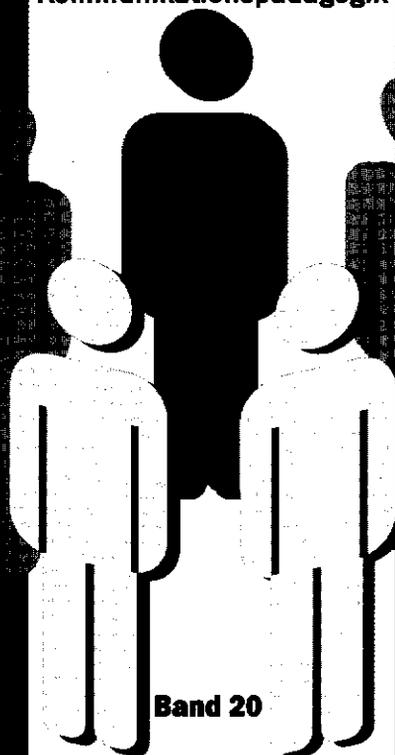


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# Communication and Political Change

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### Political Change through Communication: Breaking with Ancient Taboos?

Taboos standardize social conduct; they regulate how to act and “what to do, and what not to do.” They place members of a society under constraints. Taboos are learned at an early age, and violations are strictly sanctioned. A “civilized” child learns early on that his excretions are taboo, for instance. Many rules apply to the teaching of cleanliness.

Today, for example, spitting is taboo. It was a common practice throughout the past centuries and in Western civilization, and only became taboo during the course of the twentieth century. Only fifty, sixty years ago, people had to be reminded of this ban on spitting. In the railroad trains, enameled signs were installed beneath the windows, warning in black-and-white and in several languages, that there was to be “No Spitting.” Railway stations still featured spittoons, indicating that spitting was restricted to these areas. Today, without questioning, we swallow any excess saliva. We have internalized the taboo.

Here another taboo area: despite all the sex and promiscuity shown in movies, sex in public is still taboo, and in some countries even kissing or the exchange of other caresses are taboo. Even though the limits of modesty have been relaxed in many places, the genital area still secures a person’s self respect and personal dignity. Therefore, it is taboo to penetrate another person’s genital area, to injure a person’s dignity with sexual harassment, or to destroy it with rape. This much can be

generalized: "Certain things" happen on a daily basis, at all times, and in all societies, but they cannot and must not be recognized because they are taboo. Therefore, they have been excommunicated from the discourse of society, and they cannot be changed "individually," neither by general acceptance nor by general rejection. People and groups acting outside of social taboos will be ignored, simply not acknowledged, or judged. The opportunity to change these matters will only arise when broad and public discussions of taboo subjects have become possible.

Generally, however, this does not happen from one day to the next. Many matters, which are still taboo within the general society, have already long been discussed and questioned within smaller groups, and they are only partially taboo anymore. Therefore, each topic that is considered to be taboo needs to be examined: it is taboo – for whom? Not taboo – for whom? Taboo – why? Who is helped by the taboo? Who is harmed by it?

Each taboo seems to be ambivalent without the context of orthodoxy; it seems to contain an accepted ban, a "taboo," and at the same time some sort of "non-taboo."

Taboo matters are "non-taboo" for smaller circles. Although the generally accepted taboo still applies to them personally, their critical observation of social matters has led them to recognize that the taboo can no longer be tolerated. These groups free themselves from perception-restricting blinders, they do not allow anyone to forbid them independent thinking, and they question dogmatic statements. However, in these cases it is possible that a new dogmatism, the new group ideology, might give rise to a new taboo.

Once these groups stop thinking only for and about themselves, they will try to win public support for the necessary change of, or even break with, the taboo. Public discussion is the first step to condemnation of taboo

matters, or to winning acceptance for the change of an existing taboo. To illustrate this process, I chose “violence as a means of war” as an example.

