

FERENCZI AS SOCIAL TRAUMA THINKER (*)

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In the 21st century, the notion of trauma is so commonly used that one can speak of a culture of trauma. Today, a wide variety of people claim victimhood, pointing to their traumas as validation. Fassin and Rechtman denounce the way in which recognition strategies make use of the identity of victim to justify compensation policies and financial reparations. This paper presents Sandor Ferenczi's contributions on trauma, showing how his theory takes into consideration relational and political aspects that were underemphasized by Freud. When Ferenczi is compared to contemporary recognition thinkers (such as Honneth, Fraser and Butler), one can see that what is at stake in his theory is neither identity nor victimization. It is deeper: Ferenczi shows the importance of the vulnerable dimension in all of us, suggesting that recognizing mutual vulnerability is a basis of the sense of connectedness and solidarity with the other.

KEY WORDS: culture of trauma; disavowal; victimization; recognition; mutual vulnerability; Ferenczi.

RESUMEN:

En el siglo XXI, la noción de trauma es tan comúnmente utilizada que se puede hablar de una cultura del trauma. Hoy en día, una amplia variedad de personas reclaman victimización, señalando sus traumas como validación. Fassin y Rechtman denuncian la forma en que las estrategias de reconocimiento utilizan la 'identidad de víctima' para justificar políticas de compensación y reparaciones financieras. Este documento presenta las contribuciones de Sándor Ferenczi sobre el trauma, mostrando cómo su teoría tiene en cuenta aspectos relacionales y políticos que fueron subestimados por Freud. Cuando se compara a Ferenczi con pensadores contemporáneos del reconocimiento (como Honneth, Fraser y Butler), se puede ver que lo que está en juego en su teoría no es ni la identidad ni la victimización. Es más profundo: Ferenczi muestra la importancia de la dimensión vulnerable en todos nosotros, sugiriendo que reconocer la vulnerabilidad mutua es la base del sentido de conexión y solidaridad con el otro.

Palabras claves: cultura del trauma; desmentida; victimización; reconocimiento; vulnerabilidad mutua; Ferenczi.

A form of psychic suffering is currently being discussed on a wider scale: traumatic suffering. Problems as diverse as the abuse imposed on women and children and those concerned with migrants and refugees, and problems of racism and genocide, are turning trauma into an issue that extends to the collective and social fields. Fassin and Rechtman wrote an interesting book on this phenomenon called *The Empire of Trauma* (2007). They hold that trauma might be the signifier that best expresses the zeitgeist of our times, and that best indicates our particular worries, values and expectations. But they also denounce the way in which trauma has become big business, mobilizing a wide range of professionals as well as judicial and political interests: psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, sociologists, and educators. The importance given to trauma has led to the advent of a new identity, a central figure for anyone who hopes to understand contemporary societies: the figure of the victim. Today, a wide variety of people make claims to victimhood, pointing to their trauma as an argument. Those who suffer accidents at work use the idea of trauma to claim damages from insurance companies; refugees justify their need for shelter by appealing to trauma; those who seek political asylum appeal to trauma to gain recognition for the persecution they have suffered. This

entire complex has produced and been further stoked by a new nosological category, PostTraumatic Stress Disorder. In summary, for Fassin and Rechtman, traumatic victimization has become the great identity product of our time. It is what justifies compensation policies and financial reparations.

Faced with these circumstances, what can psychoanalysis do? We know that psychoanalysis participated actively in giving prominence to trauma at the beginning of the twentieth century. Freud postulated an unconscious psychic reality based on hysterical trauma. One hundred years later, what can psychoanalysis say about trauma when faced with this new identity—that of the victim—and these attempts at reparation?

