

THE DESTRUCTIVE WORK OF THE FIGURE OF "THANATHOFORO"⁴ AND ITS INVOLVEMENT IN THE COLLAPSE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL HOLDER: THE LOOK OF A PEDAGOGICAL SUPERVISION WITHIN A COMMUNITY FOR CHILDREN

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I have now worked for almost three years as pedagogical consultant and supervisor within a service where relationships were characterized by a high rate of suffering. If at first the explicit question I was asked referred to having to take care of the dysfunctions of the communication processes within the team, I realized afterwards that the level of unease was linked not just to a first level, that of communicative interactions, but also to a sharper, pervasive and imperceptible level, linked to the phenomena related by Bleger to the "area of the syncretic sociability" (Bleger, 1967).

These phenomena concern: "the primary mental processes in which each of those we consider as being isolated, from a naturalistic point of view, is in a state of fusion or indiscrimination." This level can also be seen in the mental life of the groups, including those sharing the same duty, and it's very intense. On a first level, a group communicates on the base of conscious interactions, while on a second level it works according to a syncretic model that assures stability and affiliation, but develops divisions. Primitive elements circulated in the "institutional field" (Correale, 1991) producing a relational atmosphere characterized by a strongly destructive element expressed by states of emotional impermeability, distrust, cynicism, intolerance toward every form of change, ideological rigidity.

The residential institutes like the community for children here described, are particularly subject to this drift, for the educators develop a strong tendency to personally invest in their work and struggle to mark clear borders between personal and professional life; these are educational places inhabited by a *family* mentality. Even if these communities are like families only on a "fictional" level, these places experience deep contaminations with diffused life; the inhabitants' different cultures mix, and so do their personal histories and the emotional bonds within the team and between the children with their transferal and counter-transferal experience. This complex relational field contributes to form that unique and original patrimony that every community elaborates in times, but it also exposes it to the risk of a communication based on self-referentiality and pathological drifts. The institutional and organizational dimension centered on the roles and positions of power, is contaminated by a more intangible level in

⁴ Diet, E. (1988), *Il Thanatoforo. Lavoro della morte e distruttività nelle istituzioni* in A. A.V.V., trad.it., *Sofferenza e psicopatologia dei legami istituzionali*, Borla, Roma, 1991, p. 125

which large portions of primitive emotions circulate, making the life of operators and children extremely complex and tiring (Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2012).

In one of his interesting work, the psychoanalyst Diet (1988) goes deep into the topic of institutional suffering from a perspective that focuses on the articulation between the individual dimension and the institutional dimension. The author says: "within real groups and within organizations, suffering sharply questions the articulation between the intra-psychic, the inter-subjective and the trans-subjective."⁵ The author identifies in the figure of *thanathoforo* a function, expressed by one or more individuals, capable of diverting the institution towards destructive, deadly drifts.

I would like to shortly describe the scenario of this community for foreign minors, who entered our Country as illegal immigrants and ended up trying to be part of a life and working experience in the community; I am going to go through a few particular moments concerning my professional experience in this service, starting with the first meeting we had, then eventually I will discuss upon this articulation between intra-psychic, inter-subjective and trans-subjective, through the figure of *thanathoforo*.

One day, I received a phone call from a person who introduced herself as the coordinator of an educational service located in a big city of northern Italy. She summed up the reason for calling for consultancy: the operators were experiencing an extremely deep sense of unease concerning both their mutual relationship and the relationship between coordinators and their director. According to the coordinator, the educators were taking conflictual positions within the team that could not be handled, and the same was happening between the coordinators and the director.

She told me she was calling on behalf of the director, for he needed help to understand the reason of this diffused sense of frustration. He was willing to pay for consultancy, "the sooner the better". The coordinator also told me that it was a urgent matter because more than anyone else, the guests were being negatively affected by this malfunctioning. At my arrival on the day established, I was taken by a guest to see the director and coordinator. Then we all moved to the meeting room, as the director started to tell us about the history of the service: he pointed out the early days and his intention to recover the service from the previous administration's failure, caused by a group of educators that he describes as being "an excellent trio, full of ideas and passion." He also said that he use to work for a company and eventually he developed strong managerial skills.

He was very passionate when he had to describe the relationship within that first group of pioneers, stating that the group was very much close and just a look in the eyes was enough for them to share decisions. He also told me that this "state of grace" lasted for the whole first period of foundation of the service. His

ivi, p. 125.

memories were veiled with regret: problems, said the director, started about three years later, when the evolution of the educational project required the opening of two new services and to recruit new educators.

