

# Martyrdom, Or, The Solar Phallus

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# Contents

The Magical Wonder of Bourgeois Life . . . . .	3
Liberal-capitalism (Heart) Trauma . . . . .	4
The Ecstasy of the Martyr . . . . .	4
”Trauma, Fill My Hole!” . . . . .	5
Trauma and Submission . . . . .	5
The Joy of Trauma . . . . .	6
The Radical Olympics of Desire . . . . .	7
Trauma and Aggressiveness . . . . .	7

The martyr accepts suffering at the hands of the enemy or non-believer and, in the process, gives an inspiring lesson to all those watching. The martyr does not just self-sacrifice for the cause, but also saves souls; maybe this is why martyrdom remains so popular in circles self-defined as anti-authoritarian. This Christian fantasy fits well with the various fantasies of tragedy, passion, resolve, valour, strength, burning with a bright flame and inspiring the masses (or the Other) through one's sacrifice that thrive in many anarchist-etc. environments. Exploring the functions of martyrdom in the bourgeois cosmology might give us some tools to tinker with our own ecstatic technologies; or, at least, reflect in a libidinal mirror the extent to which we remain hooked to the bourgeois apparatuses of the self.

## The Magical Wonder of Bourgeois Life

To justify the heroic aura that modern ideology wraps around him or her, the bourgeois needs to demonstrate, against abundant evidence to the contrary, that s/he is more than a stubborn accumulator of fetishes and amulets and a devoted follower of ritual. S/he has to show that s/he is a complex, reflexive individual that does not blindly obey the law but, on the contrary, confronts it. This bourgeois mystique can be produced through a couple of tropes: the first one is narrativising the supremely banal events of bourgeois life - the typical stories of family, children, work, sex, love, death, illness, travelling, bungee jumping, interior decoration or marriage - as dramas that chart a unique and extraordinary life. The second one is draping one's "being" in trauma.

What Max Weber diagnosed as a "disenchanted" modern world, actually preserved inside its fantasies all the fairy tales it could fit. We, Westernised moderns, fervently believe in gods, aliens, reptilians, Atlantis, fairies, illuminati, spirits, ghosts, horoscopes, divination, astrology, karma, fate, spirituality, magic, absolute truths, the primordial nature of desire and the divine nature of the soul. This "re-enchantment" sprinkles the dullest elements of bourgeois reality with stale but efficient-enough magic dust: technology and science are "miraculous"; art or creativity are "incredible"; children, reproduction and the bourgeois family in general are also "a miracle" or a "gift from heaven"; colonial tourism is once again "incredible" and "marvellous"; nature, while being quite natural, is likewise "miraculous"; and oh my, the consumption frenzy and grotesque family allegory of Christmas is similarly "magic". However attractive this sprinkling is though, mining bourgeois compulsions for traces of magic is less efficient than its reverse: presenting oneself as blessed not with supreme joy but with supreme suffering. Thus the second, even more reliable and exciting bourgeois trope of uniqueness and desirability: cultivating trauma; or, in keeping with the theme of ecstasy, *martyrdom*.

## Liberal-capitalism (Heart) Trauma

As a tool for self-definition, trauma achieved huge popularity in contemporary liberal-capitalism: see the florid production of trauma-related artefacts in the bourgeois regime, from trauma-literature to the traumatic kernel that defines the individuality of each and every Hollywood hero or celebrity. These days it seems that one cannot be a proper (unique, special, etc.) person without a personal trauma to display.

If bourgeois trauma is understood, as I will argue below, to be based on a passionate identification with authority, on narcissism and on the annexation of the other as an instrument of this narcissism, then we move closer to understanding its irresistible appeal in neoliberalism:

*The desire for narratives of the past, for re-creations, re-readings, re-productions seems boundless at every level of our culture. History in a certain canonical form may be delegitimized as far as its core pedagogical and philosophical mission is concerned, but the seduction of the archive and its trove of histories of human achievement and suffering has never been greater (Andreas Huyssen).*

Bourgeois trauma is unable to problematise the modern disasters of identity, the Nation, colonialism or capitalism; after all, the mechanisms that generated these modern traumas are the same ones that generate contemporary bourgeois reality and subjectivity. So instead, the invocation of trauma performs the mythical function of pointing beyond that traumatic event and towards progress, reconciliation, healing, cohesion, truth, justice, in a word towards neoliberal fullness. Thus, trauma functions as the obscene supplement that pumps neoliberalism up with the promise of harmony and, indeed, of the ecstasy provided as reparation for one's individual or collective loss.

