Freud's concept of transference and modern genocide

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So far, psychoanalysis has had a relatively minor role regarding the psychology of genocide. Only recently, scholars, researchers and analysts such as Jacques Semelin, Slavoj Žižek, Dominick LaCapra, Dan Stone, J.S. Kerstenberg, or Steven Baum, have initiated new conceptualizations derived—more or less directly—from psychoanalysis. Their purpose is to deepen and diversify our understanding of social "decontamination" phenomena, whose extreme forms have been regarded by many as incomprehensible. Such a goal requires the rethinking of modern genocide and mass murder, firstly by moving them from the space of exception, into the very fabric of modern societies' ethos and cultural frameworks. To the Freudian concepts already employed, the present study adds negative transference as present psychological experience of hostile emotions of unconscious past origin. Among the suggestions, there are the analytical implications of (collective) negative transference's capacity to channel the destructive energies it triggers, towards a fantasy figure that "embodies" the individuals' idiosyncrasies.

Key words: transference, genocide, fantasy-figure, destructive impulses and energy, (de)contamination, violence

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Together with *interpretation* and *working through*, transference represents the core of psychoanalysis and its variants. "One of Freud's most central and profoundly creative discoveries, it is a powerful concept, speaking to the essence of the unconscious—the past hidden within the present—and continuity—the present in continuum with the past"(Schwaber, as cited in Kahn, 2001, 181). As Gregory puts it, "a patient in psychotherapy tends to transfer into his relationship with the therapist the sometimes intense feelings he experienced at an earlier stage in his life in his relationship with an important figure. The formation of a transference relationship thus facilitates the overcoming of resistances to the recall of painful experiences from his past" (Gregory, 2004, 920).

During the years between the world wars the analysis and elucidation of the transference relationship became the main therapeutic tool and hallmark of the therapy pioneered by Freud, gradually replacing the interpretation of dreams and the overcoming of resistances (Gregory, 2004). In Freud's own words, "the productive powers of the neurosis are … occupied in the creation of a special class of mental structures, for the most part unconscious, to which the name *"transferences"* may be given… [T]ransferences… are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and fantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity, which is characteristic for their species, that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician. To put it another way: a whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, but as applying to the person of the physician at the present moment" (Freud, 1989, 234).

According to Michael Kahn, Freud came to the conclusion that there were three main categories of transference:

1) The positive transference, in which the patient's feelings for the therapist are primarily affection and trust.

2) The negative transference, consisting primarily of hostility and suspicion.

3) The un-neutralized erotic transference, in which the patient experiences insistent desire for sexual intimacy with the analyst (Kahn, 2002, 184-5).

Whereas positive transference is seen as the basis for the working alliance and should be welcomed—as it contributes to providing the client with confidence in the therapist and a feeling of being permanently supported—the negative transference and the un-neutralized erotic transference jeopardize the therapeutic relationship. As far as they remain at the stage of a merely mild aspect of positive transference, the erotic feelings for the analyst can be converted into useful analytic exploration; however, if they were very insistent and resisted any such converting attempt, Freud recommended the discontinuation of analysis. Whereas both the first and the third forms of transference were expressions of libidinal energy the negative transference was considered by Freud an expression of destructive energy. In the second section I will try to discuss a form of its manifestation in modern society.

One of the most influential followers of Freud, Merton Gill, offered a perspective that enhanced the utility and flexibility of transference and overcame the thorny problem of deciding—in other words, judging—which transferences are "distorted" [initially thought of as referring to perceptions and reactions considered distorted] and which "realistic": "Each of us views interpersonal interactions through the lens of our unconscious fantasies, through the lens of the idiosyncratic principles by which we have learned to organize experience. Interpersonal stimuli are very likely to be ambiguous, lending themselves to multiple interpretations" (Kahn, 2002, 192).

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As early as 1885, Freud began to believe that the feelings (often very strong) involved in transference refer not to the targeted person(s) personally, but to a fantasy figure. Writing that the various lines of tradition initiated by Freud do not regard transference as confined to the client-counselor relationship, Feltham and Dryden (1997, 197) remark that psychoanalysis recognizes that everyone carries forward and inadvertently transfers on to others images and feelings about other people.

My following hypothesis is no more than a preliminary sketchy attempt, encouraged by Freud's expanding of transference outside the therapeutic relationships as such:

What psycho-analysis reveals in the transference phenomena of neurotics can also be observed in the lives of some normal people. The impression they give is of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'demonic' power; but psycho-analysis has always taken the view that their fate is for the most part arranged by themselves and determined by earl[ier] ... influences ... This "perpetual recurrence of the same thing" causes us no astonishment when it relates to active behaviour on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences ... We shall find courage to assume that there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which overrides the pleasure principle (Freud, 1989, 604, 605).

