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Mourning: ethical practice and conceptual tool for social and political relations

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Abstract

This article draws upon discourse theoretical and psychoanalytical approaches to provide an overview on the potentiality of mourning as both a practice and a conceptual tool for the critical analysis of social and political phenomena. Within poststructuralist discourse theory, mourning has recently been considered a practice with the potential to engage in 'ideological critique'. In contrast, stunted mourning and melancholia have been associated with being under the 'grip of ideology', affected by hegemonic discursive narratives and practices. By providing examples ranging from national identity to unemployment and class resubjectivation, the argument is made that mourning is a useful practice and analytical tool for examining phenomena that result

from the experience of dislocation, even when it is not death related.

Keywords

Mourning - Melancholia - Ethical Practice - Ideology - Dislocation

Introduction

Meaning and the notion of subjectivity play a central role in structuring and understanding phenomena in the social world. Within the social sciences, poststructuralist discourse theory has been key in highlighting the need to incorporate these concepts in the research of social and political practices, as many of them could go unnoticed or insufficiently studied. Instances of loss, with death perhaps being its more representative one, are areas in social life which deserve attention for being unavoidable, beyond our control, and for the potential impact they can have on the rest of the network of social relations. As such, a body of research into them can discover and explore areas in which loss, its meaning to subjects and its affective dimension, maintains or transforms the status quo of social practices.

Related to loss and death are two concepts which help uncover social practices that deal with their aftermath: mourning and melancholia. The way these have been studied generally focuses on the individual perspective that aims to understand an individual's psyche. Nonetheless, as it will be explored, a number of rituals, practices and policies have interconnections with loss and death, and as such, the manner in which they are carried out and their success may be affected by the mourning process, sometimes substantively. For this reason, research into mourning processes which expands the scope from individual perspective to a wider perspective that covers social and political activities is needed.

My aim in this article is to provide some insights about how the concept of mourning can be used to analyse contemporary social and political practices from a poststructuralist discourse theory perspective. My central thesis is that the concept is useful for the analysis of social practices that result from dislocation, even if they are not death-related. I argue that mourning can be seen as an ethical practice, wherein the contingent character of social reality is explicitly recognized and enables a person or a collective to successfully come to terms with it. This essay is divided into two main sections. The first section presents the theoretical perspectives with which to analyse the notion of mourning, beginning with a recognition of death and loss as moments of dislocation and following through with a discussion of mourning as an ethical practice and the conditions which enable mourning to take place. The second section will introduce a number of social and political practices that can be analysed through the lenses of the mourning process. In particular, I argue that instances of public-official discourse of national identity, the prospects of sudden shifts in economic practices and lifestyle, and instances of chronic illnesses and disability could be further explored under this theoretical perspective.

Section 1: Theoretical Framework - Mourning as an ethical practice Discourse and Fantasy

In order to understand how mourning allows us to analyse social and political phenomena, it is important to describe how Discourse Theory and the category of fantasy provide relevant frameworks from which to look at social reality. From poststructuralist discourse theory, we draw upon the notion of radical contingency. Contingency, in this framework, can be better understood as the impossibility of achieving total closure. Although the term is more often used when studying socio-political identities, it can also be used to describe the tension that characterizes discursive narratives in their inability to be all-encompassing, being always subjected to a constitutive outside. This “outside” or external aspect to discourse can be considered constitutive because it plays a central role in creating discursive meaning. What contingency does, in this sense, is to highlight the limits of discourse and subjectivity (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), and makes it possible to recognize the existence of, if not fully grasp, alternative possibilities to the discursive narratives in place.

From the discipline of psychoanalysis, we draw upon the insight that there is an affective investment in discourse and the category of fantasy. Before proceeding, it is necessary to establish the notion of dislocation. Dislocation, in concrete words, refers to the “moment when the subject’s mode of being is experienced as disrupted” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007:110). When in the presence of dislocation, subjects will most likely experience sensations of anxiety and uneasiness. As stated by Glynos (2014), the degree of the aforementioned affective investment in certain discursive elements may allow the subject to tolerate anxiety caused by the awareness of its radical contingency. For the category of fantasy, it is important to establish two of its essential attributes: It is based on a logic of desire, wherein the sudden exposure of elements that are not fully assimilated by public-official discourse can produce embarrassment or guilt; this logic produces *jouissance*, or enjoyment, but this is not to be understood in the traditional sense of the word, instead taking on a meaning similar to “painful pleasure”. The other attribute is the protection from the anxiety that results from becoming aware of the radical contingency of social life and the experience of dislocation.

