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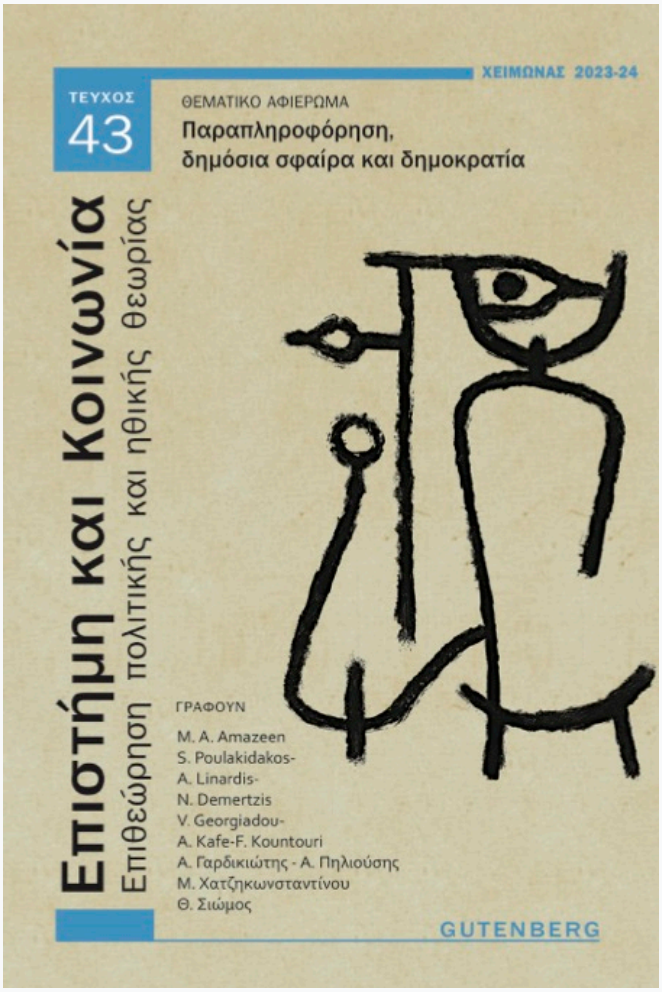

Assesing cultural trauma's theory scope

Evangelos Vaiannis

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*Evangelos Vaiannis**

REEXAMINING CULTURAL TRAUMA'S SIGNIFICANCE

Ron Eyerman (2011). *The Cultural Sociology of Political Assassination: From MLK and RFK to Fortuyn and van Gogh*. New York: Palgrave.

Ron Eyerman (2019). *Memory, Trauma, and Identity*. New York: Palgrave.

Ron Eyerman's books are quintessential intellectual products of the 'strong program' of Cultural Sociology, one of the most radical manifestations of the cultural turn that began to shape in the end of the last century. Although Cultural Sociology and Sociology of Culture may indeed share a 'common repertoire of terms', the former highlights the analytical autonomy of cultural structures and pinpoints the centrality of meaning-making procedures.

In the first book, the author proceeds to a comparative examination of six political assassinations in three distinct national contexts using the methodological tools of cultural trauma theory. Consistent with the nature of his aims, the interpretive

* Master's student, Columbia University, Department of Sociology.

schema of cultural trauma illuminates nuances of the collective experience that have been on the analytical periphery of traditional sociological approaches for decades. Consequently, political assassinations are now engraved on the core of the study of cultural traumas. Perhaps the most challenging task that the author achieves is the unambiguous delineation of the factors that either catalyze or attenuate the formation of a cultural trauma.

One would not exaggerate to claim that Eyerman's monography paved the intellectual path for the emergence of *Memory, Trauma and Identity*, for it signified a critical moment of broader consensus within the scientific community about the significance of applying the cultural trauma theory in diverse domains of the social field. Theorists now understand the need for salient reconsiderations of the basic characteristics of the existing schema. They do so by highlighting structural transformations in the field of mass mediated representation, as is the appearance of new dominant *media* such as social media platforms and of course the internet in a broader sense. When the authors of the essays perceive major social phenomena of contemporary history through the lenses of trauma and its role in shaping collective memory, they essentially shed sufficient light to various scientific lacunae.

