneself a survivor implies recognizing that there was the risk of death, a closeness of death, a time of dying that left the taste of death with those who survived. On the other hand, it seems that many of those who did not share this experience believe that if the terror that affected the survivors is forgotten, then Chile's unacknowledged collective terror could also be forgotten.

From a psychological perspective we have spoken of the social damage to the individuals as a result of trauma produced by the violations of human rights. The concept of trauma has been the basis for understanding the subjective impact and the consequences of human rights violations.

The traumatic nature of human rights violation generates distressing emotions and meanings not only for the victims. This perhaps explains the efforts in many sectors of Chilean society to »close the book« on this theme, silence it, arguing that its persistence may bring calls for vengeance, violence, and confrontation. But society can't decree loss of memory, even if it won't support its validation. Those who need to remember will find a way, even if it is distorted, to sustain it.

Memory or its suppression has been a great dilemma for Chilean society and for all the countries which have experienced political conflicts, today. There are countless dead and disappeared that do not rest in peace. There is the strong desire by some to turn the page and forget, and for others simply to continue living. This is not an abstract dilemma. It is experienced by the Chilean people, as well Argentines, Uruguayans, Salvadorians, Guatemalans, and others in their daily lives. Like all historic dilemmas, there is no simple consensus how it should be resolved.

In the political context of transitions to democracy, it is said that »it is necessary to maintain historical memory or social memory« as a collective process, remembering what occurred during the dictatorship. It is also said, »It is necessary to forget and forgive the human rights violations in the name of social peace.« Chilean society tries to remember and to forget the past abuses. Here under the epidermis of a society are the unhealed wounds, wounds that cannot close if not exposed to open air. To remember traumatic experiences is perceived as »living it all over again.« The painful remembrance of such deep ruptures, of the presence of death and fear in social relations, is still considered as threatening. People invoke a variety of arguments to defend the idea that all this damage should be completely forgotten, and those who committed it, unconditionally pardoned.

»The most common argument is that of the political necessity of getting beyond the past, so as not to perpetuate the conflict, and this requires pardon and social reconciliation. Finally, from time to time the argument is made that if pardon and social forgetting are not forthcoming, there is the danger of the military overthrowing the democratic system and bringing back dictatorship. Consequently, as much for social convenience as for political

realism, we would have to let go any thought of prosecuting those who committed offences in the name of national security, and to quit all claims for reparation for the social damage they have produced. The second argument is without doubt the strongest, and must be granted a measure of validity. There is no doubt that the evolution of human society requires the capacity to overcome differences, to pardon offences and even renounce certain well founded claims in the interest of peace and the common good. Nevertheless, the problem turns on whether that pardon and renunciation are going to be established on a foundation of truth and justice, or on lies and continued injustice« (Martin Baró, 1989).

This theme has been extremely controversial in Chile since 1989. For different motives, the issues of memory and its suppression have been discussed among all sectors of society. The theme took on enormous and terrible significance when a mass grave was discovered with 19 bodies near Pisagua, in northern Chile, in 1990. Conserved by the desert, the desperate screams and agony of the victims literally faced all Chileans in photos on the front page of newspapers. Memory, the past, the disappeared, and the topic of impunity for the perpetrators were front page news.

Social and political groups with different interests and ideas called for justice, truth, and derogation of the amnesty law that protected the murderers. Others responded with threats, signalling that »forgetting« the past was the condition for social peace. Some called for making the amnesty law more inclusive, covering all political crimes from 1973 to 1990, instead of those to 1978.

In his statement, the politician noted the need to distinguish between the circumstances in which the human rights violations occurred, and therefore, to take into account the existing »political climate« though of course this did not mean accepting the moral or legal validity of actions that could not be justified.

The debate remained yet unresolved. What was the »past?« What had led to the coup? What had »really« occurred after September 11? What was the »truth? To what extent was there a »war« against subversives and to what extent »state terrorism?« What was the extent of torture, murder, and »human rights violations? Who were the victims? Or were they »enemies« in mortal combat against the patria? Who would tell the story of the past, who would define its meaning in the present? And could there be »forgetting,« reparation, reconciliation without repentance? From our perspective today, these themes are inevitably both political and psychological; we must connect them.

Confronted by the threat of uncontrollable emotions and political violence, Chileans feared conflicts, overvalued consensus, and avoided the risk of political instability. They censured their words and deeds related to that past, fearing a return to the horror. In doing so, they allowed the recent past

to govern and »pacify« the present. But there are permanent signals from society that the open wounds will not heal.

What is memory?

Memory is understood as the ability to remember events and experiences from the past. Memory is also the ability to conserve and remember past states of consciousness and everything associated with them. Memory is also described as the psychic functions that permit us to represent the past as past.

