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## Call to Remain Responsible as a Sign of Cultural Trauma

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### *Summary*

In this text, by analysing the message that envelopes strategies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, “Let us remain responsible”, the author points to the problem that cultural trauma can be witnessed only after the event (*Nachträglichkeit*) or during the event itself. The message by itself already produces at least three interwoven paradoxes: 1) paradox of addressee; 2) paradox of receiver; and 3) paradox of demand. Those paradoxes point to the existence of trauma inside the culture that becomes tangible in the time of crises and is reflected, among other things, as the awareness of the split in subject (Jacques Lacan). This awareness of the split as ‘extimate’ experience broadens the binary interpretation of cultural trauma proposed by Jeffrey Alexander, who situates trauma between the event and its representation, in which the representation is the source of trauma, not the event itself. The presented cases point to the conclusion that the event itself is already symbolic and, hence, representational, but in the inverse sense, as an object that is missing in the symbolic or Lacanian algebra as “object a” that is the source of traumatic repetition.

*Keywords:* Cultural Trauma, COVID-19, Post-Lacanian Theory

### **Introduction**

In the text ‘Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma’, Jeffrey Alexander (2004) proposed that cultural trauma is a result of the representation of the event, not the traumatic quality of the event itself. According to such logic, it is impossible to know whether society suffered trauma during the event. It is possible to know that only through representation of the event that took place and gained position in the collective representation. “[S]ocieties can experience massive disruptions that do not become traumatic. (...) For traumas to emerge at the level of collectivity, social crisis

must become cultural crisis” (*ibid.*, p. 10). Of course, Alexander is well aware of the issue concerning the differentiation between cultural and social crisis. It seems that cultural crisis, according to Alexander, is part of representation, i.e., symbolic transformation of a particular event in a traumatic way. Does this claim point to the social realm as external to representation? Or, in other words, does this mean that the event in itself exists on the ontological level and is just a question of representation, or, to put it bluntly, that trauma is an issue of epistemology? These questions point to the standard dichotomy, or binary opposition, that juxtaposes event and representation. But, as Stuart Hall (2000) pointed out, we can easily understand event as a product of representation in the sense that what is selected from “reality” as event is always already part of representation. By applying Hall’s idea to the cultural trauma issue, it can be said that there is trauma in representation before the supposedly traumatic event happened or even independently of it. In that case, we can face cultural trauma only as representation, and not in representation, and understand it as the moment in which representational practices are unable to construct a meaningful world for collectivity. Social crisis introduced by Alexander would then be just crisis, which is part of representational practices, understood and expected as ‘crisis’. Furthermore, the mechanisms that Alexander investigates in the transformation of social crisis into cultural trauma through different social actors thus cannot be located in the realm of decision: “Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as fundamental threat to their sense of who they are...” (Alexander, 2004, p. 10), but in the representation itself. A moment when social actors start to operate through representation is the moment after the representational system failed and society already tries to patch the rip in the texture of understanding the world, or, in other words, society tries to ‘*pull itself together*’. Cultural trauma in that case could be understood as an internal inherent impasse of representational practice. Such a claim is not very far from Alexander’s view, event is still independent of representation, but social and cultural crises are differently understood. A social crisis refers to those events that are part of the symbolic chain of signification; a cultural crisis emerges when this chain collapses and representation is impossible or at least highly contested.

In this text, I will examine the aforementioned proposition of understanding cultural trauma, as a way of collapse of representational practices, through the case of cultural reaction to the COVID-19 crisis. Namely, the structure of cultural trauma proposed by Alexander cannot provide an answer to whether the ongoing pandemic is a cultural trauma or just another social crisis. The answer is left for the future. But, if cultural trauma is an effect in representation, rather than of representation, there must be symptoms of the trauma spread across representational practices that society uses facing the pandemic.

### **‘To Be Responsible...’ – Faced with Trauma**

Last summer while I was driving back from holidays, numerous digital billboards along the highway were sending the same message :“LET US REMAIN RESPONSIBLE!” Of course, in different contexts, such a message could be differently understood. For example, just two years ago this message could be interpreted as a call to be attentive in traffic by respecting speed limits or adjusting driving due to heavy traffic circumstances. But last summer everyone immediately understood that this message was not addressed to our way of driving, but our behavior in the pandemic. At the time, these words were already part of the media campaign related to maintaining physical distance, washing hands, and wearing a protection mask. The media successfully fixed the meaning of the message and no matter where or when someone saw it, it served as a reminder of those three simple tasks.

