Cultural Trauma?
On the Most Recent Turn in Jeffrey Alexander’s Cultural Sociology

Hans Joas
MAX WEBER CENTER, ERFURT AND UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO


For many years now, Jeffrey Alexander has been – together with Richard Münch – the most fervent proponent of a neo-Parsonian approach in social theory. More than Münch, however, Alexander has distanced himself from Parsons’ own understanding of culture and attempted to integrate recent developments of cultural theory and the potential of the late-Durkheimian writings into his work. More than Parsons’ former co-author Edward Shils, Alexander is sensitive to the disruptive sides of charisma (or the sacred) and the openness of situations in which its repercussions are felt. Whereas Shmuel Eisenstadt, together with Robert Bellah perhaps the greatest student of Parsons, has devoted his life to a thorough revision of Parsonianism in the light of historical sociology, Alexander’s work focuses on the present and the recent past, on the conditions which enable the functioning of civil society and on the ‘social construction’ of moral universalism in the 20th century.1

The keyword for the most recent development of his work is ‘cultural trauma’. This concept, which is by no means plausible without further discussion, is not just seen as a useful addition to the conceptual arsenal of sociology, but as the core assumption of a far-reaching research programme. The theoretical development indicated by that term is not restricted to the writings of Alexander himself, but can be found in a circle of highly-respected sociologists whose spiritus rector Alexander undoubtedly is. The present volume Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity collects representative contributions from this circle. The list of contributors is very impressive. Next to Alexander we find Neil Smelser, who as a very young man co-authored Parsons’ work on economic sociology (Economy and Society). Like few others, Smelser retains and continues Parsons’ intense interest in the connection of sociological and psychoanalytic theorizing and is now one of the ‘elder statesmen’ of American sociology. Piotr Sztompka, the
internationally best-known Polish sociologist and current president of the *International Sociological Association*, belongs to this group; he would probably not want to be called a Neo-Parsonian but rather a Neo-Mertonian since he has always kept his distance from a grand theory à la Parsons (or Jürgen Habermas or Niklas Luhmann) and preferred to contribute to the construction of so-called middle-range theory. His empirical area of inquiry was for some time macrosocial action in the time of Poland’s major domestic conflicts prior to the collapse of communism and in the following period of transformation. Further contributors are Ron Eyerman, who, although of American origin, taught many years in Scandinavia and published important work on social movements, and finally, the German sociologist Bernhard Giesen whose investigations of German history are deeply influenced by Eisenstadt’s work while using neoparsonian theoretical means in innovative ways.

The present volume, however, is a collection and not an integrated monograph. Moreover, it is remarkable that the book is the result of a group that initially had come together to explore a different topic, namely ‘Cultural Values and Social Polarization’. As we learn from the preface, it soon turned out that ‘trauma’ – particularly so-called ‘cultural trauma’ – became more and more evident as the common denominator. Regrettably, the chapters on topics like slavery, the Holocaust or post-communist system transformation are not preceded by a theoretical chapter that delineates and integrates the shared theoretical orientation of the authors. Given the lack of such a chapter each contribution offers its own theoretical foundation. This is repetitive because the same reflections are presented several times and it is also confusing because the definitions of concepts and the basic theoretical assumptions do not seem to be fully shared by all authors. In a somewhat cryptic remark in the preface Alexander points out that Sztompka’s view of the relationship between ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ elements of trauma differs from the view of the other contributors (p. ix, n. 1). But neither Sztompka nor any other chapter offers an explicit discussion of this difference. Further (theoretical) divergences are to be found as well – I will come back to that. Because of the lack of an unambiguous and unison declaration of the theoretical approach we have to take Jeffrey Alexander’s first chapter as the foundation of the whole endeavor and indeed, Alexander seems to make that claim (p. 24). But there are serious problems with this chapter. Given the differences between the chapters, the following objections at least initially refer only to Alexander’s introduction.

Alexander starts off with a definition:

> 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. (p. 1)

How does this definition differ from the usual definitions of trauma in psychological or psychiatric handbooks? Certainly not by its reference to ‘horrendous events’ or ‘indelible marks’, which affect the formation of memory and identity
for all times and in irreversible ways. All this is part of the psychological definition of trauma as well. Whereas the psychological definition mostly refers to individuals, what is added here is a reference to collectivities. This seems justified because trauma-producing horrible events frequently do not only affect singular individuals but entire groups of people who, of course, can all be traumatized and whose social bond may have become irreversibly damaged in such a way that a collective attempt to deal with the collectively experienced horror is inevitable. The decisive innovation thus is not the reference to collectivities but the reference to culture and the accompanying 'subjectivation' of the definition of trauma (which should not be overlooked here): ‘... when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected ...’ (p. 1, emphasis added). Can the notion of trauma be extended to whole cultures? Is there such a thing as a ‘cultural’ trauma? Does a trauma depend on being defined as such by those most affected by it?

