

Cultural Trauma

The Other Face of Social Change

Piotr Sztompka

JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY, POLAND

Abstract

There is a current effort to borrow the concept of trauma from medicine and psychiatry and to introduce it into sociological theory. The author explicates the notion of cultural trauma as applicable to the theory of social change. He defines cultural trauma as the culturally defined and interpreted shock to the cultural tissue of a society, and presents a model of the traumatic sequence, describing typical conditions under which cultural trauma emerges and evolves. Drawing on the work of Robert K. Merton on anomie, and of Anthony Giddens on risk, he suggests a number of typical strategies by which societies cope with cultural traumas. Cultural trauma is treated as a link in the ongoing chain of social changes; depending on the number of concrete circumstances, cultural trauma may be a phase in the constructive morphogenesis of culture or in the destructive cycle of cultural decay.

Key words

■ cultural trauma ■ social becoming ■ social change ■ trauma ■ traumatic sequence

There was a time when social change was idealized, considered to be unequivocally good, producing betterment, facilitating progress. It is no longer seen in this way. The experience of the twentieth century – the century epitomizing social change on an incomparable scale, a true ‘Century of Change’ – leaves us in a different mood; neither over-optimistic nor progressivist. And we feel more sceptical because we have seen in bold relief the dark face of change: the costs, pain, and suffering that it may bring about.

If we look at the ways in which sociological theories have perceived and conceptualized historical change, we can distinguish three types of dominant discourses. First, for the whole nineteenth century there prevailed a *discourse of progress*, accompanying the birth and spread of triumphant modernity (Alexander and Sztompka, 1990). Then, sometime in the middle of the twentieth century, we witnessed the decay of the idea of progress (Nisbet, 1980) and the ascendancy of a *discourse of crisis* (Holton, 1990). And now, at the end of the twentieth century, we suddenly hear more and more often – in the media, in political

speeches, in everyday talk – the strange word ‘trauma’, no longer confined to hospitals and psychiatric wards. (For example, the index of *The Economist* lists almost 80 instances of the use of the term in its articles during the last five years, and only five during the preceding five years.) A new discourse is born, the *discourse of trauma*, and it is slowly entering the domain of social sciences and the humanities (Caruth, 1995, 1996, Maruyama, 1996; Neal, 1998).

One possible use of the concept of trauma is to deal with the problem of negative, dysfunctional, adverse effects that major social change may leave in its wake, the ‘trauma of change’ inflicted on the ‘body’ of a changing society. The forerunner of this approach was Pitirim Sorokin. When in his *Sociology of Revolution* (1967[1928]) he analyzed the aftermath of the Soviet revolution of 1917, he stressed the biological and demographic damage to the society: physical degradation of a population, widespread disease, mental disturbances, falling fertility rates, rising mortality rates, famine, etc. This article attempts to extend the notion of trauma to the damage inflicted by major social change on the cultural, rather than biological, tissue of a society. Our purpose is the initial explication of a specific concept of *cultural trauma* (or trauma to a culture), distinct from other meanings that the notion of trauma may have. We shall attempt to locate this proposed concept within wider trends of contemporary theories of change, and argue for its usefulness.

Social Change as Social Becoming: Some Implications

The need for the concept of trauma, and specifically of cultural trauma, becomes apparent when we consider some crucial insights suggested by contemporary theories of social change. Post-developmental and post-progressivist theories of change based on the idea of *social becoming*, or making history, construe social transformations as continuous, contingent, partly undetermined and open-ended processes, driven by collective agency and occurring within the field of structured options (limited opportunities for action) inherited as the accumulated outcome of earlier phases of the same processes. The process of social becoming occurs in the inherited cultural environment, the socially shared pool of ready-made templates for symbolizing, interpreting, framing, and narrating the ongoing social praxis (Sztompka, 1991, 1993a).

The implications of this image of social change include:

- 1 a focus on *collective agency*, the active, driving force of social change residing in human collectivities of various sorts (from small groups to whole societies);
- 2 recognition of cultural constraints on the agents who have access to a limited pool of cultural resources;
- 3 a focus on the *effects of earlier social changes* on the present condition of collective agency, shaping its capacity to produce future social changes;
- 4 consideration of *negative, adverse effects* of earlier social change on the future dynamic potential of agency – in other words, recognizing the possibility of non-progressive change, paralyzing rather than enabling agency;

- 5 the observation that the earlier social changes affect various segments of social agency unequally, leaving their *differentiated imprint* depending on the type of accessible cultural resources and agential endowment of human collectivities (such as nations, classes, occupations, professions, local communities, social movements);
- 6 the observation that social change runs at *various paces, rhythms, and tempos*, with occasional periods of accelerated, rapid, and radical transformations that leave their strongest imprint on collective agency and its capacity for creative future praxis;
- 7 the observation that the pace, rhythm, and tempo of social change is *unequal in various domains of social life*, with the area of culture marked by the strongest inertia, the slowest coming of change and longest persistence of changed conditions, once the change has occurred (for instance as stipulated in William Ogburn's theory of 'cultural lag' [Ogburn, 1964], or Ralf Dahrendorf's 'three clocks' hypothesis [Dahrendorf, 1990]).

