Mediatizing Traumas in the Risk Society. A Sociology of Emotions Approach

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Introduction

In mainstream clinical psychology the study of traumatization emerged in the end of the seventies and early eighties (Ehrenreich 2003). In cultural sociology and cultural studies at large, studying traumas is a relatively fresh social-scientific endeavor. It is without doubt attributable to the legacy of the Holocaust, the other atrocities of the World War II, the numerous civil wars, the veterans' experience of the Vietnam War, the racial and ethnic conflicts, the crimes committed by military regimes and dictatorships, the gender inequalities and the concomitant politics of recognition that contributed to their formation. They have been also fueled by the more recent experiences of post communist nationalist conflicts and genocides (in Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Rwanda and elsewhere), the terrorist attacks in New York, Madrid and London as well as by the so called war against terrorism, the dramatic natural disasters and the abundance of hazardous environmental conditions due to human activity. In a way, from Japan and China to South Africa, and from Northern Ireland and Kosovo to Latin America, the contemporary world seems to be haunted by traumatic memories intrinsically related to the (re)construction of national and local histories, and the (re)formation of collective identities. It is not accidental, therefore, that a number of scholars talk about our times and culture as "trauma time" (Edkins 2003, xiv) and "the culture of trauma" (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 2). Nor is it accidental that the new sub-fields of memory studies, trauma studies and disaster studies have appeared in social science and humanities in tandem with the sociology of emotions.

Of course, national identities have been always constructed via the interplay of remembering and forgetting that forges the difference with the national Other, the reference to a national heartland, the testimonial of predecessors' blood, and the selective, as it were, definition of righteous

victims and villain perpetrators. All these are old and familiar discursive strategies. What is new in the post-Cold War period is not only the perpetuation of wars and violence that produce new victims and traumas, as horrendous as they might be, but two additional elements: Firstly, in the newly formed international environment almost everybody (states, groups, nationalities, ethnicities, movements, etc) wants to take the position of the victim without currently being one; in a time when victimhood and survivor status have attained substantial symbolic value, they wish that they had been victims in the past, without wishing to be in the present (Todorov 1995; Koulouri 2002). This helps them to legitimize current acts of violence in the name of a discursively elaborated, in other words mythologized, past (e.g. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Secondly, the generalization of traumatic experiences of all sorts and, what is more, the global dissemination of their (tele)visualization calls for a newly, late modern, emerging politics of pity and moral stance, which is no less ambivalent than modern ethics.

The central purpose of this essay is to connect the cultural sociological notion of trauma with the notion of risk society and look at them through the perspective of the sociology of emotions. This is accomplished by exploring the links between memory and trauma studies, on the one hand, and delving into the moral consequences of the visualization of traumatic experiences, on the other.

Cultural-Social and Psychic Trauma

As a matter of fact, scholars engaged in trauma/memory studies, either directly and extensively or latently and minimally, refer to the concept of psychic trauma, as it has been originally outlined by Freud. Obviously, there is a huge time interval separating the concept of cultural-social trauma and the concept of psychic or psychological trauma and the vicissitudes of the traumatic in psychoanalytic literature. From his *Studies on Hysteria* (Freud and Breuer 1956) up to *Moses* (1986), Freud attributes a key position to the concept in order to understand the (dys)functions of the psychic organ. On the other side of the Atlantic, for twenty-five years now, under the pressure of the anti-war and feminist movements and also of the psychic diseases of the veterans of Vietnam, the American Psychiatric

Association in 1980 added a new category in its diagnostic guide: the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Therefore, "trauma" either as a psychoanalytic or as a clinical psychological concept has been present for many decades (Edkins 2003, 2–3, 42–3).

On the contrary, "cultural-social trauma" is a much newer concept that taps a multitude of social phenomena which are related to the transgressing of the boundaries and terms of reproduction of social systems and sub-systems (crises, wars, risks, ethnic cleansings, genocides, etc.). It is forwarded systematically as a distinct sociological concept referring to institutional changes, to the constitution of collective memory and to forms of collective action; doing that, it steers clear from similar notions advocated by psychologists ("mass trauma," "collective trauma," "historical trauma," etc.) which are quite un-theorized or treated deterministically according to applied psychosocial models (Ehrenreich 2003; Pupavac 2007). In this section I shall attempt to trace the elective affinities and the differences between the psychic-clinical and the cultural-social trauma, proposing thus a reflective intersection of the two which may give a more articulate frame of analysis.

Relating the Two Concepts

Transcribed to the semantic field of *cultural sociology,* the concept of cultural-social trauma has been elaborated by Alexander et al. (2004). This transcription was thought to be necessary since a significant amount of bibliography had already been published in the fields of psychology, psychoanalysis, social psychology and literary criticism, where "trauma" occupied a central position (Leys 2000; Kansteiner 2004). The authors wanted to differentiate themselves from previous uses of the term, especially from psychological/psychoanalytic ones, in order to point out its significance in the analysis of social (not personal) issues and phenomena. However, they did not discuss the way in which their theory is related to the newly-formed sociological "trauma" studies—or even to the destruction studies—, to the formation of which both psychology and psychoanalysis has notably contributed (Misztal 2003, 139). Had they demonstrated such a relation, the links between their cultural sociological approach of trauma would join ranks with the psychoanalytic point of view.

