Introduction

THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC TRAGEDY

Crisis, misfortune, and suffering—in a word, tragedy—are a universal part of the human experience. They always have been and likely always will be. While trauma and loss of seemingly limitless variety can occur anywhere, affecting individuals, communities, and even nations, most suffering is experienced as personal tragedy. Some tragedies, however, rise above the sad but inevitable traumas that populate everyday life and become hyper-politicized and notorious public events: they become public tragedies in which suffering is made publicly visible and lamentable. Such tragedies trigger and are defined by a comparable set of public political reactions, including accusations and social blame, denial and denunciation, outpourings of grief and anger, spontaneous memorialization and collective action, and a struggle to define the collective meaning and memory of the event (cf. Doka 2003b). Natural disasters, school shootings, terrorist attacks, and economic crises can become public tragedies. Sexual assaults, primarily of women, by abusive executives recently emerged as a public tragedy, as has African Americans being brutalized by police, which has sown widespread political unrest, protest, and rioting across the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic, seemingly a natural disaster, quickly transitioned into a public tragedy as deaths mounted and a pervasive
sense of mismanagement, distrust, and blame directed at federal and state
governments for inaction, on the one hand, and rights violations, on the
other, led to political controversy that engulfed the nation and the world.

Traumatic events that spur public shock, outrage, and accusation, and
from them denial and denunciation, can rapidly develop into national po-
litical events, even international social and political controversies, further
elevating the spectacle and the social conflicts associated with them. In-
deed, public tragedies do more than simply shock the public; they now
help to define public issues, political platforms, policy fiats, and more. Yet
countless traumas with causes and outcomes that are essentially the same
do not become widely recognized and socially inflamed and therefore are
not politically consequential. They do not become publicly tragic.

What transforms an event that has typically been understood in the
past as an “individual misfortune” or “fateful disaster” into a public trag-
edy that today can seize the public’s attention and galvanize the emotions
of millions? Why have public reactions to distinctive types of individual
and collective crises increasingly taken shape through very similar types
of claims and accusations? Why do present-day Americans regularly sym-
pathize with those harmed in ways that can transform a localized trauma
into a widely reviled public tragedy, triggering protest and controversy
and perhaps even political transformation? I strive to answer these ques-
tions in After Tragedy Strikes. They are significant for several reasons.
First, prior research and theory suggest this was not the case in the past
(Bovens and ’t Hart 2016; Giddens 1999; Quarantelli 1998; Rubin 2012;
Steinberg 2006). Well into the twentieth century, trauma and loss were
typically attributed to God’s plan, fate, bad luck, and blameless accident
or, in line with the U.S. liberal political tradition, attributed to individual
responsibility (Butler 2012a; Fukuyama 2022; Kuipers and ’t Hart 2014;
Levy 2012; Rubin 2012). This was often the case even when losses were
known to have been caused or worsened by human actions or omissions
(Godbey 2006; Levy 2012; Platt 1999).

While very public, hyperpoliticized, and tragic events involving outpour-
ings of grief and anger, claims of victimization, spontaneous memorializa-
tion, social blame, and collective action are not new, they were considerably
rarer in the past. Their surge in frequency, indeed their present common-
ness, shows their qualitatively greater significance in the early twenty-first
century. Their regularity has also exposed a shift in how trauma and loss are perceived, sympathized with, and collectively responded to. For reasons I outline in the following pages, suffering is now afforded much more attention than it gained in the past. Indeed, I argue that sympathy for claims of societal victimization and the valorization of “victimhood” as a type of claim and political identity are distinctive sociopolitical features of the contemporary. These sentiments stand behind and animate public tragedies. I further argue that reflecting transformations in public beliefs and sentiment, public tragedies have become our time’s definitive social and political events. Public tragedies are, in this sense, epochal. From the September 11 terror attacks to Hurricane Katrina, Harvey Weinstein’s sexual assault cases, George Floyd’s murder by police, and the COVID-19 pandemic, these events and others that co-occurred, are occurring, and have yet to occur represent a change in what qualifies as a “tragic circumstance” and therefore in how they are increasingly cast and responded to in the United States and elsewhere. Events and sentiments like these are also increasingly associated with partisan political polarization, even sectarian claims, as those harmed blame society or a societal proxy and the institutions, organizations, and/or groups associated with them, who respond by denying blame and denouncing their detractors. The question, then, becomes: *What has changed?*