In particular, fantasmatic elements (i.e. those that belong to the category of fantasy) help ward off that anxiety. There are two dimensions in which fantasy plays a role: According to Glynos and Howarth, these are the ideological and ethical dimensions. The ideological dimension “signals the way in which the subject becomes complicit in covering over the radical contingency of social relations by identifying with a particular discourse” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007:117). What is implied by this is that the subject, under the grip of ideology, is insulated from the possible moments of disruption of its identity. Moreover, this has the consequences of making the subject forget the discursive origins of social practices, thereby continuing to live as if the current status quo were natural. The ethical dimension, in

contrast, makes the radical contingency of social life present to the subjects, and explores the way in which they relate to the experience of dislocation. Summarizing, when in the presence of dislocation, subjects will most likely experience sensations of anxiety and uneasiness. They, in turn, have two options: engage in either ideological or ethical practices. Mourning, as will be argued, is a particular instance in which subjects engage in an ethical practice.

Loss, death, and mourning as an ethical practice

Experiences of loss, and specifically the presence of death and/or its prospects, can be interpreted as particular moments of dislocation because they have disruptive effects on social life and in discursive narratives. Because of this, these experiences also register the radical contingency of the existence of subjects, both as individual, physical beings and as part of a wider network of social relations which give them meaning. It is the prospect or the experience of the death of that person that can make us reconsider and become more aware of the expectations and attachments we feel towards him/her.

But this is not only applicable to death-related instances, but to loss in a more general sense. As is often the case, other elements that have become part of our routine are not recognized as contingent, and that conceals them within an illusion of inertia and permanence that they do not have. From certain habits to our health status and even particular objects we use in our everyday life (i.e. the car, the personal computer, etc...), the sudden loss of them can trigger an emotional response that we would likely not have foreseen, due to being unaware of the prominent role they play and the radical contingency of our narratives. Of course, this could be interpreted as necessary for the well-being of the human psyche, as a profound awareness of potential instances of dislocation as a result of loss would put the subject under constant stress and anxiety. From a discourse theory psychoanalytical standpoint, Slavoj Žižek's (1989) work regarding fantasy and ideology has been influential in explaining these affective attachments of subjects, as his work has associated the idea of engaging in an 'ideological critique' with what he calls 'traversing the fantasy', or the subject assuming a new position in relation to the object that was lost. But this new position is not adopted immediately - it involves a process of becoming aware of the elements of fantasy and their effects.

Mourning, then, comes in as a process that helps the subject deal with dislocation that comes as a result of the experience of loss, particularly the death of someone. As stated by Jason Glynos, "Mourning the loss of someone is thus largely about mourning the loss of our attachment to the material support underpinning the symbolic and/or imaginary roles the deceased played for us in shaping our social relations and fantasy life" (Glynos, 2014:140). In other words, mourning enables us to distinguish the recently deceased when they were alive, in a process of trying to establish who they

were as individuals, from the fact that they played a role in sustaining our own social identity and thus formed part of a larger narrative due to our experiences and interactions with them, a fantasmatic narrative characterized by unacknowledged contingency. I would argue that the importance of mourning arises from the fact that, although we recognize on a cognitive-intellectual, or even intuitive, level that death and losses are unavoidable, subjects are often not prepared to deal with them when these instances make themselves present. Similarly, this unpreparedness masks the emotional/affective responses that emerge when we inevitably have to face them.

At this point it is necessary to highlight some important characteristics of the mourning process, and to establish some modalities in which this process is made difficult. In concrete terms, mourning could be said to be the successful processing of the grieving feelings that come as a reaction to loss. Sigmund Freud, who provided one of the first systematic attempts to examine the mourning process, stated in *Totem and Taboo* that “Mourning has a quite specific psychological task to perform: its function is to detach the survivors’ memories and hopes from the dead” (Freud, 2011 [1913]:65). According to Freud, a crucial attribute of mourning, however, is that there is nothing natural about it (Freud, 1917:248). What is meant by this is that the mourning process does not occur effortlessly, by default after a loss. Quite the contrary, mourning involves an engagement with the process and a willingness to recognize that the deceased will not come back, that there is a void left by their absence in our narratives. Yet, the subject should also acknowledge that life must continue without their presence. As stated by psychoanalyst Darian Leader, “this process of surveying and reshuffling thoughts and images will eventually exhaust itself, and the mourner will choose life over death” (Leader, 2009:60).

