POLITICAL VIOLENCE AND WAR AS CAUSES OF PSYCHOSOCIAL TRAUMA IN EL SALVADOR

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Two images of El Salvador

According to an image widely circulated by U.S. Government spokes-
people, El Salvador represents the best example of the “new Latin
American democracies” that have emerged during the last decade,
particularly in the Central American region, with the exception of
Nicaragua. In support of this statement, the following points are made:

1. The Salvadoran Government was chosen in free elections, in
   accordance with a democratic constitution.

2. There is a growing respect for human rights among the country’s
   population. According to the U.S. Government, 80% of the human
   rights violations that still occur are committed by the rebels.

3. The Salvadoran army has become increasingly professional and
   submits to civilian control.

4. Although there are still a few problems, for example, in the
   functioning of the judicial system, to a large extent this should be
   attributed to the situation created by the Marxist-Leninist groups prac-
   ticing violent terrorism with support from Cuba and Nicaragua.

Regrettably, this image of the country reflects little, if anything, of
the real situation of El Salvador. The democratic character of a govern-
ment does not depend—at least not solely—on the way in which it is
elected, but rather on the forces that determine its day-to-day conduct.

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And the verifiable fact is that, in terms of El Salvador’s basic policies, North American fears about “national security” count more than the most basic needs of the Salvadoran people. It would never cross any Salvadoran’s mind that the Duarte government might have some significant control over the Salvadoran Armed Forces: this is simply a result of the daily experience Salvadorans have of who is in charge there. And in the end, attributing the majority of human rights violations to the rebels does not exempt the government from its share of the responsibility. Moreover, the fact is that such attribution constitutes a gross distortion of the evidence, as has been made clear by independent observers [1–4].

What, then, is the reality of El Salvador? Instead of making “generic” statements, a series of facts of daily life will be presented that directly relate to mental health and reveal a Salvadoran reality very different from that depicted above.

Let us consider a small community in the Department of Chalatenango, in the northern part of the country. This is one of the most conflictive zones, effectively controlled by insurrgnts of the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) for a good part of the year. The residents consist of a few dozen very poor campesino families: the elderly, a few adult men, women and children; there are no youths.

Periodically the army launches military operations affecting this small village, including the destruction of homes and crops. Every time an operation is begun, the people take shelter in their houses, gripped by a series of psychosomatic symptoms: generalized trembling of the body, muscular weakness, diarrhea. . . . One elderly couple has chosen, since the beginning of the war, to hide in a tatu, or shelter, every time there is an operation or when the armed forces approach the area. The result has been that the mere announcement that there will be an operation produces in the husband what the whole village calls “the pain”: violent intestinal cramps, a crushing headache, and a generalized weakness that makes it impossible to walk.

A small study carried out in 1987 in the refuge of San José Calle Real, situated on the outskirts of San Salvador, among 250 people of all ages (36% of the refugees there), found that the presence of the army in
the vicinity of the refuge was sufficient to cause 87% of those questioned to experience fear; 75% felt an accelerated pulse rate, and 64% were overcome by generalized bodily trembling [5. Pp 12–13].

Usulután is an area in the southeast part of the country with two different regions: a coastal zone, rich in cotton production, and a more mountainous zone, with large coffee farms. In this area there is a permanent presence of the FMLN, and the armed forces carry out continuous counterinsurgency operations.

In the course of a series of opinion polls, we have gathered clear evidence that government soldiers practice systematic sexual abuse of the campesina women living in the area. One of these women told us that in order to avoid the continuing mass rape, the “cleverest ones” (las más listas was the expression she used) resort to the protection of some soldier or official, prostituting themselves to him so that he will protect them from the other soldiers. According to our information, this is a common practice among the members of the government armed forces, but not among members of the FMLN.

