

ANTI-THESIS

No Such Thing as Society? A Critique of Hegemonic Notions of Trauma in the Research on Cultural Production

Felix Lang

The notion of trauma is widely used in contemporary research on literature, film, music, and other forms of cultural production in the Arab world. Building on a tradition of trauma studies in the humanities, much of this work is predicated on an essentialist and naturalized notion of trauma as developed in the seminal work of the literary scholar Cathy Caruth, among others. In this article I suggest that

such a notion of trauma is problematic as it depoliticizes human suffering and marginalizes non-hegemonic ways of dealing with experiences of violence. In order to address these problems, I propose to turn to social constructivist approaches to trauma.

Keywords: Cultural Trauma, Literature, Film, Arab World, Trauma Studies

Violence and human suffering have long occupied an important place in scholarship on the Arab world. Notions of individual and collective trauma would seem to lend themselves to the analysis of cultural products from Moroccan prison literature to Lebanese post-civil war visual art as well as the social and political contexts in which they are produced. Indeed, we have seen the development of a substantial body of research in this field over the past twenty years. What is seldom questioned in these accounts are the assumptions about the relations between the individual, the social, and the political implicitly carried by the trauma paradigm. As I will argue in the following, the espousal of an essentialist, naturalized notion of trauma puts much research in the humanities at risk of uncritically perpetuating a trauma paradigm that depoliticizes human suffering and marginalizes non-hegemonic ways of dealing with experiences of violence. Taking the lead from the social sciences and scholars like Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander et al.), Didier Fassin, and Richard Rechtman (Fassin and Rechtman), I want to propose a social constructivist approach to trauma as a basis for a self-reflexive use of the term in our research.

In the most current notions of trauma in the humanities, such as Caruth's psychoanalytically informed work (Caruth), trauma is the result of an event so gravely interfering with basic human needs for safety, order, and love that it cannot be integrated into a person's existing conceptual framework. In other words, the experience cannot be processed and the *truth* of the event is hidden in the unconscious and only surfaces in the form of symptoms. Trauma appears as a direct response of the individual to a particular type of event, a kind of psychological reflex. This naturalist or essentialist notion of trauma brackets out the social—except as a stimulus. This is all the more surprising when we take a look at the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the official diagnosis which became the heir of traumatic neurosis in the early 1980s (cf. Fassin and Rechtman 77-97). The lists of potentially traumatic events and symptoms potentially related to traumatic experiences stretch over two pages in the current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Organisation 275-276). In other words, psychiatrists present us with a system of classification in which *trauma* groups together diverse forms of human suffering. This classification, as all classifications, is a social product, and it is

as such that *trauma* acquires a crucial role in individuals' lives. Through social recognition as trauma, suffering becomes legitimate—and it becomes so as the result of political struggles of women's groups, Vietnam veterans, and many other groups (Fassin 77-97; Leys 5). That trauma came to be understood as the effect of an extraordinary event on an ordinary person, rather than the response of a somewhat deficient individual to otherwise ordinary events, (Fassin and Rechtman 86) in the early 1980s is not so much a greater approximation of some *objective truth* about relations between violence and human suffering as a moral re-evaluation of the phenomenon.

When bracketing out the social seems at least questionable on the individual level, it is on the level of collective traumata that an essentialist notion of trauma becomes untenable. As Alexander has shown (Alexander), cultural traumata do not come into being in a direct and non-reflexive response to a historic event but are the product of what he terms the trauma process through which a certain event becomes recognized as *traumatic* by a social group.

Scholars of the humanities with a research focus on trauma, just as many other actors

who deal with it professionally, such as the humanitarian aid organizations on which Fassin focusses, and of course artists themselves, contribute to the traumatization of events and experiences in two different ways. On the one hand, scholars are claiming for a certain group of victims the legitimacy of trauma by tracing its effects in cultural products. On the other hand, where artists themselves make use of the aesthetic repertoire connected to trauma, scholars act as self-appointed spokespersons—indeed, much of the appeal of the concept of trauma for the humanities seems to stem from the moral urge to make heard the voices of those who are marginalized and to confirm a shared humanity through the universality of trauma.

Recognizing the agency of artists and scholars in these processes is the first step towards a critical and self-reflexive approach to trauma that avoids the “naturalistic fallacy” (8).¹ To be clear, my intention is not to dispute that the experience of violence can produce human suffering. However, as soon as a system of classification for the objectively observable symptoms is developed, it becomes a social construct. Once we acknowledge the social dimension and the social uses of trauma, the artists and scholars' decision

to traumatize works of art is open to debate. Far from being a neutral clinical diagnosis, trauma becomes an instrument and stake in social and political struggles, in which researchers and artists inevitably position themselves—a fact that is of particular importance when dealing with a part of the world which finds itself in a dominated position in the global field of power, such as the Middle East and North Africa.