## The Ecstasy of the Martyr

The fantasy of individual martyrdom has a long genealogy and precise governmental function in the bourgeois order. It is, for example, a central part of the British imperial cosmology, even before Victorian evangelism attempted the full Christianisation of the empire:

*Captain Cook in the South Pacific, General Wolfe in Canada, General Gordon in the Sudan; or else there was mass martyrdom (the Black Hole massacre in India) or crucifixion averted (the popular tale of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas in America) ... After Cook's death in 1779, poems by Helen Maria Williams, William Cowper, and Hannah More, along with a famous elegy by Anna Seward, all compared*

*him to Christ and stressed his having been deified by the Hawaiians who killed him ... (John Kucich)*

These myths of martyrdom sanctify the heroic and beneficent agent of colonialism and suggest that, just like in the myth of Christ, suffering is a beginning rather than an end, in this case the beginning of an imperial resurrection; such myths are still efficiently put to work in the post 9/11 narratives of USA imperial martyrdom, for example. And if it worked for Christ and Cook, why wouldn't it work for the rank-and-file bourgeois? As fantasies of suffering trickle in the social tissue, the "middle classes" appropriate them as a sign of their moral higher ground. Hence the eternal bourgeois fetish with moral crusades that promise redemption through suffering ("X walks alone to the North Pole dressed only in his logoed spandex G-strings to raise money for the children of Africa!" or "I am sacrificing my life for the sake of activism!").

## **"Trauma, Fill My Hole!"**

Every bourgeois trauma involves looping in one's mind a personalised scenario of losing something important, be it wholeness, perfection, integrity, dignity, purity, innocence, bliss, autonomy, grace, selfhood, self-worth, knowledge, territory, wealth, a dear one, power and prestige and so on. But paradoxically, this scenario of "loss" is actually a fantasy of wholeness. In the martyrdom scenario, the constitutive "hole" of subjectivity - and along with it the fundamental uncertainty and anxiety of being - are re-represented as generated *ex nihilo* by the traumatic event, thus as tragic but *avoidable* occurrences.

This is a narrative with big stakes since it presents lack, anxiety and uncertainty as reversible and the "original", "pre-traumatised" subject as whole; it therefore gains overwhelming mass in the subject's psychic cosmos, enough mass to convert trauma into a sort of black hole that sucks all other processes in its gravitational field. Or, if we want to keep the astropatriarchal theme going, enough mass to convert it into a psychic "solar phallus", the signifier in relation to which all other "planets" of the person's psychological system are defined.

## **Trauma and Submission**

Representing an event, which could gain a variety of significations in the subject's psyche, as a trauma always involves processes of recognition by an authority or formal symbolic system, even if this recognition is fantasmatic. This is not to say that representing an event as a trauma is a voluntary process; but even if the con-

struction of trauma is not under the subject's voluntary control, it remains under the control of the dominant bourgeois apparatuses of identity and ecstasy production. For example: it is only if one's being is equated with masculinity and the penis/phallus (that is to say, with inborn power over others, or inborn symbolic status as an aristocrat of the human race, or inborn desirability) that one can be traumatised by being called non-masculine or by being submitted to "de-masculinising rituals" that expose the gap between the penis and the phallus. Jacqueline Rose has a good discussion of the trauma of castration that shapes the most aggressive tendencies of contemporary Zionism; but more generally, any form of fascism stages a traumatic myth of castration in order to fuel its macho ecstasies.

But this is not the whole story: even if the representation of an event as traumatic submits to the dominant symbolic codes *unconsciously* there is, in the psychic circuit of trauma, an *assumed* moment of submission: *the demand to be recognised through one's trauma*. It is this demand that makes trauma into a widespread technique of the self in contemporary liberal-capitalism and that keeps the traumatised subject invested in authority and its rules of recognition. Since the demand for recognition and adjacent submission happen at ego level, there is no wonder that one is often shamed and aggressive when demanding recognition for their trauma, for example when asking the patriarchal, heterosexist and racist bourgeois regime to recognise and heal one's gendered trauma in the name of "woman's rights" or one's racialized trauma in the name of "minority rights".

