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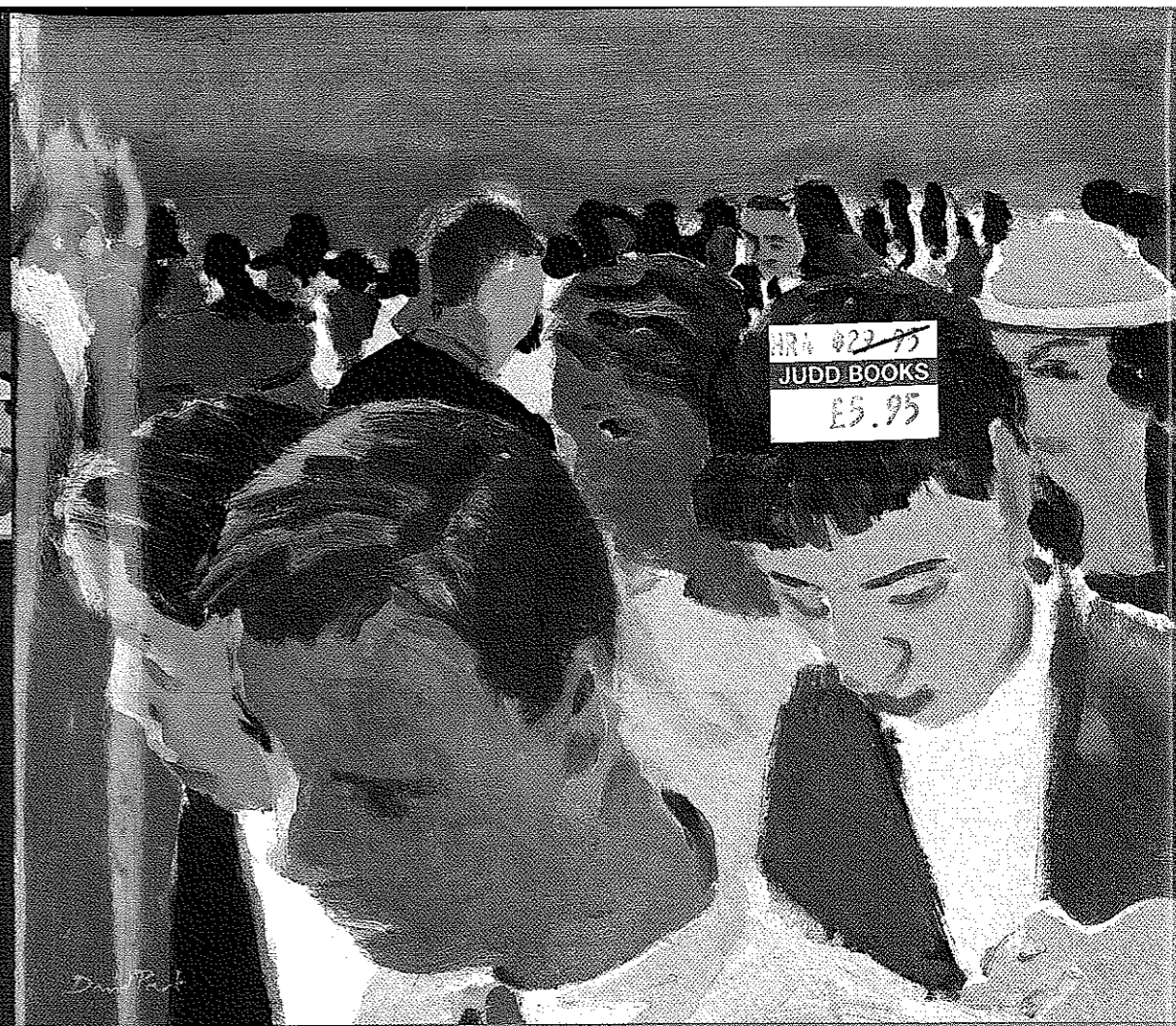—Zygmunt Bauman, author of *Modernity and the Holocaust*
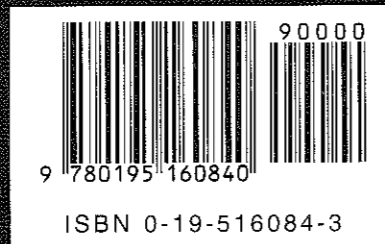
ALEXANDER

THE MEANINGS OF *Social Life*

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Social Life

A Cultural Sociology

OXFORD

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

THE STRONG PROGRAM IN CULTURAL SOCIOLOGY

Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics
(with Philip Smith)

Throughout the world, culture has been doggedly pushing its way onto the center stage of debates not only in sociological theory and research but also throughout the human sciences. As with any profound intellectual shift, this has been a process characterized by leads and lags. In Britain, for example, culture has been making headway since the early 1970s. In the United States, the tide began to turn unmistakably only in the mid-1980s. In continental Europe, it is possible to argue that culture never really went away. Despite this ongoing revival of interest, however, there is anything but consensus among sociologists specializing in the area about just what the concept means and how it relates to the discipline as traditionally understood. These differences of opinion can be usefully explained only partly as empirical reflections of geographical, sociopolitical, or national traditions. More important, they are manifestations of deeper contradictions relating to axiomatic and foundational logics in the theory of culture. Pivotal to all these disputes is the issue of "cultural autonomy" (Alexander, 1990a; Smith, 1998a). In this chapter, we employ the concept of cultural autonomy to explore and evaluate the competing understandings of culture currently available to social theory. We suggest that fundamental flaws characterize most of these models, and we argue for an alternative approach that can be broadly understood as a kind of structural hermeneutics.

Lévi-Strauss (1974) famously wrote that the study of culture should be like the study of geology. According to this dictum, analysis should account for surface variation in terms of deeper generative principles, just as geomorphology explains the distribution of plants, the shape of hills, and the drainage patterns followed by rivers in terms of underlying geology. In this chapter, we intend to

apply this principle to the enterprise of contemporary cultural sociology in a way that is both reflexive and diagnostic. Our aim is not so much to review the field and document its diversity, although we will indeed conduct such a review, as to engage in a seismographic enterprise that will trace a fault line running right through it. Understanding this fault line and its theoretical implications allows us not only to reduce complexity but also to transcend the kind of purely taxonomic mode of discourse that so often plagues essays of this programmatic kind. This seismographic principle will provide a powerful tool for getting to the heart of current controversies and understanding the slippages and instabilities that undermine so much of the territory of cultural inquiry. Contra Lévi-Strauss, however, we do not see our structural enquiry as a disinterested scientific exercise. Our discourse here is openly polemical, our language slightly colored. Rather than affecting neutrality, we are going to propose one particular style of theory as offering the best way forward for cultural sociology.

THE FAULT LINE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

The fault line at the heart of current debates lies between "cultural sociology" and the "sociology of culture."[1] To believe in the possibility of a cultural sociology is to subscribe to the idea that every action, no matter how instrumental, reflexive, or coerced vis-à-vis its external environments (Alexander, 1988), is embedded to some extent in a horizon of affect and meaning. This internal environment is one toward which the actor can never be fully instrumental or reflexive. It is, rather, an ideal resource that partially enables and partially constrains action, providing for both routine and creativity and allowing for the reproduction and transformation of structure (Sewell, 1992). Similarly, a belief in the possibility of a cultural sociology implies that institutions, no matter how impersonal or technocratic, have an ideal foundation that fundamentally shapes their organization and goals and provides the structured context for debates over their legitimation.[2] When described in the folk idiom of positivism, one could say that the more traditional sociology of culture approach treats culture as a dependent variable, whereas in cultural sociology it is an "independent variable" that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces.

Viewed from a distance, the sociology of culture offers the same kind of landscape as cultural sociology. There is a common conceptual repertoire of terms like values, codes, and discourses. Both traditions argue that culture is something important in society, something that repays careful sociological study. Both speak of the recent "cultural turn" as a pivotal moment in social theory. But these resemblances are only superficial. At the structural level we find deep antinomies. To speak of the sociology of culture is to suggest that culture is something to be explained, by something else entirely separated from the do-

main of meaning itself. To speak of the sociology of culture is to suggest that explanatory power lies in the study of the "hard" variables of social structure, such that structured sets of meanings become superstructures and ideologies driven by these more "real" and tangible social forces. In this approach, culture becomes defined as a "soft," not really independent variable: it is more or less confined to participating in the reproduction of social relations.

A notion that has emerged from the extraordinary new field of science studies is the sociologically inspired idea of the "strong program" (e.g., Bloor, 1976; Latour & Woolgar, 1986). The argument here is that scientific ideas are cultural and linguistic conventions as much as they are simply the results of other, more "objective" actions and procedures. Rather than only "findings" that hold up a mirror to nature (Rorty, 1979), science is understood as a collective representation, a language game that reflects a prior pattern of sense-making activity. In the context of the sociology of science, the concept of the strong program, in other words, suggests a radical uncoupling of cognitive content from natural determination. We would like to suggest that a strong program also might be emerging in the sociological study of culture. Such an initiative argues for a sharp analytical uncoupling of culture from social structure, which is what we mean by cultural autonomy (Alexander, 1988; Kane, 1992). As compared to the sociology of culture, cultural sociology depends on establishing this autonomy, and it is only via such a strong program that sociologists can illuminate the powerful role that culture plays in shaping social life. By contrast, the sociology of culture offers a "weak program" in which culture is a feeble and ambivalent variable. Borrowing from Basil Bernstein (1971), we might say that the strong program is powered by an elaborated theoretical code, whereas the weak program is limited by a restricted code that reflects the inhibitions and habitus of traditional, institutionally oriented social science.

