

*For the discussion at the EATGA's STUDY DAY, Milan 2013, on "Some reflections on the transsubjective unconscious of transcultural groups - What destiny for subjectivity today?", Silvia Amati Sas proposes this paper read on the occasion of the Panel on "The unconscious and institutions" at the Congress of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society, Taormina, May 2010.*

## **WHICH UNCONSCIOUS FOR THE TRANSCULTURAL?**

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Asking the question "which unconscious for the transcultural?" initially evokes an idea of transcendence. Maimonides says: "We should respect people of all beliefs; we all yearn for the same thing: to arrive at God". God in secular terms can be translated as the idea of certainty.

If we suppose there is a "transcultural unconscious" what desire should we attribute to it? It may be a wish of certainty but also for "survival"?

Transculturality is a contemporary theme which frequently defines daily situations in the globalised world. Can we think there is a "work of transculture" in the "work of culture" (Kulturarbeit) which is relevant for our time?

To consider the mental space of the meeting of cultures, I will refer to my experiences in experimental transcultural encounters with the psychoanalytical based group method in which I have been a participant, particularly in "large groups" within EATGA workshops.

The European Association for Transcultural Group Analysis was founded in 1982 by a group of psychoanalysts (among its founders, René Kaës, Jaak Le Roy, Malcolm Pines, Claude Rouchy, Kurt Husemann and others) with the project of a common research on the cultural foundations of personality. The intention was "to evidence those unconscious cultural elements that contribute to structure the self and identity and also the attitudes to what is strange or foreign. The traditional specific method used in Eatga's research in group experience is the non obligatory translation of the language each participant speaks. We approach transculturality through inter-cultural and multi-cultural encounters.

Transculturality refers to differences and similarities, otherness and belonging, to the familiar and the foreign, to those aspects of the other that are unknown or enigmatic for us or those which are identifiable and able to be recognised by us.

In the presence of others, consciously or unconsciously, we try to understand if they can be included in, or excluded from, our sense of security.

We ask ourselves what significance give to the collective event: whether there will be consensus or dissent, convergence or divergence, whether there will be reciprocity and the chance of finding a common ground.

The initial encounter with a different group implies, for each subject, a moment of perplexity, a very slight depersonalisation, a brief signal of alarm, all of which can be defined as “estrangement” because the presence of diversity always involves a change of one’s context of security. Even when one knows some others in a new group experience, there is a fleeting sense of anomie, of “no man’s land”. We need to ask ourselves if this sense of estrangement (as an expression of anxiety) is a basic problem of the mind or else the result of historical events, of the memory of persecution and collective social trauma, of what humans have done and are capable of doing to other human beings.

I will use here my therapeutic experience with individual patients that have endured extreme social violent situations (“terrifying newness” in the words of Hannah Arendt) as a reference to observe other banal new situations as group encounters.

I will follow my usual theoretical references and the metaphors which came to me in tune with my clinical experience.

First of all, I want to underline estrangement as an affective signal in transcultural encounters (even if it appears in other group experiences).

Estrangement is a momentary dilemma of one’s sense of identity, which can be expressed in many nuanced ways, from an “effervescent curiosity” for novelty, to a catastrophic perception of one’s anxiety, a “fear of breakdown”.

At the core of group encounters there is in every participant a slight fear of undifferentiation because everyone projects and deposits in the group unknown and undifferentiated aspects of themselves, and at the same time is (in Bleger’s words) the depository for the most undifferentiated aspects of others. In this initial disordered links, in this ambiguous groupal “trans-mental” tissue, the participants tend to search their own belonging and identity with apparently paranoid defensive movements which may be interpreted by others as aggression, hate or destructiveness.

An urgent transpersonal need to escape from undifferentiation appear by establishing antinomies: “any” antinomy or arbitrary comparison may be good enough but certainly based on collective convictions or previous prejudices about the others belongings.

While in small groups it is expected and often satisfied the fact of being recognised by others, which allows to feel oneself differentiated, in large groups there is a sense of anonymity and loss of identity and fear of losing oneself in a random and not chosen belonging.

My intention here is to associate these group experiences to the two “mechanism for survival” which I have come across in my therapeutic work with individual patients who had undergone an immersion in extreme violent circumstances (concentration camps). I have called these survival mechanisms “adaptation to whatsoever” and “object to be saved” (Amati Sas 1988)

(Extreme traumatic social violence are intentionally created perverse context and circumstances (concentration camp, torture) established by power agencies to lead victims to undifferentiation, to negate identity and to ignore any diversity except from the definition given by their victimizers).