In an opinion poll conducted in February 1988, campesinos were asked to indicate what they considered to be the causes of the war. Of those interviewed, who had expressed themselves very freely up until that moment, 59.1% appeared frightened and answered that they did not know anything about it [6]. Even when they were shown obvious results of the war—burnt crops, the marks of bullets or bombs on their own houses—they insisted on their ignorance, saying that these things had happened when they were not home. It is clear that although fear may have diminished in recent years among the population in the urban area of San Salvador, it continues to be very prevalent among the campesinos, including those who live in less-conflictive areas of the country.

There is an increasing number of massacres of civilians by soldiers on leave or by former soldiers, who throw grenades at a home, into a bus, or in the middle of a dance hall. Often those who commit these acts are found to have been drunk. The motives tend to be jealousy or the desire to assert their power or “authority.” In just the last week of February 1988, the press reported no fewer than four such cases.
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In a research project carried out between April and May of 1987, we tried to replicate some North American studies on the formation of the concept of social class [7]. More than two hundred children of various ages, belonging to various social sectors, were interviewed. One of the questions asked was: “What would have to happen in order for there to be no poor people?” Several of the children from the higher socioeconomic sectors gave this response: “Kill them all.”

Of course, this piece of data can be interpreted in various ways, and the study is still unfinished. But the studies carried out in the United States have never reported this kind of answer. It should be added that some sectors of Salvadoran society propose as a solution to the civil war the elimination of “all the subversives,” in the style of the 1932 mass killing that took place in the country [8] in order to “win in this way another fifty years of peace.”

These four examples present an image of El Salvador that is very different from that offered in official reports. Moreover, they point to a social and political framework without which it is impossible to understand the problems of both the Salvadorans who stay in the country and of those who seek refuge abroad. Three features can be useful in defining that reality.

1. Above all, this is a society that is more than poor—it is impoverished; a society that is not just divided—it is violently torn apart. It is a society in which the most basic human rights of the majority are structurally and systematically denied—such fundamental rights as having a place to live, a job in which to fulfill oneself as a human being, or a school in which to educate one’s children [3]. This situation demonstrates how arbitrary and deceptive it can be to distinguish between “economic” and “political” refugees: in El Salvador to demand the satisfaction of the basic needs of the poor majority is, in itself, a “subversive” proposition since it attacks the very bases of a discriminatory system.

2. The government’s armed forces continue to represent, for the majority of Salvadorans, a terrifying and abusive force, arbitrary and omnipotent “authority,” and the expression of a system organized to serve the needs of a minority of 10% or 15% of the population. This is not meant to deny the partial improvements since 1984 in the Salva-
doran Army, in both its technical performance and in its relations with the civilian population. Nevertheless, the armed forces in El Salvador continue to be an institution beyond the law. Whether or not its members respect people’s rights depends on the discretion of its collective interests and, worse, on the generally narrow understanding the local officials or common soldiers ("the authorities") bring to each situation.

3. The Salvadoran population is being systematically destroyed by the war, which has devastated the country for eight years, and which the U.S. military advisers calculate may continue for another eight years. Obviously, a very fundamental part of this destruction is the number of victims: the death toll from the conflict during these last few years is estimated to amount to nearly seventy thousand [9]. It is difficult to give an exact number for the wounded, though it is known that in military combat in general there are at least three wounded for each fatality.

But what I am interested in emphasizing here is not so much the physical destruction as the psychosocial destruction. As illustrated above, the impact of the Salvadoran war ranges from the kind of organic deterioration manifested in psychosomatic symptoms, to the aberrant criminalization of children’s minds, to the unhinging of social relations as they are submitted to the abuse and violence of those who hold the power in their hands.

The Salvadoran war

All wars constitute a way of resolving conflict between groups that is characterized by a resort to violence in an attempt to destroy or dominate one’s rival. Psychological studies on war tend to concentrate predominantly on two areas: one seeks to improve the efficiency of military actions by focusing on those very elements that contribute to the war effort (what is called "psychological warfare"); the other concentrates on the psychological consequences of the war, and is oriented toward prevention and treatment.