Naturally, it was not the first time that the media tried to overcome the sliding of meaning under the signifier and create a message that would be recognizable in every context. But, in such attempts, the media message suddenly starts to point to its internal inconsistencies. In the case of remaining responsible, it is the grammar of the message. There are three aspects contained in the message that are paradoxical: paradox of addressee, paradox of sender, and paradox of demand. Let me clarify this.

The message is structured through an exhortative imperative verb mood, which is a strange choice if we compare it with other possible imperatives at hand, for example as a command: “Remain responsible” or a suggestion such as “Let’s remain responsible”. The exhortative imperative situates the message between command and suggestion, it could be interpreted at the same time as command and as suggestion. That leaves the addressee of the message in an undecidable position, faced with the enigma what the sender wants her or him to do, to blindly obey or critically discuss the situation and act accordingly. Or, if we use Lacanian vocabulary, it is the question: “Che vuoi?” or what the Other wants from me. On the other hand, the message, whether intended to be a suggestion or a command, or both, lacks the point from which it is sent. By using first person plural, it puts the sender in the same ambivalent position as the addressee – it is simultaneously sender and addressee. Namely, from what point does the subject send the message? And, finally, to complicate the problem even further, a call for responsibility (in almost all Indo-European languages) is a call to give an answer, a response to some demand. But to answer questions such as: Where does this demand come from? Who is demanding? or What is the demand? is problematic. It seems that the way to understand the message is to presuppose some radically external position from which the demand is coming. In that way, paradoxes can be digested and normalized. If the demand comes from outside of the symbolic order (social relations, language, institutions, etc.) and we don’t really understand the reasons for the demand, then the usage of

exhortative imperative is the cry of a desperate subject exhorting her or his fellow citizens as well as himself. Moreover, external demand enables the subject to be in both positions, sender and receiver as well as someone who, so to say, critically completely obeys. Or, to put it differently, in accordance with Lacanian concepts, if the demand is coming from an unknown source inflicting us in an enigmatic way, the immediate reaction of the subject is a sudden realization of its own split. In “normal” circumstances, this split is always sewed together by fantasy or, in the words of Sean Homer: “Through fantasy, the subject attempts to sustain the illusion of unity with the Other and ignore his or her own division” (Homer, 2005, p. 87). The odd division that the individual experienced by exposure to the enigmatic demand was concealed in forms of unity represented through the mode of exhortative imperative.

Another result of this construction of unity was a closing of the borders and an emergence of different kinds of collectivism as the last retreat from the enigmatic demand. Lockdown as the main tool to address the disease was not only an epidemiological measure but also a way to introduce social fantasy founded on the idea that the Other is the same as me. This fantasy was embodied in another popular slogan: “We are all in this together!” In cases from history when societies faced a pandemic, this slogan took the form of *Danse Macabre*, a popular motive in art after the Black Death.



In the case presented, in the fresco from the town of Beram in Istria, we see that everyone is paired with a skeleton. For every woman, man, or even infant, there is her or his skeleton partner, providing the music and rhythm to the dance. One possible interpretation of the picture would be that we are all the same facing death or “*Memento mori*” in Latin, which Christianity took from the earlier

periods in European art. But there is a possible different meaning to the motive of Danse Macabre in line with the former arguments. Could we perhaps interpret it as a representation of the split subject, as a visual reaction to the internal division? If we look closer at the image, one paradoxical detail emerges: skeletons look more alive than their partners. Skeletons are playing trumpets; they are dancing and look cheerful. People, on the other hand, are static, hooked up to some role they have to play even beyond their physical death. In his book *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, leaning on Freud, Eric Santner points out that "... Freud's conception of the mechanistic aspect of the mind as manifest, for example, in the primary processes and the repetition compulsion, clearly pertains to the dimension of meaning itself and not to some more primitive, biological substratum of meaning" (Santner, 2001, pp. 29-30). This means that life itself has some sort of inanimation within it, which we clearly see in the reproduction of the fresco from Beram. Skeletons are a representation of a different kind of life, not bounded by fantasy. Then the theme of the image is not some unifying death experience, but unbounded energy of the new life which is still a sketch or skeleton waiting to be fully formed; we can only hear its announcement through the sound of trumpets, but its form is still invisible.