Commitment to a cultural-sociological theory that recognizes cultural autonomy is the single most important quality of a strong program. There are, however, two other defining characteristics that must drive any such approach, characteristics that can be described as methodological. One is the commitment to hermeneutically reconstructing social texts in a rich and persuasive way. What is needed here is a Geertzian "thick description" of the codes, narratives, and symbols that create the textured webs of social meaning. The contrast here is to the "thin description" that typically characterizes studies inspired by the weak program, in which meaning is either simply read off from social structure or reduced to abstracted descriptions of reified values, norms, ideology, or fetishism. The weak program fails to fill these empty vessels with the rich wine of symbolic significance. The philosophical principles for this hermeneutic position were articulated by Dilthey (1962), and it seems to us that his powerful methodological injunction to look at the "inner meaning" of social structures has never been surpassed. Rather than inventing a new approach, the deservedly

influential cultural analyses of Clifford Geertz can be seen as providing the most powerful contemporary application of Dilthey's ideas.[3]

In methodological terms, the achievement of thick description requires the bracketing-out of wider, nonsymbolic social relations. This bracketing-out, analogous to Husserl's phenomenological reduction, allows the reconstruction of the pure cultural text, the theoretical and philosophical rationale for which Ricoeur (1971) supplied in his important argument for the necessary linkage between hermeneutics and semiotics. This reconstruction can be thought of as creating, or mapping out, the culture structures (Rambo & Chan, 1990) that form one dimension of social life. It is the notion of the culture structure as a social text that allows the well-developed conceptual resources of literary studies—from Aristotle to such contemporary figures as Frye (1971, [1957]) and Brooks (1984)—to be brought into social science. Only after the analytical bracketing demanded by hermeneutics has been completed, after the internal pattern of meaning has been reconstructed, should social science move from analytic to concrete autonomy (Kane, 1992). Only after having created the analytically autonomous culture object does it become possible to discover in what ways culture intersects with other social forces, such as power and instrumental reason in the concrete social world.

This brings us to the third characteristic of a strong program. Far from being ambiguous or shy about specifying just how culture makes a difference, far from speaking in terms of abstract systemic logics as causal processes (à la Lévi-Strauss), we suggest that a strong program tries to anchor causality in proximate actors and agencies, specifying in detail just how culture interferes with and directs what really happens. By contrast, as Thompson (1978) demonstrated, weak programs typically hedge and stutter on this issue. They tend to develop elaborate and abstract terminological (de)fenses that provide the illusion of specifying concrete mechanisms, as well as the illusion of having solved intractable dilemmas of freedom and determination. As they say in the fashion business, however, the quality is in the detail. We would argue that it is only by resolving issues of detail—who says what, why, and to what effect—that cultural analysis can become plausible according to the criteria of a social science. We do not believe, in other words, that hardheaded and skeptical demands for causal clarity should be confined to empiricists or to those who are obsessively concerned with power and social structure.[4] These criteria also apply to a cultural sociology.

The idea of a strong *program* carries with it the suggestions of an agenda. In what follows we discuss this agenda. We look first at the history of social theory, showing how this agenda failed to emerge until the 1960s. We go on to explore several contemporary traditions in the social scientific analysis of culture. We suggest that, despite appearances, each comprises a weak program, failing to meet in one way or another the defining criteria we have set forth here. We conclude by pointing to an emerging tradition of cultural sociology, most of it American, that in our view establishes the parameters of a strong program.

CULTURE IN SOCIAL THEORY FROM THE CLASSICS TO THE 1960S

For most of its history, sociology, both as theory and method, has suffered from a numbness toward meaning. Culturally unmusical scholars have depicted human action as insipidly or brutally instrumental, as if it were constructed without reference to the internal environments of actions that are established by the moral structures of sacred—good and profane—evil (Brooks, 1984) and by the narrative teleologies that create chronology (White, 1987) and define dramatic meaning (Frye, 1971, [1957]). Caught up in the ongoing crises of modernity, the classical founders of the discipline believed that epochal historical transformations had emptied the world of meaning. Capitalism, industrialization, secularization, rationalization, anomie, and egoism, these core processes were held to create confused and dominated individuals, to shatter the possibilities of a meaningful telos, to eliminate the ordering power of the sacred and profane. Only occasionally does a glimmer of a strong program come through in this classical period. Weber's (1958) religious sociology, and most particularly his essay "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions" (see Alexander, 1988) suggested that the quest for salvation was a universal cultural need whose various solutions had forcefully shaped organizational and motivational dynamics in world civilizations. Durkheim's later sociology, as articulated in critical passages from *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1968) and in posthumously recovered courses of lectures (Alexander, 1982), suggested that even contemporary social life had an ineluctable spiritual-cum-symbolic component. While plagued by the weak program symptom of causal ambivalence, the young Marx's (1963b) writings on species-being also forcefully pointed to the way nonmaterial forces tied humans together in common projects and destinies. This early suggestion that alienation is not only the reflection of material relationships adumbrated the critical chapter in *Capital*, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," (Marx, 1963a [1867], 71–83) which has so often served as an unstable bridge from structural to cultural Marxism in the present day.

The communist and fascist revolutionary upheavals that marked the first half of this century were premised on the same kind of widespread fear that modernity had eroded the possibility of meaningful sociality. Communist and fascist thinkers attempted to alchemize what they saw as the barren codes of bourgeois civil society into new, resacralized forms that could accommodate technology and reason within wider, encompassing spheres of meaning (Smith, 1998C). In the calm that descended on the postwar period, Talcott Parsons and his colleagues, motivated by entirely different ideological ambitions, also began to think that modernity did not have to be understood in such a corrosive way. Beginning from an analytical rather than eschatological premise, Parsons theorized that "values" had to be central to actions and institutions if a society was to be

able to function as a coherent enterprise. The result was a theory that seemed to many of Parsons's modern contemporaries to exhibit an idealizing culturalist bias (Lockwood, 1992). We ourselves would suggest an opposite reading.

From a strong program viewpoint, Parsonian functionalism can be taken as insufficiently cultural, as denuded of musicality. In the absence of a musical moment where the social text is reconstructed in its pure form, Parsons's work lacks a powerful hermeneutic dimension. While Parsons theorized that values were important, he did not explain the nature of values themselves. Instead of engaging in the social imaginary, diving into the febrile codes and narratives that make up a social text, he and his functionalist colleagues observed action from the outside and induced the existence of guiding valuations using categorical frameworks supposedly generated by functional necessity. Without a counterweight of thick description, we are left with a position in which culture has autonomy only in an abstract and analytic sense. When we turn to the empirical world, we find that functionalist logic ties up cultural form with social function and institutional dynamics to such an extent that it is difficult to imagine where culture's autonomy might lie in any concrete setting. The result was an ingenious systems theory that remains too hermeneutically feeble, too distant on the issue of autonomy to offer much to a strong program.

Flawed as the functionalist project was, the alternatives were far worse. The world in the 1960s was a place of conflict and turmoil. When the Cold War turned hot, macrosocial theory shifted toward the analysis of power from a one-sided and anticultural stance. Thinkers with an interest in macrohistorical process approached meaning through its contexts, treating it as a product of some supposedly more "real" social force, when they spoke of it at all. For scholars like Barrington Moore and C. Wright Mills and later followers such as Charles Tilly, Randall Collins, and Michael Mann, culture must be thought of in terms of self-interested ideologies, group process, and networks rather than in terms of texts. Meanwhile, during the same period, microsociology emphasized the radical reflexivity of actors. For such writers as Blumer, Goffman, and Garfinkel, culture forms an external environment in relation to which actors formulate lines of action that are "accountable" or give off a good "impression." We find precious little indication in this tradition of the power of the symbolic to shape interactions from within, as normative precepts or narratives that carry an internalized moral force.

Yet during the same period of the 1960s, at the very moment when the halfway cultural approach of functionalism was disappearing from American sociology, theories that spoke forcefully of a social text began to have enormous influence in France. Through creative misreadings of the structural linguistics of Saussure and Jacobson, and bearing a (carefully hidden) influence from the late Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, thinkers like Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and the early Michel Foucault created a revolution in the human sciences by insisting on the textuality of institutions and the discursive nature of human action.

When viewed from a contemporary strong program perspective, such approaches remain too abstracted; they also typically fail to specify agency and causal dynamics. In these failings they resemble Parsons' functionalism. Nevertheless, in providing hermeneutic and theoretical resources to establish the autonomy of culture, they constituted a turning point for the construction of a strong program. In the next section we discuss how this project has been derailed by a succession of weak programs that continue to dominate research on culture and society today.

WEAK PROGRAMS IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL THEORY

One of the first research traditions to apply French *nouvelle vague* theorizing outside of the hothouse Parisian environment was the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, widely known as the Birmingham School. The masterstroke of the school was to meld ideas about cultural texts onto the neo-Marxist understanding that Gramsci established about the role played by cultural hegemony in maintaining social relations. This allowed exciting new ideas about how culture worked to be applied in a flexible way to a variety of settings, all the while without letting go of comforting old ideas about class domination. The result was a "sociology of culture" analysis, which tied cultural forms to social structure as manifestations of "hegemony" (if the analyst did not like what they saw) or "resistance" (if they did). At its best, this mode of sociology could be brilliantly illuminating. Paul Willis's (1977) ethnographic study of working-class school kids was outstanding in its reconstruction of the zeitgeist of the "lads." Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Roberts's (1978) classic study of the moral panic over mugging in 1970s Britain, *Policing the Crisis,* managed in its early pages to decode the discourse of urban decay and racism that underpinned an authoritarian crackdown. In these ways, Birmingham work approached a "strong program" in its ability to recreate social texts and lived meanings. Where it fails, however, is in the area of cultural autonomy (Sherwood, Smith, & Alexander, 1993). Notwithstanding attempts to move beyond the classical Marxist position, neo-Gramscian theorizing exhibits the telltale weak program ambiguities over the role of culture that plague the luminous *Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci, 1971) themselves. Terms like "articulation" and "anchoring" suggest contingency in the play of culture. But this contingency is often reduced to instrumental reason (in the case of elites articulating a discourse for hegemony purposes) or to some kind of ambiguous systemic or structural causation (in the case of discourses being anchored in relations of power).

Failure to grasp the nettle of cultural autonomy and quit the sociology of culture–driven project of "Western Marxism" (Anderson, 1979) contributed to a fateful ambiguity over the mechanisms through which culture links with social structure and action. There is no clearer example of this latter process

than in *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) itself. After building up a detailed picture of the mugging panic and its symbolic resonances, the book lurches into a sequence of insistent claims that the moral panic is linked to the economic logic of capitalism and its proximate demise; that it functions to legitimate law-and-order politics on streets that harbor latent revolutionary tendencies. Yet the concrete mechanisms through which the incipient crisis of capitalism (has it arrived yet?) are translated into the concrete decisions of judges, parliamentarians, newspaper editors, and police officers on the beat are never spelled out. The result is a theory that despite a critical edge and superior hermeneutic capabilities to classical functionalism curiously resembles Parsons in its tendency to invoke abstracted influences and processes as adequate explanation for empirical social actions.