There is, nevertheless, an aspect of war that is of great importance and should be analyzed by social psychology: its way of defining all that is social. By its very dynamic, a war tends to become the most all-
encompassing phenomenon of a country's situation, the dominant process to which all other social, economic, political, and cultural processes must be subordinated, and which, directly or indirectly, affects all the members of a society.

But this same absorbing quality of the war can lead to ignoring the different ways in which it affects groups and individuals: what represents ruin for some becomes big business for others, and what places some close to death opens for others the possibility of a new life. The war suffered in the flesh by the campesino is one thing; what the urban middle-class contemplates on the television screen is quite another. In El Salvador, those who go to the battlefields are generally the poor, the children of campesinos or the urban poor, not the children of the factory owner or the professional.

From a psychosocial perspective, the Salvadoran civil war was marked in 1984 by three fundamental characteristics: (1) violence, which directs the best resources of each contestant toward the destruction of its rival; (2) social polarization, that is, the displacement of groups toward opposite extremes, with a resultant rigidification of their respective ideological positions and pressure exerted upon everyone to align himself or herself with "us" or "them"; and (3) the institutional lie, involving such effects as distortion of institutions' purposes and ideological screening of social reality [10]. Fundamentally, this psychosocial characterization of the Salvadoran war continued to hold true in 1988. But the fact that the situation of the war still has not substantially changed in spite of the blood spilled, the hundreds of millions of dollars invested by the United States, the destruction and the suffering is an indication that either the war is not the solution to the conflict or that it is wrongly conducted. All in all, it seems necessary to examine the variations that the three psychosocial characteristics of the Salvadoran civil war have assumed as the war drags on if Axis IV of DSM-III [11] concerning situational and psychosocial precipitants of mental problems is to be taken seriously.

Social polarization

In 1984, the degree of polarization of the Salvadoran population seemed to have reached a peak, and significant signs of depolarization
could be observed—that is, conscious efforts by some groups and sectors to dissociate themselves from either side [10. P. 507]. The processes of polarization and depolarization are neither uniform nor mechanical. Instead, they are closely related to the progress of military activity and to the evolution of the political situation itself. In this sense, from 1984 until the present, various important processes have been observable. Perhaps the most significant is the resurgence of mass movements, with clear sympathies toward the position of the FMLN.

Nevertheless, the conscious effort to polarize and take the grassroots organizations beyond labor demands toward more conscious political, radical, and even violent positions has produced a new reduction in the movement. Some have drawn away who feel they lack the strength to enter into this dynamic, or who fear a repetition of the violent repression of 1981–1982. On the governmental side, the armed forces have embarked on many plans of counterinsurgency, one of whose essential ingredients is the so-called “psychological war.” These plans have expressly sought to win “the hearts and minds” of the civilian population, to create a major obstacle for the rebels by presenting them as common terrorists and enemies of the people.

A concerted effort has been made not only to maintain the social polarization but to extend and deepen it. Toward this end, both sides have tried to emphasize points of antagonism rather than points of possible agreement, exploiting sources of resentment and of intergroup hatred. Each group has presented the other as the incarnation of evil, as “the enemy” that must be eliminated. Government propaganda is more contradictory in this aspect than the propaganda of the FMLN, owing as much to its volume and intensity (incomparably greater) as to its distortion of the language.

The degree of social polarization currently in the country is probably less than it was during the first years of the civil war. Bad as the situation may be, some political spaces have been opening, whether because of weariness and reason, disillusionment with a military solution and the daily demands of getting along, or international pressure and the emergence of various options. Some people are attempting to take advantage of these spaces to build bridges and to map out new horizons. The “‘National Debate’” launched by the Catholic Church in August 1988, which assembled 60 significant social groups (unions,
universities, professional associations, and others) and reached fundamental agreements about how to end the war, has been the best example of efforts toward social reconciliation [12].

