

A Sickened Country

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This replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization. (Freud, 1930, p. 42)

Sadness, perplexity, impotency. Feelings that invade us when we witness the fissure that opens up in our Brazil – a result of the intense polarization that has been defining our political, social, and ideological discussions. There are many accounts of passionate debates, often charged with hatred toward those on the opposite side. These disputes can cause painful ruptures or lead one of the people involved to opt for the unsaid, silencing their different views in order to maintain an affective link – or, in extreme cases, in order to protect their physical integrity. A split that strips bare the sickening of our country and challenges us (in our perplexity) to understand some threads of the weave that brought us here. Many points can be pulled from this, and I will attempt to elaborate some of them from a psychoanalytical point of view.

Viewed from each person's subjective standpoint, the events that have mobilized the Brazilian population are coated with diverse narratives – truly parallel realities that carry an intangible factual character surrounded by related desires. The country experiences difficulties, with a society marked by intense inequality in terms of civil rights and access to health, education, housing, and employment. In this context, the growing distance between the different social strata has been an integral part of our history since its colonial beginnings, shaping a vulnerable society, susceptible to the development of new terrains for conflict and polarization. Within a slavocrat structure that formed an elite whose identity was established through privileges, inclusive public policies that aim for better distribution of income and services generate resentment and resistance from the groups controlling the economic, political, and social power. A number of forces act in this sense. First, a combination of serious economic crisis, numerous denunciations and condemnations due to corruption, growing urban violence, and high unemployment rates stimulate the search for enemies who can be blamed for the situation, in an individual attempt to 'organize' an otherwise hostile world. Additionally, there is an articulation of a significant part of our judicial, parliamentary, and media systems around the fight for political power. These forces work together to lead the individual, once again, to manifest the (internal and external) reality as a split between good and evil, hero and bandit.

Our population behaves in its majority, according to Freud's (1921) analysis of mass psychology: the individual adheres to the group with which they feel identified; they then strengthen their libidinal links and their need for belonging; finally, they start to see people with opposing thoughts as targets for hatred and intolerance. Extreme polarization is then forged by those who envisage the annihilation of the other. This happens, for example, when an individual intends to de-legitimize the confrontation of ideas by indiscriminately treating them as the manifestation of a hateful and ideological radicalization from the 'other side' – especially when this 'other side' is considered an expression of the progressive spectrum. Splitting and fragmentation invade our social fabric and put at risk a political arrangement that, until not long ago, had been able to contain and negotiate differences. They tear, therefore, the seam of the democratic weave.

Hatred and destructivity have now free transit in Brazil, stimulated and authorized by a perverse leadership figure who emerged from this radical polarization, under the promise to represent the change in the political and economic configuration that many desire: in a game of identifications and direct communication via social media, he interacts with his followers, shares the loosening of his

inhibitions, and constantly attacks our institutions. We watch, once again perplexed, the rise in the number of cases of femicide, as well as those of the death of innocents during violent police operations. Lack of respect toward people's humanity is also growing, especially toward black, indigenous, and poor people. Actions appear from the basement of people's minds to reveal hatred as a propelling and unifying force for a group of people. A group who was fundamental – with their vote – in choosing that same leadership figure as the country's head of state: an authoritarian leader, incapable of dealing with plurality and the contradictory, who manifests his desire to exclude those who could intervene in his narcissist demands. The fantasy of an omnipotent father observed in childhood (or in the primal horde) lurks around the corner.

In a campaign in which the massive and criminal broadcast of distorted and false information fed hatred, fear, fanaticism, and intolerance – especially toward progressive ideas and their representatives – we saw a society falling into the trap of its own illusions. People succumbed before a libertarian wish for ideas previously damned by the commitment to democracy and social welfare – ideals that had been fought for through the mobilization of minority groups. A society that is hostage to its own prejudice and obscurantism; that denudes the arrogance of its authoritarian thinking and makes apparent its desire to perpetuate its heritage of slavery. A society that reveals, ultimately, that each individual's biggest fear is to see and recognize the bitterness of their own internal world.

The agglutinating power of social media provides a fecund ground for the intensification of this phenomenon of mass dynamics: the immediatism that threatens the exercise of critical thinking allows for even more permissive practices in terms of the expression and performance of primitive aspects of the mind. The absence of the other's view – of a third party's mediation – and the exclusion of the non-identical 'confirm' the omnipotence of narcissist certainties. The negation of oedipal castration and triangulation are more easily performed and, thus, promote an attack against otherness and interdictions. A lawless terrain is generated, where perverse lies and 'self-proclaimed' truths are disseminated by leaderships who exploit the vicious circle between fear and hatred, seducing those who yearn for illusory and simplistic narratives. A significant part of the population, filled with dissatisfaction and disbelief in relation to our political and democratic institutions, craves an object to absorb the destructive drive that floods the country. The virtual arena potentializes and exceeds street manifestations. On one side, we see the demonization of that who is considered the enemy, responsible for all our evils and failures. On the other side, there is a demand for a savior who could rescue us from this abandonment. These two perspectives are more and more molded and sedimented. Our elections have become more heated, accentuating the fissure that splits the country into two Brazils.