**Public Tragedies are Political Events**

Natural and human-made disasters and social crises are often understood as “disastrous” because of the objective extent of the damage(s) they have wrought or the horrific crime(s) they exemplify (Alexander 2004:8). In this essentializing perspective, the intensity of a tornado, the cost associated with a hurricane, the number of persons harmed in a mass shooting, the importance of the person harmed, or the heinousness of the harm inflicted on victims defines the trauma and therefore its notoriety. In *After Tragedy Strikes*, by contrast, I approach public tragedies as social and political events. I argue that their increased frequency and association with public spectacle involve a transformation in the politics of our time. They do not simply happen but are politically made. They are, at heart, issues
and events that, through their political and cultural framing, come to represent an existential threat to the social and moral order. As public tragedies, they ultimately reflect a kind of moral critique and “panic” regarding societal issues and relations (Cohen 2011). These critiques of society and social relations, founded in the crucible of trauma and loss, then become a source for political action. This makes public tragedies notorious and potentially transformative political events. I therefore distinguish public tragedies from those “disasters,” “calamities,” and other sorts of trauma and loss that may cause significant personal and collective damage and human suffering but do not challenge the social and moral order. Put another way, while the material qualities of a disaster certainly matter, they are not on their own enough to generate a public tragedy.

Focusing explicitly on “public tragedies,” Lattanzi-Licht and Doka (2003) seek to determine what sets them apart from other disasters and, importantly for this book, how the public experiences them. In his opening remarks, Doka (2003b) expresses surprise that while there is a great deal of literature on “specific public tragedies . . . there is little written about public tragedy sui generis” (4). In fact, there is a dearth of research on public tragedies as a class of societal-wide trauma distinct from simple disasters, crises, and loss, even though, as I argue, the transformative power of public tragedy reigns supreme in the twenty-first century. Lattanzi-Licht and Doka (2003) describe public tragedies as traumatic events that, while involving any number of causes and outcomes, evoke a similar public response: outpourings of anger and grief, spontaneous memorialization, collective action, and attempts at finding meaning in the loss. Several factors, in combination, work to heighten public notoriety, including cause, scope, severity, and duration; the public’s affinity with those harmed; the level of suffering involved; and the “social value” of the victims. Also significant is whether the trauma was intended, expected, or preventable (8–10). While these factors represent a catalog of the necessary conditions for an event to become publicly tragic, necessary does not mean sufficient.

I focus less on quantified, actual, and material trauma and loss and more on why specific crisis events are politicized through social and cultural framings—how they are, in turn, taken up in the public domain such that they become public tragedies. By “public domain,” I refer to
communications that scale beyond the individual, group, or even local level to those levels where heterogeneous individuals, groups, political interests and parties, social movements, and the news media virtually congregate. Here they converse and debate, seeking to shape and control the discussion of events and the outcomes associated with them (Calhoun 1998; Fraser 1990; Habermas 1979, 1991; Lichterman 1996). Therefore, I am concerned with how a given case of trauma and loss is publicly explained and remembered such that it benefits a political interest, comes to existentially threaten the public or some significant subset of it, and through that interest or threat becomes “publicly tragic.”

Public tragedy is typically accompanied by outrage and moral accusations, claims of victimization, and social blame for the trauma and loss. Social blame is a core aspect of public tragedy; it attributes harm to social and relational forces rather than blaming individuals or superordinate forces like fate or bad luck (Oorschot and Halman 2000). As Erikson points out, injuries of the former kind are especially distressing and prone to moralization and conflict because they reflect basic interactional issues such as distrust, deception, dishonesty, and betrayal (1994:231). As I show, public reaction is often further stoked and shaped by political elites, the media, and/or victims’ advocates; therapeutic professionals; and social movement entrepreneurs, all historically novel and organized interest groups native to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Beyond the actual suffering, then, public tragedies are inherently political constructs as much as they are deeply traumatic cultural experiences.