In any case, by establishing a locus of differentiation, the authors have come across to think that even when people experience simultaneously and massively a negative, harmful or catastrophic, event (such as, for example, a 9 Richter "global" earthquake), it is inadequate to outline a discourse of "cultural" or/and "social" trauma. This is because an event of massive proportions of catastrophes lacks subjective meaning; cultural-social trauma involves the realization (in both meanings of the word, that is as becoming conscious of something and as something becoming real) of a common plight. It has to be defined collectively as such in order to influence the systems of reference of a whole society or, at least, of a significant part of it and change established roles, norms, and narratives. In other words, it has to function as a total social event and not just as the aggregate of numerous individual experiences. A traumatogenic event (whether it is the result of a natural disaster or a social dislocation like, for example, a civil war) does not in itself constitute a "trauma." In order to become "trauma," it has to undergo a process of social signification; namely, it has to be signified and become socially accepted and constructed as "trauma."[1]

However, the adoption of social constructionism cannot sustain the sharp differentiation of the cultural from the psychological trauma in the manner, as well as to the degree that the aforementioned authors argue—especially Alexander (2004; 2003, 85–107). To be more precise: when Alexander states that trauma does not draw "naturally" from the events themselves (as a commonplace understanding based on the positivism of the PTSD would have it, a position that he lingers over psychoanalysis as well), but from their representation and social-semantic definition, it would be arguable that such a position violates open doors. By mentioning, for instance, that cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel that they have suffered a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories for ever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways (2004, 1), Alexander doesn't only go beyond the Freudian conceptualization of trauma, but he positions himself as being outmoded, to a certain extent.

1 According to Sztompka's definition (2004, 165–6), "The cultural traumas generated by major social changes and triggered by traumatizing conditions and situations interpreted as threatening, unjust and improper, are expressed by complex social moods, characterized by a number of collective emotions, orientations and attitudes" (my emphasis).

This is because the trauma of the earlier, at least, childhood, according to Freud, may well be a crack of the protective shield (Reizschutz), but still it is always a retrospective experience, whose meaning is always constructed a posteriori (Laplanche and Pontalis 1986, 503–7).

Traumas are at first repressed, stay latent and are then retrieved if and when the right circumstances exist, acquiring thereof a meaning for the subject. So, psychic trauma does not follow automatically. Emerging as a symptom (neurosis of traumatic causation) at a latter time, when the subject faces circumstances which activate repressed negative feelings and when the defense mechanisms start to be loosened, psychic trauma is always a reconstruction.

Therefore, the psychic traumas as well as the cultural trauma are belated experiences, a memory and a reconstruction of a negative encounter. As a matter of fact, for Freud (1986, 317) the psychic trauma does not necessarily result from a bodily experience or a consequence of a specific event (as in the case of cultural trauma). It could well be a completion of an impression or a fantasy. From this point of view, Freud articulates a more radical constructionism than the one professed by Alexander, who nonetheless merely mentions (2004, 8–9) that sometimes events that are deeply traumatizing may not actually have occurred at all.

Another common characteristic of the two concepts is the intense and continuous impact of the traumatic experience: largely, cultural trauma brings about irreversible changes to collective memory and identity; psychic trauma brings about durable harmful effects to the psychic constitution of the subject. However, not all of the negative and hurtful circumstances lead to trauma (whether cultural-social or clinical-psychic). It is the process of social construction (e.g. cultures of revenge are conducive to trauma formation *vis-a-vis* cultures of forgiveness) that transforms selectively a risky and painful condition into "trauma" as a boundary mark of social memory and collective identity. Likewise, according to Freud (2003, 85–6), a traumatizing condition is converted into trauma when its "quantity" is such that the dynamics of the pleasure principle cannot master it any more. In both cases, the "pre-traumatic" conditions selectively determine to a high degree the very formation of trauma, as well as the post-traumatic stage. The experience of good motherhood, of a developed ego-ideal, the ability to work through and incorporate, are certain internal pre-traumatic factors that bound the formation of psychic trauma and allow for the individual's adjustment to the post-traumatic

environment, reducing in that way the manifestation of symptoms. Correspondingly, cultural trauma always poses a question: "trauma for whom?" This is so because the inequality of economic, symbolic, social and political capital influences—if not determines altogether—the vulnerability of the particular social groups facing the traumatizing circumstances. Not everyone suffers from trauma in the same way nor does everyone adopt the same strategies for dealing with it (Sztompka 2004, 166–7). With regards to war traumas one could argue that there are manifold personal, political and social factors, as well as domestic and international circumstances, which mediate war experiences and influence whether an individual does or does not become traumatized (Pupavac 2007).

Neil Smelser tries to develop a more sophisticated articulation of psychic and cultural-social trauma. He makes extensive use of Freudian and other psychoanalytic and psychological texts and, by avoiding psychological reductionism, proposes a fourfold typology of the mechanisms for dealing with trauma—mainly psychic trauma (denial, projection, reaction formation, and depersonalization). Adopting the paradigm of social constructionism, Smelser (2004, 44) offers the most complete definition of cultural trauma:

> "A memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation, which is (a) laden with 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."

Drawing on empirical material from the American Civil War, Pearl Harbor, the internment of American citizens of Japanese descent in 1942, Vietnam and September 11th—and in accordance to the above definition—he shows that the study of cultural-social trauma should be articulated within the sphere of three interrelated levels: the cognitive, the emotive and the mnemonic. He argues (2004, 36–7) that a given historical event or situation may qualify as trauma at one moment in a society's history but not in another, and while that event may not be traumatic for other societies is more likely to constitute trauma in afflicted societies. Hence, "cultural traumas are for the most part historically made, not born." He also emphasizes the selective nature of memory, stressing the mediating role of intellectuals, social movements, the media, journalists, educational institutions and various other moral entrepreneurs. Cultural trauma has to be understood, explained and publicly represented through discourse.