Freud's thinking is always a starting point for studies of trauma. However, we can recognize Ferenczi as being the greatest thinker of trauma and catastrophe within the field of psychoanalysis when we reflect on political and social aspects that are not so deeply stressed by Freud. In fact, the Ferenczian theory of trauma is much more complex than the Freudian one. For Freud, trauma refers to an event that exceeds the capacity of a given psychic apparatus; in other words, it is an economic disorder—an imbalance with excessive stimulus overwhelming the ego's ability—that establishes itself between an individual's psychic capacity and the stimuli to which that individual is subjected. For Ferenczi, on the other hand, trauma involves an entire complex of relations. A traumatic situation does not simply result from economic disturbances; it is always based on relationships. As such, questions relating to power and to modes of affecting and being affected are invariably present. Much more than psychic imbalance is at play, including relations of power, dependency, devaluation, and disrespect. In other words, political relations are at play, since affects like humiliation, contempt, and shame can, as proposed by Homi Bhabha (1994), be considered political affects. If, as Paul Ricoeur affirms, politics refers to all forms of relations that make up “an art of living together” (Ricoeur, 1993, p. 10), we can say that Ferenczi introduces social and political dimensions to discussions of trauma.

The emblematic situation to which Ferenczi refers (1933) to explain his theory of trauma—involving a child, an abusive adult, and another adult whom the child seeks out in order to explain what has taken place—is an excellent example of his preoccupation with relations of power. An excessive experience is not necessarily traumatic: it only becomes so when the report, the suffering, and the perception of whoever lived through it are not recognized by someone stronger and more powerful—an experience that Ferenczi labeled with the German word *Verleugnung* (Ferenczi, 1931, p. 285). Due to this, the sufferer feels as if he has no way out. In translating *Verleugnung* into English, I prefer “disavowal” to “denial”. “Denial” refers to a logical negation while “disavowal” is a relational form in which someone de-authorizes a person under his influence. Hence, *disavowal* indicates the existence of a relation of power, better expressing the political side of the experience, and it is more useful than *denial* to refer to an interpersonal sense as opposed to an intrapsychic one.

Currently, “disavowal” has been the object of much discussion in the *strictu sensu* political sphere, even when it is not called by this name. In contemporary political discussions, “disavowal” appears as its opposite: “recognition”. It is a theme that has existed in political philosophy for at least two centuries. John Adams, the second president of the US, quoted to have said that *every individual is strongly moved by a desire to be seen, heard, talked of, approved, and respected by the people around him* (Adams, 1851). In our own terms, we might say: every individual possesses a vital necessity to be made legitimate in his way of living, and it is this vital necessity that is found at the core of contemporary political claims. This is the claim made by ethnic minorities, people who do not make heteronormative sexual choices, and groups that desire to maintain their specific culture and to have it respected within the context of a dominant culture. In other words, they want to be recognized, authorized as legitimate subjects with their own sensibilities, their own tastes, and their own forms of life, denouncing situations in which this does not occur. This means that the non-recognition of a subject is not a private issue, but rather a problem for the public sphere. For this reason, the so-called *politics of recognition* bring the themes of trauma and victimhood to the center of the political discussions. In this sense, *recognition* can be seen as is the opposite of *disavowal*, which refers to the non-validation of someone's perceptions and affect.

The works of Axel Honneth (1992), a philosopher from the contemporary Frankfurt School, develop along these lines, although he refers to Winnicott and not to Ferenczi. Honneth approaches the problem of recognition through situations in which it fails; he works with what he calls forms of *refusal of recognition* (Honneth, 1992). In these forms of refusal, inflicting physical harm is not the main issue; the point is the violation of the integrity of a human being as someone who needs approval and recognition. Recognition, for Honneth, is fundamental to the construction of identity, because he sees all identity as being constructed in an intersubjective way.

For Honneth, there are three levels of recognition corresponding to one of three forms of refusal. The first is the sphere of love, experienced in primary relations, and its absence is felt as a violation. The second is judicial recognition, and its refusal consists of denying someone's fundamental rights. Finally, the third level is social esteem or solidarity, in which refusal is experienced as an offense to one's way of living. Through those three levels of recognition, Honneth admits to a continuity across the affective, social, judicial, and political fields. Primary recognition is always affective: it is derived from the field of love, or, more specifically, from a loving relationship with one's mother, which becomes the necessary condition of all subjective constitutions. To reinforce his idea, Honneth searches for support in Winnicott, a psychoanalyst interested in primary affective bonds between a mother and her baby. However, I believe that Winnicott's horizon is wider than the treatment Honneth affords him (Honneth, 1992). Winnicott (1967) refers to a primary recognition in the mother's gaze. This is not the recognition of someone who is; instead, it is the recognition of someone's subjective potential. What a mother recognizes is not her child's identity, but rather the singularity of her child's promise.

