

Historein

Vol 14, No 2 (2014)

Historein 14/2 (2014)



Review of Nikos Demertzis, Eleni Paschaloudi and Giorgos Antoniou (eds), Εμφύλιος: Πολιτισμικό τραύμα [Civil war: cultural trauma]

Vasilis Dalkavoukis

doi: [10.12681/historein.292](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.292)

Copyright © 2015, Vasilis Dalkavoukis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Dalkavoukis, V. (2014). Review of Nikos Demertzis, Eleni Paschaloudi and Giorgos Antoniou (eds), Εμφύλιος: Πολιτισμικό τραύμα [Civil war: cultural trauma]. *Historein*, 14(2), 147–150. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.292>

**Nikos Demertzis, Eleni Paschaloudi
and Giorgos Antoniou (eds)**

Εμφύλιος: Πολιτισμικό τραύμα

[Civil war: cultural trauma]

Athens: Alexandria, 2013. 351 pp.

Vasileios Dalkavoukis

Democritus University of Thrace

What exactly is trauma? What is the precise meaning of “collective trauma” and which factors render trauma “cultural”? Under what circumstances does a historical fact become “traumatic”? These are some of the questions posed in this collective volume on the Greek Civil War.

As an analytical tool in psychoanalysis, trauma mostly applies on an individual level. What is deemed “traumatic” in this respect is characterised as anything that causes and is accompanied by negative feelings and emotions; is designated by the presence of defence mechanisms that push it into oblivion but simultaneously resurrect it at another level of behaviour (such as repetition compulsion); is very often a retrospective reconstruction of real or imagined conditions; and normally leaves permanent traces in one’s personal identity.

However, in recent decades and within the context of its use in the social sciences, there has been a great change in the notion of trauma. Prompted by the approach that views the Holocaust as a central event of the Second World War, the concept of trauma has been widened to form what is now known as “collective trauma”, concerning a wider group of people who have all been through a traumatic experience. Similar “collective traumas” are genocides, be they recognised or not, a term

introduced in the political vocabulary after the end of the war with the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.¹ The result of this conceptual expansion was the production, on the one hand, of a “culture of victims” or “victim culture”,² in which a victim identity is embraced, as painful it may be, in order to gain official protection or benefits and, on the other hand, a number of new multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary areas like memory studies,³ disaster studies, trauma studies,⁴ etc.

Yet the term “cultural trauma”, although it requires the transition from individual to collective trauma, is not self-evident, as it has been suggested by JC Alexander within the framework of cultural sociology, which assumes that ideas and symbolic processes may have an independent effect on social institutions, politics and culture itself,⁵ defining a new transdisciplinary field between interpretive anthropology and sociology.⁶ More specifically, concerning cultural trauma, Alexander believes that that it “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways”.⁷ Furthermore, he says the notion of cultural trauma could become more comprehensible if we connect the collective memory of a group of people with the narrative that reconstructs the past, thus generating new meanings. In two of his texts, for example,⁸ he processes the idea that the Holocaust was not immediately perceived universally as signifying universal evil for western societies. Instead, it was constructed through a long process of narration and signification.

In the volume under review, Nikos Demertzis undertakes a general clarification of the term

cultural trauma, a relatively unknown conceptual tool in Greek academia, in two texts: "Cultural trauma in collective identities: Adventures of memory and routes of emotion" and "The civil war: from collective suffering to cultural trauma". In the first, which is more theoretical in approach, cultural trauma is compared with clinical trauma. He focuses on the so-called "optimistic version of cultural trauma theory" (35–42), which deals with the procedure of forgiveness as part of a wider "therapeutic process" by linking it with the concept of a "successful mourning". For this to happen, the process of memory is certainly dominant, but not as a process of "reminiscence", constituting the static version of memory and reproducing negative feelings, but of "recollection", referring to an active process of awareness of the history of a (collective) subject in relation to his or her future.