The political assassinations on which the author concentrates in the former book are those of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King in the USA, Olof Palme and Anna Lindh in Sweden and Theo Van Gogh and Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands. In the first chapter, the author introduces the reader to the book's problematic by describing the chronicle and the social circumstances of John F. Kennedy's assassination with increased vividness. Eyerman focuses on those aspects of the event that allow him to illuminate key areas of the American cultural structure and to illustrate the key questions that will be addressed in the following chapters. Kennedy's murder serves as a reference point for other emblematic yet horrendous assassinations of late modernity, especially in the context of mass-mediated representation and the social evaluation of how well institutions perform. It al-

so creates the conditions for the formation of a cultural trauma in the United States; a trauma that becomes transparent only after the tragic occurrence of Martin Luther King's (hereinafter MLK) and Robert F. Kennedy's (hereinafter RFK) assassinations.

Eyerman proceeds to a diligent clarification of his conceptual repertoire from the beginning of the first book. He clarifies the concept of cultural trauma from one-dimensional approaches and exo-sociological content. He additionally expresses the fundamental notion that a cultural trauma is constructed, not born, i.e., that a complex and long-term process of deep transformations must take place until the appearance of indicators that testify to the existence of a cultural trauma. This re-emphasises the distinction between psychological and cultural trauma, which is explicitly underlined in nearly every theoretical text that frames the 'strong program' (Smelser et al. 2004).

One can detect in Eyerman's texts the notion that certain horrific events, like political assassinations, contain as such within themselves more layers of traumatic 'fabric'; implying they have relatively increasing chances of being evolved into cultural traumas. Indeed, he reintroduces this concept with certainty in his later book. But because Eyerman gradually develops a cohesive and less narrow approach to trauma, linking it with greater transformations of collective memory and identity, he thus establishes a distinct 'third paradigm' that transcends the existing radical binary of naturalistic and constructivist viewpoints.

The understanding of trauma as a complex process becomes even more evident with the second fundamental distinction of Eyerman between 'occurrence' and 'event'. The author gives prominence to the term 'event', which contains within itself the connotations of a parallel action taking place; implying the initiation of its representation and conceptual reconstruction in the media.

The third distinction concerns 'social trauma' and 'cultural trauma'. Drawing on Smelser's conceptual repertoire, Eyerman focuses not solely on shocking events that caused tears in the social fabric and were traumatic to small-scale collectivities; but on

broadly meaningful crises that led to the emergence of a public discourse that tested established identities and founding myths of entire nations. The role of carrier groups, media and the moral framework is central. The former two because they make the traumatic event accessible and comprehensible to the social body by providing an explanatory platform, thus facilitating the success of the trauma drama; the latter because it orients the meaning struggle that arises in the aftermath of traumatic events.

Intellectuals can act, in fact, as pivotal carrier groups. One can identify an interesting, yet neutral and less polemic definition of 'intellectuals' in *Memory, Trauma and Identity*. I argue that this anti-elitist perception allows him to pinpoint with clarity the actual and decisive actors that engage in the meaning struggle and enhance the 'drama trauma'.

In the United States, MLK was an increasingly popular figure and was perceived as an iconic representative of the civil rights movement even before his assassination. It seems reasonable to argue that MLK was a 'celebrity-icon' accordant to the definition of Alexander, thus 'an iconic form of collective representation central to the meaningful construction of contemporary society' (Alexander, 2010). As a matter of fact, he embodied all those characteristics that his assassin detested. The media were quick to cover his murder and intensified the meaning struggle, especially after the identity of the perpetrator was revealed. Eyerman portrays MLK's transformation from an embodiment of the civil rights movement to a universal symbol for equality and freedom. The author identifies two main mechanisms at work for such an outcome: the widespread, international dissemination of MLK's message and the incorporation of MLK's figure even by the mechanisms of advertising.

A point of high significance during the trauma process that cuts across the levels of memory, emotion and identity is, according to Eyerman, the discourse regarding MLK's commemoration. By choosing his birthday to memorialize his personality, King – and the message he represented – receives the highest after-death symbolic recognition, as he is commemorated in

a manner similar to all those traditional figures that represented the 'purest American values'. Similar mechanisms seem to have worked after the assassination of Harvey Milk, in terms of ascribing a meaning to his vision and assassination that is more abstract and universal, rather local and particular.