## The Joy of Trauma

Today, like in Cook's time, the representation of trauma is not the end of the subject's social history, but its beginning. Once recognised by an authority or another, trauma functions like stigmata, marking the bearer as a "chosen one" and yielding all sorts of "ecstasy of presence".

"Histrionic martyrdom", one's publicly displayed suffering at the hands of "fate/'authority" - the State, society, the world, parents, job, car traffic, one's boss, and so on - transforms a bourgeois that in terms of their practices is a slave of ritual into something of a hero: a Promethean champion pitted against the mighty gods. In any social relationship ruled by the demands and desires of the martyr, the witness has the obligation to listen to their confession, deplore their loss, recognise their uniqueness, devote oneself to protecting and nurturing them and, even, share their aggressiveness (the duty of sympathy and support towards the traumatized involves sharing their enmities, enemies, phobias and so on). Traumatic narcissism obliterates the other's ecstasies and uses them as fuel for one's own.

So, while no doubt experienced as distressing and so on, trauma is actually a pimped-up form of bourgeois narcissism that reduces the whole spectrum of social relations to an enjoyable obsession with the “I”. The traumatic symptom becomes an addictive technology of the self, propping the myth of the unitary ego and submitting one’s social reality to a form of imperial control with her/himself as the centre.

And whenever the radical martyr experiences a libidinal conflict – say, self-defining as an antinomist but displaying the desire for a cosy, hipster, fashion, artsy, jet-setter, philanthropic, family or academic bourgeois life - the invocation of trauma allows them to evade the critical analysis of their own enjoyment and to delegate responsibility to the Other (“Let me heal first and then I’ll be able to think about my ecstasies!” “I am entitled to this because I have been traumatised!” or its twin, “I need to make up for my suffering!”).

## **The Radical Olympics of Desire**

One of the dungeons of bourgeois ecstasy that still towers over our spaces is the “hierarchy of radical desirability”, with its array of ritual practices of competition for the spotlight that follow closely the bourgeois criteria of value: academic or theoretical prowess and credentials or, more generally, mastery over accredited mechanisms of knowledge-formation and erudition; experience and achievements in “struggles” (the radical equivalent of “work”); radical travelogue; self-assurance and authoritativeness in decision-making, strategy and organising; looks, lifestyle, sexual prowess, and so on. In order to secure this aura but also to make sure that it is distinguished from the bourgeois competition for desirability from which it is otherwise undistinguishable, trauma – personal or collective - is often added to the mix, glazing this conformist cake with the sugar of martyrdom.

## **Trauma and Aggressiveness**

In Freud’s “A Child Is Being Beaten” parable, the child’s masochistic fantasy of being punished by the desirable paternal authority is easily transformed into the more acceptable, but not less ecstatic, sadistic fantasy of watching other children being punished by this same authority. The ease of this transformation from punished into sadistic witness is explained by the ability of the bourgeois martyr to project their shame on others with unflinching resolve and aggressiveness.

Judith Butler makes a similar argument (I’m adapting her occult prose): the bourgeois, a creature obsessed with “independence” but that enjoys submission more

than anything, struggles to represent their submission as martyrdom. Once this martyr status is achieved, the bourgeois uses it as a permission to enact atrocities against others in the name of self-defense.

***The 3-step quick guide to recognising bourgeois martyrdom***

1. Trauma asks for recognition and reparation from the very same order that makes possible the trauma, increasing the hold of this symbolic regime on the traumatised (e.g. the hold of the phallic order, where the penis is fantasised as the supreme weapon that can give or take away worth, dignity, recognition, desirability and love).

2. Trauma is an attempt to eliminate the anxiety of being and the uncertainty of the Other's desire by reducing everyone's desire to the recognition of MY trauma and to everyone's duty to cater for MY well-being.

3. Trauma not only allows one to embrace the crudest egotism; but also to feel entitled when perpetuating violence against the others in the name of one's martyrdom.



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