In this respect, in contrast to the Birmingham School, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has real merits. While many Birmingham-style analyses seem to lack any clear application of method, Bourdieu's oeuvre is resolutely grounded in middle-range empirical research projects of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. His inferences and claims are more modest and less manifestly tendentious. In his best work, moreover, such as the description of a Kabyle house or a French peasant dance (Bourdieu, 1962, 1977), Bourdieu's thick description abilities show that he has the musicality to recognize and decode cultural texts that is at least equal to that of the Birmingham ethnographers. Despite these qualities, Bourdieu's research also can best be described as a weak program dedicated to the sociology of culture rather than cultural sociology. Once they have penetrated the thickets of terminological ambiguity that always mark out a weak program, commentators agree that in Bourdieu's framework culture has a role in ensuring the reproduction of inequality rather than permitting innovation (Alexander, 1995a; Honneth,1986; Sewell, 1992). As a result, culture, working through habitus, operates more as a dependent than an independent variable. It is a gearbox, not an engine. When it comes to specifying exactly how the process of reproduction takes place, Bourdieu is vague. Habitus produces a sense of style, ease, and taste. Yet to know just how these influence stratification, something more would be needed: a detailed study of concrete social settings where decisions are made and social reproduction ensured (see Lamont, 1992). We need to know more about the thinking of gatekeepers in job interviews and publishing houses, the impact of classroom dynamics on learning, or the logic of the citation process. Without this "missing link" we are left with a theory that points to circumstantial homologies but cannot produce a smoking gun.

Bourdieu's understanding of the links of culture to power also falls short of demanding strong program ideals. For Bourdieu, stratification systems make use of status cultures in competition with each other in various fields. The semantic content of these cultures has little to do with how society is organized. Meaning has no wider impact. While Weber, for example, argued that forms of eschatology have determinate outputs on the way that social life is patterned, for

Bourdieu cultural content is arbitrary and without import. In his formulation there always will be systems of stratification defined by class, and all that is important for dominant groups is to have their cultural codes embraced as legitimate. In the final analysis, what we have here is a Veblenesque vision in which culture provides a strategic resource for actors, an external environment of action, rather than a Text that shapes the world in an immanent fashion. People use culture, but they do not seem to really care about it.

Michel Foucault's works, and the poststructural and postmodern theoretical program they have initiated, provides the third weak program we discuss here. Despite its brilliance, what we find here, yet again, is a body of work wrought with the tortured contradictions that indicate a failure to grasp the nettle of a strong program. On the one hand, Foucault's (1970, 1972) major theoretical texts, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Order of Things*, provide important groundwork for a strong program with their assertion that discourses operate in arbitrary ways to classify the world and shape knowledge formation. His empirical applications of this theory also should be praised for assembling rich historical data in a way that approximates the reconstruction of a social text. So far so good. Unfortunately, there is another hand at work. The crux of the issue is Foucault's genealogical method; his insistence that power and knowledge are fused in power/knowledge. The result is a reductionist line of reasoning akin to functionalism (Brenner, 1994), where discourses are homologous with institutions, flows of power, and technologies. Contingency is specified at the level of "history," at the level of untheorizable collisions and ruptures, not at the level of the dispositif. There is little room for a synchronically arranged contingency that might encompass disjunctures between culture and institutions, between power and its symbolic or textual foundations, between texts and actors interpretations of those texts. This binding of discourse to social structure, in other words, leaves no room for understanding how an autonomous cultural realm hinders or assists actors in judgment, in critique, or in the provision of transcendental goals that texture social life. Foucault's world is one where Nietzsche's prison house of language finds its material expression with such force that no room is left for cultural autonomy or, by implication, the autonomy of action. Responding to this sort of criticism, Foucault attempted to theorize self and resistance in his later work. But he did so in an ad hoc way, seeing acts of resistance as random dysfunctions (Brenner, 1994: 698) or unexplained self-assertions. These late texts do not work through the ways that cultural frames might permit "outsiders" to produce and sustain opposition to power.

In the currently most influential stream of work to come out of the Foucauldian stable, we can see that the latent tension between the Foucault (1972) of the *Archaeology* and Foucault's genealogical avatar has been resolved decisively in favor of an anticultural mode of theory. The proliferating body of work on "governmentality" centers on the control of populations (Miller & Rose, 1990; Rose, 1993) but does so through an elaboration of the role of administrative

techniques and expert systems. To be sure, there is acknowledgment that "language" is important, that government has a "discursive character." This sounds promising, but on closer inspection we find that "language" and "discourse" boil down to dry modes of technical communication (graphs, statistics, reports, etc.) that operate as technologies to allow "evaluation, calculation, intervention" at a distance by institutions and bureaucracies (Miller & Rose, 1990: 7). There is little work here to recapture the more textual nature of political and administrative discourses. No effort is made to go beyond a "thin description" and identify the broader symbolic patterns, the hot, affective criteria through which policies of control and coordination are appraised by citizens and elites alike. Here the project of governmentality falls short of the standards set by Hall et al. (1978), which at least managed to conjure up the emotive spirit of populism in Heathera Britain.

Research on the "production and reception of culture" marks the fourth weak program we will identify. Unlike those we have just discussed, it is one that lacks theoretical bravura and charismatic leadership. For the most part it is characterized by the unsung virtues of intellectual modesty, diligence, clarity, and a studious attention to questions of method. Its numerous proponents make sensible, middle-range empirical studies of the circumstances in which "culture" is produced and consumed (for an overview see Crane, 1992). For this reason it has become particularly powerful in the United States, where these kinds of properties assimilate best to professional norms within sociology. The great strength of this approach is that it offers explicit causal links between culture and social structure, thus avoiding the pitfalls of indeterminacy and obfuscation that have plagued more theoretically ambitious understandings. Unfortunately, this intellectual honesty usually serves only to broadcast a reductionist impulse that remains latent in the other approaches we have examined. The insistent aim of study after study (e.g., Blau, 1989; Peterson, 1985) seems to be to explain away culture as the product of sponsoring institutions, elites, or interests. The quest for profit, power, prestige, or ideological control sits at the core of cultural production. Reception, meanwhile, is relentlessly determined by social location. Audience ethnographies, for example, are undertaken to document the decisive impact of class, race, and gender on the ways that television programs are understood. Here we find the sociology of culture writ large. The aim of analysis is not so much to uncover the impact of meaning on social life and identity formation but rather to see how social life and identities constrain potential meanings.

While the sociological credentials of such an undertaking are to be applauded, something more is needed if the autonomy of culture is to be recognized, namely a robust understanding of the codes that are at play in the cultural objects under consideration. Only when these are taken into account can cultural products be seen to have internal cultural inputs and constraints. However, in the production of culture approach, such efforts at hermeneutic understanding are rare. All too often meaning remains a sort of black box, with analytical attention centered on the circumstances of cultural production and reception. When meanings and discourses are explored, it is usually in order to talk through some kind of fit between cultural content and the social needs and actions of specific producing and receiving groups. Wendy Griswold (1983), for example, shows how the trickster figure was transformed with the emergence of Restoration drama. In the medieval morality play, the figure of "vice" was evil. He was later to morph into the attractive, quick-thinking "gallant." The new character was one that could appeal to an audience of young, disinherited men who had migrated to the city and had to depend on their wits for social advancement. Similarly, Robert Wuthnow (1989) argues that the ideologies of the Reformation germinated and took root as an appropriate response to a particular set of social circumstances. He persuasively demonstrates that new binary oppositions emerged in theological discourse, for example, those between a corrupt Catholicism and a pure Protestantism. These refracted the politics and social dislocations underlying religious and secular struggles in sixteenth-century Europe.

We have some concerns about singling such work out for criticism, for they are among the best of the genre and approximate the sort of thick description we advocate. There can be little doubt that Griswold and Wuthnow correctly understand a need to study meaning in cultural analysis. However, they fail to systematically connect its exploration with the problematic of cultural autonomy. For all their attention to cultural messages and historical continuities, they do little to reduce our fear that there is an underlying reductionism in such analysis. The overall effect is to understand meanings as infinitely malleable in response to social settings. A more satisfying approach to Griswold's data, for example, would recognize the dramatic narratives as inevitably structured by constraining, cultural codes relating to plot and character, for it is the combinations between these that make any kind of drama a possibility. Similarly, Wuthnow should have been much more sensitive to the understanding of binary opposition advocated by Saussure: it is a precondition of discourse rather than merely a description of its historically specific form.[5] And so to our reading, such efforts as Griswold's and Wuthnow's represent narrowly lost opportunities for a decisive demonstration cultural autonomy as a product of culture-structure. In the final section of this chapter, we look for signs of a structuralist hermeneutics that can perhaps better accomplish this theoretical goal.

STEPS TOWARD A STRONG PROGRAM

All things considered, the sociological investigation of culture remains dominated by weak programs characterized by some combination of hermeneutic inadequacy, ambivalence over cultural autonomy, and poorly specified, abstract mechanisms for grounding culture in concrete social process. In this final section we discuss recent trends in cultural sociology where there are signs that a bona fide strong program might finally be emerging.

A first step in the construction of a strong program is the hermeneutic project of "thick description" itself, which we have already invoked in a positive way. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur and Kenneth Burke, Clifford Geertz (1973, [1964]) has worked harder than any other person to show that culture is a rich and complex text, with a subtle patterning influence on social life. The result is a compelling vision of culture as webs of significance that guide action. Yet while superior to the other approaches we have considered, this position too has its flaws. Nobody could accuse Geertz of hermeneutic inadequacy or of neglecting cultural autonomy, yet on close inspection his enormously influential concept of thick description seems rather elusive. The precise mechanisms through which webs of meaning influence action on the ground are rarely specified with any clarity. Culture seems to take on the qualities of a transcendental actor (Alexander, 1987). So in terms of the third criterion of a strong program that we have specified—causal specificity—the program initiated by Geertz runs into trouble. One reason is the later Geertz's reluctance to connect his interpretive analyses to any kind of general theory. There is a relentless emphasis on the way that the local explains the local. He insists that societies, like texts, contain their own explanation. Writing the local, as a consequence, comes into play as a substitute for theory construction. The focus here is on a novelistic recapitulation of details, with the aim of analysis being to accumulate these and fashion a model of the cultural text within a particular setting. Such a rhetorical turn has made it difficult to draw a line between anthropology and literature, or even travel writing. This in turn has made Geertz's project vulnerable to takeover bids. Most notably, during the 1980s the idea that society could be read like a text was taken over by poststructural writers who argued that culture was little more than contending texts or "representations" (Clifford, 1988) and that ethnography was either allegory, fantasy, or biography. The aim of analysis now shifted to the exposition of professional representations and the techniques and power relations behind them. The resulting program has been one that has told us a good deal about academic writing, ethnographic museum displays, and so on. It helps us to understand the discursive conditions of cultural production but has almost given up on the task of explaining ordinary social life or the possibility of a general understanding. Not surprisingly, Geertz enthusiastically devoted himself to the new cause, writing an eloquent text on the tropes through which anthropologists construct their ethnographic authority (Geertz, 1988). As the text replaces the tribe as the object of analysis, cultural theory begins to look more and more like critical narcissism and less and less like the explanatory discipline that Dilthey so vividly imagined.