Because mourning is not an automatic process, it is possible that it can become pathological or even blocked from reaching its ultimate resolution. Leader mentions two different modalities of mourning, pathological or complicated mourning, and melancholia. In the first, the process of choosing life over death “is arrested, due primarily to the presence of powerful feelings of hate mixed with our love for the deceased. In melancholia, the unconscious hatred of the one we’ve lost twists back to submerge us: we rage against ourselves as we once raged against the other, due to our unconscious identification with them” (Leader, 2009:60). Melancholia in particular is something that was of concern for Freud, as he was interested in the distortion of the mourning process. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud (1917) describes the melancholic subject as one who presents very low opinions in self-regard, with a pervasive feeling of worthlessness and an abandonment of the instinct to remain alive. But of interesting note is his insight that, when directing at himself accusations of despicableness, they can also be applicable

to the deceased. He argued that this was actually a mechanism in which the person was allowed to feel hate in the form of self-reproach, as guilt would arise if the subject consciously acknowledged the feelings of hate and anger he/she may have had towards the person who had passed away. At this point, the subject has identified with the deceased, which Leader characterizes as punishing “the lost loved one in effigy, yet it is their own self which has become this effigy” (Leader, 2009:55).

Although the traditional view of mourning emphasizes detachment from the source of loss, new perspectives on mourning actually suggest that subjects continue some form of attachment with the deceased, albeit in different form. They recommend the recognition of the person as deceased, while at the same time trying to construct a relationship between the deceased and the living as a new dynamic, one that is based on occasional memories of experiences together and the acknowledgment of the lessons that have been learned from them (Becker and Knudson, 2003). These new forms of mourning could, in theory, provide alternatives that can help subjects overcome complicated mourning or melancholia. Although the detachment view is more applicable to critical political analysis, I will argue that, in certain cases of national identity, this newer form could also be useful in the analysis.

Having described the processes of mourning and melancholia and discussed how death and loss are instances of dislocation, it is important to characterize mourning as an ethical practice within a psychoanalytical and poststructuralist framework. First, it asks us to deal with a moment of disruption. Because a key aspect of the mourning process is becoming aware of the emotional underpinnings and support structures the deceased provided us, it also requires an effort to recognize that those structures are gone forever with the deceased. At the same time, it implies bringing into the conscious mind and facing the radical contingency of our fantasy life and mode of being. I would argue that it is the reinforced attentiveness to contingency that results from loss that allows mourning as a process to be characterized as an ethical practice. In contrast, the failed modalities of mourning could be characterized as ideological practices. Although it could be argued that this is not the case because melancholia still brings some degree of attentiveness to the radical contingency, my argument is that subjects get too immersed in shifting the blame and negative feelings towards themselves, thus concealing to a degree the anxiety that results from facing radical contingency. Melancholia, in particular, functions as a way of avoiding either a successful detachment, in the traditional view, or successful integrative approach, as in the newer perspective. In other words, while mourning tries to get the subject to work through the feelings of anxiety, blocked mourning and melancholia “would fall on the side of eschewing this anxiety by retaining an overinvested and unconscious relation to its fantasy life” (Glynos, 2014:141).

Conditions that enable mourning

One last theoretical aspect which should be discussed before proceeding to exemplify how mourning could be used in critical political analysis is to specify the conditions which would allow mourning to successfully take place. As both Leader (2009) and Glynos (2014) have stated, the social and institutional context in which mourning occurs plays a crucial role in the possibilities of success. In particular, Glynos states two key conditions: 1) “an event or site that enacts for an individual or collective subject a publicly shared recognition of loss”, and 2) “an appropriate context within which loss can be processed ethically and creatively integrated into one’s individual and collective life” (Glynos, 2014:144-145).