The silent sound of trumpets might lead us to yet another conclusion. In his book *Voice and nothing more*, Mladen Dolar points to the problem of pinpointing the voice. It has an elusive character, it appears and then disappears temporarily, it also acts as a pure and unimportant surplus of speech, but at the same time there is no speech without the voice: "If we speak in order to 'make sense', signify, convey something, then the voice is a material support of bringing about meaning, but it does not contribute to it itself" (Dolar, 2006, p. 15). Those characteristics make out of the voice an object that cannot be represented by itself. The same goes for another such object – gaze. It is known that what we see and what is sensible to us is a product of the reflection of light. But the light as such cannot be seen. Those are the blind spots of human existence. In order to produce human beings, there is something that should be repressed, and this repression opens the possibility for producing culture to organize the world in a sensible manner. In analysing gaze as oscillation between passive and active components, Jacques Lacan used the old example of Choang-tsu's paradox of dreaming of being a butterfly. Choang-tsu asks himself whether he is, when awake, just a dream of a butterfly being Choang-tsu. Here is how Lacan resolves the paradox: "... when he is the butterfly, the idea does not occur to him to wonder whether, when he is Choang-tsu awake, he is not the butterfly that he is dreaming of being. This is because, when dreaming of being the butterfly, he will no doubt have to bear witness later that he represented himself as a butterfly. But this does not mean that he is captivated by the butterfly – he is a

captive butterfly, but captured by nothing, for, in the dream, he is a butterfly for nobody. *It is when he is awake that he is Choang-tsu for others and is caught in their butterfly net*” (Lacan, 1998, p. 76; emphasis mine). This means that certain qualities of the butterfly must be repressed so Choang-tsu, when awake, could think about the butterfly, the butterfly becomes a signifier, not the butterfly as it is, so that both the butterfly and Choang-tsu could become meaningful objects for the others who attest to their existence. The gaze coming from outside is constitutive for the possibility of seeing, it is a blind spot ready to be filled in by the act of looking. Object voice is another expression of this repression that enables the speech as such, similarly as gaze, strongly connected to others. Again a quote from Dolar: “In isolation, in solitude, in complete loneliness, away from the madding crowd, we are not simply free of the voice – it can be that this is when another kind of voice appears, more intrusive and compelling than the usual mumbo-jumbo: the internal voice, a voice which cannot be silenced. As if the voice were the very epitome of a society that we carry with us and cannot get away from. We are social beings by the voice and through the voice; it seems that the voice stands at the axis of our social bonds, and that voices are the very texture of the social, as well as the intimate kernel of subjectivity” (Dolar, 2006, p. 14). Is that what we see in the fresco from Beram, some intrusive object that we cannot get rid of, even after death? Then the fresco could point to togetherness in a slightly different manner than those proposed in the motto related to COVID (“We are all in this together”). It is a social force that goes beyond a certain individual or his/her social role, age, profession, etc. It is the social that is indestructible even if there is no king and queen, pope, or even infant. This claim goes hand in hand with the description of Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Silvia Federici in the book *Caliban and the Witch*. The Black Death was devastating for the economic relations in the Middle Ages. Suddenly, the amount of property was not enough to provide secure profit because there was no work force and wages were extremely high. Those who worked became wealthier than the owners of the land: “... for the broad section of the western European peasantry, and for urban workers, the 15<sup>th</sup> century was a period of unprecedented power. Not only did scarcity of labour give them the upper hand, but the spectacle of employers competing for their services strengthened their sense of self-value, and erased centuries of degradation and subservience” (Federici, 2009, p. 46). And if we take into consideration that the first Danse Macabre was painted in Paris in times when there was no crowned king in France, the claim that the fresco could be a visual representation of a still not fully formed new society that will emerge, is not completely missing the point.