The historical context out of which the impulse to offer such a culturalist version arises, can easily be grasped. The Holocaust is, the more the temporal distance grows, more and more (and not less and less) considered as the gigantic trauma of Jews (as victims), but also of Germans and others (as perpetrators) and of mankind in general. The enslavement of the Africans deported to North America is, the more the temporal distance grows, more and more (and not less and less) defined as a trauma of the American Blacks and of US society as a whole. In this sense Alexander’s definition certainly gains plausibility and refers to social facts. It is motivated by sympathy for the victims of slavery and the Holocaust and by a concern for the cultural conditions of an expansion of moral universalism. I certainly have nothing to object to these motivations and the normative dimensions of the project. But is the approach conceptually and theoretically viable – or does it lead astray and neglect the true potential of psychological trauma research for historical sociology?

Alexander is very well aware of the tension between the psychological definition of trauma and his definition of cultural trauma. He knows that the psychological definition is in harmony with common sense when it considers traumas as events that befall actors and because of their suddenness and brute force radically overstrain their capabilities to respond. But Alexander depreciates this view immediately, when he calls it ‘lay trauma theory’ and the psychological theory of trauma its ‘academic version’ (p. 5). In view of the fact that research about trauma indubitably has its origin in medicine and psychology (and not in sociology) this conceptual move is a bit presumptuous. It is unpleasant as well because right from the beginning the reservations of the critical reader are downplayed and seen as the difficulties of the ignorant layman.

For Alexander the professional perspective is an extremely social-constructivist approach. ‘For trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society’ (p. 2). It would be absurd indeed to deny that every proposition about traumatization is a social construct, all the more so every larger interpretation of historical events and their formative role for identities. But exactly because this is true for any proposition, the constructedness as such does not allow us any conclusion regarding its truth. True statements are also
social constructions – that was already the idea of the founders of American pragmatism. Nobody should dispute the constructedness of propositions about traumatization, but the question remains whether these constructions do refer to something that has its own qualities that exert some resistance in the process of construction, whether traumas therefore are ‘nothing but’ constructions. In the case of traumas the main question is whether the statement is true that traumas can be characterized by a certain non-assimilability, by the enormous difficulty for the subject to integrate them into the available frameworks of interpretation. Therefore, the question is whether this non-assimilability can be assigned an objective status of reality or not.

Alexander not only uses the notion of lay theory in a rather polemical way, he also has several other militant slogans for those who do not follow his constructivist direction. He frequently speaks of the ‘naturalistic’ or ‘realistic’ fallacies of his adversaries. One can certainly use these names for all those who systematically ignore the interpretive dimension, but nowadays their number is rather small and not everyone blamed for these alleged fallacies falls into these categories. The most important point of the controversy thus, is the question whether the non-assimilability of the traumatic experience is an objective fact that is independent from the dynamics of cultural interpretation – or whether this is not the case.

To avoid misunderstandings, I would like to present a list of aspects in which one cannot speak about traumatization as an objective fact.

(1) It is true that one should not ignore the psychological and cultural context of an experience; the ‘same’ event can be experienced by different people in completely different ways, depending on their earlier biography and psychological predisposition, and different cultures certainly offer different repertoires for the interpretation of events. George Herbert Mead spoke of the objective reality of subjective perspectives (Mead, 1926) and I would call the fact of such different subjective experiences an objective fact. Subjective experience as such is not a construction; talking about it, however, is, and conversation certainly influences the interpretation of experiences and maybe even the experiences themselves. This influence then is again an objective fact about which one can construe true (and false) statements.

(2) My insistence on the objective character of traumatization does not mean that I deny that experiences can result from a merely imagined event. As the Chicago sociologist William Isaac Thomas famously remarked long ago, everything that is taken to be real by the actors is real in its consequences. The imagination of an event is then an objective fact even when this imagination does not comply with the facts. Similarly, the actor’s own impulses can be experienced as threatening and as traumatizing by the actor, but in this case it is the idea to be driven by e.g., a murderous or pedophile impulse that is the fact in question.