The introductory chapter on JFK was indicative for the understanding of the interplay between key actors involved in the trauma process, but additionally important for it is in JFK's assassination where the primary elements of the trauma are traced. Consequently, the basic discursive universes and fields of confrontation will emerge most emphatically after the assassination of his brother. When RFK was murdered, civil society, law enforcement and the medical system worked in such a way as to prevent 'another Dallas' from happening. Thus the memory of JFK was more than present after the death of his brother. One would not exaggerate to argue that his memory took the form of a collective expectation that institutions and judicial mechanisms would function in a better way.

In the midst of an atmosphere of 'meaning struggle', victims and perpetrators cease to be mere individuals and embody deep divisions and social rifts; nearly every person is thus called upon to take a stand on these tragic phenomena. Eyerman finds that RFK's assassination was the catalytic event that prompted the widening of the trauma, unlike preceding 'social traumas' such as the assassination of Malcolm X.

But one observes not just the re-appearance of his robust terminology in his second book, rather the epistemological deepening of it. Eyerman reiterates that trauma and its associated sociocultural processes are in fact seldom homogenous. They certainly can be divisive, as is the case of the dominant narratives embedded in the meaning struggle. Eyerman finds two dichotomous narratives regarding black American collective representation, the 'redemptive' and the 'progressive' one. Proximal to these divergent interpretations of the macro-historical phenomenon of racial segregation are the antithetical narratives that framed the Vietnam War, the apotheosis of an avoidable conflict

that traumatized rather than unified an entire nation and numerous social groups.

When focalizing on political assassinations, the author explores the conceptual implications that the murders of Olof Palme and Anna Lindh had in Swedish society. He argues that those events were undoubtedly shocking and had potentiality of testing Sweden's self-image; that is, the notion of a qualitative civil society of heightened democratic and political ethos. Yet there was no reassessment of the Swedish founding narratives nor collective self-reflective elements embedded in the public debate that emerged after these events. Faithfulness to the post-war social contract is maintained and despite the existence of collective grief in both murders of these iconic Swedish figures, the key carrier groups did not elevate these events to a higher symbolic level. Eyerman concludes that no cracks in the foundations of the Swedish state were detected, in visible contrast to what happened in Poland decades after the Katyn Massacre. By liberating free speech and letting a democratic public sphere to appear, these inner catastrophes that remained hidden in individual memories could then be part of a tragic public history.

What undisputedly occurred in Sweden were fundamental changes in institutions including law enforcement and the political party in which they both thrived (SAP). The author connotes that latent social divisions and areas of conflict were absent when the murders occurred; a dimension particularly important for the emergence of a cultural trauma.

The third pair of political assassinations of interest to Eyerman is that of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands. The former prevailed in the collective consciousness as a highly controversial yet charismatic figure; a bold representative of an emerging alt-right rhetoric that expressed a not insignificant proportion of the Dutch social body. The author accurately discerns, at this point, the subtle differences in the profile of the murderer: he did not come from the lower levels of social stratification, nor did he act out of impulsive action. Fortuyn's increased presence in the media and his ostensibly high electoral

chances did actually trigger immense diffusion of mourning and concerns about the state of freedom of speech in the country.

At the same time, the murder of Theo van Gogh brought to the surface a similar, quite polemic public discourse. The ritualistic dimension of the murder (namely the presence of a five-page text pinned to the victim, the selection of specific dress code and the knife as a weapon) added to the established narratives the aspect of religious fundamentalism and the dichotomous dynamics of immigration; both then transformed into critical issues of the political competition. As a personality, van Gogh was capable of evoking broad psychological identifications and his murder was able to penetrate the perceptual and emotional schemas of a large segment of the population. Eyerman concludes that this event initiates an extensive debate about the foundations of Dutch identity and a broad 'renegotiation' of the terms of the Dutch social contract. In his previous book where he focuses merely on the assassination of Theo Van Gogh, Eyerman has also demonstrated the decline of other founding myths, especially this of 'the good Dutchman fighting for the Jews'. This may also be the case of the My Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War, which decisively expedited the trauma process and nearly annihilated the heroic narratives that were to justify an already vulnerable collective sense of 'American exceptionalism'.