Inadequate as it may be, the work of Geertz provides a springboard for a strong program in cultural analysis. It indicates the need for the explication of meaning to be at the center of the intellectual agenda and offers a vigorous affirmation of cultural autonomy. What is missing, however, is a theory of culture that has autonomy built into the very fabric of meaning as well as a more robust understanding of social structure and institutional dynamics. We suggest, following Saussure, that a more structural approach toward culture helps with the first point. In addition, it initiates the movement toward general theory that Geertz avoids. In short, it can recognize the autonomy and the centrality of meaning but does not develop a hermeneutics of the particular at the expense of a hermeneutics of the universal.

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, we saw the revival of "culture" in American sociology and the declining prestige of anticultural forms of macro- and micro-thought. This strand of work, with its developing strong program characteristics, offers the best hope for a truly cultural sociology finally to emerge as a major research tradition. To be sure, a number of weak programs organized around the sociology of culture remain powerful, perhaps dominant, in the U.S. context. One thinks in particular of studies of the production, consumption, and distribution of culture that (as we have shown) focus on organizational and institutional contexts rather than content and meanings (e.g., Blau, 1989; Peterson, 1985). One also thinks of work inspired by the Western Marxist tradition that attempts to link cultural change to the workings of capital, especially in the context of urban form (e.g., Davis, 1992; Gottdeiner, 1995). The neoinstitutionalists (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) see culture as significant but only as a legitimating constraint, only as an external environment of action, not as a lived text, as Geertz might (see Friedland & Alford, 1991). Of course, there are numerous United States–based apostles of British cultural studies (e.g., Fiske, 1987; Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1991), who combine virtuoso hermeneutic readings with thin, stratification-oriented forms of quasimaterialist reduction. Yet it is equally important to recognize that there has emerged a current of work that gives to meaningful and autonomous texts a much more central place (for a sample, see Smith, 1998b). These contemporary sociologists are the "children" of an earlier generation of culturalist thinkers, Geertz, Bellah (1970; see Alexander & Sherwood, 2002), Turner (1974), and Sahlins (1976) foremost among them, who wrote against the grain of 1960s and 1970s reductionism and attempted to demonstrate the textuality of social life and the necessary autonomy of cultural forms. In contemporary scholarship, we are seeing efforts to align these two axioms of a strong program with the third imperative of identifying concrete mechanisms through which culture does its work.

Responses to the question of transmission mechanisms have been decisively shaped, in a positive direction, by the American pragmatist and empiricist traditions. The influence of structural linguistics on European scholarship sanctioned a kind of cultural theory that paid little attention to the relationship between culture and action (unless tempered by the dangerously "humanist" discourses of existentialism or phenomenology). Simultaneously, the philosophical formation of writers like Althusser and Foucault permitted a dense and tortured kind of writing, where issues of causality and autonomy could be circled around in endless, elusive spirals of words. By contrast, American pragma-

tism has provided the seedbed for a discourse where clarity is rewarded; where it is believed that complex language games can be reduced to simpler statements; where it is argued that actors have to play some role in translating cultural structures into concrete actions and institutions. While the influence of pragmatism has reached American cultural sociologists in a diffuse way, its most direct inheritance can be seen in the work of Swidler (1986), Sewell (1992), Emirbayer and his collaborators (e.g., Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1996; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), and Fine (1987), where efforts are made to relate culture to action without recourse to the materialistic reductionism of Bourdieu's praxis theory.

Other forces also have played a role in shaping the emerging strong program in American cultural sociology. Because these are more closely related than the pragmatists to our argument that a structuralist hermeneutics is the best way forward, we will expand on them here. Pivotal to all such work is an effort to understand culture not just as a text (à la Geertz) but rather as a text that is underpinned by signs and symbols that are in patterned relationships to each other. Writing in the first decades of the twentieth century, Durkheim and his students such as Hertz and Mauss understood that culture was a classification system consisting of binary oppositions. At the same time Saussure was developing his structural linguistics, arguing that meanings were generated by means of patterned relationships between concepts and sounds. A few decades later, Lévi-Strauss was to pull these linguistic and sociological approaches to classification together in his pioneering studies of myth, kinship, and totemism. The great virtue of this synthesis was that it provided a powerful way for understanding the autonomy of culture. Because meanings are arbitrary and are generated from within the sign system, they enjoy a certain autonomy from social determination, just as the language of a country cannot be predicted from the knowledge that it is capitalist or socialist, industrial or agrarian. Culture now becomes a structure as objective as any more material social fact.

With the thematics of the "autonomy of culture" taking center stage in the 1980s, there was a vigorous appreciation of the work of the late Durkheim, with his insistence on the cultural as well as functional origins of solidarity (for a review of this literature, see Emirbayer, 1996; Smith & Alexander, 1996). The felicitous but not altogether accidental congruence between Durkheim's opposition of the sacred and the profane and structuralist theories of sign-systems enabled insights from French theory to be translated into a distinctively sociological discourse and tradition, much of it concerned with the impact of cultural codes and codings. Numerous studies of boundary maintenance, for example, reflect this trend (for a sample, see Lamont & Fournier, 1993), and it is instructive to contrast them with more reductionist weak program alternatives about processes of "othering." Emerging from this tradition has been a focus on the binary opposition as a key tool for asserting the autonomy of cultural forms (see Alexander & Smith, 1993; Edles, 1998; Magnuson, 1997; Smith, 1991).

Further inspirations for structural hermeneutics within a strong program for

cultural theory have come from anthropology. The new breed of symbolic anthropologists, in addition to Geertz, most notably Mary Douglas (1966), Victor Turner (1974), and Marshall Sahlins (1976, 1981), took on board the message of structuralism but tried to move it in new directions. Postmodernisms and poststructuralisms also have played their role but in an optimistic guise. The knot between power and knowledge that has stunted European weak programs has been loosened by American postmodern theorists like Steven Seidman (1988). For postmodern pragmatistic philosophers like Richard Rorty (e.g., 1989), language tends to be seen as a creative force for the social imaginary rather than as Nietzsche's prison house. As a result, discourses and actors are provided with greater autonomy from power in the construction of identities.

These trends are well known, but there also is an interdisciplinary dark horse to which we wish to draw attention. In philosophy and literary studies, there has been growing interest in narrative and genre theory. Cultural sociologists such as Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1986, 1994, 2000; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991), Margaret Somers (1995), Wendy Griswold (1983), Ronald Jacobs (1996, 2000), Agnes Ku (1999), William Gibson (1994), and the authors of this chapter are now reading literary theorists like Northrup Frye, Peter Brooks, and Fredric Jameson, historians like Hayden White, and Aristotelian philosophers like Ricoeur and MacIntyre (see Lara, 1998). The appeal of such theory lies partially in its affinity for a textual understanding of social life. The emphasis on teleology carries with it some of the interpretive power of the classical hermeneutic model. This impulse toward reading culture as a text is complemented, in such narrative work, by an interest in developing formal models that can be applied across different comparative and historical cases. In other words, narrative forms such as the morality play or melodrama, tragedy, and comedy can be understood as "types" that carry with them particular implications for social life. The morality play, for example, does not seem to be conducive to compromise (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986, 1994). Tragedy can give rise to fatalism (Jacobs, 1996) and withdrawal from civic engagement, but it also can promote moral responsibility (Alexander, 1995b; Eyerman, 2001). Comedy and romance, by contrast, generate optimism and social inclusion (Jacobs & Smith, 1997; Smith, 1994). Irony provides a potent tool for the critique of authority and reflexivity about dominant cultural codes, opening space for difference and cultural innovation (Jacobs & Smith, 1997; Smith, 1996).

A further bonus for this narrative approach is that cultural autonomy is assured (e.g., in the analytic sense, see Kane, 1992). If one takes a structuralist approach to narrative (Barthes, 1977), textual forms are seen as interwoven repertoires of characters, plot lines, and moral evaluations whose relationships can be specified in terms of formal models. Narrative theory, like semiotics, thus operates as a bridge between the kind of hermeneutic inquiry advocated by Geertz and the impulse toward general cultural theory. As Northrop Frye recognized, when approached in a structural way narrative allows for the construction of

models that can be applied across cases and contexts but at the same time provides a tool for interrogating particularities.

It is important to emphasize that while meaningful texts are central in this American strand of a strong program, wider social contexts are not by any means necessarily ignored. In fact, the objective structures and visceral struggles that characterize the real social world are every bit as important as in work from the weak programs. Notable contributions have been made to areas such as censorship and exclusion (Beisel, 1993), race (Jacobs, 1996), sexuality (Seidman, 1988), violence (Gibson, 1994; Smith, 1991, 1996; Wagner-Pacifici, 1994), and failed sociohistorical projects for radical transformation (Alexander, 1995b). These contexts are treated, however, not as forces unto themselves that ultimately determine the content and significance of cultural texts; rather, they are seen as institutions and processes that refract cultural texts in a meaningful way. They are arenas in which cultural forces combine or clash with material conditions and rational interests to produce particular outcomes (Ku, 1999; Smith, 1996). Beyond this they are seen as cultural metatexts themselves, as concrete embodiments of wider ideal currents.

CONCLUSIONS

We have suggested here that structuralism and hermeneutics can be made into fine bedfellows. The former offers possibilities for general theory construction, prediction, and assertions of the autonomy of culture. The latter allows analysis to capture the texture and temper of social life. When complemented by attention to institutions and actors as causal intermediaries, we have the foundations of a robust cultural sociology. The argument we have made here for an emerging strong program has been somewhat polemical in tone. This does not mean we disparage efforts to look at culture in other ways. If sociology is to remain healthy as a discipline, it should be able to support a theoretical pluralism and lively debate. There are important research questions, in fields from demography to stratification to economic and political life, to which weak programs can be expected to make significant contributions. But it is equally important to make room for a genuinely cultural sociology. A first step toward this end is to speak out against false idols, to avoid the mistake of confusing reductionist sociology of culture approaches with a genuine strong program. Only in this way can the full promise of a cultural sociology be realized during the coming century.

