

The Split Esplanade: A Nightmare of Citizenship

Sra. Maria Elizabeth Mori

A girl lands in the recently inaugurated capital city and marvels at this dry and hot little town situated in the center of the country. The city was designed in the shape of an airplane, and the airport is a small shed at the end of its imaginary southern wing. During the journey from there to the city center, the girl is seized by unrest.

What would her life be in such a removed place? What would it be like to live in those red-earthed woods where a city was being built to host candangos [\[1\]](#) from all over Brazil? A place that broke the known limits represented by the big metropolis and her reference of living. The girl would inadvertently face customs and values belonging to singular human beings – conflicting with what had, until then, seemed so universal to her.

The visit to the city's Esplanade appeases her heart. The gigantic and beautiful public square, with its huge open-air lawn and Cerrado trees, architecturally arranged to host the Republic's powers, conveys a feeling of freedom to the girl. In that instant, the new – and previously uncomfortable – becomes familiar. She remembers her juvenile desire to live a free and safe life, without the oppression of skyscrapers and the dangerous traffic, which had motivated so many parental prohibitions.

She would later learn that such a monumental landmark (the Esplanade), located in the central area of the airplane's body, separates the two wings (a north and south one), delineating two large spaces with specific, fragmented subdivisions: one sector for schools; another one for hospitals; then hotels, residences, commerce, and culture. Such a different city! Whoever heard of each thing in its own place and nothing mixed up? "A planned city! Architects' stuff" – she remembers her father's explanation, somewhat proud of having brought his family to live there.

Hence, a new world of many accents – all equally strong – will populate her adolescence, youth and adulthood. The city doors were open: a city born with the promise of a world for many and for all.

The girl will grow up aware of the city's singular importance within Brazil's political landscape, and will very closely witness the polarizations caused by political passions – sometimes conservative, and sometimes democratic. Her juvenile calmness will be obscured by the 1964 civil-military coup d'état, which will close down the National Congress and establish a military dictatorship that will last for twenty-one years. The return of the democracy in 1985 will be a "slow, gradual and safe opening," according to the then military President.

Stupefied, she will see the big public square being occupied by soldiers and a couple of tanks in the Brazilian Years of Lead. During the escalation of military oppression, the press will be censored and regime opponents persecuted, while public authorities are released of any responsibility for their crimes. In a moment of hope, she will mingle with thousands in front of the Congress to support the ultimately unsuccessful demonstrations for direct presidential elections; likewise, she will exult at the inauguration of a worker as the President of the Republic. She cannot imagine then, that 13 years later, she will see a long wall bleeding the center of the monumental lawn. A wall starting at the

magnanimous Congress building – where the destitution of a democratically elected president will be weaved – and extending all the way to the white Cathedral that opens upwards to the sky.

A wall cutting the square...

Every photo says something about us. We attribute significance and meaning to it. Using our imagination, we reveal the said and the not-said within the images captured by photographers. The picture from the Ministries Esplanade that opens this text was taken on the 17th of April 2016, when the Chamber of Deputies was voting the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff. Amid the controversy about the legality of the process, the country was split in two: those who were in favor of the impeachment, and those who considered it a parliamentary coup. Separated and divided as football fans, each group had their own area of protest outlined. Therefore, it was possible to identify who supported whom and on which side each person was at that moment. The “reds” on one side and the “yellows” on the other. [2]

The authorities claimed that the goal was to ensure the demonstrators’ safety. The image, however, revealed more: it exposed the intolerance and disharmony that had been growing and that are still present today. The colors and the derogatory terms “coxinhas” [3] and “mortadelas” [4] still express on which side each person is within the emotional turbulence produced by the country’s macropolitics.

Politics burst into the office

Rita, a patient who is also a psychoanalyst, arrives at my office very startled and says she is distraught by the recent events. She tells me that, the day before, after having participated in a march in favor of the movement Lula Livre [5], while walking at the Esplanade with her husband and friends, she faced a very unsettling situation. They were cheerful, under the contagious effect of the march’s joy, when they heard a loud voice – or, in fact, shouts – from a woman heading in their direction. The shouts became more intense as they reached the crossroads.

