

CULTURAL TRAUMA

by

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Jeffrey C. Alexander

CHAPTER ONE

Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma

by

Jeffrey C. Alexander

Traumas occur when individuals and groups feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their consciousness, will mark their memories forever, and will change their future in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

In this book, we introduce a new approach to this experience, the sociological concept we call "cultural trauma," and we develop an empirical model of the role it plays in the structures and processes of contemporary society. In this introduction, I will present the background of the approach we have taken and outline the model we employ. The chapters following are devoted to a series of theoretical-cum-empirical studies, in which my co-authors and I elaborate the theoretical model and demonstrate how "cultural trauma" provides a new way of looking at empirical phenomena. As these extensive case studies are developed, we elaborate our collectively developed theory of cultural trauma in subtly different ways. While there is a strong common core to the model that informs our work, it remains a theory-in-progress. We have not tried to achieve premature closure by presenting one definitive explanatory scheme. Further research and theoretical elaboration are required.

We hope our book will inspire such future work.¹

The idea of cultural trauma developed over the course of an intensive year-long dialogue among the contributors to this book. Initially launched as an investigation into "common values and social polarization,"² we soon realized that it was cultural trauma we were really talking about, and the more we explored this concept, the more we came to believe that it possessed compelling theoretical importance and empirical power.³ We found that in the disciplines of

1. Not least among ourselves. In fact, two of my co-authors have completed monographic studies that will be published more or less simultaneously with the present volume, and others are on the way. See also the preliminary reports on our project already published by Piotr Sztompka ("Theory of Cultural Trauma," citation to be added) and Bernhard Giesen, (citation to be added).

2. The present work is, in fact, the third in a series of publications sponsored by a generous grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation to the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences under the title of "Values and Social Process." Neil J. Smelser, the CASBS Center Director, and I took joint responsibility for directing the earlier phases of this project. The results of our two earlier initiatives were published in Neil J. Smelser and Jeffrey C. Alexander, eds., Diversity and Its Discontents: Cultural Conflict and Common Ground in Contemporary America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and in a special edition devoted to "The Public Representation of Culture and History" of the American Behavioral Scientist 42 (6), March 1999. It was my special privilege to direct the third phase of this funded research as a "Special Project" during the 1998-99 academic year at the Center. As collaborators, I was able to invite, with the approval of the CASBS Board of Directors, the co-authors of the present volume, to become Fellows at the Center. It was our great fortune that Neil Smelser chose to participate fully in our discussions despite his administrative responsibilities. He exercised a powerful influence on the proceedings. We would like here to record our gratitude not only to the Hewlett Foundation and the library and administrative staff of CASBS but to Neil Smelser as well.

3. Piotr Sztompka first brought our attention to "trauma" after the first day of discussion. In the course of the second day we added the crucial adjective "cultural."

the humanities there had already emerged a rapidly growing literature on trauma, and we analyzed these contributions alongside the century long discussion of trauma in psychological thought.⁴ We realized that we could build upon both these discussions to study social phenomena. We also realized that, in order to do so, we would need to create a new, more distinctively sociological approach.

We developed this approach both discursively and empirically. We read through other literatures, and also invited researchers in the humanities and psychological sciences to make presentations of their own research.⁵ We processed this information collectively in the course of hard-nosed, sometimes contentious weekly discussions among ourselves. Over the same period of time, we made use of the emerging cultural trauma concept to pursue our own case studies, reporting back to the group as our understandings developed, responding to criticism and revising our approach in turn. We made step-by-step comparisons, created provisional models, went back to the case studies, and revised our models again. As I have suggested above, our aim

4. Neil Smelser provides an overview of the developments in this psychological discussion in relation to the themes of the present volume in Chapter 2, below.

5. We would particularly like to recognize, in this connection, Norman Naimark and Hilda Sabato, who were also Fellows at CASBS, and Kenneth Thompson, Professor at the Open University, each of whom made very helpful presentations to our group. During the course of our project at the Center, we also benefitted from less formal discussions with Eduardo Cadava, Professor of English at Princeton University, Nancy Cott, Professor of History at Yale, and Arie Kuglanski, Professor of Psychology at the University of Maryland.

was not to create a set of formally elegant propositions but, rather, a robust and open-ended model that would provide a vigorous heuristic for "seeing" some significant social processes in a new way. Cultural trauma is what the pragmatist sociologist Herbert Blumer once called a "sensitizing concept."⁶ It alerts us to a new empirical phenomenon and suggests a new relationship between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions. It allows us to understand how apparently unrelated social phenomena interact with one another in coherent ways.

