

## Ordinary Language and Reflexivity

## CULTURAL TRAUMA: A SOCIAL THEORY

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

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 may also take on board some significant responsibility for it. Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma in a manner that assumes such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the suffering 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, or place the responsibility for it on people other than themselves. Because of their failure they cannot achieve a moral stance. Refusing to participate in the process of trauma creation, social groups restrict solidarity, leaving others to suffer alone.

One of the great advantages of this new theoretical concept is that it partakes so deeply of everyday life. In the last century, first in Western societies and then, soon after, throughout the rest of the world, people spoke continually about being traumatized by an experience, by an event, by an act of violence or harassment, or even, simply, by an abrupt and unexpected, and sometimes not even particularly malevolent, experience of social transformation and change.<sup>1</sup> People also have continually employed the language of trauma to explain what happens, not only to themselves, but to the collectivities to which they belong as well. We often speak of an organization being traumatized when a leader departs or dies, when a governing regime falls, when an organization suffers an unexpected reversal of fortune. Actors describe themselves as traumatized when the environment of an individual or a collectivity suddenly shifts in an unforeseen and unwelcome manner.

We know from ordinary language, in other words, that with the idea of trauma we are on to something widely experienced and intuitively understood. Such rootedness in the life-world 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. The scholarly approaches to trauma developed thus far have actually been distorted by the powerful, commonsense understandings of trauma that have emerged in everyday life. Indeed, it might be said that these commonsense 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 experienced as 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.<sup>2</sup>

### *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 informs 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). 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 (Neal 1998: 9–10). “Dismissing or ignoring the traumatic experience is not a reasonable option,” Neal asserts; neither is “holding an attitude of benign neglect” or “cynical

indifference” (Neal 1998: 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” (Neal 1998: 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” (Neal 1998: 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 sociological model developed by Kai Erikson in *Everything in its Path*. This heart-wrenching account of the effects on a small Appalachian community of a devastating flood was constrained by a naturalistic perspective, yet it laid the groundwork for a distinctively sociological approach by thematizing 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 its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma.” But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important 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)

As Smelser suggests (2004), following, lay trauma theory began to enter ordinary language and scholarly discussions alike in the efforts to understand the kind of “shell shock” that affected so many soldiers during the First World War, and it became expanded and elaborated in relation to other wars that followed in the course of the twentieth century. When Glen Elder (1974) 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. 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 and responses to other episodes of mass murder in modern times.

### *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 commonsense and academic thinking. This approach places a model of unconscious emotional fears and cognitively distorting mechanisms of psychic defense between the external shattering event and the actor’s internal traumatic response. When bad things happen to good people, according to this version of lay theory, they can become so frightened that they can actually repress the experience of trauma itself. Rather than activating 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 to perceive them consciously. The truth about the experience is perceived, but only unconsciously. In effect, truth goes underground, and accurate memory and responsible action are its victims. Traumatic feelings and perceptions, then, come not only from the originating event but also from the anxiety of keeping it repressed. Trauma will be resolved not only by setting things right in the world, but also by setting things right in the self.<sup>3</sup> According to this perspective, the truth can be recovered, and psychological equanimity restored, only, as the Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander (1979) 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 1979, 1992). 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 upon contemporary recollection.<sup>4</sup>

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 hermeneutic 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).<sup>5</sup> Caruth focuses on the complex permutations that unconscious emotions impose on traumatic reactions, yet, at the same time, she roots her analysis in the power and objectivity of the originating traumatic event. “Freud’s intuition of, and his passionate fascination with, traumatic experiences,” she asserts, 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.” 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” (Caruth 1995: 3–4, italics added).<sup>6</sup>

The enormous influence of this psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory can be seen in the manner in which it has informed the efforts by Latin American scholars to come to terms with the traumatic brutalities of their late-twentieth century dictatorships. Many of these discussions, of course, are purely empirical investigations of the extent of repression 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 commonsense. Both the traumatized feelings of the victims and the actions that should be taken in response are treated as unmediated, commonsense 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 a powerful report on their initial findings, “Layers of Memories: Twenty Years After in Argentina,”<sup>7</sup> they contrast the victims’ insistence 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 which triggered the traumatizing repression was real, they argue, such 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 objective 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” (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 from the rejection of this naturalistic fallacy that my argument in this volume precedes. 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 (1991) describes in *Imagined Communities*. 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 they were injured or traumatized by agents of some putatively 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 (Spasić 2011). The type case of such militarist construction of primordial national trauma was Adolf Hitler’s grotesque assertion that the international Jewish conspiracy

had been responsible for Germany's traumatic losses in the First World War.

