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Dealing with a Trauma Burdened Past:
between Remembering and Forgetting

Abstract: Recognition that societies will not be able to build a future as long as they do not face the 'demons of the past' has become a kind of universal truth over the last decades of the 20th Century (Gibney et al., 2008, p. 1). This view, though challenging and ambiguous, is reflected in the globally present attempts to improve or rebuild relations within and between different communities at the domestic and international level. The question concerning, on the one hand, the essence and most essential elements and, on the other hand, the instruments and the limitations of rebuilding relations, as well as the political implications of those processes have become the broad area of interest and the discourse leading to significantly different ideas and solutions. The article aims at presenting different approaches referring to dealing with the conflicted and traumatized past both at the domestic and international level. Some selected instruments and methods which enable movement from a divided past towards a common future are discussed namely the strategy of engagement with the past versus the strategy of avoidance of the past. The special attention is paid to the notion of reconciliation understood as a process of rebuilding of relations through the multi-dimensional transformation of former adversaries after the period of violence and repression.

Keywords: *trauma; truth; forgetting; reconciliation; memory; identity; transformation*

Dealing with Trauma: towards Holistic Approach

Traumatized and "divided" (Lederach, 1999) or "fractured societies" (Duthie, 2017) have increasingly gained attention not only due to political and legal challenges being faced by them in the aftermath of totalitarian, authoritarian or any conflictual and violence-ridden past. For the last few decades, a significant shift regarding the way

of perceiving and dealing with the consequences of the past harm and injustices has been observed. The focus, so far more structurally and institutionally oriented, has widened to also include social relations in people-to-people context. This more culture and identity-oriented approach has been visible at different levels: in the societies undergoing the process of transformation from dictatorships and internal political violence towards a more peaceful and more democratic system, those emerging from the civil wars, including those accompanied by genocide and finally those building and rebuilding mutual relations after interstate conflicts.

With the new, more holistic approach many new notions have been applied and included into the discourse in the area of political science and international relations especially since the 1990s, making this discourse far more extensive and interdisciplinary. This evolution has led not only to some normative reassessments but has also been reflected in the change of the language and vocabulary being used. Some new "soft" and "non-political" terms have been included among which reconciliation, apology, and forgiveness can be pointed out. The problems of remembering versus forgetting, guilt versus contrition, punishing versus pardoning, truth versus justice and restorative justice versus retributive justice have been discussed with increased attention paid to the wide context of the accountability of individuals versus those of collectives.

Howard Zehr describes trauma as pervasive and multidimensional. He points out that it affects individuals in a variety of ways: emotionally and spiritually but also physically since the cognitive processing of the brain is often altered. However, as he remarks, "(…) trauma also profoundly impacts communities and societies. Trauma shapes one's overall behaviour including patterns of wrongdoing and conflict as well as processes of recovery, resolution or transformation. The social, as well as the individual dimensions of trauma, must be addressed as part of peacebuilding and restorative justice processes" (Zehr, 2008, p. 10). Thus the methods and instruments aimed at any effort to overcome the legacies of the violent and oppressed past must refer to the all-encompassing, holistic approach which will enable one to cope with the trauma in a pervasive and multidimensional manner.

When dealing with the past burdened with violence and repression resulting in trauma experienced by the smaller or larger social groups, some different approaches and strategies are possible. The very starting point in this discussion is the fundamental question of how to approach the violent and oppressed past from the perspective of the present. While it would seem the answer to this question is fundamentally dependent on the time distance between the past and the presence, i.e. the question whether the direct victims and witnesses of these events are still alive, in fact, the "time factor" does not always turn out to be of central importance. Social and psychological determinants need to be separated from political determinants in this regard.