We can also consider another example of the representation of a similar invisible object from another turbulent period – the French Revolution. And again, we have a country with no king or, more precisely, the beginning of the process

of overthrowing the monarchy. The painting in question is “Death of Marat” by Jacques-Louis David. The whole upper half of the painting is formless, we are confronted with one big stain. Some critics claim that this painting is the beginning of abstraction. But what is of importance in this painting that connects us back with *Danse Macabre* is this impossibility to perceive the future, a moment in time when everything is possible. Events are happening as if there was no underlying logic, and it is questionable what we really see. Instead, what we are witnessing, in the words of Eric Santner, is “... an impasse affecting the possibility of converting events – and these events in particular – into representative images and bodies that would convincingly incarnate their truths” (Santner, 2011, p. 91). Normativity of the society changed the normativity of the painting. From that moment on, Western society will search to represent this abstraction from the upper half of “Death of Marat” or, as Santner concludes a chapter of the book *Royal Remains*, focused on the painting: “... the normative pressure proper to painting – the pressure pushing toward what counts as excellence in painting – was mutating in response to radical transformation of the political and social form of the normative pressure informing lives more generally” (*ibid.*, p. 94). Thus, what connects COVID slogans with two examples from history (*Danse Macabre* and “Death of Marat”) is an unrepresentable part of the reality. In the case of the slogans, it is a split in the subject, in the case of the fresco, a paradoxical representation of living skeletons, and in the painting “Death of Marat”, a representational deadlock in the painting that only leaves a stain on the canvas.

Representational (or cultural) trauma in the presented cases is connected to some part that is completely strange to the logic of representation. This surplus has no future, present or past, it is simply there, mocking, like the skeletons from the fresco.

### **“To Remain...” – Repetition and Blindness**

There is, however, another enigmatic part of the message (or slogan) “Let us remain responsible” that has to do with time. What the paradoxical sender/receiver also wants from us (and from herself/herself) is ‘to remain’. What does this mean? Were we all responsible in the past and it is time to just remain responsible? And when did this past time start, before the pandemic or at the start of it? And then, why exhorting? There must be some unnamed threat that could easily shatter our responsibility. Unlike the demand for response, this threat is not coming from outside. To endure or to remain is part of the sender/receiver’s internal strength and decision-making. So, there is a constant internal threat that could explode any time if we are not in constant control of our behavior. It was Jean Laplanche (2005) who first detected this hidden part of the subject that is connected to time and named it ‘enigmatic signifier’.

Jean Laplanche introduced this term in his endeavor to radicalize the Copernican revolution in Freudian thought. For Laplanche, Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory led him to centralize the subject back into the ego, characterized by constant defense against pressure coming from libidinal primal energy. Contrary to Freud, Laplanche, in order to decentralize the ego and stay faithful to the decentralizing nature of psychoanalysis, proposed to extend the seduction theory with the role of the other (the caregiver to the child). In the relation between the child and the caregiver, the infant is faced with signifiers through which he tries to fulfil his biological needs.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, what the adult is sending is not just fulfilment of the demand, but, with it, a surplus message which is the unconscious content of the adult. The child is therefore confronted with the part of the message that is undecipherable, aka the 'enigmatic signifier'. In that way Laplanche postulates this signifier as responsible for constructing the ego of the human being. The possibility to decipher part of the message builds the conscious part of the being, but as the message cannot be completely translated, it leaves a trace in the unconscious as an implant of the other. Thus, for Laplanche, there exist two types of otherness, and he used German terms to describe them – *das Andere* and *der Andere*. The first, *das Andere*, is this implant inside the individual that is never translated (alienness would be Laplanche's proper term), and *der Andere* is the other person whose unconscious part of the message is sent to the child. This alienness within the individual is responsible for the traumatic effect: "Any gesture, any mimicry functions as a signifier. These originary, traumatic signifiers I propose to call enigmatic signifiers" (Laplanche, 2005, p. 129).

