

Post-Colonial Trauma Studies' Network: Trans-regional and Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Summaries of the Papers and Discussion of the Interdisciplinary Conference

“Between Politics and Healing”: Understanding Trauma in Conflicts and Recent Violent Transformation Processes from a Comparative Perspective

November 20-21, 2014 (University of Cologne)

The objective for this kind of 'report' is fourfold: 1) Having brief summaries of each paper – some auxiliary retrospective so to say, 2) giving everybody the chance to add or stress (an) important point(s) she/he likes to share with the others, 3) trying to continue our discussion and 4) developing further ideas and topics related to our interest in trauma for future joint activities. We hope that you will find yourself more or less represented in the text below.

Nora Amin:

In her keynote speech Nora stressed that the word trauma is often (ab-)used to carry out and justify charity. She remarked on this: „We want to help ourselves by helping the others instead of othering ourselves, we are appropriating the others“. Nora also reflected on the implication of trauma in life with trauma being somehow part of it - as if growing up requires trauma (loss of loved ones etc.). Considering the cases of gang rapes and sexual violence in prisons, she stated that there is an equivalence between the sexuality and the power (sexual politics). Moreover, she made clear how important the bodily aspects in dealing with traumatic pasts are, and that stabilizing a narrative can be a process which has to take into account the body and its memories. Explaining the title of her talk, she said: “Working with trauma and going through the whole process of digging for things, transforming them and finally ideally presenting them, is a rite of passage, a passage from the fragmented self to the reconciled self, from the monster in the past to the survivor in the present.” Thus, to survive and somehow recover from traumatic situations and events can also make us stronger, (comment: an idea that is very often found in (Arabic) exilic writing, at times expressed in the idea of the new-born writer.). By this statement, Nora highlighted the aspect of personal growth in trauma and traumatic life stories.

Vivienne Matthies-Boon:

With the Frankfurt School in mind, Vivienne considered trauma as a concept that comes into being when the social and internal fabric of individuals is ruptured. The revolution was one point for such an traumatic event/situation. Vivienne evoked the traumatic torture experiences of Egyptian activists and problematized the position and relation of the interviewer and the interviewee in this highly emotional context of research. She also stated that laughter and mocking is one way the activists try to cope with or deny their trauma. So there is a dilemma, a permanent oscillation between avoidance and intrusion by trauma.

Vivienne's appeal was to not forget the human (when all the talk is about politics) and the everyday stress a lot of Egyptian people are confronted with. She furthermore criticized a current hype in western discourses about female sexual violence while male victims of sexual violence are often left out.

Karen Mlodoch:

Karen presented insights from her over 20years work experience with the “Anfal women”. In their society, Anfal women are defined by the absence of male relatives thus sidelining their suffering. Furthermore, their self-concepts as mothers have been shattered by a feeling of guilt that came from helplessness. They couldn't protect their children and lived under permanent 'stress' for over 15

years as they didn't know what happened to their male relatives. But there was a shift to a survivors' pride, to claim justice as well as political and social respect what conflicts with the official discourse that often presents them as passive victims. Karen remarked that the claims for justice by the Kurdish victims of Saddam Hussein and his Baath regime however compete and have competed before with today's victims (war of US, IS etc.).

Concerning the psychological level, Karen said that trauma is a much contested concept and that the dynamic relation of an objective event and the subjective perception is important. Trauma is also a political and moral issue that gained formal recognition and thus legal claims in the 1970s with the introduction of the PTSD-concept.

Barbara Hofner:

Barbara started her talk with reminding us of the racist and dehumanizing activities of European (French) colonial medicine in the first half of the 20th century, which basically abused colonized subjects in North Africa ("Algiers School") for experiments with invasive methods like lobotomy, brain surgery, electric, insulin, and cardiazol shocks, while European (French) patients were treated in less violent and abusive ways, e. g. with social therapy and psycho-hygienic methods.

She stressed that the legacies of racist colonial psychiatry have to be kept in mind shaping the historical background for dealing with the state of psychology and psychiatry in the Arab countries today; however, there is today still little understanding of the inner processes in traumatized people and its consequences in emotions, body reactions, thinking and behavior, and there is still a huge gap between the need for competent trauma therapies and the small number of experts and mental health workers (esp. with children) qualified in this field. She went on by stating that since a number of years there is a rising interest in trauma as an important phenomenon in many Arab societies. And one important aspect of dealing with trauma is the question of religion as a resource for coping with trauma. She concluded by relating this to her own experiences as a trauma therapist and to the situation in Germany and the issue of trans-generational trauma.