Crucial significance of psychiatry and clinical psychology as the sources of scientific knowledge of the effect of political violence and traumatic loss on individuals and nations have been increasingly debated with particular attention paid to the psychology of victimhood. Since for many nations and people, traumatic loss dominates their memory of history and constitutes the burdens of history, the psychology of victimhood is an automatic product of aggression and resultant traumatic loss in individuals and peoples. From a psychological point of view, for contemporary victims of political trauma, the process of dealing with violence and loss can be complicated, more difficult than for representatives of groups or nations that have suffered a traumatic loss in the past. While not knowing is one way of describing the victim's high reluctance to recall terror and pain associated with the past, healing of the past is perceived as a necessity both for the direct and indirect victims (Montville, 2001, pp. 130–133.)

From a political point of view, the way of dealing with the past is a matter of choice and the decision that is made by the politicians. What thus becomes crucial in the context of crimes and injustices committed by the political regimes, but can also apply to the problem of coping with the traumatised and conflictual past in intergroup and interstate context, are the political strategies of dealing with the past. These strategies are expressed in two basic approaches proposed. On the one hand, it is engagement with the past, on the other hand, it is avoidance of the past (Amstutz, 2013, p. 113). As a result, it may turn out that the political discourse on the past while absent or almost absent in the generation of the direct victims will reoccur in the next generations.

Truth and Acknowledgement of Past Wrongdoing

Dealing with the violent and oppressed past through engaging with this past is the popular model. It is based on the assumption that before the societies can heal and reconcile, the wrongdoing "(…) must be disclosed, acknowledged and redressed through appropriate strategies of accountability" (Amstutz, 2013, 114). According to this approach, if the past will not be acknowledged and redressed it will result in future divisions and tensions, which will hinder the rebuilding of interpersonal and civil relations. The foundation of this strategy is an acknowledgement of truth since there can be no reckoning with the past if there is no knowledge of past wrongdoing. The offences and the offenders, both individuals and the groups or institutions, have to be known to the wide public. Truth is regarded a necessary condition in a community which is to come to terms with the past offences (Amstutz, 2013, p. 114).

The "truth therapy" (Domosławski, 2017, pp. 46–48) became one of the most well known and most often applied strategies within the framework of the acknowledge-

ment and redress approach. Since 1974 over forty truth commissions, and in some cases truth and reconciliation commissions, have been established worldwide with the task of investigating the injustices of a specific place and period with the sharp increase since the 1980s. The truth commissions established in Latin America in the 1980s, especially in Argentina and Chile, were the first ones to attract global interest. However, the most famous one, and the most discussed one has undoubtedly been the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa (Philpott, 2012, p. 182).

"Storytelling", as the reaction to both individual and group traumatic loss, is the main instrument used in this strategy. Telling a story "(…) is no longer an account of shame and humiliation. Rather it becomes a story about dignity and virtue. Victims in the process restore and regain their lives so that they can move on" (Montville, 2001, p. 134). Being the form of ritual testimony storytelling has the healing powers. It has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual as well as public aspect, which is political and judicial (Montville, 2001, p. 134).

In spite of some deficits of TRC's pointed out by the critics of this body, among them its illiberal, non-democratic and "impunity-promoting" character (Ash, 1997; Crocker, 2000) discovering the truth about the past regime, and making it publicly known, is widely recognized as one of TRC's crucial merits. TRC opened the floor to victims on each side and gave them the chance to "tell their story" (Rousoux, 2004, p. 160). According to Richard Goldstone, who chaired the important fact-finding commission in the last years of apartheid, the greatest value of TRC is that the one, common history of what happened in the apartheid years was displayed and acknowledged which was "a great gift to the nation" (Cobban, 2007, pp.133–134).