At the beginning of group experiential situations (which are freely chosen and, by definition, non-violent) a brief sense of estrangement and a paranoid defensive need to control

the new situation shows that the fear of undifferentiation appears in more banal group situations.

There is a basic human possibility to adapt to any present reality as it is, without conflict or choice. At a first level this is signaled by an automatic (pre-subjective) fear of not being able to differentiate from others and, at a more mature subjective level, by taking a defensive “ambiguous position”, (a pre-schizophrenic non conflictive position as described by Bleger, (Note 1), which is adaptive to situations, numbs emotions, and provides time endurance (Defensive ambiguity appears as an specific answer to social violence (Amati Sas, 2012).

During the therapeutic process with survivors of extreme situations we can discover another “survival resistance” to the violent reality (split from “adaptation to whatsoever”); this is the subject’s concern for someone else who appears signified in dreams and remembrances, which can be interpreted as “an object to be saved”. This subject’s concern for some other (a husband, a son, etc, be they alive, dead or disappeared) had remained secret, hidden, or even removed during the whole traumatic period. Later, during the therapeutic process, the concern for “an object to be saved” turns out to be understood as a significant challenge and subjective resistance to the perverse situation and has an important “subjectifying” value for the patient. It is “an object relation” and shows the continuity of the individual’s capacity for identification and affective choices. The “object to be saved” is the representation of a link (vinculo) that the subject has experienced in his/her life which necessarily entails the relational style of the culture he/she belongs to and therefore can be considered a “cultural resistance” because it implies a particular cultural style of linking and relating.

In an intercultural “large group”, we perceive a “resistance” to what is “new” and different in the importance that each participant gives to one’s own sense of belonging in which there are always premises, pre-concepts and prejudices that may appear to an observer as discriminatory attitudes towards the others. Discrimination is necessary for the “transcultural working through” that each participant has to do in order to find a coherent position in the transcultural group, but nevertheless it has a paranoid aspect and may remain at that level (prejudice, racism, etc.) (Amati Sas, 2012).

Trying to actualize the meaning of EATGA’s evolution and research we have asked R. Kaës in 2010 how to think transculturality in today’s world.

Kaës emphasised the importance of the myriad forms of massive economic and political emigration and of the growing economic exchanges resulting from globalization, where all the conflict and suffering that typically arise from the meeting of cultures becomes evident. Kaës said that we are no longer asking ourselves how cultures differentiate themselves in constructing their Oedipus or in how they dream or organise their anxieties. We are nowadays interested in the conflict between those who wish “to be an other for others” or “an other amongst others”, (that is those who accept differences or different others) and those who defend an only, unique, unified, lasting identity and refuse to recognise that identity is a process and a shifting function of successive identifications and belongings.

Kaës (following Mauss) considers our era as “a total psychosocial phenomenon” where a failure of the social transitional space “may evolve into a destruction of psychic, social and somatic life, because it implies an individual psychic return to the area of undifferentiation between the ego and the non-ego”.

The social transitional space is a mutual and shared trans-personal space where diversity and similarity are worked through in a movement of inclusion and exclusion, of discrimination and comparison. Its failure derives from the failure of society as context, the lack of solid guarantees and moral (meta-psychic and meta-social) reference points (Kaës, 2007). This is promoted by the equivocal and confusing input of the mass media, by economic instability, precariousness of employment, arbitrariness of social justice, corruption.

Following Bleger, I think that the failure of the social context as depositary of basic subjective undifferentiation, increases defensive ambiguity which conveys more adaptability and unconscious penetrability.

The failure of the social context entails an “adaptation to whatsoever” which socially appears as a strong tendency not to react, not to work through, to be indifferent, and to accept standardization and massification. It manifests itself as an attitude of “why bothering”, of ducking one’s head in front of the profound paradoxes into which social-political and economic forces are able to draw a population, thereby altering the security and social guarantees that are necessary for coherent mental functioning.

Adjusting to repetitive violent situations and to gradually increasing uncertainty, we may lose the “sense of catastrophe” as expressed by Eigen through the example of frogs, which get used to gradually rising water temperatures until they don’t perceive they perish.

Because of its long history, our own little institution EATGA is a good place to share and reflect on experiences of interculturality. However, one of the obstacles of the intercultural and the transcultural working group seems to be to hinder the possibility of synthesis, which is perhaps nothing else than a perfectionist utopia because finally we have to accept that their own cultural roots are impressed on the thought and behaviours of each participant and it seems that everyone remains unconsciously loyal to his or her own cultural belonging, above and beyond the working group.

