

# I Have Been Traumatized – Therefore We Exist

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*Abstract.* In this paper it will be suggested that in this era we cannot understand the concept of trauma without first understudying the cultural context. Yet not less important it will be suggested that trauma stands in the very core of our culture, namely, traumatic event and the creation of a group of survivors is a pre-condition for the formation of a community. The collective identity is rooted within the traumatic event, and the structure of this collective identity is based upon the survivors' stories.

*Key words:* Trauma, PTSD, Culture, Survivors

## 1. Trauma as Culture, Culture as Trauma

Defining culture is an almost impossible mission, yet in the simplest possible terms we can suggest that people who belong to the same culture share something in common: knowledge, belief, language etc. In the broadest sense, common symbols represent culture.

This paper suggests that the very notion of culture is based upon trauma; namely, the traumatic event defines a heterogeneous and diverse collection of individuals as a group. Without trauma there can be no collective, since trauma is a constituent factor in forming a community and preventing that community from falling apart. Trauma is the fuel that keeps a community alive and functioning. Hence to be part of a community is in fact to accept and embrace the iconic trauma (such The Binding of Isaac, the crucifixion of Jesus, the Holocaust etc.) that shapes that particular community. Thus culture is rooted in trauma in the most fundamental way.

Essentially, however, it is not necessary that all the members of a certain group will themselves undergo the constitutive traumatic event (Tal, 1996). Indeed one of the most important questions in the context of the linking between trauma and culture is how trauma can be absorbed by members of the community who did not experience the traumatic event itself? The answer is begging the question: the creation of culture allows a particular group to create symbols which, in turn, enable a particular individual to be part of a wider community. Tal (1996) defines this process as "cultural codification of the trauma" (p. 6). We not merely accept this notion but in fact believe that this process is unavoidable: trauma and culture are intimately connected.

Although it may be argued that this link between trauma and culture is a type of circular reasoning, this objection is far from bothering us – it is not for nothing that we have declared that the answer begging the question. We do not deny the existence of circular reasoning between culture and trauma, rather the opposite: we believe that there is a closed loop between trauma and culture. Thus, trauma and culture are two sides of the same coin: the study of culture leads us to the iconic and constitutive trauma - the most famous example probably being "Moses and Monotheism" (Freud, 1939) - and the study of this iconic trauma is, in fact, the study of culture (Meghnagi, 1993). To study the one is to study the other (and vice versa).

Likewise, it would not be an exaggeration to say that traumatic identity stands at the core of cultures, for instance as a national collective memory. Thus, according to Seltzer (1997) it is not merely that "a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (p. 3) occurs, but rather he believes that trauma creates a pathological public sphere: "The pathological public sphere is everywhere crossed by the vague and shifting lines between the singularity or privacy of the subject, on the one side, and collective forms of representation, exhibition, and witnessing, on the other" (p. 4). Moreover, Seltzer (1997) has suggested that trauma is a kind of Archimedes point at

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which the private and public meet: "trauma has thus come to function as a switch point between individual and collective, private and public orders of things" (p. 5). According to this approach, trauma is a point in space and time that unites the individual with the collective. To be clearer: trauma is the meeting point of the collective and it is trauma that allows us to shift from I to WE.

Yet herein lies the problem: the traumatic event, by its very nature, is an event that undermines the most basic concepts of one's life. Indeed, concepts such as knowledge, memory, time, and truth all collapse during trauma. In fact many studies (Herman, 1992; Lifton, 1967; Wilson, 2006) have demonstrated that following trauma the very notion of identity is damaged in a most fundamental way. Furthermore, language itself collapses and our ability to represent (and by so doing to process) the traumatic experience is almost nonexistent. In a sense these elements make an event traumatic.