The first condition is important, because it is not as straightforward as it seems for a number of reasons. Firstly, although death has thus far been assumed to be a specific instance of loss, death is not necessarily processed as a loss in all cases. This is due to the affective investment that may or may not be present, as well as the role the deceased played into our lives. In other words, if the deceased were heavily involved in the subjects’ narratives, then these subjects could process the deaths as losses. But the less involved the deceased were in a subjects’ narratives, the less likely it is that they register their deaths as losses, instead barely registering their absence at all. Second, even though the subjects may intuitively register the deaths as losses, they may not be able to consciously construct them as such. This is why rituals and activities in memory of the deceased are carried out: they actively register and construct the deaths as losses. This, according to Glynos (2014), would in turn enable the subjects to grant the deceased the respect and recognition of having once been human beings, and thus also the tacit recognition that they are worthy of being mourned.

The second condition is perhaps more explicitly difficult than the first, because it requires a greater degree of action or cooperation from the other actors involved and, if applicable, an appropriate institutional setting. Because the deceased are not only material beings in the world, but are also imbued with meaning from their interactions with others within a wider network of social relations, some of their traits have an imaginary or symbolic representation within specific institutional settings, ranging from the family to a larger organization or even the government in the marco-level. For instance, the death of a particular public figure associated with freedom of expression in a country which is officially democratic but has evident aspects of authoritarianism may prove to be an experience of dislocation for different sectors of the population. This might be because this figure provided fierce and documented critiques of the government, something which a large part of the civil society supported, and the sudden loss of that figure both makes civil society aware of his/her contributions to the political sphere in the country, but also triggers anxiety related to the quality of the freedom of expression

that would, from then on, continue without that specific figure. To be registered, though, important sectors such as the media and NGOs would have to publicly address it for a sufficient period of time, thus providing an adequate context for mourning to take place, and the mourning process would not only be of the public figure but also of quality of freedom of expression in that country. What is to be highlighted by this example is the following question, key to the second condition of mourning: “whether the space and time given to us is appropriate to the task of determining how a death matters to us and how loss can be transformed into a creative and active shaper in individual and collective life” (Glynos, 2014:146). Of course, there is no given conditions which automatically set the stage for mourning to take place. Rather, depending on the figure being mourned, the space, time and other contextual elements, the conditions agreed for mourning will vary and will have to be discussed among those who registered the death as loss.

Section 2: The role of mourning in critical political analysis

Having introduced the role losses and death can play as instances of dislocation, the concept of mourning as an ethical practice in the poststructuralist discourse theory framework and the conditions that enable mourning, a discussion on how mourning can be used in critical political analysis can proceed. This section will present three different instances in which mourning provides useful insights: sociopolitical issues dealing related to national identity and public figures, social issues dealing with adjustment to chronic illness and disability, and economic issues dealing with unemployment and class identities.

National identity: failed and successful mourning

It is perhaps on instances of national identity or deceased people who represented something in the political life of a nation that could be more explicitly analysed in the framework presented so far. I provide two examples: one of blocked mourning in the case of the U.S., and then one of blocked mourning in the first instance and then successful mourning in Chile. Butler (2006) and Glynos (2014) have both addressed moments in American history after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars (Afghanistan and Iraq) that have the potential to be analysed through the lenses of mourning and its failed modalities. When then-president George W. Bush stated in the aftermath of 9/11 that the time for grief was over just after ten days of the destruction of the Twin Towers, the second condition of possibility of an appropriate social and institutional context and enough time to process grief was not met. Instead, in the wake of tragedy, what was asked of the population was to ‘move on’. But I would argue that grieving September 11, 2001 is not only about processing the destruction of the World

Trade Center and those who perished, but also about grieving the sense of security of the United States as a nation in the decade between the end of the Cold War and the terrorist attacks. This moment of dislocation signaled to America that there was a new enemy, not in the form of Communism, but in the form of terrorism, particularly Islamic terrorism. The actual institutional response was military mobilization against this new enemy. And in this sense, the embodiment of this response, the soldiers going to war, stood for self-righteousness, feelings of security and democratic ideals that the United States as a nation wants to represent. My view is that this military mobilization, a moment in which the mourning process was stunted, was also of ideological nature because it shifted the attention from the experience of anxiety and the awareness of radical contingency in American life as a nation to an action that dwelled on the loss itself. It also did not allow for a moment of questioning traditional American values and exploring different alternatives for how the United States should behave in the international arena in the 21st century.