Social memory can be understood, in this context, as the memory of subjective processes associated with historical events that have traumatically affected everyday life. Social memory implies giving meaning to those events. Social memory, in this sense, entails not only »objective« remembering, but subjective meaning conferred on the past.

Memory is not identical to history and doesn't imply a critical perspective. Memory is reconstruction of past emotions, feelings and perceptions. It is related to social history and to private experiences. New experiences may allow new meanings and valuations of the past. When this occurs, it differentiates these memories from other experiences that are not psychologically redefined.

Memory makes possible retrospective perception and makes necessary reflection on how the past is present in Chileans' daily lives. This past has been called »an open wound.« For many women and men, indelibly marked by the dictatorship, this wound will not scar. These people include relatives of disappeared, the widows and orphans, and the tortured. For them the impunity of their victimizers and the political proposition coming from different sectors of the society to forget the past makes impossible healing and true reconciliation.

The most important material for the reconstruction of truth was the memory of the survivors. Although truth is insufficient, it is an essential aspect of the social and political process implying a public acknowledgment of the victims' suffering. If this process does not take place, societies are doomed to repeat the past and the victims doomed to private heartaches.

Other types of creation of social memory took the form of poetry, essays, novels, clandestine writings, videos, films, plays, »art actions«, paintings, photographs, murals, and tapestries (»arpilleras«). These cultural and artistic contributions to memory accumulated questions and responses. They became a living memory, a cultural documentation of dictatorship (Dorfman, 1991).

Why Remember? Why Forget? Reconciliation as Historical and Political Utopia

It is frequently said that reconciliation among Chileans is indispensable and for that to succeed some propose »forgetting the past« and living for the present. Others propose reviewing the past to achieve reconciliation. Are they speaking of the same thing? What is understood in everyday language by reconciliation? Most dictionaries offer two principal definitions. One implies the coexistence of ideas or situations that are not entirely incompatible, though they are very different, even contradictory. The other usage refers to a situation in which two persons or countries re-establish amity between themselves after a profound conflict. Both interpretations are implicit in the allusions to reconciliation made in Chile. Thus reconciliation appears as a utopia for all social and political sectors, especially about the differences and disagreements of regarding the »past.« The common political future would be subject to this utopia, the guarantee of permanent social and economic development, promising, therefore, peace, stability, and democracy. Reconciliation emerges as an elixir capable of exorcizing the past, healing wounds, eliminating the threats and violence, transforming the personnel meaning of past fear and exile. It is a remedy that undoes the anger and resentment, relieves pain and injury, allows forgetting frustration and misery, constructs a common space for the promise of the future. However, while all share the outward desire for »reconciliation« there also exists a latent anti utopian legacy that prevents its achievement.

The perception of the past is associated with highly charged emotional associations, referring to extreme conditions with risk of losing life and of taking life. It is associated with perceptions of intolerable threats and personal losses, of loss of identity, of family, of a way of life, and even of the patria itself – despite its different meanings for various persons and groups. It evokes almost unimaginable suffering, physical and psychological. Thus »human rights« becomes a summary term, a »prompt« for all these images, emotions, and memories – for people on both sides of the conflict, and those who wished to sit out the conflict but could not help but be affected by it as Chilean society was transformed under military rule.

Some say that only the passage of time will lessen the intensity of these feelings and passions; indeed that only the passage of time will do so. Therefore they prefer to bury the past with its victims. But the »past« refuses to be buried, and it claws at Chilean society and politics, it perturbs social relations, and it prevents individual reconciliation and psychological tranquillity precisely because so many Chileans insist on the desirability of »forgetting,« even seeking to impose it as public policy on those whose nightmares and day fears won't let them forget.

Conclusions

The military dictatorship made evident the authoritarian foundation of social relations and institutional structures in Chilean society. It was as if the dictatorship were the chemical catalyst revealing photographs, allowing appearing what previously was invisible. The antidemocratic features in Chilean society were rooted deeply in the country's socialization practices of family relations, schools, labour organization, business, university life and the country's political institutions.

Pinochet and his supporters underlined their historical role in Chile. He has been the hero who saved the Patria from totalitarian communism, re-established law and order, provided the constitutional foundations of a modern democracy and permitted a peaceful legal transition from authoritarian rule to elected government (Loveman, 1990). This was the true past. The military and their allies described the past as unending war against subversives, though they recognized that few soldiers were killed »in battle.« They reminded Chileans that they were struggling with »the enemies« of the Patria.

The vision of the victims and human rights institutions was quite different. They had suffered political repression in the past. They demand justice and public acknowledgment of human right's violations.

