

## ***The Trauma Club***

Manu Bazzano

*Self & Society – Journal for Humanistic Psychology* N. 7, Summer 2021

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Leaflets on trauma, grief, and loss tumble out each time I open the envelope containing one of the many psychology magazines I subscribe to. Ads of summits and seminars on trauma, grief, and loss clog up most pages of these mags and journals, leaving some space for articles on trauma, grief, and loss, plus the regular interview with the newest expert on trauma, grief, and loss. Time and again, trainees and colleagues alike tell me about the last trauma, grief, and loss workshop they attended, of the trailblazing findings revealed from the screen of zesty zoom webinars. They tell me of the latest thrilling trends – from polyvagal theory to neurobiology to post-traumatic ‘growth’. They graciously ignore my sceptical rejoinder, my pointing out that growth is for carrots rather than humans; that neuroscience is still in its cradle and that its claims feel a little too feverish. They won’t have it; they are adamant that these smart new integrated schemes will tackle trauma, grief, and loss in unprecedented ways.

It’s been hard in the past to work with trauma, the brightly coloured leaflets concede, but thankfully a winning permutation has just been devised that brings together and ‘integrates’ (a key word in these narratives) the very best modalities. Prospective punters are told that this or that legendary clinician, whose fully integrated visage beams from the edges of these ornate ads, will confidently ‘curate’ this freshly minted model for healing trauma. The word *curate* is apt, evoking both the stuffy ways of old (‘more tea, vicar?’) and the ‘curating’ that goes on in art galleries, routinely pushing trauma-free and duly narcotized products. The terminally vapid iPad art by national treasure David Hockney comes to mind, his depiction of a beautified and orderly ‘nature’ perfectly matching the equally green and pleasant regulated affect so beloved of contemporary neuropsychology. Hockney’s retro-melange of old and new in primary colours offers a gentrified vessel for the dull dream of aristocracy of the contemporary English middle-class. His pretty pictures provide a fitting paradigm for keeping culture vultures and

cultured philistines alike immunized from the trauma-ridden yet magnificent fury of far more significant artists like Francis Bacon.

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Trauma is unquestionably, painfully real in the lives of individuals and entire communities. It is endemic in our ostensibly free world where the breezy illusion of free-markets, individual liberties and ‘healthy’ competition makes all of us prone to an awful lot more than the injuries of fate and the existential grievances of anguish and uncertainty. What’s more, trauma is often the upshot of wounds hatched and compounded within the family, that bedrock of bourgeois ideology so idealized by Attachment Theory and its current avatars across theoretical orientations, all of them applauding essentialism and biologism (unwittingly?), endorsing the slow burning microfascism that goes down quietly and not-so quietly in every kitchen. Every therapy training that I know of is besieged by *dataism*, the PowerPoint-driven belief that the world can be shrunk to decontextualized data and measurable rationalization. This is not only ludicrous (as in the notion of measuring empathy on an empathy scale). It is also creepily attuned to the kind of defrosted Blairite baloney – the insipid, pseudo-progressive devotion in the almighty power of technology to save us all by replacing politics on the synthetic wings of a silicon chip.

In short: did reactive forces *usurp* the psych world? Now that I think of it, that question is naïve. It assumes that there once was a virgin terrain of transformative psychical enquiry before Corporate Mindfulness, Burning Man, Existential Therapy Inc., and Cyborg-centred Therapy took over. Could it be that despite its subversive and exploratory potential, the psych world was reactive from the start? A cursory glimpse at the trajectory of men’s groups from the late 1980s to the present makes for an instructive read. We have travelled from the richly ambivalent mythopoetic work of Bly, Hillman, and Meade – through *katabasis* (descent, going under), its questioning of stereotypes, a reclaiming of a masculinity of the heart – to the current narrow-minded essentialist defence of archaic and reactionary ideas about gender championed by Jordan Peterson. In both cases (it makes me wince to realize this) the key inspiration is Jung. Aspects may be found at the heart of the renowned Swiss doctor’s work which are now advertised in the banal self-help lingo of Peterson, Jung’s most substandard disciple: glorification of the Self with a capital ‘s’, dependence on Platonism, fear of the Dionysian, flirtation with and eventual rejection of multiplicity, and to top it all, reactionary politics.

Like the followers of Ken Wilber before them, Petersonians, most of them fed on a diet of *YouTube* videos, loudly object to the dangers of ‘Marxist postmodernism’ in the name of the

blessed standards of identity, home ownership, and an officious defence of ‘Truth’. What often drives them is fear of the foreign, of the nonbinary, of the sexually and relationally ambivalent. No wonder a large section of men’s groups has now tragically become undistinguishable from the alt-right and the noxious mansphere.

