

Reclaiming Words, Reclaiming Worlds

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Nearly ten years ago, while walking on a largely empty beach in an off-season Cancun, Mexico, I bumped into an old friend and colleague who was also on a holiday visit to that country. It was a purely chance encounter, a happenstance that left both of us surprised and overjoyed, for we had been quite good friends but hadn't seen each other in recent years. He was living-as he has lived all his life-in a country that had been immersed for the previous five years in state terrorism, under an extremely violent, repressive system that included total control of the media, arbitrary detention, torture, and disappearances, among other horrors.

We began to walk together on that deserted beach, recounting for each other's benefit our respective lives and miracles. After a little while, I asked him, "How much of a presence in your life is the political violence, the death squads?" Looking over his right shoulder, then his left, my friend glared at me intently, with surprise and reprobation, and said to me in a low voice: "We'd better not talk about that now." Rather amused, I told him, "Aw, c'mon, look around you, look where we are!" He answered with annoyance, "Later, later, not now."

It was clear to me that the actual context in which the conversation took place was not dangerous at all-there were no witnesses, we were far beyond anybody's ears, and, besides, our meeting was taking place in a democratic country. It was also clear to me that my friend's responses were evidence of a "portable reality" (a felicitous term coined by family therapist Donald A. Bloch), which contravened all that I knew to be true and in which the sensitive themes I had raised were perceived by him as too dangerous for discussion.

A few years later, in the course of a professional congress that took place in Argentina some months after the election of the first civilian government to follow ten years of military dictatorship, I delivered a keynote address that incorporated fragments of a videotaped interview with a family that included "disappeared" members.¹ In the question-and-answer

¹ Discussed in Sluzki C.E. (1990). Disappeared: Semantic and somatic effects of political repression in a family seeking therapy. *Family Process*, 29(2), 131- 144.

period that followed the presentation, feedback centered largely on what seems to have been the collective reaction to my material. At first, it took the form of extreme fear, based on the not fully expressed belief that "This is dangerous! The police will come any minute now!" This initial response soon gave way to a sense of discovery, an awakening to the experience of freedom, and subsequently a profound elation mixed with sadness. It had been, according to the collective voice, a liberating, corrective experience.

Several years after that, in 1990, I had the privilege of delivering an inaugural address to a congress on family therapy in Chile that was timed to coincide with the return of democracy to that country. During that speech I used harsh words to characterize the prior repressive military regimes (I referred to them, I believe, as "gorillas with machine guns"). In the intermission that followed the opening ceremonies, two members of the audience came up to me and, after politely praising my speech, admonished me, saying that I should not have used those epithets as it was important that I speak to all members of the audience, including those who had supported the prior military regime. "The past leaders are also human beings," they stated, "and the present moment is a period of 'national reconciliation.'"

Highly repressive political regimes—and, to a lesser degree, all political regimes—favor approved, official terms and codes that are developed to espouse certain ideas. At the same time, these regimes discourage, or simply ban from public usage, certain other phrases. Repressive governments make this process effective through the punishment of those who use the forbidden phrases and themes. The process is reinforced by the government's own selective use of these same words and themes, but always immersed in threatening semantic contexts. In addition, those in power actively employ other sets of officially sanctioned words that not only keep the ban in mind but also establish a safe and sanitized version of events. Thus, in documents and decrees of an autocratic government, the official use of the term "social costs" to refer to the negative impact of a political measure on the well-being of people will not only generate a context of justification for that particular measure but will also serve as a reminder that alternative descriptions will not be accepted by the government. For instance, freezing wages and increasing the price of the basic food basket by fifty percent will have a "social cost" that is deemed acceptable by the government, regardless of the amount of actual pain and hunger that these acts inflict on the most destitute members of the population. An alternative description, which sets forth the

possibility that thousands of children may die of malnutrition as a result of those measures, would not be recognized as valid and would almost certainly be politically dangerous to espouse. "Final solution," that chilling expression of sinister Nazi vintage, belongs to this category of terminology.