The concept closely connected with acknowledgement of truth is the right to truth. Right to truth refers both to the victims themselves and to their families. It includes the right to know about the abuses they have suffered, the identity of perpetrators, the causes that gave rise to the violations and, if appropriate, the ultimate fate and whereabouts of the forcibly disappeared (Gonzáles et al., 2013, p. 3). Even though it is undoubtedly one of the most strongly addressed notions within legal and human rights discourse, the right to truth cannot be identified with truth-telling. Truth-telling is, in fact, a much more complicated concept expressing the holistic approach to peacebuilding. While in the strict legal sense the right to truth is the necessary demand of justice leading to punishing the perpetrator and satisfying the rights of the victim, public truth-telling is aimed at exceeding the legal scope and achieving much wider social and political results. When perceived through the prism of restorative justice, instead of retributive justice, public truth-telling is to contribute to the process of rebuilding of relations between both sides. It is to lead to transformation processes and

healing of the social bonds rather than punishing the perpetrators. As Desmond Tutu emphasizes when he criticizes the punishment-oriented "Nuremberg trial paradigm" (Tutu, 1999, p. 30), truth-telling is not about finding who the guilty party is, which is the essence of retributive justice, but about trying to reconcile the opposing parties, which is the essence of restorative justice (Chaudary, 2010, p. 119).

An important point of discussion connected with looking for and discovering the truth is the notion of acknowledgement. While acknowledgement of truth can be and often is equated with truth-telling, the acknowledgement can also be analysed as the distinct concept preceding apology and forgiveness[1]. Acknowledgement itself refers to the official, public recognition of what happened. According to Daniel Philpott, being one of the elements of the reconciliation process, acknowledgement "(…) is the action by which a political official or body of officials, speaking on behalf of the political order, recognize victims as having suffered a political injustice, as having been wounded by this political injustice, and as being full citizens again" (Philpott, 2012, 181). At the same time, though primarily directed at political officials, acknowledgement is amplified when other citizens join in this same recognition.

The fundamental significance of acknowledgement is based on the assumption that if suppressed traumas will inevitably re-emerge in the destructive ways. Just like truth-telling acknowledgement of wrongs and of victims helps heal psychic wounds and enable trust (Radzik & Murphy, 2015). Acknowledgement is though not the same as an apology and definitely not the same as forgiveness. Albie Sachs, one of the African National Congress's most long-standing white members who was bombed by apartheid regime in the assassination attempt and lost his right hand, expresses the opinion that acknowledgment can be valued even higher than the apology itself: "Some people put much emphasis on having expressions of remorse and forgiveness at TRC. (…) For me, acknowledgement by a person of his past misdeeds is more powerful than any expression of remorse. In making an acknowledgement, a person is accepting responsibility for his or her actions acknowledging the gravity of his or her offence and "bending the knee" to the rule of law. That is important. Expressing remorse can just be breast-beating and self-serving" (Cobban, 2007, p. 134).

Being the crucial instrument of dealing with past harm and injustices, acknowledgement of truth is not the only and in fact often not a sufficient instrument used in the strategy of engagement. According to the holistic perspective, some other elements are also necessary in this regard providing a comprehensive scheme for dealing with the past. Apart from the right to know, which encompasses the right to

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[1] While acknowledgement of the traumatic past is a widely agreed condition of transformation processes, apology and especially forgiveness raise controversies (Lind, 2010; Villa-Vincencio, 2009).

truth and the duty of the state to preserve memory, three other components have to be considered. These are the right to justice, the right to reparations and the guarantee of non-recurrence (Sisson, 2010, p. 12–13). When analyzed in the wide, holistic context the term of transitional justice can be applied[2] which is defined as "(…) the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale abuses in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation" (UN Secretary General, 2004, p. 4). Among the processes and mechanisms constituting transitional justice, both judicial and non-judicial ones are listed such as individual prosecutions, reparations, truth-seeking, institutional reform, vetting and dismissals. As Pablo de Greiff rightly points out in this comprehensive understanding of the term, all transitional justice measures seek to provide recognition to victims. In this regard, the acknowledgement is essential because it constitutes the form of recognising the significance and value of persons as individuals, as citizens and as victims. However, acknowledgement embraces not only the "cognitive" dimension of official recognition of the facts through which the victims gain symbolic, political and psychological empowerment. It may also provide a material form of recognition through reparations and an institutional one through vetting and dismissals (De Greiff, 2010, p. 22).