As the consultant asked which were these problems, the director explained that these were most of all organizational problems, due to the need to adopt new rules, new roles and duties positioning, following the recruitment of new staff.

He recalled how dissatisfaction spread and led the group to start complaining and claiming: many educators started to ask for wage increase, complaining about the educational job being too hard. He also remembered how budget cuts put him in an ever restrictive position and that exasperated the conflicts. The coordinator remained silent. While I was listening to him, my attention got caught by a drawing on the blackboard of the meeting room.

The director noticed it and changed subject; he started telling us that, besides the administration, he was also in charge of the general education project of the service and the operators' training, which was something he had to give up on for the operators refused his authority, which to him was a clear sign of how “sick the service was”.

Then he pointed out the drawing on the board, a result of a formative work done by his team: a few sketches, images of war where the three professional teams were represented by a bomb, a submarine and a tank.

The director, I finally understood, had a kind of *narcissistic* leadership and his collaborators were welcome only to the point where they accepted his work; as for him, because of this pathological aspect of his personality, he didn't understand that it was impossible to be in charge of the administration office and at the same time, of the operators' training. By caring only for his needs and not his collaborators, we was sensing all those who were not on his side as being enemies, and the drawing on the board highlighted the state of civil war that was taking place within the service.

After a couple of months I met M., a young educator who had worked for this service and happened to participate to the groups of supervision I was in charge of. He had entered the community when the service was still small, run by only one team, with a few educators and children. The moment M. entered the group, he was captured by this wave of harmony in the first phase, and for some time he took active part to all this, sharing a friendly relationship with the other educators and the director, even outside work. After a few months, the service started to expand, new children entered the community, therefore a more appropriate organization service was needed.

In this phase of enthusiasm and transformation, together with a young colleague just recruited, M. proposed a lab activity for the guests, based on reading newspapers, with the aim of promoting better knowledge of the Italian culture amongst the foreign children.

The activity got started but, after a few sessions, suddenly suspended, following a disciplinary action taken by the director, and the two educators transferred to a

new team that was being formed. The reason for the disciplinary action remained unknown for quite a while; only a few months later it was revealed that the lab activity had been seen by the head office as a mean through which sponsoring a specific political party by reading certain newspapers instead of others.

From that moment on, M. became the leader of a silent, anti-institutional rebellion that gathered several followers and led to a first breach in the team, between those who were supporting the director and those who took side with his two "rivals".

Diet explains that the *thanathoforo* is an individual who offers his/her personal problems to the institutional apparatus to attack its “living elements” of thought and transformation; we are dealing with a strong, charismatic personality that, by bringing the attention on the destructive capacity of its subject, seduces and paralyzes the group of which it is part, it immobilizes the internal dynamism and forces it to stop and surrender to any attempt of crossing and overcoming the psychic experience in progress. The *thanathoforo* produces an effect of bombing on the mental level of a group, that erases any form of life and creates an effect of distressing impotence and impossibility to react. This attitude was used by M. in the groups of supervision that were destabilized and impoverished by his action. He continuously projected his hostility on the head office and manipulated the group to gather allies upon his experience of "*politically persecuted person*". Nevertheless, he never thought about discussing the matter and his reasons with the director in a face-to-face meeting, nor ever considered to leave and look for another employment.

He was acting as a persecuted-persecutor who, during the supervision sessions, crystallized his relationship with the group upon a sadomasochistic register. He use to either attack every thought that was suggesting a change, or play the role of institutional *scapegoat*; his job was to informally discredit the director and keep on fueling a silent climate of war where everyone was vigilant for the enemy was everywhere, and who was an ally could have turned into an enemy from one day to another.

Diet explains that this figure does not represent much just one individual, but instead a “containing function”,⁶ capable of moving from one individual to the other within the same institution and aims at nipping in the bud any possible change. His action was directed to destroy the bonds, to discredit hostile people and build up a state of uncertainty, precariousness and unbalance within the group, in which fears could be cultivated and cleverly exploited and manipulated.

Diet also explains that the personal pathology of the *thanathoforo* can be read, in kleinian terms, as overloaded with envy and subject to the impossibility to access gratitude (Klein, 1957).

² Neri, C. (2004), *Gruppo*, Borla, Roma, p. 15.

We are dealing with individuals who accept relationships with the others only based on power, failing to take into accounts the limits imposed by the institutional life to its members and the sacrifice of the individual needs. The *thanathoforo* is obsessed with power and attacks whoever holds it. Power became in time the institutional problem: everyone felt threatened and started to attack one another for they were fearing each other; the teams were “basic assumption” groups (Bion, 1961) that, for their own sake, stopped looking after the children, for they were too busy discussing their relationship without solving them.

