VII   PSYCHOSOCIAL CONSEQUENCES AND POLITICS OF FEAR

CONCLUSIONS[1]

Fear was a widespread experience in Chilean society. This reality made us wonder: Where and how has this problem been recorded and studied? What has the relevance of fear been in Chilean political history in this century, before the dictatorship, and during the dictatorship? What psychosocial theory or theories can be used to understand this process? Why differentiate between fear and threat even though they only represent one type of social relation? What objective and subjective elements does the content of threats in a given political context appeal to? How did human rights violation come to represent a political threat? How much fear has there been and to what extent will it persist in Chilean society despite the transition to democracy? These questions along with others defined the type of research that we carried out.

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[1] Chapter 7 of *Psicología de la amenaza politica y del miedo* [Psychology of political threat and fear] by Elizabeh Lira Kornfeld (1991) translated to English by Aluna Acompañamiento Psicosocial.

We became convinced that these types of problems emerge as subject matter in situations in which researchers are also spokespeople within a concrete reality that they are part of. However, despite the limitations that arise from the nature of this problem, and based on our own involvement, we took on the task of formulating a theoretical proposal from a psychological perspective that would allow us to attempt to respond to these questions.

We were interested in finding out what the relationship was between **political threat** and **fear** and explaining the observed processes from a subjective perspective. This point of view defines the area that was explored as well as its limits. The analysis, which was carried out through partial studies and is commented on below, proposes to respond to these questions, assuming that the nature of the problem causes the answers to still be unfinished and incomplete.

Social Order and Political Threat

One of the central questions of this research is that of social order and the place that coercion and threat have in this order, considering how they are internalized in the subjects.

Threatening does not imply that something has materialized or been executed yet. Therefore, a threat **warns** about the foreseen punishment for transgressing the established order as stated in **the law**.

To fully understand the meaning of processes of threat in a particular political regimen, it is necessary to be familiar with their power structures and recognize the symbols and meanings that are part of the collective representation of this society. In Chile, the power structures and the fundamental values that have motivated them are primarily related to Hispanic heritage. The social and cultural structure of traditional estates (*haciendas*) articulated this type of order in detail, which was sustained by obeying laws. The authority of the land was founded on the authority of God.

These factors contributed to providing a long period of political stability, as these rules were not substantially questioned. The notion of respecting authority—and, therefore, the law that it sets forth—as a value of respect for life is a relevant aspect that is incorporated into the culture, thus forming part of the social imaginary even though the *hacienda* no longer exists as an economic, social, and cultural structure.

In a context that appears to be rather stable and coherent, the ruptures illustrate the meaning of political threat better than any other process. This is why we explored the impact of the social, labor, and political conflicts in Chilean history that have resulted in death. These conflicts and their solutions are directly related to the established order's self-preservation strategies. These acts of killing are recorded in collective memory as **massacres**, regardless of how many people might have died.

Using murder as a way to settle conflicts at different points in history, the **massacres**—as they have been called—set an example with a terrifying effect, not only on the subjects and their families but also on organizations and their convening power. Political violence that results in death appears in particular situations, and—both for having happened and for their effects—they are perceived as both extreme and unusual events.

In Chilean society, the perception of the uncommon character of this type of political repression coexists with the lasting notion of the threat of the punishment that those who transgress the established order will suffer. The threat is active is a way that is imperceptible. It is internalized in subjects in such a way that the fear of transgression is the best guarantee of the stability of the social and political system. The notion that respect for human life is the ultimate limit of all transgression has played a substantial role in this balance. All members of society shared this notion in the social imaginary. Only a **declared war** could constitute a **legal** condition that would allow for this limit to be transgressed.

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To this effect, we established that the unfurled terror in Chilean society was connected to the historical conditions of subjugation as related to the established order. This observation makes it possible to describe a way of exercising power through coercion and threat that did not begin historically with the military coup. The operative nature of threat relied on subjects' social-historical **education** and was later reinforced by managing sophisticated techniques for psychological uses of terror through mass media.

Interpreting historical process makes it possible to establish continuity in the value of life and the threatening nature of death for political reasons within collective representation in Chilean society. This observation, which seems to correspond to **the natural order**, is not quite the most common notion of the value of life and death in Latin America.

It is necessary to establish two general aspects of what we classify as a political threat. The first refers to the relationship between legitimacy and legality in Chilean political culture, and the second refers to the design of political repression and its impact on social structures and subjects. Regarding the first point, it is necessary to point out that the concepts of legality and legitimacy have practically been synonyms; because of this, legislation was necessary to legitimize the military intervention of 1973. Retroactively legalizing political repression penalized many conducts that had been legitimate up until the military coup.