ON THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MORAL UNIVERSALS

The "Holocaust" from War Crime to Trauma Drama

If we bear this suffering, and if there are still Jews left, when it is over, then Jews, instead of being doomed, will be held up as an example. Who knows, it might even be our religion from which the world and all peoples learn good, and for that reason and for that alone do we have to suffer now.

—Anne Frank, 1944

"Holocaust" has become so universal a reference point that even contemporary Chinese writers, who live thousands of miles from the place of Nazi brutality and possess only scanty knowledge of the details of the Holocaust, came to call their horrendous experiences during the Cultural Revolution "the ten-year holocaust."

—Sheng Mei Ma, 1987

The term history unites the objective and the subjective side, and denotes . . . not less what happened than the narration of what happened. This union of the two meanings we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events.

—G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*

universalizing ethic by which members of different Asian national and ethnic groupings could be commonly judged. Instead, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima have become an originating trauma for postwar Japanese identity. While producing an extraordinary commitment to pacificism, the dramatization of this trauma, which was inflicted on Japan by its wartime enemy, the United States, has had the effect of confirming rather than dislodging Japan in its role as narrative agent. The trauma has functioned, in other words, to steadfastly oppose any effort to widen the circle of perpetrators, which makes it less likely that the national history of Japan will be submitted to some kind of supranational standard of judgment.

Such submission is very difficult, of course, in any strongly national context, in the West as well as in the East. Nonetheless, the analysis presented in this chapter compels us to ask this question: Can countries or civilizations that do not acknowledge the Holocaust develop universalistic political moralities? Obviously, non-Western nations cannot "remember" the Holocaust, but in the context of cultural globalization they certainly have become gradually aware of its symbolic meaning and social significance. It might also be the case that non-Western nations could develop trauma dramas that are functional equivalents to the Holocaust. It has been the thesis of this essay that moral universalism rests on social processes that construct and channel cultural trauma. If this is indeed the case, then globalization will have to involve a very different kind of social process than the ones that students of this supranational development have talked about so far: East and West, North and South must learn to share the experiences of one another's traumas and to take vicarious responsibility for the other's afflictions.

Geoffrey Hartman has recently likened the pervasive status of the Holocaust in contemporary society to a barely articulated but nonetheless powerful and pervasive legend. "In Greek tragedy . . . with its moments of highly condensed dialogue, the framing legend is so well known that it does not have to be emphasized. A powerful abstraction, or simplification, takes over. In this sense, and in this sense only, the Holocaust is on the way to becoming a legendary event" (Hartman, 2000: 16).

Human beings are story-telling animals. We tell stories about our triumphs. We tell stories about tragedies. We like to believe in the verisimilitude of our accounts, but it is the moral frameworks themselves that are real and constant, not the factual material that we employ them to describe. In the history of human societies, it has often been the case that narrative accounts of the same event compete with one another, and that they eventually displace one another over historical time. In the case of the Nazis' mass murder of the Jews, what was once described as a prelude and incitement to moral and social progress has come to be reconstructed as a decisive demonstration that not even the most "modern" improvements in the condition of humanity can ensure advancement in anything other than a purely technical sense. It is paradoxical that a decided increase in moral and social justice may eventually be the unintended result.

CULTURAL TRAUMA AND
COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.[1]

As I develop it here, cultural trauma is first of all an empirical, scientific concept, suggesting new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions. But this new scientific concept also illuminates an emerging domain of social responsibility and political action. It is by constructing cultural traumas that social groups, national societies, and sometimes even entire civilizations not only cognitively identify the existence and source of human suffering but "take on board" some significant responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others. Is the suffering of others also our own? In thinking that it might in fact be, societies expand the circle of the we. By the same token, social groups can, and often do, refuse to recognize the existence of others' trauma, and because of their failure they cannot achieve a moral stance. By denying the reality of other's suffering, they not only diffuse their own responsibility for other's suffering but often project the responsibility for their own suffering on these others. In other words, by refusing to participate in what I will later describe as the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone.

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, first in Western soci-

eties and then, soon after, throughout the rest of the world, 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.[2] People also have continually employed the language of trauma to explain what happens, not only to themselves but to the collectivities they belong to. We often speak of an organization being traumatized when a leader departs or dies, when a governing regime falls, when an unexpected reversal of fortune is suffered by an organizations. 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.

In this task of making trauma strange, its embeddedness in everyday life and language, so important for providing an initial intuitive understanding, now presents itself as a challenge to be overcome. In fact, 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.[3]

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.

This Enlightenment version of lay trauma theory has recently been exemplified by Arthur Neal in his *National Trauma and Collective Memory*. In explaining whether or not a collectivity is traumatized, Neal points to the quality of the event itself. National traumas have been created, he argues, by "individual and collective reactions to a volcano-like event that shook the foundations of the social world" (Neal, 1998: ix). An event traumatizes a collectivity because it is "an extraordinary event," an event that has such "an explosive quality" that it creates "disruption" and "radical change . . . within a short period of time" (Neal, 1998: 3, 9–10, italics added). These objective empirical qualities "command the attention of all major subgroups of the population," triggering emotional response and public attention because rational people simply cannot react in any other way (9–10). "Dismissing or ignoring the traumatic experience is not a reasonable option," nor is "holding an attitude of benign neglect" or "cynical indifference" (4, 9–10). It is precisely because actors are reasonable that traumatic events typically lead to progress: "The very fact that a disruptive event has occurred" means that "new opportunities emerge for innovation and change" (18). It is hardly surprising, in other words, 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" (5).

Despite what I will later call the naturalistic limitations of such an Enlightenment understanding of trauma, 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 focusing on events that create trauma for national, not individual identity, Neal follows the pathbreaking sociological model developed by Kai Erikson in his widely influential book, *Everything in Its Path*. While this heartwrenching account of the effects on a small Appalachian community of a devastating flood is likewise constrained by a naturalistic perspective, it established the groundwork for the distinctively sociological approach I follow here. Erikson's theoretical innovation was to conceptualize the

difference between collective and individual trauma. Both the attention to collectively emergent properties, and the naturalism with which such collective traumas are conceived, are evident in the following passage.

> 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 life that *damages* the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works it's 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 part of the self has disappeared.* . . . "We" no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (Erikson, 1976: 153–4, italics added)

As Smelser suggests (Alexander et al., forthcoming), trauma theory began to enter ordinary language and scholarly discussions alike in the efforts to understand the "shell shock" that affected so many soldiers during World War I, and it became expanded and elaborated in relation to other wars that followed in the course of the twentieth century. When Glen Elder created "life course analysis" to trace the cohort effects on individual identity of these and other cataclysmic social events in the twentieth century, he and his students adopted a similar Enlightenment mode of trauma (Elder, 1974). Similar understandings have long informed approaches in other disciplines, for example the vast historiography devoted to 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 (see chapter 2, above) and responses to other episodes of mass murder in the twentieth century.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THINKING

Such 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 both contemporary lay common sense and academic thinking. 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 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.[4] According to this perspective, the truth can be recovered, and psychological equanimity restored only, as the Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander once put it, "when memory comes."

This phrase actually provides the title of Friedlander's memoir about his childhood during the Holocaust years in Germany and France. Recounting, in evocative literary language, his earlier experiences of persecution and displacement, Friedlander suggests that conscious perception of highly traumatic events can emerge only after psychological introspection and "working through" allows actors to recover their full capacities for agency (Friedlander, 1978, 1992b). Emblematic of the intellectual framework that has emerged over the last three decades in response to the Holocaust experience, this psychoanalytically informed theorizing particularly illuminated the role of collective memory, insisting on the importance of working backward through the symbolic residues that the originating event has left on contemporary recollection.[5]

Much as these memory residues surface through free association in psychoanalytic treatment, they appear in public life through the creation of literature. It should not be surprising, then, that literary interpretation, with its hermeneutical approach to symbolic patterns, has been offered as a kind of academic counterpart to the psychoanalytic intervention. In fact, the major theoretical and empirical statements of the psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory have been produced by scholars in the various disciplines of the humanities. Because within the psychoanalytic tradition it has been Lacan who has emphasized the importance of language in emotional formation, it has been Lacanian theory, often in combination with Derridean deconstruction, that has informed these humanities-based studies of trauma.

Perhaps the most influential scholar in shaping this approach has been Cathy Caruth, in her own collection of essays, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History,* and in her edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Caruth, 1995, 1996).[6] Caruth focuses on the complex permutations that unconscious emotions impose on traumatic reactions, and her work has certainly been helpful in my own thinking about cultural trauma. In keeping with the psychoanalytic tradition, however, Caruth roots her analysis in the power and objectivity of the originating traumatic event, saying that "Freud's intuition of, and his

passionate fascination with, traumatic experiences" related traumatic reactions to "the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth, 1995: 2). The event cannot be left behind because "the breach in the mind's experience," according to Caruth, "is experienced too soon." This abruptness prevents the mind from fully cognizing the event. It is experienced "too unexpectedly . . . to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness." Buried in the unconscious, the event is experienced irrationally, "in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor." This shows how the psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory goes beyond the Enlightenment one: "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on." When Caruth describes these traumatic symptoms, however, she returns to the theme of objectivity, suggesting that they "tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (3–4).[7]

The enormous influence of this psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory can be seen in the way it has informed the recent efforts by Latin American scholars to come to terms with the traumatic brutalities of their recent dictatorships. Many of these discussions, of course, are purely empirical investigations of the extent of repression and/or normative arguments that assign responsibilities and demand reparations. Yet there is an increasing body of literature that addresses the effects of the repression in terms of the traumas it caused.

The aim is to restore collective psychological health by lifting societal repression and restoring memory. To achieve this, social scientists stress the importance of finding—through public acts of commemoration, cultural representation, and public political struggle—some collective means for undoing repression and allowing the pent-up emotions of loss and mourning to be expressed. While thoroughly laudable in moral terms, and without doubt also very helpful in terms of promoting public discourse and enhancing self-esteem, this advocacy literature typically is limited by the constraints of lay common sense. The traumatized feelings of the victims, and the actions that should be taken in response, are both treated as the unmediated, common-sense reactions to the repression itself. Elizabeth Jelin and Susana Kaufman, for example, directed a large-scale project on "Memory and Narrativity" sponsored by the Ford Foundation, involving a team of investigators from different South American countries. In their powerful report on their initial findings, "Layers of Memories: Twenty Years After in Argentina,"[8] they contrast the victims' insistance on recognizing the reality of traumatizing events and experiences with the denials of the perpetrators and their conservative supporters, denials that insist 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.'" Jelin and Kaufman call these conservative forces the "bystanders of horror"

who claim they "did not know" and "did not see." But because the event—the traumatizing repression—was real, these denials will not work: "The personalized memory of people cannot be erased or destroyed by decree or by force." The efforts to memorialize the victims of the repression are presented as efforts to restore the objectivity reality of the brutal events, to separate them from the unconscious distortions of memory: "Monuments, museums and memorials 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" (unpublished, 5–7).

