TRAUMA
For Ron Eyerman
TRAUMA
A Social Theory

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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.

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

— Henry James
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.
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
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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.
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.
Ordinary Language and Reflexivity

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. 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.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 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
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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.³

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.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, 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 symp-
toms, 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).

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 trau-
matic 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 respon-
sibilities 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 strug-
gle – 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-
esteeem, 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 unmedi-
ated, 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,” they contrast the
victims’ insistence on recognizing the reality of traumatizing events
and experiences with the denials of the perpetrators and their con-
servative 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 disappear-
ances 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 “bystand-
ers 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 personal-
ized memory of people cannot be erased or destroyed by decree or
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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). The persons who