People who live in politically repressive environments learn soon enough not to discuss certain issues and not to mention certain words in public. In many cases, that ban extends to their private lives, as they elect not to make use of those words even at home. This repression of politically sensitive words and themes has complex consequences. It excludes from the domain of public discourse—and, by extension, from the domain of personal perception—the concepts or events named by those words, thus generating blind spots that, while certainly rendering life more restricted, can also serve to make it bearable.^{2*} The postwar plea of the "good Germans" that "we didn't know" about the torture or the genocide, even though they and their families may have lived for years within walking distance of a concentration camp, constitutes a prime example of the process by which events that cannot be safely described or discussed are made to disappear from our conceptual field.

Even in countries with the most politically repressive governments, there is always an underground cadre of "keepers of the forbidden words"—those who, by defying the ban when in the company of their trusted friends or the intimacy of their own homes or the privacy of their own souls, keep alive both the words and the concepts to which they refer. However, these brave people are the exception. The adoption of a personal policy of avoidance of forbidden words, and the consequent generation of blind spots that obliterate the concepts underlying those words, is regrettably the rule for those who live in repressive political circumstances—including many mental health workers who must carry out their daily work under those political conditions.

It should be noted as well that, in countries where political repression is in force, what is considered "subversive" is sometimes kept alive by displacing the forbidden words, which are simply not uttered, to broader emblems of defiance. During the military regime in Argentina, for example, the young and predominantly middle-class audience at a concert by a popular singer went wild with excitement when she broke into a Spanish translation of the French ballad "I Sing for Thee, Freedom!" During that same period in Chile, a pop song took on the character of protest and defiance because it included a verse containing the

² *These issues are discussed in greater detail in Sluzki, CE. (1993). Toward a model of family and political victimization: Implications for treatment and recovery. *Psychiatry*, 56, 179-187.

line "In September the lights were turned off," an apparent reference to Pinochet's coup against Allende, which took place in that month. And in Brazil, when a famous singer performed a series of concerts at which he confined himself to playing several of his songs on the guitar because the lyrics, which dealt with poverty and the empowerment of the oppressed, had been banned by the right-wing semi-military government, the crowd, filled with fervor, spontaneously sang his words for him. These examples are both moving and pathetic: moving because they portray the resilience of the collective spirit, pathetic because they exemplify the extent to which tyrants will go to suppress the words that they deem dangerous.

A this moment in history, while some nations remain in the grip of totalitarian regimes and others are moving from one form of authoritarianism to another, there is reason for some optimism. Politically oppressive and repressive governments are being replaced in many countries by more open and democratic leadership. This is occurring in Eastern Europe and in Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and elsewhere in Latin America. Thus, countless citizens, among them many professionals in the field of mental health, are emerging from a prolonged period of their lives in which words were banned and themes prohibited; they may be ready now to open up to concepts and meanings that had been eliminated from their construction of reality by their years of living and working in fear under a repressive government.

In the course of a workshop that I led at the Chilean family therapy congress referred to earlier, and taking advantage of my not having been exposed to the same politico-cultural experiences as the participants from my host country, I conducted an experimental exercise that was judged to be extremely enlightening by those in attendance, was certainly most revealing to me, and may prove to be of value to others in similar contexts. I began the workshop as I began this essay, by telling the stories of my encounter on the beach and of my presentation to the Argentinian congress. I went on to discuss with the participants in the workshop this phenomenon of words and themes that could not be voiced, and of words and themes that constitute the alternative "official story."

Following this introduction, I invited the participants-some seventy family therapists from Latin American countries, many of them currently under or just exiting from repressive governments-to participate in an experiment. I described it as a kind of exorcism intended to reclaim their semantic territory and expand their freedom. I asked them to give voice now to words that were, or that had been, forbidden in their home country.

I proceeded by listing on a blackboard the words given by the few who were willing to volunteer any. Then, as the list took shape, the words started to pour out, shouted from all

sides of the room in an atmosphere of growing excitement, recognition, and laughter, punctuated by somber moments of dark recollection. In this way, I organized a list of forbidden words that included, among others: *torture*, *disappeared*, *repression*, *intellectual*, *bearded*, *leftist*, *milico* (a slightly derogatory reference to the military), and *terriscos* (an idiosyncratic derivative of "terrorists," with specific meaning to the Peruvian government in reference to the Shining Path guerrillas of that country). I then developed a second list of terms, those included in the official story, such as *social cost*, *national reconciliation*, and *national unity*.