Some of the institutions responsible for law enforcement have proved to be compromised on many levels. This becomes apparent when they manipulate investigations – deepening the above-mentioned fissure – as well as when they get carried away by the masses' clamor for punitive measures that often go against our constitution. We witness a serious attack against the pact of civilization – and it comes with a trail.

As part of our collective traumas and non-elaborated contents, there is a failure to listen to the pain of various groups of our population who do not see their subjectivity recognized: indigenous communities who had their lands invaded and their cultures vilified; black people who were wrenched from their lives and had their access to their own histories and ancestries eliminated. Generations of people enslaved for over 300 years and whose descendants continue to be exploited, discriminated, or subjected to new forms of servitude. Other minorities (LGBTQ, women, homeless people, and others) are put together with these groups, forming a legion of target-objects who serve

as *continent* for the projection of the unbearable *unheimlich* (the uncanny that inhabits our unconscious) of those who need to get rid of it to insure their narcissist survival.

From the negation of our history and our crimes, rises a president who, as well as expressing his misogynistic, homophobic and racist ideas, carries in his speeches praise of the country's years of dictatorship – praise of torture and torturer – voicing his own and other people's resentment; people who cannot tolerate having been removed from power and, thus, insist on the revisionism of the coup d'état – in 1964, the military forces seized the power and imposed a dictatorial regime that remained in control until 1985, with the first democratic elections being held in 1989. The coup and the years of dictatorship still bleed in the memory of families whose relatives were killed, tortured, or went missing. Many are the wounds that we have accumulated throughout these 500 years of Brazil, and which still echo in the intense inequality and suffering seen in our streets. Our fight for democracy has begun long ago and is still running.

Will we know how to build and put into practice a truly democratic project, abandoning the compulsion to repetition that has been imprisoning us? Will we be able to overcome the human tendency to gather within units that exclude the other and strengthen the identical? Or the human tendency to find a 'foreigner' to satisfy the group's aggressiveness and, at the same time, try to guarantee its internal cohesion? (In the intersubjectivity between nations, groups, or individuals). Will we be able to develop, in the social field, the ability to tolerate and coexist? Will our – receded and melted – institutions know how to regain control over their functions? In a lecture on the day after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Amós Oz suggests the idea of human beings as peninsulas 'half attached to the mainland, half facing the ocean; half connected to family and friends and culture and tradition and country and nation and sex and language and many other ties. And the other half wants to be left alone to face the ocean' (pp. 79-80) [English translation found online: Princeton University Press, 2006]. A metaphor that encourages us, I believe, to take the necessary plunge into our own subjectivity, destructivity, vulnerability, and incompleteness, so that we can emerge back more integrated, capable of recognizing otherness and, hopefully, of resisting the seductive homogenization of our groups.

The exacerbation of all kinds of intolerance, here and in other parts of the world; the noisy death drive seen in the overflow of destruction and hatred – such as in the dismantlement of public policies, or in censorship and cuts to the funding of artistic and academic production, as well as in the criminal fires that burn our forests and threaten many indigenous tribes; the incessant bombing of the word-action-shrapnel that counters or negates our reality; or the very presence of the fracture that splits our society and subtracts from us important affective links. All these movements testify to our impotency and have been making us sick. In psychoanalytical offices, patients search for a name for their pain and that of the country, in a constant and difficult elaboration.

Nevertheless, it is important to say: from the recognition of the anguish – or even from the depressive state that hits many of us – we have the opportunity to direct our gaze toward our historic gaps and harbor the denial. We can care about the memory and the wounds that boil in the broth of our unconscious – either as an individual or as a nation. We are able to elaborate the damage we have done and deal with the challenges of mourning and reparation, enabling a new walk in a path of investment in life drive and desire for knowledge – knowledge about oneself and the other.

The construction of pathways that can rescue us from the paralyzing and sterile position of splitting is an arduous task for each one of us. In the face of the authoritarian threat that pulses inside our country, it is necessary to transform the current polarization into a functional and creative

confrontation, capable of tolerating differences, restraining the attacks against critical thinking, and defending the full exercise of the democratic state. We need to let go of our omnipotent defenses and deal with the discontent of the human condition, with the fissures and abandonments that constitute us. We must 'reconcile' with the bothersome existence of our symptoms and dissatisfactions, and with the institutions that our culture has created in order to regulate our relationships and, through laws, contain and protect us from our own destructive potency. Even if these institutions seem to have temporarily given up on us, it is vital that we never give up on them. Or else, we will go from civilization and its discontents to the terror of barbarity.

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