# Psychoanalysis and the third position: social upheavals and atrocity

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**ABSTRACT**

Many situations are now characterized by a breakdown of order and structure, leaving people at the peril of unorganized forces (war machines, human traffickers, etc.) resulting in the dehumanizing of ordinary people on a mass scale, especially in the refugee field. The paper focuses on how alienating discourses on "trauma" and society's neglect of traumatized people increase suffering and have grave consequences for coming generations. It reflects on how psychoanalysis may represent a mediating function in relation to regressive processes at individual, group and societal levels. A conceptualization of a third position from which psychoanalysis can work is developed. The third position is seen as inevitable in psychoanalytic clinical work in that symbolization and working though must be anchored in a common cultural discourse. A model for rethinking traumatization is proposed that develops the conception of the third position in relation to a broader field and encompasses the subject's relations to dyadic, bodily-affective relations, to the group and family, and to culture/discourse. This model may lay the groundwork for understanding how atrocities and social catastrophes such as collective traumatization can be worked through at the individual and social levels. Clinical examples are presented to illuminate these processes.

## Introduction

We live in a time marked by impending catastrophes: climate change, food crisis, pandemics, wars, political tensions between countries with threats of war and a massive number of people displaced from their homes due to war and persecution, amounting now to around 100 million (UNHCR 2022). At the time of writing (June 2022) the situation is characterized by extreme uncertainty, especially due to the war on Ukraine. Large groups, nations, ethnicities and subgroups within a nation are under pressure, and anxieties are causing instabilities and group regressions.

Group anxieties may take forms of basic assumption (Bion 1952; Hopper 2002), resulting in conspiracy theories where others/strangers are seen as threatening large group identities (Volkan 1997). Conspiracy theories can function as organizers and rigid containers for these anxieties, confusing the distinction between imaginary fears and workable problems. The threat of nuclear war represents a real threat to the existence of human mankind. The refugee crisis in 2015 provoked conflicts at a mass level between fear and care where realistic evaluations of what was possible and reasonable broke down and extreme measures were implemented that put large groups in danger, with unconcealed violations of international laws and human rights conventions as consequences (Varvin 2017; Varvin 2019). We thus see a breakdown of order and structure leaving many people at peril of unorganized forces (war machines, human traffickers, etc.) and the dehumanizing of ordinary people happens on a mass scale, especially in the refugee field (Varvin 2017).

In this paper I will discuss the ways in which psychoanalysis may represent a mediating function in relation to regressive tendencies at the individual, group and societal levels. Can psychoanalysis develop a position where anxieties can be contained, understood and reflected upon, thus preventing acting on ideations connected with collective anxieties? Can psychoanalysis in any reasonable way function in such position, a third in relation to dichotomic and antagonistic ways of functioning seen in mass-regressive situations related to collective traumatization (Bohleber 2002)?

The concept of psychoanalysis representing a third-party mediator in relation to intrapsychic and interpersonal conflicts and deficits is well developed in psychoanalysis (Ogden 1994; Kernberg 1997; Green 2004; Zwiebel 2004). Freud extended this position to cover societal and cultural phenomena, such as religion (Freud 1939), civilization processes (Freud (1930 (1929)) and group functioning (Freud 1921). The third will in this paper underline the social and structural dimension and be understood " as a logical principle grounding and mediating differentiated positions, as a standard defining behavior in terms of tasks and roles, and as a shared code providing the means for human subjects to sustain a common perspective" (Muller 2007, 238). In situations of atrocity, the shared code collapses, and the restoration of the ethical standard inherent in a shared code is a complicated sociopolitical process also involving working with the unconscious dimensions of large groups.

In clinical psychoanalysis, working through can be seen as a process of establishing an external, third position in relation to defensive processes that may be halted or frozen. This position of thirdness has a potential for instigating symbolization and reflection and is at the core of the work of psychoanalysis (Green 2004). Working through implies coming to terms with past difficult experiences to be able to go forward, to not be engulfed by unconscious determinations shaped, for example, by a traumatic past. To achieve this, the painful past must be described and reflected upon, and, most of all, demonstrating how the past "works" in the present, thus laying the groundwork for future possibilities. Similar reflective processes have been seen as important at the group and societal levels, as exemplified in the work of Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich on the difficulties of mourning in post-war Germany (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967). The working through of past atrocities has, however, been shown to be extremely difficult and is often avoided (e.g. in Latin America, China and the former Yugoslavia).

