TRAUMA
For Ron Eyerman
TRAUMA

A Social Theory

JEFFREY C. ALEXANDER

polity
# CONTENTS

*Preface and Acknowledgments* vi

Introduction 1

1 Cultural Trauma: A Social Theory 6

2 Holocaust and Trauma: Moral Universalism in the West 31

3 Holocaust and Trauma: Moral Restriction in Israel (with Shai M. Dromi) 97

4 Mass Murder and Trauma: Nanjing and the Silence of Maosim (with Rui Gao) 118

5 Partition and Trauma: Repairing India and Pakistan 136

6 Globalization and Trauma: The Dream of Cosmopolitan Peace 155

*Notes* 166

*References* 207

*Index* 222
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has its origins in the ferment of an intellectual project begun in Palo Alto almost fifteen years ago under the auspices of the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences. Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka were co-creators, and our different lines of shared thinking eventually formed the chapters of Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, and Sztompka 2004). The cultural trauma project has continued in the years since, with many new contributors (see, e.g., Goodman 2009; Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese 2011). From the beginning of this project until today it has been my privilege to collaborate closely with Ron Eyerman, whose theoretical and empirical investigations into cultural trauma (Eyerman 2001, 2008, and 2011) have been immensely stimulating to my own, and with whom I have directed (along with Philip Smith) the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology. I dedicate this volume to Ron Eyerman with gratitude for the generosity of his thinking, collegiality, and friendship. And, as so often before, I also wish to record my indebtedness to Nadine Amalfi for her editorial assistance in the preparation of this volume.

The chapters that follow have been revised in small or large part for publication here. I thank the following publishers for permission to reprint:

University of California Press for “Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma.” In J. C. Alexander et al., Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity. 2004. (Chapter 1)


Peking University Press for “Remembrance of Things Past: Cultural Trauma, The Nanking Massacre, and Chinese Identity” (with Rui Gao). In Peking–Yale University Conference Publication on Tradition and Modernity: Comparative Perspectives. 2007. (Chapter 4)

Routledge for “Postcolonialism, Trauma, and Civil Society: A New Understanding.” In S. Koniordos et al. (eds) Conflict, Citizenship and Civil Society. 2009. (Chapter 5)

“The essence of drama: what will happen, who suffer, who not suffer, what turn be determined, what crisis created, what issue found?”

— Henry James
INTRODUCTION

That groups visit grave injuries on one another is an historical certainty central to social theory. Exactly how these injuries are felt and configured, and how such feelings and figurations affect social perceptions of grievance and the conflicts that ensue, have not been deeply conceptualized. In theorizing group conflict, the object of injury is typically conceived as an interest denied or a capacity suppressed, and the response of the dominated subject understood either as resignation or rebellion. Such conceptions of injury, interest, capacity, and response are thin. They assume a narrowness of reference and a clarity of perception which, for better and for worse, simply do not exist.

With this book, I aim to thicken these conceptions. We need to blow up the idea of self-interest to encompass collective identity, as something not given but culturally conceived, whose boundary expands and contracts. Instead of dominated interest, we need to think about social suffering, about emotions and existential threats to ethical convictions. We must also reconsider agency. It is not a great coil of energy waiting to explode. Formed in the forge of social suffering, it too must be culturally conceived.

Instead of interest and capacity, this book offers a social theory of collective trauma. It explains how collective agency develops, or fails to develop, in response to the experience of social suffering. Religion, nation, race, ethnicity, gender, class – each of these dimensions can be a medium for inflicting social pain. What this suffering is exactly, who delivered it, and who was on the receiving end – the answers to these questions are not objectively known but established through a trauma process. And concern with moral responsibility marks every step along the way. How can agents be punished and victims
compensated? How can social conditions be repaired to prevent such pain from happening again?

These chapters investigate social suffering on a broad scale. They address exploitation and violence, war and genocide, the massacre of innocents, and intense and often heinous religious, economic, ethnic, and racial strife. It is not their focus on such gruesome topics, however, that makes this book distinctive. Rather, it is a particular approach to social suffering’s causes and effects. While sensitive to the materiality and pragmatics of social suffering, these studies reject materialist and pragmatic approaches for one centered inside a cultural sociology.

Material forces are deeply implicated in social suffering, and the strategic calculations and practical considerations surrounding traumatic events have significant effects on social organization. I am concerned, however, to trace the manner in which these causes and effects are crucially mediated by symbolic representations of social suffering, with understanding how a cultural process channels powerful human emotions, and to what effect. These symbolic-cum-emotional forces are carried by social groups whose actions transform the worlds of morality, materiality, and organization. Intellectuals, artists, politicians, and social movement leaders create narratives about social suffering. Projected as ideologies that create new ideal interests, trauma narratives can trigger significant repairs in the civil fabric. They can also instigate new rounds of social suffering.

I approach symbolic-cum-emotional representation as a collective process centering on meaning making. The cultural construction of collective trauma is fuelled by individual experiences of pain and suffering, but it is the threat to collective rather than individual identity that defines the suffering at stake. Individual suffering is of extraordinary human, moral, and intellectual import; in itself, however, it is a matter for ethics and psychology. My concern is with traumas that become collective. They can become so if they are conceived as wounds to social identity. This is a matter of intense cultural and political work. Suffering collectivities – whether dyads, groups, societies, or civilizations – do not exist simply as material networks. They must be imagined into being. The pivotal question becomes not who did this to me, but what group did this to us? Intellectuals, political leaders, and symbol creators of all kinds make competing claims. They identify protagonists and antagonists and weave them into accusatory narratives projected to audiences of third parties.