Let us note that culture appears in this theory in a double capacity: as a *context of change*, i.e. the pool of cultural resources ('templates'), engaged by agents in labeling, defining, interpreting certain events, or even conceiving non-existent, 'virtual' events; and as an *object of change*, affected by agential praxis, and particularly by major social upheavals, in a disruptive way. Paraphrasing Giddens's idea of the 'duality of structure' (Giddens, 1985), one may speak here of the 'duality of culture', as not only the means of change but also the product of change, shaping and shaped, constructing and being constructed (or in our case being disrupted) at the same time.

If one sees social change in this way, it becomes important to study the processes through which the collective agency is affected in a lasting manner by the consequences of earlier social change, because the future transforming potential of agency (its capacity for creative praxis) fundamentally hinges on such effects. More specifically, it becomes important to study the effects of *rapid, sudden, and radical* social change on the *cultural environment of agency* (enriching or diminishing the pool of cultural resources for further change), because it may be argued that such effects will be the deepest and will last the longest. And even more concretely, it may be crucial to focus on lasting *adverse effects*, the ways in which agential potential is persistently hindered by earlier – rapid, sudden, and radical – social change, through the destructive impact such change may have on the *cultural tissue*, the core of agential potentiality for further, creative praxis.

The Notion of a Trauma: Extending the Metaphor

Focusing on that specific research area, one easily hits on the metaphor of trauma. In medical parlance this term refers precisely to the impact of a sudden event, leaving long-term, destructive effects on the *body*, incapacitating it in some important respect. Extended to psychiatric discourse, it means a similar long-term destructive impact on the *personality*, resulting in some form of mental or

emotional incapacity. It may be worthwhile to give the term yet another connotation: to apply it to the social domain, to look for destructive effects on the *body social*. What could it mean in that context?

Trauma would indicate a specific pathology of the agency. 'Agency' is of course a concept with multiple meanings, but in the theory of social becoming it is understood as a complex, synthetic quality of human collectivity allowing for its creative self-transformation (Sztompka, 1991). The trauma on which we focus in this article appears in the aftermath of a peculiar type of social change. To be potentially traumatizing social change must have four characteristics, all of which need to be present in conjunction.

- 1 Such a change is marked by a particular *temporal quality* – it is sudden and rapid.
- 2 It has particular *substance and scope* – it is radical, deep, comprehensive, touching the core.
- 3 It has particular *origins* – it is perceived as imposed, exogenous, coming from the outside, as something to which we ourselves have not contributed, or if we did, then only unwittingly (we 'suffer' traumas, traumas 'occur to us', we 'encounter' traumas).
- 4 It is encountered with a particular *mental frame* – it is perceived as unexpected, unpredicted, surprising, shocking, repulsive.

There follows a tentative and random list of social changes of various magnitude and importance meeting this description, and therefore likely to initiate cultural trauma:

- revolution (whether victorious or failed), coup d'état, racial riots;
- collapse of the market, crash on the stock exchange;
- radical economic reform (e.g. nationalization or privatization);
- forced migration or deportation, ethnic cleansing;
- genocide, extermination, mass murder;
- acts of terrorism or violence;
- assassination of the political leader, resignation of a high-ranking official;
- opening secret archives and revealing the truth about the past;
- revisionist interpretation of national heroic tradition;
- collapse of an empire, lost war.

Of course, these are only a few illustrations of social changes which might precipitate the traumatic sequence. Some meet our general description more closely than others. I give the list just to convey the core intuition involved in the concept as I conceive it. To avoid misunderstanding let me emphasize three points: first, such events need not all evoke trauma (although under some conditions all of them *can*, and some of them actually *do*); second, the resulting traumas may be of radically unequal strength, duration, and significance; and third, a *cultural* trauma need not always appear (the effects of potentially traumatizing events may be diverse, going beyond or not reaching the level of cultural trauma).

In short, trauma is not a stable condition, but a dynamic, evolving process or

a *traumatic sequence*. The logic of the process resembles that identified by Neil Smelser in the emergence of social movements, called 'value-added dynamics' (Smelser, 1963). I will apply it *mutatis mutandis*, with some modifications, for the description of a traumatic sequence. Thus in my reconstruction a traumatic sequence can be analytically dissected into six stages:

- 1 the structural and cultural background (environment) conducive for the emergence of trauma ('structural conduciveness' is the term Smelser uses in his theory);
- 2 traumatizing situations or events ('structural strain' in Smelser's terminology);
- 3 specific ways of defining, interpreting, framing, or narrating the traumatizing events, drawing from the pool of inherited cultural resources ('generalized beliefs' in Smelser's language);
- 4 traumatic symptoms, i.e. specific behavioral or belief patterns (shared ways of conduct or typical, widespread opinions; collective moods);
- 5 post-traumatic adaptations ('social control' in Smelser's theory);
- 6 overcoming trauma (the closing phase of the sequence, or the beginning of the new cycle of the traumatic sequence, when the alleviated trauma provides structural and cultural conduciveness for another kind of trauma to appear).