I will reflect on possible ways in which psychoanalytic insights can be used at societal levels in processes of symbolizing and coming to terms with a group's or nation's past and present difficulties, thus avoiding regression to basic assumptions and fantasized solutions. My focus is on how atrocities affect the minds of ordinary people and their group-formations. These violations affect the cores of human existence and have the potential to disturb internal structures of safety, intimate relations, the functioning of families and groups, and ultimately society's structure and, as a rule, the meaning-giving function of culture. The following example may indicate some aspects of this.

A middle-aged man from a former Soviet republic said in the first session after the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine: "It is the same. They did it in my country. Everything was destroyed, people were killed, even in 'safe' evacuation corridors." He returned time and time again to a painful experience reported in fragments. Soldiers came to his house. A gun was held against his head while his father was severely beaten and humiliated, and his mother raped. The worst part came afterwards when he saw his father crying bitterly. The "fall" of the father and the realization that he had done nothing to protect his parents had haunted him ever since – in dreams, in hallucinations and as a totalizing anxiety that followed him everywhere and demanded that, most of the time, he had to hide in his home.

There was also a history preceding this. The patient had been born just after his parents came back from forced exile within the Soviet system, where almost the whole population of his republic had been removed under the direst conditions. Most of his family had died – killed, starved to death or dying from diseases. These deportations represented a massive destruction of culture, social relations, intimate relations, one that reached into the coming generations. He had been raised with a priority to build, to restore and to develop – and then it happened again.

Counterforces and reorganizations set in during and after hardships and atrocities, at individual level, at group levels and in societies. Resilience is in fact the rule. There are ample examples of how groups and societies manage to recover, build up and make relations work again (Ungar 2008).

## Resilience and depletion

In individuals and in groups one may see a balance between processes of resilience, and resignation or what may be called depletion. At an individual level, depletion refers to a process in which a traumatized person struggles against senselessness, non-predictability and hopelessness and thereby gradually withdraws, both mentally and socially. If there is no care or help, the withdrawal may be prolonged, lead to diminished interactions with the world and a disturbance in psychically vital processes – a lack of perspectives of life – and eventually lead towards disease and death (Hoppe 1968; Eitinger 1969).

Resilience refers to forces seeking to change, relate, create and learn. It signifies integrative aspects concerned with growth and development, and implies a condition of active, creative and transforming dialogues and fantasies about a future (Alayarian 2007). Resilience is moreover highly dependent on context and is thus a social and collective process (Hauser, Allen, and Golden 2006; Ungar 2008). The phenomenology of post-traumatic states is to a large degree characterized by the dynamics between "vitality" and

"death", presence and absence, symbolized states of mind and unrepresented or poorly represented mental states.

We see similar processes in traumatized groups and societies. Empirical research has, for example, shown increased morbidity and mortality in groups of severely traumatized people (Eitinger 1965; Eitinger 1971; Askevold 1980) indicating depletion at a group level. The lack of help, treatment and support for these groups after World War II (e.g. Holocaust survivors, naval personnel) demonstrated how a lack of resilience was part of a societal process of negligence. Keilson's seminal study on sequential traumatization demonstrated, on the other hand, how acceptance and support can be crucial for a an outcome of resilience (Keilson and Sarpathie 1979). Resilience is characterized by the capacity to learn from experience (Hauser 1999), at the both the individual and group levels (Ungar 2012). Resilience thus implies establishing a third position in a social interactive process from which it is possible to have an outside perspective and reflect, resonating with psychoanalytic conceptions of the third.

A central question in this regard is how traumatization is understood and how processes of resilience may be promoted in traumatized individuals and groups. I hold that present theories of traumatization may overlook resilient processes and inadvertently support a passive, devitalizing approach as the socially determined third position is eclipsed.

## On traumatization and symbolization: the development of the third position

The imprecise use of the word "trauma" (trauma as the invading event, something in the mind, something done to victims, etc.) hampers our understanding and treatment efforts and indicates an uneasiness in our relations to people exposed to atrocities. It is as if there is something uncanny or alien that has invaded the person. The use of the term tends to disregard the reorganizing forces that are immediately set in motion in exposed persons or groups, and "trauma" becomes something static in the mind. From a third position, this implies reification and reduction. When used in psychoanalytic discourse, it may alienate the person afflicted. A reflection on traumatization is therefore necessary.