Engagement with the past, while based on the demand of truth-telling, constitutes a challenge when the mutual relations between the truth and justice are taken into consideration and an even bigger challenge when the issue of peace is included into the equation. It shows that usually one of the values has to retreat against the other one. To avoid this dilemma, another possibility of dealing with a violent and oppressed past can be introduced namely the strategy of avoidance or forgetting the past.

Avoiding, Denying, Forgetting the Past

"No truth-seeking", either in the form of amnesty or the form of amnesia, is the second strategy of dealing with the traumatised past. While amnesia is the effort to deny the past or to neglect memory, amnesties are public acts that relieve offenders of their individual and collective responsibility. The main purpose underlying this strategy of avoiding the past is focusing on the consolidation of the new political and legal order by concentration on the restoration of peace and the pursuit of national reconciliation.

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[2]   According to Jonathan Sisson, the term "transitional justice" is often too narrowly identified with judicial mechanism, and for that reason, the term "Dealing with the Past" (DwP) is a more comprehensive one. Also, the term DwP has to do with a long-term process and is not limited to a transitional period (Sisson, 2010, p. 11).

The new political order is to be institutionalised by emphasising the presence and the future and by neglecting the past and the memory (Amstutz, 2013, p. 115).

One of the examples of the avoidance strategy is Mozambique where after the years of the civil war between FRELIMO and RENAMO, it was extremely hard to maintain the sharp, dyadic distinction between the perpetrators and the victims (Cobban, 2007, p. 14). In the case of Mozambique, there was no formal transformation process sponsored by either the national government or the international community which would enable the survivors of the civil war to tell their version of the story as in South Africa. At the same time, one of the decisions made in the peace agreement was a blanket amnesty for all civil war-era violence (Cobban, 2007, p. 190). Though at the national level the peace plan was implemented by the government, the national reconciliation was in fact carried out in a very original way. While there was not a formal, officially recognized program run, there was a series of healing projects carried out informally throughout the country and over a prolonged period, both during and after the war. These projects were carried out by leaders of Mozambique churches, mosques, as well as traditional and other faith communities (Cobban, 2007, p. 14).

Amnesties also became the model used in the countries of former communist bloc towards the representatives of the former regimes. As one of the examples of this model the "thick line" proposed by the first non-communist prime minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki may be considered (Amstutz, 2013, p. 115). Though planned initially as leaving behind the communist heritage and emphasising the new period in the history of Poland, it was perceived by its critics as the model aimed at excessive tolerance for the post-communist forces (Dudek, 2016, p. 63).

In post regime Spain another variation of the avoidance model was used, namely, the amnesia model called in this particular case "the pact of forgetting" based on the assumption that positive transformation focused on looking towards the future will be a safer and more just solution that "punishing" the past. At the same time, the past neglected at the political level was to be memorised in cultural dimension (Domosławski, 2017, p. 48).

Avoidance through amnesia, though not widely performed, can be analysed as the element of the more general view denouncing remembering and praising forgetting. While it is commonly believed that remembering is moral and forgetting is immoral, there are the voices pointing out that "memory can be toxic". According to this approach, there is too much remembering - remembering is becoming the obsession. Over the last decades, memory has turned out to be the "new cult" which in fact does not always serve good causes (Teodorov, 2003, p. 159). One of the proponents of this approach, David Rieff, opposes the healing role of memory. In his opinion, collective historical memory is "no respecter of the past", and it has increasingly become the

instrument used by the regimes and political parties against peace rather than for peace. While forgetting might do an injustice to the past, remembering may do the same to the present. Referring to such examples as Holocaust and war in Bosnia shows that collective historical memory has led far too often to war rather than to peace thus oblivion may be a better and safer response than memory (Rieff, 2011; 2016).

