

# A Commentary on “Desubjectivation, Resubjectivation and Collective Resilience in Disasters Situation: The Exile of European and Jewish Populations of the Maghreb”

**Tomasella S\***

Founder of CERP, Psychoanalyst, France

\* **Corresponding author:** Saverio Tomasella, Founder and Manager, CERP, Psychoanalyst, France, E-mail: [saveriotomasella@gmail.com](mailto:saveriotomasella@gmail.com)

**Received date:** January 17, 2017; **Accepted date:** February 01, 2017; **Published date:** February 20, 2017

**Citation:** Tomasella S (2017) Desubjectivation, Resubjectivation and Collective Resilience in Disasters Situation: The Exile of European and Jewish Populations of the Maghreb. *Trauma Acute Care* 2: 34.

**Copyright:** © 2017 Tomasella S. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

## Abstract

Our present time is engrossed with the question of disasters. Whether natural disasters, human slaughters or terrorist attacks, such disasters challenge our ability both to confront, and respond to, them, both individually and collectively. In this context, the notion of trauma and, still more, the idea of "resilience" need to be supplemented and expanded, or even superseded. The disaster corresponds to a rupture of existential continuity for individuals, families, and communities. More than an amount of grief and trauma, it brings about a real overthrow leading to the desubjectivation of those facing it or those who were witnesses. After such an experience of the chaos, what are the possibilities of resubjectivation for the individual? What could be the forms of "collective resilience", considered as a set of processes to invent together, particularly through memory and solidarity?

**Keywords:** Disaster; Trauma; Exile; Subjectivity; Memory; Time; Metaphor; Transference; Colonization

## Commentary

On Friday, November 13, 2015, at about 9 pm, in Paris and Saint-Denis, six simultaneous attacks, carried out in forty-five minutes, left one hundred and thirty dead and more than four hundred and eighty wounded, ninety-nine in an extremely serious condition, designated as "absolute emergency". Witnesses speak of "horror scenes", "barbarism", "nightmare" and "hell", doctors of "war wounds", journalists of "carnage", and policies of "war". Some words very often return to the testimony of night and tomorrow: terror, sadness, terror, pain, anger, disgust, desolation, and so on [1]. A few months earlier, in early January 2015, a wave of terrorist attacks had already plunged the French capital into dismay, and again on July 14, 2016, a suicide truck killed more than eighty-six people in Nice, in an unnamed carnage.

Thus, in these recent years, it has been possible to observe a clear preponderance and a strong persistence of the disaster in

the social psychic climate. This phenomenon is intensifying and concerns as much the natural cataclysms as the human massacres. Among others, artists try to shape the chaotic intrusion of chaos into the routine of daily life and express the questions of a world that sometimes seems to drift away. Among them, the American photographer Steve McCurry was born in Philadelphia in 1950. Even more than the world of catastrophe, his photographs testify of a catastrophic world, through conflicts such as the war in Afghanistan or through the gradual disappearance of some cultures. McCurry chooses to adopt a specific point of view, very different from that of an outside observer: he looks at the scenes he photographs as if he were living them from within, leaving the spectator to participate in the event through a close human proximity.

Beyond these spectacular events, the French psychoanalyst Kaës sheds light in a very detailed and well-argued manner, in a work on the illness (evil-being, he says), how discomfort in culture has become painful, difficult to live and difficult to express. It even comes to be a "source of disagreement", thought disturbances, impressive paradoxes, uncontrolled violence, profoundly disturbing the very process of "subjectivation" (being/becoming subject). Kaës identifies a "permanent crisis of culture", which requires from each of us an "incessant work of culture against the onslaught of barbarism". Unpredictability and discontinuity make it difficult to invent together a common future and projects. The rapidity and magnitude of the changes that have taken place over the past two generations bring this experience to a massive trauma: "undecipherable, out-of-the-way experiences in which space and time landmarks have been disrupted" causing "feelings of helplessness" and "chaotic thinking". Kaës even observes "processes without subject" [2]. Thus, the question of subjectivation is at the heart of contemporary disorders and disagreements, accompanied by massive fear, avoidance and denial.

Kaës insists on the necessary deepening, development and reorganization of the psychoanalytic theory implied by these mutations of the contemporary world. In recent years, criticisms of psychoanalysis have also become attacks, sometimes of great virulence. "These attacks are provoked by the psychoanalytic societies themselves, especially the most powerful, and by their

purring speech”, acknowledges psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Nachin [3]. In fact, tending to focus on the meticulous study of sole psychic mechanisms, on punctilious pathological descriptions or on school disputes concerning the exegesis of such-and-such author, “research in psychoanalysis is absent from the study of collective phenomena and disasters”.

Moreover, many authors insist on the same necessity to open the field of psychoanalytic research and invite to renew it [4]. Faced with the world in crisis, it could first be to rediscover an inventive, non-idealized psychoanalysis, “descended from its pretensions and freed from its conceptual cults”. Indeed, let us not forget that, as early as 1891, Freud “vigorously rejects scientific reductionist tendencies”, placing importance on the memory and the speech of the subject. Moreover, the scope of the Freudian project also concerns, without restriction, “the psychic life and the libidinal economy of the instituted groups and the masses” [5].