Central to this are the disturbances of symbolization that take place during the processes of traumatization. The different metaphors used, such as "black hole" (Kinston and Cohen 1986) "psychic vacuum" (Riesenberg-Malcolm 2004), "empty circle" (Laub, 2000), "un-represented mental states" (Levine, Reed, and Scarfone 2013) and "nameless dread" (Bion 1962), signify countertransferential difficulties in grasping unsymbolized and deeply anxiety-provoking material. These metaphors are attempts to catch the inability of the traumatized individual to symbolize essential parts of self-experience, the experience of self–other relationships and how these disturbances affect the speech and intentionality of traumatized individuals in social interactions.

Levine uses the term "the representational imperative" to indicate the essential role that psychic elaborative processes play in emotional regulation and in the symbolization of these processes (Levine 2021). Psychic activity is governed by an inherent pressure to form representations and link them into meaningful, affect-laden, coherent narratives. This pressure, the representational imperative, originating from internal sources (drives, memory transformation) or external sources (e.g. perceptions), exerts a "demand upon

the mind" for psychic work. It is this demand upon the mind that is changed (weakened, undermined, attacked) during traumatization.

The traumatized mind gradually gives up, abandons, the anchorage of "the demand" or dissociates this part of the mind to preserve some mental functionality, with a loss of a feeling of chronology in which "past" precedes, and is distinguished from "present" and "future". In traumatic conditions, the deictic anchorage of time (Bühler 1934) is undermined and often "converted" into a disordered, existential time experience. Since the deictic anchorage of a person in space and time is basic to the integration of perceptions, feelings and thoughts in symbol formation, the changes to this anchorage may be far-reaching and experienced as catastrophic. Any sign that bears some reference to signs of the earlier perceived danger is evaluated as a signal of danger and catastrophe.

This way of perceiving the environment, based on symmetry, is characterized by imaginary reasoning. At its worst, the experience of time is turned into a fragmented experience, disconnected from the framework of biographical time, and a deficiency of one's ability to symbolize feeling-states of the body, of intersubjective experience as well as one's relation to the social/cultural field (Rosenbaum and Varvin 2007). Under these conditions perceptions and sensations of the body and environment are not even linked by means of imaginary modes of thinking. Instead, they may be said to be of an indexical nature (Peirce 1984), i.e. immediate, perceptual, non-symbolic attacks on and intrusions into the mind – a semiotic term having similarities with phenomena described with the terms "black hole", "psychic vacuum" and "empty circle".

Parts of the personality may under these circumstances be experienced as empty, hollow, with undefined, not-named anxieties constantly appearing. To be able to symbolize traumatic experience, affirmation and confirmation from others and society is paramount. The traumatized needs narratives that can meet the mind's attempts to symbolize the traumatic experiences. When these are insufficient, false or lacking, as is amply demonstrated in many contexts where a group's traumatization is denied or neglected, the traumatized person or group becomes alienated, isolated and alone with chaotic and extremely painful emotional experiences.

The development of symbolization and resilience is relational and highly dependent on how the traumatized individuals are met. The traumatized person attempts to organize a chaotic inner world, and giving meaning to experience is thus dependent on an activation of inner resources through relations to others, and on pertinent narratives that can help meaning making. That is, the traumatized person needs help to develop a third position from where they can see and reflect on experiences. The following example may elucidate this process.

Mr A. was a thin and shabbily dressed man around the age of thirty who entered the consulting room in a state of extreme anxiety. He immediately searched the room for dangers, looking behind pictures on the wall, under the sofa, etc. He sat down, shivering and looking with wide-open eyes at the analyst. When asked about his situation, he first stuttered: "he killed all my family – the dictator. No one is left." He was living with friends, never staying long in the same place. He had no residence permit, and thus no civil rights in society.

His speech was difficult to understand as he stuttered and lost words. Asked if he was getting any food, Mr A. became bewildered, and said friends gave him food from time to time. The analyst then asked what food he liked from his home country, and if he could

remember his mother's cooking. He then reluctantly started to talk about the food his mother had cooked for him, and he started crying. He turned into another person, breathing more deeply, relaxing in his body and obviously feeling safer. This lasted for some time, before he once again became tense with wide-open, anxious eyes.

The process of symbolization was distorted to the extent that thoughts could not be given a temporally meaningful place in an autobiographical narrative. The temporal fragmentation allowed the emotions of anxiety, aggression and depression to dominate, and to a certain extent destroy the effort of meaning making (Bruner 1990) and symbol formation. Mr A. was immersed in chaotic anxieties without the ability to think or reflect. The meeting with the other, the psychoanalyst, became frightening and was felt as complicated, confusing and an immersion in a power struggle. When memories, not only of the food, but also of the earlier safe relation with an empathic other emerged, his symbolizing function was restored for a short time. A coherent emotional reminiscence eased his anxiety. But he also tried to give a narrative context to his experience, albeit haltingly: "he killed all my family – the dictator. No one is left." For a while, a third position was co-created by the patient and the analyst, making it possible to think. It is crucial that these attempts at giving meaning to experience are met not only by the analyst, but also from society and culture. The rejection of this man's status as a refugee implied for him a massive denial of the reality of what had happened to him.

