

Crisis and aggressiveness in culture

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The term ‘crisis,’ from an etymological point of view, represents notions such as ‘distinction,’ ‘decision,’ ‘sentence,’ ‘judgment,’ ‘separation.’ It is often used to designate a period of tension in which there is some rupture, separation, distinction. From an economic point of view, crisis is related to a moment of scarcity in production, trade, and consumption of products and services. The cyclical aspect of the economy combines moments of expansion (or growth) and contraction (or stagnation), and the alternation between these moments forms the so-called ‘economic cycle.’ The moments observed in a crisis (expansion and contraction, growth and stagnation, tension and relief) make it an important process leading to the growth of a nation or a subject. From the psychic point of view, this dynamic seems to resemble what the theory of psychoanalysis says about the tension and relief between pleasure and displeasure, or the pulsating movement of the unconscious, opening and closing.

Thus, when one considers ‘crisis’ as a movement of the subject – related to their psychic instances and roughly presenting a movement of tension and relief – it can be understood as something particular to the human subject; inevitable and sometimes necessary. The crisis in culture is perhaps connected to the malaise in culture, i.e., there is no culture without malaise, or malaise is the culture’s very foundation. The same may apply to the crisis: it is at the foundation of the culture, and there is no culture without crisis. The discussion about the crisis in culture, therefore, is not a debate about a crisis in modernity or contemporary times. It is a debate about a crisis at the foundation of the subject and the culture.

Against this backdrop, how can one name the current crisis? It is a crisis characterized by a wave of conservatism in daily life and, such as in an economic crisis, it seems to be cyclical. When it looks like conservative positions are disappearing, and that society is moving toward a more robust democracy – in the specific case of Brazil – there is a backlash with the increase of behaviors such as prejudice, hatred, and attacks on minorities. It is possible to say that this is a ‘return’ to a point from where society never departed. Psychoanalysts cannot and should not be silent when facing a government that put forward proposals that are misogynistic, homophobic, and discriminatory, proposals that return to ‘macho conservatism’ and hatred toward women and the representation of female. This phenomenon cannot merely be considered as a malaise in structural culture, a malaise that is part of human nature. There is no doubt that these aspects are very human, but it is essential to reflect on what psychoanalysts can do to intervene in this facet of human.

This crisis in culture does not come without a dose of aggression. According to Freud (1933 [1932], p. 198, our translation): “Therefore, it is a general principle that conflicts of interest between men are resolved using violence.” It is a type of violence not necessarily imposed by brute force or weapons of destruction as shown in history books. Aggressiveness is portrayed in words, in the absence of diplomacy, in disregarding the Other. It is reflected in resentment, in disrespect for everything that can be built based on tolerance toward differences. In Lacan’s work *Aggressiveness in Psychoanalysis* (1998 [1948], p.112), it is important to clarify that aggressiveness is narcissistic because it is produced from a narcissism that not only does not accept the

other but wants to exterminate them. In the same text, Lacan (1998 [1948], p. 109, our translation) is clear and simple when saying, “dialogue in itself seems to involve a renunciation of aggressiveness.” For the author, speech mobilizes the subjectivity in this display of aggression, producing something else in the relationship of the subject with the Other. Lacan (1998 [1948], p. 109, our translation) adds: “[...] the analyst cured through dialogue, curing cases of madness that were just as serious.” Thus, in the face of the verbal attacks heard every day, one cannot react differently from seeking a dialogue – even though this is often impossible because many people in Brazil finally found ‘authorization,’ in the image of the leader, to express prejudice and discrimination against minorities. If there is no dialogue, Lacan (1998, p. 125, our translation) concludes: “[...] the war is increasingly proving to be the obligatory and necessary ‘midwife’ of all the progress of our organization.”

A clinical fragment is presented here, potentially containing issues that are influenced by the current political elements observed in people’s daily lives. The case addressed here was conducted by a colleague psychoanalyst who brought it to me for control analysis. The case refers to a 14-year-old girl who was referred for analysis because she did not want to go to school. She was a little depressed. The analysis revealed that the patient did not want to go to school because she was being bullied. The other students were saying that she should not study at that school because her mother was a house cleaner and she did not have enough money to be in that school.

From the patient’s life story, the psychoanalyst heard that her mother has worked for a family for many years. Her mother worked and lived in this family’s house. The family was formed by the widow and her children and, as the children became adults and lived in their own houses, the widow was the only family member living there. The working relationship between the patient’s mother and this employer was always very good, marked by trust, companionship, and friendship. This friendship led the patient’s mother to invite her employer to be the patient’s godmother when she was born. The patient was free to visit her godmother’s house and did so frequently, but she did not live there with her mother since they had a house elsewhere. The godmother had always welcomed the patient. Throughout her childhood, the patients’ birthday parties were in the godmother’s house, which had a beautiful, spacious backyard with a pool. The godmother was loving and caring and used to give her good presents, clothes, as well as offer good education. Since childhood, the godmother paid for the patient’s school. She has always studied in a private institution with a quality education. The school was located near the godmother’s house so that after class she would visit, have her meal, and do schoolwork while her mother worked.