(3) Even if one has to be extremely careful at this point, it is also true that we can be traumatized by occurrences that we haven’t experienced personally.
The feeling of closeness may lead to an identification with the experiences of others. The fear that a beloved person might die, may lead to our own experience of fear of death. At the same time, a mere (cognitive) knowledge of the fact that people close to us or our ancestors have been affected might oblige us to deal with the consequences. In my view, however, the use of the notion traumatization would not be appropriate in this case.

(4) Emphasizing the objectivity of traumatic experience does not mean that one should abstract from the social dynamics of interpretation which include the dimension of power. It is correct not to consider interpretations as mere emanations from experience, and Alexander is well advised to apply the whole sociological arsenal of the 'social construction of everything' to the interpretation of traumatic experiences.

(5) It cannot be denied that the scientific concept of 'trauma' is a historical one which has not always been available. Thus, it is appropriate to reflect on its history, its 'genealogy' (Leys, 2000). But again I cannot see why this constitutes an objection against the reference of concepts to objective facts that antedate their conceptual reconstruction and are independent of it.

If these points are plausible, it should be clear that sociology despite its knowledge about the dimension of social construction has not found a way around the question what has 'really' happened, who has 'really' been affected by an event, etc. A mere reconstruction of social constructions as it is frequently undertaken and propagated today under the name of 'discourse analysis' is therefore impossible. It would not even be desirable under Alexander’s normative presuppositions. Let us take as an example the memory of the Vietnam War and its traumatic consequences – an example that appears quite frequently in the volume under review. Undoubtedly it is useful to reconstruct in a sociological manner the history of the social struggles about this memory (see my rather small contribution to this question, Joas, 2003: 111–21).3. But how should we deal with the fact that the traumatization of the Vietnamese population has hardly entered the American memory of the war? Is it no traumatization because it has not been constructed as such? Or is it an alarming sign that there are only few impulses to include the suffering of the former enemies into the American reconstruction of history? Could not one say that the impressive Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC, which individualizes the suffering of a great number of human beings by listing all the names of the more than 50,000 Americans killed in Vietnam one by one, would even be more important as a memorial against unjust wars and for reconciliation if it also tried to list the individual names of the more than three million killed Vietnamese? But where should such an impulse come from if one cannot see the suffering of the bereaved survivors in Vietnam as not fully articulated, as calling for articulation?

An easy way out of this conceptual dilemma would be to suppose two separate subject matters: namely psychological traumatization, individual or collective, and its consequences on the one hand and the so-called cultural trauma and its construction, on the other hand. Subsequently, we would have to deal with
traumatizations that are not defined as cultural traumas and with cultural traumas that are not (or no longer) based on psychological traumatizations. The concepts would be somewhat confusing, but one should not deny the legitimacy of both subject matters. But this easy way out has been blocked by Alexander who states that the concept of traumatization has to be restricted to so-called cultural traumatization and that a traumatization without a culturally victorious definition is nothing but naïve objectivism. Cultural classification, he writes ‘is critical to the process by which a collectivity becomes traumatized’ (p. 15) or ‘experiencing trauma’ can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility and distributes the ideal and material consequences’ (p. 22). Here the line to a relativist constructionism has clearly been crossed. I agree with Alexander when he asks why certain events – like the Japanese atrocities of Nanking – have become so much less a part of cultural memory than other occurrences (p. 26) and this holds true for many atrocities committed in the non-Western world. Mark Mazower (2002) has convincingly argued that the pattern of the ‘Holocaust’ cannot help us to understand most of them. It is also true that the explanation for this difference cannot be the ‘intrinsic nature of the original suffering’ (p. 26), as – according to Alexander – the ‘lay trauma theory’ (for which he does not give references) assumes. But whereas it would be naïve to take the extent of a traumatization to be the only variable for explaining the emergence of a cultural definition of trauma, it would just be this naïveté in reverse to draw the attention exclusively to cultural processes of definition and away from the challenging task to reconstruct the consequences of a suffering that has difficulties to make itself heard.

This problem becomes particularly salient at an especially critical point – in Alexander’s criticism of the work of the American historian Peter Novick. According to Alexander, Novick states ‘that the Holocaust became central to contemporary history because it became central to America, that it became central to America because it became central to America’s Jewish community, and that it became central to Jews because it became central to the ambitions of Jewish organizations who were central to the mass media in all its forms’.