Ordinary Language and Reflexivity

One of the great advantages of this new theoretical concept is that it partakes so deeply of everyday life. Throughout the twentieth century, in Western societies at least, people have spoken continually about being traumatized by an experience, by an event, by an act of violence or harrassment, or even, simply, by an abrupt and unexpected, and sometimes not even particularly malevolent, experience of social transformation and change.⁷ People also have continually employed the language of trauma to explain what happens, not only to themselves, but to the collectivities to which they belong. We often speak of an

6. Herbert Blumer, citation to be added.

7. The issue of whether the lay perception of events as "traumatic" is confined to the West, or whether the language extends into nonWestern societies, is an issue that demands further investigation. I refer to it briefly in my own contribution in Chapter 7, below.

organization being traumatized when a leader departs or dies, when a governing regime falls, when an organization suffers an unexpected reversal of fortune. Actors describe themselves as traumatized when the environment of an individual or a collectivity suddenly shifts in an unforeseen and unwelcome manner.

We know from ordinary language, in other words, that we are onto something widely experienced and intuitively understood. Such rootedness in the lifeworld is the soil that nourishes every social scientific concept. The trick is to gain reflexivity, to move from the sense of something commonly experienced to the sense of strangeness that allows us to think sociologically. For trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society. It is this construction that the co-authors of this volume have set themselves the task of trying to understand.

In this task of making trauma strange, its imbeddedness in everyday life and language, so important for providing an initial intuitive understanding, now presents itself as a challenge to be overcome. We have come to believe, in fact, that the scholarly approaches to trauma developed thus far actually have been distorted by the powerful, common sense understandings of trauma that have emerged in everyday life. Indeed, it might be said that these common sense understandings constitute a kind of "lay trauma theory" in contrast to which a more theoretically reflexive approach to trauma must be erected.

Lay Trauma Theory

According to lay theory, traumas are naturally occurring events that shatter an individual or collective actor's sense of well being. In other words, the power to shatter -- the "trauma" -- is thought to emerge from events themselves. The reaction to such shattering events -- "being traumatized" -- is felt and thought to be an immediate and unreflexive response. According to the lay perspective, the trauma experience occurs when the traumatizing event interacts with human nature. Human beings need security, order, love, and connection. If something happens that sharply undermines these needs, it hardly seems surprising, according to the lay theory, that people will be traumatized as a result.

Enlightenment Thinking

There are "enlightenment" and "psychoanalytic" versions of this lay trauma theory. The enlightenment understanding suggests that trauma is a kind of rational response to abrupt change, whether at the individual or social level. The objects or events that trigger trauma are perceived clearly by actors; their responses are lucid; and the effects of these responses are problem-solving and progressive. When bad things happen to good people, they become shocked, outraged, indignant. From an enlightenment perspective, it seems obvious, perhaps even unremarkable, that political scandals are cause for indignation; that

economic depressions are cause for despair; that lost wars create a sense of anger and aimlessness; that disasters in the physical environment lead to panic; that assaults on the human body lead to intense anxiety; that technological disasters create concerns, even phobias, about risk. The responses to such traumas will be efforts to alter the circumstances that caused them. Memories about the past guide this thinking about the future. Programs for action will be developed, individual and collective environments will be reconstructed, and eventually the feelings of trauma will subside.⁸

8. This enlightenment version of lay trauma theory is exemplified by Arthur G. Neal's National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century (New York and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), an ambitious and insightful book of theory and case studies that represents the major sociological investigation into trauma to this point. In explaining whether or not a collectivity is traumatized, Neal points to the factual nature of the event, recounting how "each case study" in his book "focussed on individual and collective reactions to a volcano-like event that shook the foundations of the social world" (p. ix, emphasis added). Neal explains that "a trauma has an explosive quality about it because of the radical change that occurs within a short period of time" (p. 3, italics added). This empirical quality of the event triggers emotional response and public attention, for "dismissing or ignoring the traumatic experience is not a reasonable option" (p. 4, emphasis added). Suggesting that the trauma reaction typically leads to progress, Neal recounts that "permanent changes were introduced into the [American] nation as a result of the Civil War, the Great Depression, and the trauma of World War II" (p. 5).

