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The Girl Who Renegotiated Trauma: An Introduction to Trauma Theory for Activists

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Wednesday, May 18, 2011 - 10:45



*Spoiler alert: This essay reveals important plot developments from the last two books of Stiegg Larson's Millennium Trilogy. If you haven't read or seen *The Girl Who Played With Fire* or *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, better get to it.*

In *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, author Stiegg Larson introduces us to the twenty-first century's first great traumatized protagonist, Lisbeth Salander. Called the “perfect victim” by one of her friends, she is a private investigator who faces all kinds of abuse from men in her life, men who hate women in general and her in particular. At a young age, she watched her father regularly and viciously abuse her mother. Seeing that police and social workers would do nothing to stop him, Lisbeth sets her father on fire, ending his attacks on her mother but landing herself in a mental institution. While locked up, she is physically, medically, and psychologically abused by a

psychiatrist. Once she is let out, she is declared legally incompetent, and is required to have a legal guardian to handle her financial affairs and check in with her. One of these guardians rapes her twice, the second time with unbelievable brutality and sadism.

Lisbeth responds to this barrage of trauma by building an invisible steel wall around herself, detaching emotionally from the people around her, becoming introverted and anti-social. She reveals no emotional vulnerability to anyone save a handful of very good friends and lovers, and even then, she doesn't go so far as to let them know where she lives or what she does with her time. She dresses in a mash-up of goth and punk styles, and her clothes “mark her private space as hostile territory”. The rivets in her leather jacket operate as “a defense mechanism, like the quills of a hedgehog . . .” signaling “don't try to touch me—it will hurt”.¹

Recognizing that appealing to authority figures gets her nowhere, she refuses to speak to therapists, social workers, or police. Instead, she fights for her own justice. Having a penchant for revenge, Lisbeth attacks the people who have hurt her, as well other men who have abused women, with brilliant, shocking intensity.

Lisbeth's responses to trauma lead people to call her a psychopath, a paranoid schizophrenic, a pathological narcissist, a Satanic lesbian witch, and everything in between. At times, she plays this up, like when she attacks a statutory rapist while her face is painted in a grim, comic book villain style. But no one ever suspects what she is really up to. Lisbeth is an ingenious hacker, who has the ability to gather hidden information, spy on people, and potentially bring down the Swedish government when she works on her own and with the small international community called the Hacker Republic. Lisbeth uses the introversion and caution born from her post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to work for her. She fights against the people who hurt her, as well as other deserving individuals and corporations, with the gifts that trauma gave her.

Trauma and Social Movements

Lisbeth Salander has a lot to teach us about trauma. For activists in social movements, she can help in the understanding of how trauma and PTSD effect our organizing, messaging, analyses, tactics, and personal lives. Lisbeth reacted to the abuse she faced by synthesizing her traumatic responses with her skills and convictions, turning herself into an effective and powerful feminist and hacker. In this, she is a model for modern traumatized activists.

Trauma effects everybody. Though most recent media attention about trauma revolves around veterans of foreign wars, it is a much wider phenomenon. Any number of events—invasive surgeries, the death of loved ones, car accidents, physical and sexual assaults—can traumatize a person. The fact that so many people are physically, sexually, or verbally abused by individuals and institutions means that we all members of a trauma-oriented society.

The ubiquity of trauma means that people organizing for social change and against oppression need to take it into account when they are doing their work. This starts with recognizing that the people we are organizing with may be traumatized, as are people who we're targeting through campaigns or protests. We also need to take into account the ways that we trigger people, and adjusting our messages and strategies accordingly.

A traumatic event is one in which our normal ways of coping are completely overwhelmed. In response, our bodies begin instinctual, physiological processes. If these processes are followed

through and the energy mobilized for them spent, it is not likely that the event will lead to post-traumatic stress. For example, a person is attacked by a dog, but manages to punch it in the nose, startle it, and run away to safety. In the future they may be a little antsy around dogs, but they probably won't experience PTSD. If the same person tried to punch the dog but missed by an inch, allowing the dog to take a serious bite out of their arm, it is very probable that they will experience PTSD. In the first case, the fight and flight instincts worked successfully to neutralize a threat. In the second, the same fight instinct led to more painful conclusions and the flight instinct may have been engaged but never followed through. The energy exerted in throwing the punch never reached a natural end point, because other factors stymied it.

An animal in the wild instinctively discharges compressed energy after potentially traumatizing situations. Most do it through movement, including shaking, and sometimes through play. If a group of cats narrowly escape a life-threatening attack, they'll play with each other afterwards in a way that mimics the attack. This takes the built-up energy and releases it.