The traumatic event is similar to a black hole; it is absolute nothingness (Grotstein, 1990 a; 1990 b; Pitman & Orr, 1990; Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996), as Perlman (1988) describes in the context of Hiroshima: "Hiroshima is the place of no place, revealing a deep lacuna, a placelessness, at the heart of postindustrial culture" (p. 91). Hence if we accept that cultures are rooted within a traumatic event(s), we are obliged to admit that there is a lacuna at the heart of any culture. If trauma is a physical or metaphorical point in space and time that unites the individual with the collective, we cannot escape the idea that the individual unites with the collective at a moment that does not really exist in either space or time - since trauma completely twists the dimensions of both time and space. With this in mind, it is clear that the powers pulling at different kinds of individuals and transforming them into a community are negative in nature. We are united by void and nothingness.

## 2. The Scientific Crisis

The location and boundaries of trauma remain very vague. Indeed, a fundamental question in the study of trauma is whether trauma is *merely* a mental injury - "the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, 1996, p. 3) – or, by contrast, a *purely* physical phenomenon. With this question in mind, it is obvious that trauma is a radical example of the well-known philosophical mind-body problem. Without agreement regarding the exact nature of the traumatic experience - whether it is in the mind or body - it is difficult to discern under which scientific discipline it should be categorized and studied. Indeed, everyone wants a piece of trauma yet not one single scientific discipline can tackle trauma alone precisely because trauma rejects all notions of location and boundaries.

History, so it seems, suffers from the most severe trauma: "If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history" (Caruth, 1995, p. 5). The traumatic event undermines the very foundation of History as a scientific discipline. To be clearer, trauma raises doubts not only as to whether history can serve as a scientific discipline but also as to whether history truly exists. Although clearly there is a past, trauma makes us wonder whether there is a History; namely, whether we have the ability to say something real and meaningful about the past, whether the past can be told. This challenging issue arises, among other reasons, because trauma is not experienced merely at the moment it happens but rather later on and thus, in a way, the traumatic experience is detached from the traumatic event. This difficulty is destructive for history as a scientific discipline since, in Caruth's (1995) words, "For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs" (p. 8). Indeed, it appears that in the case of trauma, the gap between memory and history becomes unbridgeable (Nora, 1989; Young, 1997).

A further fundamental problem is how History should handle the testimony of the post-traumatic figure (LaCapra, 2001). On the one hand, the traumatic figure stands at the heart of the story that historians wish to tell while, on the other hand, the traumatic memory is far from being reliable memory (Brewin, 2007; 2011; Kihlstrom, 1995; Kihlstrom & Schacter, 1995; McNally, Lasko, Macklin, & Pitman, 1995; Nadel & Jacobs, 1998). This issue is even more problematic than it appears at first: if traumatic events cannot be coded in the first place (on this issue see: (Kindt, Van den Hout, & Buck, 2005; Spiegel, 1997)) the survivor does not simply forget (or fail to remember) the trauma but in fact does not know what really happened during the traumatic event. If this is

indeed the case, the survivor's story is meaningless; worse, it is merely a fantasy or even an implanted memory (Loftus, 2003a; 2003b; 1993). This problem leads us, unavoidably, to a fundamental crisis of witness.

Bearing this in mind, we should ask what kind of method enables historians to distinguish between History as Science on the one hand and History as Literature on the other (Gossman, 1990). More precisely, given that (a) history is obliged to deal with constitutive events and (b) trauma separates between truth and facts (Agamben, 1999) we must ask (i) how trauma should be studied, namely what can be considered scientific data in the study of trauma and (ii) how trauma should be represented from an historical perspective (LaCapra, 1994; 2001).

Let us elaborate on this notion further: on the one hand the traumatic figure plays a central role in [HI]story, yet on the other hand the traumatic figure is literally ungraspable, incomprehensible, and non-quantifiable (Laub, 1995). Since historians seek to tell the iconic and constitutive story (what else if not these stories?) in an objective manner, yet at the same time are aware that trauma by definition rejects the very notion of a [HI]story and more importantly, the very notion of objectifying (Douglass & Vogler, 2003), trauma - as a paradoxical notion (aporia) - becomes the trauma of History. Trauma refuses to be represented, categorized, or to become part of the scientific discourse and, instead, as Caruth (1996) succinctly put it, trauma:

«is always the story of the wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. The truth in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very action and our language» (p. 4).