An extraordinary event becomes a national trauma under circumstances in which the social system is disrupted to such a magnitude that it commands the attention of all major subgroups of the population ... The social fabric is under attack, and people pay attention because the consequences appear to be so great that they cannot be ignored. Holding an attitude of benign neglect or cynical

indifferences is not a reasonable option. (pp. 9-10, emphasis added)

The causes, conditions, and consequences of most national traumas become topics for debate and argumentation for many years to come. A national trauma frequently has liberating effects on a social system. Older ways of doing things are called into question, and new opportunities for change and innovation surface. The very fact that a **disruptive event** has occurred opens up the possibility that the social system will be perceived as defective in some way or another. In confronting the danger implied in a crisis event, new opportunities emerge for innovation and change. (p. 18)

Despite its naturalistic limitations, what remains singularly important about Neal's approach is its emphasis on the collectivity rather than the individual, an emphasis that sets it apart from the more individually-oriented psychoanalytically informed approaches discussed below. In focussing on events that create trauma for national, not individual identity, Neal follows the path-breaking sociological model developed by Kai Erikson in his widely influential book, Everything in Its Path (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1976). While this sensitively observed, often heart wrenching account of the effects on a small Appalachian community of a devastating flood is constrained by the lay enlightenment perspective, it established the groundwork for the distinctively sociological approach we adopt in this volume. Erikson's theoretical innovation was to conceptualize the difference between collective and individual trauma. This attention to collectively emergent properties, and the naturalism with which such collective traumas are conceived, are both evident in the following quotation.

By **individual trauma** I mean a **blow** to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so **suddenly** and with such **brutal force** that one cannot react to it effectively ... By **collective trauma**, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social that **damages** the bonds attaching people together and **impairs** the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with "trauma." But it is a **form of shock** all the same, a gradual realization that the **community no longer exists** as an effective source of support and that an important of the self **has disappeared** ... "We" no

Psychoanalytic Thinking

This kind of realist thinking continues to permeate everyday life and scholarly thought alike. Increasingly, however, it has come to be filtered through a psychoanalytic perspective that has become central to contemporary lay thinking and academic "common sense" alike. This approach places a model of unconscious emotional fears and cognitively distorting mechanisms of psychological defense between the external shattering event and the actor's internal traumatic response. When bad things happen to good people, according to this academic version of lay theory, they can become so frightened that they can actually repress

longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (loc. cit., pp. 153-54, emphasis added)

As the contributions to this volume by Smelser (Chapter 2 and Bjorn Wittrock (Chapter 6) make clear, lay trauma theory began to enter ordinary language and scholarly discussions alike in the complex reactions that developed to World War I, and it became expanded and elaborated in relation to the wars that followed in the course of the twentieth century. The "life course" approach in sociology and social-psychology, especially in the form pioneered by Glen Elder and his students -- e.g., Glen H. Elder, Jr., Children of the Great Depression, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974 -- has adopted a similar enlightenment model of trauma for studying the effects on individual identity of major social events such as the Great Depression and World War II. Yet similar understandings have long informed approaches in other disciplines, for example the vast historiography examining the far reaching effects on nineteenth century Europe and the United States of the trauma of the French Revolution. Elements of the lay enlightenment perspective have also informed contemporary thinking about the Holocaust and responses to other episodes of mass murder in the 20th century, as my discussion of the "progressive narrative" of the Holocaust in the following chapter suggests. This despite the fact that the understanding of the Holocaust, as I suggest below, has been fundamentally informed by psychoanalytic sensibilities.

the experience of trauma itself. Rather than direct cognition and rational understanding, the traumatizing event becomes distorted in the actor's imagination and memory. The effort to accurately attribute responsibility for the event, and the progressive effort to develop an ameliorating response, are undermined by displacement. This psychoanalytically mediated perspective continues to maintain a naturalistic approach to traumatic events, but it suggests a more complex understanding about the human ability consciously to perceive them. The truth about the experience is perceived, but only unconsciously. In effect, truth goes underground, and accurate memory and responsible action are its victim. Traumatic feelings and perceptions, then, come not only from the originating event but from the anxiety of keeping it repressed. Trauma will be resolved, not only by setting things right in the world, but by setting things right in the self.⁹ The truth can be recovered, and psychological equanimity restored, only, as the Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander once put it, "when memory comes."¹⁰

9. The most subtle and sophisticated recent representation of this approach is Jeffrey Prager's (citation to be added) acute psychoanalytic-cum-sociology study of repression and displacement in the case of a patient who claimed sexual harassment by her father. Prager goes beyond lay theory, however, by demonstrating how the individual's memory of trauma was the product, not only of her actual experience, but also of the contemporary cultural milieu.