Each of these components or phases requires brief explication.

Conducive Background: Cultural Disorientation

The conditions for cultural trauma are ripe when there appears some kind of disorganization, displacement, or incoherence in culture – in other words, when the normative and cognitive context of human life and social actions loses its homogeneity, coherence, and stability, and becomes diversified or even polarized into opposite cultural complexes. Looking at it from the perspective of the actors, we may speak of *cultural disorientation*. In this discussion I shall be particularly concerned with the duality, split, ambivalence, clash within a culture, emerging suddenly, rapidly and unexpectedly, and embracing the core areas of cultural components, such as basic values, central beliefs, and common norms.

What is the etiology of such a condition, providing necessary (but by no means sufficient) background for cultural trauma? Let us distinguish four typical situations (which do not exhaust all possibilities, but are indicated as illustrations).

First, cultural disorientation is apt to occur when some significant, sudden and unexpected episode of social change (or salient recollection of such an event from the past) gives a blow to the very central assumptions of a culture, or more precisely is interpreted as fundamentally incongruent with the core values, bases of identity, foundations of collective pride, etc. A defeat in war, a crushed national uprising, the collapse of an empire, persecution of the indigenous religion, delegitimation of traditional family forms, disclosure of corruption among the political elite – these are just some examples of such occurrences which may

acquire a cultural interpretation that implies the disruption of pre-existent culture. Another variety of this disorientation is caused by the memories of collective sins committed by the community to which we belong, the pervasive feelings of shame or guilt, caused by recollection of earlier collective deeds violating accepted cultural principles (Roth, 1995). Good examples would be the Vichy regime and wartime collaboration with the Nazis as a shameful memory for the French; the history of slavery that haunts American society to our day; the memory of the Holocaust in Germany, and in East and Central European societies the obsessive concern with the communist past and coming to terms with it by means of 'de-communization' or 'lustration' (*Transitions*, 1997, 1998). In brief, in all situations such as these, cultural disorientation results from the clash between facts – present or past – interpreted as incongruent with basic cultural premises.

Second, cultural disorientation appears when people find themselves in the grip of a new culture, or more precisely when the socialized, internalized culture that they carry 'in their heads' or in their semi-automatic 'habits of the heart' clashes with the cultural environment in which they find themselves. There are two variations of this kind of cultural clash. One, well known to travellers and tourists, and in a collective way to emigrants, is due to spatial mobility. People simply move to different cultural areas and turn out to be maladjusted or ill-suited to the new environment. Perhaps the best account of a collective cultural disorientation of this sort, engulfing a whole, huge community of immigrants, is to be found in the classic work by W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1974[1927]). The opposite variant is seen when people are not mobile, but an alien culture comes to embrace them, as in foreign conquest, colonialism, or imperial domination, but also in more mild, subtle and yet equally penetrating forms of cultural globalization (Hannerz, 1996), variously called Westernization, Americanization, and McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993). People suddenly find themselves in a cultural world completely at odds with their indigenous cultures, and if this is culturally defined as painful and unbearable (and not as an exotic tourist attraction, or a welcomed new experience) serious collective trauma emerges. This is the domain of numerous studies by social anthropologists from Bronislaw Malinowski (1944, 1961), to Ulf Hannerz (1996). Another variety of this situation occurs when collectivities with mutually incongruent cultures are involved in intense interactions, repeated, routine dealings which cannot be avoided. Circumstances especially conducive to this kind of disorientation arise in multicultural societies, where numerous, diverse cultures are brought into daily contact with each other. Of course such a pluralism must be ethnocentrically defined as painful, rather than as an enriching exercise in tolerance. Trauma results here from a *clash of indigenous with a foreign culture*, culturally interpreted as pernicious.

The third way in which cultural disorientation appears has to do with the sudden, unexpected and wide-ranging novelty of unaccustomed ways of life, emerging due to radically changed technological, economic, or political conditions (and within the framework of an unchanged or slowly changing culture). Then people find out that their spontaneously developed or situationally induced

new patterns of action clash with the old, traditional culture. Before those new ways of life become themselves encoded and sanctioned in new cultural rules, the traditional culture loses its taken-for-granted quality, becomes problematic, constraining, perceived as hostile or obsolete. This is often accompanied by a conflict of generations: the old generation sticking to traditional rules, and the young developing new ways of life. Cultural disorientation is in this case a necessary intermediate phase in the 'morphogenesis of culture' (Archer, 1986). The areas of sexual and family patterns, leisure, forms of work, art styles, provide numerous examples of this kind of cultural disorientation. Disorientation results here from a *clash of new ways of life with an old culture*.