In what follows I would try to resort briefly to negative transference as a possible explanatory concept of one of the most disturbing phenomena of modern history, namely genocide. The origins of genocide have been sought by scholars in many areas of human experience: politics, religion, culture, economics, demography, ideology. All these of course are valid explanations, and go a long way to getting to grips with the objective conditions surrounding genocide. But, as Berel Lang put it some time ago, there remains an inexplicable gap between the *idea* and the *act* of mass murder. (Lang, 1984-5, 1-2) That gap could be at least partially bridged by adding a human dimension represented by (negative) transference to the existing explanations. In order for it to be applied to the dimensions of collective psychology involved in genocide negative transference could (presumably) be associated with ideas such as Georges Bataille's concept of society's "excess energy" (Bataille, 1991), and Emile Durkheim's idea of "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, [1912] 1995), and then connected to those used explicitly in relation to the Holocaust by Dominick LaCapra ("scapegoating" and the "carnivalesque") (LaCapra, 2001) and Saul Friedländer ("Rausch" or "ecstasy") (Friedländer,

1993), I subscribe to Dan Stone's insightful idea that prior to and during any act of genocide "there occurs a heightening of community feeling, to the point at which this ecstatic sense of belonging permits, indeed demands, a normally forbidden act of transgression (of rules and taboos)" aiming at "safeguarding" the community by destroying the designated "threatening" group (Stone, 2004, 49, 52-60).

How can the concept of negative transference be useful here? I will resort to Freud himself:

[B]y introducing [the] ... mechanism of changing love into hate, we ... have reckoned as though there existed in the mind—whether in the ego or in the id—a displaceable energy, which, neutral in itself, can be added to a qualitatively differentiated erotic or destructive impulse, and augment its total cathexis ... This displaceable ... energy, which is no doubt active both in the ego and the id, proceeds from the narcissistic store of libido—that it is desexualized Eros ... [and] is employed in the service of the pleasure principle to obviate blockages and to facilitate discharge (Freud, 1989, 648).

Beyond all socio-historical (and by no means insignificant) differences there is a level at which these genocides and massacres can be seen to stem from something in common: the creation of "ecstatic communities" based on a radical form of exclusion that occurs under sociologically and anthropologically and, why not, psychoanalytically explicable circumstances. "This exclusion usually takes the form of racial or religious hatred or extreme nationalism (or a combination of these, as in the Armenian genocide), and drives the feeling that, however distasteful the murder is, the perpetrating community needs its victims dead in order to purify the state or return to a putative prelapsarian condition" (Stone, 2004, 50). The ultranationalists' psyche projects onto their targeted victims (Jews, Armenians, Gypsies, Croats, etc.) the image of the "foreign body" (often compared "scientifically" to a virus in the advanced societies) who has to pay for the alleged evil done by the latter's ascendants to the former's old organic harmonious collective unit; this was (and still is) a radical (and widespread) dimension of modernity's psyche, with a heavy emphasis on an ethnocentric understanding of the nation whose cohesion and identity were pictured as deeply endangered by alien contamination. The aim of the extermination actions was the restoration of the "original" blissful (fictitious) symphony of loving embraces lost at the hands of the racially, or religiously, or cultural-linguistically impure. This is the context in which many scapegoating atrocities took place.

In seeking to understand what leads to genocide as a form of human behaviour, it might by arguable to say that violence is, quite simply, the norm in society, a natural urge of human beings that can be mobilised by certain ideologies under certain conditions, and that what we call 'civilization' is the exception, though one no less worth striving for. People kill one another when they have been granted leave to do so or otherwise feel that they are safe to do so, for the main reason that they can, and because they enjoy doing so (Stone, 2004, 48). "Violence", as Ian James puts it, "is the very bedrock of human reality" (James, 2001, 59).

Back to Freud, I resort to his idea (adapted to negative transference, and to a collective "neurotic" or anxious subject) that, with respect to the discharge of energies,

[I]t is easy to observe a certain indifference as to the path along which the discharge takes place, so long as it takes place somehow. We know this trait; it is characteristic of the cathetic process in the id. It is found in erotic cathexes, where a peculiar indifference in regard to the object displays itself; and it is especially evident in the [negative, F.L.] *transferences, … which develop inevitably, irrespective of the persons who are their object. Not long ago Rank published some good examples of the way in which neurotic acts of revenge can be directed against the wrong people … [In such cases,] punishment must be exacted even if it does not fall upon the guilty … [The] objects [of revenge themselves] were … relegated to a position of no more than secondary importance… If this displaceable energy is desexualized libido, it may be also described as sublimated energy; for it would still retain the main purpose of Eros—that of uniting and binding—in so far as it helps towards establishing the unity, or tendency to unity, which is particularly characteristic of the ego* (Freud, 1989, 648, 649).

Seen in this light, the above associations are not incompatible with perspectives on genocide such as that of Du Preez (1994, 3, 28), that stresses its "unprofitable" or "transcendental" aspects, or that of Aronson (1984, 139, 142), who talks of genocide as "social madness" that "comes from the depths of a society", or that implied by Stone's characterization of the phenomenon as social "articulation of frustrated energy" (Stone, 2003, 9).