10. When Memory Comes (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1979) is Friedlander's memoir about his childhood experiences during the Holocaust in Germany and France. He recounts here, in highly evocative literary language, his early traumatic experiences of persecution and displacement

from the perspective of a reflexive adult. Here and elsewhere in his writings (e.g., his "Trauma, Transference and 'Working through' in Writing the History of the Shoah" in History and Memory 4, no. 1 [Spring/Summer 1992]), Friedlander suggests that conscious perception of highly traumatic events can emerge only after psychological and artistic "self work" allows actors to recover their full capacities for agency. Friedlander's is emblematic of the intellectual framework that has emerged over the last three decades in response to the Holocaust experience, and it has been this psychoanalytically informed lay and scholarly theorizing that has informed the most influential perspectives that have been developed to understand trauma more generally. Perhaps the most innovative contribution of this body of work is its focus on memory, its insistence on the importance of working backward through the symbolic residue that the originating event has left upon contemporary recollection. Much as these memory residues surface through free association in psychoanalytic treatment, they appear in public life through the creation of literature. Because within the psychoanalytic tradition it has been Lacan who has emphasized the importance of language in emotional formation, and it has been Lacanian theory, often in combination with Derridean deconstruction, that has informed so much of the humanities based studies of trauma. (See Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic Awakenings: Freud, Lacan, and the Ethics of Memory," pp. 91-112 in Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996; for a non-psychoanalytic, emphatically sociological approach to memory, derived from the Durkheimian tradition, see the important statement by Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). It is hardly surprising, in other words, that the major theoretical and empirical statements of psychoanalytic lay trauma theory have been produced by scholars in the various disciplines of the humanities. Literary interpretation, with its hermeneutical approach to symbolic patterns, has been offered as a kind of academic counterpart to the psychoanalytic intervention.

Perhaps the most influential scholar in shaping this approach has been Cathy Caruth, in her own collection of essays, Unclaimed Experience (loc. cit) and in her edited collection Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Caruth's work on the complex permutations that unconscious emotions impose on traumatic reactions has been helpful in our own thinking. (See the conceptual model that Giesen develops in Chapter 3, below). Nonetheless, Caruth remains very much committed to a naturalistic understanding of the originating traumatic event. She writes, for example, about "Freud's intuition of, and his passionate fascination with, traumatic **experiences**" and suggests that "the experience that Freud will call 'traumatic neurosis' ... emerges as the unwitting

reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Unclaimed Experiences, loc. cit., pp. 3, 2, emphasis added). This implicit naturalism is also revealed in Caruth's emphasis on "knowing."

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing ... The wound of the mind -- the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world -- is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that ... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor ... So trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way the its very unassimilated nature -- the way it was precisely **not known** in the first instance -- returns to haunt the survivor later on ... Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. (Loc. cit., pp. 3-4, original emphasis)

For another illuminating and influential work in this tradition, see Dominick La Capra, Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994).

The enormous, now world-wide influence of this psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory can be seen in the manner in which it has informed the recent outpouring of literature by Latin American scholars devoted to understanding the contemporary struggles to come to terms with the traumatic brutalities of their recent dictatorships. Insofar as these discussions separate themselves from the immediate objective of demanding reparations and assigning moral blame -- legitimate and extremely important political and moral aims -- they devote themselves to the challenge of restoring collective psychological health by lifting societal repression and restoring memory. They stress the importance of finding -- through public acts of commemoration, cultural representation, and public political struggle -- some collective means for undoing repression and allowing pent-up emotions of loss and mourning to be expressed. Both the traumatized feelings of the victims, not to mention the immoral brutalities that initially caused them, are assumed

The Naturalistic Fallacy

It is through these enlightenment and psychoanalytic approaches that trauma has been translated from an idea in ordinary language into an intellectual concept in the academic languages of diverse disciplines. Both perspectives, however, share the "naturalistic fallacy" of the lay understandings from which they derive. It is upon

to have a naturalistic status. Elizabeth Jelin and Susana Kaufman, for example, direct a large-scale project on "Memory and Narrativity" (Information to be added) sponsored by the Ford Foundation, involving a team of investigators from different South America countries. In their powerful report on their initial findings, "Layers of Memories: Twenty Years After in Argentina," they contrast the victims' insistence on recognizing the reality of traumatizing events and experiences with the conservatives' denials of the reality of either or both, a denial that presents itself as an insistence on looking to the future and forgetting the past.

