

Taking care of the world, through the catastrophe

Mental health practices in areas of conflict, crisis, and political violence



edited by **Brigata Basaglia**



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Note

This text collects the interventions shared during the internationalist meeting *Taking care of the world, through the catastrophe* organized by the Basaglia Brigade on March 24, 2024. These are texts written to be read orally, with simultaneous translation in four languages, Italian, English, Spanish and Turkish. Because of the oral form, the diversity of voices, language and experiences, the dissimilarities remain evident and depict the chorality and complexity of the meeting.

It's important to notice that we have chosen to keep the gender declination as in the original texts, while agreeing on the need for more in-depth internal discussion on transfeminist translation options, for possible future publications. Many thanks to those who worked on translating, editing and disseminating this document.

Brigata Basaglia is a project dedicated to psychological and social support based in Italy.
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For an international resistance network

Brigata Basaglia

On March 24, 2024, we hosted an international meeting where diverse political organizations, individuals, and communities from various parts of the world came together to share experiences and reflections on the concept and practices of care in contexts of war, conflict, and political violence.

The theme of this meeting had to do with the context in which Brigata Basaglia was born, the great social and health catastrophe of 2020. Our network of psychosocial support took shape while all around us tens of thousands of people were dying in overcrowded hospitals, the streets were patrolled by the military, and riots broke out in prisons, and were suppressed in blood. We understood that the only way to deal with the emergency without submitting to the brutality and selfishness of our corrupt, mafia-like, profit-seeking institutions was to organize from below.

We also realized that if we had organized earlier, our political work would have had a greater impact, we would have resisted the emergency directives more strongly. Therefore, over these years, we have not stopped organizing and supporting other organizations and communities affected by the floods, student collectives repressed by the police, and workers struggling against layoffs.

We have come to realize that an ever-widening and internally heterogeneous network of organizations enables us to resist the crises and emergencies that are happening. We also know that many of the crises we face have global origins, and that many of the wars, catastrophes and genocides that occur in other territories also originate within our own borders.

We therefore believe that internationalist solidarity is indispensable and complementary to territorial and community work. We also believe this because the founding nucleus of Brigata Basaglia works and builds the organization from different territories, not only in Italy, but also in Mexico. We know what it means to work in a context marked by enforced disappearances, para-militarization of civil society, extrajudicial executions, material poverty and constant insecurity. We know that we must learn from those who have been organizing and struggling for longer than we have, for generations and centuries, from those who experience far more brutal and totalizing oppression and violence.

These international meetings - the first took place in person in Milan in May 2023, the second online in March 2024 - are a trace of the intention to create a network capable of going beyond national borders, because the systems we are dealing with are also global and transnational. We hope, therefore, that through stories, testimonies and the sharing of practices, this dialogue will lead to building concrete and sustainable proposals for collaboration, consolidate new relationships that will blossom into other encounters that strengthen the common struggle.

We would like to thank with great generosity those who gave their time to this collective and international project: Fikret Çalağan from Ata Soyer Sağlık ve Politika Okulu, Davide Grasso, Ian Parker and Luke Manzarpour from Red Clinic, Samah Jabr from Palestine, Mariela Rodriguez from Cuba, Graciela Painelaf from Wallmapu, Comité Cerezo from Mexico, Pedro Mercado and Beto Paredes from the Santa Maria Ostula community in Michoacán.

1. THE HEALING POWER OF SOCIETY

by Fikret Çalağan, a member of the Ata Soyer School of Health and Politics, a founding reality of the health assembly of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK) and the health assembly of the Peoples' Democratic Congress (HDK)

First and foremost, on behalf of the Ata Soyer School of Health and Policy students, we extend our gratitude for being invited to such a gathering.

Crisis, conflict, and violence are strategies of governance that have intensified and deepened in today's world. However, society persists by continuously resisting and reconstructing its existence with foundational elements. We oppose to the redirection of society, turning it into a passive recipient of "aid" amidst prevailing crises. Instead, we believe it is more appropriate to focus on activating society's inherent healing power, thereby facilitating its organized and robust emergence from crisis environments.

It is important to state our final point at the outset. Any effort initiated under the guise of "mental health practices" inherently implies the "medicalization" of the process. This is a serious issue that needs addressing. The use of terms like "mental health practices" creates a perception of a passive society being intervened upon by an external force. We emphasize that the interventions made under the guise of "mental health practices" inhibit societal construction and hinder the process of societal existence, despite our best intentions. Through medicalized interventions, the healing power of society is obstructed and eroded by the policies developed by capitalist/modern medicine and its extensions. Unfortunately, these interventions often feed off our ignorance, fostering a sense of "we know, we act" mentality. Our practices, influenced by dominant distorted health paradigms, not only conceal these interventions but also strengthen them through us. Conversely, it is crucial to engage in efforts that bring forth society's healing power and combat factors that inhibit its emergence. At the Ata Soyer School of Health and Policy, we strive to implement initiatives that highlight how factors like these will be reshaped by the actions of organizations like ours, which focus on rebuilding societal structures.

Where there is a society, there is healing power. As long as society exists, this power will continue to grow and thrive. Many of our current "knowledge" states are relatively new, often acquired through the usurpation or distortion of existing societal knowledge. Without subjecting the information imposed upon us by capitalist medicine to societal scrutiny, it becomes tainted over time with anti-social content. We understand that activating our societal filters involves discussing what and how we will do things together with society. This will also enable us to uncover the suppressed healing power within society's depths. Sociality involves sharing life, self-governance, finding common solutions to problems, and acting together. When health is considered within this framework, all components of society contribute directly to healing efforts. Every endeavor, from housing to food, water, infrastructure, material production, culture, education, and all efforts to sustain life, directly contributes to societal health. The most significant healing is resistance against relationships of domination and exploitation, which allows individuals and communities to articulate their own voices and decisions, thus becoming subjects. When health is approached from this perspective, breaking free from the narrowed concept of "medical services" becomes possible, and action can be taken.

Crisis moments also present opportunities. These moments naturally create a distance between society and dominant states/institutions/structures and mindsets. This distance leads to a loosening of the dependency relationships imposed on society, replacing the passive waiting and victim-playing with an obligation to act and reveal society's healing and constructive power, which has been suppressed and made invisible. We can easily observe this phenomenon during earthquakes, migrations, floods, and wartime situations.