While not addressing public tragedies as discrete political events, some have studied trauma and developed exemplary accounts of how horrific circumstances shape cultural views, not only of immediate victims but also of associated collectivities and even subsequent generations (Alexander 2004; Eyerman 2001). These scholars have advanced an understanding of “cultural trauma” based on what collective memories of prolonged suffering can do to individuals, social groups, and even whole societies. Through case studies of slavery, genocide, massacres, civil wars, colonialism, and terrorism, they have found that “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness” (Alexander 2004:4; see also Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese 2015; Kleinman,
Das, and Lock 1997). These documented traumas have social causes that injure the psyche, leaving in their wake feelings of distrust and vulnerability from which recovery is difficult or impossible.

Focusing on exceptional cases of suffering and deeply traumatized groups, the cultural trauma view provides a template for understanding pervasive damage caused by a wide range of conditions (Alexander 2004; Sztompka 2000). And yet the cultural trauma view ultimately adheres to a psychological definition that treats “the trauma” as the driver behind social change. It depicts cultural trauma as a process at the collective level that runs parallel to the development of actual psychological trauma at the individual level. It is during culture work on the part of the afflicted—the active engagement and shaping of collective memories around a shared story of suffering—that cultural group identities emerge, trauma is “felt,” and the conditions for a culture of trauma are established.

Rather than centering on a specific group’s cultural experience and identity construction, I focus on the standardized language of suffering—in discourse and claims making—that has emerged in arguments made about trauma and loss in the context and aftermath of crisis. In my theorization of public tragedies, the collective memories that anchor cultural trauma do not “cause” an event to become publicly tragic, even if they play a role in its construction. As I show, the emergence of public tragedies as powerful political events reveals a highly conventionalized language of victimhood and a response that transcends specific events and associated cultural memories and identities. Following on Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) work on repertoires of evaluation and “orders of worth,” I argue that people rely on a relatively fixed number of justifications in assessing whether an act benefits or conflicts with the common good (see also Dodier 1995; Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Moody and Thévenot 2000). Similarly, I have found that victims of trauma and loss, those who support them, and those who would deny them recognition also rely on a relatively narrow language to foment outrage and elicit support from the wider public or to deny them such support.

1. Such conventionalized justifications include the market sphere (performance), industrial sphere (efficiency), civic sphere (equality and solidarity), domestic sphere (parochial and traditional trustworthiness), inspirational sphere (expressed in creativity, emotion, or religious grace), and renown sphere (public opinion and fame) (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006).
Therefore, while claims of victimhood can be based on authentic cases and genuinely “felt” cultural trauma, such claims and the conventionalized language they invoke need not be genuine for people to use them as a political rhetoric to promote a position, whether their own or that of others. Indeed, I argue that an expanded appreciation for and definition of “the traumatic” (by therapeutic professionals, victims’ advocates, and activists; see Fassin and Rechtman 2009), along with the emergence of trauma as a conventionalized narrative (Sehgal 2021; Self 2021), have significantly widened the standardized language’s applicability, legitimacy, and power (Bennett 2022; Pandell 2022). Because of its newfound power to define experience, the discourse of trauma has become a leading political “script,” applied to almost any type of personal or collective suffering. While used to articulate authentic trauma and loss, what I call the “trauma script” also aims to cultivate sympathy and support, whether those who use it or respond to it are themselves victims of trauma or not.