Felix Lang:

Felix presented us a talk about trauma in Lebanese literature. He drew a (not mutually excluding) separation between traumatized characters in novels and traumatized authors who might use "writing as a therapy". He stressed the fact that academia often romanticized the Lebanese authors and that Lebanese intellectuals are too often perceived in the eyes of western commentators as the saviors of Lebanese society. This is not only patronizing as there are other popular forms of remembrance, such as in martyr portraits or in sectarian memory culture. But these Lebanese authors are part of a global elite and might be somehow disconnected from other parts of their society. At the end, Felix also pointed out that the political elite and sectarian systems have no interest in working on memory.

Michela Borzega:

Michela was very concerned about the pitfalls and limitations of the trauma concept. She pleaded to regard events and accidents separately. She stated that we have been accustomed to the trauma concept like a concrete essence, a substance. But it is and has to be personalized, a fluid concept that exists as a practice. It is not predictable and thus the power of the unforeseen has to be considered as well as multiple epistemologies of trauma. When Nelson Mandela evoked trauma as a unifying factor all have to face, the truth and reconciliation commission has been installed. However, the focus was on reconciliation and not so much on justice, which did not do justice to many victims of Apartheid. Michela stressed that from her point of view, freedom and liberation from various factors restricting the possibilities of good life should be much more in focus than healing.

Ihab Saloul:

Ihab pointed out that there is a tendency to not only find an analogy between individual and collective trauma but to create new concepts that often already start with the group/collective trauma as the initial point, which is problematic. Ihab stressed the importance to think in other categories than victim and perpetrator because it polarizes and purifies their relationship and it is difficult where to put the line of victim/perpetrator. He therefore asked for the position of the researcher or observer in relation to victimizing events.

Moreover, the dialectic of perpetrator and victim ignores other subject's positions e.g. those who profit from violence without directly engaging in it. It puts extraordinary events at the central stage at the expense of structural and slow forms of everyday violence. In his examples of competing memories and representations of traumatic history in Palestinian and Israeli history, he made clear that there can be many cases in point to be found which deal, for various reasons, with history in problematic and ideological ways that rather giving insights and providing understanding.

Wiam Simav Badirxan:

Wiam encouraged us not forget about the everyday suffering of the Syrian people, especially the children. However she told us how the Syrian people manage to resist the oppression and to find ways out of hell, of making life possible under impossible conditions. When the people find a tomb with a name on it, it is a form of joy because so many are nameless. When they find a complete body, it is joyful because often the scattered parts of it are the only remains. A horrific way of fighting the rebels is using the perfid "al-barmil", barrel bombs, whose effects on all levels (not only the physical destruction) surpass any kind of imagination. Wiam who in Homs worked a lot with children used the metaphor of the unborn but nurtured body in order to describe the work she is doing: "The work of documentation is like an umbilical for future generations". Therefore filming is, in essence, to document (tauthiq) the injustice and the crimes, and to tell future generations what happened to their parents and grand-parents, enabling understanding in the future. She also said that there is a friendship between the Syrian people and death now as death is considered as a place where you might find peace. Those who remain face hardship. This position is also reflected in the movie "Silvered waters" that she produced together with Oussama Mohammed.

Stephan Milich:

In his presentation, Stephan pointed out three different ways of approaching the issue of trauma in literary texts: Firstly, the problematic of the political implications of narratives and representations of trauma highlighted by a newspaper article on a 'traumatized' American military dig in Iraq, as well as a short story by Iraqi writer Hassan Balasim; secondly, the reading of a poem by Zakariyya Mohammed as a metaphorization of collective trauma in Palestinian society, and finally, a discussion of the novel "Dhat/Zaat" by Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim as another approach to portraying a society whose individuals have been confronted from birth on with sequential shocks (and traumas) resulting in an incapacity of making sense of relevant historical and personal 'events' in their private and social life. The objective of the paper was to think together aspects of trauma that at first sight seem to be separate from each other but which interact in complex ways that need to be understood in a more precise way. This leads to the question how to conceptualize trauma on a collective scale with regard to Arab societies and how to contextualize (de-contextualized narratives of) trauma in a way that does justice to the persons involved.

Jamal Sobeh:

Jamal pointed out that trauma is not only encoded as a narrative but on a psychological level as an effect in neurological terms. He demonstrated well how trauma functions in the human brain providing us with important background knowledge when dealing with trauma. After speaking in a first part on brain and trauma, he continued to present his own work of training activists who work with Syrian children. He spoke about how the war affects the children reflecting on what can best be done in

view of an extreme lack of resources. Since different kinds of traumatization are wide-spread among adults and children, becoming competent and having a certain knowledge about trauma and how to deal with it becomes vital.