Trauma tears facts from truth: "The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension" (Agamben, 1999, p. 12). Certainly, severe trauma does not merely cast doubts on what can be known, instead it completely undermines the very notion of knowledge (Bracken, 2001) and in so doing becomes a threat to the scientific project as a whole which focuses on acquiring knowledge in objective manner.

### **3. Mental Trauma as a Product of the Industrial Era**

In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) added PTSD to the third edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). PTSD is an anxiety problem that develops in some people following extremely traumatic events. People suffering from PTSD may relive the event via intrusive memories, flashbacks, and nightmares; avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma; and have intense anxious feelings that they did not previously experience which disrupt their lives. Interestingly, scholars (Farrell, 1998; Leys, 2000; Luckhurst, 2008) studying the development of mental trauma as a concept tend to identify the formation of the mental trauma with a railway accident and in so doing in fact connect trauma and modernity - for one of the most important characteristics of the modern age is transportation (Thacker, 2003).

Seltzer (1997), for instance, suggests that "the modern subject has become inseparable from categories of shock and trauma" (p. 18). These kind of scholars define mental trauma not merely as a byproduct of the industrial era but rather go a step further, suggesting that if the railways are indeed the icon of the British modernity then mental trauma stands at the very core of this era as constitutive in shaping the structure of its cultural discourse.

Such thinking leads these scholars to present the Great War (World War I) as an industrial battlefield, namely a factory of death producing mental trauma. Indeed even early official reports (War Office Committee, 1922) could not ignore the posttraumatic symptoms that followed WWI. The shell-shocked soldier came to be "one of the iconic trauma victims of the twenty century" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 50). Yet nevertheless, as can be learned from official reports such as the War Office Committee (1922), the authorities found it extremely difficult to acknowledge those suffering from invisible injuries.

If modernity can be defined as an industrial era generating ongoing mass mental trauma, obviously World War II was the climax of this process: the same trains used to transport goods transported humans to slaughter in the gas chambers.

However, PTSD or any other similar phenomena were not acknowledged by the formal authorities even after WWII; only after the Vietnam War was there any real progress in this regard. At this stage the posttraumatic figure was already well-known through the representation of the Vietnam veteran in popular movies such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *Taxi Driver* (Schrader, 1976), and others. In this sense the official authorities were behind the cultural representation of post-traumatic survivor's post-traumatic mind (Shephard, 2001).

It would be, however, a fundamental mistake to identify PTSD as it appeared at the DSM-III (1980) merely as post-Vietnam symptoms, instead it represent wide range of post traumatic symptoms: from survivors of the Hiroshima bombing and the Nazi's concentration camps, to victims of slavery and segregation and women who were subjected to rape, incest and more (Herman, 1992; Luckhurst, 2008).<sup>1</sup>

#### **4. Are We All Survivors (?)**

According to the DSM-III (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), in order for one to develop PTSD one must undergo a traumatic event. However, over the last thirty years this thinking has changed and, according to the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), it is enough for one to *witness or even merely hear* about the death (or injury) of a relative for PTSD to ensue.

Thus now days, while listening to everyday stories in the news and even in the prime-time, it sometimes seems and feels as if everyone undergo trauma on daily basis. Undoubtedly, there is ongoing drift, in turn, in this process, everyone experiencing trauma. As a result there exists an impression that we are all survivors. Considering trauma in cultural terms, this development is crucial: it allows large groups to be part of the trauma.

Trauma as a constitutive event which is spread and transmitted through witnessing generates overwhelming sympathy. In fact Felman (1992) believes that, in a way, through the act of listening to the survivor one can be exposed to the trauma. In this process trauma is transmitted according to the Freudian model (Freud, 1922; McGrath, 2000): the listener who is engaged in the survivor's story also becomes a survivor and in this way trauma leaks from the actual survivor to her associates.<sup>2</sup> This model of sympathy, identification, and transition explains how different individuals may feel that they share the same traumatic event as an iconic and constitutive (Tal, 1996). The traumatic experience, so it seems, tends to have mysterious powers of transference; it causes overwhelming sympathy, enabling transference to take place. Clearly in this process trauma becomes merely a matter of degree.