However, we also acknowledge that these situations are short-lived and rapidly dissipate when foundational elements are not implemented.

In times of crisis, even democratic structures tend to shift from a sense of solidarity and aid towards passivity and victimization. As states begin to overcome initial crisis moments, we highlight their efforts to relegate society back to a passive state through interventions. Our experiences show that without strong societal organization, society quickly reverts to its previous position, or even regresses further. We must note that this outcome will further deepen societal dependency and passivity. This result also sheds light on why those in power continuously maintain conflict and violence

environments. As capitalism and states rebuild themselves during crises, they also dismantle society. Therefore, bringing forth society's healing power is an act of defending society.

As the Ata Soyer School of Health and Policy and the HDK Health Assembly, we aim to bring forth society's healing power by:

- Emphasizing learning from and with society instead of professionals imparting knowledge onto society.
- Challenging the dependency relationships imposed on society by capitalist medicine and its extensions.
- Engaging in efforts to reclaim distorted societal health knowledge and making visible what has been suppressed.
- Organizing assemblies with a Women's Health Movement perspective to foster grassroots organizations in the health domain.
- Democratizing health services by transforming the perception of healthcare workers within existing health institutions, thereby contributing to the societalization of health and countering anti-social and societal engineering structures.
- Most importantly, striving to transform ourselves to rebuild our way of connecting.

Through these approaches, we strive to learn from our experiences and progress. The Van earthquake, the migration from Kobani to Suruç, and the recent earthquake on February 6th have been pivotal crisis moments for us.

The experiences gained from our activities during crisis periods have conceptually enriched us and expanded our organizational network. We have attempted to establish a theoretical foundation through regular and periodic meetings. We have collaborated with the Democratic Society Congress Health Assembly on community-related projects. However, we find the most instructive practices occur during crisis moments. During these periods, we have achieved significant results by prioritizing learning from and alongside society rather than teaching society, revisiting and developing concepts, and initiating qualitative leaps in the school's development.

From the outset, we aimed to connect with communities striving to reveal their inherent power and self-governance experiences under the umbrella of societal

health. We have participated in several international studies. To overcome our international limitations, we plan to host an international conference by the end of this year. We invite all friends who participated in this conference to join us.

Through this network, we can foster ongoing discussions and share experiences, contributing to our learning processes."

2. MY EXPERIENCE IN THE YPG

by Davide Grasso, former Italian fighter in Syria with the YPG in 2016, researcher and writer

I want to start by thanking you for this invitation and opportunity. My name is Davide Grasso and I am a researcher as well as a precarious professor of philosophy and social sciences in Turin and Marsiglia. I am currently in Marsiglia, but usually in Turin. I am speaking to you tonight because years ago I made the decision to go to Syria to join the army of the Syrian Democratic Forces, an autonomous-grassroots and revolutionary army. The Syrian Democratic Forces is not dependent on the Syrian State, or any other state. And like me, this choice was also made by a few dozen people -men and women- from Italy. What I will talk about here is based on personal experience, and is also a result of subjective perceptions gained also from discussions with others.

So, first, I want to explain that the Syrian Democratic Forces is an army which defends a self-government experience, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which is a self-governing institution of that region formed by regional, local citizens, and city councils, but mostly by a network of people's communes, revolutionary cooperatives, and women autonomous assemblies.

This experience of transformation of social relations in a revolutionary sense in a democratic and socialist sense, while at the same time, is the only positive outcome of the Syrian civil war and the Syrian revolution. Unfortunately it is also an experience which exists within the conflict of the Syrian government, Turkish government, and several far-right (Islamist) groups existing in Syria. Therefore, it is an entity which had to defend and arm itself with the People's Defense Units and the Women's Protection Units, respectively. And later the YPG within this larger army, the Syrian Democratic Forces, which totals to around 80,000 women.

There are armed women and men coming from several linguistic communities, mainly Arab, Kurdish, and also importantly, Yezidi, Armenian, Assyrian, and Turkem. There are also several religions: Muslims, Christians, Yezidi, atheists, and agnostics. These democratic and syndical forces are what composes the army in which we are in. We joined the army and almost all of us participated in military operations, we took part in military offensives, on many occasions between 2014 and 2019 against the Islamic

State or Daesh, on other occasions, between 2018 and 2019, against the Turkish army and Islamic groups.

The majority of us had never had any prior experience or military training. The military training we did on site was little and negligible due to the situation of chaos, revolution, civil war, and urgency that exists in those regions. Mostly due to the fact that we are a people's army, the equipment available was minimal, and the situations of violence we faced were terrible. We certainly had incurred shocks, traumas and wounds. Slowly we made our way back to Italy and once we arrived we created our own sort of informal, invisible, small modality in order to confront ourselves.

We lost two people in Syria, Giovanni Asperti and Lorenzo Orsetti. Sadly, one year ago we also lost Riccardo Nicodano, who decided to leave this world. It's not easy for anyone to come back and come to terms with what has happened, but losing a person like Riccardo, in this way, is something we will hardly recover from. It is like the sense of guilt and inadequacy afflicting those who went to war had found a new reason for confirmation and amplification.

I think that a lot of the trauma is due to the violence. But I do not think - like many people who have experienced the war (like myself before joining the army)-that depends on the idea of "killing someone", that is to be actively part in the death of people fighting with the enemy. Our collective military operations and the offensives caused the death of many people, that is true. However, it does not seem to be the core of the trauma myself and others suffered, and in some ways we are still suffering and maybe trying to overcome. Also, it is not either – another thing I thought before leaving from Italy- the visual appearance of war, the blood, or the wounds. Of course, these things do not help at all, but the part of the trauma related to violence is deeper and unspeakable, so I will not dwell on this.

There a second aspect more difficult to focus on and I believe it is fundamental, it is related to self-esteem: of all people, all of us, who came home experienced a very fluctuating self-esteem, often a sort of lack of self-esteem, a disrespect of ourselves because we had the feeling that we hadn't been able to face the situations. Not being adequate, especially in situations in which things happened we didn't want to happen, we would prefer they had not happened.