To help with symbolizing and to support restorative processes in traumatized individuals and groups, an extended understanding of traumatization may be necessary.

## Further development of the understanding of traumatization

In the following I will briefly describe a model that can serve as a framework for the development of our thinking on traumatization (Rosenbaum and Varvin 2007; Varvin and Rosenbaum 2011). In agreement with the view that social trauma and its after-effects are linked with the individual's relation to others and the social context, three dimensions of interaction can be identified.

### *The body–world dimension*

This dimension concerns the individual's relation to the other at a dyadic bodily-affective level. This is the level of emotional bodily-mediated regulation of affective states. Within this dimension, important non-verbal emotional regulatory processes occur between self and others, and there is a self-soothing reliance based on trusting internalized object relations.

Emotional withdrawal will diminish the possibility to use others in the process of activating inner empathic relations and through this modulate negative affect, so the person may thus be unable to symbolize sensations and subjective experiencing as such. With Mr A., some capacity to symbolize was restored through empathic presence and interventions by the analyst in the context of co-creation of a third position.

Affective self-regulatory processes and interpersonal regulatory interactions are central for maintaining subjectively experienced safety (Schore 2003). This pertains especially to the regulation of negative or unpleasant arousal, which depends on safe early attachment relationships and good-enough early containment by the mother/caregiver. These relationships are, in turn, dependent on a growth-promoting cultural and social

context, including family and social network support. Moreover, what at a social psychological level is identified as the urge to create emotional bonds is contingent on a belief shared by the participants in a dyad or a group that emotions can be regulated at this level, that is, by the creation of a "shared code providing the means for human subjects to sustain a common perspective" (Muller 2007, 235).

## The subject–group dimension

This is the dimension of identity formation by which one finds one's identity as a member of a matrix: family, group, and community. It is a "membership" based on the capacity to experience oneself as both belonging to and separate from the group. One is both ordinary (like the others in the group) and unique/special (different from the others). The group functions both as a safety background, an arena for intimate emotional relationships, but also as source of knowledge on what one is and what one should or could be. In close/intimate groups (family), one learns from others and acquires the ability to empathize and take the other's perspective.

A malfunctioning group-identity structure creates a poor background for the desire to change, to relate and reflect. In societies where the family and the related larger grouping (e.g. clan, tribe) are the most important organizing units of society, and where belonging to such a group is of fundamental importance both for personal and social identity, disturbances in this dimension may have grave disorganizing effects.

## The subject–discourse dimension

This dimension signifies the subject's relationship to culture in the broadest sense: myths, philosophies, ideologies, ethics, morals, folklore, poetry, literature, jurisdiction and other forms of social discourse. Discourse is in principle the written, temporalized and memorized signs of a living culture. These signs are not particularly stable over long periods, but they are stable enough to produce converging and diverging myths, narratives, ideologies and paradigms of beliefs and argumentation, "a shared code". The subject's modes of relating to the differences and divergences, and the expression of social passions based on "higher principles", are part and parcel of the subject–discourse dimension. Included in this dimension is also the subject's experience of being grounded in time: linear time, experiential/deictic time (seeing the present in relation to past and future) and existential time (associative, dreaming). This dimension consequently transforms the group-mind, enabling the subject to step outside the group while still remaining a part of a cultural movement. It thus represents a regulatory principle and a dimension that structures meaning in the other dimensions.

We can see the functions of these dimensions as an extended conceptualization of the third dimension. The relation to discourse/culture is of overriding importance in that it structures and gives meaning to the other dimensions by establishing "a shared code". The intimate dyadic relation, for example mother and infant, being mostly non-verbal, is highly dependent on a well-functioning group/family structure, which again is dependent on a reasonably stable cultural meaning-giving function in groups and societies.

The three dimensions must be seen as interrelated and as a whole, i.e. all of them functioning at the same time. The intimate relation between mother/caregiver and infant

needs a group/family that not only can give support, but also give direction and meaning to feeding and caring for the infant. This counts for all developmental stages. The family/group exists in cultural context where traditions and meaning are transmitted both orally and through texts. This is aptly focused by the proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child". When groups and ethnicities are attacked through persecution and genocides, disturbances in all three dimensions follow.