In these experiences we can observe the transitional, the circumstantial, the transitory, the “transit” between cultures (Profita, Ruvolo, Lo Mauro) or how they “interfere” (Puget, Berenstein, Kaës).

In EATGA workshops, participants are immersed for a brief period in the context offered by the local culture whose members host and organise the meeting. The encounter between cultures (whether in small groups or larger ones) can lead to a certain level of insight into one’s own culture, into one’s own sense of belonging and also to one’s own capacity for identification and integration with other people’s sense of belonging.

We come to compromises, both positive and negative, with other cultures or with the new environment in which we find ourselves. This has been studied by Rouchy who uses the word “incorporated”. The “incorporated” culture may either become integrated in one’s sense of

self or remain assimilated for a certain time without modifying one's own sense of identity.

Unconscious conformism can lead to alienation (P. Aulagnier), when someone wants to impose a way of thinking and manages to do so without the subject realising it. If the unconscious is too permeable to the mentality of others, it would be an impregnation which, in the words of Eigen, would not be disturbing, which is not marked by an alarming distress (estrangement, perplexity) and which becomes part of the obvious, the implicit or the familiar in which we live.

At this point we may ask ourselves the extent to which we are permeable to the culture of the globalised world, the world of the mass media, the world of information technology, the world of statistics, to what extent we are at the mercy of ever-changing information, of changes provoked by diverse interests (which became our common culture of belonging over and above our family and professional belongings etc.).

If ambiguity implies a basic plasticity of the mind and allows suggestion and imprinting, what is it that is introjected? According to different theories, these are symbols, fantasies, representations, traces,  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$ . particles. We can call them imitation, contagion, mimicry. What is introjected is rather a style of thought, a mentality, a way of thinking. The alienating agent could be the speech of a leader who imposes himself to a crowd but could also simply be a context, a cultural style, a mentality in which we are immersed and which we incorporate unconsciously in ourselves.

We can imagine that this corresponds to the clinical phenomenon regarding people who, having been immersed in the perverse situation of a concentration camp were not able to express their rebellion and, even if unconsciously resisting, have however introjected a certain perverse reality, and need a long working through process to represent what is unrepresentable and to elaborate their experience of adaptation, shame and alienation and need to find a meaning to the political-social and historic-cultural context which they have gone through.

Some years ago an EATGA workshop was held in Marsala. The organiser's intention was the exploration of a transcultural group as "a transitional place which could allow access to a symbolic intersubjective and transubjective space above and beyond each group member's prior sense of belonging and identification". The idea was to construct a new cultural matrix which would allow the participants to relate to one another regardless of their previous sense of belonging.

Marsala is a Mediterranean city rich in history, through which many peoples have passed as a result of various colonisations. Even today it is a port of entry for immigrants hoping to enter Europe. Given the May-time heady mixture of scents and tastes and of people out in the streets of the city, the organizers placed great emphasis on sensoriality.

The question was to determine what kind of belonging would develop out of this particular container. I will briefly refer to how I saw the process and the theme of the experience.

The meeting of the large group took place in an ancient cloister with a grassy courtyard in the middle of which stood an immensely tall palm and a flowerbed of red geraniums. May sunshine created areas of light and shade and the participants moved from one point to another without settling in one place for long. In fact the group seemed to be always changing form

and often it was hard to hear the voices because of the breeze, or to understand the various languages that were spoken, given the number of participants (over 80). All this increased one's sense of disorientation in the large group. I was aware of opposition and aggression between the students, pupils of the organizers, and the "strangers" who had come from the "mainland". This opposition showed itself in economic terms, about who was paying, which interests were involved, where the mafia was etc. During the three sessions, although it is hard to describe exactly how, I experienced a personal disorientation and I found it difficult to find "a purpose" to the encounter, ( I consider this as a signal of my estrangement). Usually my own expectation is that it will emerge some existential or psycho-social truth or a hypothetical "discourse on the state of humanity" (perhaps it is a messianic fantasy shared by everybody?). But on the contrary, certain interventions seemed very superficial simply referred to the moment itself (where the sun was, who was in the shade, who in the sun) or to conflicts about languages.

Most often the interventions seemed as non coordinated shouts attempting to establish separations, discriminations and antinomies as if participants were looking for a way to make sense out of the encounter. This was not altogether unpleasant but it was always unpredictable, sometimes irritating, sometimes passionate.