When both these lists had been compiled, I invited the workshop participants to organize discussion groups made up of four or five people. Each group was assigned the task of talking among themselves, actively utilizing the words contained in the first list. It was to be a sort of festival, aimed at freeing those words from the ban. This assignment was carried out with evident joy and enthusiasm, in groups that were filled with giggles, emphatic gestures, and boisterous tones.

Twenty minutes later I was able to regain their attention. I asked them to comment on their experiences with this exercise. Without exception, the participants expressed elation. Some said that to use those words had been for them like "talking dirty" and they had a great time doing so. New words had by now been added to the lists on the blackboard.

One of the participants, a lucid gastroenterologist with family therapy training, described a spontaneous experiment that had just been carried out in his small group, and which illustrates the ideological weight and symbolic power of those words. The group had been joined by a latecomer, a man who entered the workshop after the groups had formed and were starting their conversations. The newcomer whispered to the gastroenterologist, asking him to explain the task. The latter, deciding on the spur of the moment to mislead the newcomer, told him that the group was to converse utilizing, as much as possible, the words on the *second* list, those of the "official story." Meanwhile, the rest of the group was busily engaged in using terms from the "banned story" list. Within five minutes, the group as a whole had turned against the newcomer. Because of the words he was using, he was perceived by group members to be a fascist, while the poor, misled man felt himself to be surrounded by an unaccountably hostile, radical crowd. The group continued to berate the newcomer until the gastroenterologist revealed the nature of his private experiment, at which point the group members were allowed to tap from a common vocabulary.

After many other group exchanges were recounted and personal commentaries offered, observations dwindled and the excitement of the day began to wind down. I adjourned the

session then, congratulating the participants for their active involvement in this experiment and urging them to carry on in their own ways the neverending struggle to liberate thought and language. In the days that followed, during the remainder of the congress of which this session was a part, many of the workshop participants stopped me in the corridor and at other informal gatherings to express their appreciation and to recount the sense of elation and breakthrough that they had experienced.

In assessing this experiment, it is important to keep in mind that I did not provide the words, but that the two lists were compiled from terminology provided by the participants. It should also be noted that neither the experiment as a whole nor the listed words were specific to any one country. Rather, people from different countries contributed words in equal measure for the "banned story" list and the "official story" list. Having characterized the experiment in my summary to the participants as an open-ended task, one that is part of a neverending process, I have come to think of it since as an experiment in "deuterolearning," that is, in "learning to learn." It is an experiment that aimed at making participants aware not only of the ways in which their semantic resources had been tampered with while they lived in a politically repressive environment, but also of how a process of progressive recovery of their lexicon, and indeed of their thought processes, can be undertaken.

The effect of this experiment on the experimenter should be noted as well, since it has been not only extremely enriching to me but also more powerful than I had anticipated. It has so intrigued me that I have repeated it, with small variations, in groups of professionals from several countries that were emerging from dictatorships. In every case, I have found it exhilarating and easily adapted to different countries and contexts.

But what of the friend I met on the beach, the colleague who first set me to thinking about the enduring effects of suppression on words and thoughts and about the need to reclaim our vocabulary? Since that serendipitous meeting a decade ago, I have been haunted by afterthoughts and unanswered questions. In what way was this enforced scotoma, this semantic blind spot, reflected in my colleague's clinical practice? Doesn't this severe restriction, although perhaps an essential element of survival in a violently repressive society, undermine one of the categorical imperatives of our profession-that of enriching the number and quality of our patients' options?

The workshop experiment described in this essay was conceived of as an antidote, an example of a type of activity that may be developed to counter the effects of that linguistic and conceptual void. It can be a step toward restoring to legitimacy-in the world of these therapists and hence in the lives of their patients-vital concepts and practices, the

banishment of which might otherwise remain as a dark legacy of repressive regimes. If psychotherapy is a practice that aims at enriching the language and thought processes of our patients in order to help them expand the quantity and quality of their options in life, it is crucial that we who conduct the practice be vigilant in this regard with ourselves.

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