We discussed it, also with friends from other countries and this is a common trait, even if in different expressions/ways. It's not considered anxiety induced performativity. We are on another planet. It's something caused by the impossibility of

tolerating things you can not change and which are not acceptable for human beings, even if they happen because of us, as humans.

All of these factors forced us into a situation in which, on one hand, everything did not go the way we expected and it seems to be our fault, on the other hand, some of us blame the army, the people in charge, all of us, all of them and there is a general feeling of hatred and resentment towards ourselves and others (but never towards the enemies, because they are the enemies, just towards ourselves and friends). All of these (feelings) are due to the issue of knowing that some friends are not with you anymore. Their glimpses and their voices haunt us, some more than others.

After coming back, after a time, we were confronted with a second phase of the trauma, or maybe with a second trauma, different from the first one but obviously related to it. We have lost the possibility to communicate with others, not because we have lost the words, on the contrary some of us -as me- have spoken in public in these years, but we have a sort of impossibility to communicate truly especially about some topics. When we tried – because many of us have tried, have been tempted to talk with someone – we gained very few things in return without being able to blame the other person, but feeling again hatred and resentment for not finding words and glances we were looking for, maybe we do not even know what they should have been.

For some it was like they could not find the understanding and care -not in a political, abstract, mythological, or ideological sense, but in a human sense- that we would have liked. This very inability to communicate takes us to a ghetto – and it's important that the ghetto exists, because we can at least talk amongst ourselves, but it happens that in this ghetto we exclusively talk about these things, these experiences. We are completely characterized by this and we become more authentic, because in some ways we embodied this experience as the most important among the many experiences we had in our lives. We keep on living that experience and it then defines us, it becomes an obsession, and thus our minds are still in Syria in many different ways, but our bodies are in Italy, with all of the pain and social inabilities as the result of this experience.

On the other hand, our network is very dismembered, because we live in different places and cities in Italy, and some of us do not even live in Italy. All of us have an enormous amount of work, precarious and with low salaries. Some of us live in severe

poverty and others -among survivors- experienced drug abuse and alcoholism. We can say they are very complex situations that are difficult to manage by talking on the phone.

We have also been accused of being socially dangerous, especially some of us (officially), but we have realized that was an accusation toward all of us. Some of us, in particular one, Eddi Marcucci, suffered the greatest consequences. It was a sort of disrespect towards us and our experience coming from the Italian State. On some level, we were not surprised, but on another level the indecency was beyond expectations and maybe we suffered more than we would like to admit.

Concerning the political groups we -some of us- were part of before joining the YPG, when we came back, there haven't always been psychologically safe places. Many of us left those groups, many of us came into conflict. And naturally this experience extends to all relations, friendships, family, and love. More or less every story is different, every person is different, but I saw -in my experience and from others experiences- this tendency to break relationships, abandon others, distance oneself, oppose others, often as a provocation to test to what extent they would tolerate us to what extent they would have accepted to be close to us, regardless of our behaviors.

Of course, this is a losing game and it led us to behave poorly. Let me be clear: not every bad behavior from former YPG fighters depends on the experience of the war, it will be too simplistic to say this. Besides, we gave ourselves rules as a group and some people -a couple- have been removed. But undoubtedly, even if we are continuing on this path, we realize that we made mistakes very often and we cannot use the experience of the war as an excuse, but on the other hand we cannot pretend that we have not lived some experiences. There have been some of us who asked for help from professionals, and discussing about that we noticed that the professionals usually said to us "I don't know if you realize what are you saying, you're not a person who cannot have consequences from your experience"

In the end, the absence of institutional psychological support, due to our army not being recognized as a legitimate entity. Also, the absence of other types of support, non-institutional, non-social, but from informal groups outside of institutions forces us to pay for psychological support, if needed. These years Lorenzo Orsetti's family did a lot for us, but it was the only entity that helped. Some of us were capable of asking for help to professionals, thanks to external economic support, but many of us didn't have the strength of spirit, despite working, perhaps even working hard, they did not have

the amount of money -because this money is relevant for poor people- they needed to pay also the political regulated rates requested by psychoanalysts who offer political regulated rates.

This could be linked to the difficulty of accepting the need for psychological support, to share some experiences and to admit to being weak and fragile. Also our “political vision” could be put into perspective and questioned by someone who is talking to us, maybe indirectly. I want to say, we are not self-sufficient from the mental perspective and also not from the political perspective. And yet we sometimes have defensive reactions to a “political vision” are for us part of the strategies we use to defend ourselves from emotional breakdown, and this complicates things.

On the other hand, I think that you can help us to understand better how to move and, maybe, even after many years of struggling, find solutions and situations of well-being, especially for those who are living the worst moments now.

3. RED CLINIC: TWENTY-TWO POINTS

by Ian Parker and Luke Manzarpour, a collective of communists mental health workers, united for radical psychotherapy, for the care of the oppressed and for the convergence of the two in communist politics

The Red Clinic was founded by a small group of therapeutic practitioners and activists in London last year. There is a governing board, a group of clinicians from around the world listed on the website, and there have been referrals for therapy to members of that group. We have had online discussions and face-to-face meetings about what the Red Clinic should look like and what it could do. We know that we cannot do this on our own, and need to connect with others. These twenty-two points briefly introduce and review questions of politics, therapy, psychologisation, organisation and practice.

Politics: Why we are communist

1. The Red Clinic project began with a 'mental health workers inquiry', and the link between mental health and labour is at the core of why we say we are communists. Mental distress that is brought into therapy is intimately bound up with the nature of work in capitalist society. Therapy itself can be turned into a form of alienated labour, and therapists are also workers. Questions for us include asking what work therapists do, and how they link with working-class struggle.
2. There is a history of 'free clinics' in psychoanalysis and of 'radical therapy' in general that is closely connected with socialist and communist politics. This history, which is obscured by the professionalization of therapy, and the attempt to adapt people to society, to make them good productive citizens, is our history. We remember this history, learn from it, and take it forward as part of the broader communist project.
3. The link between psychotherapy and radical politics was closed down in capitalist societies and in those societies that claimed to speak for the working class. Remaking the link now means that we open communism again to the struggles of all of the exploited and oppressed. The mission statement on the

website signals this as an open form of communism that is inclusive of difference, that is non-normative.