But what Anderson means by "imagined" does not quite point to what I have in mind, for he employs the concept to reference the illusory, nonempirical 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. 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 forces. My own 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 upon 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 epistemology, with which 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 challenge to meaning that provides the sense of shock and fear, not the events 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 are 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.

### 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 (Sztompka 1991a, 1993a; Alexander 1987; Alexander, Giesen, Munch, and Smelser 1987).<sup>8</sup> The persons who

compose collectivities 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).<sup>9</sup> 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 1978: 468–517).<sup>10</sup> Carrier groups are 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 “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. Carrier groups 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 (Alexander 2011).

### *Audience and Situation: Social Performance*

The trauma process can be likened, in this sense, to performative speech acts (Austin 1962; Alexander, Giesen, and Mast 2006).

Speaker: the carrier group

Audience: the public, putatively homogeneous but sociologically fragmented

Situation: the historical, cultural, and institutional environment within which the performance unfolds

The goal of performative actions is to project the trauma claim to the audience-public persuasively. In doing so, the carrier group makes use of the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the opportunities provided by institutional structures.

Initially, the performance of trauma is projected to members of the carrier group itself. If successful, 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 upon what Kenneth Thompson has called, in reference to moral panics, a “spiral of signification” (Thompson 1998: 20–4).<sup>11</sup> Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story. Yet this storytelling is, at the same time, a complex and multivalent symbolic process that is contingent, 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 making 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 cross-referential. The causality is symbolic and aesthetic, not sequential or developmental but “value-added” (Smelser 1962).

These are the questions to which a successful process of collective representation must provide compelling answers:

- (1) *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 denouncement 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, of 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”?<sup>12</sup>
  - 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 coercive, and highly profitable, mode of economic production? If the latter, then slavery did not produce traumatic pain. If the former, it involved brutal and traumatizing physical domination.
  - Was the internecine ethnic and religious conflict in Northern Ireland “civil unrest and terrorism,” as Queen Elizabeth II once described it, or a “bloody war,” as claimed by the IRA (quoted in Maillot 2000)?
  - Were there less than a hundred persons who died at the hands of Japanese soldiers in Nanjing, China, in 1938, or were there 300,000 victims? Did these deaths result from a one-sided “massacre” or a “fierce contest” between opposing armies? (Chang 1997: 206; and Chapter 4, below).
- (2) *The nature of the victim.* What group of persons were affected by this traumatizing pain? Were they particular individuals or groups, or “the people” in general? Did a singular and delimited group receive the brunt of the pain, or were several groups involved?
- Were 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 disabled 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 Americans 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 Native Americans the victims of European colonizers, or were the victims particularly situated, and particularly “aggressive,” Indian nations?
  - Are non-Western nations the victims of globalization, or is it only the least developed, or the least equipped, among them?
- (3) *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 representation experience identification 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.

- Roma (“Gypsies”) are acknowledged by many contemporary Central Europeans as trauma victims, the bearers of a tragic history. Yet insofar as large numbers of Central Europeans represent Roma 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 television 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?
- (4) *Attribution of responsibility.* In creating a compelling trauma narrative, it is critical to establish the identity of the perpetrator – the “antagonist.” 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 Wehrmacht, the entire Nazi army, also deeply involved? Did the crime extend to ordinary soldiers, to ordinary citizens, to Catholic as well as Protestant Germans? Was it only the older generation of Germans who were responsible, or were later generations responsible as well (Giesen 2004)?

### *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.<sup>13</sup> But it does not

unfold in what Habermas would call a transparent speech situation (Habermas 1984).<sup>14</sup> The notion of transparency is a normative ideal essential to the democratic functioning of the public sphere, not an empirical description. In actual social practice, social performances never unfold in an unmediated way. Linguistic action is powerfully mediated by the nature of the institutional arenas and stratification hierarchies within which it occurs.

*Religious.* 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.