Nancy Fraser, another important theoretician of recognition, severely criticizes Honneth, alleging that he is imprisoned in an identity-based paradigm of recognition. According to Fraser, Honneth's thinking can give way to a belief in authentic and essential identities, thereby favoring the production of social ghettos (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). We can add to Fraser's critique by pointing out that Honneth's theory goes together with the dissemination of the identity that characterizes our time: the victim identity.

In their book, Fassin and Rechtman (2007) also denounce the identitybased concept of recognition by showing the extent to which this conception fits with the current tendency of judicializing the condition of victimhood. In *L'Empire du Traumatisme* [Empire of Trauma], they show how politics of recognition, when articulated with identities, ultimately wind up promoting the ascension of a single identity—that of the victim—as the principal mode of subjectification of our times. For this reason, they say, we must exercise a certain caution with the theme of trauma and recognition in politics. The recognition of identities has been a central aim of the “politically correct,” and this defense of identity has favored policies that award damages to groups and individuals seen as victims. The problem of this tendency toward victimization—encouraged by the identity politics of recognition—is that it may fall back on a more subtle or sophisticated form of disavowal: by promoting financial reparations, they may deny injustice and violence, to the extent that these damages mollify collective guilt.

It is at this point that we must mark the specific contribution of Ferenczian analysis to the notion of social trauma. Although Ferenczi often emphasizes the condition of the victim, his ideas never permit this condition to be transformed into an identity, nor do they provide a psychological base for the judicialization of society. We will now see how, through Ferenczi's thinking, we can further develop a theory of recognition.

There is a moment in Ferenczi's work in which he proposes a further nuance for the comprehension of disavowal or non-recognition. In Hungary, when children, demonstrating pain or suffering, seek out an adult, looking for soothing, they are often met with the term “*katonadolog*” (literally, *soldiers can take it*). The equivalent expression in English, in this context, would be something like “Boys don't cry” or “You're too big for that.” By utilizing this “popular saying”, Ferenczi (1932a, p. 25) calls our attention to the way in which adults treat children's injuries as banal, whereas children experience them with great intensity. In this way, Ferenczi presents us with a nuanced understanding of the notion of disavowal: it is based on the adults' non-perception of the child's vulnerability to violent situations. Ferenczi writes on September 19th, 1932: “The Hungarian expression ‘*katonadolog*’, applied to children, demands of these children a degree

of heroism of which they are not yet capable” (Ferenczi, 1932b, p. 111). This implies a lack of concern with children’s fragility and tenderness (Ferenczi, 1933). Even if a violent act occurs, the adult refuses to recognize, but disavows what is precarious in the child. We can say that, for Ferenczi, what is significant is *not recognizing a child’s vulnerability*, not the child’s identity.

This vulnerability is not exclusive to the child, it is a vital part of all of us. It is important to emphasize that Ferenczi is not speaking of a helpless person, but instead of a vulnerable one. This implies thinking of an individual immersed in an environment, and perceiving the individual in his/her relationships. The notion of *helplessness* has constitutional, almost ontological weight (ultimately, a person is helpless, to the degree he lacks resources to deal with the magnitude of his drives), while the notion of vulnerability is entirely relational. If, for Freud, a person needs another because of his helpless constitution, Ferenczi sees the person as being vulnerable in relation to another (see: Borgogno and Vigna-Taglianti, 2008; Kilborne, 2014; Kelley-Laine’, 2015; Mucci, 2017). This implies recognizing ourselves and others as being vulnerable.

