



Book Review

***Resilience and Survival: Understanding and Healing Intergenerational Trauma*, by Clara Mucci, Confer Books, London, 2022, 212 pages.**

Clara Mucci is a well-known and prolific author who has extensively published in the fields of both literature and clinical psychology. Her profile is unique, embracing different but also complementary competencies. After a Ph.D. in literature and psychoanalysis at the Emory University, she became full professor of English literature in Italy. Later, she studied with Otto Kernberg at the Personality Disorder Institute, and became full professor of Clinical Psychology. Presently, she has the Chair in Dynamic Psychology at the University of Bergamo, Italy. In her first academic life she wrote on Shakespeare and women's life, while in her second she wrote on the Shoah and trauma theory. Some of her best-known books are *Extreme Sorrow: Trauma from Freud to the Shoah* (2008), *Beyond Individual and Collective Trauma: Intergenerational Transmission, Psychoanalytic Treatment, and the Dynamics of Forgiveness* (2013); and *Borderline Bodies: Affect Regulation Therapy for Personality Disorders* (2018). Each one of these books is marked by Mucci's encounter with an author who has had a deep and lasting influence on her: Dori Laub, and his definition of trauma as "the break of the empathic dyad"; Giovanni Liotti, and his claim that only trauma of human agency creates dissociation in the psyche; and finally, Allan Schore, with his view of attachment as based on a right-brain connection between child and caregiver, the same which regulates the unconscious connection between patient and psychotherapist. Her main and original contribution consists in the reorganization of these elements in a unique psychodynamic theory of the progressive levels of interpersonal traumatization: 1. early relational trauma due to misattunement between mother and child; 2. active abuse and maltreatment, leading to the identification with the aggressor; and 3. collective and massive traumatization. Since these progressive levels of interpersonal traumatization usually result in the intergenerational transmission of trauma, in turn they affect the basic level of syntonization and affect regulation, giving the process of human traumatization a peculiar circularity. This process is fully developed in Mucci's last book on *Resilience and Survival*.¹

Its starting point is the criticism of the DSM's notion of post-traumatic stress disorder, which, by including both trauma of human agency and natural catastrophes, blurs a fundamental distinction, since "natural catastrophes do not create dissociation" (p. 18). "The fact that only trauma of human agency creates dissociation in the psyche points," according to Mucci, "at the utmost importance for the human psyche to create and maintain a bond with the other, a bond based on

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trust and security.” (p. 81). The core of trauma is an attack to this bond; its immediate effect is that “the trust in the world totally breaks down” as put by the philosopher and survivor Jean Amery (p. 56), while its lasting effect is dissociation, which is here presented as “the basic structure of human pathology” and described as “a fracture in vertical connectivity in the human mind” (p. 18) or, in neurobiological terms, “between the amygdala and other higher structures in the brain” (p. 18).

Once clarified that trauma is a threat to the “security of attachment,” which is instrumental to the acquisition of affect regulation and to the creation of a protection against future stressors in the individual, Mucci presents her psychodynamic model of traumatization, which is based on dissociation and deeply tuned with Ferenczi’s understanding of trauma. Here we find a further original contribution by Mucci, namely her interpretation of Ferenczi’s key notion of identification with the aggressor, which is re-described as internalization of a victim/persecutor dyad. This enables a sharper distinction of the three levels of traumatization. Beyond their own peculiarities, these different levels have a common feature: they are all a transgression of the “of the pact between humans that keeps society safe, the pact of empathy and recognition of the humanity in the other” (pp. 55–56).

The Freudian battle between Eros and Thanatos is then located “within the two extremes of utter inhumanity and the incredible capacity to resist or elaborate stress and contrast traumatic effects” (p. 7) and reformulated into a battle between creating and destroying bonds which ultimately questions “what it means to be ‘human’ “ (p. 7). As put by Mucci, “if what makes us human and extraordinarily creative ... and even resilient, is embedded in the same essence that makes us ‘inhuman’ and utterly destructive, how are we going to define the human?” (p. 10).

According to Mucci, who largely draws from contemporary epigenetics, there is not an *a priori* definition, simply based on a given “nature.” Neither aggressiveness nor resilience are “innate.” Violence and antisocial behavior “are connected to insecure and disorganized attachment” (p. 13), and since attachment “is not innate,” but depends on the quality of caregiving, “we can create ‘resilient societies’ if we first of all take care of children and their parents” (p. 22). Resilience itself, far from being “a gift of chance or merely the legacy of good genes ... can be and needs to be continuously recreated and ensured or installed between one generation and the other, individually and collectively” (p. 22).