Since cultural traumas do not arise by themselves and *ex nihilo*, then, arguably, they are the historical products of discursive (re)constructions. A classic case in point is presented by the traumatic narratives of origin that deal with the (re)birth of the nation: mostly, this formation means wars, genocides, sacrifices and losses which are the cornerstones upon which nations, as imaginary political communities, are founded. Such shaping involves the interplay between memory and oblivion in the selective invention of a tradition on the base of which collective identities are constituted (Demertzis 1996, 95–100; Misztal 2003, 37–49, 139–45). In this process there are various interests fighting against each other, from the top (elite) as well as from the bottom (the people, the underdogs etc.), since the traumatic content of an event has to prevail retroactively and hegemonize the alternative conceptions. This process is a kind of "symbolic struggle," a "drama of trauma," and a "speech act" *a la* Austin, whose outcome leaves deep traces on collective identity, on the networks of social capital and on the personality structure.

Another elective affinity between the psychic and the cultural trauma, following Smelser's argumentation, is that both concepts give birth to, and are accompanied by, negative feelings and emotions. Terror, anxiety, fear, shame, humiliation, anger, disgust and guilt are some of the negative feelings stirred by the breaking of the social bond and the normative system of reference. Smelser is categorical as to the importance of affect in the analysis of cultural trauma: "if a potentially traumatizing event cannot be endowed with negative affect (e.g. a national tragedy, a national shame, a national catastrophe), then it cannot qualify as being traumatic" (2004, 40). One could argue that the "universal language" of the basic negative emotions as described by Ekman (1993) i.e. fear, anger, sadness, disgust, is necessary in the negotiation of the meaning of a traumatic event.[2] If the

2 The "universal language" of the basic emotions does not imply a naturalist conception of emotion in general. To my mind, basic emotions provide a minimum of affective universals, a thin foundation whereby an infinite array of situationally formed emotions flourish. Between the strong cases of the organic and the extreme constructionist approach, I adopt an intermediate approach of mild constructionism, based on the idea that everything is not a construction or constructable with regard to emotions. A contemporary historian summarizes what Hume, James and other great thinkers of emotions took for granted: "nearly everyone agrees that there is a biological substratum to emotions that simply cannot be denied, but emotions themselves are extremely plastic" (Rosenwein 2001, 231). See also Kövecses' (2000) formulation of "body-based social constructionism," which he argues enables us to see anger and its counterparts as both universal and culture specific.

impetus of negative affects is not activated, an event cannot be defined and interjected as threatening, disastrous, harmful, and so on.

It could be argued, however, that affection also offers an additional account equally important to our argument: this account refers both to the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic bridge which connects the cultural and the psychic trauma. A cultural trauma may bring about dramatic changes and ruptures to the systems of reference and the politico-economic structures of a society or a wide social group (a civil war for example); yet, it is the individuals as individuals who interiorize and feel the impact of these societal changes, so that the trauma of the macro-level (cultural-social trauma) is retranslated in terms of the micro-level (psychic-personal and clinical trauma). As we know from the sociology of emotion, emotions[3] are links that join the collective and the individual, social structures and individual behavior; in addition, emotions are seen as intervening variables in the maintenance, modification, or disruption of society (Barbalet 1998, 27). This holds true for the psychology of emotions as well; for Oatley and Jenkins (1996, 122, 124, 130) emotions structure our relations with others in the sense that they establish, maintain, change, or terminate the relation between the person and the environment on matters of significance to the person.

Finally, Smelser insists on the analogy of the defense and working through mechanisms in both kinds of trauma, clinical and cultural. He underscores the "displacement" and "projection" with regards to the attribution of responsibility and the rationalization of trauma. In situations of cultural trauma, moral panics, the demonization of the other, scapegoats, expiatory victims, conspiratorial explanations of history, and so on, constitute defense mechanisms which belong to the same class as those concerning psychic trauma. Another similar defense mechanism is the double tendency of remembering and forgetting. For one and the same traumatic event, precisely because it constitutes a field of competing interpretations and significations, there is, on the one hand, the demand to

3 Often in the sociology of emotion the terms "emotion," "feeling," "affect," "sentiment" and "passion" are used interchangeably. This is not the place to raise the question of the definition of emotion which ultimately leads to an endless and counterintuitive argumentation. However, for the sake of the argument I offer hereby a working definition; by "emotion" (or feeling) I refer to the arousal of the human organism that takes place within a definite time context, involves awareness but not necessarily verbalization, and induces readiness for action and evaluations of objects, relations and situations.

"leave everything behind us," but there is also the injunction to "preserve our historical memory." By way of analogy, in clinical cases of psychic traumas we can observe in one and the same person denial and avoidance (amnesia, emotional paralysis, repression, etc.), but also the reliving of trauma through repetition compulsion.

Dismembering the Two Concepts

It is clear that there are a number of common elements between the social-cultural and the psychic trauma: they are both retroactive constructions, they are accompanied by negative feelings, they leave permanent traces and activate similar defense mechanisms. So, where lays their differences? It would be an outmoded mistake to point them at the micro *versus* macro pseudo-differentiation. Freud himself (1986; 1977) had from the very start relativized the distinction between individual and social psychology, and modern social theory has long ago aimed at the non-reductive bridging of the gap between the macro and the micro level (Giddens 1984, 139–44).