Certainly, the amount of resources required to maintain the social polarization gives an indication of the Salvadoran people’s growing resistance to the attempt to solve the conflict by military means. However, the results of this resistance are not entirely positive, since the resistance can take such forms as inhibition or skepticism, which are not necessarily socially or personally constructive.

But even though the level of social polarization has tended to diminish and a popular resistance is developing that is deaf to all efforts to further radicalize the conflict, the campaigns of polarization keep the country in an atmosphere of tension. This tension is not just military but psychosocial as well: facts are ideologized, people are demonized, and the use of those very political spaces that have begun to open is criminalized—all of which leads to an apparent stagnation of social confrontation and to greater difficulty in trying to establish spaces for interaction of the various social groups with respect to objectives they share.

The institutionalized lie

The systematic screening of reality continues to be one of the fundamental characteristics of the Salvadoran war. This screening assumes various forms:

1. Above all, the object is to create an official version of the facts, an “official story,” which ignores crucial aspects of reality, distorts others, and even falsifies or invents still others. This official story is imposed by means of an intense and extremely aggressive display of propaganda, which is backed up even by all the weight of the highest official positions. Thus, for example, the president of the country became the public guarantor of an official explanation that attempted to blame the FMLN for the murder of the president of the Nongovernmental Commission of Human Rights, Herbert Anaya Sanabria.

2. When, for whatever reason, facts come to light that directly contradict the “official story,” they are “cordoned off.” A circle of silence is imposed that relegates the facts to quick oblivion or to a past that is presumably superseded by the evolution of events. The continual
violations of human rights by members of the armed forces enter this realm of blanketing silence.

3. Public statements about the national reality, the reporting of violations of human rights, and, above all, the unmasking of the official story, of the institutionalized lie, are considered “subversive” activities—in fact they are, since they subvert the order of the established lie. Thus, we come to the paradox that whoever dares to state the reality or to report abuses becomes, by this very act, a culprit of justice. What seems to be important is not whether the facts in question are true or not, which is always denied a priori; what is important is that they are stated. It is not the deeds that count, but the images.

For example, when the Auxiliary Bishop of San Salvador, Monseñor Rosa Chávez, reported in February 1988 that members of the First Infantry Brigade were the perpetrators of a triple murder with all the characteristics of a “death squad” killing, he was immediately branded a criminal by the highest civilian and military authorities. It was up to the bishop to prove his “innocence.” He was the accused, and it did not seem to matter much whether the facts he reported were really true or not.

4. Another element of falsehood is the degree of corruption that has increasingly permeated the various state organisms and the new Christian Democratic officials. Of course, this does not represent any historic novelty in a Salvadoran administration. What is new is that the corruption has penetrated so deeply into a party that until recently had behaved with relative honesty and whose stated principles are strongly opposed to the private use of public resources. The overwhelming contrast between the political discourse and the actual behavior of the members of the Christian Democratic Party now in power establishes a new level of falsehood. This becomes all the more striking in the context of the Salvadoran people’s present circumstances of extreme poverty. The most favorable judgment heard today about the corruption of the Christian Democrats in the government is that they are no different from governments previous to 1979—which were precisely those governments whose behavior helped bring about the civil war.

The violence

It is known that the violence of war in El Salvador (as in the so-called
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"low intensity conflicts") has two sources: on the one hand, that of open military confrontation involving combatants; on the other, that of undercover paramilitary repression, directed not against combatants but against all sectors or groups of the population that support or sympathize with the insurgents or are suspected of supporting or sympathizing with them.

The Salvadoran war was previously characterized by a minimum of open military actions and a maximum of undercover paramilitary actions. The "death squads" rather than the battalions were the principal instruments of war used by the government to remain in power as it faced popular and revolutionary harassment. Nevertheless, with the prolongation of the war and the very demands of the United States' counterinsurgency project for El Salvador, this proportion has been inverted. While military confrontations have been acquiring primary importance, repression has been relegated to a minor position. Since 1984, there has been a significant reduction in the number of torture victims.