*Aesthetic.* Insofar as meaning making 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 Diary of Anne Frank* played a vital role, and in later years an entirely new genre called "survivor literature" developed (Hayes 1999). In the aftermath of ethnocide in Guatemala, in which 200,000 Mayan Indians were killed and entire villages destroyed, an ethnographer recorded how, in the town of Santa Maria Tzeja, theater 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 didactically lays out the laws and rights that the military violated. The play pointedly 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. Performances inevitably led to moving, at times heated, discussions. [The production] had a cathartic impact on the village. (Manz 2002: 292-309)

As this example suggests, mass media are significant, but not necessary, in the aesthetic arena. In the aftermath of the NATO bombing that forced Yugoslavian Serbs to abandon their violent, decade-long domination of Albanian Kosovo, Serbian films provided mass channels for reexperiencing the period of suffering even while they

narrated the protagonists, 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 Milosevic's propagandists had more than 10 years to build. [In one movie, the protagonist recounts] "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." (Watson 2001: AI-6)

*Legal.* 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 responsibility for them. Nonetheless, the legal statutes developed at Nuremberg were elaborated in the decades following, laying the basis for dozens of highly publicized lawsuits that in later years created significant dramaturgy and unleashed profound moral effects. These trials for "crimes against humanity" implicated not only individuals but also national organizations.

Because neither postwar Japanese governments nor some influential Japanese publics have recognized the war crimes committed by Japan's imperial war policies, much less taken moral responsibility for them (Hashimoto 2011), 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 finally did make substantial progress, observers pointed to the specificity and autonomy of the legal arena.



As a member of the Japanese biological warfare outfit, known as United 73 I, 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. (French 2000: A3)

*Scientific.* 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 responsibility. In doing so, the cultural classification process often triggers explosive methodological controversies.

- What were the causes of the First World War? 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, DC, by the Japanese imperial government delayed by inadvertence and diplomatic confusion?
- The German “Historichstreit” controversy captured international attention in the 1980s, questioning the new scholarly conservatives’ emphasis on anti-Communism as a motivation for the Nazi seizure of power and its anti-Jewish policies. In the 1990s, Daniel Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* was attacked by mainstream historians for overemphasizing the uniqueness of German anti-Semitism.

*Mass media.* When the trauma process enters the mass media, it gains opportunities and at the same time becomes subject to distinctive kinds of restriction. Mediated mass communication allows traumas to be expressively dramatized and permits 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, their owners, and often the journalists whose reporting established the trauma facts.

- During 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 upon 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.

*State bureaucracy.* When the trauma process enters into the state bureaucracy, it can draw upon 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 1962).<sup>15</sup> 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:

293–4). 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” (ibid.). In 1994, as part of the negotiation between the Guatemalan government and the umbrella group of insurgent forces, a 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” (ibid.). 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” (ibid.).

- In the middle 1990s, the post-apartheid South African government established a 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 a 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 post-fascist Japanese government has never been willing to create official commissions to investigate the war crimes committed by its imperial leaders and soldiers against non-Japanese during the Second World War. In regard to the Japanese enslavement of tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of “comfort women,” primarily Korean, who provided sexual services for imperial soldiers, the Japanese government finally agreed in the late 1990s to disperse token monetary reparations to the Korean women still alive. Critics have continued to demand that an officially sanctioned commission hold public hearings regarding the trauma, a dramaturgical and legally binding process that the Japanese government, despite its ambiguous and brief public apology to the “comfort women,” 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. (French 2000: A3)

### *Stratificational Hierarchies*

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

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

As I indicated earlier, local, provincial, and national governments deploy significant power over the trauma process. What must be considered here is that these bodies might occupy a position 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 US 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. This 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 hundreds of Korean civilians by American soldiers at No Gun Ri early in the Korean War. Statements 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 US Army itself to convene its own official, in-house investigation. While a senior army official claimed that “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 US 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 civilian casualties were at the hand[s] of American soldier[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* 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 shift. This reconstruction means that there will be a searching re-remembering of the collective past, for memory is not only social and fluid but also 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 re-aggregation. As the heightened and powerfully affective discourse of trauma disappears, the “lessons” of the trauma become objectified in monuments, museums, and collections of historical artifacts.<sup>16</sup> The new collective identity will be rooted in sacred places and structured in ritual routines. In the late 1970s, the ultra-Maoist Khmer Rouge (DK) 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’s [Khmer Rouge] 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 . . . as well as in a monumental display of skulls and bones at Bhoeung 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 and Ledgerwood 2002: 282–3)