I want now to bring up the example of how a newer approach to mourning might look in the context of critical political analysis by looking at the Chilean coup in 1973 and the death of Salvador Allende, which was first experienced as blocked mourning and subsequently became successful. The description of the evolution of sociopolitical dynamics in Chile since the coup made by Johnson (2014) provide the context to analyze the mourning processes. When Allende was in power, although he was democratically elected and had support among the popular classes, for many of them in the middle and upper classes in Chilean society Allende's policies represented a financial cost to their lifestyles. Because of his socialist views, his policies tended to emphasize distribution and social programs and higher wages and as a result, more financial burden was experienced by the wealthier classes (although by no means excessive). When the coup occurred in September 11, 1973, and General Pinochet promised to implement policies to spur economic growth in Chile, there was a cautious sense of excitement mixed with feelings of uneasiness due to the violent nature of the coup and the death of Allende. But very soon after, repressive policies and the capture, arrest and murder of anyone who was deemed subversive by the new regime derailed the mourning process, making it impossible for the popular masses to mourn Allende's loss. But the middle and upper classes also had reason to mourn: many of their previous liberties were gone, as Pinochet's regime imposed many limitations on freedoms of association and speech, especially in the early years. This moment of failed mourning again masked feelings of anxiety that were being experienced by the population and concealed the radical contingency of social life in Chile by instead focusing on the promises of progress and economic prosperity that were to come, at least where public-official discourse was concerned.

I argue that this example provides an instance of the newer approach to mourning, because once the conditions were met for civil society to engage in successful mourning, it was not about detaching from Allende's symbolic representation of democracy, but rather reintegrating it in the new democracy in Chile that would come after Pinochet's dictatorship. This instance of mourning could be characterized as an ethical practice in the newer, integrative view, because the democratic regimes after the fall of the dictatorship recognized Allende's role for democracy, but these new regimes were also neoliberal in nature. As a result, Allende has come to be regarded as a public figure in struggles for a different kind of democracy, one that is fairer in the distribution of wealth among Chile's population. So Allende's figure and what he represented can be said to bring attentiveness to the radical contingency of political regimes. It is not about 'moving on', but about integrating his memory into the political struggles of Chile's neoliberal democratic regime, as a reminder that its neoliberal nature can be contested and realizing that alternative forms of democracy can also be possible.

Adjustment to Chronic Illness and disability

According to Sally E. Thorne, in cases of chronic illness or disability, the patients may believe that the shifts in attitude from others in response to the onset of the illness or the presence of the disability is justified. They may experience feelings of worthlessness and being a burden as a result of these interactions, particularly regarding the costs implied by trying to manage the disease or by trying to take on a "normal appearance" (Thorne, 1993). The dislocation experienced is the result of the loss of the normal lifestyle, coupled with the addition of new financial costs. My view is that melancholic subjects remain attached to their past lifestyle, thus unable to successfully detach and begin the process of mourning. What they do instead is to dwell on the burdens associated with their new forced mode of being. I could characterize this as an ideological practice because it conceals both the contingency of this new lifestyle, as well as the contingency of outside structural impositions. For instance, although they would probably need to change some of their previous activities to adjust to their new limitations, this does not mean that they cannot experience a similar kind of pleasure or perform a functionally similar activity to a previous one. Let me highlight this by providing some contrasts: for subjects who due to their illness or disability find it difficult to move to their workplace, a subject who undergoes a successful mourning process is able to detach from the previous mode of being and come up with ideas in which they can work from home; whether or not this means a shift in employment is also dependent on the willingness of the employer to accept this new dynamic, but they could become self-employed by starting their own business at home. Melancholic subjects, in contrast,

would instead assign blame to themselves and remain in a new disabled identity that obstructs the path to new possibilities in their lifestyle.