Fourth, cultural disorientation may also originate within an area of culture, not at the border between culture and action, or between culture and events. There are several varieties of these *intra-cultural origins of cultural disorientation*. First, disorientation appears when various segments of a culture develop at an unequal pace, with a resulting 'cultural lag' of some segments behind others (Ogburn, 1964). For example, the de-synchronized development of various institutional spheres – law, politics, economy, financial and banking systems, mass culture – has often been indicated as a predicament of post-communist societies (Dahrendorf, 1990, Sztompka, 1996). Second, disorientation may be due to some internal cultural invention, introducing themes incongruent with the earlier culture, disrupting its coherence, producing a redefinition of meanings, a re-evaluation of beliefs. Luther's Reformation in the domain of religion, the Copernican Revolution in astronomy, and the Einsteinian paradigm shift in physics may serve as examples. Third, culture may be shaken by some discovery, unraveling of facts, or emergence of new evidence, throwing radically new light on events or persons and demanding basic reinterpretation of earlier judgments. The revelations in Nikita Khrushchev's 'secret' speech at the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956 demonstrated the extent of Stalin's crimes and produced a cultural disorientation for the indoctrinated Soviet citizens, as well as communist intellectuals worldwide. The discovery of the wartime collaboration of the Swiss banks with the Nazis became traumatic for at least some segments of Swiss society. Fourth, disorientation may be induced by a reinterpretation of the past. The so-called revisionist interpretation of the great French Revolution (Furet, 1981), focusing on violence and terror, or the revisionist interpretation of Columbus's discovery of America emphasizing the extermination of the Indians, clash so strongly with standard heroic accounts that cultural trauma is the likely result.

Disorientation as such, and cultural incongruences or inconsistencies per se, do not necessarily turn into cultural traumas. A traumatic sequence is started only when such maladjustments, tensions, and clashes are *perceived and experienced* as problems, as something troubling or painful that demands healing. In all these cases the shift from disorientation towards cultural trauma is manifested by the *intellectual, moral, and artistic mobilization of a society*, the appearance of a particular 'meaning industry' (collective efforts to make sense of the situation). It may also be accompanied by intensified activity among social movements,

particularly those known as 'new social movements', focusing their agendas on cultural issues or 'postmaterialist values'. If we observe heated debates and public disputes in the media, at public meetings, or in political bodies; if values and judgments are strongly contested; if certain themes become obsessive for artistic expression through the movies, theatre, literature, and poetry; if social movements mobilize for the expression of cultural discontents, then we are certainly witnessing unhealed and potentially evolving trauma. The most noticeable symptom of a condition conducive to trauma is that people talk about it and want to do something about it. Even in the most repressive regimes, if they cannot talk publicly, they more than substitute for it in the private circles of family, close friends, and acquaintances. The condition of cultural disorientation, accompanied by social concern and expressed by intensified emotional, intellectual, organizational activism, provides a necessary background for the cultural trauma to appear. It is by no means a sufficient condition. Precipitating traumatizing situations or events, and cultural reinterpretations of these, are the next stages of the traumatic sequence.

Potentially Traumatizing Situations or Events

Traumatizing situations or events occur as side-effects of major social change. They are not directly related to culture; rather, they affect the actual social life of the members of the changing society, or the social structure of their society. Traumatizing events or situations may produce dislocations in the routine, accustomed ways of acting or thinking, change the life-world of the people in often dramatic ways, reshape their patterns of acting and thinking. What is potentially traumatizing differs among various societies. Taking the example of East and Central European societies after the collapse of communism, one may list the following potentially traumatizing events or situations: unemployment, inflation, lowering of living standards and degradation of prestige, poverty, rising crime, a flow of immigrants, and corruption among the political elite. Some of these are universal, affecting everybody (e.g. inflation or crime), others are more particular, affecting only some segments of the population (unemployment, degradation of status) (Sztompka, 2000). Against a background of cultural disorientation, a condition that makes the people more sensitive and anxious, events or situations like this may engender the traumatic syndrome. But before they do, there is a stage of cultural labeling and redefining.

Cultural Framing of Traumatizing Occasions

Trauma, like many other social conditions, is at the same time both *objective and subjective*: it is usually based in some actual occurrences or phenomena, but it does not exist as long as they do not become visible and defined in a particular way. The defining, framing, interpretative efforts do not occur in the vacuum.

There is always a pre-existing pool of available meanings encoded in the shared culture of a given community or society. Individual people do not invent meanings, but rather draw them selectively from their surrounding culture and apply them to the potentially traumatizing events. Hence the traumatizing event is always a cultural construction.