There are three fundamental differences between the two concepts. As Eyerman suggests (2001, 3; 2004, 61), we can still talk of cultural trauma without it having been necessarily felt by everyone, directly or indirectly. In order for a cultural trauma to exist it does not have to be felt directly by everyone, since some take it up indirectly from the selective social memory (as happens to the next generations of a civil war or a genocide), and it does not have to involve everyone. Obviously, not all Jews were equally affected by the Nazi's "final solution," plenty of them actually exempted it; yet it does not follow that they have not been affected by the Holocaust trauma (Lev-Wiesel 2007). Cultural-social trauma is not only grounded on group-specific communicative or social memories—i.e. commonly shared bad memories experienced personally and instigating a host of negative emotions—but on cultural or historical memories which are not necessarily lived first hand by everyone. In memory studies, "cultural" or "historical" memories are those which exist independent of their carriers, are institutionally shaped via a number of mnemotechniques and mediated by books, commemorating holidays, media, educational systems, popular culture and so on (Levy and Sznaider 2002). Of course, they elicit negative emotions as well. In both ways, therefore, traumas mark collective memory, thus molding the socialization mechanisms and the identity

formation processes of the generations to come. Even if some or many people are exempt from this process, the cultural-social trauma does not stop existing and producing permanent effects. Something like that cannot be said, of course, not even by way of analogy, about the psychic-clinical trauma.

The second difference has to do with the mechanisms of instituting and sustaining trauma. Clinical trauma is constituted and administered by the inner-psychic mechanisms of repression, denial, adjustment and working through. On the contrary, cultural trauma results from discursive-authoritative mechanisms of defining (and therefore instituting) an event as being traumatic (Smelser 2004, 38–9; Edkins 2003, 44–5). Competing issue claimers, interest groups, the organic and traditional intellectuals of Gramsci or the free-floating intellectuals of Mannheim, and the media contest for: a) the very existence of the traumatic event itself (e.g. the dispute concerning the truth of the Holocaust), b) its interpretation (was the 1946–49 clash in Greece a "civil war" or an "insurgence of gangs?"), c) the proper accompanying emotions (anger, sadness, nostalgia, guilt, shame, disgust, pride, etc.).

The third difference is that the psychic trauma may well not be related to a particular event, but to be structured around a fantasy. On the contrary, cultural trauma is always formed by referring to an event, whose accuracy, memory and significance is negotiable. Cultural-social trauma is related to an event or events whose significance and meaning may be negotiated and constructed discursively; its meaning is not derived out of thin air, as there is a factual basis, whatever its exactness, prior to any symbolic mediation. Its "fate" (i.e. its characterization as trauma or not) depends on the specific "regime of signification." Two examples elucidate this argument: in early December 1938 the Japanese army invaded China and slaughtered 300.000 civilian Chinese in the Nanking area within a six week period. This extremity was known to the international public opinion from the start. However, it was never constituted as a national "trauma" for China itself, for Japan or even as a trauma for humanity as such, as it was with the case of the Jewish Holocaust (Alexander 2003, 106). It is well know that in 1995 a horrendous atrocity, perpetrated by the Serbs, took place in the Bosnian city of Srebrenica during the war in Yugoslavia; for more than a decade the Bosnians, as well as other constituents of the European public opinion, have been at pains to name that atrocity as genocide, while Serbia was denied it. At the end of the day, in 2007, it was

The Hague International Court which characterized that atrocity as genocide without, however, putting the blame to Serbia as a state.

Traumas and Risk Society

Irrespective of the conceptual similarities and differences between cultural-social and clinical-psychic trauma, the theory of cultural trauma carries special weight for the analysis of contemporary societies. It has been put forward as a middle range theory (Alexander 2004, 24) in order to give answers to urgent conceptual and normative questions of "risk society." Therefore, it is not by chance that this theory (and memory and trauma studies for that matter) has achieved prominence within the late modern risk society (meaning the society of other-inflicted and involuntary risk), in which the state of emergency threatens to become the normal state (Beck 1992, 24, 79). This prominence has a double sense: a) there is a slow but undisputable spreading of the idea of the subject as "that-which-can-be-hurt," and b) there is a loss of trust in institutions, systems, and reference groups.

As to the first property of prominence, it should come as no surprise that risk society is a traumatizing and traumatized society, a society whose self-image is no longer organized around the dominant and, in many ways, reassuring signifier "progress." But what is qualitatively different in risk society, such that it changes the experience of trauma? Arguably, in the past people were definitely running many risks and were exposed to hazardous conditions; but these were particular and isolated risks to be coped with separately and within the optimistic emotional climate of "progress," "development," "modernization," and so on. Nowadays, on the contrary, the very self is in danger; gradually, individuals feel unprotected and deprived of resilience (Furedi 2004). It is precisely because the discourse of progress and development has been more or less replaced by the discourse of crisis and fear that "trauma" tends to develop into one of the central imaginary significations of late modern societies. Here Cornelius Castoriadis' terminology is used on purpose in order to illustrate that nowadays reference to trauma, with all its cognitive and emotional implications, is inter alia a way in which society as a whole, as well as a particular social group, may think and speak of itself (Castoriades

