Book review:
Sarajevo 2000. The psychosocial consequences of war. Results of empirical research from the territory of former Yugoslavia.

Tania Zittoun

University of Cambridge
Email: tz211@cam.ac.uk

At one end of things, there is a psychology that slowly polishes its models in quiet libraries, before discussing them at scientific conferences. And at the other end, there is another psychology, which is brutally begotten when reality breaks down. This is a psychology of emergency, necessarily based on the slow work of its protected relative.

"Sarajevo 2000" brings together papers of psychologists that have worked during or after the war in Yugoslavia: scholars from Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and a few Americans and Europeans. These psychologists have been exposed to war and its social, psychological and material consequences, and have dealt with people that have been victims and witnesses of violence and destruction. These are in refugee camps because their homes have been destroyed, in health dispensaries, or within communities that try to reconstruct themselves. The question the book addresses is, given the major ruptures war has exerted for the countries, the communities, families and individuals, and the very long process transition through which a new social organisation and life trajectories might emerge, what is the nature of the trauma fallen upon this region, its inhabitants and its psychologists? And how can we describe and understand, act upon it, and possibly heal it?

The 65 papers gathered in this book on the basis of a Symposium held in Sarajevo in 2000 are organised into two sections: papers on adults, and papers on children and youth. Each of these sections is itself subdivided: half of the papers aim at describing the consequences of war, half account for initiatives of healing, reconstruction, reorganisation of the people, the communities and the material and social world in Yugoslavia. Helpful synthetic papers open each section, rendering explicit the psychosocial framework that organises the project.

As social psychologists tell us, in situations of rupture of socially shared reality, two complementary processes happen. On one hand, when situations are on the edge of collapsing, only the more robust and simple categorical tools resist. On the other hand, social representations and other forms of simplifying thoughts intrude where the social fabric is torn apart (Moscovici 1999). These two dynamics strongly appear in "Sarajevo 2000" as resulting from emergency work.

The simple and robust enough framework that has been proposed to organise descriptions and attempts to understand the complex reality, is a "psychosocial model". According to such an approach, and against medical and sociological models, traumatic and posttraumatic effects of the war are not located "within" the person or seen only as resulting from social dynamics: a traumatic situation is rather understood at the interplay between a person and his or her life story, the material and social situation which she or he is situated, inter group dynamics, and collective events. In some cases, interpersonal, group and collective situations can also provide resources to confront such ruptures, and support meaning-making processes that might enable recuperation. The more illuminating uses of this model is given by presentations of complex, multilevel psychosocial interventions: the book documents many local initiatives to restore community links, enable collective circulation of speech, commitment to actions and mutual support.

Social psychology has also warned us that more rigid and readymade forms of thought and communication might occupy the scene in emergency situations. In the papers gathered for "Sarajevo 2000", this rigidity is formal and methodological: each paper is very short (more an abstract than a paper), and presented according to a standardised psychological format: case presentation, a hypothesis on variables influencing the gravity of trauma, its consequences or a repertory measure, and results that are consistent or not with that hypothesis; most of the data is collected through standardised tests. The form is frustrating, for as social psychologists, we wish to have access to the psychosocial processes and dynamics that lead to increased traumatic situations, not to correlations based on scales that we don't see. Also, it is interesting, but not enough, to read that this or that "group psychosocial activity" had positive effect: what we want to read is how, through which interactions, negotiations and activities, young people where brought to be able to overcome the ruptures imposed to their lives on a societal scale (for example, Emiliani & Bastianoni 1993, Heath 1996, Hundeide 2004). Beyond this frustration, however, the accumulation of short papers enables the reader to get an impressionistic view of the consequences of war and post-war period. Finally, through this methodological difficulty, we have a glimpse of the disarray of the psychologists that have to "measure" trauma, asking children how many direct or indirect violence events they have been exposed to, or to test the hypothesis of people's "negative attitudes" towards the fact that they have been displaced.

The book, as revealing a "societal psychology" of emergency, is important; it is also a testimony of the work of psychologists committed to account for a difficult reality with available tools. Yet the book's limitations tragically reflect the demands of a standardised psychology. It also cruelly indicated that not so many of the numerous conceptual tools developed in time of peace are de facto available and robust enough to be used by people who need to read, describe and understand complex disruptive socio-cultural and human situations.

Thus, on the basis, one would like this book to be only the first step of a collective work. On the side of psychologists engaged in re-constructive communities, we would expect a more extended documentation of local actions. On the other hand, the book documents a complex reality that might be of interest for social, clinical and developmental "library" psychologists, and might invite them to engage a dialogue with their colleagues in the field. Such a mutual acknowledgement and exchange would enable addressing theoretical matters,

such as trauma as a psychosocial problem, and developing methods and an epistemology that enables accounting for complex local realities without loosing scientific quality.

References

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