**A CONVENTIONALIZED SCRIPT OF TRAUMA AND LOSS**

Why term it the trauma script? According to Goffman (1959), social scripts are frameworks that guide human interpretation and behavior. They signal to people that distinct situations and scenarios require specific performances, in much the same way as a script functions in a play or film. Implicit scripts specify not only how one is to act but also when and whether the context for performance is “front” (public) or “backstage” (private). Therefore, the script concept suggests that specific scenarios can “trigger” the use of specific narratives. Similarly, scripts communicate that narratives can cue other social scripts that guide participants toward socially “appropriate” responses. The trauma script is just such a conventionalized narrative, triggering relatively predictable responses when used to frame and explain trauma and loss. Events that associate harm with the trauma script have the power to command attention and gain the kind of notoriety required to become publicly tragic in the twenty-first century (cf. Davis 2005b; Ewick and Sibley 1995; Loseke 2001). The trauma script is a contemporary cultural framing and explanation of trauma and loss that centers on blameless victims who have suffered unnecessarily
at the hands of others and therefore pivots on social blame. Social blame suggests unfair treatment and suffering caused by a group or collective (Oorschot and Halman 2000). The ultimate “perpetrator,” according to the trauma script, is therefore society or some aspect of it.

After Tragedy Strikes situates public tragedies as explicitly political events in contemporary twenty-first-century social and political discourse and relations. Public tragedies appropriate now-routine, standardized narratives of harm—the trauma script—to communicate and politicize trauma and loss to gain public attention and political recognition. This mechanism reflects qualitative changes in the role that trauma—as an idea, a condition, a claim type, and increasingly a political stratagem—plays in politics, political conflict, and social change more generally.

To support this assertion, I track a range of traumatic events as they took shape in public discourse, to gain a clearer sense of how and why some crises emerge as politically consequential public tragedies while other, objectively similar events do not. I focus less on the details of crisis, trauma, and loss or on cultural traumas (especially as they affect groups) and more on the emergence of contemporary public tragedies as volatile political crises made relevant by epochal conditions and animated by a highly conventionalized discourse. Events that I consider to be public tragedies currently propel the news cycle, anchoring mainstream politics and political campaigns. They also generate the rhetoric deployed by victims’ advocates and many social movement entrepreneurs on the left and right. I draw on insights from a range of works on public tragedy (Hayes, Waddell, and Smudde 2017; Jorgensen-Earp and Lanzilotti 1998; Lattanzi-Licht and Doka 2003; Ott and Aoki 2002), culture and trauma (Alexander 2004; Campbell and Manning 2018; Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese 2015; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Lukianoff and Haidt 2018), victims and victimology (Best 1997; Christie 1986; Davis 2005a; Fattah 2000; Lamb 1999a, 1999b), risk and risk management (Beamish 2015; Freudenburg 2001; Gephart 1993; Kuipers and ’t Hart 2014; ’t Hart 1993), and risk society theory (Bauman 2007; Beck 1992; Giddens 1990) to address the core issues that lie at the center of this effort. Ultimately, by situating public tragedies in contemporary social and institutional relations I analyze why they, and the narratives that comprise them, have emerged as the twenty-first century’s quintessential political events.
In this book I show how and why some events involving trauma and loss “take off,” gaining tremendous social influence by becoming publicly tragic, while objectively similar traumas do not. Theoretically, I address a contemporary “structure of feeling” (Williams 1961) in the United States—and, I suggest, across Western postindustrial states—that has cultivated broad identification with and sympathy for those who are viewed as having been victimized by conditions and actions attributed to society. This structure of feeling has its origins in several intersecting forces and trends I take up in detail in chapter 1, “A World at Risk.” To document and exemplify the process of public tragedy construction in the United States, I conduct a comparative analysis of the role social institutions (such as government, mass media, and victims’ advocates) play and how they actively shape public experience and understanding of events through competitive political construction and framing. As such, my analytic focus is on tragedies as public, political, and discursive contests. They are sui generis: an emergent and currently ascendant type of politics founded in the crucible of crisis, reflecting a specific, relatively conventionalized political claims making that actors deploy to gain the upper hand in political dialogue and dispute (cf. Boltanski 1999; Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Thévenot, Moody, and Lafaye 2000). Currently, political contests of this kind involve stylized claims of persecution, innocence, trauma, loss, victimization, and ultimately social blame. Those who deploy such claims seek to foment moral panic to prevail in public disputes. Public tragedies are therefore events of active political framing, leading to public struggle over what will (and will not) be recognized as traumatic and, with that designation, who will (and will not) gain power over explanations of the event and attributions of blame and deservingness.