1987). Somehow, it is a semiotic means for the self-representation and self-understanding of societies, groups, and individuals. More precisely, for Castoriadis' analysis—which of course cannot not be given herein the space it deserves—a central imaginative signification is not an image of something or someone, nor is it reduced to, or derivative of something "objective," external and non-imaginative. Rather, it constitutes and posits social being and social action by giving meaning to, and defining what is and what is not, what is worthwhile and what is not worthwhile. A central imaginative signification reorganizes, reforms, and re-determines retroactively the host of meanings and significances already available in a society or social group; in this way it can offer a new, and adversarial for that matter, interpretative frame of social reality(ies). It operates in the way a "master signifier" functions according to the advocates of Lacanian social theory, i.e. as a special signifier that quilts the chain of floating signifiers providing a nodal point in the production and circulation of discourse (Žižek 1989, 100–5; Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 105, 112; Stavrakakis 1999, 127–8). In this way discourses organized as particular and different entities; e.g. "nature," "terrorism," "freedom," and "the people" articulate the environmental discourse, the bellicose discourse of the Bush Administration, the neo-liberal economic discourse, and the populist political discourse, respectively. Thus the point is not that people did not have any traumatic experiences in the past. It is rather that the signifier "trauma" has become a nodal point, a central signification through which many individuals and social groups can imagine themselves retroactively as past, current, or virtual victims.

To be sure, the upgrading of "trauma" to the status of a central imaginative signification does not come out of thin air, nor is it a mere scheme of speech. It derives from the very dynamic of the late modern risk society itself which not only systematically produces threats about hazardous situations in the future (e.g. nuclear risks), but entails the politics of fear (Anselmi and Gouliamos 1998; Smith 2006; Richards 2007) which in effect makes for the description of contemporary society as "angst society" instead of "risk society" (Scott 2000).

As to the second sense of prominence, regarding the case of the signifier "crisis" (Koselleck 1988), trauma also originates in medical discourse and it is precisely as a metaphor that we use it in this context; it is a metaphor we live by. Yet, since it is not a dead metaphor and its metaphorical meaning is constantly under negotiation, the analysis of

cultural trauma could give rise to an ambivalent attitude: on the one hand, trauma can activate the logic of self-fulfilling prophecy, victimizing the subject and cultivating a fatalistic culture of risk and helplessness (Žižek 1997, 136). This victimization is accompanied and supported by the breaking of bonds of social trust and confidence. As Edkins (2003, 4) notes, an event is called traumatic not only when it offends the subject's capabilities, but when at the same time it implies the betrayal and breaching of relations of trust. Similarly, Beck (1992, 28, 61) maintains that "risks experienced presume a normative horizon of lost security and broken trust" and that risk is lived nowadays as a condensation of "wounded images of a life worth living" and its side effects have "voices, faces, eyes and tears." Therefore, the insistence on cynicism, nihilism, anti-party sentiments, and distrust, apparent in social theory and political sociology literature of the last two decades (Sloterdijk 1988; Goldfarb 1991; Bewes 1997), should be appreciated in connection with the more recent sociology of trauma and emotions.

On the other hand, however, it is outlined that cultural traumas have the capacity to widen the field of social understanding and sympathy. Their institutionalization implies necessarily the designation of victims, the attribution of responsibility and the allocation of material and symbolic consequences. Earlier in this paper it was argued that, frequently, cultural-social trauma is *inter alia* constituted via historical memories in the articulation of which the media plays a crucial role. In the following section the media's influence is analyzed further by focusing on the possible moral consequences of the mediatization of traumas, i.e. the visualization of others' suffering.

Media, Trauma, and Morality

The strong feelings that accompany cultural-social trauma entail the identification with the victims, not only of those who suffer from it in the first place (inner group), but also of the wider public. Here, a crucial (although often ambivalent) role is played by the media since the extended availability of their messages about people's suffering allows forms of empathy with distant others (Thompson 1995, 258–65; Baer 2001). Observing the pain of others through the media does not always follow the

logic of the spectacle and does not always give birth to "quasi-emotions;" namely, emotions which do not motivate, do not endure in time and which mortify our sensitivities (Meštrović 1997). A common wisdom in the critical media debate is that suffering is commodified chiefly by the electronic media and the audience becomes passive spectators of distant death and pain endowed with no moral commitment.

Nevertheless, the mediated participation in the pain of others (especially when the trauma is acute and hard to face) through the means of communication can lead to new forms of social interaction (Alexander 2004, 22, 24) and it may initiate what Luc Boltanski (1999, 3–19), drawing from Arendt, calls "the politics of pity." That is, the spectacle of suffering at a distance by people who do not suffer is possible to induce moral obligation and responsibility for the distant unfortunate. The politics of pity is premised on commitment, on strong moral sentiments like indignation, anger and denunciation, as well as on specific forms of individual and collective public action in favor of the unfortunates, such as accusation of the persecutors, petitions, demonstrations, humanitarian action, fund raising and so on. In contrast to Mestrovic's thesis on quasi-emotions and Baudrillard's analysis of simulacra, Boltanski discerns a strong possibility of effective political action in the present triggered by the spectacle of suffering, by carving out new public domains for the defense of the unfortunate victims (Chouliaraki 2004; 2006).

Boltanski differentiates (1999, 96–101) the presence of moral sentiments as a necessary condition for the articulation of the politics of pity, as distinct from sentimentalism, that is, an essentially aesthetic stance towards the pain of the other. The sentimental person seeks out the spectacle of suffering not in order to relieve it, but in order to get the pleasure that the aroused sensibility confirms his/her humanity. According to Boltanski (1999, 99) it becomes crucial "to separate real emotions, the externalization of the inner going back directly to the roots of the heart, from purely external, imitated or depicted emotions with no inner reference."