A limiting case, always possible in the human world, is grasped by the famous Thomas theorem: 'If people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Merton, 1996). There may be traumas which are not rooted in any real traumatizing events or situations, but only in the widespread imaginations of such events. For instance, if enough people believe in an imminent invasion from Mars, widespread panic will result. If enough people are convinced that a charismatic leader has committed treason, a legitimation crisis will ensue, even if he is completely innocent. But the opposite is also possible: the events or situations with objectively strong traumatizing potential may not lead to actual trauma, because they are explained away, rationalized, reinterpreted in ways which make them invisible, innocuous, or even benign or beneficial. The case when actual traumatizing events are also perceived as such, and when perceptions of traumatizing events have their foundations in reality, is only one of possibly three situations.

Thus, there are three possibilities: some of the interpretations construe such events as traumatic; some construe imagined, objectively non-existent events as traumatic; and some construe objectively traumatizing events as non-traumatic. Such is the power of cultural relativization.

Traumatic Symptoms

Whether trauma is rooted in real or only imagined traumatizing events, the traumatic condition has some common characteristics, namely disruption of normality or regularity. There is probably something in human nature that puts a bonus on order, routine, repetitiveness, continuity, standardization, predictability, the *taken-for-grantedness* of the environment in which people live. Such conditions satisfy our craving for existential security. Trauma occurs when there is a break, displacement, or disorganization in the orderly, taken-for-granted universe. The experience of a trauma by a collectivity depends on the *relative degree* of such a break or displacement, as compared with the preceding measure of order, or as compared with expectations concerning the continuation of order. This is what we mean by saying that trauma is brought about by 'shocking' events. One may expect two regularities here. First, the larger is the gap between the accustomed, orderly environment, and the condition resulting from some traumatizing event (i.e. the stronger is the 'shock'), the stronger will be the experience of a trauma (e.g. in a peaceful, orderly, law-abiding community, the murder of a member may produce collective trauma, whereas in a crime-ridden neighborhood the same event might go virtually unnoticed). Second, the more trauma touches the core of collective order – the domain of main values, constitutive rules, central expectations – the stronger it will be felt.

The traumatic condition, brought about by traumatizing events or situations, culturally interpreted as traumas, is in most general terms an *unusual condition*, an uncommon state of affairs: some disruption, dislocation, or disturbance, provided that it is experienced or perceived negatively – as painful, harmful, unpleasant, repulsive. But does cultural trauma always result from some failure or adverse occurrence (in other words, are the traumatizing events always negative) or can cultural trauma also originate in success, if it is unexpected, unaccustomed, exceeding some level, undermining the normal routines of collective life (in other words, can the traumatizing events be – objectively – positive, beneficial)? The hint of such a possibility is given by Emile Durkheim in his discussion of the ‘*anomie of success*’ (1951). A recent good example on a macro scale is the collapse of communism and the deep, radical transformations of East European societies. The event greeted with greatest enthusiasm by most people has resulted, for some time and for some groups, in traumatic experiences known as the ‘*pains of transition*’ (e.g. unemployment, status degradation, impoverishment, rise of crime) (Sztompka, 2000).

Trauma is a ‘social fact’ in the classical, Durkheimian sense of the term (Durkheim, 1982): it is shared and widespread among the members of a certain group. It acquires facticity or externality with respect to each of them, and it is perceived as imposed on and constraining for their actions. Trauma is a *collective phenomenon*, a condition experienced by a group, community, or society, as a result of disruptive events culturally interpreted as traumatizing. Trauma affects the collectivity and therefore cannot be treated as an individual psychological predicament (as it is treated in the rich psychoanalytic literature).

Cultural trauma affects *culture*. Of course any trauma is by definition a cultural phenomenon, as it involves cultural interpretation of potentially traumatizing events or situations. But it may also be cultural in the more direct sense, as touching the cultural tissue of the society. In other words cultural trauma is the *culturally interpreted wound to cultural tissue itself*. In the aftermath of rapid, radical social change the ‘*duality of culture*’ will manifest itself in a peculiar way: traumatizing events that are themselves meaningful, endowed with meaning by the members of the collectivity, may disturb the very same universe of meanings. If a disturbance occurs, the symbols start to mean something other than they normally do; values become valueless, or demand unrealizable goals; norms prescribe unfeasible actions; gestures and words signify something different from what they meant before; beliefs are refuted, faith undermined, trust breached; charisma collapses, idols fall. I believe cultural trauma is most threatening, because like all cultural phenomena it has the strongest inertia; it persists and lingers considerably longer than other kinds of trauma, sometimes over several generations, preserved in collective memory or hibernating in collective subconsciousness, and occasionally gaining salience when conducive circumstances arise. A good example is provided by tribal, ethnic, or national traumas rooted in violent, traumatizing events from the distant past, and suddenly reappearing in bursts of inter-group hatred, conflicts and even wars. We currently witness dramatic cases of this sort in Africa, the post-Soviet republics, and the Balkans.