This schema of work of the enigmatic signifier can be useful in understanding the aforementioned paradoxes of the message. The otherness (*der Andere*) of the virus message is partly understandable (and translatable) by science and medicine, but on the other hand it also refers to an untranslatable part located outside the scientific discourse. In other words, the virus is not just spreading through its biological properties but also through paths provided by the social structure in which we live; through the ways in which we communicate, celebrate, trade, make money, love, etc. What societies considered to be normal suddenly shows itself as an obstacle to 'digesting' the external threat, even an obstacle to preserving life itself. The Freudian term "unheimlich" (uncanny) is, in that sense, connected to the enigmatic signifier. This odd term connects interiority with exteriority<sup>2</sup> in, as Freud shows, its usage

<sup>1</sup> In fact, at the very moment of this cause-and-effect exchange through the signifier, all biological dimension is lost – the infant splits its message between need and demand (Lacan, 2006, pp. 575-585). All needs are transferred through the signifier into the demand in order to be met.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, in 'The Uncanny' Freud opens the same question as Alexander regarding conceptualization of cultural trauma. Freud, as Alexander, asks how it is possible that some novel things become uncanny and some do not.



in the language. *Heimlich* can be something that “belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud, 1970, p. 225), and through this ambiguous meaning can convert to *unheimlich*. Things that make us secure and familiar (homely) transform themselves into uncanny objects (un-homely). This transformation connects external events with internal ‘alienness’ and makes an event appear as strange matter inside society, and at the same time something very private. So, the *unheimlich* or uncanny effect is a product of realization of internal incompleteness. In the case of a pandemic, it is realization that our ‘normality’, something so familiar that we never reflect on it, comes to the fore not just as a sudden realization of internal structure, but as something that is problematic, an obstacle, a threat. Skeletons from the previous examples are part of the human body, internal stuff, but when we face them as disconnected from us, they trigger an uncanny effect. This connection between uncanny and enigmatic signifier opens the possibility to follow Laplanche’s argument also on the social level, not just individual. One example of the relation between *das Andere* and *der Andere* on the social level is the construction of collective identity. From Frederic Barth’s (1998) conceptualization of identity in his seminal book *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* to the concept of hybridity coined by Homi Bhabha (1994), identity is understood as the product of invention and the organization of cultural difference after contact with the Other (*der Andere*). Thus, the otherness is defining identity, every identity is constructed by and through the Other. This otherness is then translated into alienness (*das Andere*), this homely/unhomely element. The mentioned example goes hand in hand with Laplanche’s conceptualization of the ego. For him, the ego is constructed around the ‘alienness’ of the message of the other. The infant processes part of the message from the other, but never completely. The untranslated, enigmatic part will become unconscious. Similarly, we can understand collective identity as a form of organization formed around enigmatic otherness. It is worth mentioning that it is not just another human group that can be the origin of otherness, it could also be an environment generally understood as different from human.<sup>3</sup>

This argument leads us back to Alexander’s point on the structure of cultural trauma: “Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity” (Alexander, 2004, p 10). The discomfort thus is not the realization of some decision of collective actors, but collective realization of this unhomely element that

<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Cathy Caruth, Laplanche claimed that we can understand natural forms like earthquakes as some sort of message from the other: “I mean that, ultimately, a trauma like that may be – and this is very strange – in consonance with something like a message. After all, even an earthquake could be taken in as a message. Not just something that is factual, but something that means something to you” (<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt>).

structures their identity. Social actors act ‘a posteriori’ to deal with the effects of the enigmatic signifier.

