

Reflections from the IPA Congress 2017, Buenos Aires; Intimacy, Witnessing, Rising Up

Two cultural exhibitions in Buenos Aires deepened and bookended my experience. Before the Congress, the Memorial at ESMA (*Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada*), the detention center, torture chamber, and point of debarkation for the disappeared. Afterwards, the exhibition *Soulèvements (Uprisings)*, curated by the cultural theorist and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman for the Jeu de Paume in Paris and brought to Buenos Aires' *Museo de la Universidad de Tres do Febrero*. Indelible images from these exhibitions remain with me, framing the Congress in my mind.

Adrienne Harris' moving keynote paper "*The tank in the bedroom*", (IJP 2017:98), reminds us that intimacy, the Congress theme, is affected by traumatic cultural and historic forces. This topic reoccurred through the program. Ira Brenner, winner of the Hayman Award for the Study of the Holocaust and Genocide for his paper, '*The last witnesses, learning about life and death from aging survivors*', shared his work with child survivors, some of whom only speak of what they witnessed now as they approach the end of their lives. In another session, David, Mara, and Samuel Gerson presented work by and about later generations of families of survivors that transforms the intergenerationally transmitted trauma. One of the final panels was with the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo*, the Grandmothers of the disappeared. The intimacy of witnessing and remembering reverberated through the Congress.

ESMA - The site, a former Naval Training School right in Buenos Aires, is still considered a crime scene. The Officer's Club was converted into a prison like an old house hastily renovated into shabby apartments. Suspected subversives were brought to be interrogated under torture. Heavy curtains and loud music hid the cruelty inside from the cadets training next door and the bustling community right across Avenida del Libertador. I couldn't read the wall labels in Spanish and was buffeted by the images of suffering without any secondary process text to hold onto. The final room in the basement was a dingy, macabre space where people were sedated and taken to airplanes from which they were dropped into the *Río de la Platte*, often still conscious. There was a wall of photographs of haunted faces in that room that I at first assumed to be of victims but no, they were the torturers! A sullen young woman, a nervous man, a woman who could have been someone's grandmother, not a brute among them, indistinguishable from the faces of their victims. A prisoner with the job of taking id card portraits of the perpetrators had smuggled out duplicates, a courageous act of witnessing. These were the '*responsables*' of ESMA, the word Adrienne Harris quoted Carlos Liscano, the Uruguayan novelist and survivor of oppression, as using to describe torturers, indicating their terrorizing yet intimate connection with their victims. A powerful reminder that the potential for violence and sadism resides in all of us.

"Uprisings" - After the Congress, a colleague took some of us on a short walk along the shoreline from the Hilton to Didi-Huberman's profound and provocative exhibition. D-H first became known to psychoanalysts as the author of *The Invention of Hysteria; Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*. "*Uprisings*" is a multi-disciplinary exhibition of "human gestures that raise up the world or rise up against it".

The dramatic iconography ranges across mediums and is divided into sections: Elements (Unleashed); Gestures (Intense); Words (Exclaimed); Conflicts (Flared up); Desires (Indestructibles). Some of the most powerful images were the subject of a previous work, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, based on the only extant photographs that show the actual mass killing at the gas chambers. These rare photos were taken clandestinely by a Jewish prisoner forced to participate in the atrocities and the negatives smuggled out by partisans. D-H's explication of these ghastly images sparked heated debate over the representability of the Holocaust, with D-H arguing that these irrefutable images are a potent act of resistance that desires and deserves our recognition. "But potency outlives power. Freud said that desire was indestructible. Even those who knew they were condemned—in the camps, in the prisons—seek every means to transmit a testimony or call out."

The exhibition brought to mind the uprisings of my youth and of today. I was reminded also of the radical nature of psychoanalysis. Ted Jacobs tells a story about a young patient in the 60's who introduced herself saying "I'm into consciousness raising, what are you into?" Ted's spontaneous reply was, "I'm into unconsciousness raising". And so are we all. Analysis is a rising up. As psychoanalysts, we witness, imagine the unimaginable, and do the careful, painstaking work of helping patients represent and speak their experiences. This is uprising on an individual scale. A no against oppression and repression, an expression of indestructible desire that cumulatively express Freud's '*Freiheitsdrang*'. "What makes itself felt in a human community as a 'desire for freedom' may be their revolt against some existing injustice, and so may prove favorable to a further development of civilization." (*Civilization and Its Discontents*)

The clandestine photographers of Auschwitz and ESMA, doomed but not submitting, smuggled their potent images out despite the grave risk of hastening their demise. Rising up in a push towards freedom, asking the viewer to bear witness and transmit their message. In our consulting rooms, our patients also rise up in spite of all their conflict and despair. It is our responsibility to receive and transform their messages. In doing so we realize the revolutionary potential of psychoanalysis.

In these trying times it was heartening to be with colleagues from around the world who share humanistic values and support one another. I thank the organizers of the Congress, many colleagues, and all those whose testimony made this meeting such a powerful *Uprising*.

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