The confrontation is between the voices of those who call for commemoration, for remembrance of the disappearances and the torment, for denunciation of the repressors, and those who make it their business to act "as if nothing has happened here" [These are persons] who "did not know," who did not see, the "bystanders of horror" ... That Chilean society wants to "to forget" the past and look towards the future comes out in public opinion polls ... But the personalized memory of people cannot be erased or destroyed by decree or by force, and therefore it has to look for alternative channels of expression ... Controversies and political conflict about monuments, museums and memorials are plentiful everywhere They are attempts to make statements and affirmations [to create] a **materiality** with a political, collective, public meaning [and] a **physical reminder** of a conflictive political past ... When their aim is opposed or blocked by other social forces, the subjectivity, the desire and the will of these women and men who are struggling to attain it come out into public view ... The issue of turning the unique, personal and non-transferable feelings into public and collective meanings is left open and active.
(Unpublished manuscript, pp. 5-7, emphasis added)

the rejection of this naturalistic fallacy that our own approach rests. First and foremost, we maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution. The attribution may be made in real time, as an event unfolds; it may also be made before the event occurs, as an adumbration, or after the event has concluded, as a post-hoc reconstruction. Sometimes, in fact, events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred at all; such imagined events, however, can be as traumatizing as events that have actually occurred.¹¹

Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of harmfulness or abruptness per se, but because they are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity. Individual security is anchored in structures of emotional and cultural

11. This notion of an "imagined" traumatic event suggests the kind of process that Benedict Anderson documented in his Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 1991). In fact, while Anderson's concern is not with trauma, the kinds of self-consciously ideological creation of nationalist history that he describes often narrate a decisive traumatic event that is said to have compelled a particular national identity to be created and defended. Recent experience is replete with examples of angry nationalist groups, and their ideological and media representatives, asserting that they have been injured or traumatized by agents of some putatively antagonistic ethnic and political group, which then must be battled against in turn. The Serbians inside Serbia, for example, contended that ethnic Albanians in Kosovar did them traumatic injury, thus providing justification for their own "defensive" invasion and ethnic cleansing. The type case of of such imagined trauma was Adolph Hitler's persuasive case to his German countrymen that it was the international Jewish conspiracy who was behind the traumatic events of World War I and its aftermath.

expectations that provide a sense of capability. These expectations and capabilities, in turn, are rooted in the sturdiness of the collectivities of which individuals are a part. At issue is not the stability of a collectivity in the material or behavioral sense, although this certainly plays an important part. What is at stake, rather, is the collectivity's, its stability in terms of meaning, not action.

Identity involves a cultural reference. Only if the patterned meanings of the collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event. It is the meanings that provide the sense of shockingness and fear, not the events in themselves. Whether or not the structures of meaning are destabilized and shocked is not the result of an event but the effect of a cultural process. It is the result of an exercise of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification. This cultural process is deeply affected by power structures and by the contingent skills of reflexive social agents.

Culturalizing Social Trauma

At the level of the social system, societies can experience massive disruptions that do not become traumatic. Institutions can fail to perform. Schools may fail to educate, failing miserably even to provide basic skills. Governments may be unable to secure basic protections and may undergo severe crises of delegitimation. Economic systems

may be profoundly disrupted, to the extent that their allocative functions fail even to provide basic goods. All of these problems are real and fundamental, but they are not, by any means, necessarily traumatic for members of the affected collectivities much less for the society at large. For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, representations of these events quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. Collective actors "decide" to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go.

The Trauma Process

The gap between event and representation can be conceived as a "trauma process." Collectivities do not make decisions as such; rather, it is agents who do.¹² The persons who compose collectivities broadcast symbolic representations of ongoing social events, past, present, and future. They broadcast these representations as members of some social group. In this sense, the cultural construction

12. Piotr Sztompka emphasizes the importance of "agency" for theorizing social change in Sociology in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) and The Sociology of Social Change (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). See also my "Action and Its Environments" in Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Richard Munch, and Neil J. Smelser, eds., The Micro-Macro Link (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

of trauma begins with a claim.¹³ It is a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative of some horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution.

Carrier Groups

Such claims are made by what Max Weber, in his sociology of religion, called "carrier groups."¹⁴ Carrier groups are the collective agents of the trauma process. These groups have their ideal and material interests; they are situated in their own particular places in the social

13. The concept of "claims" is drawn from the sociological literature on moral panics, See Kenneth Thompson, Moral Panics (London: Routledge, 1998).