War means “...the attested freedom to commit all sorts of criminal acts” (Malinowski 1942/1986, 217). “War means the reversal of the normal, constructive standards of human cooperation. Acts that are prohibited as criminal acts under normal circumstances [...], will be elevated to military virtues during the war: killing, destruction, intimidation, raping, and robbing” (220).

At all times and during all wars, women have been and still are becoming the enemies’ victims of sexual violence. “Rape as a consciously used means of war weaves like a red thread through all of history, regardless of nationality, geography, culture, race, class, caste, or ideology” (Schmidt-Harzbach 2002). The perpetrators are conveying this message: “You do not exist as a person or a human being.” “In male communication, the warrior adheres to the rule: “Rape the enemy’s wife...’ The victors’ desecrations are robbing the defeated men of any remaining illusions of power and possession” (Guendel 2002). In addition, the siring of “bastards” destroys ethnic pride for a long time afterwards. This is not an old wives’ tale, but our contemporary history. It happened during World War II, it happened in Bosnia, it happened (and is still happening?) in Kosovo, and it happens anywhere in the world wherever wars are waged.

During 1945 and for a few months after the end of the war, violence against women was definitely discussed among women, but it did not come to light within the larger public, and so it did not enter public consciousness. As a child during this time, I remember overhearing how the adults were whispering behind their hands about this or that woman, “who had to confess.” This was not meant for my ears, and it was not until decades later when I finally understood the meaning of this phrase. “Confessing” – a lingual euphemism from lofty moral heights for an event

of the most abysmal humiliation. “Behind the hand” – that means the fates of women were condemned to public silence, they were taboo, even though violence is a collective female experience.

“In 1945, when more than 450,000 soldiers of the Red Army fought in Berlin, 1.4 million girls and women lived in the city. Between early summer and fall of 1945, Red Army soldiers raped at least 110,000 of these girls and women... 11,000 of these women of childbearing age became pregnant... More than 40% suffered multiple rapes” (Johr 1992, 54f.).

The German Armed Forces and the SS also used “violence against women as means of war.” The total number of rapes in all of the countries occupied by German troops is unknown. But more than 500 Armed Forces bordellos were in existence, where mostly Eastern European and Jewish women were forced into prostitution. The main reasons for the establishment of these bordellos were these fears: sexually transmitted diseases could become epidemics, and a general ban on sexual contacts could lead to offences against decency (meaning for the most part homosexual acts, which would undermine military morale).

Rosenthal’s research concerning how violence against Jewish women during National Socialism affected their children and grandchildren makes clear that many Jewish women in the concentration camps were forced into prostitution in the camp bordellos (Rosenthal 1999, 27). The SS and privileged inmates had access to these bordellos. The interviews, however, clearly show that “... the topic of experiences of sexual violence in connection with the past persecution had been greatly tabooed, in private as well as in public discourse. This taboo was established by a silence and a denial, which now is very difficult to overcome for the survivors as well as their descendants. We can also conclude that the repeatedly observed tendency towards the social exclusion of survivors of collective massive

violence [...] even increases in regards to survivors of sexual violence within the context of war” (Rosenthal, 27).

During the Nürnberg Trials (the 1945 – 1949 trials against the survivors of the Nazi elite conducted by an international military court, and by U.S. military courts), rapes were only mentioned incidentally in some indictment documents but did not result in convictions – not even in the twelve follow-up trials. The violence against women by German men, which resulted in forced prostitution for the benefit of the armed forces and the SS, is taboo for the perpetrators and their descendants as well as for the survivors and their descendants (Rosenthal, 28). The women bear the additional stigma of having been dishonored and desecrated. The collective silence is transferred to the next generations in some way or other (Rosenthal; also Vegh 1983 with a different focus). Collective silence, too, means non-communication on both sides: the silence of the traumatized women and the secrecy of the perpetrators. As long as the taboo cannot or must not be broken, and as long as it cannot be discussed, public opinion cannot form, and change cannot take place.