Laplanche called this reaction to the enigmatic traumatic core of the human being ‘afterwardness’. Through this neologism (as a translation of the Freudian term *Nachträglichkeit*), Laplanche tries to point to three different time vectors related to the traumatic signifier. The basic point is that a potentially traumatic event that happened sometime in the past is internalized, but to become traumatic, it must be revived or relived to become trauma. One way of transformation of the event into trauma is the idea that there is some inherent traumatic characteristic of the event. Alexander rightly criticizes what he called a ‘natural fallacy’, claiming that the traumatic event does not have its own ‘natural’ characteristic, but this is only one (although the most common) way of understanding trauma. There is, however, a different, retroactive one, again in accordance with Alexander, that understands trauma as a retroactive effect coming from the present position in which we ‘decide’ which experience can be represented as traumatic. Laplanche called these two positions deterministic and hermeneutic. Although the hermeneutic position is more accurate, we must bear in mind that “the past already has something deposited in it that demands to be deciphered...” (Laplanche, 2005, p. 269). This deposition of the event with traumatic potential does not just refer to an event that resists interpretation that exists outside of the representational frame (enigmatic signifier). Genocide, for example, is an event that will inevitably produce cultural trauma. Hence, Alexander’s claim that there is no inherent traumatic characteristic of the event is not universally applicable. But, unlike other events, genocide induces an universal representational impasse. As Dominik LaCapra (2014) demonstrated, it is even impossible to take an objective distance in dealing with the historical facts about genocide. Objective distancing would produce just another bystander role in the considered genocide and put the historian in an ethically impossible position: “In a case such as that of the Holocaust, the figures with whom the historian has at least implicitly identified have often been bystanders, because the identification with the bystander is at least superficially closest to the other possibility for the historian – that is, the idea of full objectivity, neutrality, not being a player, not being a participant” (*ibid.*, p. 146). Genocide thus produces surplus identification; it immerses all subjects that come in close contact with genocide in its own logic. Its enigma is situated in the surplus of the event that the subject cannot evade. But this surplus is also of an enigmatic nature, we do not really know what it is, it just puts pressure on us.

Such an object ‘deposited in the past’ is not an event, it is not something that can be described, but a blind spot that constantly puts pressure on society. This unknown object is designated in post-lacanian theory as ‘object petit a’. It is a sign of incompleteness that is inscribed in the representational practice itself. In his book

*Sublime Object of Ideology* Slavoj Žižek (2009) used it to show how ideology from this perspective works differently from the Marxist notion of ‘false consciousness’: “... in the predominant Marxist perspective the ideological gaze is a *partial gaze* overlooking the totality of social relations, whereas in the Lacanian perspective ideology rather designates a *totality seton effacing the traces of its own impossibility*” (*ibid.*, p. 50). For Žižek the trace of impossibility is exactly *object petit a*, inherent incompleteness of every representation or symbolic structure. In that case, the enigmatic signifier is covered (or even effaced) by the work of representation. This claim leads to the implication that representation works as a shield from trauma. Part of the slogan ‘to remain’, thus, points to another reaction to trauma (symptomatically absent from Alexander’s formulation): denial. In that way, representing some event as traumatic, especially through the network of different social actors, can be seen as a ‘seton’ to reality of the trauma which is this strange ‘ex-timate’<sup>4</sup> part in the core of collectivity, same as implant of the Other (*das Andere*). Asking ‘to remain’ can also be understood as a means of avoiding any afterwardness, any possible contact with the internal abyss, or the traumatic core, inside the culture.

This avoidance of the traumatic core can be interpreted as blindness in correlation with the *object petit a*. It is a kind of denial elaborated in Shoshana Felman’s book *The Juridical Unconscious* (2002). In this book, she analyzes Tolstoy’s story ‘Kreuzer Sonata’. It is a story about a husband (Pozdnyshev) who murdered his wife, got indicted for murder and then was legally acquitted. What Felman put forward in analyzing this story is a certain blindness of the court in addressing the case. What the court took as the main starting point in interpreting the murder was honor that was in jeopardy due to the wife’s behavior. But for Pozdnyshev, it was not honor or jealousy that was the motive for murder, but a deep abyss of hatred that emerged from the beginning of their marriage. It was marriage as an institution that provoked the violence that resulted in murder.<sup>5</sup> This abyss is the product of institutionalized gender relations that produce violence. However, the court could not address this structural guilt, otherwise the whole society would break apart. The more Pozdnyshev admitted his guilt, the more the court interpreted his words as protection of a man’s honor. Felman concludes that: “Under the practical constraints of having to ensure accountability and to bring justice, the law tries to *make sense of the abyss* or to reduce its threat (its senselessness, its unintelligible chaos) by giving

<sup>4</sup> Lacanian term which designates the opposition between inside and outside. For Lacan, as for Laplanche, unconscious is something that is at the same time inside and outside of the subject.