Which narrative wins out is a matter of performative power. The emotional experience of suffering, while critical, is not primordial. To
find the meaning of suffering, it must be framed against background expectations. But effective performance depends upon more than creating powerful symbols. It is a matter also of material resources and demographics, which affect, even if they do not determine, what can be heard and who might listen. Who can command the most effective platform to tell the trauma story? Some stories are repressed by ruthless states, while others are materially sustained. Some stories are enriched by long-standing background representations; others seem so counterintuitive vis-à-vis established traditions as scarcely to be believed. Some trauma narratives address homogeneous audiences, others face fragmented and divided audiences; for others, there is nobody listening at all.

When social groups do construe events as gravely endangering, suffering becomes a matter of collective concern, cultural worry, social panic, gut-wrenching fear, catastrophic anxiety. Individual victims react to traumatic injury with repression and denial, gaining relief when these psychological defenses are overcome, bringing pain into consciousness so they are able to mourn. For collectivities, it is different. Rather than denial, repression, and “working through,” it is a matter of symbolic construction and framing, of creating stories and characters, and moving along from there. A “we” must be constructed via narrative and coding, and it is this collective identity that experiences and confronts the danger. Hundreds and thousands of individuals may have lost their lives, and many more might experience grievous pain. Still, the construction of a shared cultural trauma is not automatically guaranteed. The lives lost and pains experienced are individual facts; shared trauma depends on collective processes of cultural interpretation.

Massive deaths from war can be seen as morally justified sacrifice. Americans who sent soldiers to triumphal victory in the First and Second World Wars did not experience collective trauma, despite the tens of thousands of deaths to men and women they loved and lost and the postwar “shell shock” so many individual soldiers experienced after they returned. Neither did Germans experience trauma during their early Blitzkriegs. Far from endangering American and German collective identities, these military confrontations actually seemed to reinforce them. It is only when narratives of triumph are challenged, when individual deaths seem worthless or polluted, when those who have fallen are seen not as sacrificing for a noble cause but as wasted victims of irresponsible chicanery, that wars become traumatic indeed (Giesen 2004; Heins 2011; Eyerman et al. 2011).

To transform individual suffering into collective trauma is cultural
work. It depends upon speeches, rituals, marches, meetings, plays, movies, and storytelling of all kinds. Carrier groups tie their material and ideal interests to particular scripts about who did what to whom, and how society must respond if a collective identity is to be sustained. These constructions have the potential to trigger horrific group conflict, but they can also become the platform for amelioration and reconciliation. Lost wars, economic depressions, even mass murders can be understood according to drastically varying accounts and imply sharply antithetical social prescriptions. But, even the most compelling trauma narratives must reach outside themselves. The spiral of signification is mediated by institutional structures and uneven distributions of wealth and power. Are we struggling over the nature of collective trauma in the field of party conflict, in a court of law, in the mass media, or on a theatrical stage? Do cultural entrepreneurs have access to the means of symbolic production? Once again: Power and resources are critical, even if they alone will not decide.

Collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about what must have been and what should be. From the perspective of a cultural sociology, the contrast between factual and fictional statements is not an Archimedean point. The truth of a cultural script depends not on its empirical accuracy, but on its symbolic power and enactment. Yet, while the trauma process is not rational, it is intentional. It is people who make traumatic meanings, in circumstances they have not themselves created and which they do not fully comprehend.

Trauma scripts are performed in the theatres of everyday collective life. In the wake of the Sabra and Shatila massacres after Israeli’s 1982 Lebanon War, it was not only the public war of words between right-wing Likud officials and their Peace Now critics that allowed the Holocaust narrative to be extended to Palestinians for the first time. It was the extraordinary and unprecedented ritual of the “400,000 Protest,” the spectacle of hundreds of thousands of patriotic but outraged Israelis massively protesting against the massacres in a Tel Aviv square (Chapter 3).

The relative independence of collective trauma narration from individual experience and historical event, the intervening agency of culture creators, the performative impact of textual enactment – these social facts explain why and how trauma-dramas have such extraordinarily powerful effects on the organization and structure of our social worlds. Would Mao’s communism have achieved sustained
INTRODUCTION

legitimacy, despite its political repression and disastrous economic policies, if class-trauma had not been so strenuously narrated as to suppress humiliating memories of Japan’s Rape of Nanjing (Chapter 4)? Would the new states of India and Pakistan have been able to project progressive postcolonial identities if the massacres of Partition had been narrated in a manner that thrust the responsibility of their founding fathers into public view (Chapter 5)? Would the horrors of the twentieth century have looked the same if they had not been haunted by the construction of post-Holocaust morality (Chapter 2)? Would globalization have become central to the contemporary imagination if the trauma of Cold War had not triggered utopian hopes for a civil repair (Chapter 6)?

Simply to ask these questions is to see how cultural constructions of collective trauma have often played out in world-historical ways. The trauma process is a dangerous game. It can lead to utopian heights or to depths of despair. Yet, while the actual outcome of any particular trauma process is contingent, the challenges it confronts can be clearly foreseen. Illuminating these cultural structures and social processes cannot prevent massive social suffering. But a social theory of trauma might allow victims, audiences, and even perpetrators to gain enough critical distance to prevent some of its most horrific results.