Only the violence against Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian women has raised public consciousness about violence against women as a means of war. During the war in Bosnia and Croatia, hundreds of thousands of girls and women were raped not only by Bosnian Serbs, but by soldiers of all nations (including the U.N. Blue Helmets!); many of them suffered multiple rapes, many of them were murdered. (Guendel 2002, 3) In Kosovo, phenomena occurred that were similar to those in the wake of sexual violence against women during World War II.

“In addition, rapes in Kosovo can destroy the usually very stable social construction holding together large families. Enormous pressure to hide and deny these events is exerted upon the victims as well as their families” (Amnesty International, May 27, 1999, 1). Nonetheless, some women were

ready to make public the violence they and other women had experienced. Newspaper reports and especially television reports began removing the taboos, at long last leading to public discussions and to a change in public consciousness. This was followed by a change in communication regarding violence against women as a means of war.

In 1998, it was finally decided to establish an international court; even the U.S.A. signed this agreement. [The Bush administration annulled the U.S. signatures for the International Court in May 2002!] The Haag Tribunal passes judgments on war trials and war criminals. Now, for the first time in history, sexual violence against women during war is regarded as a war crime!

In his statement for International Women's Day (March 8, 1998), Kofi Annan, General Secretary of the United Nations, demands urgent measures to combat violence against women and for the protection of women during armed conflicts. In his words, these two subjects are "... especially urgent: Violence against women and the affects of armed conflicts upon women" (Annan, March 8, 1998, 1). For the first time in March of 1998, a war criminal was brought to trial before the International Court for mass raping.

In the end, breaking with this taboo has led to the legal foundation upon which it is now possible to name "rape as a means of war" a prosecutable crime. Common experiences of many women during war times, matters which used to be excommunicated and buried in general silence, have been changed by communication. But for whom did change occur? Taboos prevent freedom – still, for whom? And what kind of freedom can be obtained by breaking with taboos?

While working on this paper, I noticed the ambiguousness connected to breaking with taboos. Events become public, and thus become open for discussion, for the most part when the media takes them up. This is what happened here, too. Rapes of girls and women during war became a media

topic. Magazines published pages upon pages of illustrated reports, and numerous television shows – women shows, television discussions, and news reports – picked up the topic as well.

The media pays attention to provable facts, which means in this case, that the victims' physical appearance differs very much from the usual portrayals of women. Women on television are for the most part young, beautiful, attractive, and perhaps witty. The "victims" should be total wrecks, emaciated, and miserable. But the victims gain their real credibility only with the help of comments of the experts: doctors, psychologists, or perhaps employees of Amnesty International. They all give witness, that real horrors took place, that many women were raped, tortured, murdered, and that the survivors have been harmed permanently.

"The media and their makers do not at all act as advocates of the victimized women in order to plead their cause in our public media: Rather, they play the role of the persecutor in a typical rape trial, where they themselves bring suit and ask permission to bring in the victims as admissible evidence" (Kappeler 1992, 36).

Women who publicly gave witness of their horrid experiences hoped to win more compassion for the victims of humiliations; they perhaps hoped to find more psychological and political support; but by now, they are bitterly disappointed. "We believe that this sensationalist journalism only served to frighten and shake-up the victimized women even further" (Zagreber Frauenlobby, December 21, 1992, quoted in Kappeler, 51).

From this point of view, it seems that, although breaking with taboos regarding violence against women as a means of war has turned these actions into prosecutable crimes and brought about the sentencing of the perpetrators, it still did not change anything for the victimized women themselves.

Why? Because published opinion has not turned into public opinion? Because fear of the taboo is stronger than the courage to be free? Because this courage for freedom would destroy the taboo's protection for our own forces, too, if used against foreign forces? Because the media's own taboo breakers are still clinging to the media-empowering taboo?

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