Humans have a harder time of it. Our evolved brain is the culprit, with the neo-cortex introducing rational thought into our consciousness, interfering with our mammalian instincts. We replay the traumatizing situations, too, but often in ways that don't resolve anything. This is called reenactment. A common example is people who have been physically abused as children and then go on to abuse their lovers and children as adults. Some people constantly replay the situation that traumatized them, imagining different ways they could have acted, usually beating themselves up for not doing what, in hindsight, seems like the right thing. In both instances, the energy called upon to respond to the original trauma is never resolved. Instead, it is the fuel for perpetuating more triggering situations, such as physical abuse, guilt, and self-loathing. Every day, people act out because their traumatic responses are triggered. We respond to triggering by re-experiencing our original traumatizing moments and reacting through a number of instinctual survival mechanisms—flight, fight, freeze, appease. These responses serve us at times, keeping us alive and safe. At other times, they hold us back, keeping us stuck in patterns of reaction and reenactment that we can't seem to break out of.

Coping

Lisbeth Salander has a strange relationship to her traumatic reactions. She has trained herself to be silent in the face of authorities and most everyone else. As a private investigator, hacker, and avenger, she relies on secrecy, and the freeze-response of tight-lipped silence protects her privacy and her life. At the same time, this response, in addition to her flight-response, leads her to hurt the people she most loves by not checking in with them when she disappears for months or years at a time. On the one hand, her traumatic responses keep her alive by keeping her from trusting anyone too much. On the other, they make her untrustworthy. She is a loyal friend, but her flightiness and fear of attachment keep her from truly connecting with people.

As humans, we need to recognize when we're acting out traumatic responses, honor them in a non-judgmental way, and address whether or not the behavior is serving us. As activists, we need to recognize when our comrades, potential allies, potential adversaries and targets are acting out in such a way. At times, we may avoid triggering our allies in order to create safe, healing spaces and movements. At others, we may do just the opposite to push people out of their comfort zone when we're trying to make difficult points we think are vital. For the targets of campaigns and protests, we may want to avoid pushing buttons we know may invoke trauma so that we can communicate nonviolently and with compassion. But sometimes, it might serve us to intentionally

trigger our them, to force a confrontation on our own terms or to push them towards a moment of reckoning.

Although Lisbeth is “the perfect victim”, she does her share of victimizing other people. In particular, she uses her skills as a hacker to betray her friends' privacy. Lisbeth has a program through which she can access people's hard drives, and she uses it to hack into her friend and former lover Mikael's computer. She does not shy away from reading his personal emails or stories he is working on.

Oppression and Trauma

On the surface, it is shocking that someone who so values her own privacy completely disregards other people's, and it disrupts the cliché of the righteous victim. How is it that people who have been traumatized by oppressive acts turn around and reenact the same behavior? How can it be that someone who is oppressed becomes an oppressor?

Applying trauma theory to social movements complicates the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. All of us wear different hats, some of them oppressive, some of them oppressed. For example, a white, native-born, middle-class, gay woman experiences homophobia, sexism, and classism. At the same time, she experiences privileges because of her skin color, class status, citizenship, and for being cisgendered. Does a person like this fall easily into the oppressor or oppressed categories? No, and most of us do not, either. When we organize for social justice, a critical understanding of trauma can give us a richer analysis of oppression that takes into account the layered, complicated factors leading to people simultaneously carrying privileges and feeling disempowered.

Trauma does not just play a crucial role in oppression—trauma and oppression are one in the same. Oppression is the collective, sustained, systemic traumatization of a individuals within a targeted group. As Sonia Aurora Morales put it, “abuse is the local eruption of systemic oppression, and oppression is the accumulation of millions of small systematic abuses.”ⁱⁱ

For example, in a recent op-ed for the Baltimore Independent Reader on street harassment of women and LGBTQ people, Shawna Potter recounts a moment when she was harassed on the street by two laughing men who grabbed her bottom and kept walking. To the man she was with, the threat was over as soon as the other two men were gone. But as Shawna put it, “a memory was made that replays every time I find myself on that street, a similar street, or even a street with any groups of men laughing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This demonstrates the way oppressive systems are reinforced through traumatization. When men harass women, trans people, or queers on the street, they are perpetuating patriarchy, transphobia and homophobia through their actions. If sexist, homophobic and transphobic laws, social structures, and religious, political and medical institutions are the systematic embodiments of gender-based oppression, men on streets and in bedrooms are the individual enforcers. They are playing their parts in systems that afford them power over others, making this power concrete through threats and acts of physical and sexual violence. These acts work to traumatize women, queer and trans people. Beyond this, the overwhelming prevalence of sexual violence towards women, queer and trans people means that a huge amount of people have been raped and sexually assaulted by men. If people have already been traumatized by men, street harassment may trigger memories of the initial traumatizing events.

Traumatic events are marked by the overwhelming sense of powerlessness that accompanies them. When someone is being physically abused by an authority figure, they experience complete powerlessness. The same is true for other traumatizing circumstances. When triggered, that sense of powerlessness returns. This explains why abusive men often claim to be powerless and accuse women of trying to take what little power they feel they hold. Men who are abused as children or adults, or face racial or economic oppression, may abuse and oppress the women and children in their lives. Internal powerlessness can be a catalyst for abuse and violence when it is experienced by someone holding power over others.