4. The communist link between what is 'red' and what is 'clinic' has been theorised before, and needs to be theorised again. Our work is the product of individuals, but the work must also be collectivised, making multiple connections between history, theory and practice. That means working with radical clinicians and with communist activists who are willing to engage with the question of personal change.

5. We insist on the 'red' of the Red Clinic. We are communists in the clinic, not because we want to turn the clinic into an arena for propaganda, but because we want to make clear the necessary link between communism and care. Being communist here is more than simply providing free therapy. It is part of a political project to make communism visible again in culture and public debate, communism as something that has a good as well as a bad history, something that is worth reclaiming.

Therapy: Addressing differences of approach and institutional divisions

6. We insist on the 'clinic' of the Red Clinic. What we mean by 'clinic' is very different from the medical treatment that some mental health practitioners jealously guard for themselves as a professional speciality. Our clinic is an open space that includes those working in and against any of the 'psy' professions, and those who make use of those services, and anyone who wants to engage with the question of how to link personal change with radical social change.

7. The collectivising of experience and collective activity of the Red Clinic has immediate implications for how we think about the privatising of distress under capitalism. The individualisation of experience is replicated in one-to-one 'individual' therapy, and we need to find a way to connect with forms of group therapy. We acknowledge and respect and work with the personal singular nature of distress, and need to draw upon different approaches to tackle it.

8. Psychoanalytic ideas are useful, but not all of them are radical; quite the contrary. These ideas underpin the development of most other models of psychotherapy and counselling. We do not privilege psychoanalysis over other models, and actively include practitioners who are not psychoanalytic. We are

learning from what 'radical therapy' might look like that also refuses psychoanalysis as such.

9. We also question the hierarchical pyramid structure of psychotherapy in which psychoanalysis is assumed to be at the top, a larger number of psychotherapists underneath them, and a huge mass of mainly working-class women counsellors consigned to what is supposed by those at the top of the pyramid to be a lesser and less intense level of provision. We cut across this division, against the bureaucratic professionalization and regulatory divide-and-rule structures.

10. We are not developing a new 'model' for psychotherapy, but harnessing the strength of different approaches, questioning each of them. We do not adhere only to therapy as such or to the 'clinic' as the only place for personal and social change. There is no one perfect model of therapy and therapy itself is not a cure for the ills of capitalism. Our engagement with the clinic is tactical and strategic.

Psychologisation: Resisting therapeutic discourse

11. The Red Clinic is critical of mainstream therapy that aims to adapt people to this society. It is critical of psychiatry that medicalises distress, connecting with radical critiques of mental health services and connecting with users of services. It is critical of psychology that wants to make people think more positively about their lives and of the role of 'psychologisation' in society, as well as the intensely ideological message that problems are individual and should be addressed at an individual level.

12. We also acknowledge and connect with existing communist practice, working with the contradictions between conservative institutions and well-meaning practitioners. There are many practitioners, whether self-consciously 'communist' or not, who attempt to do radical work and resist the lures of psychologisation. They already offer low-cost or, in some cases, free therapy. They attempt to take questions of class and 'race' and disability and gender and sexuality seriously, and we want to help open up the contradictions these practices pose.

13. We need to find ways of addressing the connection between material oppression and felt experience, distress, that does not reduce politics to therapy. We do not evangelise about psychoanalysis or any other model of psychotherapy. We do not reframe political questions in line with therapeutic discourse, either in

the application of therapeutic theory to understand political phenomena or in practical proposals for ameliorating distress.

14. The obverse is as important. We do not reduce the therapeutic process to politics, and do not inject our understanding of what it means to be communist, for example, into the clinic. The therapeutic space, which is private, is a problem insofar as it is privatising, but it is also a secure contained space. It is refuge from demands made by capital, and from political demands of any kind, whether reactionary or ostensibly 'radical'.

Organisation: Collectivising work through networks

15. The Red Clinic is committed to the collectivising of experience, of those directly involved and those we work with. That means building a 'critical mass' of practitioners and activists. We need to think therapeutically and politically about what the boundaries are between the inside and outside of the clinic and between therapists and clients. A critical mass includes different kinds of critical mass engaged in different kinds of task, organising and linking and learning from each kind of practice.

16. Organisational work involves education and the integration of what we learn into the development of the clinic. The monthly online panel events organised through the Learning Cooperative need to be organically linked to reading and discussion groups. There needs to be an accumulating corpus of material, resources for those joining us to read and discuss. This is part of the historical memory of the project as part of the longer history of communist therapeutic practice.

17. We can build a 'service' and that will at some point need a material base, but we are also a network. We need to be able to build different kinds of network that are appropriate to the different kinds of work we do. This needs to be formulated in such a way that it is open to change. The development of the network or networks should have the potential to challenge and go beyond their assigned place and transform what is expected of them. Local initiatives and autonomous groups are part of this process.

18. At the same time, dialectically linked to the locally-grounded initiatives and a crucial aspect of the communist nature of the project, is that it is internationalist.

Our internationalism means that we think of ourselves in relation to global struggles, open to a collective dimension of our work that is as important as the historical dimension. This is facilitated by online work, but that online communication has its own limitations. How we are concretely practically 'internationalist' is a recurring question for us.

Practice: What we can realistically provide now

19. We are linking in practice with existing initiatives, and working towards the development of online forums and exchanges. These are overlapping networks that we want to support and that we want to feed into our own work. This means working out with these other initiatives in different parts of the world what is specific about them, and what differences we enable in order to maintain ourselves and offer something distinctive to them.

20. We are giving support as well as supervision and providing psychotherapy. The work of the Arabic-speaking groups we set up in Palestine, for example, has posed questions about what it is to work under occupation and what we can do practically to support therapists who are engaging in radical work. We will be collectivising that experience and conceptualising it, making it available while maintaining the safety and security of our colleagues.

21. We can provide support for radical therapists and trainees as a network, a space to think through contradictions in theory and practice. We break the isolation and privatisation of distress and therapeutic experience, primarily focusing now on what we can actually do; that is, we cannot pretend to bring therapy to the people. We can operate as a relay point through which others can, in a minimal way, offer therapy in a radical way and challenge their own institutions, at least survive inside them.