In the concluding chapter the author reiterates that nothing profound that could indelibly impact its equilibrium unveiled in Swedish society after the two assassinations. For the process of national self-criticism that pervaded the Dutch society after the two murders was indeed absent in Sweden. He observes smooth political transition and a lack of competent carrier groups (politicians, intellectuals, media representatives) to frame the traumatic event with a veil of meaning. Thus we return to the initial argument that a cultural trauma cannot be merely – and is not – the sum of collective pain. As argued on page 157, 'the success of trauma lies in the extent to which the collective in question embodies and accepts the moral framework by which the distinction between good and evil is formed'.

Eyerman's explanatory efforts regarding the differences between the three states and those variables that hinder or catalyze the trauma process are particularly heuristic. It is, however, his most recent book that is characterized by a double additional contribution: a) the scope of the application of cultural trauma's schema is considerably broadened and b) the theory is renewed, terminologies are deepened and a methodologically richer work thus emerges.

Nevertheless, what is considered an intrinsic characteristic of the cultural trauma theory is the notion that the examination is done 'in retrospect'. Thus, there is a high degree of ambivalence regarding the moment when a researcher can assess the occurrence of a cultural trauma without theoretical inhibition. On that account, nearly a decade after the writing of the first book, new analyses and readjustments may emerge based on these theoretical efforts.

For example, current rearrangements in the Swedish political system can be regarded as indicators of: a) a different orientation of Swedish society and b) a distinct change in the structures of collective emotions. The electorate is moving to the right and the issues-at-stake are much more strongly related to immigration policies, crime and gun ownership. Nowadays, the leading far-right politician Jimmie Akesson is characterized by major media outlets as a central figure on the political scene, rather than just a pariah. At the same time, the knife attack in Almedalen brought Palme and Lindh murders back into the collective consciousness, what was described in poignant terms as 'an attack to Swedish democracy'. Scholars can probably argue that new data exist on the basis of which the notion of a partly-open cultural trauma in Sweden can be revisited. Hence, that a debate about the foundations of Swedish society is tentatively beginning to form. Although the reasoning regarding the absence of a Swedish cultural trauma is re-introduced in 2019's *Memory, Trauma and Identity*, I argue that the current period of time is crucial for further discussions.

These remarks apparently do not undermine the fact that Eyerman's books enrich cultural trauma theory and complement

the efforts of the representatives of the 'strong program' to install an analytically more adequate and methodologically richer sociological trend. They also help bridging the void between micro and macro perspectives and reaching into depths that can be penetrated, according to Jeffrey Alexander, 'only with the tools of cultural sociology' (Alexander, 2003, p.179). In particular, however, they provide a useful methodological platform for examining diverse cultural structures and national societies.

If one concentrates on political assassinations, for example, one can detect assassinations in contemporary Greece that are either utterly in accordance with the traditional definition of 'political murder', or are political in a broader sense. Let us refer to the country's proximal relationship with political and social violence, especially after the beginning of the Greek Crisis (Panagiotopoulos et al, 2021); the long-lasting presence of the Revolutionary Organization 17 November, the most lethal, radical and widely known organization the country has ever known; the assassination of Gregorios Lambrakis in 1963 and Pavlos Bakoyannis in 1989. These horrendous events have been systematically and profoundly studied by several disciplines that have not been particularly cultural (e.g. historiography). To borrow Lamont's phrase, 'the tools of cultural sociology may prove invaluable in identifying taken-for-granted cultural understandings that deserve scrutiny' (Lamont, 2000). Consequently, a Greek Cultural Sociology that would delve into the symbolic structures created in the aftermath of the murders and would offer an explanation as to whether these murders succeeded in causing large-scale redefinitions of the Greek identity, is still absent.

Hence Eyerman's overall oeuvre continues to provide an occasion for fruitful debate on macro-historical phenomena. Its importance as a useful tool for further examining the vibrant interplay between trauma-identity-collective memory is unequivocal.

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