14. Max Weber, Economy and Society, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1969, pp. 468-517. In relation to issues of cultural change and conflict, Weber's concept was developed further in various writings by S.N. Eisenstadt, e.g., "The Axial Age: The Emergence of Transcendental Visions and the Rise of Clerics," European Journal of Sociology 23 (2) 1982: 299-314) and most recently by Bernhard Giesen in Intellectuals and the Nation (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). The idea is also linked to the idea of "movement intellectuals" that Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jameson developed in Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach (London: Polity Press, 199X). Smelser made an innovative contribution to the understanding of group interest in relation to cultural conflict in his appropriation of Tocqueville's notion of "estates" in "Growth, Structural Change, and Conflict in California Public Higher Education, 1950-1970," pp. 9-142 in Neil J. Smelser and Gabriel Almond, eds., Public Higher Education in California, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974. See also Bjorn Wittrock, "Cultural Identity and Nationhood: The Reconstitution of Germany or the Open Answer to an Almost Closed Question," pp. 76-87 in Martin Trow and Thorsten Nybom, eds., University and Society: Essays on the Role of Research and Higher Education, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

structure; they have their own particular "illocutionary talents," their ability to skillfully articulate their perspectives via meaning making in the public sphere. Carrier groups may be elites, but they may also be denigrated lower classes. They may be prestigious religious leaders or groups whom the majority has designated as spiritual pariahs. They may represent one generation against another, one's own nation against a putative enemy, the representatives of one particular institution against others in a fragmented and polarized social order.

The trauma process can be likened, in this sense, to a speech act.¹⁵ There is a speaker (the carrier group), an audience (the public, putatively solidary but sociologically fragmented), and a situation (historical, cultural, and institutional). The goal of the speaker is persuasively to project the trauma claim to the audience, making use of the

15. The foundation of speech act theory can be found in the pragmatically inspired interpretation of Wittgenstein that the philosopher J. L. Austin developed in, How to Do Things with Words (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962). In that classic work, Austin developed the notion that speech is not only directed to symbolic understanding but to achieving what he called "illocutionary force," that is, to having a pragmatic effect on social interaction. The model achieved its most detailed form in John Searle's Speech Acts (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969). In contemporary philosophy, it has been Jurgen Habermas who has demonstrated how speech act theory is relevant to social action and social structure, beginning with his Theory of Communicative Action (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984). For a recent philosophical demonstration of how such an effort to achieve illocutionary force is central to social movements and social change, a discussion which connects speech act theory to cultural processes, see Maria Pia Lara, Feminist Narratives in the Public Sphere (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999).

particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and opportunities provided by institutional structures. In the first place, of course, the speaker's audience must be members of the carrier group itself; if there is illocutionary success, the members of this originating collectivity become convinced that they have been traumatized by a singular event. Only with this success can the audience for the traumatic claim be broadened to include "society at large."

Cultural Classification

Bridging the gap between event and representation depends upon what Thompson calls a "spiral of signification," a complex and multivalent symbolic process that results in the construction and emplacement of a compelling framework of cultural classification.¹⁶ This is a contingent, highly contested, often polarizing social process. For the wider audience to become persuaded that they, too, have become traumatized by an experience or an event, the carrier group needs to engage in successful meaning work. Four critical representations must be persuasively elaborated.¹⁷

16. Thompson, loc. cit., in his review and synthesis of the sociological literature on moral panics. Thompson also speaks of a "representational process" (ibid., pp. 140-141). In the moral panics literature, Stuart Hall refers to a similar kind of process as involving what he calls the "spiral of signification" as involving the articulation of discourses that have not been linked before the panic began (in ibid., pp. 20-24).

17. The order of the following presentation is not intended to suggest temporality. These representational accomplishments unfold in a complex and interlarded manner

* **The nature of the pain.** What actually happened to the group and to the wider collectivity of which it is a part? Did the America military lose the Vietnam war or were the nation's hands "tied behind its back"?¹⁸ Did hundreds of ethnic Albanians "inadvertantly" die in Kosovo or were tens of thousands deliberately murdered? Was African-American slavery a mode of coercive economic production or a system of brutal physical domination?

* **The nature of the victim.** What group of persons was affected by this traumatizing pain? Were they individuals or the "people" as such? Did one particular and delimited group receive the brunt of the pain, or were several groups involved? Were the German Jews the primary victims of the Holocaust or was it the Jews of the Pale, European Jewry, or the Jewish people as a whole? Were the millions of Polish people who died at the hands of German Nazis also the victims of the Holocaust? Were Kosovar Albanians the primary victims of ethnic cleansing or were Kosovar Serbs also significantly, or even equally victimized? Are African-American Blacks the victims of the brutal, traumatizing conditions in the desolate inner cities of the United States

that is continuously cross-referential. The causality implied is the kind of "value added" approach that Smelser developed in Theory of Collective Behavior (New York: Free Press, 1962).

