The Politics of Commemoration: The Holocaust, Memory and Trauma
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Assuming that the consequences of devastating events for individuals and collectivities run different courses, why do we use the word "trauma" to explain a wide array of social and cultural phenomenon? Trauma has traveled far to become a key not only to explain, like originally conceived wounds to the body, but injuries to spirit, culture, society and politics. Trauma has proliferated into a metaphor deployed to explain almost everything unpleasant that happens to us as individuals and as members of political communities. How do we conceptualize the transition from the trauma of the individual to the traumatized community? What does trauma mean for a theoretical formulation of collective memory? What are the social, legal and political dimensions that inform representations of collective traumata? Wulf Kansteiner (2004) provides an insightful history of the metaphoric diffusion of trauma, criticizing its loose deployment as inadequate. He points out that it is misleading to compare the trauma of an individual survivor to a broader public that has not experienced any comparable violence.

However, for the sociological significance of this transposition, the actually experienced pain, or rather the impossibility of its transference is less significant. What matters for the theoretical vantage point we are exploring here, is how these metaphors of trauma facilitate the appropriation of a culturally celebrated status of victimhood. More specifically, we examine how changing representations of trauma and memory of the Holocaust, and by extension reference to mass atrocities in general, emerge as a constitutive feature of a European identity project.[1] Changing memories of the Holocaust and its function as the paradigmatic trauma of the 20th century, serve as an illustration for the contentious nature of cultural representations. We address how 'traumatic' metaphors, addressing acts of extreme violence and innocence, exemplified through representations of the Holocaust, have become a key mechanism to address the precarious balance of universal and particular modes of identification (and theoretical interpretations). The particular experience of the Holocaust has become dislodged from its historical context and been inscribed as a universal code of suffering. By emphasizing the traumatic and subsequent therapeutic dimensions of this process, the dividing line between perpetrators and victims as well as the distinction between historical specificity and universal applicability, is frequently blurred. On this view, representations of Holocaust memories at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, we suggest, carry implications for both theories of collective memory and ongoing attempts to search for a common European founding moment. In contrast to early nation building efforts that relied on mythological inventions of political communities, nascent European Identity seems to revolve around a negative foundational moment through commemorating universal lessons of the Holocaust.

<u>The Psychology of Trauma</u>

But before "trauma" turned political, it was institutionalized in other professional discourses. A central feature of trauma theories addressing injuries, usually involves a clear-cut perception of who the victim and who the perpetrator is. Paralleling developments in other fields, we observe a shift from a moral to a medicalized discourse. This view has a long pre-history starting with the psychological conceptualization of trauma in the 19th century. There, the stance

toward perpetrators changed from a moral to a therapeutic one, characterized by rational and abstract language. Freud himself triggered a discussion of sexual child abuse within the family in an early article "The Aetiology of Hysteria," (1897) which argued its prevalence, but soon afterwards reversed himself emphasizing instead "infantile sexuality" and the role of sexual fantasies. What he had believed to be the actual sexual experiences of children were relegated to the world of childhood fantasies. Many psychoanalysts claim that this retraction, coupled with the discovery of the "Oedipus complex" was the actual beginning of psychoanalysis as a scientific enterprise.

What matters for our interpretative purposes, is that trauma entered the collective lexicon around the time that many societies were beginning to reevaluate memories of their national past. This was preceded already in the 19thcentury, by French scientists like Charcot and Janet who discovered mental trauma as the source of people's misery. They perceived of these memories like parasites of the mind. It was around that time that the experience of war was conceptualized as trauma. On the psychological level, the right treatment was supposed to overcome trauma. On the collective level, the 1864 Geneva Convention laid the foundations for contemporary humanitarian law, as a remedy t o the atrocities of modern warfare.

Later in the 20th century, post-Vietnam reactions in the USA, but also in Europe, had a lasting impact on psychiatry, psychoanalysis and sociology. The American Psychiatric Association acknowledged in 1980 a phenomenon called "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD) referring to how people respond to human and natural catastrophes.[2] What is called "the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience" (Caruth 1991:2) is the source for a 'crisis of truth' that needs to be restored through memory work. The diagnosis calls for a need to uncover previously hidden memories. Restoring psychological health becomes the paramount goal, and recovering memory the means to it. It takes for granted that we are held hostage to earlier trauma. This presupposition applies not only to personal therapy but also to the contemporary culture of therapeutic politics.