Yet herein lies the problem: In the processes in which trauma is everything, we become a "community of survivors" (Tal, 1996, p. 3). In this sense we have all experienced trauma. If we have all experienced trauma and there exists no real difference between being raped or merely seeing a rape occur on the television, what happens to those who underwent the direct trauma? Is the real posttraumatic survivor once again ignored and repressed?

#### **5. "I have Been Traumatized - Therefore We Exist"**

In a society of survivors it should come as no surprise that the traumatic figure becomes almost a hero, a saint: "the victim becomes a site of identification" (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 64). While listening to the traumatic stories we bond with these figures and feel part of something bigger. It is the story of the traumatic figure that enables us to shift from I to WE.

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<sup>1</sup> There is still ongoing debate about the ability of the DSM definition to really capture the very essence of severe traumatic experiences such as the concentration camps. For instance in 1992 Herman has suggested the concept of complex PTSD (Herman, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Clearly this issue is much more complex. For in depth discussion see: (Caruth, 1995; 1996; Felman & Laub, 1992; LaCapra, 1994; Laub, 1995)

Camus (1962) altered Descartes' (1637/1996) famous sentence "I think, therefore I am" (or better put "I am thinking, therefore I exist") to read "I rebel; therefore I exist" and then went a step further by formulating this notion as "I rebel — therefore *we* exist". In the posttraumatic age it is possible to reformulate this sentence once again as "I have been traumatized — therefore *we* exist" or even "*they* have been traumatized — therefore *we* exist". Indeed it seems that traumatic event and the creation of a group of survivors is a pre-condition for the formation of a community. The collective identity is rooted within the traumatic event, and the structure of this collective identity is based upon the survivors' stories.

Remarkably, in this political and cultural process the survivor can once again find herself the victim of a community in search of a narrative with which it can identify; the community demands from the survivor a story that will fit its political goals. With this in mind Tal phrases the pertinent question most accurately: "how are survivor's stories adapted to fit and then contained within the dominant structure of social, cultural and political discourse?" (Tal, 1996, p. 3).

If the survivor is not willing to adjust, for example to tell her story of surviving the Holocaust in terms of bravery, then she is excluded from the public sphere which demands a tale worthy of Hollywood. In this situation the survivor is doomed to silence not only by the actual event, which cannot be put into words (Laub, 1995), but also by the community at home. Communities require that a survivor play her role professionally, as part of the big circus. In a sense we wish for the survivor to become a myth in her life – to obey the rules.

Rosenfeld (1999) argues that a traumatic event becomes a political asset for any kind of community and in Flanzbaum's words, "learning about one's heritage automatically entails the glorification of suffering, as if without proving the persistence of persecution you cannot legitimate your claim to minority, or ethnic, status" (Flanzbaum, 1999, p. 14 [qtd. in Douglass 12]). If we accept that modernity and trauma go hand in hand, clearly when everyone is traumatized each community requires its own unique trauma to distinguish it from others - in practice this means that the iconic trauma must be radicalized and fueled in order for the community to survive. If this process fails to take place, the community may fall apart – individuals may try to embrace more severe traumatic events as their constitutive event.

The feminist movement is one of the best examples of a group that has redefined its iconic trauma. In a sense, somewhat paradoxically, the feminist movement demanded acknowledgment of the fact that women go through continuous trauma – being raped and humiliated on daily basis, at home and in the public sphere (Herman, 1992). This is a paradox because in order to empower women as a group and as individuals, the movement demanded to be acknowledged as victims - for instance arguing that one out of three girls were abused (Bass & Davis, 2002). While Herman (1992) defines this as war between the sexes, this battle was really over who owns the trauma. The solution for this paradox is straight forward: trauma is necessary for collective identity and the creation of political power.

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