Nevertheless, two factual statements should be made:

1. The number of victims in military confrontations, including fatalities and the wounded, is currently much higher than the number of victims of repression.

2. The number of victims of repression has been reduced, but it is still higher than it was before the war, when it was condemned as unacceptable by international organizations such as the United Nations and the Organization of American States.

This change in the war's direction has given rise to a parallel phenomenon in the social order: an order maintained by state terrorism has given way to a militarized order. In El Salvador a militarization of society and of collective life has been produced, as much in the zones controlled by the government as in those controlled by the FMLN (although very clear differences exist between the two situations).

The militarization of the social order means, at the least, two things: (a) military officials tend to occupy most positions that are vital for institutional order; (b) military permission becomes the criterion of validity and even of possibility of any activity. In other words, it would be difficult to carry out any activity or business of any degree of importance in the country without obtaining the institutional endorse-
ment of the armed forces or the personal sponsorship of some military officer. The surveillance the army openly exercises over the various systems of communication is nothing but the most visible expression of its growing power over the functioning of Salvadoran society.

Psychosocial trauma

If human beings are products of history, then clearly the particular history of war in El Salvador will have repercussions on the mental health of its inhabitants. Here, this impact will be referred to as psychosocial trauma.

The nature of psychosocial trauma due to the war

Etymologically, trauma means injury. In psychology, it is customary to speak of trauma when referring to an experience that affects a person in such a way that he or she is scarred, that is, left with a permanent residue of what happened. If one speaks of trauma, it is because it is understood that this residue is negative, that an injury is involved that unfavorably marks the person’s life.

In general, the term psychic trauma is used to refer to a particular injury that a difficult or exceptional experience—e.g., the death of a beloved person, a situation of extreme stress or suffering, a painfully frustrating event—inflicts on a particular person. An example would be the experience of a child who sees his or her parents die in an accident or a fire. At times, in a sense more analogous to the Salvador situation, one speaks of social trauma to refer to the way in which some historic process can leave a whole population affected. This would be the case, for example, of the German people and of the Jewish people after the experience of the “final solution.”

The term psychosocial trauma is not meant to express the idea that some uniform effect is produced throughout a population, or that one can assume in the experience of war some mechanical impact on people. The dialectical nature of psychosocial trauma implies that the injury or damage depends on the particular experience of each individual, an experience conditioned by his or her social background and
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degree of participation in the event and by other characteristics of the individual’s personality and experience [10. Pp. 509–511]. The suffering that accompanies war even offers some people the opportunity to grow in human terms. The development of someone like the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, Monseñor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, shows paradigmatically the growth of a person in proportion to the worsening of the persecution and attacks against him. Monseñor Romero is only one among many other Salvadorans to whom the war has given an opportunity to develop exceptional human virtues of pure altruism and love in solidarity with the Salvadoran people.

But in speaking of psychosocial trauma, one should emphasize two other aspects that are frequently forgotten: (a) the injury that affects people has been produced socially—i.e., its roots are not found in the individual, but in society; and (b) its very nature is nourished and maintained in the relationship between the individual and society, through various mediations by institutions, groups, and even individuals. These aspects have obvious important consequences that must be considered when trying to determine what ought to be done to overcome these traumas.

Psychosocial trauma as dehumanization

Joaquín Samayoa [13. P. 215] holds that the cognitive and behavioral changes caused by war bring with them a process of dehumanization, understood as the impoverishment of four important abilities of the human being: (a) the ability to think lucidly, (b) the ability to communicate truthfully, (c) sensitivity to the suffering of others, and (d) hope.