At school, she always had good academic performance, with good grades and good behavior. She had no difficulty in interpersonal relationships, and her circle of friends was formed by classmates, friends that had been studying together for many years, since preschool. At one point, these same friends started to offend her, segregating the patient in the group of friends. They said she should not study at that school, that she could not afford it. They said she was the maid’s daughter and could not be there. Unable to react and deal well with these offenses, this young woman went into a depressed and derogatory state, refusing to go to school.

The control analysis took two directions. In one direction it is possible to advocate for the importance to react to these insults. The patient must be able to say something to her friends, to react to this ferocity. What before was fraternity, now is revealed as a cruel ferocity. Those who were her friends show anger and hatred for the social difference among them and present visible cruelty. Lacan (1998 [1948], p. 107, our translation) points out that “intentional aggressiveness gnaws away, undermines,

and disintegrates; it castrates; it leads to death.” The subject was inhibited by this small other who tries to appear a large Other, endowed with power and action over the subject. It is up to the teenager patient to react to what the other says: “You are this.” It is important to be able to say: “No, I am not that,” or rather, “I am not just that.” “Yes, I am the maid’s daughter, but it does not make me less of a person, on the contrary, I am proud, and I can be more than that.” In this sense, it is a reaction of the subject to this Other that seems to own the situation and gain space in the subjective field, trying to dominate the field. As Lacan points out (1998 [1949], p. 103), “[...] from the subject to the subject, psychoanalysis can follow the subject to this ecstatic limit of ‘You are this,’ which reveals to them, the figure of their mortal desire, but it is not only in our power as practitioners to take the subject to that moment when the real journey begins.” In other words, this is where psychoanalysis can do something, start the real journey.

In the insult of “you are this,” the voice emerges as a real of the body from which the subject cannot detach. The voice brings the unmistakable ‘body detached from the speech.’ The offense does not occur without vocal harshness, without shouting and howling. Boos, shouts, whistles, these are a kind of vocal derision, for the other is insulted not for what they utter, but for what they are. Thus, the voice imprints a mark; it is a political act that is not in speech, but in the body, producing effects in speech.

In another direction, what was heard in the control analysis leads to consider some pertinent questions for the case: What happened to these young girls in their early teens? Why did the patient’s old friends start to react so aggressively? Did they always think of her in this way, but veiled their opinions, and now feel empowered by a large Other to speak what was previously present but in a veiled way? Or does this anger arise now, at this moment when they are entering adolescence? I do not have answers to these questions, but I would like to make some considerations.

Adolescence is indeed a period in which sexual issues return in unbridled profusion, and aggressive impulses emerge at this point in the subject’s life when socialization and interaction expands. These impulses put the adolescent in a relationship with the other where the attack and aggressiveness show their cruelest facets. What is under consideration is not the psychosocial aspect, but a sexual drive. Could the patient be surrounded by these feelings of hostility and aggressiveness typical of puberty? However, it is important to consider that this aggressiveness does not arise in adolescence as a period of life or as a time when it comes to the surface. It is not a question of attributing aggressiveness to a psychosocial or child development issue, but to considering it as a drive and something typical of the sexuality, which may return with greater vigor at puberty.

In the specific case addressed in this work, the hypothesis is that the patient’s friends have always thought this way about her, they always thought of her as a poor person, the maid’s daughter. They always thought she should not be in that school. This thought was veiled due to a specific social pressure that considered it inappropriate to express. There was somehow a social vigilance. Leaders occupying certain social positions restrained these expressions of hatred. Nowadays people feel entitled to express their thoughts without many brakes, without respect for each other. There is a confusion between the democratic principle around the right to express a thought, and simply saying whatever one wants. Online social networks, messaging applications, and internet discussion groups have made a double movement over the years.

On the one hand these tools democratized the media and gave space for unknown artists to produce and publicize their work, while YouTube channels offered opportunities for new artists, thinkers, or artisans to show their work. On the other hand, everyone gained platforms to say what they want. The Internet was invaded with

senseless people producing equally senseless videos, without any production, coherence, and knowledge. As Humberto Eco puts it “social networks have given voice to a legion of imbeciles¹.” Fake News, for example, produced crudely and without foundation gained space in our electronic applications and had the power, in Brazil, to elect a fool for president.

In a moment when a powerful nation like the United States elected a president such as Donald Trump; when the internet offers platforms where everyone says anything; when the president of Brazil is deliberately disrespectful toward women, indigenous people, the LGBTQ+ community, the environment, science (Brazilian universities just went through severe budget cuts). Finally, when facing this context of discrimination and disregard for the other, it is fair to ask: aren't these girls socially authorized to offend a friend at school? If a young woman sees national leaders using forms of prejudice and xenophobia, wouldn't she also feel entitled to do the same to her friend, through discrimination and offense? Isn't this whole social context reinforcing and legitimating bullying and offenses, without any limit? If those in leadership positions behave in certain way, a teenager may feel fully supported to do the same to their peer.

Finally, I would like to say that these aspects 'sew' the subject in the clinic in a Moebian way. The subject is traversed by the singular and the collective, by the individuality and society, by the political and the joy that constitute the subject of the unconscious.

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¹ Retrieved from <https://omartelodenietzsche.com/2018/10/18/umberto-eco-as-redes-sociais-deram-voz-uma-legiao-de-imbecis-y/> on August 30, 2019.