Novick, one should add, explicitly criticizes an explanation of the memory of the Holocaust in the USA out of the dynamics of trauma. According to him the historical sources do not make it plausible that the majority of Jewish Americans – not to mention their non-Jewish fellow citizens – was traumatized by the Holocaust. While Alexander’s empirical statements rely exclusively on historiographical work and not on primary sources (and in this connection Novick’s book is a rich source for him), he sharply rejects Novick’s interpretation. He calls his analysis ‘rendentious’ and expresses the contrast between his own approach and that of Novick in the language of social theory: ‘ “To employ the categories of classical sociological theory, Novick might be described as offering an instrumentally oriented “status group” explanation à la Weber, in contrast to the more culturally oriented late-Durkheim approach taken here”’ (Alexander, 2002: 73). But an empirical question cannot be decided by labeling one’s
opponent in metatheoretical terms. Alexander does not want to deny the role of power, interests, or status groups; he just wants to avoid reductionism. But this laudable anti-reductionist impulse remains ineffective against the empirical assertion that in a specific case specific interests are the decisive explanatory variable and, although interests can be pursued only along the tracks of larger cultural ideas, specific ideas are not really relevant in a specific case. When Alexander – in addition to the point just mentioned – describes Novick’s approach as ‘a particularization of the Holocaust – its being captured by Jewish identity politics’ and his own as ‘universalization’, we are dealing not with two theories but rather two different topics. Novick probably would not refute Alexander’s questions; he just denies that the actual dynamics of the American memory of the Holocaust can be understood on the basis of the inner logic of trauma processes. And this objection cannot be disapproved by references to a late-Durkheimian approach nor to an interest in the origins of universalization processes. A provisional summary of my argument thus could be that Alexander does not make a clear distinction between psychological and social consequences of traumas on the one hand and the social construction of cultural memory and a phenomenon called ‘trauma’ on the other hand. His interest in the second topic leads him to depreciate the first and not pursue it at all. Because this remains conceptually unclear, his text becomes entangled in contradictions.

How do the other contributors deal with this problem in their case studies? I will not do full justice to all the aspects of these chapters, but restrict myself to the crucial question of the relationship between (socio-) psychological research on trauma and the concept of ‘cultural trauma’.

Neil Smelser describes the history of the psychological notion of trauma before, in and after Sigmund Freud in more detail than Alexander. After his competent account, however, the text shows the same ambiguity as that of Alexander. Is it the intention of the research about ‘cultural trauma’ to get beyond socio-psychological research on trauma or does it deal with a different subject matter that is unfortunately called ‘cultural trauma’ instead of simply being part and parcel of the research about collective memory? It does not really get clear in this chapter.

Ron Eyerman’s interesting study of ‘Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity’ (pp. 60–111) is less ambiguous because it deals exclusively with the topic of memory. This is instructive in itself. But it also implies that the question to what extent the culture of American blacks has indeed been affected by the original individual and collective traumatizations of slavery remains untouched. This is remarkable since there have been substantive controversies in American sociology – for example around the Moynihan Report – about the question whether the fragility of family structures in the contemporary black underclass is somehow causally connected to the difficulties for responsible male behaviour under the conditions of slavery in the past.

In Bernhard Giesen’s study the psychological (and not the cultural) concept of trauma seems to be the guiding thread. He has contributed an excellent case study: ‘The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference...
of German National Identity’ (pp. 112–54). Given that the traumatization of the perpetrators of violent acts is seldom studied – a fact that is psychologically understandable, but analytically harmful – his text is innovative in several respects. Giesen makes it very clear that 1945 was a trauma for many Germans. The shocking insight into the criminal nature of the regime in whose deeds one had been involved until recently led to the sudden loss of self-respect and moral integrity (p. 115). He could have asked a little bit more intensely, perhaps, whether the long period of silence about the Holocaust in almost the whole world does not put into question the trauma-theoretical explanation. But for the problem at hand his analysis of the German conflicts in the late 1960s is especially important: ‘. . . it was not only the conflict between generations but also a shift from personal memories, silenced or reconstructed in micro-conversations, to the remembrance of the past by public discourse carried by those who did not take part and could not refer to personal memories’ (p. 130). This summary is especially important because it offers a description of the collision between the two levels that I am trying to distinguish conceptually. The traumatized perpetrators quarrel with their children whose views on war and Nazism were formed in school and through the media. The situation was even more complex because one would also have to describe how and to what extent these ‘children’ witnessed the silence of their parents or their ‘micro-conversations’.