The Sociology of Trauma

Focusing on a shift from psychological to social/political/cultural manifestations, the central theoretical question remains: How can trauma provide the social theorist with a toolbox with which to understand the horrors of the 20th century and ours? One of the first sociologists to use trauma as a sociological concept was Kai Erikson (1994).[3] He shifted the notion from an individualized context toward the analysis of "traumatized communities." He went as far as to suggest, that "trauma can create community" (Erikson 1994, p.231). Erikson brings trauma not only to sociology but one that focuses on group interest.

This Durkheimian concern also informs Jeffrey Alexander's contribution to shift our attention from psychological assumptions to sociological processes. The specific content of the trauma or how trauma operates collectively is not fully addressed in Erikson's approach. Alexander offers an important corrective to this theoretical gap. He too recognizes the fallacies of psychological trauma theories that remain centered on the individual. In an attempt to link trauma theory to broader issues of collective (rather than individual) identity, he proposes the concept of 'cultural trauma'. It "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" (Alexander 2004: 1).

Referring to trauma as a cultural phenomenon implies two significant departures from the psychological literature. For one, choices are made and "trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society" (Ibid: 2). Reflexivity is perceived as the prerequisite to shift the language of trauma away from its essentialist and pathological connotations toward a symbolic and institutional context that is constitutive for collective and moral identifications. However, this is a highly contested process and as Alexander points out, "events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution" (Alexander 2004: 8). This raises questions about both the agents and the mechanisms of mediation. The attribution of traumatic suffering is frequently organized along two representational dimensions: one revolves around the difference between universal values and particular experiences; the other is related and involves the changing nature of the victim-perpetrator relationship. The respective balance between these elements informs the extent to which memories and representations of trauma are politically and culturally consequential.

These themes are also at the core of Dominique LaCapra's distinction between structural and historical trauma, which he perceives as central for coming to terms with the Holocaust.[4] Structural trauma in his language is related to "trans-historical absence and appears in all societies and lives" (LaCapra 2001:76). On this view, everyone is potentially a victim or a survivor. Historical trauma, on the other hand, refers to particular experiences, not to surrogate victims. According to LaCapra, everybody can be subject to structural trauma. However, with respect to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction between victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial. "Victim" is not a psychological category, but rather a political (social/ethical) one (Ibid: 79). Here, we move from psychology to history, from psychoanalysis to politics, from the individual to the collective level.

Sociological investigations of trauma thus focus on how political communities deal with the construction and representation of trauma in collective rather than individual terms. Communities do not remember; they commemorate. Trauma becomes "collective consciousness" and shared. To ensure that an event is perceived as a trauma it requires a degree of institutionalization and routinization. The proliferation of museal exhibits and memorial sites representing not heroic narrations of nationhood, but traumatic events, indicates the centrality of negative foundational moments. Trauma also becomes inscribed in rituals and law. The latter is particularly salient in societies that have just emerged from ongoing internal strives, where the dividing lines between perpetrators and victims remain subject to interpretations of the past. Frequently the creation and resolution of collective traumata are addressed in terms of justice, what can be referred to as 'traumatic transition.'[5] "The cultural construction of trauma begins with … a claim to some fundamental injury, an exclamation of the terrifying profanation of some sacred value, a narrative about a horribly destructive social process, and a demand for emotional, institutional, and symbolic reparation and reconstitution" (Alexander 2004: 11). Accordingly, political trials, war crime tribunals, truth and reconciliation commissions all become trauma laboratories.

Traumatic Memories: The Holocaust

It is our contention that it was the Holocaust which carried trauma from the personal to the collective level and became synonymous with political evil itself.[6] The Holocaust has become the iconic trauma. It is now a concept that has been

dislocated from space and time resulting in its inscription into other acts of injustice and traumatic national memories across the globe. Put differently, it is now perceived as a structural rather than a historical trauma. The boundaries between personal and collective traumata, real and imagined memories, are increasingly blurred.