It is at this point that something should be explicitly stated. Chronically ill or disabled subjects can be considered to experience two moments of detachment. The first one is related to their old lifestyle. They need to recognize that their former lifestyle is gone and cannot get it back exactly as it was, and thus they can come to accept their new limitations. This, however, does not mean settling in a specific, disadvantaged or damaged identity. They need not think of themselves as ill nor disabled. This is where the second moment of detachment should occur: If they have constructed an identity of illness and disability, and they can successfully detach from that identity, they can integrate themselves into a different but equally functional lifestyle. Of course, constructing an identity of illness and disability does not occur by default and it is in the best interest of the subjects that it does not happen at all. If they, however, fall into this identity and remain trapped within it, then blocked mourning is being experienced. For mourning to be considered successful, the recognition of the new limitations and the integration to a new functional lifestyle must take place. What would characterize mourning as an ethical practice in this scenario is that it brought attentiveness to the radical contingency of two narratives, that of their former lifestyle and that of a lifestyle in a disabled identity. It also allowed subjects to successfully detach from those modes of being and come up with new possibilities of living. What is important about this form of mourning is the empowerment it brings to these subjects, as they can force themselves to take greater control of their own lives and think of ways to get over some structural barriers from their earlier narratives, as in the example, the subjects were forced to consider entrepreneurship as an alternative, among others.

Unemployment and class resubjectivation

As with the previous example, a similar issue is faced by those who face sudden unemployment or a shift in their economic conditions. Research by Gibson-Graham (2006) and Özselcuk (2006) has pointed out the dislocation experienced by workers who, when faced with the prospects of economic restructuring, fall back into a worker identity that views itself as morally superior and threatened. As highlighted by Özselcuk in particular, this class identity is sustained by the sensation of an injury caused by class relations, and as such, has an unconscious desire for the continuation of capitalism and exploitative relations between capital-owners and wage-labourers. This has relevant repercussions for political struggle: the melancholic subjects that continue to define themselves in the worker identity after experiencing distress from economic dislocation do not have opportunities to win that struggle, as they are unable to imagine alternative ways in which the economy could function. In this sense, maintaining the worker identity is to engage in

an ideological practice because it makes the subjects complicit in the continuation of capitalist class relations and shifts attentiveness away from the radical contingency of social life. This is similar to the experience of the ill and disabled subjects, who by maintaining their identity, they fail to consider ways in which to transform the dynamics of social relations.

Özselcuk (2006) pointed out two strategies in which they could help workers engage in a successful mourning process. First, desidentification: a process in which workers were shown or told some cultural, political and economic problems resulting from capitalism. Second, providing examples of successful and feasible economic enterprises post-economic restructuring that were directed by former workers. Mourning in this instance implies a process of resubjectivation: detaching from the previous identity and class relations and the ethical practice of becoming aware of the contingency of discursive narratives and realizing that there are viable alternatives to current economic practices, such as Workers Self-Directed Enterprises, as suggested by Wolff (2012). This would not necessarily imply a complete detachment from the worker identity, but rather a reconfiguration of certain attributes related to it. In this sense, it means putting an end to the static identity of the worker as exploited, transforming it into an identity capable of self-governance.

Some considerations on mourning as an ethical practice and conceptual tool

A short way to summarize what has been said thus far is that mourning can be associated with the ethical dimension within poststructuralist discourse theory, and can be understood as becoming aware of discursive narratives and practices. In contrast, stunted mourning or melancholia can arise from staying immersed in these discursive narratives and practices, unaware of its effects in everyday life. Although, as seen, these concepts are useful conceptual tools for the analysis of a variety of social and political phenomena, there are some considerations to keep in mind for its adequate use.

Perhaps most importantly, when characterizing mourning as an ethical practice, it must be clear that the “ethical” attribute is placed within its meaning in poststructuralist discourse theory, and is not to be confused with the Western philosophical tradition of ethics. Mourning can indeed be considered ethical in the Western philosophical sense in a variety of instances, such as the creation of public memorials (Weinrich, 2004). But if mourning can be considered a powerful ethical stance (in the Western sense), so too can melancholia be thought of as ethical. Two examples can help illustrate this point. An individual one is Jean Amery’s decision to practice “the ethics of resentment” as long as people in Germany in the 50’s and 60’s refused to engage with the atrocities committed during the Nazi Regime. He viewed this failure to ‘move on’, or to engage in successful mourning, as a necessary ethical practice, because for him the conditions that could ensure that such political phenomena would not happen again had not yet been met