There was a discussion about the terminology Jamal as a psychologist used. When he spoke about primitive reactions, the bells of those having postcolonial/critical theory in mind rang out. Whereas in neurological terms it just describes a reflexive reaction when being confronted with danger (snake), in cultural anthropology and other disciplines the legacy of colonial racialization and dehumanization resonates heavily. After having explained his way of working with the activists Jamal made clear that in consideration of the difficult situation and circumstances in Syria, there is no real choice of choosing from various methods and actions: immediate action is needed and there is not really a space for broad theorization at the moment. While one ought to be critical towards some of the neurological practice of experimenting with and using people in a problematic and selfish way, each context and concrete work have to be considered and looked at closely, without judging in a too generalizing way that does not justice to the specific situation or example.

Final discussion:

Question that arose: Is trauma always directly linked to healing? The Anfal women for example considered healing as treachery to their experience (loss of husband etc.) and as a denial (trauma justification). Therefore trauma concepts have to be used for specific purposes in specific contexts and they have to be contextualized according to the social and political backgrounds.

Furthermore, the self-reflection is very important. How do we, as researchers or therapists, conceptualize our own position? We need to think critically about our own position and involvement in our research, keeping in mind the relationship between the scholar and the 'objects of research'. What are our interests and (hidden) agendas, what is our personal and emotional involvement, where is our position, and what behavior is most appropriate for doing justice to people involved in our project or activities? Finally, where are our own mental and emotional blockages? We think that the discussion about the dialectics of politics (claiming rights, being proud etc.) and healing, prioritizing the recovery of humans which might include forgetting, is not yet over and to be continued by contextualizing each specific case or example we are dealing with.

In the following we would like to just list some topics that might be useful for future encounters and activities:

- Conceptualizations of Trauma / Re-Thinking Trauma (Fanon, Bracket, Mbembe, Derrida, Caruth, each one could present the trauma concept of one thinker...)
- Interchange between empiricism (Therapy, field research, texts, experiences..) and theory
- Trauma: Justice and Temporality
- Trauma Politics (including maybe necro-politics, suggested by Michela), competing memories (Ihab)
- Social-Psychology and Middle Eastern Studies
- Trauma and the Body beyond cognitive-verbal expression : Dhakirat al-jasad

Suggestions for joint activities:

- Establishing a new DAVO Working Group "Trauma, Memory, Justice" (see <http://davo1.de/en/davo-arbeitskreise/>)
- Organizing a Panel at the next BRISMES Conference
- Thinking about ways of producing an edited volume
- Having a bigger transregional and interdisciplinary conference on a concrete aspect of trauma (studies)

Some Reflections on our Discussions:

Finally we like to add that what Stephan intended to say in the final discussion with regard to

- 1) the importance of being tolerant towards others when adopting a critical attitude in trauma studies, can be reformulated as follows: In critical trauma studies - which of course ought to be critical - there are quite many categorical statements and judgments to be found and sometimes it seems that these statements are more meant as judgments than as illuminating hints or critical comments. Fabian and I have come to the conclusion, however, that the adequate way of speaking about trauma varies from case to case and from context to context, hence we think that we have to be careful about judging others' perspectives on trauma, and avoid to generalize. (For instance, how do I read a literary text and autobiographical statement in which the author stresses that s/he is damaged, that his/her memory is dysfunctional, that s/he feels completely traumatized etc.? How does one read and interpret a literary work by which the author existentializes his own person and literary work as being traumatized? I had this case in my PDH thesis and I didn't know how to approach and how to read the writer's poems and all that I could say is that this author struggles with language in a way that seems to be an attempt to learn to live again (in exile and after having experienced many damages) to me as a reader, because he feels he is no more able to live any more after all the damages he went through. I think that traumatizing circumstances and disrupting experiences can push humans into a state of 'non-living', in which one only survives almost without emotions, since emotion and feeling are no more possible without collapsing... The categorical refusal made by theorists to read an author's work in this respect seems to us also problematic.
- 2) Psychology has a double nature, it has the potential to heal and to facilitate recovery, but it also can enhance and secure control over human beings, it can help to pathologize and exploit human beings, and cultural identities as such. The new US Soldier Comprehensive Resilience Programme is just one case in point which raises the questions if western psychiatry and psychology are used to reach 'imperialist' objectives by making soldiers resilient in situations of combat in order to secure foreign intervention - in some regard this could be perceived as a continuation of "colonial madness":
<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/amp-66-1-4.pdf>
- 3) In this regard, we'd like to remind Vivienne's hint at Foucault as a critic of the European psychiatric institution which seems very important in this context, but the question is how vital psychology and therapy have become after all the damages that would not have been possible without colonialism? And how do we approach and make use of psychology without falling into the trap of Orientalism?

Fabian Heerbaart and Stephan Milich