The retroactive character of the law is one of the most potent elements of political threat, as it takes a set of actions that subjects carried out during a time when they were **legal** and defines them as illegal and susceptible to punishment. At the same time, the rupture of legality had a widespread threatening effect by invalidating the security that had been gained and contradicting the principles of broad sectors of society surrounding the protective function of authority and laws. This is why political rhetoric and symbolization that justified this rupture were needed. To this end, these types of situations were presented as a consequence of the **subjective climate** that existed during the rule of the Popular Unity government, which has

been continuously alluded to as an argument to justify the military intervention of 1973. This subjective climate appeared to be created by the agitation caused by the political campaign against the Popular Unity government. Unyielding polarization was an experience that involved the entire society. The conspiracy, which came to be known after the fact, demonstrated how this process had been developed using the anxieties and fears of large national sectors with the aim of eroding the credibility and basic subjective foundations that comprised the continuity of social and political structures and daily life.

This subjective climate was created using everything from the most general elements to the most private elements, threatening the foundations of individual and group identity. The sector of society that felt threatened was capable of identifying its own interests with a threat to the established order, which they stated and generalized as a threat to society. This type of generalization would not have been successful if it had not had a bearing on the very fears that were bred in subjects by the difficulties and problems of daily life. The exacerbation of the **subjective climate of war** was sustained by extensive terror campaigns, which were coupled with the government's intentions of social change at that time—perceived by some sectors as very threatening—and the real problems that the country was facing. The high degree of polarization and the confrontational line of argument that placed responsibility for the outcome on **the other** explain the complementary nature of the threats that were perceived by one sector or another.

The military coup was supported by the earlier subjective climate and the creation of a climate of widespread terror in opposition to the national sector, which had been identified as **the enemy** and as having caused the previous situation.

The second aspect refers to the design of the political repression. As a result of the military coup, an image of massiveness and arbitrariness developed in such a way that anyone could feel threatened, with the only exception being the group that was in power.

Political repression was exercised through systematic practices of human rights violations. This represents a political threat perceived as a threat of annihilation directed at the existence of subjects in their condition as living and social beings. Such repression operated within collective representation and its meanings. Therefore, a state of war needed to be **legally** established in order to justify the deaths that took place **for reasons of the State.**

The social perception is that the repression brought about a huge number of deaths, detainments, and torture, and, for this same reason, it became extremely threatening. The number of deaths that took place under these circumstances is **immeasurable**. This perception is a metaphor for the collective representation of what took place, and it emphasizes the terrifying meaning that these events have in the Chilean social imaginary. Those that claim the right to decide about life and death in order to resolve political crisis **know** the threatening impact that this type of rupture implies within this collective representation.

Political Threat and Psychosocial Identity

The impact of political threat on psychosocial identity could be observed in the society and the subjects themselves. The extreme polarization that was present in the country made it easier for the **left** to be characterized as the sector with a **malicious** or **negative** identity and to establish that its existence represented a threat to the whole of society. According to ideological criteria, the group in power defined these sectors as not being part of the national identity. In accordance with the categories of the National Security Doctrine, they were indistinctively identified as **agents of subversion**, **extremists**, **leftists**, **communists**, **Marxists**, and others along these same lines. Therefore, the political threat was aimed at the existence and identity of the subjects that **did not belong** to the Chilean nation and at their organizations or groups of belonging—political parties or social organizations—that were to be excluded as well.

Politically, this threat involved devaluing subjects' social and political participation and, at the same time, defining that the Chilean nation's identity was not a plural identity. As an effect of this process, national identity was split by defining the exclusion of a national group with conflicting ideological criteria. The **disassociated** sector was threatened with destruction. In turn, the very subjects who carried the identity defined as negative were threatened with different forms of social exclusion. Forms of this exclusion were framed in popular representation **as confinement (*el encierro*), exile (*el destierro*), and burial (*entierro*)**. Terrorism in the Chilean State used forms of repression that were aimed at the fundamental aspects of national identity and the identity of specific subjects, making them progressively separate from the threats of reality and establishing them from a subjective standpoint.

Threat as a political instrument is systematically denied by those who use it. It functions invisibly, and, apparently, it leaves no trace, but this does not mean it has no real influence on modifying behaviors by causing subjugation.

A set of meanings that aimed to influence subjects' conscience and behavior was used in the threats of **terror campaigns**. In the 1988 plebiscite, the threats of the pro-government option were centered on creating terror; they associated any political change with the automatic return of a climate of insecurity and uncertainty surrounding the satisfaction of basic needs and threatened the loss of material objects associated with well-being and social peace, which would lead to political violence.