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 understanding from which they derive. It is on the rejection of this naturalistic fallacy that my own approach rests. First and foremost, I maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create collective 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.

This notion of an "imagined" traumatic event seems to suggest the kind of process that Benedict Anderson describes in *Imagined Communites* (Anderson, 1991). Anderson's concern, of course, is not with trauma per se but with the kinds of self-consciously ideological narratives of nationalist history. Yet these collective beliefs often assert the existence of some national trauma. In the course of defining national identity, national histories are constructed around injuries that cry out for revenge. The twentieth century was replete with examples of angry nationalist groups and their intellectual and media representatives asserting that they were injured or traumatized by agents of some putatatively antagonistic ethnic and political group, which must then be battled against in turn. The Serbians inside Serbia, for example, contended that ethnic Albanians in Kosovo did them traumatic injury, thus providing justification for their own "defensive" invasion and ethnic cleansing. The type case of such militarist construction of primordial national trauma was Adolph Hitler's grotesque assertion that the international Jewish conspiracy had been responsible for Germany's traumatic loss in World War I.

But what Anderson means by "imagined" is not, in fact, exactly what I have in mind here. For he makes use of this concept in order to point to the com-

pletely illusory, nonempirical, nonexistent quality of the original event. Anderson is horrified by the ideology of nationalism, and his analysis of imagined national communities partakes of "ideology critique." As such, it applies the kind of Enlightenment perspective that mars lay trauma theory, which I am criticizing here. It is not that traumas are never constructed from nonexistent events. Certainly they are. But it is too easy to accept the imagined dimension of trauma when the reference is primarily to claims like these, which point to events that either never did occur or to events whose representation involve exaggerations that serve obviously aggressive and harmful political force. Our approach to the idea of "imagined" is more like what Durkheim meant in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* when he wrote of the "religious imagination." Imagination is intrinsic to the very process of representation. It seizes on an inchoate experience from life and forms it, through association, condensation, and aesthetic creation, into some specific shape.

Imagination informs trauma construction just as much when the reference is to something that has actually occurred as to something that has not. It is only through the imaginative process of representation that actors have the sense of experience. Even when claims of victimhood are morally justifiable, politically democratic, and socially progressive, these claims still cannot be seen as automatic, or natural, responses to the actual nature of an event itself. To accept the constructivist position in such cases may be difficult, for the claim to verisimilitude is fundamental to the very sense that a trauma has occurred. Yet, while every argument about trauma claims ontological reality, as cultural sociologists we are not primarily concerned with the accuracy of social actors' claims, much less with evaluating their moral justification. We are concerned only with how and under what conditions the claims are made, and with what results. It is neither ontology nor morality, but with epistemology, that we are concerned.

Traumatic status is attributed to real or imagined phenomena, not because of their actual harmfulness or their objective abruptness, but because these phenomena are believed to have abruptly, and harmfully, affected collective identity. Individual security is anchored in structures of emotional and cultural expectations that provide a sense of security and 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 a part. What is at stake, rather, is the collectivity's identity, 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 sociocultural 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.

THE SOCIAL PROCESS OF CULTURAL 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. Such 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. In this section I lay out the processes that the nature of these collective actions and the cultural and institutional processes that mediate them.

Claim-Making: The Spiral of Signification

The gap between event and representation can be conceived as the "trauma process." Collectivities do not make decisions as such; rather, it is agents who do (Alexander, 1987; Alexander, Giesen, Munch, & Smelser, 1987; Sztompka, 1991, 1993). The persons who compose collectivites broadcast symbolic representations—characterizations—of ongoing social events, past, present, and future. They broadcast these representations as members of a social group. These group representations can be seen as "claims" about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply. The cultural construction of trauma begins with such a claim (Thompson, 1998).[9] It is a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a 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" (Weber, 1968: 468–517).[10] the collective agents of the trauma process. Carrier groups have both ideal and material interests; they are situated

in particular places in the social structure; and they have particular discursive talents for articulating their claims—for what might be called "meaning making"—in the public sphere. Carrier groups may be elites, but they may also be denigrated and marginalized classes. They may be prestigious religious leaders or groups whom the majority has designated as spiritual pariahs. A carrier group can be generational, representing the perspectives and interests of a younger generation against an older one. It can be national, pitting one's own nation against a putative enemy. It can be institutional, representing one particular social sector or organization against others in a fragmented and polarized social order.

Audience and Situation: Speech Act Theory

The trauma process can be likened, in this sense, to a speech act (Austin, 1962; Habermas, 1984; Pia Lara, 1998; Searle, 1969).[11] Traumas, like speech acts, have the following elements:

1. *Speaker*: the carrier group
2. *Audience*: the public, putatively homogeneous but sociologically fragmented
3. *Situation*: the historical, cultural, and institutional environment within which the speech act occurs

The goal of the speaker is persuasively to project the trauma claim to the audience-public. In doing so, the carrier group makes use of the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and opportunites 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 other publics within the "society at large."

Cultural Classification: The Creation of Trauma as a New Master Narrative

Bridging the gap between event and representation depends on what Kenneth Thompson has called, in reference to the topic of moral panics, a "spiral of signification" (Thompson, 1998: 20–4).[12] Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story. Yet this story-telling is, at the same time, a complex and multivalent symbolic process that is contingent, highly contested, and sometimes highly polarizing. 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 are essential to the creation of a new master narrative. While I will place these four dimensions of representations into an analytical sequence, I do not mean to suggest temporality. In social reality, these representations unfold in an interlarded manner that is continuously crossreferential. The causality is symbolic and aesthetic, not sequential or developmental but "value-added" (Smelser, 1963).

The questions to which a successful process of collective representation must provide compelling answers are as follows.

The nature of the pain. What actually happened—to the particular group and to the wider collectivity of which it is a part?

- Did the denouement of the Vietnam War leave a festering wound on the American psyche or was it incorporated in a more or less routine way? If there was a shattering wound, in what exactly did it consist? Did the American military lose the Vietnam War or did the Vietnam trauma consist of the pain of having the nation's hands "tied behind its back"?[13]
- Did hundreds of ethnic Albanians die in Kosovo, or was it tens and possibly even hundreds of thousands? Did they die because of starvation or displacement in the course of a civil war, or were they deliberately murdered?
- Was slavery a trauma for African Americans? Or was it, as some revisionist historians have claimed, merely a highly profitable mode of economic production? If the latter, then slavery may not have produced traumatic pain. If the former, it certainly involved brutal and traumatizing physical domination (Eyerman, 2002).
- Was the internecine ethnic and religious conflict in Northern Ireland, these last thirty years, "civil unrest and terrorism," as Queen Elizabeth once described it, or a "bloody war," as claimed by the IRA (quoted in Maillot, unpublished manuscript)?
- Did less than a hundred persons die at the hands of Japanese soldiers in Nanking, China, in 1938, or three hundred thousand? Did these deaths result from a one-sided "massacre" or a "fierce contest" between opposing armies? (Chang, 1997: 206)

The nature of the victim. What group of persons was affected by this traumatizing pain? Were they particular individuals or groups, or the much more all-encompassing "people" as such? Did one singular 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 did the victim group extend to 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 victims of the Holocaust? Were communists, socialists, homosexuals, and handicapped persons also victims of the Nazi 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, or are the victims of these conditions members of an economically defined "underclass"?
- Were North American Indians the victims of European colonizers or were the victims particularly situated, and particularly "aggressive," Indian nations?
- Are non-Western or third world nations the victims of globalization, or only the least developed, or least well equipped, 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 highly significant question of the relation of the victim to the wider audience. To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group? Typically, at the beginning of the trauma process, most audience members see little if any relation between themselves and the victimized group. Only if the victims are represented in terms of valued qualities shared by the larger collective identity will the audience be able to symbolically participate in the experience of the originating trauma.

- Gypsies are acknowledged by contemporary Central Europeans as trauma victims, the bearers of a tragic history. Yet insofar as large numbers of central Europeans represent the "Roman people" as deviant and uncivilized, they have not made that tragic past their own.
- Influential groups of German and Polish people have acknowledged that Jews were victims of mass murder, but they have often refused to experience their own national 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 identification among the white Americans who watched the events on their televisions in the safety of the nonsegregated North? Is the history of white American racial domination relegated to an entirely separate time, or is it conceived, by virtue of the reconstruction of collective memory, as a contemporary issue?

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? This issue is always a matter of symbolic and social construction.

- Did "Germany" create the Holocaust or was it the Nazi regime? Was the crime restricted to special SS forces or was the Werhmacht, the entire Nazi army, also deeply involved? Did the crime extend to ordinary soldiers, to ordi-

nary citizens, to Catholic as well as Protestant Germans? Was it only the older generation of Germans who were responsible, or later generations as well?

Institutional Arenas

This representational process creates a new master narrative of social suffering. Such cultural (re)classification is critical to the process by which a collectivity becomes traumatized.[14] But it does not unfold in what Habermas would call a transparent speech situation (Habermas, 1984).[15] The notion of transparency is posited by Habermas as a normative ideal essential to the democratic functioning of the public sphere, not as an empirical description. In actual social practice, speech acts never unfold in an unmediated way. Linguistic action is powerfully mediated by the nature of the institutional arenas within which it occurs. While by no means exhaustive, some examples of this institutional mediation are provided here.

1. If the trauma process unfolds inside the *religious* arena, its concern will be to link trauma to theodicy.

- The Torah's story of Job, for example, asks "why did God allow this evil?" The answers to such questions will generate searching discussions about whether and how human beings strayed from divinely inspired ethics and sacred law, or whether the existence of evil means that God does not exist.

2. Insofar as meaning work takes place in the *aesthetic* realm, it will be channeled by specific genres and narratives that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis.

- In the early representations of the Holocaust, for example, the tragic *Diary of Anne Frank* played a vital role, and in later years an entirely new genre called "survivor literature" developed (Hayes, 1999, and chapter 2, above).
- In the aftermath of ethnocide in Guatemala, in which two hundred thousand Mayan Indians were killed and entire villages destroyed, an ethnographer recorded how, in the town of Santa Maria Tzeja, theatre was "used to publicly confront the past."