I show that, as the twenty-first century unfolds, claims and conflicts of this kind are no longer peripheral or confined to groups that have developed identities around horrific histories of abuse (cf. Alexander 2002; Eyerman 2001). Rather, the media regularly and strategically mobilizes the discourse of trauma as a trope to shock audiences and promote viewer attention. The trope is also exploited by a range of professional mediators and pundits, including therapeutic professionals, political elites,
academics, experts, victims’ advocates, and social movement organizations, to gain recognition, adherents, and resources for their causes (cf. Best 1997).

The contemporary resonance of the trauma script and the emergence of public tragedies in the United States reveal the intersection of current trends in thinking and feeling underlying the transformation from “modern society” to “risk society.” As a kind of event, public tragedies are epochal. Williams (1961) contended that every era has a zeitgeist, a structure of feeling: a collective worldview through which people experience that period’s social, political, and material dynamics. He developed the concept “structure of feeling” to capture the different ways of thinking that compete for expression. They emerge from and in competition with the dominant forms of thinking and doing. The structure of feeling emerges out of the fissures and lapses that always exist amid the official, the authoritative, and the conventional understandings of the day. Williams stressed “feeling” rather than “thought” to signal that what is at stake may not be fully articulated but can remain inferred in public reactions to official actions, omissions, and interpretations. Such is the case for the sentiments that animate public tragedies, where public responses to official proclamations and actions reveal a range of feelings characteristic of our time. Such feelings include distrust of and cynicism toward authority as well as more general feelings of precarity, vulnerability, and victimization by social forces that “feel” out of control. These feelings further manifest as a penchant to blame society—that is, engage in social blaming—for personal and collective instances of trauma, loss, and suffering.

Contemporary partisan politics in the United States, which has with time become increasingly sectarian (Finkel et al. 2020), has further weaponized these feelings of vulnerability. Political elites increasingly rely on rhetoric that no longer promises shared prosperity and security but instead targets subpublics, emphasizing what will benefit their constituents (often also elites) and implicitly themselves (Brenner 2003, 2020). Elites also use the trauma script to mobilize their constituents and strengthen their claims making. Within this context of heightened partisanship and a sense of precarity and imperilment, claims to victimization have also achieved greater institutional legitimacy and political leverage because of the professional efforts of what Best (1997) labeled the “victim industry.”
Psychologists, sociologists, the humanities (indeed much of the academy), those in the legal profession, social workers, and medical and therapeutic professionals who specialize in topics as diverse as trauma care, hospice and grieving, crisis response, inequality, victims advocacy, and victimology, among many others, have staked out agendas in their fields to both advocate for and assist those who have been harmed by society (Butler 2012a; Hawdon and Ryan 2011; Hayes et. al. 2017; Kropf and Jones 2014; Neal 1998; Platt 1999). One might even say trauma’s conventionalization as a concept and script exemplifies Giddens’s (1984) notion of the “double hermeneutic”—a situation in which theories and ideas of human behavior, like the technical and forensic term trauma, become everyday lay concepts used in political rhetoric to explain personal and collective issues and justify responses to them. This then feeds back into technical and forensic uses. As such, “victim of trauma,” for example, has become an idiom and rhetorical device as much as it is a technical phrase that explains harm of some kind (cf. Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

