Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma

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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 we 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 others' suffering, people not only diffuse their own responsibility for the suffering but often project the responsibility for their own suffering on these others. In other words, by refusing to participate in what I will 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 societies 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 harassment, or even, simply, by an abrupt and unexpected, and sometimes not even particularly malevolent, experience of social transformation and change.[1] 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 we are onto 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. It is this construction that the coauthors of this volume have set themselves the task of trying to understand.

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. We have come to believe, in fact, that the scholarly approaches to trauma developed thus far actually have 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 trauma-

tized"—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.[2]

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). 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," nor 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 path-breaking sociological model developed by Kai Erikson in his widely influential book *Everything in Its Path*. While this heart-wrenching 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 we adopt in this volume. 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 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, 153–54, italics added)

As Smelser suggests in chapter 2, 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 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 and responses to other episodes of mass murder in the twentieth century, as Eyerman and I suggest in our respective discussions of "progressive narratives" in this volume.

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 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 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 victims. 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.[3] 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 (Freidlander 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.[4]

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).[5] Caruth focuses on the complex permutations that unconscious emotions impose on traumatic reactions, and her approach has certainly been helpful in our own thinking about cultural trauma.[6] In keeping with the psychoanalytic tradition, however, Caruth roots her analysis in the power and objectivity of the originating traumatic event, explaining 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" (Caruth 1995, 3–4, italics added).[7]

The enormous influence of this psychoanalytic version of lay trauma theory can be seen in the manner in which 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, 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 their powerful report on their initial findings, "Layers of Memories: Twenty Years After in Argentina,"[8] 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 tor-

ment, 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 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 upon the rejection of this naturalistic fallacy that our own approach rests. First and foremost, we maintain that events do not, in and of themselves, create 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 Communities* (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 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 Kosovar 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 we have in mind here. For he makes use of this concept to point to the completely 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 we are 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 forces. 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 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 meanings that provide the sense of shock 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 form 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 (Sztompka 1991a, 1993a; Alexander 1987; Alexander, Giesen, Munch, and Smelser 1987).[9] 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).[10] 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).[11] 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 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; Searle 1969; Habermas 1984; Lara 1999).[12] Traumas, like speech acts, have the following elements:

Speaker: the carrier group

Audience: the public, putatively homogeneous but sociologically
   fragmented

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 opportunities provided by institutional structures. In the first place, of course, the speaker's audience must be members of the carrier group itself. If there is illocutionary success, the members of this originating collectivity become convinced that they have been traumatized by a singular event. Only with this success can the audience for the traumatic claim be broadened to include 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 the topic of moral panics, a "spiral of signification" (Thompson 1998, 20–24).[13] 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, 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 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:

A. 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, 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"?[14]

- 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, 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 2000).

- Were there less than a hundred persons who died at the hands of Japanese soldiers in Nanking, 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)

B. The nature of the victim.   What group of persons was 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 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 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 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 is it only the least developed, or least equipped, among them?

C. 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.[15]

- 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 Ameri-

can racial domination relegated to an entirely separate time, or is it conceived, by virtue of the reconstruction of collective memory, as a contemporary issue?[16]

D. 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 Werhmacht, 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?[17]

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.[18] But it does not unfold in what Habermas would call a transparent speech situation (Habermas 1984).[19] 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 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 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. Peformances inevitably led to moving, 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 the aesthetic arena. In the aftermath of the eighty-day 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 Slobadan 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 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." (Watson 2001, A1–6)

Legal. When the cultural classification enters the legal realm, it will be disciplined by the demand to issue a definitive judgment of legally bind-