From our experience, it is necessary to recognize and differentiate historical events and diverse interpretations of them. It is necessary to differentiate the fantasies and emotions associated with the past, especially the idealizations, the desires, and hopes that are associated with the losses, frustrations, and suffering. These emotions are not only individual. They influence collective attitudes toward politics and the commitment, or lack of it, with the fate of Chilean society presently. In this process, literature and often art of all forms represents one possibility of integrating what we were, what we are, and what we wish to be or not to be.

Through art and other media, elaboration of the past by remembering, allows each of us to recognize its present significance through the fear, impotence, exhaustion, sadness, and anguish that resurface. Individual suffering can be recognized and validated. People can obtain more information about what happened. But this requires also understanding the relationship between the suffering and the political context that induced it. It also implies understanding that the present is not »a return to democracy« as imagined but rather the creation of a different »democracy« that has incorporated institutional and ideological aspects of the military regime. Since elaboration of the past in psychological, cultural, and ethical terms cannot be dissociated, at least for now, with the present political order that operates in an ambience of lingering threat and fear, while permitting impunity for most of the victimizers, successful therapy must confront (that is, force us to recognize) the present effects on patients of the new political system as

well as the trauma of the past. This confrontation at the social level, which is collective memory, is also essential to prevent repetition of the horror.

Openly acknowledging the past and openly recognizing their »private« truth is extremely threatening to the victimizers and to political stability as we have observed. Many have argued that examining the past only leads to re-traumatization and the re-opening of old wounds and scars. The deep desire to simply forget, though legitimate in certain ways, also becomes an impossible proposal. To be able to forget, it is necessary to remember.

More and more there is discussion about »not forgetting«; the importance of »knowing the truth« and »not allowing impunity.« All these ideas are very important. But they must be put into practice, not only as an abstract ideas or declarations. I think that this is the difference, this is the challenge. We need to work with this because it is important for us as therapists, as Chilean citizens, and as human beings. We have no temptation to remain in the past if we work with the consequences of human rights violations. We are dealing with the influence of a traumatic past that affects the everyday life of some people directly, and of most Chileans indirectly, though they might deny it or be ignorant of the effects. We think that it is impossible to forget as long as this past remains so influential on the present and as a burden for the future. This is the effect of keeping it »untouched« (or suppressed) as if trauma were only a frozen legacy of the past. This is for me the main problem. I think we need to uncover the meanings concealed by the invitation to forget. What are the subjective and political significance of »peace« when it calls for »forgetting« the unforgettable?

Such simulated »forgetting« is a mistake in private life and in social and political life. Peace is the result of satisfactory resolutions of the past conflicts. Not of the denial of those conflicts.

The polarization of society has not been completely overcome, and at the same time it is possible to understand the balance of political power in the society in a more complex way. We need to discuss this, but this type of discussion seems to menace the existing equilibrium. The political-legal system of the dictatorship has been largely retained – though some small reforms have been possible. The dictatorship's amnesty law extends to political crimes committed before 1978 – that is the period of most intense repression. It excludes on a few crimes, such as the murder of ex-minister of defense Orlando Letelier in Washington, D.C. in 1976. And the governing political coalition (Concertación de partidos por la democracia) has no power to abolish that law until 2009. The Supreme Court has upheld the amnesty and the legality of most other acts of the military junta. The national security legislation remains in place as does the 1980 constitution. All these contradictions of the transition to »democracy« are obstacles to resolving human rights legacies and for institutionalizing respect for human rights in the future.

Socially constructing »the truth« as was attempted in truth commissions such as the Rettig Commission (1990-1991) and Political Imprisonment and Torture Commission (2003-2005) in Chile and similar groups elsewhere, is an attempt to publicly and officially acknowledge the suffering occasioned by human rights violations, and makes possible both remorse and policies aimed at reparation. But it is also an effort to recover »the past« and provide a shared »memory.« This definition implies not accepting that »only the passing of time« is the salve for the society's wounds. It is an effort to operationalize reconciliation at the policy level and also to symbolically support the utopian version of reconciliation, by opening up for discussion pending ethical and political themes. It must also be said that this process has been publicly rejected by victimizers, in Chile, Argentina, El Salvador and elsewhere.

Memory of »the past« conveys different moral meanings; without remorse or at least understanding the possibility of remorse, the process of reconciliation can hardly begin.

Others have argued, on the other hand, that examining the past leads only to retraumatization, which only wounds, even scars, are reopened. The strong desire to just »forget,« though legitimate, is not possible. To »forget,« it is first necessary to »remember« and then closes the history.

Reflecting on the past from a historical and philosophical perspective allows distinctions to be made between »facts« and their »political causes« and between individual memories and their collective meaning. It helps prevent words from clouding »reality« and allows Chileans to remember a common past as an essential condition for building a common future. I recognize that this possibility is far from reality today. If reconciliation is even to be approximated, however, memory must be a part of the process, if »forgetting« is ever to be possible.

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