One sub-category of cultural trauma is particularly interesting. If we agree that the culture of a collectivity is the main framework for the self-definition of *collective identity*, for the delimitation of the borders of the category 'we', as opposed to 'them', then the breakdown of cultural order will often be reflected in disturbances of collective identity. An identity crisis and the struggle to re-establish, reshape, or construct anew a collective identity may be the most empirically salient variety of cultural trauma. Think, for example, about the widely discussed collapse of Russian identity ('the wound to the Russian soul') in the wake of the highly traumatizing disintegration of the Soviet empire and the demise of the communist system.

Sociological theory has of course been dealing with various types of social and cultural traumas for quite some time, even though not under that label. The overlapping theoretical concepts dealing with negative consequences of social change which in some, wider or narrower, segments of their meaning clearly refer to conditions akin to cultural trauma, would include:

- anomie (Durkheim, 1951; Merton, 1996[1938]);
- civilizational incompetence (Sztompka, 1993b);
- social friction (Etzioni, 1991);
- distrust syndrome (Sztompka, 1999);
- collective guilt;
- collective shame;
- crisis of identity;
- legitimation crisis (Habermas, 1975);
- cultural lag (Ogburn, 1964).

In spite of some affinities, research using these notions has usually proceeded separately and independently. The important merit of the concept of cultural trauma, formulated at a higher level of abstraction and generalization, could be to bring those diverse research traditions under one theoretical umbrella and allow for their mutual enrichment, as well as cross-verification.

Differentiated Sensitivity to Cultural Traumas

Of course not all groups in a society are equally sensitive to cultural traumas and equally prone to expressing them. Perhaps for each traumatizing event there are some core groups who experience and perceive it strongly, and peripheral groups for whom it is irrelevant or marginal. Groups also have differentiated access to the pool of cultural interpretative templates which can be applied when defining events and situations as traumatic. As a result, the impact of the same potentially traumatizing events may be qualitatively quite opposite for various groups: destructive and disruptive for some, beneficial and welcomed for some, ignored and neutral for others. Think of any revolution and the elation and hopes it brings for some while gloom and despair engulf others, and some simply do not care. Or take any major political reform and its impact on the proponents and

opponents, as well as the indifferent. To put it otherwise, some groups, due to their cultural location, are more insulated and some are more susceptible to the impact of trauma. Some groups are more articulate, more able to express trauma, and others lack the requisite skills. And some groups command better resources to deal with trauma, to fight and overcome it, while other groups may lack such resources. The question 'trauma for whom?' opens an important area of contingency.

We may indulge in some speculation about the factors responsible for the differences among various groups in their susceptibility to trauma. It seems that the crucial variable may be the command of various resources, of *social and cultural capital* helpful in perceiving, defining, and dealing actively with traumas. The central factor seems to be education. On the one hand, the higher their level of education, the more perceptive and more sensitive to cultural traumas people become. And at the same time, they are better equipped to express trauma. No wonder that some more subtle and hidden traumas have been first perceived and diagnosed by intellectuals, philosophers, and social scientists, who have provided ready-made definitions and symbolic frames for other people to pick up. Usually more educated groups also have better skills for actively coping with cultural traumas. Maybe a general, diversified, wide education is more important here than narrow specialization. One additional argument for the British ideal of the widely educated 'gentleman' could be that cultural traumas often demand re-learning, re-skilling, and re-socializing. And such flexibility is much better served by a multi-directional, rounded, broad education. For example, the collapse of communism in East and Central Europe, followed by the opening to the West and the emergence of a competitive market and democratic politics, is obviously less traumatizing for educated than uneducated people. Those who command foreign languages, professional skills, and cosmopolitan attitudes have much less trouble in coping with transition than do unskilled manual workers or simple peasants.

But other factors, apart from education, may also play a part. For those kinds of trauma that originate in a cultural clash, or multiculturalism, *tolerant, relativistic attitudes* – as opposed to ethnocentrism or dogmatism – will allow people to cope better with trauma. Another variable may be called *social rootedness*. For example, in studies of post-communist societies it was observed that those who have rich social networks of acquaintances, numerous friends and strong family support will be much better prepared to cope with the traumatic reorientation to capitalist entrepreneurship, free markets and individualistic responsibility. Obviously, for many kinds of trauma wealth or power may be important cushioning factors, insulating against trauma or providing efficient means to deal with it. The list of such personal factors serving as mediating variables is certainly not closed. These are only some hints indicating directions in which we should search.

Strategies for Coping with Cultural Trauma

As emphasized earlier, events or situations brought about by sudden, rapid and fundamental social change become traumatic conditions only because of the interpretative activity of human agents. One form that such an activity may take is hiding, explaining away, rationalizing or in other ways domesticating or neutralizing the occurrences which objectively, potentially, may be traumatizing. This can provide a kind of cultural, subjective insulation against such events or situations and prevent the appearance of the traumatic condition. This is a *preventive coping with trauma* which does not yet exist but is potentially threatening.