With routinization, the trauma process, once so vivid, can become subject to the technical, sometimes desiccating 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. Intended 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.<sup>17</sup>

The elements of the trauma process I have outlined here 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 deconstruction of a traumatic event. Whether any of these structures actually come into play is not itself a matter of structural determination. It is subject to the contingencies of human agency and 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 counter publics 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 this chapter, I have elaborated a middle-range theory that models the complex causes propelling 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 apologies for traumatic episodes in their national histories. But it has been the non-Western regions of the world, and the most defenseless among them, that have been subjected to some of the most terrifying traumatic injuries. Hinton has suggested that “while the behaviors it references have an ancient pedigree, the concept of genocide . . . is thoroughly modern” (Hinton 2002: 25). Nonetheless, by the latter half of the twentieth century this modern framework had thoroughly

penetrated non-Western societies: “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” (Hinton 2002: 21–2).

Genocide is more likely to occur in collective arenas that are neither legally regulated, democratic, nor formally egalitarian (Kuper 1981). So, 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 500,000 Tutsis in fewer than three weeks in Rwanda, the Guatemalan military’s ethnocide of 200,000 Mayan Indians during the dirty civil war in the early 1980s, the Maoist Khmer Rouge’s elimination of almost a 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 (e.g., Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997). What cultural trauma theory helps us understand, instead, is a central paradox, not about the causes of genocide but its after-effects: 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.

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 (see Chapter 4, below). In early December 1937, invading Japanese soldiers slaughtered as many as 300,000 Chinese residents of Nanjing, 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 upon massively by respected members of the world’s press. Yet, in the sixty

years that have elapsed since that time, the memorialization of the "Rape of Nanjing" has never extended beyond the regional confines of China, and, until recently, barely beyond the confines of Nanjing 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 Nanjing represents one of the worst instances of mass extermination" (Chang 1997: 5). Yet, though extraordinarily traumatic for the contemporary residents of Nanjing, it became "the forgotten Holocaust of World War II," and it remains an "obscure incident" today (*ibid.*: 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 introductory 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 a trauma process. In Japan and China, just as in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Guatemala, claims have certainly been made for the central relevance of such "distant sufferings" (Boltanski 1999).<sup>18</sup> But for both social structural and cultural 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.

However tortuous the trauma process, however, it can allow collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibility and to redirect the course of political action. Collective traumas have no geographical or cultural limitations. They emerge when collectivities experience themselves as having sustained grave injuries, and when they draw, for better and for worse, on the moral lessons that seem to emanate from them.

## HOLOCAUST AND TRAUMA: MORAL UNIVERSALISM IN THE WEST

How did a specific and situated historical event, an event marked by ethnic and racial hatred, violence, and war, become transformed into a generalized symbol of human suffering and moral evil, a universalized symbol whose very existence has created historically unprecedented opportunities for ethnic, racial, and religious justice, for mutual recognition, and for global conflicts becoming regulated in a more civil way?<sup>1</sup> This cultural transformation has been achieved because the originating historical event, traumatic in the extreme for a delimited particular group, has come over the last sixty years to be redefined as a traumatic event for all of humankind.<sup>2</sup> Now free-floating rather than situated – universal rather than particular – this traumatic event vividly "lives" in the memories of contemporaries whose parents and grandparents never felt themselves even remotely related to it.

In what follows, I explore the social creation of a cultural fact and the effects of this cultural fact on social and moral life.

In the beginning, in April 1945, the Holocaust was not the "Holocaust." In the torrent of newspaper, radio, and magazine stories reporting the discovery by American infantrymen of the Nazi concentration camps, the empirical remains of what had transpired were typified as "atrocities." Their obvious awfulness, and indeed their strangeness, placed them for contemporary observers at the borderline of the category of behavior known as "man's inhumanity to man." Nonetheless, qua atrocity, the discoveries were placed side-by-side – metonymically and semantically – with a whole series of other brutalities that were considered to be the natural results of the ill wind of this second, very unnatural, and most inhuman world war.