In **terror campaigns**, the threat to the identity of subjects, and by extension to national identity, is a focal point. The threat is formulated in such a way that it implies a precise indication of the danger of disintegration, a threat of destruction, which is generalized as if the whole of society were threatened from within and without by those who are designated as bearers of the **malicious identity**.

On the one hand, this common perception confirms the deliberate and conscious use of these collective meanings, appealing to aspects that **are known** to have an effect on subjects, and, on the other hand, it confirms that the message has been received. In other words, the fact that subjects feel threatened and afraid is, precisely, a confirmation that they have, indeed, been threatened.

In the group work that was carried out, we verified that political threat was aimed at the different characteristics that made up a subject's identity and that were formed through social relations. Subjects are threatened by losing their jobs, by their fears about life and their standard of living, or by being excluded from society due to their beliefs and convictions. This is a degree of political threat. In the study groups, these threats were recorded as specific fears.

The study's subjects perceive political threat as an actual death threat, as annihilation, as a threat to the process of strengthening or maintaining their identity. Social perception of basic distrust, neglect, loss of autonomy, and desperation is developed, appearing in the contents of the fears that are created by political threat. The identified fears are closely related to the stages of psychosocial development of identity and the processes that articulate the subject's relationship with reality in each stage. This perspective allows for linking the subjective experience with the type of political threat, that is, with the specific nature of the human rights violations.

By presenting death as a possible sanction, political repression modified the previous social rules, the collective representation of politics, and the permanence of the rules, **the laws**, as referential norms. To this effect, it involved reformulating the codes for interpreting reality and its representations, altering the basic trust of the subjects within reality and within their own perceptions about it. The social decoding was modified by the emergency of political threat. This caused subjects to perceive themselves in a state of neglect.

All change could become threatening since it was nearly impossible to predict the rules of daily working order in a situation of State terrorism. Subjects were continuously trapped in this situation because of their inner fears.

The climate of terror, which interfered with social relations, is consistent with the perception of neglect that the study's subjects had when facing an authority perceived as omnipotent, cruel, and sadistic. Neglect is an experience that literally corresponds to that of a society in which **writ of amparo (habeas corpus)** ceased to operate and subjects were left defenseless in the face of arbitrariness.

Torture, as a violation of the private space of the body, and house raids are a concrete expression of the absence of spaces **of shelter**—there is no place of refuge, there is no time nor place with guarantees of protection. The night in is the preferred space for horror. The appearance of daily life's normality gives an even more threatening meaning to the decoded reality. Resistance and repression are made clandestine.

A long period of social life was characterized by silence. No one would mention what was happening because it was prohibited to do so. Reality could be described from the viewpoint of experiences that had distorted the limits of social life to the point that it seemed that codes other than threat and fear did not exist. This perception, which seems to belong exclusively to the subjective level, was confirmed as a fact of the reality in the public opinion surveys of the study's period, which registered the impact and internalization of the threat and the fear among society and discerned the perception of a social climate of threat. These surveys allowed for the way this climate was socially processed to be observed, and they **statistically** confirmed what the society had been registering: the spread of threat and fear in social relations. This verification reflected a shared social perception, which also made it possible to develop an awareness of the existing threat and fear. Their impact was reduced by objectifying them and revealing their mechanisms. Their existence was confirmed by reducing their ambiguity in the perception of

reality, which allowed for structuring and naming this reality with objective and subjective terms and then acting on it.

The Public Opinion Surveys confirmed that fear existed, that it was a real experience. Moreover, they confirmed the massiveness of the problem by fear being registered in survey results that included 98% of the population. These characteristics represented it as a political problem, providing evidence of the magnitude of the threat perceived by society.

Human Rights Violation and Political Threat

State terrorism used systematic human rights violation, which represented an objective threat to Chilean society. However, realizing that one can be threatened—the fact that a **perceived threat** exists—depends, firstly, on the relationship that individuals and groups have with the established power; that is, it depends on their own position of power.

Political threat becomes unbearable if it is shaped by arbitrary processes, making the criteria for vulnerability or security in the face of the threat unpredictable. At the same time, the continuous transgression of established limits in a particular society, as related to traditionally respected positions of power, creates a perception of uncontrollable threat. This happens when diplomatic immunity is not respected, when the territorial space of an embassy is violated, when the lives of ecclesiastic authorities are threatened, or when the laws of war are no longer recognized. These types of situations took place during the period of the dictatorship and can be objectively recognized.

