# CULTURAL TRAUMA AS A SUBJECT OF SOCIAL REPRODUCIION[1]

# Marija DIMITROVSKA[2]

*Abstract* The focus of this paper is cultural trauma, in particular the processes of reproduction of traumatic narratives from the collective memory of the community. Within sociological theories of cultural trauma, the problem of collective memory is mainly addressed in two respects: as a problem of representation, related to the structures of social power; and, as a collective memory that is the subject of commemorative practices. For both approaches, it is characteristic that the trauma binds itself to a narrative of a collective memory that disrupts the group's collective identity and as such forms the basis of a particular type of action. The basic assumption of this paper is that cultural trauma, represented as a narrative of collective memory, is subject to internalization on behalf of the agents, which incorporate it in their actions, facilitating the process of social reproduction. Agents, who adhere to different strategies during the traumatic sequence to minimize the effects of discomfort caused by the traumatic narrative, through routinization of actions which incorporate the symptoms of thetraumatic process, can contribute to the prolongation/maintenance of the trauma.

*Keywords: cultural trauma, collective memory, practical consciousness, social reproduction.*

## Introduction

Long before the introduction of the term trauma and its treatment within other social and humanistic sciences,sociology problematized the same social processes and phenomena that are presently sublimated in the terms social/cultural trauma. Namely, these refer to the processes of deep, radical and revolutionary social changes that manage to destabilize the flows of (seemingly) predictable, stable social developmentin a manifest way. The discourse of change, which followed the various stages of the development of social thought,

---

is in the era of high modernity marked by the focus on the duality of its nature. Consequently, understanding the ambivalent nature of social change generates a new intrigue - the question issue of the consequences of such dramatic changes. The discourse on the potential devastating consequences of the change is not new – but relatively recentlybegan to be treated as a trauma.

The focus of this paper is cultural trauma, analyzed in the context of the processes of social reproduction of collective traumatic experiences. The theoretical basis for cultural trauma are the theories of Jeffrey Alexander and Piotr Sztompka (Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004; Eyerman, Alexander, & Butler Breese, 2011; Sztompka, 2000), while the problem of social reproduction is analyzed in the context of the theory of structurationby Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 1986). The basic assumption of this paper is that cultural trauma, represented as a narrative of the collective memory, is subject to internalization on behalf of the agents, which incorporate it in their actions, facilitating the process of social reproduction. Giddens' concepts of *practical consciousness*, as a separate agent of human action, as opposed to *discursive consciousness*, which refers to actions that the individual is able to articulate,were taken as a starting pointwhen considering the problem of reproduction of traumatic symptoms. This dichotomy is a result of Giddens' attempt to overcome the functionalist and structuralist implicit determinations of the individual as a passive subject, which is completely conditioned by his foundation in socio-cultural and historical trends, an attempt that resulted in the idea of an *agency*, through the possibility of transcending the routinized sequences of social life.

The modern theory of trauma stems from the conjunction of psychoanalysis, post-traumatic stress disorder studies, and memory studies. However, the conceptualization of trauma within narrow limits, as a psychological state extended in the domain of literary and media texts, is somewhat limiting, since traumahas been a legitimate part of the theories of culture for more than a century. Freud is one of the first authorswho, at the beginning of the twentieth century, elaborated the concept of trauma as a problem that goes beyond individual experience and attributes to social collectives in the work *Totem and Taboo* (Freud, 1919). A few decades later, Benjamin and Adorno invoked these ideas in the development of their critical theory in the 1920s and 1930s (Meek, 2010, p. 2).

With regards tosociology, the theory of trauma as a phenomenon of significance to social collectives is a relatively recent concept. Perceived primarily through the prism of the processes of social disintegration, an attempt was made to overcome the classic attachment of traumato exceptional episodes of terror and violence in human history, which is still a dominant tendency

inother disciplines (history, memory studies, psychoanalysis),and to make a methodological step forwards in discovering the social processes and phenomena that give rise to this problem. The comprehensive analysis of the wide range of phenomena and processes that can be treated as traumatogenic, has led to the conclusion that a wider framework that could unite these phenomena under a single methodological "cover"was needed. Consequently, the problem of cultural trauma was transferred to a higher level of abstraction - in the domain of one of the key disciplines in sociology - the sociology of change.

The key distinction of the sociological study of the trauma lies in overcoming the naturalistic determinations of the trauma, as both spatial and temporal fact. In particular, trauma is analyzed from the perspective of the "processes of creating meaning and attribution, a dialectical process in which different individuals and groups struggle to define a situation and find mechanisms for its control" (Eyerman, 2013, p. 43). This creates a certain risk of over-exploitation of the term and, consequently, of its scientific discrediting. For example, the radical social-constructivist stance, according to which (depending on the capacity to impose a traumatic representation of a narrative), any event can be considered as a potential trauma, stems from the overtforcing of the thesis that "the traumas are created, not born" (Eyerman, 2013). The other extreme, the naturalistic or lay trauma theory treats the problem from the perspective that the events themselves are traumatic, i.e. are the direct cause of the traumatic effect.