The avoidance of the past may the pursued by the governments because of many reasons. Mark Amstutz pointed out to a few of them in a model's discussion. First in the situation when the significant part of society may have been part of the oppressive regime, it may be difficult to claim legal accountability on the side of all the perpetrators and decision makers. Another argument raised is that being aware of the future trials, the offenders may not be willing to allow for giving up on their power and transformation to the more democratic regime in a peaceful way. It is also believed that in case of focusing on culpability the further polarisation of the society may occur which will hinder the political but also wider social, national reconciliation. "(…) Since the crimes, injustices and structural evils of the past cannot be undone, some officials assume that the best approach is to allow the balm of time to heal the social and political wounds of the past. Confronting the unjust, evil deeds of the past might only increase resentment, distort priorities and inhibit political healing" (Amstutz. 2013, p. 115). Finally, an important argument referred to is the preference of a "forward-looking strategy" which gives priority to building more humane political order over the claims of retributive justice. Institutionalization of the constitutional norms and structures and the renewal of political morality are valued more than settling legal claims.

Reconciliation as Transformation of Memory and Identity

While the truth commission established around the world to deal with the past violence and injustices aimed primarily at public acknowledgement of the facts from the past, many of them extended into truth and reconciliation commissions also focusing on a more future-oriented goal of improving and rebuilding of relations within divided and traumatised societies. This development resulted in a wide debate on how to understand reconciliation but also in including this term into the growing number of new, "soft" terms in the area of political science and international relations.

Many different proposals have been made to define reconciliation stretching from the minimal level of coexistence between conflicted groups to the maximal level of mutual acceptance and even appreciation. Various authors differentiate between weak and strong reconciliation (Hermann, 2004, p. 44), thin and thick reconciliation (Crocker, 2000, p. 6) or functional and regenerative reconciliation (Clark, 2010,

p. 239). One of the most well-known definitions is the one proposed by Johan Galtung according to which reconciliation equals closure and healing (Reconciliation = Closure + Healing). The closure is understood as not reopening of hostilities while healing means being rehabilitated. This lack of complexity of the concept does not imply that reconciliation itself can be perceived this way. "(…) Reconciliation is a theme with deep psychological, sociological, theological, philosophical, and profoundly human roots – and nobody knows how to successfully achieve it" (Galtung, 2001, p. 4).

Janine Natalya Clark defines reconciliation as the repair and restoring of relationships and rebuilding of trust, both at the vertical level, meaning the relations between the people and the institutions, and the horizontal level, meaning people-to-people relations (Clark, 2012). Nell Bolton and Edita Čolo Zahirović point out three basic dimensions which are necessary elements of the whole process. First, it is re-humanising of the other. Second, it is accepting the existence of alternative historical and political narratives. Third, it is being willed to cooperate for mutual prosperity (Bolton, Zahirović, 2017, p. 22). Ann Phillips understands reconciliation as restoring friendship, harmony or communion between two parties of which either one or both experienced trauma in the past (Phillips, 2000, p. 52).

To be effective reconciliation, similarly to trauma, needs to be pervasive and multidimensional and must include both cognitive and emotional elements. In this regard, Joseph Montville defines reconciliation as the healing of history (Montville, 2006) and Herbert Kelman defines reconciliation as identity change (Kelman, 2004). Since the process of reconciliation aims at transforming mutual relations between the former opponents, it has to be rooted both in memory and in identity which stays in the relation of mutual "overlapping". Identity is defined in political psychology as the accumulation of individual and large-group historical memory. In other words, the identity – who we are and what we feel – is composed of the memory of what has happened to us as individuals and as identity groups or nations" (Montville, 2015, p. 38). On the other hand memory, not being the equivalence of history, constitutes a tool and is the result of the process in which identities are constructed or reconstructed (Rouseaux, 2004, 161). As a tool, memory is also instrumentalised by the government in the form of the government "remembrance policy" aimed at influencing citizens' attitudes, behaviours, decisions and identities (Wawrzyński, 2017, p. 308).