“She called us awful names, said we were demonic stuff. I can still feel her wet spit on my arm. I arrived home feeling so bad, with high blood pressure... I was worried because until then I had never had blood pressure issues.”

That same day, another patient, Luciana, a human rights lawyer, comes for her session saying that she had been in that same march, and that she feels troubled by the “state of exception” in the country. She says that her colleagues and her are “very sad at feeling impotent before the juridical process instated by the instrument of rewarded delation adopted in Brazil since 2016.” She claims no longer to believe in the institutions and that the judicialization of politics has been “offending the constitution.” She believes – as do her other friends in the field of justice – that “there is no reason for the imprisonment of President Lula – the purchase of the investigated property has not been proved.”

A third patient, Fernando, a journalist, lies on the divan and begins by speaking about “an anthropological experience” he had the night before, when having dinner with some colleagues from the newspaper:

“You know, I don’t get confrontational – as in thinking about winning or losing – especially when it comes to politics; because this is when we are actually affected... we blindly defend our point of view and stop having critical thinking.”

He refers to the extremists who are always

“bloated with reason. People today present themselves as knowledgeable about everything, and when this happens, one must be suspicious, because when we get irritated, our blood boils. It shouldn’t. But the tone of ‘you don’t know what I do’ feels like a punch in the stomach to me. I don’t like confrontation. At work, with family, with friends... Both sides have to yield. It is possible to

combine... I come here because we think together. You always make me think about what I say. My friends say I'm right. Just like my image in the mirror: it agrees, does not contest, and says I'm handsome. And when I stop speaking, the mirror stops responding. If you want someone to agree with you, speak to your friends. Don't even think about it. Or even: speak to a recorder."

What do these three accounts tell us about the Brazilian society today?

Rita feels within her own body the violent pain caused by the act of hatred; Luciana sees her profession being vilified, in an act of symbolic violence practiced by judges who, according to her, do not legitimately represent the people since they have not been elected by it; Fernando laments his difficulty at dealing with conflicts, both in private and public environments, because he identifies that extremists fragment the reality. He understands that psychoanalysis is an invitation to reflection and not definitive answers.

Politics appears in the psychoanalytic office in the unsaid elements of our traumatic past history, which is updated in interpersonal, social and institutional relationships through the non-symbolization of events. The lack of working through regarding the way we deal with the public life leads to the reproduction of authoritarian macropolitics' perverse effects.

Scission and fragmentation in public life

According to the philosopher Hanna Arendt (2002), the public sphere, being the common world, gathers us in the company of one another. Politics, in turn, happens in the between, in people's plurality. Thus, it is both a product of and produced by our many relationships. It is politics that "organizes those who are absolutely different with a view to their relative equality and in contradistinction to their relative differences." Politics deals with the relationship of absolute chaos between those who are different and politically organize themselves to achieve certain common goals. Through the art of negotiation in politics, the different interests that exist are reconciled by the adoption of shared measures according to the democratic principle (pp. 23-24) [6].

In this sense, the context of violence and confrontation in the Polis indicates that it is very difficult for us to create common ground in our daily life – i.e. micropolitics. The situation is no different in macropolitics. Across the world, we see political leaders instigating hatred against those who are different and creating physical and moral barriers in order to stop the movement of "the other" – the foreigner who struggles for a better livelihood. The deterioration of personal relationships, the polarization of differences, and hate crimes increase the social violence represented by the exclusion of the different.

In Brazil, the October presidential elections are fast approaching. It is alarming to see the protagonist role assumed by certain candidates – who come from the "old" neoliberal political system but claim to be "new" within the national landscape – instigating hatred and the nonacceptance of differences. This totalizing discourse turns the other into the enemy. Hatred, envy and resentment prevail. These feelings invade physical and virtual (social media) conversations with friends and family, with predominant intolerance and exclusion. The expression "politically correct" – which seemed to have been understood as an acceptance of the different – has recently been fought against as "ideological stuff from a group" who disrespects traditional and conservative values. Symbolically, democracy – the pact between siblings – is under attack.