Broadening our understanding of people in oppressive roles as traumatized does not excuse their behavior, but it does shed light on how oppression is reproduced through perpetual traumatization. It also helps us be real about our own roles within intersecting systems of oppression and privilege. This can cut down on the self-righteousness and denial of privilege that turns so many people off of activism. Also, it can disrupt a simplistic dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed that alienates potential allies, divides movements, and promotes a two-dimensional, moralistic worldview. Recognizing everyone's potential to be oppressed and oppress others allows us to humanize, rather than demonize, targets of campaigns and protests, and pushes us to communicate and act more effectively.

Renegotiation

There is a compelling scene at the end of *The Girl Who Kicked A Hornet's Nest* where Lisbeth has a choice to make. She is sitting in a courtroom, and a judge is about to rescind the declaration of incompetence that has kept Lisbeth under the supervision of the state her whole adult life. Throughout the trial, Lisbeth repeats a mantra in her mind, "no compromise, no compromise." The judge tells her that if her declaration of incompetence is rescinded, she will have the same rights and responsibilities as other Swedish citizens, including having to testify if called as a witness at future trials. If she refuses, she would be treated like any other adult and be charged with obstruction of justice or perjury. This goes against her trauma-inspired survival mechanism of never uttering a word to an authority figure, which has served her well enough up to this point. But does it still serve her? She thinks for a moment, curtly nods, and agrees to testify if asked to. She thinks to herself, "OK, a little compromise".

Renegotiation of trauma is the process through which the repetitive cycle of triggering, reenactment, and acting out is transformed into a healing ritual. It is not something that can be done through talk therapy, as trauma resides in the body, and not exclusively in the brain.

Practitioners of somatic therapy, who use movement to work through energy blocks, and therapists who work in eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, have made tremendous advances in the treatment of trauma. Their practices work through teaching the body a third option beyond the cycle of reenacting trauma and avoiding it, which comes from synthesizing fragmented parts of the felt sense and calling on the body's capacity to heal itself.

Lisbeth's "little compromise" is a kind of renegotiation. Up until this point, she stood in complete opposition to just about everything and everyone. For Lisbeth to take on the responsibilities of a normal citizen seems completely out of her character. After all, she'd built a wall to keep society out. Now, vindicated by court of law, why should she change? But that wall was born of trauma that she has the opportunity to overcome. In a moment, she needs to decide if she is going to allow trauma to continue dominating her life. She breaks down the wall of "no compromise" with the incredibly brave act of making a "little compromise".

For activists, renegotiation can be a metaphor for the transformations we're working towards. We can see our activism as a means of collectively working through the trauma of oppression, and the renegotiation of that trauma as a series of victories. For example, a person sees that there is a need for a clean needle exchange program in their neighborhood. She gets in touch with some of her friends and talks about it. They reach out to other groups doing work around harm reduction, community healthcare and HIV/AIDS prevention, and develop the idea within a larger community. Grant applications are written, a space is found, needles are purchased, people are notified, and the needle exchange opens up. The space brings people together, not just to get rid of old needles and procure new ones, but to exist as an impromptu alternative health center. People bring their different skills to share. Some do acupuncture, some massage, some bring a healing presence just by being there.

Looking at activism through the lens of trauma theory, every step of this process can be a renegotiation of trauma. For the person to decide to take action and call her friends may involve moving through trauma that kept her isolated and feeling like she couldn't change anything. Friends getting together with one another to brainstorm a plan may involve moving through trauma that kept them from talking about sensitive issues. For them to reach out to other organizations may involve moving through trauma that made people cautious of working with more mainstream groups. It can go on and on.

A benefit of looking at activism this way is that it honors the often painful transformations people experience in their personal lives when they do social and political work. Too often, the measure of success in a campaign is so lofty that it is almost impossible to feel anything but pessimistic. If victory for a labor organizer means overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with a system where wealth is justly distributed, then they may never feel like they've accomplished a thing until that moment arrives. But if victory means staying passionate about organizing and still taking time to recharge to avoid burning out, or encouraging another worker to take more of a leading role in planning for a demonstration, or keeping people's morale up through cracking jokes, then success can be something tangible and realistic.

Raising our consciousnesses around trauma can make our political work transformative on multiple levels. We can change ourselves, our communities, our relationships and our futures simultaneously. Through recognizing how trauma works, we can create healthy, sustainable movements, helping each other and ourselves as we heal trauma and oppression.

iLarsson, S. (2010). *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* . New York: Knopf. pp. 463

iiWineman, S., & Morales, A. (2003). *Power-under: trauma and nonviolent social change*. Cambridge, MA: Steven Wineman. pp. 20

iiiOP-ED: *International Anti- Street Harassment Day | Indydependent Reader*. (n.d.). *Indydependent Reader*. Retrieved March 23, 2011, from <http://indyreader.org/content/op-ed-international-anti-street-harassment...> [2]

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