18. For the contingency of this process in the aftermath of the Vietnam war, and the intensive symbolic work involved in establishing the nature of the pain, the victim, and the appropriate response, see J. William Gibson, Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

or are the victims of these conditions members of an economically defined "underclass"? Were the American Indians the victims of European colonizers or the victims particularly situated, or particularly "aggressive" Indian nations? Are nonWestern or thirdworld nations the victims of globalization or only the least developed groups among them?

*** Relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience.**

Even when the nature of the pain has been crystallized and the identity of the victim established, there remains the decisive question of the relation of the victim to the wider audience. To what extent does the audience for symbolic representations of trauma experience an identity with the victimized group? The broader audience may believe, or become convinced, that in fact it has no relation to the victimized group. If, by contrast, the victimized group is constructed as embodying some fundamental quality of the larger collective identity, the wider audience for the carrier group's illocutionary action will come to share the originating trauma in some decisive way.¹⁹ Gypsies may be acknowledged as traumatized victims of a tragic history, but members of Central European nations may continue to despise them, maintaining cultural distance and expressing little sense of cultural identification or social solidarity. Germans or Poles may acknowledge that Jews were victims of mass murder, but they may very well refuse to experience

19. This thesis is developed in my own contribution to this volume in the chapter following.

their collective identities as being affected by the Jews' tragic fate. Did the police brutality that traumatized Black civil rights activists in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, create solidary identification among the white Americans who watched the events on their televisions in the safety of the nonsegregated North? Is the past something relegated to a separate time, or does it become part of present time? Is the historically bounded trauma of Black enslavement an "issue" for contemporary African-Americans today?²⁰ Do white Americans experience themselves as sharing that long ago trauma?

* **Attribution of responsibility.** In creating a compelling trauma narrative, the identity of the perpetrator -- the "antagonist" -- is critical to establish. Who actually injured the victim? Who caused the trauma? Did "Germany" create the Holocaust or was it the Nazi regime? Was the crime restricted to special SS forces or was the Wehrmacht, the entire Nazi army, also deeply involved? Did the crime extend to ordinary soldiers, to ordinary citizens, to Catholic as well as Protestant Germans? Was it only the older generation of Germans who were responsible, or later generations as well?²¹

Institutional Arenas and Stratification Hierarchies

This representational process of cultural

20. See the development of this theme on Ron Eyerman's contribution to this volume, in Chapter 4, below.

21. These themes are developed in Bernhard Giesen's contribution to this volume, in Chapter 3, below.

classification, so critical to the process by which a collectivity becomes traumatized, is not carried out in a transparent speech situation.²² Rather, it is powerfully mediated by the nature of the institutional arenas and stratification hierarchies within which it occurs. If the trauma process unfolds inside the religious arena, its concern will be to link trauma to theodicy. Questions about "why did God allow this evil?" will be answered by searching discussions about how human beings strayed from divinely inspired ethics and sacred law.²³ Insofar as meaning work takes place in the aesthetic realm, it will be channelled by specific genres and narratives that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis.²⁴ When the cultural classification enters the law courts, it will be disciplined by the demand to issue a definitive judgment of legally binding responsibilities and to distribute punishments and material reparations.²⁵ When the trauma

22. This idea of transparency is posited as a normative ideal essential the democratic functioning of the public sphere by Habermas, loc. cit. While it is, indeed, an essential normative ideal, from a sociological perspective it never exists in practice in an unmediated way.

23. See Isabel Cabrera, "Is God Evil?" and Richard Hecht, "Evil Individuals, Evil Institutions, Evil Cosmos: Cultural Representations of Evil after the Holocaust," in Maria Pia Lara, ed., Rethinking Evil, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, forthcoming.

24. In regard to the Holocaust, for example, there now exists an entire genre of "survivor literature". See, e.g., Peter Hayes, ed., Memory, Memorialization, and Denial, vol. III of Lessons and Legacies, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999.

25. The Neuremburg Trials after World War II first established the importance of this arena. In the last two decades, building on this case law, there have been dozens of highly publicized trials, in many Western nations, of

process enters the scientific world, it becomes subject to evidentiary stipulations of an altogether different kind, creating scholarly controversies, "revelations," and "revisions."²⁶ When the trauma process enters the media of communication, it becomes subject not only to such journalistic ethics as concision and neutrality, but also to the competition for readership that inspires the relentless production of "news" in mass circulation newspapers and magazines.