## 1. Trauma as Collective Memory

The definition of trauma as "a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evokingan event or situation which is: a) laden with a negative affect; b) represented as indelible; and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions" (Alexander et al., 2004, p. 44), directly binds the notion to narratives from the collective memory of the community. This connection is quite logical given the fact that for most cultures collective memory represents a "central form of sociality" (Stepnisky, 2005, p. 1384).

Apart from the pioneering attempts of Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 1992) in the field of the sociological study of memory (invoked by authors from other disciplines, such as memory studies), during the second half of the twentieth century, memory became subject to considerable interest within sociology and other social sciences, but also in art and philosophy. Jedlowski, (Jedlowski, 2001, pp. 29-30) locatesthe reasons for this particular attention in the cultural and social constellations of modernity: on the one hand, modernity has produced a constant change, in which traditions lose value and generate recurrent discontinuities; on the other hand, it offers increasingly sophisticated technical

instruments that externalize human ability torecall and question its significance. Perceived through the prism of narrative theory, collective memories are events that receive meaning in the context of the "larger"narratives. In sociological literature, the term collective memory rarely refers to a single memory, but coincides and is inseparable from the idea of a narrative. In that sense, collective memory is not just a representation of an event from the past, but also a way of seeing and living in relation to many important events "which were created through shared stories" (Stepnisky, 2005, p. 1387).

However, sociologists whoaddress issues of traumatic collective memories are mainly focused on the analysis and significance of commemorative practices, but are somewhat less interested in the issues of transgenerational memory transmission, understood as a conscious or unconscious incorporation of practices, norms and attitudes in the process of socialization, which the individual has adopted during a traumatic process. This issue is furthermore intriguing considering that social memory can be more habitual than habitual behavior. Specifically, there may be a habit of remembering a particular event. According to Duncan Bell, the words "used to capture that event can become habitual" (Bell, 2006, p. 122). In fact, the problem is not to be condemned to the revival of the past so as not to forget - but that "remembrance involves a compulsive attachment to unrelieved trauma" (Ibid., P. 154).

Within the frame of sociological theories of cultural trauma, the problem of collective memory is mainly analyzed from two aspects: as a problem of representation, tied to the structures of social power; and, on the other, as a collective memory that is the subject of commemorative practices. For both approaches it is characteristic that the trauma binds itself to a narrative of a collective memory that disrupts the group's collective identity and as such forms the basis for a particular type of action.

The trauma narrative stems from the need to give expression to, and further define, the contours of the traumatic situation. In this regard, the narrative has two functions: mimetic and cathartic (Stepnisky, 2005). As mimesis, the narrative transforms the chaotic, inarticulate, and vague impressions of existence into cultural forms and symbols that have disintegrative impact on the collective identity. As catharsis, the narrative serves as a shared exhaust valve for expressing emotions, generating shared feelings and dedication to a common story.

The traumatic narrative becomes an essential part of the traumatic process/sequence, as the basis according to which agents orient their action. While Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural trauma (Alexander et al., 2004; Eyerman et al., 2011) focuses on the contesting processes for the establishment

of a dominant narrative of the traumatic experience and the practices of commemoration for normalization of the trauma, the theory of social trauma by Piotr Sztompka, relies on the typology proposed by Merton (1938) regarding the strategies that individuals and groups undertake in dealing with the state of anomie induced by the trauma. This paper analyzes the potential for reproduction of the trauma, through the action of agents driven by practical or discursive consciousness, a concept invoked from Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration.

## 2.  Reproduction of Trauma

In the elaboration of his theory of structuration, Giddens (1986) proposes a stratified model in the conceptualization of human agency, according to which the agentsreflexively monitor their ownbehavior and the behavior of others. This is influenced by two levels of consciousness, *discursive* and *practical*. Discursive consciousness refers to the agents'capacity to provide *reasons* and to *rationalize* their behavior, while practical consciousness refers to the contingent of unarticulated knowledge that the agents implicitly use to orient in different situations and to interpret the actions of others. Giddens sees the main motivating force behind the action in the unconscious dimension of human agency - the need for *ontological security* that stems out of the need for and thesense of trust. Without a sense of trust and the ontological security system derived from it, Giddens believes that agents suffer from acute anxiety in their social relations. In this context, the unconscious motives for maintaining ontological security are reflected in regionalized (arranged in space), routinized social interactions (predictable and stable).

In this way, social relations are reproduced over time through a wide range of techniques, contained in the practical consciousness of the agents, which have the function to maintain the routine and thus the ontological security and trust. This ontological security is acquired not only through the reflexive monitoring of the action, but also through its routinization and regionalization.

Referring to Erikson's theory of personality development, Giddens' thesis is that *ontological security*, or *trust* or belief in the continuity of the world, represents a basic psychological need that agents can satisfy only through routine daily activities. In a sense, routinization is "a cunning of institutional reason: agents seek ontological security through habitual conduct, and in their striving they bring about social reproduction, with higher or lower awareness of the socially reproductive consequences of their habitual conduct" (Aranguren, 2015, p. 548).