To be sure, participation in the pain of others, new forms of solidarity and the emotional armor of the politics of pity is a very complex issue that pinches with the essentials of moral philosophy. A whole array of phenomena of fellow-feeling is involved in the politics of pity and the visualization of others' suffering is similar to these analyzed insuperably by Max Scheler (1954, 8–36). Vicarious feelings of sympathy, pity,

understanding, imitation and emotional identification are evoked and it is certainly too difficult, if not impossible, to separate pity from compassion, as Boltanski does. Compassion is supposed to be premised on a face-to-face basis, on immediacy and a community of feeling not conducive to political action proper, i.e. abstract and general goal attainment; pity is premised on the distance between the spectator and the sufferer and it is this distance that permits the development of political strategies and the enactment of impersonal rules (Boltanski 1999, 6). In Scheler's terms (1954, 13), to whom, incidentally Boltanski scarcely makes reference, pity is fellow-feeling which involves intentional reference to the other person's experience in the sense that "*my* commiseration and *his* suffering are phenomenologically *two different facts*."

Yet, in actual postmodern, mediatized, politics it would be too much to expect crystal clear differences in the emotional responses to the visualization of the distant others' sufferings and traumas. Besides, the difference between compassion and pity is not self-evident for everyone in academic community. For instance, Sznaider (1998) speaks of "public compassion" which originates in an abstract, theoretical and rational idea of humanity rather than in a face-to-face encounter with suffering persons. According to his thesis, public compassion draws from the humanitarian movements that arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as movements to abolish slavery and child labor, rather than from the tradition of religious charity. For Nussbaum (2001, 301) compassion is "a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune," and it seems that in her account "awareness" does not necessarily entail physical proximity and interpersonal communication. I guess that Scheler himself would steer clear from Boltanski's "pity" to the extend that "modern humanitarianism" or "humanitarian love" is only interested in the sum total of human individuals, it is a quantitative equalitarian force that "does not command and value the personal act of love from man to man, but primarily the impersonal 'institution' of welfare" (Scheler 1961, 116, 120–1). Also we could take notice of Höijer's (2003, 20) point that "compassion has to do with perceiving the suffering and the needs of distant others through media images and reports. Global compassion is then a moral sensibility or concern for remote strangers from different continents, cultures and societies."

Nevertheless, in fairness to arguments *a la* Boltanski and Chouliaraki, it needs to be said that the crux of the matter is not of terminological nature; rather, the crucial moral question is whether the media's presentation of the others' traumas undermines the nature of sympathy in the human form as the "taking the attitude of the other when one is assisting the other" (Mead 1934, 299) or as "a function of the whole mind" according to which "what a person is and what he can understand" is accomplished "through the life of others" (Cooley 1964, 140). This question could be posited in another way as well, i.e. to what extent can the media of communication eradicate the natural disposition of the human being to empathize with other people, a disposition much praised by moral philosophers like Hume and Smith?

In any case, estimating the representation of others' traumas through the logic of the "culture industry," simulation and "hyper-reality" leads to quite different conclusions from those forwarded by Alexander, Boltanski, Chouliaraki, and Sontag. For the latter, exposure to traumatic images can function as a "challenge to turn our attention to, to think, to learn, to check the explanations invoked by those in power in order to justify collective pain" (Sontag 2003, 121–2). On the contrary, for "apocalyptic" followers of Adorno and Jameson the commodity aesthetics of the electronic media has blocked all possible critical reflection, as false accounts of collective memory and social-cultural traumas have colonized the audience's historical imagination instead of liberating and broadening it. A mediatized trauma is seen as mere entertainment and detached curiosity (Kansteiner 2004).

Needless to say that things are never or rarely "either-or" and it is not compulsory for someone to adopt either an ungrounded optimism, or an unnecessary pessimism in the debate under consideration (Chouliaraki 2004). It is true that media aesthetics and consumerism are sometimes detrimental to the development of vigorous solidarities and active trust and it would be naïve to undercut the legacy of the Frankfurt School altogether. In fact, following the beats of war journalism by offering dramatic coverage of civilian populations in pain (Luostarinen 2002), the media not only sell human tragedies in a global market place, but they cultivate the numbing effect, if only because "the spectacle of suffering becomes domesticated by the experience of watching television" (Chouliaraki 2004, 189). Journalists themselves become desensitized and the audience acquires a blasé and/or quasi emotional stance towards this

spectacle. On top of this, one should take into account particular results of psychological research which point to the fact that mediatized and visualized traumas and the exposure to others' suffering bring about vicarious helplessness since the subject feels that control of his/her environment is out of hand (Johnson and Davey 1997).