The constraints imposed by institutional arenas are mediated, but not determined, by the uneven distribution of material resources and the patterned social networks that provide differential access to them. Who owns the newspapers? To what degree are journalists independent of political and financial control? Who controls the religious orders? Are they internally authoritarian or can congregants exercise independent influence? Are courts independent? What is the scope of action available to entrepreneurial legal

"war criminals" whose were deemed responsible for "crimes against humanity."

26. For every historical event that has come to be understand as traumatic the cultural classification process has been powerfully affected by scholarly research and has triggered explosive methodological controversies. What were the causes of World War I? Did the Japanese intend to launch a "sneak" attack on Pearl Harbor, or was the late-arriving message by the Imperial government delayed by inadvertance and diplomatic confusion? In the 1980s German academics were involved in a tense controversy over whether it was German anti-Semitism or Soviet Communism that triggered the Nazi's "final solution" to the Jewish problem. Outside Germany, there have also been the many spurious historical efforts to deny Nazi genocide that have become characterized as "Holocaust revisionism."

advocates? Are educational policies subject to mass movements of public opinion or are they insulated by bureaucratic procedures at more centralized levels? State powers at local, provincial, and national levels also deploy important controls. Decisions by the executive branches of governments to create national commissions of inquiry, moves by parliaments to establish investigative committees, the establishment of state-directed police investigations and new directives about national priorities -- these kinds of actions can have decisive effects on handling and channelling the spiral of signification that marks the trauma process.²⁷

The cultural classification that generates enduring perspectives of cultural trauma is crystallized through contentious public arguments between representatives of carrier groups in specific and diverse institutional arenas. This representational process is fundamentally affected by the differential structures of available resources. It is also, however, subject to the unstructured, unforeseeable contingencies of historical time. If a war has been lost or won, if a new regime has entered power or a discredited regime remains stubbornly in place, whether publics are

27. Thompson (loc. cit.) recounts, for example, how the Thatcher government's belated decision to launch a massive public education campaign about the dangers of HIV quickly took the steam out of the moral panic over the AIDS epidemic that had swept through British society. The notion that intense spirals of symbolic signification are often "handled and channelled" by state agencies of social control was suggested by Smelser in his Theory of Collective Behavior (loc. cit).

empowered and enthusiastic or exhausted by long periods of social conflict and stalemate -- these contingent historical factors exercise powerful influence on whether the kind of consensus can be generated that allows the cultural classification of trauma to be set firmly in place.

Conclusion

"Experiencing trauma" can be understood, in the sociological sense, as defining a painful injury to the collectivity, establishing the victim, attributing responsibility, and distributing the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as collectivies traumas are so experienced, the collective identity will become significantly revised. This identity revision means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self. Identities are continuously constructed and secured not only by facing the present and future but also by reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life.

Once the collective identity has been so reconstructed, there will inevitably, at some point in time, be a period of "calming down." The spiral of signification flattens out, affect and emotion become less inflamed, preoccupation with sacrality and pollution fade. Charisma becomes routinized, effervescence evaporates, liminality gives way to reaggregation. As the heightened and powerfully affecting discourse of trauma disappears, the "lessons" of the trauma

become objectified in monuments, museums, and collections of historical artifacts. They become subject to the technical, desiccated attention of specialists who detach affect from meaning. This triumph of the mundane is often noted with regret by audiences which had been mobilized by the trauma process, and it is sometimes forcefully opposed by carrier groups. Often, however, it is welcomed with a sense of public and private relief. The new collective identity will be ritualized in structured routines that, created to remember and commemorate the trauma process, will prove increasingly unable to evoke the strong emotions, the sentiments of betrayal and the affirmations of sacrality that once were so powerfully associated with it. No longer deeply preoccupying, the reconstructed collective identity becomes a resource for resolving future social problems and disturbances of collective consciousness.

This inevitability of such a routinization process by no means neutralizes the extraordinary social significance of cultural traumas. Their creation and routinization have, to the contrary, the most profound normative implications for the conduct of social life. By allowing members of wider publics to participate in the pain of others, cultural traumas broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful avenues for new forms of social incorporation. Indeed, in the case studies which follow, we will see that, however tortuous the trauma process, it has often been the very creation of cultural

traumas that has made it possible for collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action. »