Trauma, as it used in much of humanities research today, is editing out the social. On the individual level, it does so by positing an autonomous individual confronted with stimuli from its environment. On the collective level, it constructs a social body—a *collective individual*, if you will—whose responses to the outside world are modelled on individual trauma. While the psychiatrist finds the symptoms of PTSD in the individual's behavior, the humanities scholar diagnoses whole social groups and societies with trauma based on their symptomatic cultural products. This focus on the traumatizing event and the traumatized subject leads to a de-contextualization of human suffering. Such de-contextualization relegates to the background social, political, and economic (structural) reasons for human suffering and helps to stabilize

the power relations that characterize the status quo.

Initially, the most alluring feature of trauma theory in its essentialist guise is probably the notion that the universality of trauma offers a way of fostering understanding and solidarity across cultures. When the *traumatic* event and the response of the individual became the focus of attention with the redefinition of traumatic neurosis as PTSD in 1980, hierarchies of suffering were abolished: the suffering of the Holocaust survivor, the Vietnam veteran, the child abuse victim, and the Syrian refugee are equally legitimate. However, the question of how the conditions in which traumatic situations arise have come about in the first place appears of minor importance. Particularly when we deal with trauma as a result of warfare and repression of authoritarian regimes, as in the case of the Middle East, abstracting from the structural inequalities that lie at the heart of man-made violence and trauma leads to an obfuscation of the political stakes involved. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the dominance of the language of trauma in articulating human suffering offers the role of the victim as the only possible role for entering the political arena (Fassin and Rechtman 211-212). This is precisely where the notion

of trauma becomes problematic: it limits the ways political grievances can be articulated and trades recognition of trauma for recognition of the causes for human suffering in social inequality, political power struggles, and economic interests. Accepting as a given the existence of *traumatizing events*, it functions to contain the threat posed to the power structures by those who have suffered and continue to suffer from the violence they produce.

The dialectic that turns a notion of trauma that emancipated victims from the moral judgment of society into an instrument of the political disempowerment of social groups in dominated positions is also evident in the marginalization and devaluation of ways of dealing with human suffering that do not conform to the hegemonic trauma paradigm. The importance of bearing witness to traumatic experiences, and the necessity of their recognition as such for overcoming their effects, on an individual and collective level, is an interesting case in point. For instance, Kidron compares children of survivors of the Cambodian Khmer Rouge regime in Canada and second generation Holocaust survivors. In Khmer families, the silence surrounding the experiences of the genocide is not experienced as oppressive. The parents' experiences, no doubt *traumatic*

Felix Lang

holds a PhD in Arabic Literature and Culture from the University of Marburg. He is a postdoctoral research fellow in the department of Arabic Literature and Culture at the University of Marburg, coordinator of the *Figures of Thought | Turning Points* research group (DFG-Leibniz), and author of *The Lebanese Post-Civil War Novel: Memory, Trauma, and Capital*.
email: felix.lang@staff.uni-marburg.de

in the DSM classification, are not being traumatized in the community's discourse and fail to produce the expected symptoms, a fact that Kidron puts down to a set of social, religious, and economic reasons (Kidron, "Silent Legacies"; "Alterity"). The parents' silence, in this case, is not experienced as unsettling by the children; it is seen as a sign of strength. While such non-hegemonic ways of dealing with human suffering are routinely pursued on the level of the individual and smaller social groups—albeit without being recognized as legitimate—the state of affairs is very different on the level of society. Here, witnessing and testimony have become central elements in the process of dealing with human suffering on a collective level, which has become a global norm for dealing with the violent past in post-conflict societies. Truth commissions, such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and other transitional justice mechanisms, including international criminal courts (e.g. Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia) that have been developed from the 1990s onwards (see Simić for an overview) make clear how the notion of trauma is projected on the social plane and used to implement a hegemonic memory regime, which, incidentally, sidelines socio-economic questions (Miller; Nagy). Deviations from the norm, as in for

instance post-civil war Lebanon with its memory cultures fragmented along communitarian lines, are frequently condemned on moral grounds. On the other hand, an initiative like the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, which dealt with human rights abuses during the Years of Lead (1959-1999) in Morocco and ultimately served to legitimize an authoritarian regime, is met with approval by the international community. Making trauma the prism through which human suffering as a result of socio-political conflicts is perceived opens the door to imposing a way of dealing with the past that serves the interests of the dominant players in the field of power, in particular the states of western Europe and the US, for instance by ignoring socio-economic reasons for conflict.

That said, my argument should not be misconstrued as summarily rejecting trauma as an idiom for articulating human suffering. Neither do I claim that non-hegemonic ways of doing so are necessarily less problematic. But whatever idiom we chose to talk about human suffering in its many guises and forms, we need to be aware that this choice is a political one.

Notes

¹The established critique of trauma as a Eurocentric concept still adheres to a naturalistic notion of trauma. It aims to extend the notion of trauma to include, and thus recognise as legitimate, modes of suffering restricted to minorities and postcolonial subjects. See Andermahr for a recent overview; also Craps.

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