Once those preventive interpretations are culturally unavailable, or abandoned for other reasons, or eventually ineffective, and the traumatic condition appears, people respond in various ways. For dealing with trauma there are distinct strategies, modes of actively adapting, and a repertoire of reactions undertaken by affected groups. To sort them out, I propose to apply two theoretical concepts developed in sociology with reference to kindred phenomena that clearly fall within our description of cultural trauma. One is the classical treatment of *anomie*, and social adaptations to anomic conditions, in Robert K. Merton's article of 1938 (Merton, 1996). Another is the account of *risk* as a pervasive factor of late modernity, and of the typical collective reactions to risk, given by Anthony Giddens in 1990 (Giddens, 1990). It is striking how close those two theories, so distant in time and in substantive focus, come in their diagnosis of adaptive modes.

Merton describes four typical adaptations to anomie: **innovation, rebellion, ritualism, and retreatism**. The first pair are active, constructive adaptations, the second pair are passive adaptations. To generalize this typology and to apply it, *mutatis mutandis*, to cultural traumas, one could say that adaptive innovation involves all efforts aimed at improving the position of individuals or groups within incongruent and stressful cultural conditions. One common strategy is to raise economic, social or cultural capital as resources to insulate against trauma. Legitimate ways would include advancement through work, extending social networks, improving one's education, etc. Illegitimate ways would include corruption, crime, fraud. Cultural rebellion would indicate a more radical effort aimed at changing the stressful cultural incongruence, through spontaneous or purposeful 'cultural production', aiming towards piecemeal modifications of a given culture, or even the total transformation of culture in order to replace the traumatic condition with a completely new cultural setup. The counter-cultural movements or some religious sects provide the best illustrations of this adaptation. A passive, ritualistic reaction would mean turning (or returning) to established traditions and routines, and cultivating them as safe hideouts to deflect cultural trauma. And finally, retreatism in this connection would mean ignoring trauma, repressing it, striving to forget it, and acting as if trauma did not exist.

Giddens rounds up his account of late modernity (1990) with a discussion of typical reactions that people take to adapt to pervasive uncertainty and risk: the first is a pragmatic acceptance, or a business-as-usual attitude, manifested in a

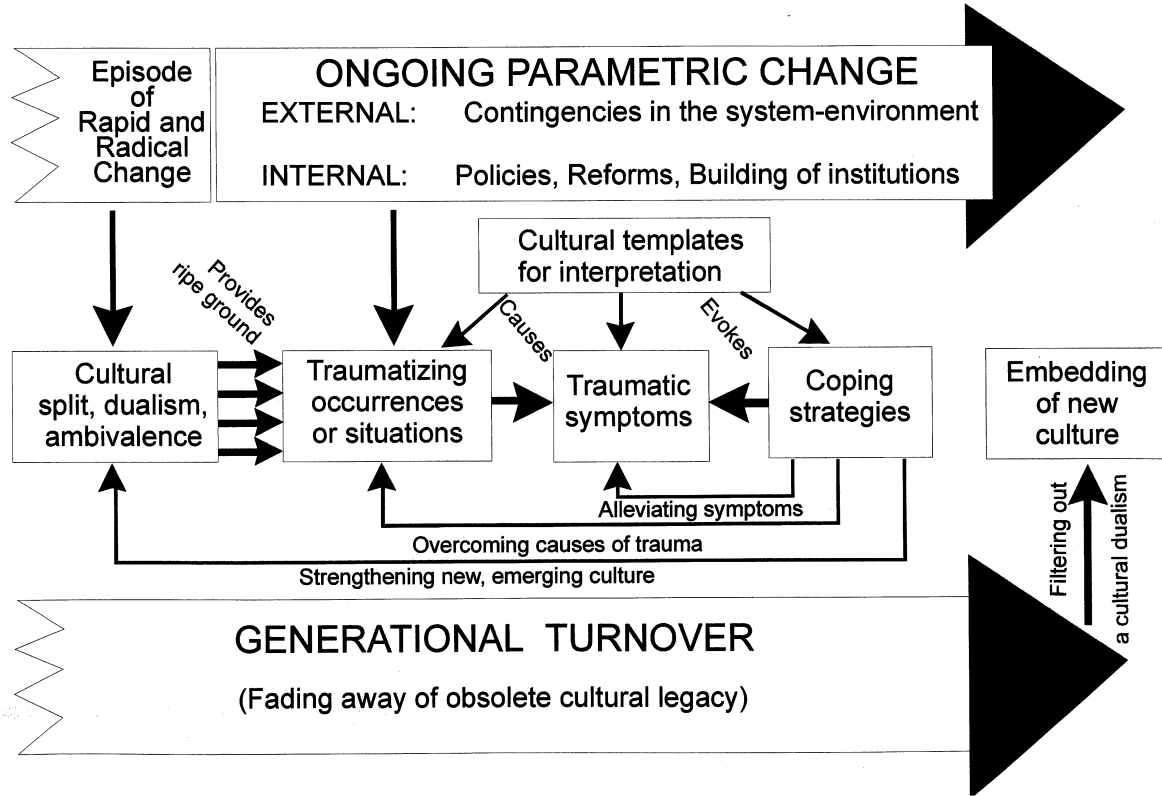


Figure 1 Traumatic sequence (in the context of ongoing change)