A second important point in what we might call the dialectic of humanity and inhumanity is represented by *forgiveness*, which is described as “the interpersonal and intrapsychic work done in therapy that allows the actual elaboration and resolution of the victim-persecutor dyad, with the subsequent elaboration of the mourning process” (p. 167). My impression here is that the author is mainly speaking of forgiving oneself, since the restoration of the self and of the world has to pass through the acceptance of one’s fragility, pain and mourning. It implies the “letting go of the internalization of the identification with a part of oneself as victim (with guilt and shame) and a part of oneself with an internalized persecutor, filled with rage and aggressiveness, often turned against one self and one’s own body” (p. 61).

The body is indeed a main element of the dialectic outlined in this book; first of all, because the working models of the psyche “are constructed through the body of

the child in interaction with the body of another" (p. 106), and then because it operates as the depository of the attacks of the others to our self, which are internalized and re-enacted first of all as attacks on one's own body, taking only secondarily the form of violence against the others. Because of dissociation "the body becomes the disregarded culprit; it is the body that feels disgust, rage, self-loathing, and other sensations, but it is impossible to connect those feelings to the self, since the self has been physically, emotionally and cognitively disconnected" (p. 79). Thus, our body marks the very presence of the other in the midst of the dissociated self, becoming the very place in which inhumanity can be reverted. What gives to the wounded body this extraordinary mutative power is its fragility or vulnerability, which is presented as "our strength" (p. 62). In Mucci's words "the very fragility of the body is also the matrix and site of resilience and resides also paradoxically in the softness and delicacy of the human body, inhabited by pain," (p. 62). In contrast with the invulnerability of the robot, it is from the feeling of tenderness born from the embrace of our "delicate body" that a sense of integrity can be found. Here "the integrity of the flesh" emerges as "a guardian to the integrity of the soul" (p. 62).

Embodied witnessing is another key notion of this book. It transports us into the space of therapy with survivors, designating it as a practice of connectedness and testimony aimed at re-establishing the lost empathic dyad inside and with the other. Mucci refers here to the empathic capacity of the "benevolent" psychotherapist of incest victims described by Ferenczi in his *Clinical Diary*, but her main inspiration is the testimonial process with survivors of the Shoah described by Dori Laub, where trauma defies representation and narrative telling and the re-establishment of a human bond "is what protects the subject from inner extinction" (p. 149). Emphasizing the need to create a holding space and a place of internal safety, Mucci is categorical in rejecting certain tools of classical analysis, such as the use of the couch and a neutral or non-judgmental posture, stressing instead the necessity of a face-to-face contact and of an unremitting sense of responsibility and ethical commitment on the part of the therapist. This commitment is described as "something closer to a spiritual position in the sense of a human quality, a dedication to the other that goes almost beyond one's own self" (p. 155), perhaps putting too pressure on the therapist's shoulders or underestimating the danger of rescue fantasies. In any case such a danger is well balanced by the recommendation that the therapist has to remain in contact with the root of his/her own fragile humanity, providing "a certain form of presence" (p. 159) which enables the survivor to reconstitute the "essential trust in humanity that has been lost in traumatization" (p. 163), and the therapist "to connect emotionally to the missing parts, the denied pieces of history, the dissociated aspects, and to resonate with them, helping in their recollection" (p. 169).

Still, here and there, one finds some excess in assertiveness – for instance: "if the listener is not totally committed and available, the erased parts cannot be retrieved" (p. 163) – which combines with a baffling lack of references to countertransference. We might say that the dialectical thinking that flows through the book, after leading the reader to the depths of the body, struggles to fully re-emerge in the interaction

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between therapist and patient. This final part, dedicated to the therapeutic process, is, in this book, less elaborated than in the previous ones, and the reader has the impression of being exposed to two different lines of thinking. One is overly prescriptive, urging to distinguish “which level of trauma the patient has been victim of” (p. 170), and lining up the “steps” in the treatment (p. 166). The other claims that the treatment cannot be an application of rules and techniques, and that we should be capable “to stay with the patient without imposing ourselves, our wish, our agenda” (p. 168). And yet also this impression is balanced by Mucci’s remark that the therapeutic process is not a linear, but rather a cyclical or recursive one.

Apart from these minor inconsistencies, which probably are due to the mixed audience for which the book is intended as it is for scholars but addressed to students, *Resilience and Survival* provides the reader not only with an enormous and updated corpus of researches, but also with lively, systematic and passionate ideas on the factors that prevent and combat extreme psychological trauma.

NOTE

This book was discussed on November 5th, 2022, at the virtual Book Presentation Series of the International Sándor Ferenczi Network, by the author Clara Mucci, book reviewer Carlo Bonomi and discussant Howard Steele.

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