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*Meanwhile*, in the commuter jungle, in the liquid world, in the rat-race fields of late-capitalist society and among the work-from-home, Netflix-and-porn-addicted precariat, false hopes for thoroughly false needs are tendered in many forms, the last of which is the vastly touted, highly lucrative and multitentacled *trauma industry* with its luxuriant roster of mini-gurus, its range of techniques, its ready-to-wear, monochrome worldview for befuddled counsellors the world over. Therapists are gradually morphing, in a grotesque reversal of Lenin’s vision, into reactive *transmission belts* entrusted with the dreary task of instilling in society this pathetic illusion, this fatigued, third rate but well-varnished neoliberal hogwash: the pledge of becoming ‘fully-functioning’ in a thoroughly dysfunctional world. Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. I will send them to online trauma courses. That’s what the Statue of Therapy says. There they’ll learn that the body keeps the score, like some bounty killer in a spaghetti western. They’ll learn that the body is emitting gnostic truths and an Ultimately True Felt Sense. Send the tempest-tossed to me, the Statue of Therapy says, I will teach them all about the autonomic nervous system. They will learn how to become a regulated presence. They will learn how to smile and dutifully adjust to an unjust world. They’ll happily go back to that cherished seat in the traffic jam. They’ll go back to the fast motorway to nowhere with a congruent smile on their face.

It is not the fault of trauma therapists if the psych world is deeply asleep in a comatose and compliant state. But the question remains as to what forces psychology and psychotherapy are serving. My guess is they are serving *reactive* rather than active forces. It could be argued that the whole psychotherapeutic enterprise, with the unconscious duly pathologized and relegated to the museum, now rests on a bed of reactive forces.

The problem is political, but what characterizes progressive politics in a ‘traumatic’ climate governed by dangerous buffoons and racist tyrants is an overtly defensive position, with no vision other than a *politics of injury* which categorizes entire communities on their trauma alone rather than their desires, ambitions, and humanity. Joe Biden is the most noticeable representative of the politics of injury, a man who is genuinely empathic because he experienced tragedy: first the death of his first wife, Neilia, and their daughter, Naomi, in a car

crash, and later the death of his son Beau. A man who strongly identified with the dead Kennedys who like him were of Irish descent. A man who, some hoped, would steer American foreign policy towards a more humane course and heal a nation under the yoke of bigotry, racism and a cluster of evils sanctified by the Republican party. Fat chance. Biden has maintained the discriminatory policies against migrants set up by Trump and which outsourced US immigration control to Mexican and Central American security forces. He has not followed on his pre-election statement to tackle the Saudi authoritarian regime; he has bolstered the laughable claim of the US as leaders of the so-called free world. He has done nothing to revive the Iran nuclear deal. The list could go on.

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*We* live in wary times, both in politics and in the allegedly private realm of psyche. While past insurgencies aimed at *all power to the imagination* and the overthrow of capitalism, all we ask for nowadays is little else than the chance to survive on an overheated planet and to quietly enjoy a solipsistic and innocuous notion of ‘liberty’. Similarly, in the psychotherapy world the aspiration towards transformation, liberation, and living more fully in solidarity with others is waning fast. All we ask for is specialist knowledge for licking our wounds. The politics of injury are replicated in the psychotherapies of injury. And if Biden is the chief representative of the former, Gabor Maté is the guru-in-chief for the latter. His neuro-reductionism is currently all the rage, supplying a set of explanations that are like mellifluous music to the ears of therapists struggling with the heavy load of vicarious trauma. To be sure, Maté is an articulate, humane, hands-on practitioner in the field of addiction who worked with inner-city addicts in Vancouver. I don’t know if it’s the same now, but I vividly remember when I was there some fifteen years ago how (literally, physically) segregated drug-users and homeless people were from the rest of the town. To a visitor stepping by mistake into this ghettoised area it felt like entering a circle of Dante’s hell. The Insite Injection Centre and the Portland Hotel, where Maté worked, provided invaluable help in the form of housing and psychological support.

‘I feel your pain’, a phrase made famous by Bill Clinton, might summarize Maté’s approach. It certainly humanizes the other. It also glosses over an asymmetry of gargantuan proportion by assuming, as most of the therapy world does, that there exists somewhere a place of equality between two people or that this place can be created through our faith in relatedness à la Spinelli and in civic dialogue à la Habermas. You and I are not different, Maté is effectively saying, even though you may be penniless, homeless, and strung up on heroin while I am a well-off therapist ‘afflicted’ by ADHD and shopping addiction like he was. You and I are the same also

because all addictions are the same, are they not? They are effectively form of brain dysfunction, the root of which is to be found in abuse suffered in early years, in unsatisfactory forms of attachment resulting in the insufficient processing of dopamine and endorphins. And so on and so forth. According to this model, drugs or other forms of addiction replace the missing stimuli. Why is this approach *reductive*? Because the problem, whatever that may be, is *reduced* to early abuse and conjectural biochemical alterations. These become the main reason and culprit. Never before the biomedical model had a more convincing advocate. Never before societal, political, and environmental contexts were so alluringly and convincingly bypassed. One way or another, the implication appears to be, we are all addicts. All we can hope for is the good fortune to alight on a safe hamlet where, guided by compassionate experts like Maté, we'll be directed to search for (and inevitably find) the traumatic root cause of our woes. Then we shall be healed. We shall be saved. We will become 'integrated' and, regaining our precious seat in the traffic jam, we'll forget all about our desire for revolution.