22. This provides the potential basis, one that is not immediately available while we build a critical mass of practitioners and activists, for formulating what we could offer to activist organisations such as political campaigns and trades unions. We are starting to formulate this, but functioning as a support base for those who are already part of collective communist activity inside and outside of the domain of the clinic.

4. SCULPTING LIBERATION: TALES OF MARCO CAVALLO AND THE JENIN BATTLE HORSE

by Samah Jabr, coordinator of mental health services in the West Bank and Gaza

Within the tales of resilience and resistance, many remarkable symbols have emerged; to me, two of these symbols have been statues of horses—one sculpture named Marco Cavallo and the other known as Al-Hissan, the Jenin Battle Horse. Their stories weave together the threads of art, symbolism, and an intricate mix of social and political factors shaping mental health. The tales of these two statues offer profound insights into the universal human need for expression and the unique challenges faced by people living under oppression.

Imagine yourself within the walls of Trieste's San Giovanni asylum, where the sculpture called Marco Cavallo stands tall, a beacon of hope amid adversity. Born in 1973 through the collaborative efforts of patients, artists, and staff, this majestic blue horse symbolizes the transformative journey of deinstitutionalization that swept through Italy's psychiatric services. Under the guidance of the visionary Franco Basaglia, the asylum's director, the Marco Cavallo statue became more than just a sculpture; it became a testament to the healing power of art and community within mental healthcare. Named after its equine predecessor, Marco the horse, this sculpture embodies the longing for freedom and dignity within the confines of the asylum, marking a profound shift towards reconnecting the domain of the asylum with the outside world.

Now, shift your gaze to the ravaged streets of Jenin, where the Palestinian community witnessed the birth of another symbol: the Jenin Battle Horse. Standing tall amidst the debris of conflict, this sixteen-foot sculpture, crafted from the metal remnants of ambulances, became a beacon of resilience and defiance. Designed by the German artist Thomas Kilpper in collaboration with the children of Jenin—children who bore witness to the horrors of the 2002 massacre—Al-Hissan embodied the capacity of the human spirit's ability to rise above tragedy. Yet, in a cruel twist of fate, the Israeli military targeted this symbolic horse, seeking to erase not only its physical presence but also the memory of Palestinian strength and identity that this work of art represented. The statue was destroyed.

The contrasting fates of Marco Cavallo and Al-Hissan highlight the struggles faced by Palestinians as they grapple with loss and oppression. While Marco Cavallo symbolizes liberation within the asylum's walls, Al-Hissan's destruction reflects the ongoing battle against settler violence and the Israeli attempt to erase Palestinian history and identity.

Symbols hold a deep psychological significance, especially in the face of adversity. They become vessels for suppressed narratives and assertions of identity, serving as powerful forms of resistance against erasure. In Palestine, where political factors heavily influence mental health, art and symbolism emerge as vital tools for expression and healing, calling for culturally sensitive and contextually relevant interventions.

From a human perspective, both Marco Cavallo and Al-Hissan are vehicles for the innate human need for symbolism and collective memory in times of trauma. While Marco Cavallo signifies progress and empowerment in mental healthcare, Al-Hissan's destruction reflects the ongoing trauma endured by Palestinian communities.

Yet a symbol cannot be exterminated. The stories of Marco Cavallo and the Jenin Battle Horse offer profound insights into the resilience of the human spirit and the power of collective memory. They remind us of the critical role symbols play in mental health and highlight the urgent need for comprehensive support of communities affected by conflict and oppression. As we reflect on their tales, we are reminded of the enduring significance of symbols in the fight for freedom and justice, and the profound impact they hold for oppressed communities worldwide.

5. THE ANALYTICAL ACT IN TIMES OF CONFLICT

by Mariela Rodríguez, member of the World Association of Psychoanalysis and Faculty of Psychology, University of Havana

I was born in a country that embarked on a transformative utopia, and I am grateful for the social opportunities it has provided to many, including myself. But it has also been part of a political conflict with the empire, resulting in more than 60 years of constant embargo. To sustain the political system, there was intense ideological struggle aimed at persuading, convincing, and fostering uncritical political support, with no democratic space for dissent.

In this context, I had the opportunity to study psychology and to encounter psychoanalysis until finally training as a psychoanalyst, within an international association. Psychoanalysis, as an "action that allows treating the real through the symbolic," differs from other treatments, according to Lacan, such as the discourse of the master, the university, the hysteric, science, and capitalism. Each of these discourses works as an order "for all", segregating and seeking to eliminate, as the only solution, what doesn't work, turning it into a symptom. Conversely, psychoanalysis starts from what is wrong and builds the analytical symptom eliciting a process that leads to consensus and adjusts the symptom within the singularity (uniqueness) of each individual.

Whenever there is a suffering subject, psychoanalysis can be applied, among others. Offering an encounter with an embodied person that speaks and provides a space for free speaking, can contribute to changing the unique subjective position in the face of war, conflict, the environment. Therefore, one can clarify their subjective position and the foundations of making one choice or another. Why the nightmares? Why do I fight? Why I don't want to fight? Why do I suffer? We are oriented by the symptom as the most subversive truth of each one, their solution, their resistance to our time's imperatives. At this point, psychoanalysis commits to a reduction of the excessive pain and to everyone's encounter with their own modalities of love, enjoyment, creation, life.

But this might be in conflict with what a group, the community, or the country needs, for example, to make the other an "enemy", *to postpone one's dreams, to resist and fight etc.* The psychologist can be there to convince, suggest, persuade and

contribute to “everyone’s struggle”, including the one for mental health. This is the first discussion between professionals, which involves the clarification of one’s subjective position in front of a conflict, understanding and sensing personal reasons, in order to feel part of and invited to participate in one way or another. It might be necessary for professionals to interpret in their own therapy their subjective relationship with war, with conflict, or with whatever other name we want to give to it. It is about creating the conditions for participation, while recognizing one’s own subjective position and responsibility.

The analyst’s desire is not the desire of a subject fixed on the fantasy that sustains it, alienated from their identifications, unaware of their modes of enjoyment, who hides and avoids the encounter with their own void. When these factors interfere, they generate a resistance that the analysts brings into their practice. Control (as in supervision), analysis, and scholarly tools are necessary for political reorientation, when this is the case.