In his second text, Demertzis characterises the Greek Civil War as cultural trauma given that "as an entire social event [it] involves all three fundamental ingredients of the term: memory, emotion and identity" (67). By integrating narratives of the civil war in the centre of political life after 1974, he distinguishes two important periods in the conversion of "collective suffering" to cultural trauma: he names the first (1974–1990) as the "phase of selective construction", during which the project of "reconciliation" of both rightwing and leftwing parties dominated, while selective oblivion towards the civil war led to a failed mourning and its "depoliticisation", as it was incorporated in nationalist discourse. In the second period (1990–2010), however, named the "phase of reflective construction", the "neglected reconciliation" (1981–82) was repositioned in the debate mainly as a result of changes in the global political scene (the collapse of the Eastern bloc) and the shifting in research questions from "who was to blame for the civil war?" to "how the civil war

happened". But even so, Demertzis concludes that "the issue of forgiveness has not yet been posed seriously". He asks: "Who is to seek or grant forgiveness, when the roles of victim and the victimiser have shifted so rapidly and when the first generation who experienced and participated in the facts has left the scene?" (88–89). This point of view is supported by Nikos Sideris, whose article notes that "unachievable mourning" (104) is blocking the overcoming of suffering, which would finally lead to forgiveness.

Other authors attempt to link the analytical value of the concept of cultural trauma with particular fields of the civil war: Eleni Paschalou-di ("The 1940s in political discourse: from the embarrassment of the winners to the 'vindication' of the defeated") deals with the public debate on the civil war in the press after the fall of the dictatorship (1974), and the contribution this debate made in shaping a consensus narrative about the 1940s somewhere in between "national resistance" and "national reconciliation". Nikos Maratzidis ("The triple trauma: memories of the civil war in the communist left") deals with the internal debate on the war within the Communist Party of Greece (KKE), as it was conducted in three successive phases: during the period of Stalinist influence (1946–56), from 1956 to 1990, and from 1991, after a new split in the KKE. The author notes that during these periods, the treatment of the civil war was adjusted to suit the strategic choices of the party. Katerina Tsekou ("Political refugee status as cultural trauma: victims, victimisers and collective pain") deals with the double debate among civil war political refugees in Bulgaria concerning the internalisation of both the defeat and the traumatic experiences of interrogation and torture of many fighters of the 7th Division of the Democratic Army of Greece (DSE) in the last stage of the civil war in eastern Macedonia and Thrace.

Giorgos Antoniou (“The celebrations of hatred and the wars of public memory, 1950–2000”) examines the evolution of anticommunist memory from the period of its absolute dominance until its delegitimation, through rituals and the erection of monuments, locating the research gap regarding the consequences of this reversal in public discourse. Panagis Panagiotopoulos (“The political uses of history, 2010–2012: the radical left and unhelpful meaning of trauma”) focuses on the other end of the political spectrum, looking at political developments in Greece since 2008, arguing that they constitute a breeding ground for the return of a memory similar in structure to that of the civil war era. Finally, Violetta Hionidou (“‘How nice you came, Marie, to affirm it, because he would not believe it otherwise’: memory, forgetfulness and cultural trauma of the famine during the occupation”) deals with the reasons why the discussion of the wartime famine is absent from public debate and any academic interest: in her view, the famine, despite the pain it caused, was not converted into a cultural trauma.

No doubt, the term cultural trauma is a remarkable theoretical “mid-range” construction, as characterised by Demertzis (26), with a potent analytical value, since it attempts to combine in a critical way Parsonian structural functionalism with the semiotic approach to culture as grounded by Clifford Geertz.⁹ However, the application of a theoretical tool such as cultural trauma in the case of the Greek Civil War presents some methodological issues.