The study groups, made up by subjects who were against the political regime, identified annihilation, the loss of autonomy of self, neglect, and the loss of personal integrity as primary fears. The subjects responded to the real threats with angst, but this angst also anticipated the possible risk. As the risk had been made constant, the fear became chronic, losing its protective function and increasing the sensation of neglect.

The groundwork that was developed in the groups involved recognizing three different processes:

- Identifying fear as a subjective micro-process, which was expressed as angst and can be understood using Freudian psychoanalytic theory, differentiating between the functions of angst and the object that produces it.

- A second aspect is the group process as such, in which the perception of the political threat that participants experienced was made evident. Insisting on the confirmatory value of reality, provided by the act of **speaking about fear**, can seem senseless or redundant. However, in these societies—in which people disappeared without a trace, in which the dead were not brought back to their families to be buried, in which those who were tortured had to confirm in writing that they were never mistreated—the disconfirmation of the experience itself was a usual phenomenon that had deeply disturbing effects that created angst. Confirming the experience, confirming the reality, and having the certainty that things were not a product of the imagination became a basic psychological need.

- A third dimension is the deprivatization of the experience. It involves an event experienced by thousands of people who, by recognizing their common nature, can seek **common** solutions, which are not easy in the political contexts that have been described. This deprivatization facilitates the recuperation of subjects' autonomy and their possibility to consciously experience that they can face the private and social impact of political threat.

The group answers gathered from the study showed how threat affected the subjects' place in reality, as they experienced their neglect in the face of the threat that they perceived as perpetual.

Fear is a sign of danger. However, what dangerous represents is not always part of the repertoire of the subject's experience. That which is dangerous and threatening has been

incorporated into the collective imaginary. In private and individual terms, the subject cannot differentiate between objective facts and their meaning. Therefore, the effects of internalizing the threat affect trust in the temporary and spatial continuance of objects and in the continuance and maintenance of social relations that shaped the subjects' relational world, their family, their professional environment, and their social environment.

Fear and threat are part of a process that exists in reality because it has previously existed in the subjects' fantasy, and that is where it functions from. It involves a manifestation of violence against the subjects and their social relations, which operates precisely from the symbolic realm. What occurs on the level of the psyche is invisible. This perception implies understanding violence as a process that is developed from an individual subjective phenomenon, which can be simultaneously extended to thousands of subjects and recognized on a social level through the predominance of social relations characterized by fear and threat, which can mainly manifest as subjugation or in expressions linked to aggression.

The reorganization of civil society during the dictatorship was done through the internalization of this process. Its consequences were part of the experience of subjects, groups, institutions, and society.

Political repression had ambiguously introduced threat and fear into social relations as if the entire society were included; however, this was only implemented against some active sectors of opposition.

The threat, and the political repression that materializes it, places subjects in unsustainable positions. To be effective, it is formulated as a threat for all, even though it actually only represents a threat for some. It is ultimately interpreted as a **fear for all**, which finally forces **everyone** to modify their perceptions of themselves, of the society, and of the work within it or expose themselves to the consequences of transgression, which can eventually result in death.

In this culture, there has been a progressive invalidation of the religious and ideological

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mediations that surround death. Because of this, the psyche's response to the danger of annihilation was varied, and political threat—which is ultimately an anticipated death threat—was very powerful. Political threat introduced loss, pain, torture, and the possibility that one's greatest fears could become a reality, which is unknown to the subjects themselves, but which others could discover by invading their body and intimacy.

The falsification of reality constructed the threat's sinister character, which was only visible and conscious for some but, nevertheless, powerfully contributed to the silence of all. The greatest alienation of this society has been to deny and sidestep the existence of a political threat, which is established from the massive violation of human rights. This denial has surreptitiously introduced fear in bodies and consciences. Eduardo Galeano wrote:

> "Blatant colonialism mutilates you without pretense: it forbids you to talk, it forbids you to act it, forbids you to exist. Invisible colonialism, however, convinces you that serfdom is your destiny and impotence is your nature: it convinces you that it's not possible to speak, not possible to act, not possible to exist."[2]

The **difficult challenge** of this study was to approach the passage from visible repression to invisible repression in Chilean society—from objective violence to subjective violence—in order to develop reflection and efforts related to the subjective consequences of the human rights violations, which were understood as a political threat by the subjects and society.

Finally, it is worth asking if the observed subjugation, which seemed almost **adaptive** to the political threat that was exercised, remains or will remain beyond the process of threat in which it was generated. Regardless of the political changes that have taken place during the transition, how much residual fear will remain in the social structures and in the people? Finally, if it remains, how can this residual fear affect the transition process to democracy and, more permanently, Chilean political culture?

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[2] From Eduardo Galeano's "The Book of Embraces" translated to English by Cedric Belfrage.