<sup>5</sup> ““They asked me in court how I lulled her, what I used to do it with. Imbeciles! They thought I killed her that day, the fifth of October, with a knife. It wasn’t that day I killed her, it was much earlier. Exactly in the same way as they’re killing. their wives now, all of them”” (Felman, 2002, p. 68; emphasis mine).

it a name, by codifying it or by subsuming its reality (which is inherently nameless and unclassifiable) into the classifying logic and into the technical, procedural coherence of the trial. But in so doing, the law (the trial or the litigation) inadvertently denies the abyssal nature of the abyss in pretending, or in misguidedly assuming, the abyss is something else, something that can be assimilated to known rules or precedents, something that can be enclosed, contained within the recognizability of known (stereotypical) legal agendas” (Felman, 2002, p. 95). So, the representation of the case in court is structured to never touch upon the original traumatic core of society. And this is what Felman calls ‘juridical unconscious’.

## Conclusion

This paper started to examine possible shortcomings in the theory of cultural trauma proposed by Alexander. The main point was that representation itself can be traumatic, not just as genre or traumatic discourse, but as the shortcomings inside it, realized as different paradoxes and impasses, similar to celebrated ‘Freudian slips’. Such an understanding is similar to the Lacanian interpretation of repression. According to Lacan (Evans, 2007, p. 165), primal repression is the systematic effect of the representation of the individual in language, or Symbolic. On a social level, it is happening in the moment of constructing the collective identity. That is the reason why Jean-Luc Nancy sees the collectivity as repressed or lost just to be constitutive for self-representation: “What this community has ‘lost’ – the immanence and the intimacy of a communion – is lost only in the sense that such ‘loss’ is constitutive of ‘community’ itself” (Nancy, 1991, p. 12). So repression is constitutive for representing the community. But there is also secondary repression in which some signifiers are excluded from the signifying chain. This means that some connections between signifiers are forbidden, those that can face the individual with the primal loss. The return of the repressed is thus a sudden realization of the broken connections always due to some external cause. This return of the repressed, as we tried to show, functions as afterwardness, simultaneously in both time directions, from the past to the present and from the present to the past. New connections between signifiers become operational due to the external cause, a message that is in close connection to the repressed enigmatic signifier. In this sense, the second repression becomes the same as the first. Crisis, which is still inside representation, becomes trauma only when the event is unrepresentable in the same way as an enigmatic signifier. The idea of collectivity suddenly emerges not as lost, as some past “golden age” or as a future output of the present endeavour, but as pure collectivity, a strange ingredient of society.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> This ‘pure collectivity’ can be compared to the concept of ‘bare life’ coined by Giorgio Agamben (1998) as something which is excluded to be afterward included or which even becomes the basis of political society.

The enigma of the message from the other is basically, as was presented in the first part, realization of internal incompleteness, individual and social. In the second part we tried to show that the reaction to this split is a denial. In fact, every representation of trauma is a way of denial because it covers the inherent incompleteness of 'normality'. Even if discourse points to a certain event as a fundamental threat to society, it is only to empower its own position. By representing something as traumatic, social actors work to provoke a certain mobilization and belief in the social order. But if the event is truly traumatic, the effect will be an impasse of representation, failed mobilization, and disbelief.

The slogan that opened the analysis ("Let us remain responsible") pointed exactly at Nancy's notion of the community 'us' as the hidden enigmatic signifier that is present and absent at the same time. The 'us' in the slogan is an undecidable position between presence and absence, or between sender and receiver. Confronted with the virus threat, Croatian society faced the impossibility to imagine society and community. The enigmatic 'us' worked as *unheimlich*, something that defines but at the same time works as a completely strange part of society. However, such an enigmatic presence can be detected in every community, but the question remains what was different in the case of Croatia. Almost nothing, except that the trauma of collective identity manifests itself differently. The process of 'imagining the nation' worked differently in Croatia than in other parts of the world. It has some similarities with postcolonial nation-building, one described by Partha Chatterjee (1993) as a product of colonial encounter. For Chatterjee, in the colonial world society was split between the material part ruled by colonizers and the spiritual part that was left to the colonized. Before the encounter, the two realms worked together. However, this spiritual part filled with customs and institutions was the source for imagining the nation. On the soil of today's Croatia was the border between three huge imperial forces: the Ottomans, the Habsburgs, and Venice. This situation also provoked a split between foreign authorities and the domestic way of life, but this domestic life was not foreign to Europe. The Ottomans were otherness like Britain in India, but Venice and the Habsburgs were not. The Western gaze toward Croatia and broader Eastern Europe after the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a gaze into the Western own past, as Larry Wolff (1994) concluded after close reading of Western travel-writing from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the pool for imagination was not the same as the one described by Chatterjee; the internal spiritual part was also European, as well as the material part. The difference between them is realized on the time scale. And it produced two kinds of collective fantasies as ideas of structured society. One is focused on purifying the past and extracting the 'real' traditions and values that will secure the structure. The other is adopting the values of the contemporary West. Both models work just as cover for the internal social split produced by the enigmatic signifier that is the 'unconscious of Europe'. Here this unconscious of Europe is not interpreted in

