A WORLD OF WOUNDED NATIONS
On the ~~Under~~ Production, Distribution and Consumption of Trauma

by Johan Galtung

Department of Politics
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

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11. On Traumas in General

I take a trauma to be a very basic formative experience, for individuals, for collectivities. The collectivity I am most interested in at this connection is the nation, in other words a group of people sharing basic aspects of a culture, such as language, religion, myths about the past and visions of the future. They may or may not be racially homogeneous, they may or may not live in geographically contiguous areas, they may or may not have a continuous history. Individuals are born and grow up in a community of people; nations are born and grow up in a community of nations. In both cases they interact. Some of the interaction is brutal, inflicting deep, lasting wounds. Individuals are hit and hurt, nations are hit and hurt somatically, mentally. Some of the wounds can heal quickly, almost on the spot. Others last, of lasting the circumstances giving rise to the wound, even to the point of being forgotten.

But they are never totally forgotten, they are cemented in the subconscious; in the individual subconscious and the collective subconscious -- the latter taking in the meaning of the collectively shared individuals subconscious. And that is the subject matter of the present paper.

It is already explicitly formulated in the preceding paragraphs but I think there is a parallel between the individual and collective levels, in human space and social space respectively. Of course this does not mean that any finding from individual psychology can immediately be transferred to national psychology and regarded as a proven fact because of the high degree of isomorphism between the two levels. But concepts and propositions from the individual level can certainly be tested for their fruitfulness and validity at the national level -- in other words, incite gain from one level may be used as a heuristic for developing something about the other level.

More concretely, elementary psychology informs us of three ways in which individuals can react when exposed to a trauma: aggression in the sense of divorce, hitting back at the sender of the trauma; displaced aggression in the sense of hitting somebody else; and aggression turned against oneself, taking the form of repression, learned helplessness, apathy, in extreme cases even suicide.

A special case in this connection would be the freudian approach which would inform us that the most basic, most important traumas are inflicted in infancy and early childhood, and the sender of the trauma more likely than not are the parents. The trauma hits the person as an adult (or before) in the form of a personal crisis. to get out of the crisis there are three conditions that have to be fulfilled: the person has to see himself as being in a crisis, the person has to trace the crisis to the trauma in his/her early life, the person has to relive the trauma, fight it through, process it, consume it, thereby liberating him/herself from the spell of the trauma. One might add that there is an implicit fourth condition: the person is not able

to do this alone but needs professional help -- from the psychoanalyst, and there is a fee involved (even considerable). However, it may be worth it! The unprocessed trauma will linger on, poison the person and his/her relations to others for the rest of their lifetime.

If individual level traumas more likely than not are inflicted in early childhood and show up as crisis in mature adult, say forty years or so later, then the senders of the traumas, the parents more likely than not are biologically or at least socially retired. Psychoanalyst may serve as a substitute; catharsis may be obtained by acting the trauma out on the analyst rather than the parents. The dissimilarity with national levels is immediately seen. The nations that produce the traumas in the first run are likely to be still around, and they may hit back if the receiver of the trauma for some reason decides to hit back. And in addition to that: although many families harbor it within the family walls about as much aggressiveness and nastiness and sheer brutality can be found in the community of nations. Many families do not. There are acts of tenderness, of love. There may be an atmosphere of prevailing sweetness. But these very words, "tenderness," "love," "sweetness" do not make very much sense in the community of nations, except if one looks at some subsystems such as, possibly, the Nordic system. And even then it should be remembered that behind the apparent kindness of the inter-Nordic system is a history of roughly speaking seven centuries of brutal warfare, and a bit as nasty as any international subsystem held out as an example of nastiness today: the Soviet hegemonical system in Eastern Europe, the US hegemonical system in South America to quote only two examples.

So there we are from an ethical point of view: there are similarities and dissimilarities, as usual. Besides, I am not necessarily that convinced that individual levels of exploration of trauma is so terribly much more advanced than the national level. But there is one tremendous difference in addition to what has just been said above -- the receiver outliving the senders, and the general setting being more nastily -- and that is the following. There is the status of the professional trauma healer, and since we are more concerned with the mental than the somatic wounds, that means the psychotherapist in the broadest sense of the word. That person may even serve the role of being a substitute for the trauma sender. It is difficult to see that there is anything similar to this particular role from the interpersonal system in the international system. Consequently, if nations want to get rid of their traumas without aggressing on others, regardless of these "others" by any reasonable interpretation can be said to be senders of the traumas or not, there is but one way out: the nation has to work on itself. And that is not going to be easy because the traumas may be basic components in the myths the nations can pertain about themselves, even to the point that if you take the trauma away from them you destroy the national identity at the same time. A problematique which, incidentally, is by no means unknown at the personal level.