What are the cognitive and behavioral changes caused by the necessity of adapting to war that bring about dehumanization? Samayoa mentions five: (1) selective inattention and a clinging to prejudices, (2) absolutism, idealization, and ideological rigidity, (3) evasive skepticism, (4) paranoid defensiveness, and (5) hatred and the desire for revenge. When examining how these cognitive and behavioral schemata emerge and how they are configured, Samayoa mentions three possible mechanisms: (a) insecurity about one’s own fate, (b) the lack of purpose and even of meaning in what one does, and (c) the necessity of connection to or membership in some group.
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A different line of thought has developed from the psychotherapeutic experience of the group in Chile headed by Elizabeth Lira [14–18]. This group suggests that a situation of state terrorism such as that undergone by Chile under Pinochet provokes a state of fear in people and, though fear is a subjective and, to a degree, a private experience, “upon being produced simultaneously in thousands of people in a society, it acquires an unsuspected relevance in social and political behavior” [16. P. 51]. According to this group of psychologists, there are four main psychological characteristics of the processes generated by this fear: (1) a sensation of vulnerability, (2) exacerbated alertness, (3) a sense of impotence or loss of control over one’s own life, and (4) an altered sense of reality, making it impossible to objectively validate one’s own experiences and knowledge.

The theories of Samayoa and of the Chilean group can be considered complementary: while one stresses the role of the cognitive and behavioral aspects, the other emphasizes the mediation of an affective element: fear. In this way, we have the three classic components of psychological analysis: knowledge, feelings, and behavior (for which some researchers substitute volition).

It is useful, nevertheless, to mention the limitations of both models. In the Chilean case, it is clear that the analysis is confined to those sectors of the population that have been the target of Pinochet’s repression. Excluded would be people favoring Pinochet, who rather than experiencing fear, have often gained satisfaction and increased security from a policy that guarantees their class dominance.

Samayoa’s focus is broader and, in principle, can be applied to all sectors of the population, since everyone has to adapt to historical circumstances. But it is precisely the fact of adaptation’s being granted such a central role that is most unsatisfactory in this focus. It would seem that groups and individuals are external to the situation of war, to which they find themselves obliged to adapt. This would therefore involve a fundamentally reactive and even passive conception of how people face historical realities. The available evidence, however, leads to affirmation of the essentially active role groups and individuals play as subjects no matter how alienated they may be. There is no doubt that for many Salvadorans, the war is something imposed on them; but for a significant number, the war is something they themselves help to cause.
and develop. Looking at their participation in those processes from a merely adaptive perspective would lead to misunderstanding.

**Crystallization of social relations**

From my perspective, it appears that the best way to understand the psychosocial trauma currently experienced by the inhabitants of El Salvador is to conceive of it as the crystallization or materialization in individuals of the social relations of war that are experienced in the country. Obviously, underlying this proposition is an understanding of the human being as a product of a particular history, which in each case is manifested in the social relations of which the individual is an active and passive part [19]. From this we arrive at the notion that the nature of the primary social relations will be embodied in individuals. The role played by each of the psychic elements—knowledge, feelings, volition—should be examined individually; but in principle it is the whole of the individual that is affected by the experiences of these relationships of war. It follows that every person will be affected according to his or her particular social context and specific way of participating in the processes of war.

The psychosocial trauma that people experience entails the alienation of social relations. The human nature of the "enemies" is denied; one rejects the possibility of any constructive interaction with them, seeing them as something one would like to destroy. The affirmation of the personality itself is affected by the dehumanization of the other as it is dialectically constructed.

If the war in El Salvador is characterized by social polarization, the institutionalized lie, and the militarization of social life, then how these three predominant aspects of social relations are crystallized in individuals must be examined. This is not a question of looking for a mechanical correlation that would objectify what are nothing more than analytical aspects of a historical reality: it is a question of seeing how the specificity of the Salvadoran war marks groups and individuals, that is, how it is crystallized into a psychosocial trauma. What follow are some hypotheses that attempt to give an account of the disturbances that have been observed but that, as working hypotheses, should be subjected to empirical verification.
In the first place, it is hypothesized that the various forms of somatization constitute the corporeal origins of social polarization. This is not to state that every polarizing process will necessarily take root in the organism, or that every psychosomatic disturbance should be attributed to the experience of the polarization of war. What is hypothesized is that the acute experience of polarization can, and frequently does, take root in the body itself.