The analyst’s desire in general politics

Politics, in general, is based on Lacan’s conception of the unconscious as transindividual, which allows us to indicate the horizon of the subjectivity of a given time and social structure.

“Psychoanalysis connects with freedom of expression and pluralism (...) it is not revolutionary, but it is subversive, (..), that is, it goes against identifications, ideals, and key words”¹

In general, it is thanks to political orientation that it becomes possible to interrogate political events with the tools of psychoanalytic discourse. This requires not only the analyst’s desire to train, but also the desire to “read” the small details and subtle changes in society and in our cases. This way, without placing oneself at either extreme of identifications, without entering into the struggle of so many contemporary -isms, it will be possible to make space for what is singular and to transmit what is possible from what psychoanalysis teaches.

¹ Miller, J.-A. (26 de Abril de 2012). *El psicoanálisis es el reverso de la política*. Obtenido de Pagina 12: <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/psicologia/9-192679-2012-04-26.html>

Psychoanalysis, as the reverse discourse of biopolitics, is a "powerful tool" that allows the questioning of discourses, bodies, their enjoyment, and their delirious potentialities "to be shared by as many subjects of the political body as possible" therefore, aiming for a conversation with whom decides, with other discourses.

Hence, the attempt for a 'good-talk', which provokes a transference towards psychoanalysis. In order for this to be established, preliminary work is necessary, in which, perhaps, the desire of the analyst must be engaged in our context. The analytic act, according to Lacan, is that which is felt by the effects of our interventions under transference (analytic and by work). The effects can be read from the goal that is politically pursued and that drives the direction of the experience. These aims change over the course of history, but retain an ethical essence insofar as the aim is for each person to consent to a possible way of desiring based on the modes of satisfaction and solutions they have designed into their existence. Ethics that passes through understanding that there is no such thing as THE solution, the relationship, happiness, health, peace, the ideal life; but there are possible ways of assuming, subjectifying, bordering on the impossible.

Up to this point, it is possible to deduce the reasons why psychoanalysis has ceased to take place in the 'revolutionary' city. This has not prevented the resistance of the symptom nor the determined desire of those who practice psychoanalysis. Is it political struggle? I believe that in my case it is political to give space to free-association of those who consult me and to find ways of reading the expression of the social context and its ways of creating symptoms, to 'talk' about them. Perhaps this is a good way of networking, the meeting of different ways of doing things, according to each person's possibilities and preferences.

6. THE VOICE OF THE NATIVE PEOPLE

by Graciela Painelaf, *Lawentuchefe of the Nahuelpan lof*, an expert on plants and other forces and energies of nature that help restore lost balance in Mapuche territory

I am Graciela Painelaf, *lawuentuchefe*, traditional connoisseur of plants and other elements and forces of nature of the *wall mapu*, Mapuche territory. It is a role that involves helping to restore the lost balance in people who come to this ancestral medicine. Currently there are many *lawuentuchefe*, *machi* " traditional doctor who sees, in an holistic way to people, family and community and takes into account all the bodies, physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, almico, cosmic, etheric. Ngutramchefe, bonesetter, *puñeñelchefe*, midwives... We help Mapuche and non Mapuche people since we coexist in the same territory, the same as the plants, which are used today; native and exotic plants or introduced after the Conquest of the territories.

I belong to a family descent to the Nahuelpan lof and currently live in the Andean Region, in Chubut, province of Patagonia, in Puel mapu (Argentina).

Considering the ancestral territory and the Andes Mountains, it would be to the east of it, in Puel mapu.

The effects of individual and collective ecological, colonial, historical and political trauma lead us to analyse that we are the great-grandchildren of the Desert Campaign, which were genocidal military operations aimed at exterminating us as a Nation People and which are still being claimed by the States on both sides of the mountain range in Chile and Argentina - Ngulu mapu and Puel mapu.

Collectively we are living the consequences and the direct effects, with the persecution, death, imprisonment, harassment, assemblies, judicialization of the protests in defense of the territory, for example, the Mapuche political prisoner Lonko Facundo Jones Wala and in recent times, other *weichafe*, warriors, fighters who have been imprisoned for usurpation when recovering ancestral territory in Patagonia. Women prisoners on both sides of the mountain range, *lamngen Machi* and other women who have returned to the territory, women and men who gave their lives, who were killed by the genocidal state, such as the *wuenuy* Santiago Maldonado yem, the *weichafe lamngen* Rafael Nahuel yem, the *lamngen weichafe* Elias Garay yem, *lamngen weichafe* Matias Catrileo yem, *weichafe lamngen*

Macarena Valdez yem and many others throughout the ancestral territory today Argentina and Chile.

Currently, not only the native peoples but also persecution of the oppressed society defending the territories, since people like Benetton has appropriated in Patagonia more than a million hectares, Joe Lewis etc. and it is necessary to defend against the illegal sale of territory, defense against mining extractivism, hydroelectric, hydrocarbons, privatization of water etc

We, as native peoples are the ones who work for them, the ones who sustain their wealth and privileges, we are the workers, the laborers in the fields, the "delinquents", our women are the ones who clean their houses and that is well known, for all this is why we decided to reveal ourselves

It has been 200 years since our people revealed themselves, that is why we are here today and we continue to defend the Petu Mongeleyñ territory.

Ecological traumas are being experienced on a planetary level and it is nothing more than the consequences of capitalism, extractivism, pollution, lack of water, the appropriation of ancestral knowledge.

We, the native peoples, have taken care of our territories for thousands of years and have related in harmony in *kume mongen*, in the good living

The native peoples have taken care of the territories for thousands of years and related in harmony in *kume mongen*, in the good living with the other existing beings, plants, animals, forces of nature... and the dominant society knows it and recognizes it. For example, in times of fires of millenary ancestral forests with species of great importance or forestations, they ask the Mapuche people to make their ceremonies to ask for rain, but we no longer want that kind of utilitarian relationship.