The first of these concerns the weak conversation between cultural trauma and the pre-existing theoretical construction for the study of memory. A few examples: in most of the volume’s contributions, the debate on cultural trauma is not about society as a whole but about smaller “communities of memory”,¹⁰ in

which we can discern several minor “traumas” that do not necessarily constitute a total collective/cultural trauma. The concept of a community of memory, however, is completely ignored in the context of the theoretical debate in the book, as are a number of established analytical tools such as the sites of memory/*lieux de memoire*¹¹ or counter-memory¹² etc. On the contrary, a number of analytical concepts that have been used to identify similar traumas (“historical trauma”, “mass trauma”, “national trauma,” “collective trauma”) are considered “theoretically incorrect or incomplete”, without any supporting argumentation being provided (26).

On the other hand, the association of the concept of cultural trauma with the verbal narrative in the public sphere constitutes a rather problematic generalisation from the semiotic point of view. For example, not only has the embodied narrative been ignored, although it has experienced considerable development within gender studies and semiotics,¹³ but so too has the public version of collective behaviours which “narrate” using nonverbal codes and require special decoding: Take for example the so-called “occupation syndrome” which drives modern Greeks en masse to supermarkets in every situation that may be considered “difficult” in social terms (the threat of war, storms, etc.) or the average Greek family’s “sacred” relationship with food, which should never be thrown away. From this perspective, the famine during the occupation constitutes a cultural trauma, readable through a nonverbal semiotic form of narrative.

Finally, both methodologically and theoretically, issues also arise from the centrality that the concept of “forgiveness” has acquired as a topic in cultural trauma theory. If, of course, one takes into account the origins of the theory (structural functionalism), they will fully un-

derstand this obsession. However, an event of such social and political complexity as the Greek Civil War – and probably every civil war – cannot be comprehended in terms of “social peace” or “recovery” because this ignores many conflictual dichotomies such as class, gender or ethnicity, that led to the conflict and, of course, continue to exist, albeit transformed, after it. The requirement of “forgiveness” – which renders issues of another level, such as the Holocaust, manageable in the context of mnemonic recovery – seems totally unrealistic for events based on the structural-conflictual dimension of a society that in general terms produce civil wars. Thus, an analytical tool like cultural trauma could be useful in the analysis of the civil war, but only selectively and through careful conversation with other theoretical and methodological achievements of the interdisciplinary community. Such a finding, however, does not diminish its value as a theoretical scheme nor, of course, the validity of the essays contained in this volume.

NOTES

- 1 Available at <http://www.hrweb.org/legal/genocide.html>.
- 2 See, for example, Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) and Melanie Phillips, “Europe’s victim culture,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 3 October 2003.
- 3 See, for example, the journal *Memory Studies*, launched in 2008, which “examines the social, cultural, cognitive, political and technological shifts affecting how, what and why individuals, groups and societies remember, and forget” (<http://mss.sagepub.com>).
- 4 See, for example, the *Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies*, which began in 1997, which “is interested in events of natural, technological and human-induced origin and their effects at individual, community, organ-

isational and national levels” (<http://trauma.massey.ac.nz/info/journal.htm>).

- 5 Jeffrey C. Alexander, “The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutic (with Philip Smith),” in *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11–26.
- 6 See, for example, Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Clifford Geertz and the Strong Program: The Human Sciences and Cultural Sociology,” *Cultural Sociology* 2/2 (2008): 157–168, and Jeffrey C. Alexander, Philip Smith and Matthew Norton, eds., *Interpreting Clifford Geertz: Cultural Investigation in the Social Sciences* (Palgrave: Macmillan, 2011) for this double inspiration.
- 7 Jeffrey C. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. Ron Eyerman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1.
- 8 See Jeffrey C. Alexander, “On the Social Construction of Moral Universals: The ‘Holocaust’ from War Crime to Trauma Drama,” in *The Meanings of Social Life*, 27–84 and also Jeffrey C. Alexander and Shai M. Dromi, “Holocaust and Trauma: Moral Restriction in Israel”, in *Trauma: A Social Theory*, ed. Jeffrey C. Alexander (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 97–117.
- 9 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- 10 Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 227.
- 11 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24.
- 12 Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
- 13 See, for example, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).