the Freudian sense that he invented during his trip to Slovenia, namely that people in the Balkans are more governed by their drives. Here I suggest understanding the unconscious of Europe as a surplus value, an enigmatic part of the message of the Other that even the sender is not aware of: "... the primordial encounter of the Unconscious is the encounter with the Other's inconsistency, with the fact that the [parental] Other is not actually the master of his acts and words, that he emits signals of whose meaning he is unaware, that he performs acts whose true libidinal tenor is inaccessible to him" (Žižek, 1999, p. 284). It means that the unconscious of Europe works as an enigmatic signifier on its periphery. And we can detect both time vectors in the two responses to the unconscious of Europe (deterministic and heuristic). The first, 'deterministic' fantasy, that is focused on searching for European identity somewhere in the past, falls short of finding this structural consistency. None of the elements of the past are decisive for constructing the proper European identity. It ends with blaming Europe that it betrayed values on which it was built for the sake of the wealth of the few. The other, 'hermeneutic' fantasy always misses the expectations of the centre to which it presents itself due to some surplus element that works as something that cannot be included in the fantasized European identity. What complicates the problem is that both social fictions blame each other for the failure. For the traditionalists (determinists), the problem is that modernists are just part of bureaucracy (they call current Croatian prime minister a Brussels slave) and as such are an obstacle to the full realisation of a structured society. At the same time, those in the camp of the 'modernists' (heuristics) blame the 'traditionalists' for primitivism and the atavisms that prevent their realization of the social ideal.

The pandemic produced a situation that led Croatian society into the new dispute between modernists and traditionalists, and closer to the inherent social traumatic core. It was visible in the debates over wearing the masks or over vaccination. Traditionalists saw medical masks as one more sign of the oppressive European bureaucracy, while modernists interpreted people refusing to wear a mask as uneducated and irresponsible individuals. The same situation happened with vaccination. In that way, the use of exhortative imperative was a sign of the structural lack within Croatian society, the impossibility to imagine even the structural fiction of the community. In his text 'Invisible ideology' Žižek proposed a model for understanding problems with social fantasy: "... the notion of fantasy offers an exemplary case of the dialectical *coincidentia oppositorum*: on the one hand, fantasy in its beatific side, in its *stabilizing* dimension, the dream of a state without disturbances, out of reach of human depravity; on the other hand, fantasy in its *destabilizing* dimension whose elementary form is envy – all that 'irritates' me about the Other, images that haunt me of what he or she is doing when out of my sight, of how he or she deceives me and plots against me, of how he or she ignores me and indulges in an enjoyment

that is intensive beyond my capacity of representation...” (Žižek, 2007, p. 28). This model of double fantasy works well in interpreting societies without the role of a third part. In Croatian society we face a more complicated situation where stabilizing fantasy is at the same time destabilizing fantasy. The virus was not represented as a pure biological fact, but as a sign of internal trauma. Two responses to virus threats point to the impossible ‘us’ of Croatian collective identity. The remaining worked as denial, but also as finding the guilty part, or as destabilizing fantasy. Both social camps circulated around the impossible, ‘us’ never to accept the fact that ‘us’ does not exist, or we can say that ‘us’ works as an enigmatic signifier. The Croatian identity was built as a response to the demand of the big Other, the imagined European identity, but with this demand came the surplus that produced internal trauma. Thus, the virus was interpreted as another metaphor for the European unconscious.

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