According to Giddens, the habitual action is indirectly motivated by the need to maintain security and, consequently, to avoid the emotion of anxiety. In

the context of the theory of cultural trauma, the traumatic event is imposed as a condition that disturbs the sense of ontological security among the agents. The trauma, as a fact that produces states that represent "acute discomfort", and that affects the "core of the sense of identity of the collective" (Alexander et al., 2004), introduces disruption in the continuity of routinized actions. The agents (individuals and groups), motivated by the need to normalize the traumatic effect, undertake a reflexive approach in the orientation of their own action. In this context, the narrative of trauma, apart from the idea of disrupting the collective identity, contains in itself interpretations of the existing social order. Symptoms of the traumatic process, in Sztompka's theory, such as: the emergence or intensification of cases of *moral panic*; increasing distrust towards other people and/or institutions; disorientation with regard to the collective identity; apathy, passivity, a sense of helplessness; and pessimism regarding the future (Alexander et al., 2004), become part of agents' practical consciousnessthrough their routinized action. Agents, in an effort to maintain ontological security, incorporate mechanisms in their behavior that orient their action towards minimizing the effects of the phenomena perceived as a threat to this security.

Cultural trauma, unlike the notion of moral panic, involves a process that takes place over a relatively longer period of time. Consequently, the routinization of the actions which incorporate the symptoms of the traumatic sequence providesthe basis for the transmission of these symptoms through newly established narratives about the social order. For example, if agents loose trust in abstract systems, their future behavior is oriented towards minimizing possible risks arising from this belief. The routinization of these actions stems from the fact that mistrust in abstract systems has become incorporated in the practical consciousness of the agents, and the lack of trust - a narrative that is incorporated in the collective memory of the community.

Discursive consciousness, in this sense, can be regarded as (partly) conditioned by the practical consciousness of the agents. Even the full articulation of the reasons for undertaking a certain type of action does not preclude the fact that articulated ideas inevitably stem from the sense of ontological security, which is in dialectical relation with practical consciousness. Namely, the sense of lack of security conditions the revision of the practical consciousness, and this,in return, maintains its existence. It should be noted that the wider definition of the category of discursive consciousness, a definition that includes both verbal formulations deriving from practical consciousness, as well as verbal formulations with a reflexive character, is taken as a reference point.

Agents that undertake different strategies during the traumatic sequence to minimize the effects of discomfort caused by the traumatic narrative,can contribute to the prolongation/maintenance of the traumatic sequencethrough

routinization of actions that have internalized symptoms of the traumatic process. In this way, the "revised cultural identity" that develops after the normalization of the traumatic process (as Sztompka and Alexander suggest) can actually contain elements that will not contribute to its stabilization, but to initiate a new traumatic process.

## Conclusion

Alexander and Sztompka's cultural/social trauma theories are relatively closedconcepts where the traumatic process/sequence receives adequate resolution in a revised cultural identity that embeds the experiences of the traumatic process and is more resistant to possible disruptions of a similar kind in the future. The authors, however, suggest that societies that do not possess adequate potentials for resistance can face social and cultural disintegration, but do not move deeper into the explication of the outcomes of possible disruptions in the traumatic process/sequence.

The paper makes an attempt to consider alternative results from the traumatic process. Cultural trauma, a process/phenomenon that disrupts the routine of social life, disrupts the sense of relative security of the agents and entails new strategies that orient future action in the direction of minimizing the effects of the traumatic process. In that direction, new strategies, if persisted over a longer period of time, become a narrative of the practical (sometimes discursive consciousness) of the agents. In this way, the symptoms of the traumatic sequence become internalized as a part of the collective memory of the community. Thus motivated action, which constantly renews the existence of disruptions in the collective identity, can prolong the traumatic process or provide a basis for initiation of a new trauma sequence.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, J., Eyerman, R., Giesen, B., Smelser, N., & Sztompka, P. (2004). *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Aranguren, M. (2015). Emotional mechanisms of social (re)production. *Social Science Information Sur Les Sciences Sociales*, *54*(4), 543–563. https://doi.org/10.1177/0539018415598403

Bell, D. (2006). Memory, Trauma and World Politics. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230627482

Eyerman, R. (2013). Social theory and trauma. *Acta Sociologica*, *56*(1), 41–53. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699312461035

Eyerman, R., Alexander, J., & Butler Breese, E. (2011). *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*. Paradigm Publishers.

Freud, S. (1919). *Totem and Taboo*. London: George Routledge & Sons Limited. Retrieved from http://www.gutenberg.org/files/41214/41214-h/41214-h.htm

Giddens, A. (1986). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/2802469

Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Jedlowski, P. (2001). Memory ans Sociology: Themes and Issues. *Time & Society*, *10*(1), 29–44. Retrieved from http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24353274

Meek, A. (2010). *Trauma and Media: Theories, Histories, and Images*. https://doi.org/0203863194

Merton, R. K. (1938). Social Structure and Anomie. *American Sociological Review*, *3*(5), 672–682.

Stepnisky, J. (2005). Global memory and the rhythm of life. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *48*(10), 1383–1402. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205277015

Sztompka, P. (2000). The ambivalence of social change: triumph or trauma? *The Polish Sociological Review*, (N° 3), 275–290. https://doi.org/10.2307/41274760