Therefore, this academic research falls within this broad framework. Its aim is to explore the processes of “desubjectivation” induced by the occurrence of a catastrophe, then to identify what may be the modalities of a possible “resubjectivation”, and finally to question the possibilities of collective resilience. A question arises immediately regarding the disaster and what can help to define it. Our study tends to prove that the disaster differs from trauma, not only because it can be “poly-traumatic”. If traumatism refers to the psychic impact of a trauma, it is primarily a matter of individual psychology. On the other hand, the study of the disaster and its effects requires a collective approach. It is the same for the exile of the European and Jewish populations of North Africa during the decolonization of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria.

From the methodological point of view, we propose research paths, working hypotheses in a broad sense, because we know that our clinical method is not experimental - through protocols and validation tests - but rather a listening approach to the specificity of each subject and the respectful reception of his evolving discourse. In fact, we opt for non-directive clinical interviewing - in the form of testimony and life story-telling [6]. Concretely, we collected the life stories of fourteen witnesses over two generations, during long-lasting interviews (about three hours). The study of these long testimonies allowed us to discover a paradox concerning memory: on the one hand, the importance of the “good memories” of the existence shared with the close relations before the occurrence of the exile and, on the other hand, different ways of apprehending, or tame, the memory of the catastrophe itself, with a common trait concerning a modification of the relationship to time, as it is lived by the subject. This led us to talk about a kind of no man's time and to consider a transfer on memory.

We have been able to arrive at a first option concerning desubjectivation because of a disaster: it corresponds to the loss of the psychic base represented by the intimate relation of the subject to the lived time, as a continuum necessary to the processes of “introjection”, that is creation of the Self and psychological elaboration.

We wanted to better understand the question of exile, notably by questioning the idea of identity, starting with six complementary interviews, and then by confronting the testimonies of the exiles we listened with the detailed work of several psychoanalysts on the Armenian exile, relying on a narrative of the exodus. Then, we considered the singular way each witness tried to recover from the catastrophe, in its singular as well as plural aspects, not only the individual but also families and communities. Once again, we measured the liberating and therapeutic importance of life narrating, as well as the fundamental place of metaphorical capacity in the processes of resubjectivation or in the phenomena of collective resilience.

Moreover, we discovered, for an exiled person, a possibility of “hating their memory”. If the hated memory is denied (that of the disaster), this leads to a cleavage with the part of memory that is idealized (the memory of lost paradise), separating the catastrophic reality with the myth of an “ideology”, a personal or familial ideal legend. More detailed clinical studies, in various situations, could better define the metapsychology of what we call the “strangerization”: a psychological defence that tends to let the individual or its community believe that the disaster, yet existing, does not concern them.

It would be interesting to look at history before a disaster, for example by conducting a systematic study of the various traumas that have taken place in genealogy and their consequences on the family, making it more fragile, more receptive or even more threatened, during the occurrence of a new disaster. Similarly, any cataclysm is part of a catastrophic series that pre-exists, marking communal culture and collective representations.

At the end of this research, it seems that the war in Algeria and, more broadly, decolonization is not over. We can assume that this war continues otherwise through racism and nationalism on the one hand, through terrorism on the other, which is among other things, symptomatic manifestations of denials in History. Little has been said about the problem of colonization. At the end of our study, it appears to us as a central element in the violent and lasting disaster that decolonization has been on both sides. Clearly, to colonize a people, more than a land, consists in imposing on it a culture, a vision of the world, its own beliefs and the certainty that they are superior to those of “indigenous” culture. There is a form of imperialism that could equally well be called fanaticism, intellectual terrorism, often accompanied by a dogmatic and theoretical arsenal of arguments for colonization.

Undoubtedly, colonization is already devastation: new ideas, beliefs and customs are instilled. It is a negation of the subject: its desubjectivation passes through a forced acculturation. It is then possible to ask how the logic of colonization and the violence of its lasting implementation would not be responsible for the terrorism that has assailed the former colonizing countries for some years.

To temporarily close this research, we wish to leave the word to the Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi: “The tragedies we are living are common to us, so the answers can also be common”.

he said on 6<sup>th</sup> January 2016, on France Culture radio, by proposing poetry as a response to barbarism.

This commentary was prepared on Doctoral thesis defended in Paris on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2016 at the University of Paris-Denis Diderot (USPC) [7].

## Disclosure

This work received no financial support and author report no conflicts of interest.

## References

1. Liberation (2015) November 14.
2. Kaes R (2012) *Le Malêtre*. Paris: Dunod.
3. Tomasella S (2017) *Le syndrome de Calimero*. Paris: Albin Michel.
4. Rand N (2001) *Quelle psychanalyse pour demain?* Toulouse: Erès.
5. Douville O (2014) *Les figures de l'autre*. Paris: Dunod.
6. Butler J (2005) *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
7. Tomasella S (2016) *Désobjectivation, resubjectivation et résilience collective en situation de catastrophes : l'exil des populations européennes et juives du Maghreb lors de la décolonisation*. Paris: USPC.