Since "the past is probably never altogether closed" memory is a selective and fluctuating process (Rouseaux, 2004, p. 160). To rebuild the relations after the period of violence and repressions both memory and identity have to be altered. Reconciliation is both the process and the outcome (Bar-Tal, Bennink, 2004)) needs to lead to and to become the transformation of memory and identity to the level at which

former adversaries can overcome the feeling of victimhood with the preference to live or at least coexist together.

Transformation of the images that parties have of the past, of the other and themselves, is the process that lasts for several generations and evolves continuously. (Rouseaux, 2004, p. 167). It is a mutual consensual development that cannot be legislated merely or imposed by political institutions but needs to be supported by emotions and actions that spring voluntarily from the societies involved (He, 2009, p. 14). This healing process is also never totally irreversible (Rouseaux, 2004, p. 165). In this regard Valerie Rouseaux refers to "negotiating memory" and Elazar Barkan to the term "negotiated history" meaning open dialogue in which victims and perpetrators can exchange perspectives, combine their memories and recover their lost dignity (Barkan, 2006, p. 8). The final result of this transformation is amending the past which may, though does not have to, create the ground for the amended future.

Concluding Remarks

The ongoing processes of dealing with violent and traumatized past in many places of the world, including those quite recent ones in Tunisia after Ben-Ali's regime and in Columbia after the civil war, but also the "old" ones, either facing the new stages of development or hardly visible progress as in case of Bosnia, confirm the continuous importance of the "never-ending" challenge of engaging with the memory but also the problem of instrumentalizing memory for the sake of political interests.

Since "The Truth Hurts but the Silence Kills"[3] for the proponents of truth-telling and acknowledgement of the past dealing with the past is the only possible strategy. The example of Spain where after the Franco regime the national strategy of silence about the past was introduced shows that cutting of the past may result in the coming back of the past in the next generations. Two decades after the Franco regime the victims are calling for justice and demand trails against those responsible ones for human rights abuses from the Franco's time. This mechanism of "returning memory" after the period of either forced or voluntary forgetting of past wrongdoings was well experienced in post-war Germany, where after the "historical amnesia" of the war generation the problem of war guilt and responsibility for the Nazi period was raised and deliberated by the generation of the end of 1960's and 1970s. The case of Poland and non-healing of the past seems to be a good example in this regard as well. Almost three decades after the "thick line" strategy proposed by the first non-communist

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[3] *The Truth Hurts but the Silence Kills* was one of the most popular slogans used in the public campaign conducted during transitional period in South Africa.

prime minister the problem of redressing the communist past and those responsible for the old regime is returning in the new form causing deep divisions not only on political but also on the social level.

More focus on memory-identity related determinants in the context of wide interdisciplinary, holistic approach to dealing with past trauma seems not to have many good alternatives. The question is though still how to reconcile the need for healing of the past with just and at the same time peaceful moving towards future. The fundamental dilemma occurs here of how to arrange most optimally the elements of the equation combining truth, justice and peace. The need for creating the memory of communities and nations is a universal phenomenon, and every country is dealing with some traumatised elements of its past. This is why political responsibility for shaping the memory in the way that reconciles and not divides continues to be the enormous challenge. The consequences of the decisions made today will result in memory and identity production in the future. For that reason, a great deal of "political wisdom" and not only temporary political calculation is necessary. It is also needed to consider the fact that regardless of the strategy decided upon by the political power, the power of trauma may occur stronger. As a consequence, the divided and traumatised past may turn out not to be the subject of expiration. There is thus no doubt the question of how the traumatised past is to be dealt with will definitely continue to be one of the most important challenges both at the social and political level in the decades to come.

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