The idea of the third position in psychoanalysis is most developed in relation to the dyad (Ogden 1989). I will, however, underline that it always already is anchored in the subject–discourse dimension, as a pre-position for establishing meaning in experience at the dyadic and triadic levels, to integrate past experiences and wisdom in an ongoing lived experience that indicates hope and future possibilities.

## Traumatization and change

Working through implies a reorganization of meaning, an opening of mental spaces and, in the broader cultural/social context, the opening up of fields of possibilities. Traumatization tends to close possibilities with fixations to frozen images in the mind and attempts to reorganize the mind by getting rid of internal bad objects, for example by projection. Attempts to find new meaning regularly fails, with a recurrence of anxiety-laden sensations, as we saw with Mr A.: for him the activation of an empathic inner object relation temporarily restored the thirdness and some organization in his mind (Laub and Podell 1995).

Such situations in therapy are crucial in that the presence of an empathic relation is felt at the same time as what is lost becomes painfully present. In such moments, the person experiences nachträglich the implications of losses and earlier traumatization. One may say that psychoanalysis, by giving meaning to the traumatic experience from a third position, anchors the subject in a cultural dimension where the realization and symbolization of what has happened may open future possibilities. The nachträglich moment in a therapeutic or any reorganizing process thus points both backwards and forwards (Larsen and Rosenbaum in press).

Ms B. realized in such a moment the implications of having lost her child. She came for therapy because of relational problems. The theme of loss had been touched upon several times but had been avoided until a key session where it suddenly appeared after a break in the therapy. She realized, as she said, that "now, my child would have been 13 years old". She had been imprisoned and maltreated in her home country because of belonging to a persecuted minority, and her child had died shortly after birth under dire circumstances. Her life after this had been a struggle with a dominant guilt and post-traumatic symptoms and depressions. The realization of what she had lost was kept isolated by being a chronic helper, trying to pay her "debts".

Unconsciously, she identified with her child, and before the key sessions she dreamt of being suffocated, with no help forthcoming. In the session, the analyst became identified in the transference as the helpless mother. In a dramatic sequence, Ms B. then remembered how she, alone with her sick child, had to endure seeing the child being suffocated to death by some respiratory disorder, as in her dreams where she felt suffocated. This nachträglich experience of her loss set in motion a forward movement where she, with her analyst, had to work through the implications of what had happened and choose

herself a forward path. The development of this nachträglich experience in a symbolic-cultural dimension became a turning point and decisively changed her life. This was contingent on the co-establishment of a third, reflective position where the dyadic interaction with the analyst and the implied triadic/Oedipal relations could be given meaning through a working through of her present relations both in exile and to her family in her homeland.

Can this type of nachträglich realization function at the social and collective levels? Mitscherlich's work on the German nation's inability to mourn demonstrated how a psychoanalytic intervention at a collective level can help mourning, a difficult process at an individual as well as a social level, which takes generations.

## Conclusion

Psychoanalysis has its origin in and main function as a treatment. The transference–countertransference dynamics of a therapeutic dyad is, however, embedded in a context determined by the rules of the setting, the contract, ethics, law, and the local cultural meaning of a therapeutic relationship. The analyst must both be embedded in the emotional relationship to the patient and represent a third position through their reflective function (Kernberg 1997). It is this thirdness that makes interpretation possible (Green 2004).

In relation to the model presented earlier, psychoanalytic work at a dyadic level is always contextualized by all three dimensions: body–world, subject–group and subject–discourse/culture. These three dimensions function as a whole, even if the patient primarily functions at a deficit-imaginary level. For the imaginary to be symbolized, the analyst must thus make an interpretation from a third position.

The question here is whether psychoanalysis may represent the third position at a collective level, and have a function that addresses the deeper layer of the social unconscious (Hopper 2002) and provides an open space for working through the effects of, among other things, collective traumatization. One precondition is that atrocities are inscribed in the collective memory. This is a collective process where official recognition and affirmation is needed, but also where cogent narratives are produced by the cultural community: writers, artists, historians, sociologists and others. Psychoanalysis may in this context contribute to a structuring third position where developments from dyadic power relations are opened, enabling mutual recognition (Muller 1999) In Freud's words: "If willingness to engage in war is an effect of the destructive instinct, the most obvious plan will be to bring Eros, its antagonist, into play against it. Anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war" (Freud 1933, 211).

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## Disclosure statement

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