On this point, the ideas of Ferenczi, a crucially important first-generation psychoanalyst, concur with those of a contemporary philosopher, the queer theoretician Judith Butler. She also considers the question of recognition, but she diverges from Axel Honneth because she does not connect recognition to identity. Even if Butler considers identity-based demands as having a certain function in political struggles, she warns that these demands may promote situations of exclusion. This is why she insists on the political relevance of the act of refusing identity, which she calls “disidentification”. By *disidentification*, Butler means that we deconstruct the identities that are imposed on us, that oppress us, and that mask our vulnerability. She writes: “It is at a moment of fundamental vulnerability that recognition becomes possible” (Butler, 2004, p. 149).

Butler, like Ferenczi, links recognition and vulnerability. In her book, *Precarious Life* (2003), she proposes a new conception of politics based not on the law, the function of the Father, or the State, but rather on the vulnerability present in all of us. This is a lateral way of considering social bonds, and Butler believes that it has many advantages when compared to ties constructed hierarchically. One can kill in the name of a leader or an idea, but no one can kill by recognizing vulnerability. In fact, violence—whether physical or psychological—is always an attempt to negate both our own vulnerability and the vulnerability of others. The change of traditional forms of power and politics, and the recognition that we are all vulnerable, might re-articulate political coexistence in a more egalitarian and just manner.

For Butler, the major problem with contemporary politics is not the fact that some have more wealth or power than others, but the fact that some lives have their vulnerability protected, while others do not. She writes:

There are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be enough to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as “grievable” (Butler, 2003, p. 32).

However, she emphasizes that recognizing vulnerability has nothing to do with promoting identities. It is not a question of recognizing what someone *is*. What is important, in recognizing someone’s vulnerable condition, is protecting his/her possibility of becoming something that we do not yet know, and that even he/she does not know. This is the difference between Butler’s idea and the politics of recognition that are currently widely disseminated: for Butler, vulnerability is tied to potency, and not to victimization. “To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition of what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition a future, always in relation to the other” (Butler, 2003, p. 44). Could we not say the same about Ferenczi’s proposal?

Butler thinks that the task of contemporary social and political thinkers is to articulate this theory of primary vulnerability in relation to a theory of power and of recognition. We believe that, on this point, Ferenczi’s contributions are profoundly political and surprisingly contemporary. Ferenczi shows how

subjectivity can be constituted and transformed as much by recognition as by disavowal. He values the vulnerability in our core and believes that it can be the basis of trusting relationships in both clinical and political settings.

In clinical work this becomes very clear in Ferenczi's proposal to always analyze the vulnerable child that exists in the adult (Ferenczi, 1931). And how do we get to this child? Through the child that exists in the analyst. For Ferenczi, the analyst must give up the hierarchical position that *the subject is supposed to know* in order to risk placing himself in the same position as the patient. He writes in his *Diary* on March 13, 1932: "[Both the analyst and his patient] give the impression of two equally terrified children who compare their experiences, and because of their common fate understand each other completely" (Ferenczi, 1932a, p. 56). It is important to note that Ferenczi does not emphasize a common origin or a common belonging. The social bond valued by him, based on trust, is not derived from a Father who binds us together in brotherhood. Instead, he speaks of a common fate, what in social sciences we could call community of fate: a group of people without leaders or previous certainties who can discuss and construct their own destiny, exactly because they are all vulnerable and, to a certain extent, they are all orphans. Here, social bonds based on power and on phallic order lose ground to a solidarity based on dispossession.

This allows us to see how the protection of vulnerability is an ethical question, and how trauma is an inevitable consequence of this lack of care. This also let us understand that the necessity of recognition that Ferenczi puts into play is not a question of law or of rights. No type of financial compensation can repair this lack of care with vulnerability. It is a profound issue, alluding to something that underlies the legal and the judicial systems and is at the heart of the very idea of justice and injustice. It is a question of recognizing the vulnerable dimension in all of us. Ferenczi suggests that the basis of an enduring sense of connectedness and solidarity with the other is the recognition of mutual vulnerability. Further, to live freely—and at the same time belonging to others and be protected—we need to get in touch with our mutual vulnerabilities. The acknowledgement of vulnerability in the other and the need to protect it, is a profound Ferenczian contribution and could serve as our contemporary ideal of how individuals and collectives could view each other.

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