SOCIAL BLAME AND PERSONAL BLAMELESSNESS

Due to the contemporary structure of feeling, the trauma script and the politics associated with risk society have given credibility and political power to social blaming. They provide victims and those who work on their behalf a potent justification for political advocacy (Best 1999; Kuiipers and ’t Hart 2014). Social blame expresses a view of trauma and loss that attributes cause to human-derived social and relational forces rather than blaming victims, individuals (perpetrators), or superordinate forces like fate or bad luck (Oorschot and Halman 2000). Human-centric social blaming reflects collective forms of blame in which an individual’s actions are held to represent a group, an organization, and/or society. These forces and factors make them collective experiences and thus “public” rather than private. Based on social movement claims, educational curriculums, and news and entertainment media information, the public has become more aware of suffering while also connecting their personal experiences to the actions and omissions of governance institutions. People now routinely blame culture and society for their trauma, loss, and
hardship. Importantly, when trauma, loss, and victimization are believed to be socially caused, this can tear the “fabric of community life,” forcing open “fault lines that once ran silently through the structure of the larger community, dividing it into divisive fragments” (Erikson 1994:236). Social blame is ultimately a moral criticism, suggesting that those (unjustifiably) harmed have been victimized by the community or society of which they are members (Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe 2014). This is the stuff of public tragedy.

Why, then, have claims of victimhood become ascendant, and why do they currently resonate so profoundly with the American public across the social and political spectrum? Most contemporary accounts presume that such claims are normatively “true” or “false.” Indeed, some advocate a social science founded squarely on “true” claims of social suffering and an attempt to ameliorate it (Wilkinson and Kleinman 2016). In After Tragedy Strikes, I do not assume the truth or falsity of such claims. Rather, I investigate how and why they have found their coherence and political power in an emergent, conventionalized understanding of trauma and loss: the trauma script. The trauma script has become a political explanation that through repetition acts as a “social heuristic,” which is now used time and again to make sense of trauma and loss. Social heuristics are shared commonsense methods that aid in interpretation and personal decision-making. They align one’s individual thinking and therefore decisions with collectively recognized and conventionalized understandings of everyday problems and issues (Beamish and Biggart 2009, 2011, 2015; Biggart and Beamish 2003; Marsh 2002).

In this script, blameless victims are suggested to have suffered from unforeseeable and unnecessary harm, and that harm is socially blamed on the actions or omissions of society or a societal proxy. Societal proxies include the state, industry, civil society, and “culture.” They take institutional form through government (and governance), the police, science and technology, the professions, education, politics, and the rule of law. Blame is also placed on societal factors and social forces—structural qualities, such as race, class, and gender, and cultural identities, such as LGBTQ,

2. On the role of “conventions” in social and economic life, see Biggart and Beamish (2003); Boltanski (1999); Boltanski and Thévenot (2006); Dodier (1993); and Sibler (1993).
disability, or religious affiliation—which are viewed as either the reason for victimization or the “privilege” through which victimization is avoided. People frequently invoke the trauma script even when the apparent cause of harm could alternately be personal responsibility, an individual, chance, a simple accident, or fate, as it likely would have been in a different historical period. This is important because it mirrors a transition away from such personal explanations and toward a greater acceptance of the public discourse of victimhood and suffering. In the new framework, troubles formerly believed to be private (such as sexual abuse, addiction, domestic violence, sexism, and racism) become seen as societally centered problems that require political resolution (Beckett 1996; Rice 1995; Rothenberg 2003).

As a conventionalized cultural narrative, the trauma script is important because it can engender sympathy among and involvement by the public when used as a lens through which to view trauma and loss. As a way of interpreting loss, the script overlaps but is distinct from the “ideal victim” (Christie 1986), which has been widely used in the study of victims and the sympathy they do (and do not) receive (Dunn 2004; Rothenberg 2002, 2003). According to Christie (1986), the ideal victim framework features a vulnerable person engaged in respectable behavior who is harmed by an evil perpetrator who is a stranger to them. While focused on the individual level of victim and perpetrator, Christie’s conceptualization introduces cultural nuance to the category of victim, highlighting the role that cultural and moral worthiness play in the degree of public sympathy and support. Sympathy for a victim, in his account, typically reflects how closely that victim’s story coheres with the cultural ideal. The more they correspond, the more moral legitimacy the victim and their claims are likely to command.