"A group of teenagers and . . . a North American teacher and director of the community's school write a play that documents what Santa Maria Tzeja has experienced. They call the play, *There Is Nothing Concealed That Will Not Be Disclosed Matthew (10:26)*, and the villagers themselves perform it. The play not only recalls what happened in the village in a stark, unflinching manner but also didactially lays out the laws and rights that the military violated. The play pointendly and precisely cites articles of the Guatemalan constitution that were trampled on, not normally the text of great drama. But in

Guatemala, reading the constitution can be a profoundly dramatic act. Peformances inevitably lead to moving and at times heated discussions. [The production] had a cathartic impact on the village. (Manz, 2002)

As this example suggests, mass media are significant, but not necessary, in this aesthetic arena.

- In the aftermath of the 80-day NATO bombing that forced Yugoslavian Serbs to abandon their violent, decade-long domination of Albanian Kosovo, Serbian films provided mass channels for reexperincing the period of suffering even while they narrated the protagonists, the victims, and the very nature of the trauma in strikingly different ways.

It is hard to see why anyone who survived 78 traumatic days of air-strikes in 1999 would want to relive the experience in a theater, bringing back memories as well of a murderous decade that ended in October with the fall of President Slobodan Milosevic. Yet Yugoslavia's feature film industry has done little else in the past year but turn out NATO war movies [some of which] have begun to cut through the national façade that Milsoevic's propagandists had more than 10 years to build. [In one movie, the protagonist recounts that] "it is dead easy to kill. . . . They stare at you, weep and wail, and you shoot 'em and that's the end—end of story. Later, of course, they all come back and you want to set things right, but it's too late. That's why the truth is always returning to judge men. (Paul Watson, "War's Over in Yugoslavia, but Box-Office Battles Have Begun," *Los Angeles Times,* January 3, 2001, A1–6)

3. When the cultural classification enters the *legal* realm, it will be disciplined by the demand to issue a definitive judgment of legally binding responsibilities and to distribute punishments and material reparations. Such a demonstration may have nothing at all to do with the perpetrators themselves accepting responsibility or a broader audience identifying with those who suffered as the trauma drama plays out.

- In regard to binding definitions of war crimes and crimes against humanity, the 1945 Nuremberg trials were critical. They created revolutionary new law and resulted in dozens of successful prosecutions, yet they did not, by any means, succeed in compelling the German people themselves to recognize the existence of Nazi traumas, much less their responsibilities for them. Nonetheless, the legal statutes developed at Nuremberg were elaborated in the decades following, laying the basis for dozens highly publicized lawsuits that in recent years have created significant dramaturgy and unleashed profound moral effects. These trials for "crimes against humanity" have implicated not only individuals but national organizations.

- Because neither postwar Japanese governments nor the most influential Japanese publics have even recognized the war crimes committed by its Imperial war policies, much less taken moral responsibility for them, no suit seeking damages for Imperial atrocities has, until recently, ever made any substantial headway in Japan's courts. In explaining why one suit against the Imperial government's biological warfare unit has finally made substantial progress, observers have pointed to the specificity and autonomy of the legal arena.

As a member of the Japanese biological warfare outfit, known as United 731, Mr. Shinozuka was told that if he ever faced capture by the Chinese, his duty to Emperor Hirohito was to kill himself rather than compromise the secrecy of a program that so clearly violated international law. . . . Now, 55 years later, he is a hale 77-year-old. But still haunted by remorse, he has spoken—providing the first account before a Japanese court by a veteran about the workings of the notorious unit. . . . That this case, now in its final stages, has not been dismissed like so many others is due in part to painstaking legal research and to cooperation over strategy by some of Japan's leading lawyers. Lawyers who have sued the government say the fact that this case has become the first in which a judge has allowed the extensive introduction of evidence instead of handing down a quick dismissal may also attest to an important shift under way on the issue of reparations. (Howard W. French, "Japanese Veteran Testifies in War Atrocity Lawsuit," *New York Times,* December 21, 2000: A3)

4. When the trauma process enters the *scientific* world, it becomes subject to evidentiary stipulations of an altogether different kind, creating scholarly controversies, "revelations," and "revisions." When historians endeavor to define an historical event as traumatic, they must document, by acceptable scholarly methods, the nature of the pain, the victims, and the responsibility. In doing so, the cultural classification process often triggers explosive methodological controversies.

- What were the causes of World War I? Who was responsible for initiating it? Who were its victims?
- Did the Japanese intend to launch a "sneak" attack on Pearl Harbor, or was the late-arriving message to Washington, D.C., from the Japanese Imperial government, delayed by inadvertance and diplomatic confusion?
- The German *Historichstreit* controversy captured international attention in the 1980s, questioning the new scholarly conservatives' emphasis on anticommunism as a motivation for the Nazi seizure of power and its anti-Jewish policies. In the 1990s, Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* was attacked by mainstream historians for overemphasizing the uniquess of German anti-Semitism.

5. When the trauma process enters the *mass media,* it is gains opportunities and at the same time becomes subject to distinctive kinds of restrictions. Mediated mass communication allows traumas to be expressively dramatized, and some of the competing interpretations to gain enormous persuasive power over others. At the same time, however, these representational processes become subject to the restrictions of news reporting, with their demands for concision, ethical neutrality, and perspectival balance. Finally, there is the competition for readership that often inspires the sometimes exaggerated and distorted production of "news" in mass circulation newspapers and magazines. As an event comes to be reported as a trauma, a particular group as "traumatized," and another group as the perpetrators, politicians and other elites may attack the media, its owners, and often the journalists whose reporting established the trauma facts.

• During the traumas of the late 1960s, American television news brought evocative images of terrible civilian suffering from the Vietnam War into the living rooms of American citizens. These images were seized on by antiwar critics. The conservative American politician, vice-president Spiro Agnew, initiated virulent attacks against the "liberal" and "Jewish-dominated" media for their insistence that the Vietnamese civilian population was being traumatized by the American-dominated war.

6. When the trauma process enters into the *state bureaucracy,* it can draw on the governmental power to channel the representational process. Decisions by the executive branches of governments to create national commissions of inquiry, votes by parliaments to establish investigative committees, the creation of state-directed police investigations and new directives about national priorities—all such actions can have decisive effects on handling and channeling the spiral of signification that marks the trauma process (Smelser, 1963).[16] In the last decade, blue-ribbon commissions have become a favored state vehicle for such involvement. By arranging and balancing the participation on such panels, forcing the appearance of witnesses, and creating carefully choreographed public dramaturgy, such panels tilt the interpretative process in powerful ways, expanding and narrowing solidarity, creating or denying the factual and moral basis for reparations and civic repair.

• Referring to hundreds of thousands of Mayan Indians who died at the hands of Guatemalan counterinsurgency forces between 1981 and 1983, an ethnographer of the region asserts that "without question, the army's horrific actions ripped deep psychological wounds into the consciousness of the inhabitants of this village [who were also] involved in a far larger trauma" (Manz, 2002: 294). Despite the objective status of the trauma, however, and the pain and suffering it had caused, the ability to collectively recognize and process it was inhibited because the village was "a place hammered into silence and

accustomed to impunity." In 1994, as part of the negotiation between the Guatemalan government and the umbrella group of insurgent forces, the *Commission for Historical Clarification* (CEH) was created to hear testimony from the affected parties and to present an interpretation. Five years later, its published conclusion declared that "agents of the State of Guatemala . . . committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people" (quoted in Manz, 2002: 293). According to the ethnographer, the report "stunned the country." By publicly representing the nature of the pain, defining victim and perpetrator, and assigning responsibility, the trauma process was enacted within the governmental arena: "It was as if the whole country burst into tears, tears that had been repressed for decades and tears of vindication" (Manz, 2002: 294).

• In the middle 1990s, the post-apartheid South African government established the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission.* Composed of widely respected blacks and whites, the group called witnesses and conducted widely broadcast hearings about the suffering created by the repression that marked the preceding Afrikaner government. The effort succeeded, to some significant degree, in generalizing the trauma process beyond racially polarized audiences, making it into a shared experience of the new, more solidary, and more democratic South African society. Such a commission could not have been created until blacks became enfranchised and became the dominant racial power.

• By contrast, the postfascist Japanese government has never been willing to create official commissions investigate the war crimes committed by its Imperial leaders and soldiers against non-Japanese during World War II. In regard to the Japanese enslavement of tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of "comfort women," primarily Korean, who provided sexual services for Imperial solidiers, the Japanese government finally agreed in the late 1990s to disperse relatively token monetary reparation to the Korean women still alive. Critics have continued to demand that an officially sanctioned commission hold public hearings into the trauma, a dramaturgical and legally binding process that, despite its ambiguous, and brief, public apology to the "comfort women," the Japanese government has never been willing to allow. It is revealing of the significance of such a governmental arena that these critics eventually mounted an unofficial tribunal themselves.

Last week in Tokyo, private Japanese and international organizations convened a war tribunal that found Japan's military leaders, including Emperor Hirohito, guilty of crimes against humanity for the sexual slavery imposed on tens of thousands of women in countries controlled by Japan during World War II. The tribunal has no legal power to exact reparations for the survivors among those so-called comfort women. But with its judges and lawyers drawn from official international tribunals for the countries that once were part of Yugoslavia and for Rwanda, it brought unparalleled moral authority to an issue scarcely discussed or taught about in Japan. (Howard W. French, "Japanese

Veteran Testifies in War Atrocity Lawsuit," *New York Times,* December 21, 2000: A3)

Stratificational Hierarchies

The constraints imposed by institutional arenas are themselves mediated by the uneven distribution of material resources and the social networks that provide differential access to them.

1. Who owns the newspapers? To what degree are journalists independent of political and financial control?
2. Who controls the religious orders? Are they internally authoritarian or can congregants exercise independent influence?
3. Are courts independent? What is the scope of action available to entrepreneurical legal advocates?
4. Are educational policies subject to mass movements of public opinion or are they insulated by bureaucratic procedures at more centralized levels?
5. Who exercizes controls over the government?

As I have indicated in my earlier reference to the governmental arena, local, provincial, and national governments deploy significant power over the trauma process. What must be considered here is that these bodies might occupy a positon of dominance over the traumatized parties themselves. In these cases, the commissions might whitewash the perpetrators' actions rather than dramatize them.