We are demanding respect, consideration, individual and collective recognition, because we are recovering our dignity and we know that our ancestors have taken care of the planet and that today we have the opportunity to contribute that *kimun*, that wisdom and this is a collective process, to return to the Mapu, to the land, which is what really does good and to the beliefs that have sustained us. *Wuiñoleyñ tayñ kimun, wuiñoleyñ taiñ feyentum, wiñoleyñ tayñ mapuzungun mew.* We are returning to the ancient knowledge, to our values, to our beliefs, to the language of the land... that is what gives us *kume Newen*, strength, energy.

We have been between 139 and 146 years of "conquest" and those effects are recent, they are from the experiences of our grandparents and great-grandparents and we also inherited that emotional body and the Mapuche people continue to resist, in everything, In returning to the territories that have been usurped, stolen by the rich of the world, multinationals like Bennett and the Qataris who are the ones who have money...

It is no coincidence that since the formation of the states, the native peoples have been present, the May Revolution in 1810, the independence of the countries in the years 1816, and so more recently March 24, which is celebrated the day of memory for truth and justice for the disappeared victims of the last military dictatorship (1976 - 1983), the Malvinas Islands war, many of those soldiers are survivors of the war are men of the communities of native peoples, today with 60 years of age and with the aftermath of the war).

The forms of self-management is to maintain and recover the identity, spirituality, concepts and experiences in families and community. The *Ngulam*, the advice of parents, grandparents, the *Ngutram*, the deep conversations, the *epew*, ancient stories that teach how life began, transmit the values of existence, how to respect the territorial spaces... Thousands of years the native peoples have lived in harmony with nature and in these 146 years, many circumstances have changed and today we live the consequences of that memory of pain, extermination, dispossession and persecution. Also of harassment.

Returning to the ceremonies, of cycle changes as the *wuiñoy tripantu*, winter solstice, the *ngillatun*, collective ceremonies, returning to the *lawuentuwun*, the ancestral medicine, to the agreements of Reñma of the families, to ceremonies of first menstruation of women, which is the *katan kawin*, revaluing the words that also heal and teach.

We continue with the ancestral force, decolonizing the thought, the medicine.... preserving our *Kimun* (wisdom), our *rakizuam* (thought) exercising the art, culture, *mapuzungun*, movement of recovery and revitalization, of that knowledge, elaborating of this knowledge, making our own medicines, cultivating the land, supporting recovery processes, providing tools for the treatment of wounds, physical and also mental and spiritual injuries, and in this context new authorities such as *machi* (traditional doctors), *lawuentuchefe*, *longko*, *ngenpin* who are the guardians of the history of our nation and the re-establishment of relations

between the communities, have also arisen. Concrete support, accompaniment in the various problems that beset us today.

I believe that today we, the native peoples, are the guardians of the land, those who for generations have assumed the protection of the territories of the Mapu. And that is why it is also important to participate in support networks.

Amulepe tayñ weichan

Amulepe tayñ kimun

Amulepe tayñ feyentun

May it continue...may our struggle continue, our wisdom and our values and beliefs....

Fey kay muten... this is as far as I can speak.

7. THE EXPERIENCE OF COMITÉ CEREZO, MEXICO

Solidarity and volunteer organisation dedicated to the defence and promotion of the human rights of the victims of political repression in Mexico, with a civil, autonomous, secular and independent character.

First of all, we would like to thank Brigata Basaglia for inviting us to this important event to share with you our experiences and learn from yours.

We claim it is important because usually the repressors and genocidaires of the people do transmit their experiences of how to destroy the organised people, and it is the organised people who for various reasons often do not learn from their own experiences and sometimes we think we are the centre of the world or that our experience of struggle is unique, when perhaps there are many experiences from which we can learn. We renew our thanks for the invitation.

I am Alejandro Cerezo Contreras, current coordinator of the psychosocial area of the human rights organisation Comité Cerezo México, and I was a politica prisoner of conscience from 2001 to 2005. The Comité Cerezo México arose as a result of the imprisonment and torture of three students in 2001, Alejandro, Héctor and Antonio, as well as Mr. Pablo Alvarado, all four were held in maximum security prisons and accused of belonging to Mexican revolutionary organisations. None of the three brothers and the co-accused participated in any revolutionary organization; we were three students who were sensitive to and in solidarity with social injustices.

From the beginning, the Comité Cerezo México considered mental health to be a fundamental element to strengthen the mental health of the three imprisoned brothers and the co-defendant. The Committee began with letter-writing campaigns and the struggle to be allowed to have reading materials in prison, which allowed the 19, 21, and 23-year-olds and the co-defendant to be permanently linked to the struggle for their freedom on the outside. Meanwhile on the outside, the members of the Committee began to be victims of political repression by the Mexican state, through death threats, surveillance and harassment. Both the prisoners of conscience and their families and friends organised abroad for their freedom were victims of a very strong process of

criminalisation. Faced with this scenario, it was also decided to reinforce the mental health of the people who were fighting. It is worth mentioning that Emiliana Cerezo, the sister of the prisoners who fought for their freedom, is a psychiatrist and this also allowed her to contribute various elements to the struggle for the freedom of the prisoners and to give due importance to the mental health of those of us who were fighting.

As a result of the work of the Comité Cerezo México with political prisoners, prisoners of conscience and prisoners associated with political motives, in 2005, indigenous people accused of belonging to a guerrilla movement were treated, tortured during their detention, later forcibly disappeared and reappeared in a maximum security prison. Older people who were members of armed revolutionary movements in their youth and who suffered torture were also treated.

In 2008, given the increase in the war against the people disguised as a war against drugs, a strategy that implemented terror against the general population through extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances and political imprisonment, the Committee together with other organisations launched the Seminar on Psychosocial Accompaniment as an effort to disseminate mental health as a right and to promote the psychosocial approach that accompanies the people who struggle and who are part of this subversion of the prevailing society. That year, together with other organisations, we produced a report on the psychosocial impacts of the prisoners and their families in San Salvador Atenco, a town where there was a struggle for land and against the construction of an airport, which was repressed in 2006.

In 2010, given the increase in state violence and the use of terror to control the population, we developed a workshop on the psychosocial impacts of political repression and coping mechanisms. The aim of this workshop is to understand mental health as a human right, to understand why political repression occurs, what effects and consequences it has at the individual-family, organisation-community and social levels, and finally, what positive coping mechanisms (that strengthen our conviction to fight and our mental state to continue fighting) and negative mechanisms exist and can be developed.