On the other side, however, it would be too harsh to exclude moral sensibility from the mediated quasi-interaction (Thompson 1995, 87–118). The electronic mass media does help the politics of pity and global compassion to emerge as the immediate speed in the transmission of distant others' traumas and suffering facilitates recipients to identify somehow with the visualized victims. That was the case, for instance, with the so called "Kosovocaust," an aftermath of the "CNN effect;" i.e. footage and news photos articulated in reference to the "lessons of the Holocaust" provoked intense moral outcries among the western public opinion, thus affecting to a considerable degree international decision making. Yet, identification with the victims can be accomplished retroactively as well; for instance, the film *Schindler's List* and almost two decades earlier the TV drama *The Holocaust* (not to mention a host of other products of popular culture on Jew's cultural-social trauma) greatly contributed to the formation of a global awareness and a strong moral stance. Either through real time transmission or retroactively, or both, the media builds up a sort of "cosmopolitan memory" sustained by the visualization of others' pain—say, for instance, the Rwanda genocide, the atrocities in Somalia, the Khmer Rouge's extermination of one-third of Cambodia's population, the famine in Darfur, and 11 September—, triggers in the spectators the expression of some of the most basic emotions recognizable by everyone: disgust and anger for the perpetrators, sadness and fear for the victims. Willy-nilly, the spectator is addressed as a witness of the evil and while recording it she/he is interpellated as a moral subject; as long as this interpellation takes place, new locus of global solidarity and ethical universality are carved out (Levi and Sznaider 2002, 88), fueled by the above mentioned emotions. It is precisely through these emotions that television becomes "an agent of moral responsibility" (Chouliaraki 2004, 186) and, consequently, a facilitator of the "democratization of responsibility" (Thompson 1995, 263–4).

It can be argued that time-space compression is a sufficient condition for the rising of cosmopolitan memories and the global spreading of responsibility; the ultimate, though, necessary condition is the feeling of

guilt. It is guilt that allows the spectators to engulf the suffering of the distant others and their traumatic history; but why is this so? Attempting an interpretation—and here I am roughly following a sort of psychoanalytic argumentation, though not so closely as it deserves—I would claim that this is so because every normal or average person is endowed with unconscious guilt due to Superego's imperatives (Freud 2001). The paradox Freud underscores is that the more ethical the subject is, the more guilty he/she feels. Ambivalence towards the father or everyone who assumes the role of the father, and the subsequent repressed aggression come back to the Ego through the Superego. This is so, because it is not only that the subject has repressed the forbidden drives before an external authority, i.e. the father; what counts more is that the subject feels anxious in front of the internal authority, the Superego. This internal authority monitors all forbidden desires so that intention becomes equivalent to wrongdoing. That is why many people feel guilty without prior wrongdoing.

Yet, it is not only the severe and punishing Superego that elicits guilt; it is also the symbolic Law underlying all social relations, i.e. the Law of the signifier, which according to Lacan commands that not everything is possible in human affairs. The prohibition of incest is an example of the symbolic Law which actually "superimposes the kingdom of culture on that of nature" (Lacan 1977, 66). It seems to me that somehow the Lacanian account of the Law, closely related to Kant's Categorical Imperative, is linked to the normative vulnerability of which Velleman (2003) speaks. Normative vulnerability is the sense of being unjustified and defenseless against negative reactions and responses aimed at one by the other(s) which appear to one to be warranted even though one has personally wielded no harm. Thus, even if one commits no wrongdoing one may feel guilty upon the imaginary anticipation that there is somewhere someone else suffering who resents or envies one's good fortune. So, whenever a spectator is in front of a horrendous mediatized event, e.g. the collapse of the twins towers on September 11th or the Rwanda genocide, not only she/he feels that the symbolic order, represented by the Law, is violated by the intrusion of pure negativity (or Evil one would say) evading any discursive intermediation; what is more, he/she experiences that his/her secure state and wellbeing is unacceptable and unjustified before the victims' tragic plight. In virtue of the unconscious guilt, the spectator feels that the violation of the Law is

somehow her/his responsibility. Besides, I would also claim that the spectator of the pain of Third World distant others on Western television and the internet may also experience a preconscious guilt in line with the following logic: although I as a person have done nothing for their suffering, somehow I am guilty because I enjoy the goods of the capitalist center which exploits and dominates countries in the periphery.

In one way or another, therefore, guilt is an ontogenetic moral ground for the development of the politics of pity, precisely because it is rooted deep in the human psyche. It is not an accidental or contingent, rather than it is an immanent moral stance. Yet, the crucial point in the information age is the degree of its universalizability against the grammar of the media of communication; apart from redefining the interplay between distance and proximity, the latter systematically promotes particularity over universality through personalization, dramatization and episodic coverage of traumatic situations.

As ambivalent their moral impact might be, and irrespective of the compassion fatigue and the routinization of the others' traumas that they produce (Tester 2001, 13; Alexander 2003, 103), observing the pain of others through the media cannot totally shield spectators from moral interpellation, from their direct or indirect moralization. It is certainly true that media reporting on distant suffering serves cynical commercial interests; telethons dedicated to the alleviation of Third World suffering and misfortunes are part of the entertainment programming and offer ample opportunities for human sponsoring and image making. It is true that frequently the politics of pity or compassion is reduced in giving money for charity just in order to keep the distant other at an arm's length. It is also true that mediatized cosmopolitan memories buttress the ideological discourse on "human rights" which provides moral grounds to international interventions described euphemistically as "humanitarian interventions" which of course create new victims, as was in fact the case when NATO and the U.S. dropped bombs over Kosovo and Serbia in the spring of 1999.