Unlike Christie’s ideal victim concept and its focus on an individual victim and perpetrator of crime, the trauma script concept identifies victims who have been mistreated by societal conditions. It culturally resonates with Americans, I argue, because the public currently identifies with the vulnerability and blamelessness conveyed by this explanation of victimization. That is, when deployed to explain trauma and loss, the framework of the trauma script can elicit widespread sympathy for the harmed, channeling social blame and moral outrage at those persons, groups,
organizations, or institutions held responsible, thus vaulting public tragedies into the political domain.

By cultural framework, I refer to an accessible and coherent cluster of ideas, beliefs, and values that people rely on to interpret incoming information and events. Such beliefs and values give rise to our emotional and moral judgments and to political arguments about fundamental group responsibilities and limitations (Alexander 2004; Kavolis 1977). I use the term trauma to connect my effort to prior research regarding the relatively recent emergence of psychic trauma as a recognized and socially prioritized form of victimhood (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). I also connect it to research on cultural trauma as a “remembered” loss that plays a role in (re)defining responsibility and group identity (Alexander et al. 2004).

WHAT DOES TRAGIC MEAN TODAY?

Both Greek and Western literary traditions suggest that tragedy reflects a protagonist’s internal, personal struggle with decisions and actions that beget great suffering (Nussbaum 2001). The meaning of tragedy has changed over time. In the Greek tradition, tragedy conveys a scenario in which bad things happen to good people, and personal redemption is impossible. In the Greek trope, the protagonist must choose between two irreconcilable but uniformly tragic outcomes (Nussbaum 2001). Later, as a Shakespearean literary term and Christian cultural aesthetic, in a tragedy morally good people (through well-intentioned acts) are brought low by character flaws. The best efforts of a character are corrupted by moral weakness, leading to profound, regretful, and tragic suffering (Burke 1984).

Over most of its history, the liberal cultural tradition in the United States depicted social ills as caused by individuals, reflecting their moral character and behavior (Fukuyama 2022). As a literary form, tragedy fit well with the liberal tradition. Yet over the course of the twentieth century, an increasing proportion of the American public began to reject this tradition, at least as it related to assigning blame for the social issues and personal vulnerabilities they have felt and experienced. This emergent view of tragedy goes against neoliberalism (the focus of much recent social and political theory as a top-down agenda pushed by social, political, and
economic elites; see Bourdieu 1999; Fukuyama 2022; Mudge 2008) and an emphasis on individual responsibility. In the twenty-first century, the American public increasingly blames not themselves or their immediate peers but society (writ large) for the social issues and problems they confront. For instance, polling of American attitudes shows that the public has shifted away from accounts of success founded on work ethic, effort, and skill and toward social conditions to explain why some are rich and others are poor. Fully two-thirds of U.S. adults polled believe that some people are rich because they have more advantages than most people. And a larger majority—three-quarters—believe that people are poor because they have faced more obstacles in life. Far fewer, about a third of those polled, suggest that people become rich because they have worked harder than others (Pew Research Center 2020).

Mirroring the public’s penchant to situate personal success and failure socially, people are also more apt to blame their own ills on society. Public tragedies, animated by the trauma script, convey a struggle in which good people are brought low by societal conditions over which they have little or no control. This sort of tragic struggle is not internal and personal but external and socially focused. It involves a scenario in which bad things happen to good people who have no choice; the heartrending outcome occurs no matter what the good person does.

In virtually all such cases, the claim (an accusation) is that had societal trustees fulfilled their charge, no harm would have befallen the victims, or at least the harm would have been significantly diminished. Therefore, the traumatic event is society’s fault. Because victims are blameless, the injuries they experience are unjust. Even when an individual perpetrator is responsible, their actions can be framed via the trauma script to reflect higher-level forces and factors representative of societal problems and issues that are ultimately cast as political in character. One such example is the horrific spate of school shootings perpetrated by individuals but attributed by a majority of the American public to permissive gun laws and corrupt politicians (Shepard 2018). Polls by the Pew Research Center show that in 1993, 57% of Americans ranked controlling gun ownership as a priority over protecting gun rights. By 2018, in the aftermath of several mass shootings, support for stricter gun laws among registered voters had risen to 68%, compared with just 25% who opposed stricter gun laws