We have carried out accompaniment and interventions in communities or entire villages, which are organised and fighting for socialism. These communities live the counter-insurgency war every day. The specificity of these villages is that they

are all organisations, there is no difference between the village and the organisation of which they are part. There, eight days of continuous mental health interventions were carried out and they went through general medicine to rule out a series of symptoms due more to poverty or lack of health in general than to the repression.

The Comité Cerezo México is an organisation that has received more than 18 death threats in its 23 years of work, that continues to be the victim of stigmatisation and criminalisation by the state, and also by some pseudo left-wing organisations that reproduce the sayings of the Mexican state.

As an organisation, we currently have general human rights schools based on the legal-historical conception of human rights, which is, basically and in synthesis, the one that says that human rights are the result of organised peoples who manage to wrest those rights from the exploiters by means of protest. These schools are held in 5 states out of the 31 that make up Mexico. We also develop schools for popular human rights educators, in which we learn to replicate the workshops that we learn in the general schools. We also have a 10-session course on Marxist psychology, in an attempt to revive Marxist psychology, which is very little known and which, unfortunately, due to the fall of the so-called socialist bloc, many psychologists have been ideologically defeated and prefer not to use the concept of Marxist psychology, but other concepts for fear of being rejected by the community of psychologists.

Another theoretical and practical source that we have taken up is the liberation psychology that was developed in Latin America, as well as conceptualisations and clinical practices developed in times of dictatorships, where several mental health professionals had to face in practice the effects of political repression, counterinsurgency warfare and various mechanisms of social control.

We hope that this brief description of what we do will open up feedback, questions and comments on our practice and will help us all to enrich ourselves and continue in our struggle for a dignified life.

8. OSTULA'S FIGHTING SPIRIT

by Pedro Mercado and Beto Paredes, Municipal Council of Santa María Ostula, an organisation located in Michoacán and founded on self-defence and independence

Pedro: Good evening, my name is Pedro Mercado, I am from the community of Santa María Ostula, on the Costa-Sierra of the state of Michoacán, our sea is the Pacific Ocean and we border with the most remote mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental. I am a member of the City Council and the Communication Commission.

15 years ago, on 29 June 2009, our community reclaimed land that had been invaded by people from a neighbouring town, people who belonged to the political party that dominated the region, the state and the country: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI); and they were also part of the criminal organisation called the Knights Templar.

After reclaiming the 1,250 hectares, our enemies' response was a very violent offensive. They invaded our community, infiltrated our Community Guard, a security institution dating back to the 17th century, and also started killing and disappearing those actively involved in the organisation of this land recovery. We lost 36 community members, including a minor who was not responsible for anything, her death was a revenge.

Five other community members are missing. So far, there has been no justice for any of the families or the community. Instead, there is an agrarian process that seeks to give ownership titles to those who invaded and used our land to traffic drugs from Colombia.

But they have not been able to break Ostula's strong fighting spirit. We have recovered and managed to rebuild life, and from 2014 until today we have fought daily for peace and calm in our community. We have rebuilt the Municipal Guard, we have regained control of our territory, and where boats loaded with drugs used to arrive, today there are schools, houses, clean beaches and fields where corn, hibiscus, sesame, papaya and tamarind are grown. Where once there were death projects, now there are children playing and studying freely.

However, criminal power has also been rebuilt, and in recent years, a new criminal organisation has appeared that has intensified attempts by companies and governments to expropriate our territory. Such is the ambition for our land that they

have once again allocated work, money and weapons in an attempt to finish us off. In 2022 they killed more comrades, four members of our community. And this year, they attacked the community and burnt down a house.

Beto: Good evening, my name is Heriberto Paredes, I am a freelance journalist and photographer. I have accompanied the community since the reclamation of the land and since then I have documented every process the community has carried out to ensure a full and free life for all the people living in its territory.

It has been very complicated for the community, and with this I want to address the question of the effects on mental health and how one assimilates each loss, while defending against various negative interests.

It seems that two rhythms coexist day after day: on one hand, there is the time of tranquillity where one can sow, reap, think about religious festivals, family celebrations, the tourism that arrives on the beaches; on the other hand, there is the rhythm of tension, uncertainty, and the fear that there will be another great offensive against Ostula and that everything will end in an unimaginable and endless tragedy.

The families of each of the murdered and desaparecidos have not had the opportunity to rest, to process their loss, let alone to grieve properly. The wounds remain open and every time they face what happened to their relatives, it feels as if it happened yesterday.

Of course, some perpetrators, i.e. state and government representatives, offered no semblance of therapeutic support or law enforcement to obtain justice. On the contrary, every interaction with officials and politicians led to further revictimization. Their contempt for the community is as great as their ambition.

With much effort and care, since 2018, when calm was prevailing, a group of trusted therapists and I have tried to work with this pain and emptiness, aiming to transform it into learning that would not hurt but strengthen awareness. Through cultural activities, individual and group therapies, some progress was made, but it was not enough and needs to be taken up again.

Pedro: Personally, as a member of the community, I had to experience very difficult moments. I had to recognise the bodies of my friends and fellow fighters. I have seen the pain of their families and the pain we also carry in the community. We do

not want this struggle to make us seen as victims, but as people who have the right to a free and dignified life, fully utilising and protecting our territory. We want to live in peace even if it costs us a lot of work to heal our wounds.

Sometimes we do not sleep, we do not eat well, we have anxiety attacks, a lot of fear, depression, illnesses that we believe are caused by the violence against us. We appeal for solidarity hoping to set up a team of specialists to resume therapeutic work and achieve good communitarian mental health. That is, not just in families or individually, but one that allows our community to flourish and to be recognised as the paradise that it is.

Beto: What Pedro is talking about is the fundamental goal: to achieve a communitarian mental health that allows us to understand fully the origin of violence, its forms and the ways in which Ostula can deal with it, because everything seems to indicate that in the long term there will be other attempts to appropriate the wealth of the community. This approach is often not taken into account or is left on the background, but the community wants to change this and prioritise an individual and collective healing process.

Thank you very much.