- In the 1980s, the conservative American and British governments of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher initially did little to dramatize the dangers of the virulent AIDS epidemic because they did not wish to create sympathy or identification with the homosexual practices their ideologies so stigmatized. The failure allowed the epidemics to spread more rapidly. Finally, the Thatcher government launched a massive public education campaign about the dangers of HIV. The effort quickly took the steam out of the moral panic over the AIDS epidemic that had swept through British society and helped launch appropriate public health measures (Thompson, 1998).
- In 2000, reports surfaced in American media about a massacre of several hundred Korean civilians by American soliders at No Gun Ri early in the Korean War. Suggestions from Korean witnesses, and newfound testimony from some American soldiers, suggested the possibility that the firings had been intentional, and allegations about racism and war crimes were made. In response, President Clinton assigned the U.S. army itself to convene its own official, in-house investigation. While a senior army official claimed "we

have worked closely with the Korean government to investigate the circumstances surrounding No Gun Ri," the power to investigate and interpret the evidence clearly rested with the perpetrators of the trauma alone. Not surprisingly, when its findings were announced several months later, the U.S. army declared itself innocent of the charges that had threatened its good name:

We do not believe it is appropriate to issue an apology in this matter. [While] some of those civilizan casualties were at the hand of American solider[s], that conclusion is very different from the allegation that was made that this was a massacre in the classic sense that we lined up innocent people and gunned them down. *(New York Times,* December 22, 2000: A5)

Identity Revision, Memory, and Routinization

"Experiencing trauma" can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, 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 eventually emerge a period of "calming down." The spiral of signification flattens out, affect and emotion become less inflamed, preoccupation with sacrality and pollution fades. Charisma becomes routinized, effervescence evaporates, and 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.[17] The new collective identity will be rooted in sacred places and structured in ritual routines. In the late 1970s, the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge government was responsible for the deaths of more than one-third of Cambodia's citizens. The murderous regime was deposed in 1979. While fragmentation, instability, and authoritarianism in the decades following prevented the trauma process from fully playing itself out, the processes of reconstruction, representation, and working-through produced significant commemoration, ritual, and reconstruction of national identity.

Vivid reminders of the DK [Khmer Rouge]'s horrors are displayed in photographs of victims, paintings of killings, and implements used for torture at the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes, a former school that had become a

deadly interrogation center's . . . as well as in a monumental display of skulls and bones at Bhhoeung Ek, a former killing field where one can still see bits of bone and cloth in the soil of what had been mass graves. The PRK [the new Cambodian government] also instituted an annual observance called The Day of Hate, in which people were gathered at various locales to hear invectives heaped on the Khmer Rouge. State propaganda played on this theme with such slogans as: "We must absolutely prevent the return of this former black darkness" and "We must struggle ceaselessly to protect against the return of the . . . genocidal clique." These formulaic and state-sanctioned expressions were genuine and often expressed in conversations among ordinary folk. (Ebihara & Ledgerwood in Hinton, 2002: 282–3)

In this routinization process, the trauma process, once so vivid, can become subject to the technical, sometimes dessicating attention of specialists who detach affect from meaning. This triumph of the mundane is often noted with regret by audiences that 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. Created to remember and commemorate the trauma process, efforts to institutionalize the lessons of the trauma will eventually prove 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 remains, nevertheless, a fundamental resource for resolving future social problems and disturbances of collective consciousness.

The inevitability of such routinization processes 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.[18]

The elements of the trauma process I have outlined in this section can be thought of as social structures, if we think of this term in something other than its materialist sense. Each element plays a role in the social construction and deconstuction of a traumatic event. Whether any or all of these structures actually come into play is not itself a matter of structural determination. It is subject to the unstructured, unforeseeable contingencies of historical time. A war is lost or won. A new regime has entered into power or a discredited regime remains stubbornly in place. Hegemonic or counterpublics may be empowered and enthusiastic or undermined and exhausted by social conflict and stalemate. Such contingent historical factors exercise powerful influence on whether a consensus will be generated that allows the cultural classification of trauma to be set firmly in place.

TRAUMA CREATION AND PRACTICAL-MORAL ACTION: THE NON-WESTERN RELEVANCE

In the preceding pages, I have elaborated a middle-range theory of the complex causes propeling the trauma process. In illustrating this analytical argument, I have referred to traumatic situations in Western and non-Western, developed and less-developed societies—in Northern Ireland and Poland, the United Kingdom and Cambodia, Japan and Yugoslavia, South Africa, Guatemala, and Korea.

It would be a serious misunderstanding if trauma theory were restricted in its reference to Western social life. True, it has been Western societies that have recently provided the most dramatic apologias for traumatic episodes in their national histories; yet the victims of these traumas have disproportionately been members of subaltern and marginalized groups. It should hardly be surprising, in other words, that the theory developed in relation to these empirical cases can so fluidly be extended to the experiences of trauma outside of Western societies. In the course of this introduction, I have mentioned also gypsies, Mayan Indians, American Indians, Kosovar Albanians, Chinese city dwellers, and Cambodian peasants. In fact, it is clear that the non-Western regions of the world, and the most defenseless segments of the world's population, that have recently been subjected to the most terrifying traumatic injuries.

The anthropologist Alexander Hinton has suggested that "while the behaviors it references have an ancient pedigree, the concept of genocide . . . is thoroughly modern." (Hinton, 2002: 27). Indeed, it is the very premise of the contributions he and his fellow anthropologists make to their collective work, *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*, that by the latter half of the twentieth century this modern framework had thoroughly penetrated non-Western societies (Hinton, 2002). "On the conceptual level," Hinton writes,

terms like *trauma*, *suffering*, and *cruelty* are linked to the discourses of modernity . . . (Hinton, 2002: 25). Furthermore, in the mass media, the victims of genocide are frequently condensed into an essentialized portrait of the *universal* sufferer, an image that can be . . . (re)broadcast to *global* audiences who see their own potential trauma reflected in this simulation of the modern subject. Refugees frequently epitomize this modern trope of human suffering; silent and anonymous, they signify both a *universal humanity* and the threat of the premodern and uncivilized, which they have supposedly barely survived. . . . Particularly in the *global* present, as such diverse populations and images flow rapidly across national borders, genocide . . . creates diasporic communities that threaten to undermine its culminating political incarnation. (26, italics added)

There is no more excruciating example of the universal relevance of trauma theory than the way it can help illuminate the tragic difficulties that non-

Western societies have often experienced in coming to terms with genocide. Because genocide is more likely to occur in collective arenas that are neither legally regulated and democratic nor formally egalitarian (Kuper, 1981),[19] it is hardly surprising that, in the last half century, the most dramatic and horrifying examples of mass murder have emerged from within the more fragmented and impoverished areas of the non-Western world: the Hutu massacre of more than five hundred thousand Tutsis in less than three weeks in Rwanda, the Guatemalan military's ethnocide of two hundred thousand Mayan Indians during the dirty civil war in the early 1980s, the Maoist Khmer Rouge's elimination of almost one-third of Cambodia's entire population in its revolutionary purges in the late 1970s.

The tragic reasons for these recent outpourings of mass murder in the non-Western world cannot be our concern here. A growing body of social scientific work is devoted to this question, although a great deal more needs to be done (Kleinman, Das, & Lock, 1997). What cultural trauma theory helps us understand, instead, is a central paradox, about not the causes of genocide but its aftereffects: Why have these genocidal actions, so traumatic to their millions of immediate victims, so rarely branded themselves on the consciousness of the wider populations? Why have these horrendous phenomena of mass suffering not become compelling, publicly available narratives of collective suffering to their respective nations, let alone to the world at large? The reasons, I suggest, can be found in the complex patterns of the trauma process I have outlined here.

In fact, several years before the Nazi massacre of the Jews, which eventually branded Western modernity as the distinctive bearer of collective trauma in the twentieth century, the most developed society outside the West had itself already engaged in systematic atrocities. In early December 1938, invading Japanese soldiers slaughtered as many as three hundred thousand Chinese residents of Nanking, China. Under orders from the highest levels of the Imperial government, they carried out this massacre in six of the bloodiest weeks of modern history, without the technological aids later developed by the Nazis in their mass extermination of the Jews. By contrast with the Nazi massacre, this Japanese atrocity was not hidden from the rest of the world. To the contrary, it was carried out under the eyes of critical and highly articulate Western observers and reported on massively by respected members of the world's press. Yet in the sixty years that have transpired since that time, the memorialization of the "rape of Nanking" has never extended beyond the regional confines of China, and eventually barely beyond the confines of Nanking itself. The trauma contributed scarcely at all to the collective identity of the People's Republic of China, let alone to the self-conception of the postwar democratic government of Japan. As the most recent narrator of the massacre puts it, "even by the standards of history's most destructive war, the Rape of Nanking represents one of the worst instances of mass extermination." Yet, though extraordinarily traumatic for the contemporary residents of Nanking, it became "the forgotten

Holocaust of World War II." It remains an "obscure incident" today (Chang, 1997: 5–6), the very existence of which is routinely and successfully denied by some of Japan's most powerful and esteemed public officials.

As I have suggested in this chapter, such failures to recognize collective traumas, much less to incorporate their lessons into collective identity, do not result from the intrinsic nature of the original suffering. This is the naturalistic fallacy that follows from lay trauma theory. The failure stems, rather, from an inability to carry through what I have called here the trauma process. In Japan and China, just as in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Guatemala, claims have certainly been made for the central relevance of these "distant sufferings" (Boltanski, 1999).[20] But for both social-structural and culture reasons, carrier groups have not emerged with the resources, authority, or interpretive competence to powerfully disseminate these trauma claims. Sufficiently persuasive narratives have not been created, or they have not been successfully broadcast to wider audiences. Because of these failures, the perpetrators of these collective sufferings have not been compelled to accept moral responsibility, and the lessons of these social traumas have been neither memorialized nor ritualized. New definitions of moral responsibility have not been generated. Social solidarities have not been extended. More primordial and more particularistic collective identities have not been changed.

In this concluding section, I have tried to underscore my earlier contention that the theory presented here is not merely technical and scientific. It is normatively relevant and significantly illuminates processes of moral-practical action. However tortuous the trauma process, it allows collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action. This open-ended and contingent process of trauma creation, and the assigning of collective responsibility that goes along with it, is as relevant to non-Western as Western societies. Collective traumas have no geographical or cultural limitations. The theory of cultural trauma applies, without prejudice, to any and all instances when societies have, or have not, constructed and experienced cultural traumatic events, and to their efforts to draw, or not to draw, the moral lessons that can be said to emanate from them.