The controversy surrounding the publication of Binjamin Wilkomirski's 'Fragments' in 1995 and the subsequent discovery that his childhood memories from the camps were fabricated, illustrates the conflation of personal and historical memory. It reveals a process fraught with tensions, where the history of trauma (i.e. the career of a theoretical concept) and traumatic histories (i.e. the social construction of Holocaust memories) are mutually reinforcing. Wilkomirski's book is a childhood memoir set in a concentration camp. It became at once a paradigmatic case for Holocaust trauma. Wilkomirski became the living example of what trauma was all about: Childhood survival, years of therapy, an uncanny and a discontinuous story and the experience of the camps. The discovery of his fabrication raised broader questions about the nexus of trauma, memory and representation. Traumatic memories from early childhood cannot stand up to a factual—or even physical, in the sense of a connection to a particular place—account of reality. This lend further credence to the so-called distinction between the "mythological memories of the victims" and professional historiography. The relationship of history and memory has long been a central feature of Holocaust historiography (Friedlander:1992) "Trauma" attempts to bridge the memories of the survivors to the scientific tools of the historian and social scientist. Wilkomirski exemplifies how one can claim the emotional traumas that lie at the heart of the trauma mode, namely emotional dissociation. [I am not sure that I understand this. Maybe this needs a little clarification] But there is a twist, as he substituted the events of his sheltered childhood with the history of the Jews in the Holocaust. Years of trauma discourse prepared Wilkomirski and his audience for this move. Accordingly, it is not entirely implausible that Wilkomirski actually believed his own fabrication. Structurally, we can all be survivors. Personal trauma has moved via historical trauma to structural trauma. There seems to be a longing for identification with those who suffered.[7] Like "child abuse," "spousal abuse," and other campaigns for the recognition of victims, the campaign to recognize the "Holocaust" has a visible history. All these histories are vitally connected to the changing status of victimhood – to its transformation from something to be ashamed of to a sign of grace and moral righteousness.

From Traumatic Memory to the Politics of Memory

Prior to the 1960s, there was no "Holocaust." There was simply a small "h" holocaust, which encompassed the killings of World War II, including the mass murder of the Jews. Nazi atrocities were originally interpreted in a universalistic fashion. Jews were considered one of the many victims of Nazism. The first victim was civilization which needed to be restored, as is evidenced in the post-war declarations against genocide and the Declaration on Human Rights. Genocide *is* the universalization of the Holocaust. It is essential to the concept that the Holocaust is but one instance of a class of (by definition comparable) phenomena. And human rights are genocide taken to one more degree of universalization. The idea of genocide contains the admonition that a moral world cannot merely stand by. Human rights, which have their modern legal origins in the same set of 1948 UN declarations, are tied up in practice with the even stronger assertion that the Holocaust is a slippery slope – that every act of ethnic repression, if not checked, might prepare the way for the next holocaust. As the Declaration put it clearly without any doubt about the

connotation: "Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people" (Preamble Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN 1948). The ultimate justification for Human Rights, thus, is neither human nature, nor some Enlightenment optimism in the rationality of mankind, but memories of catastrophe and trauma. Modern wars created traumas and traumas created means to reckon with them. But the balance between universalism and particularism is not a matter of theoretical preference, but one shaped by historical contingencies.

With the emergence of 'identity politics' in the United States, we observe a shift in rhetoric, from universal concerns to particularistic claims of groups and subcultures. Peter Novick (1999) has demonstrated how a growing focus on the Holocaust coincides with the articulation of new Jewish identities. It was during these decades, when the "voicing of pain" replaced the voicing of interests in American politics, that World War II made the transition from a holocaust to "The Holocaust" (Novick, 1999). Structural trauma was replaced with the public voices of survivor's historical trauma.

Paradoxically, it was precisely the Americanization of the Holocaust, which despite its origins as a form of Jewish identity politics, contributed to the emergence of a new epistemological vantage point. With the world-wide success of Steven Spielberg's 'Schindler's List' and the opening of the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington in the early 1990s, the trauma-centric focus on victims and perpetrators, gave way to a witness perspective. Thus the mnemonic significance of the Holocaust was re-defined in the post-Cold War era. The new meaning was shaped in the context of globality marked by an awareness of an interconnected world, where the role of the bystander shifted public attention to a non-traumatic political discourse. Massive reactions to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, during the 1990s, renewed legal and ethical attention to the notion of war crimes and genocide. The Holocaust was no longer merely a source of personal and cultural trauma, but assumed an iconic status, that became the source for self-conscious political action (or admittance of failure when mass atrocities were committed under global watch). Since this 'symbolic turn' it has frequently been deployed as a metaphor for mass atrocities and general considerations for human rights. Memories of the Holocaust have become a moral touchstone, a call to action. People are not supposed to suffer. This is true on the personal level and it becomes true on the political level as well. Now, the vulnerability of the body (and mind), as in the original formulation of trauma as blow to the body, and political institutions which try to prevent this kind of vulnerability, are going hand in hand.