All these are true, but they are not the whole truth. It seems to me that there is always a moral remainder, call it unconscious or preconscious guilt if you like, which escapes the commercial logic of the medium and under certain circumstances overwhelms quasi-emotions leading to autonomous public action. It is in these rare cases where the public media assumes the role of the "mediapolis," about which Silverstone (2006) spoke so

passionately; i.e. as a space of socio-political dialogue and deliberation of moral significance with remote others, precisely because they contribute to keeping proper distance from the victims, bringing them neither too close nor keeping them too distant. Here I would claim that in virtue of "mediapolis," though fragile and precarious, the feelings of guilt, indignation and sadness aroused while watching the unpleasant plight of distant others can be a stimulating condition for alternative moral-practical thinking. Despite the reluctance people experience in interpreting their concerns and sentiments into determinate courses of action, the mediatized trauma of the distant other could give rise to a sense of responsibility for his/her life and dignity. It prompts what Hans Jonas (1984) regards to be the attribute that differentiates par excellence the humans as a species: the undertaking of substantive responsibility towards the entire Being and the other human being. Perhaps the mediatization of traumas is unable to mobilize the Levinasian ethics of being *for* the other instead of being simply *with* the other. The likelihood is that time-space compression is conducive to the moral stance of being with the other, due to the disguised proximity of the sufferers in the screen. Yet, as long as this takes place, it is already too much; one can maintain, therefore, that the media makes possible the enunciation of an ethics of care and responsibility in our age where care seems impossible. This is accomplished, *inter alia*, through the social construction of "moral universals," i.e. generalized symbols of human suffering and moral evil (Alexander 2003, 27–84). By the same token, I would even argue that the media may make our direct or indirect encounter with the suffering of others easier and mobilize that sort of moral minimalism that Walzer (1994) was writing about: a moral minimum, a "thin morality," which does not serve any particular interest but instead regulates everyone's behavior in a mutually beneficial way. Isn't this, after all, the meaning of the international mobilizations against the war in Iraq and the solidarity that was expressed for the people in South East Asia after the earthquake of the 26th of December, 2004? And isn't this a sample of a "morality of spatial and temporal distance" translated somehow into effective social interests and into tangible political forces (Bauman 1993, 222)?

Conclusion

What I have tried to achieve in this essay is to delineate the mutual links between cultural-social trauma, risk society, the mass media and the politics of pity. My route was marked by three signposts, not necessarily corresponding to the designated sections of the text. The first was a comparative reading of cultural-social and psychic-clinical traumas. It was argued that both types of traumas result retroactively from construction processes on personal and collective level respectively. Also, they bring about irreversible changes to identities, personal as well as collective, which, however, do not mark everybody exposed to a traumatogenic situation in the same way. As in the case of psychic trauma, cultural-social trauma is conveyed through multiple negative emotions on the basis of which collective memory is selectively organized. If the impetus of negative affect is not activated, an upsetting event cannot be experienced and codified as trauma. Accordingly, the task for the sociology of emotions is to identify particular emotions elicited in and through the trauma drama and analyze their confluence and interconnections.

The second signpost of this paper refers to the conditions under which the cultural sociological theory of trauma and the rise of trauma, memory and disaster studies gain currency. It was asserted that this has become possible by virtue of the dynamics of risk society; this society is self-defined as traumatic and traumatogenic in the sense that it promotes vulnerability as one of the main characteristics of the subject, both at the national and international level. It is not simply that individuals face a host of risks in their everyday life; the crucial difference is that the very idea of the self is permeated by risks and dangers. As a consequence, trauma becomes a central imaginative signification of our era changing social bonds and the terms of social remembering.

The third signpost of the paper deals with the articulation of traumatic historical memory via the media of communication. The latter are not the only means for the (re)construction of collective and historical memory in view of traumatic experiences; yet, they may be regarded as one of the most powerful mnemotechnical apparatuses because they stretch time and space, therefore redefining the interplay between distance and proximity. Effectively, they may make for the possibility of cultural-social trauma not to be experienced directly by anyone. Yet, even more important is the fact that the media conveys moral implications when they render traumas as

part of the spectacle. A strong case is made as to the ambivalent role of the media as it is argued that the observation of others' suffering via the media may lead to two different stances: either to a routinized quasi-emotional experience which inhibits action or to a thin morality that may motivate a global politics of pity.

The theory of social-cultural trauma can contribute to the understanding of our own sufferings as well because the concept of trauma as such refers to a dynamic process which includes both the traumatic element itself *and* the process of its healing. Failure to mourn is the main reason for conceptualizing why the historical traumas keep arousing the population and instigating violence (Volkan 2004). As long as collective reflexivity on historical memory does not materialize, vindictiveness will be preserved, the blood of the ancestors will seek justice and shame will be lurking underneath anger and hate for the (national, tribal, ethnic, religious) other. Forgiveness is of utmost importance here; but to forgive is not to forget, nor is it denial or disavowal. Forgiveness entails transformation of negative emotions based on strong will, a will to start anew, a gesture quite opposite to vengeance. Forgiveness is never predicted, as it comes out of free will and frees both doer and sufferer from the relentless automatism of a vicious cycle (Arendt 1958, 236–41). What is more, forgiveness can be offered only by those (previous victims) who are able to punish (perpetrators) by all means (Ricoeur 2004, 469–70); otherwise it might be disguised *ressentiment* (Demertzis 2006).

However, who is exactly the one who forgives? Is it the persons, the sufferers, or the collectivities? Hannah Arendt is crystal-clear: "forgiving is […] always an eminently personal […] affair in which what was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it" (1958, 241). But is it just all? I do not think so. Alongside individual acts of forgiveness, social institutions of all sorts, the media included, should undertake the ethical task to reinterpret the traumatic past in order to break the process of perpetual victimization. A host of brave work has been done lately to this direction in the historiography of the Balkans (Koulouri 2002) and in the German civil society with regards the Nazi past and the Holocaust. Such endeavors may contribute to social and political change in the long run. At any rate, a theory of cultural-social trauma could offer better analyses incorporating collective healing processes, acquiring thereafter explicit qualities of a normative social theory of trauma.

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