A person assaults in defense of what they consider their own territory. As Freud (2010) reminds us, this is a belonging strategy adopted by some groups, mainly in situations of frustration and social fragility. People need to feel safe in the face of the "imaginary threat" that constellates the "enemy."

The intentional evilness against the other, and the pleasure obtained as a result of this evilness, is human – excessively human.

At the moment, we face the challenge of producing integrative solutions, based on responsibility (understood as an encounter of one's own self), ethics of collaborative affections, and tolerance towards the other. We can then produce something common, whose political expression is the return to a democratic state and the fight for social justice.

The psychoanalyst has an ethical and political commitment to refuse power in the psychoanalytical encounter and a particular social function. In their relationship with the other and society as a whole, they think about the cultural modes in our social life that produce the censorship of words, contributing thusly to the meaning and significance of the lived experience. There is a political act in the many ways of doing clinical work. In an extensive way, inside and outside of our offices – with an analytical and welcoming attitude – we produce deviations for the inclusion of the different, in order for new territories to be expressed.

I have concluded this text. Time to go to sleep. However, these thoughts keep reverberating inside of me. When I wake up the following morning, I remember the dream I had during the night. I was singing “Pesadelo” [Nightmare], a 1972 song by Maurício Tapajós and Paulo César Pinheiro.

The 19-year-old girl is back.

When the wall separates, a bridge unites

If revenge stares, regret punishes

You come and catch me, someone comes and releases me

You go by hook or crook, one day she comes back

And if the strength is yours, one day it will be ours

Look at the wall, look at the bridge, look at yesterday coming

You are so frightened by us, look...

References

Arendt, H. (2002). *O que é política [The promise of politics]*. Rio de Janeiro: Bertrand Brasil. Originally published in 1958.

Freud, S. (2010). *Psicologia das Massa e Análise do Eu. Obras completas. Volume 15. Tradução de Paulo César de Souza. [Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. Complete Works. Vol. 15. Trans. Paulo César de Souza]* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. Originally published in 1921.

Freud, S. (2010). *Psicologia das Massa e Análise do Eu. Obras completas. Volume 15. Tradução de Paulo César de Souza. [Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego. Complete Works. Vol. 15. Trans. Paulo César de Souza]* São Paulo: Companhia das Letras. Originally published in 1921.

[1] The word “candango” comes from the word “kungundu” in the Kimbundu language from Central Africa. In Portuguese, it means “ordinary” and “shabby.” It is used to name the people who moved to the center of Brazil in the 1950s to work in the construction of the country's new capital city, Brasília.

[2] The “reds” (identified by the color of President Rouseff Workers' Party) were against the impeachment, whereas the “yellows” (the national football team color, hence identified with patriotic movements) were in favor of the president's destitution. (TN)

[3] “Coxinha” is a traditional Brazilian deep-fried pulled chicken and dough snack. There is no consensus regarding why it has recently been employed as a derogatory term for someone holding rightwing political views – in the case of the text, those in favor of President Rouseff's impeachment.

(TN)

[4] “Mortadela” is a type of cold pork meat – in English, “mortadella” or “baloney”. It has recently been employed as a derogatory term for leftists because of rightwing allegations that the Workers’ Party would distribute free mortadella sandwiches to people in exchange for their participation in protests, as a strategy to gather a bigger crowd. (TN)

[5] Lula Livre (Free Lula) is a movement that demands the release of former President Lula (also from the Workers’ Party) from jail. He was arrested in April 2018 under allegations of passive corruption. Similarly to President Rousseff’s impeachment, Lula’s condemnation also involves huge controversy. National and international human rights organizations, newspapers and politicians have positioned themselves against his imprisonment, viewing the sentence as politically biased. (TN)

[6] The year and pages mentioned in the paragraph refer to the Brazilian translation used by Mori. The citation comes from the English version: Hannah Arendt, “Introduction into Politics” in *The Promise of Politics*, 2005: 96. (TN)

Image: Juca Varella/Agência Brasil