One morning I felt struck by the fact that some warplanes were flying over the cloister (from a near a military airbase), but my perception that this fact is closer to the reality of today's world, seemed not to be shared by others. Anyhow whatever argument that was put forward disappeared as a river in the desert, as if free associations were easily flowing but inconsistent. Following several misunderstandings, I got the impression that the local group wanted to maintain their distance from the outside visitors, and that in turn the visitors wanted to maintain their sense of being outsiders.

At last, when leaving the cloister, I thought that whoever conceived the large group had had a "diabolical" idea because the most elusive aspects of the transjective unconscious are stirred in these situations. The colleagues who had the role of silent "observers" interpreted the objects in the middle of the cloister - the palm tree and the flowers - as totemic symbols, sacred elements for the group.

It surprises me how many different ways there are of reading these group situations, whether psychoanalytically in terms of representation of ancient trauma or using sociological or anthropological terms.

At this point I return to my personal interpretation: I believe that the initial estrangement about adapting or not adapting to whatsoever, is immediately followed by need of searching for differences. Various types of antinomies appear, as well as the tendency to find sacred or mythical meanings to the problem. Instead other actual psycho-social issues like immigration, mafia, uncertainties, insecurities, seemed to be avoided as if there was a shared denegative pact whereby too much coherence in the discussion was not allowed. The problem remains of why we suffer so much frustration, even anger, and seem ready to lay the blame on the inadequacies of the conductors. (To be conductor of a large group is not an easy task. The interpreting style of the conductors depend on their theoretical and cultural background, but as everybody they are also immersed in the disorientating climate of the large group.)

The difficulty of thinking and of making synthesis is clear in these encounters. The large

group, even more so when multicultural, does not allow for a precise, definite expression of the individual's subjectivity. After all each one feels a little more what it means to be anonymous in a crowd or to be part of a mass. It is not that we aren't already in this situation when we are out in the street, but in the street we are already familiar with being amongst other people and part of a larger whole. Instead everyone inside the cloister (whether psychologists, psychoanalysts, or students) were not there by pure chance but because we wanted to think about and understand what happened in such a group. And it is precisely thinking that it doesn't work, a real difficulty which is perhaps similar to other mass situations?

Why does not function thought? Perhaps because we are not able to "contextualize" the transcultural, so diverse and multiform? Or because we find ourselves unable to elaborate something beyond the limited, familiar context of our actual knowledge? Finally we must accept the frustrating result and suspect that the categories with which we try to understand groupal complex issues are not yet pertinent enough!

Let us return to the two mechanisms of resistance and survival which I have suggested may exist, metaphorically speaking, in transcultural large group. "To adapt to whatsoever" is what we may be unconsciously afraid of, and the "object to be saved" may be somehow equivalent to the fact that each participant feels the need to safeguard one's own culture and sense of identity not to be alienated to a common transitory belonging. A defensive ambiguous position is the "common ground", hidden by active paranoid or inconsistent attitudes. The whole appears as a shared denegative pact, as to let time to pass without understanding?... perhaps some human transcultural truth ?

During the 80's in Lisbon I participated in a large group meeting of Palestinian and Israeli psychologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and (predominantly Lacanian) observers. After working intensely over several days, an evident common concern appeared identical for both rival nationalities: it was related to worries about their children and their children's future (a common "object to be saved"). It was a moving experience for everyone but also a depressing one, because we all knew that this discovering of that shared deep common feeling would not have an effect in the real world and would remain only as an acquisition in the psychic reality of the participants.

The experiences of this kind have a transcultural value and correspond to a more mature human experience of solidarity and responsibility where we look not only for reciprocity in becoming an "other amongst others", but also in sharing the concern for the other's others.

Note 1) ambiguity, thanks to its adaptability, and emotional numbing, protects the rest of the personality, which remains as encapsulated and suspended.

The dynamic linking of ambiguity with the outer world allows us to imagine how intentionally provoked changes in the external world can attain the more intimate, vulnerable and dependent aspects of subjectivity. In fact, the social reality functions as a "depository" for the uncertain and undifferentiated aspects of one's subjectivity, whatever the chronological age. The social context silently provides and supports the subject's illusion of belonging, safety and certainty.

Traumatic social violence gives rise to adaptive subjective phenomena of obviousness and familiarity with the altered situation which is a “defence through ambiguity” and which may lead to an “adaptation to whatsoever”. When a person is in a state of ambiguity, critical thinking and alarm mechanisms are altered, so that the individual and the group may become easily swayed (Amati Sas, 2010).

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