The Political Institutionalization of Holocaust Memory: Towards a Cosmopolitan Europe and Beyond

This vulnerability needs to be communicated which in turn problematizes testimony and evidence. Historical records are turned into trial records, survivor narratives into evidence. The juridification of Holocaust memories and by extension genocide has its origin in the Nuremberg Trials in the immediate post-war period. These trials were the beginning of historical knowledge about the Holocaust even though the extermination of European Jewry was not at its center. Presiding over the trial Justice Jackson declared: :

> The privilege of opening the first trial in history for crimes against the peace of the world imposes a grave responsibility. The wrongs which we seek to condemn and punish have been so calculated, so malignant, and so devastating, that civilization cannot tolerate their being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated. That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that Power has ever paid to Reason.[8]

More is at stake than the operation of justice. Trials are also moments where issues of guilt, sacrifice and renewal are being played out. We treat juridification not merely as a legal judgment, but a socially embedded, meaning-producing act. They are transformative opportunities, where memories of grave injustices are addressed in rituals of restitution and renewal (Osiel 1997). The Nuremberg trial, appealing to a universal language of human rights, was a bridge between historical and structural trauma. It relied mainly on German documents, and, admitted the by now iconic documentary movie "The Nazi Concentration Camps" as evidence. Voices of survivors as witnesses were almost not heard at Nuremberg, this in contradistinction to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961, which relied heavily on victims' testimonies. Both trials are paradigmatic expressions of perpetrator and victim centered historiography, respectively. This connects back to the above mentioned distinction between the “mythological memories of the victims” and professional historiography

Memories of the Holocaust did not directly cause the emergence of a global legal culture. Rather, they have produced a continued negotiation process between “international law” (i.e., finding the criteria for degrees of wrongdoing) and “normative ethics” (based on questions of reason and morality). The moral and juridical reactions to the Holocaust are drawn together by witnesses. This is also displayed in organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch who base their campaigns on eyewitness accounts of atrocities. Witnessing trauma becomes the modern means against the old fear of suppression or forgetting.[9]

The question remains how this witness perspective has been institutionalized and become politically consequential? As traumatic memories move between the historical and the structural, the psychologization of trauma has eventually given way to its politicization.[10] One, among many examples, for how historical representations of the Holocaust has been translated into a legal codex are the statutes of the recently installed International Criminal Court (ICC), which is a belated implementation of the Nuremberg principles. At the Nuremberg trials the real plaintiff was civilization, as is evidenced in the aforementioned opening remarks by Judge Jackson. Civilization and reason are combined to overcome historical and structural trauma. Structural trauma in the political sphere begins with the idea that modern warfare made everyone victims, so you could not save yourself by being a victor. Therefore to overcome this you need to wipe out or at least to civilize warfare, which was always a possibility. This was the general idea after the trauma of the world wars in the 20th century and was reflected in the Nuremberg Trials and the current International Criminal Court. In structural trauma, there is no ultimate difference between victors and vanquished. Whereas in historical trauma, there is an essential divide between victims and perpetrators. And this may also be reflected in trials dealing with specific victim groups (like the Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem in 1961). The notion that

everyone is a potential victim of modern warfare became a dominant post-traumatic idea in the 1950s when people were terrified of what is now called "atomic holocaust." There is a parallel – and somewhat incompatible -- conception of victim consciousness, one universal and one particular, corresponding to the distinction to structural and historical trauma. The particular one highlights the crimes of the aggressor; the universalist one downplays them through the very idea that we are all victims. Both imply a conversion experience as the exposure to trauma involves a redemptive departure from the original traumatic experience. The particular form of victim consciousness depends on its distinction between perpetrator and victim. Under the particular (and historical trauma) system, there can be no victim without a perpetrator -- and conversely, to call someone a victim is to instantly accuse someone else of being a perpetrator. For the universal (and structural trauma) conception, the concentration on perpetrators undercuts the whole idea of victim consciousness.

Conclusion: From history to structure and back

Collective consciousness and the expansion of solidarity remain contentious processes that involve ongoing tensions between universal and particularistic visions, of which shifting perceptions of victimhood and perpetrators are prominent aspects. The dissolution of this relationship and the emergence of non-specific actors (i.e. the witness perspective) explain the transition from historical to structural trauma. Structural trauma is based on a history without subjects. Abstract structures (like modernity) are its main components.[11] This comes at the expense of historical trauma, i.e. the specifics and particularities of the event itself. To view the Holocaust in terms of "structural trauma" removes it from the particular German-Jewish relationship, and resets it into the context of modernity. Accordingly, Germany can cease to be perceived as the exception to the standard path of European national development, instead becoming the exemplification of a common modernity. The Holocaust and World War II are turned into a universal trauma, which can be seen as either the death of the Enlightenment project, or the birth of a new regime of universalized sympathy with the suffering of others as expressed in the formation of a Human Rights regime and the general condemnation of genocide.