It is not surprising, then, that the groups and individuals with the greatest propensity to experience this kind of disturbance are those who are most torn by the stresses of polarization: the inhabitants of places that continually go from being under the control of one side to control by the other, those who are subjected to an intense ideological bombardment by one side or the other without being able to state their own choice, and even those who have to force themselves to take extreme, rigid positions in favor of the group to which they belong. Social disturbances correspond to personal and even somatic disturbances, and this can develop into the complex forms of psychotic alienation observed in some youths in the populations of conflictive areas.

In the second place, the prevailing climate of falsehood penetrates the bases of a person’s identity in various ways. The clouding of reality generates a schizoid disjunction between subjective experience and social life that allows no room for the validating formalization of one’s knowledge or, at best, refers it to an extremely restricted social circle. This difficulty in validating formalization of knowledge corresponds to a sense of insecurity about what one thinks and to skepticism regarding the various social and political options.

When falsehood must be adopted as a way of life and people find themselves forced to lead a double existence—the case of those who work clandestinely—the problem is aggravated, not so much because there is no way to formalize and validate one’s own experience as because the necessity of acting at two different levels can produce an ethical and experiential confusion. Many end up abandoning such a stressful life, which frequently produces a devaluation of the self-image and feelings of guilt regarding one’s own convictions and one’s old comrades. Lira and her colleagues have analyzed the problems of identity derived from the impossibility of organizing life according to one’s own political values when those values are contrary to the established regime [14–18,20].
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Finally, the militarization of social life can create a progressive militarization of the mind. Again, this does not involve a simple or mechanical effect. But there is little doubt that the almost compulsive violence, which can dominate interpersonal relations, including the most intimate, and the sociopathic destructiveness manifested by some members or former members of the military forces are intrinsically related to the growing preponderance of military forms of thinking, feeling, and acting in social life. The most serious effect of this psychosocial militarization occurs when it becomes a normal way of being that is transmitted by the processes of socialization, as in the case of the children who ingenuously affirm that the way to get rid of poverty is by killing all the poor people.

Conclusion: The psychosocial task at hand

The indefinite prolongation of the war in El Salvador presumes the normalization of these kinds of dehumanized social relationships, whose impact on people ranges from somatic stress to the rending of mental structures and the weakening of the personality, which can find no way of authentically affirming its own identity. It is thus impossible to understand organic crises without reference to polarizing tension. Similarly, sociopolitical inhibition cannot be understood except in response to the institutionalized lie, or the stereotypical ideologue except in response to the militarization of social life. But people who are formed in this context assume an inherent contempt for human life, adhere to the law of the strongest (or the most violent) as a social criterion, and accept corruption as a life-style, thus precipitating a vicious circle what tends to perpetuate the war—objectively as well as subjectively.

I have made no attempt to discuss here ways of dealing with this problem. But any reckoning shows the inadequacy of psychotherapy, whether individual or group, understood as a process of psychological intervention. This does not mean that the people who suffer the alienating havoc of Salvadoran history should be abandoned to their fate. The point is that psychotherapy is insufficient, even in the case of the very people who are involved. So long as there is no significant change in social relations (structural, group, and interpersonal) as they exist
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today in El Salvador, individual treatment of their consequences would be at best incomplete.

In El Salvador it is necessary to begin an intensive effort to depolarize, demilitarize, and de-ideologize the country, in order to heal social relations and allow people to work out their history in a better kind of interpersonal context. Stated in positive terms, it is necessary to work toward establishing a new framework for coexistence, a new “social contract” that would allow collective interaction without turning disagreement into mutual negation. There is an urgent need to work toward a process of greater social sincerity, in order to learn about realities before defining them, to accept facts before interpreting them. Finally, an effort must be made to educate by reason, not by force, so that coexistence can be based on mutually complementary efforts employed to resolve problems, not on violence used to impose one’s own alternative.

Note


References

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