(Amery, 2009). A contemporary collective instance of melancholic subjects are the groups of parents, NGOs and international organizations that are trying to find clear evidence of the fate of the 43 missing students of Ayotzinapa, in Guerrero, Mexico. They have not been able to bring the case to a close, and such a massive and highly mediatized forced disappearance of people has only yielded contradictory reports. It is a complex social and political event for Mexico (one that exposes widespread corruption and mass atrocities), but civil society networks have not allowed the case to disappear into oblivion - they are instead pressuring the government and international institutions to reach a clear and verifiable conclusion (González Rodríguez, 2015). Both of these examples can be considered “ethical” in the Western sense because they show people standing up for ideals of Western justice, but it does not mean that melancholy is an ethical practice within discourse theory. This does not imply, however, that there cannot be practices of mourning that are ethical in both Western philosophy and in discourse theory. A second aspect to be considered is that mourning, for the subject, is a necessary step, but not enough by itself, to produce social and political transformation. It is important to remember that discourse theory is situated within a critical tradition - one that has figures such as Marx, Gramsci, Foucault, Derrida, etc... - and as such is concerned with discovering the different forms of power, oppression and possibilities of transformation. Important theorists such as Noam Chomsky (2011) and Ernesto Laclau (2014), among others, have argued that the current era, one in which the neoliberal discourse has become hegemonic, has focused on the accumulation of power and wealth to the detriment of the well-being of the majority of the population, ignoring its demands for basic social justice. Mourning, as a process for subjects and a conceptual tool for social scientists, is a component that enables one to engage in ‘ideological critique’ - to discover the seams of a hegemonic discursive narrative and its underpinning elements, the neoliberal one in this case. But if the mourning process reveals a particular discourse and thus empowers people to overcome it, for social transformation to take place there needs to be organization and collective action. This is, in essence, what Marx and Engels (2012) advised the proletariat to do during the nineteenth century in the struggle against capitalism, and what Laclau and Mouffe (2014) have recommended as well for the confrontation against neoliberalism, integrating discourse and its elements as tools.

A final consideration is that the use of the concept of mourning as a critical political analysis tool should not be confined to either death-related topics nor to the ideological critique against neoliberalism. This was shown when discussing the adjustment to chronic illness and disability, but it can also question the foundations of legalistic discourse and transitional justice in a way that represents an ethical practice from a poststructuralist discourse theory stance. This is the project of Jill Stauffer (2015) when focusing her

research on ethical loneliness - the loss of one's world by losing the very basic assumptions about security and how the world operates, compounded by the isolation of not being heard. Mourning becomes an ethical practice here because it allows subjects to question their most basic assumptions and ideas, thus becoming aware of several discourses and several forms of injustice that they were previously unaware of. Stauffer's research deals more with traditional Western philosophy, International Law and Conflict Resolution, but it provides evidence that the concept of mourning from the discourse theory approach can be used in a variety of areas of study in the social sciences and the humanities.

Conclusions

The main insights of this article have centered on two aspects and some considerations. The first is that mourning can be considered an ethical practice in the framework of poststructuralist discourse theory because of the attentiveness it brings to the radical contingency of social relations, and because of the possibilities of transformation of the subject when mourning is successful. For successful mourning to take place, two conditions of possibility were discussed: the publicly shared recognition of the loss, either through a specific activity or a place/site for mourning, and the appropriate context in terms of institutional responses, place and time. The second aspect is that mourning can be used in critical political analysis, both in instances that are death-related and in instances that focus on dislocation. This has been presented with the examples of national identity and public figures, which were more clearly involved with death as the central focus, and the examples of chronic illness and disability and class resubjectivation, in which other forms of dislocation were involved. Finally, some considerations regarding the concept of mourning were provided, showing that it may overlap with Western ethics although it should not be confused with them, and elaborating upon its importance for the subjects engaged with it, as well as for research in social sciences and humanities.

As concluding remarks, I want to comment on what I consider to be most useful aspect of engaging in a successful mourning process: the possibility of transformation and of changing the current conditions of social relations. I believe that experiences of death and loss have a profound impact on the narratives in which subjects remain immersed. But those moments of dislocation are necessary and able to signal to the subjects the need for a response. It is from this point on that subjects can engage in mourning attempts. But those attempts which are successful are instances of change and transformation in social relations, instances which could otherwise have been avoided. Successful mourning is, then, a manner which has crucial implications for social relations in a given space and time: mainly, that it can challenge and change the status quo and bring about new conditions in which other sociopolitical and economic values, practices and regimes take place.

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