Personal and collective trauma have merged. We have entered the world of "cultural trauma,"[12] where humanity as such is taken on a destructive path. One would have thought that the Holocaust be a subject resistant to the cultural or linguistic turn and that it would more than anything else emphasize "historical realism." It seems that Social and Cultural Theory has been moving in the opposite direction. The cultural and linguistic turn has introduced the notion of trans-historical trauma into the study of the Holocaust and its subsequent representations. But what is the theoretical mileage gained from this move? Most historians and social scientists are not trained in psychoanalytical language in order to analyze the working through of trauma in personal terms. Conversely, most psychoanalysts are not trained to transfer their trauma terminology to examine history and society.

Let us end with an early European social theorist trying to come to terms with these dilemmata through a language of politics and not psychology. Hannah Arendt did not need any psychological criteria in order to understand that modern totalitarianism and especially the concentration camps constitute a radical break from tradition.[13] This break leads to a crisis in understanding, which demands new political concepts and ways of thinking, including the reassessment of causality in historical thought and the unprecedented nature of the destruction of "superfluous" people. In

her eyes, totalitarian politics cancelled the anthropological law of human self-preservation and with it destroying one of the pillars of civilization. Indeed traumatic, but without the language of trauma. Arendt may have shown us already more than 50 years ago, that when speaking of the unprecedented in politics, the tool box of your analysis can be political as well. In many ways, this kind of thinking was picked up again in the 1980s in a different mode and without any reference to Arendt. Postmodern thinkers like Lyotard[14] took the Holocaust as an opportunity to criticize the limitations of conventional scientific procedures to come to terms with it. His by now famous example is the comparison of the Holocaust with an earthquake destroying also the instruments of measuring earthquakes. Decontextualization has reached its outer limits. As much as we are tempted to use "trauma" as a key concept in contemporary politics, we should be aware of its limits. We are still dealing with people who were killed by other people and people who in the words of Arendt were deprived of their "rights to have rights." The Holocaust and other man made catastrophes were real and it is this reality which defines political responsibility in our age. This is true for social theorists as well. If we think trauma to be a useful concept, we should always keep its human and historical dimension in mind while keeping its structural elements at bay. If not we might as well do without it.

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[1] Elsewhere we have looked at the historical and conceptual significance of Holocaust memories for the dissolution of nation-centered memories. See Levy/Sznaider 2002.
[2] See American Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Washington, DC: APA, 1980. For histories of the concept in clinical and historical terms see Cathy Caruth (1991). See also Bessel A. van der Kolk, Lars Weisaeth, Orno van der Hart (1996). ; for a radical constructionist approach to the psychiatric concept of trauma see Ian Hacking (1995: 183-197).
[3] For a critique of Erikson's approach from a cultural constructionist perspective see Alexander (2004: 4-5).

[4] In addition to LaCapra, Saul Friedlander (1993) is one the leading scholars of the Holocaust trying to bring trauma to historical analysis.

[5] For an overview of such traumatic transitions in terms of justice and memory see W. James Booth (2001)

[6] For a detailed comparison of how memories of the Holocaust have converged into a generalized symbol see Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider (2005).
[7] In a review essay Ruth Franklin (2004) writes about a new trend she calls "Neo-Wilkomirskiism". Franklin takes issue with the Holocaust writing of the so-called "Second Generation" (children of Holocaust survivors who have apparently inherited some of the trauma of their parents). They try to identify with their parents and envy them for their traumatic memories. However, the memories are false. What happened here on the personal level can be projected unto the collective level as well: Identification with victimization without having actually experienced it.
[8] Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal. Volume II. Proceedings: 11/14/1945-11/30/1945. Nuremberg: IMT, 1947. p. 98
[9] For a problematization of witnessing see Felman & Laub (1992).
[10] A by now classical statement of the interplay between personal and political trauma is Judith Herman (1992). She analyzes traumata like shell shock and sexual abuse in terms of social movements (like the anti-war and feminist movements).
[11] See for instance Bauman's (1989) way of dealing with the Holocaust, which is based on the Foucaultian tradition to look at modernity as trauma.
[12] See Alexander (2004) for the genealogy of cultural trauma. See Kansteiner, Wulf. 2004. for a critique of the concept. Kansteiner points out, that projections of cultural trauma often conflate the distinctions between real victims and what could be called imagined victims. The comparison might be ethically problematic, but remains sociologically relevant.
[13] Hannah Arendt (1951)
[14] See Lyotard (1988)

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