Piotr Sztompka’s case study ‘The Trauma of Social Change: A Case of Post-communist Societies’ (pp. 155–95) shows that traumatization can be caused even by a rapid positive change, that sudden awakenings can be traumatic and that traumas can entail destructive cycles. This is very fruitful, but as a whole his chapter is characterized by an extremely wide notion of trauma so that almost every social change would have to be seen as traumatic. It is quite plausible to assert that even the most beautiful progress entails a loss that we may mourn. However, such a broad use of the concept of trauma this is problematical. Moreover, Sztompa seems to assume that traumatization may be avoided if ‘events or situations with objectively strong traumatizing potential . . . are explained away, rationalized, reinterpreted in ways that make them invisible, innocuous, or even benign or beneficial’ (p. 165). This assumption completely contradicts the psychological understanding of trauma. And he admits: ‘postcommunist trauma seems to enter the healing phase relatively quickly’ (p. 189). But he does not ask whether such a rapid healing raises the question if one can speak about trauma here in the first place.

What can we conclude from this reasoning with regard to the question whether there is such a thing as a ‘cultural trauma’? No doubt, there is such a claim in our culture, and Alexander has taken it as his point of departure (see the Holocaust and slavery). The sociological investigation of the emergence and dissemination of this claim is certainly useful. However this aspect should not be conflated with the question what the consequences of actual personal traumatization are. ‘Cultural traumas’ are neither the presupposition for individual traumatization nor their consequence. Individual traumatization as such does not depend on its cultural definition as trauma – although this cannot be the last
word on the dynamics of experience and articulation. Alexander overshoots the
mark with his theory of cultural trauma. His ‘culturalism’ should be checked by
an ‘experientialism’.

Whoever defends the concept of experience and insists on its crucial role for
cultural and social theory may be blamed for falling back into the time prior to
the linguistic turn. But that is not the point here. What we need is a reconstruc-
tion of cultural innovation processes as an interplay of processes on four levels:
the situations with their own qualitative immediacy, our pre-reflective responses
to such situations, our own articulation of these pre-reflective responses, and
publicly available and established interpretations. One can call this whole process
the dynamics of the articulation of experiences. Such articulation always takes
place in a field of power and interests and not in a vacuum. I cannot elaborate
on this here. But this brief hint may be sufficient to make the point that we are
not confronted with the dilemma of choosing between ignorance toward the
interpretive mediation of social processes or a mere reconstruction of interpretive
regimes. Alexander’s culturalist conception of cultural trauma does not help to
find a way out of this dilemma.

Notes

1 I have critically accompanied Alexander’s (and Münch’s) development for a long time
(see Hans Joas and Wolfgang Knoebl, 2004: 430–73, particularly 467–73, and my

2 See the definition of post-traumatic stress disorders by the American Psychiatric
Association:

The development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme
traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of an event that involves
actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical
integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury or a threat to the
physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death,
serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other
close associate. (quoted by Smelser in this volume, p. 57)

3 Smelser (p. 59) asserts that the classification of the effects of ‘combat stress’ as medical
symptoms can be an incentive for veterans to acquire this label because it justifies
claims for compensation. In contrast, I have emphasized that the struggle for the
definition of such effects of combat stress as trauma can itself be part of one’s dealing
with trauma. Empirically both statements can be true, of course. See also Wilbur J.

4 Alexander’s chapter does not contain all the notes of the previous publication. In this
context, however, they are particularly important (Alexander 2002: 5–85, esp. 72–4).

5 For a further elaboration see Joas (2000: 132–6) (following Charles Taylor), Joas
Eleven devoted a recent issue to Alexander’s work. Two contributions do offer some
support for the critical question I am asking. Emirbayer asks in his laudatory intro-
duction whether a culturalist model, no matter how sophisticated, can fully make
sense of what are not merely symbolic, but also specifically collective emotional processes’ (2004: 10) and Kurasawa sees an ‘occasional slippage between . . . strong and weak versions of social constructivism’ (2004: 569) in Alexander’s epistemology.

References


Hans Joas  born 1948 in Munich, Germany, is currently Director of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, Erfurt, Germany, and Professor of Sociology and Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Among his publications are: G.H. Mead. *A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought*, 1985/1997; *Social Action and Human Nature* (with Axel Honneth), 1988; *Pragmatism and Social Theory*, 1993; *The Creativity of Action*, 1996; *The Genesis of Values*, 2000; *War and Modernity*, 2003. Two new books came out in German in 2004: *Braucht der Mensch Religion?* and *Sozialtheorie* (with Wolfgang Knoebl).