focus on day-to-day tasks and repression of anxiety from consciousness; the second is sustained optimism, faith that somehow things will turn out better and dangers will be avoided, as a result of providence, or science, or technology, or ultimate human rationality; the third is cynical pessimism, with a shortened time-perspective and a hedonistic tendency to enjoy life here and now, before the dangers strike; fourth, there is radical contestation against the perceived sources of dangers, mostly carried out within the framework of social movements. It goes without saying that only this last adaptation is constructive, akin to Mertonian innovation or rebellion, allowing people to overcome some of the traumatizing effects of risks. The other adaptations are passive, coming close to Mertonian ritualism and retreatism.

Traumatic Sequence in the Dialectics of Social Change

The traumatic sequence as described and analyzed above is embedded in the wider processes of social change. The flow of social change is ubiquitous and continuous; it does not know beginnings or ends. Each episode of change occurs for various reasons, often contingent and different from other episodes. Within the flow of social change the traumatic sequence may appear in a double capacity: as the consequence of some other changes (precipitating events in conducive context), but also as an instigator of a specific kind of change (coping actions and reshaping of structures or cultures). To see this duality better, let us recall the main points of the argument.

We take as a starting point for analysis the occurrence of some sudden, radical, comprehensive social change (revolutions, sudden social upheavals are prime examples). Change of this sort is reflected in the domain of culture: the tension appears between the old cultural precepts (rules, values, meanings, symbols, discourses, etc.) and the emerging culture adequate for the new social conditions. Because of cultural inertia the legacy of earlier, and already obsolete culture survives the system for which it was functionally adequate, and for some time it coexists with the new culture, thus becoming functionally inadequate for the new system. This condition of cultural split or ambivalence provides a conducive background that can engender fully fledged cultural trauma: a *culturally defined wound in the very same culture*. Social change is also apt to produce the disruption of the life-world, bringing about several potentially traumatizing events or situations. People use the available pool of cultural resources to interpret those events or situations. Some interpretations construe them as traumas. The traumatic condition appears. In response to it people resort to various coping strategies. In the meantime social changes proceed independently according to their specific pace and concrete causation. As they are not directly influenced by the traumatic sequence (even though they affect it themselves), from the perspective of trauma such changes may be labeled as parametric. Some of the parametric changes or events may be advantageous, helping to alleviate trauma; others may be harmful, aggravating trauma.

Two alternative scenarios are then possible. One is the *vicious cycle of cultural destruction*, another a *virtuous cycle of cultural reconstruction*. The former occurs when parametric changes aggravate traumatizing situations, people resort to ineffective (or even counter-effective) coping strategies, and the obsolete culture is supported and kept going by obsessive cultivation of memories. Another is a benign parametric change ameliorating the traumatizing situations, coupled with effective coping with trauma, and the fading away of the obsolete cultural legacy through generational turnover. Together, those three forces result in alleviating or eliminating trauma and lead towards the final entrenchment of the new culture. This can be summed up in Figure 1.

Such is the dialectic mechanism of cultural change through the emergence of and the overcoming of cultural trauma. It is perhaps neither universal nor necessary for cultural change. But it seems to apply well to a particularly interesting case of such dynamics initiated by fundamental breakdowns or dislocations, in short, to a revolutionary change. Here cultural trauma, in spite of its immediate negative, painful consequences, shows its positive, functional potential as a force of social becoming. In spite of the disruption and disarray of cultural order that it brings about, in a different time-scale it may be seen as the seed of a new cultural system, the stimulus for *cultural consolidation or construction*.

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■ **Piotr Sztompka** is Professor of Theoretical Sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow (Poland). Recently he has been a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at

Stanford. He is a member of the Academia Europaea (London) and American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Cambridge, MA). He received the New Europe Prize in 1995, and in 1998 was elected a Vice-President of the International Sociological Association. Among his books are: *Society in Action: The Theory of Social Becoming* (1991), *The Sociology of Social Change* (1993), *Robert K. Merton on Social Structure and Science* (ed.) (1996), and *Trust: A Sociological Theory* (1999). Address: Institute of Sociology, Jagiellonian University, Grodzka 52, 31-044 Kraków, Poland. [email: ussztomp@cyf-kr.edu.pl]