Diet explains that the *thanathoforo* reveals itself only in a context that evokes and calls in its personal pathology; its destructive action reveals itself and takes root under the following conditions:

- an individual or a group of individuals, with pathological structure of personality;
- a group experiencing a condition of difficulty, crisis or transition;
- an organizational and institutional apparatus that is either too miserable or too rigid, that is not fully performing its duty of "holding" (as for example: a leader who doesn't recognize and protect sufficiently the rights of his/her employees, etc...)

Starting with the perspective suggested by Diet, let's analyze the conditions that enabled the thanatophoric function within the service:

- by taking part to the phase of group illusion (Neri, 2004) of the community, M. shares all the experiences that come with this condition, which causes a high rate of emotional effort, as he idealizes both the service and the group that found it;
- by suggesting to run the lab, this fantasy becomes active, as this directs significant portions of the identity of the two educators, who sense the positive requirements to express experiences and values of their history of formation, which makes them active part within the setting of the lab;
- all of a sudden, the punishment materializes, out of the blue, right when the group is trying to settle for a clearer assignment and is providing itself with a formal organizational structure; this sudden, rough passage comes to interrupt an intense imaginary game, in which utopian aspects of the personal life of the two educators were conveying alongside the utopian experience that was still characterizing the first phase of the community;

*The banishment from the group has the meaning of a **professional trauma**, felt as "a disavowal and a persecution that cancel the work of elaboration"⁷; moving into a new group is not perceived as a punishment only by the two operators, but also by the team, which feels like being unfit to hire people who are seen by the head office as unreliable.*

³ Diet, E. (1988), *op cit*, p.129.

Having failed to be appreciated by the head office, the group is destabilized and regresses. The individuals of the group experience a deep sense of abandonment and nonentity that enables the figure of the *thanathoforo* which, from that moment on, will engage a punitive mission directed to the head office and the group itself, from which was banned and wasn't sufficiently protected.

Basically, according to Diet, this individual, following these traumatic banishment and punishment, came under attack, the integrity of his *Itself* was threatened, as he was exposed to the risk of a personal breakdown. Such risk can be avoided thanks to the process of projective identification. The destructive elements move to the guilty party (the head office and the group) and the individual becomes the spokesperson of a counter-culture that takes the form of a real anti-ideology.

What consequences do an institution and a group experiencing the function of *thanathoforo* "have to face? Diet wrote:

He has cut all ties. By contemptuously receding, the *thanathoforo* breaks the group associative chain: he is the obstacle that interrupts the associative flow, the abyss that inhales the emotional waves, the switch that cut the energy to the thought.⁸

His pervasive, subtle work is done against everything and everyone; the *thanathoforo* manipulates the institutional reality and brings up its layer of immobility:

By using the mistakes done by some, the weaknesses of others, their transgressions and irregularities, the dysfunctions and contradictions observed within the institution, he radically jeopardized the legitimacy of the psychic and socio-cultural organization.⁹

It's like his work would always affect the leaks, the incongruities, the twists of the system, to finally bring to light, always and anyhow, the dark side of the institution and therefore make impossible to achieve any transformation. So M. embodied the terrible, deadly ban that can be synthesized with the expression: "it is not possible to dream!"¹⁰ He became paladin of a cynical realism and a nihilism that was working against any possible change.

Together with the ideology, I – the supervisor - was the target of his attack, being the representative of the maintenance and valorization of the affective and cultural patrimony of the community.

Then eventually I realized that the director and M. were the two twin figures connected by the unconscious intention of destroying the institutional holder. The director would have rather had the current service collapsing than having to recover from the loss of the original service; he was unable to forget the dream phase of the foundation, therefore he enjoyed, with sadism, that sense of unease

⁴ Ivi, p.137.

⁵ Ivi, p.139.

¹⁰ Ivi, p.150.

experienced by the educators and the guests; by attracting, one by one, all members of the group and seducing them with confidences, by discrediting the others, using narcissistic complicity, both of them were tearing the group apart and preventing the work of elaborating the experience. Despite the illusory antagonism, they were fighting the same war against the service and the possibility there could have been space to rebuild the bonds and the function of the thought. All this was making impossible to have a communication based on recognition and sharing, therefore any educational intent was deflagrating.

The minors, abandoned to this flow of unhealthy communication, were suffering from this cultural abuse, lack of distance and respect. Leaving was the only way I had to highlight my disapproval of this violent culture, my deep sense of indignation for the lack of any interest in the suffering of these children.

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