For some while it has become common knowledge that, among the fantasy-figures that continue to "attract" discharges of hostile, destructive, social energies (expressed in forms of physical or symbolic violence) in various societies, the "mythical Jew" remains exemplary. As Vladimir Tismăneanu suggestively put it, "this reification of "the Jew" as the threatening alien goes hand in hand with the parochial fetishisation of national history, which represents the major legitimising principle of collective identity" (Tismăneanu, 1999, 118). Following the insightful Freudian thinker Slavoj Žižek, Tismăneanu describes antisemitic fantasies as "expressions of neurotic reactions to the impossibility of a fully homogenous national identity of a corporatist type" and "the Jew" as the "embodiment of the absolute failure of the totalitarian project" (Žižek, as cited in Tismăneanu, 1999, 118). Portrayed as the negative character par excellence within the national self-laudatory narratives "the mythical Jew" is rightfully placed by another convincing analyst, Denise Rosenthal, at the epicentre of what she terms a "pervasive nostalgia":

[T]he narrative of "the mythical Jew" could be said to transpire on a complex background that includes… nostalgia, conspiracy theories and scapegoatism; self-perception as "victimised majority" and [often] a positively revived inter-war [and wartime] fascist mythology; to which we could also add a tormented post-communist socio-economic transition and its correlative cultures of despair (Rosenthal, 2001, 421).

Such accounts do not overlook the importance of "modernity"; rather, "the rational aspects of modernity are themselves the conditions which necessitate outbursts of violence such as genocide, since there are no structures in modern societies for otherwise permitting such outbursts." What is remarkable here is that "the very process of

violence is ascribed rational ends by most scholars and other commentators (e.g. war, or, *in extremis*, even the industrial, "bureaucratic" mass murder such as the Holocaust), thus confirming the extent to which modern society is blinded to the recognition of the need of violent displacement of its excess energies" (Stone, 2004, 50).

The "revengeful" exterminatory actions taken against the groups of stigmatized enemies seem to echo, at a collective level, Freud's own explanation of his former patient Dora's negative transference:

[B]ecause the unknown quantity in me which reminded [a patient whose name was] Dora of Herr K. [her former therapist] she took her revenge on me as she wanted to take her revenge on him, and deserted me as she believed herself to have been deceived and deserted by him. Thus she acted out an essential part of her recollections and fantasies (Freud, 1989, 236).

Through acting this way, a patient feels "obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of … *remembering* it as something belonging to the past. These reproductions … are invariably acted out in the sphere of transference" (Freud, 1989, 602). Interestingly enough, almost in all cases of "decontaminative", group-annihilating violence, a high degree of intimacy with the victims (as cohabitants and co-participants to the socio-economical and cultural progress) functions as a perquisite of the destructive actions, and the squandering of resources does not consist only of the allocation of means towards their annihilation, but mainly of the ritualistic, sacrificial destruction of these groups themselves, perceived as assets, as efficient parts of society. In a significant way, this resonates with Freud's dialectic of love-hate and intimacy that contextualize his treatment of transference, as well with Adam Phillips' interpretation of transference as a form of secular idolatry (Phillips, 1993, 129).

As a concluding idea—and reasserting that the above observations are just a sketchy set of suggestions—I chose Irvin Yalom's unifying existentialist idea which links human actions (no matter how extreme) with the anxious, often desperate and irrational search for meaningfulness of existence. As a part of this process, Freud's concept of transference is described as "our proclivity to experience another in an irrational fashion" (Yalom, 1998, 274). Yalom linked this universal propensity in man with the permanent quest for, if not creation of, meaning which characterizes our projections and actions: "One of the fundamental sources of anxiety from an existential frame of reference is meaninglessness. We appear to be meaning-seeking creatures who are thrown into a universe and a world which lack intrinsic meaning" (Yalom, 1998, 276).

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So far, psychoanalysis has had a relatively minor role regarding the psychology of genocide. To that end, works like Semelin's (2007)—regarding purity; LaCapra's (1994, 1998, 2001, 2009)—on "working through" trauma; Žižek's (1994, 2008)—on "traumatic" surplus-enjoyment; Stone's (2001, 2003, 2006)—on modernity's outlets of excess collective energy, as well as the more technical research, such as Laub's (1992, 2008), Kerstenberg's (1993, 1994, 1998), or Baum's (2008), are opening up a whole new range of conceptualizations and thus, of new comprehensive perspectives. Mass killings of Armenians, Jews, Cambodians, Bosnians, Rwandans, Darfurians, Kossovans, and other ethnic groups, serve as primary

sources for these explorations. Among such valuable contributions, the ones coming from the psychoanalytical professionals per se stand out, due to their technical-instrumental application of Freudian ideas to these gruesome realities. Owing to all the above (and other likeminded) scholars' perspectives and ways of blending varieties of anthropology, cultural criticism, social psychology and object relations theory, the "why" of genocide becomes more understandable in the context of normal and ordinary psychopathology. Transference might very well contribute increasingly to the necessary comprehension of these major genres of traumatic events, which repeatedly forced the redefining of human condition.

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