

1 Introduction: trauma, violence and political community

The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such.

– Slavoj Žižek¹

In the aftermath of a war or catastrophe comes the reckoning. The dead and the missing are listed, families grieve and comfort each other, and memorials are erected. If it is a war that has been won, commemoration endorses those in power, or so it seems at first glance. Victory parades, remembrance ceremonies and war museums tell of glory, courage and sacrifice. The nation is renewed, the state strengthened. Private grief is overlaid by national mourning and blunted – or eased – by stories of service and duty. The authorities that had the power to conscript citizens and send them to their deaths now write their obituaries.

But returning combatants tell a different tale. Survivors are subdued, even silent. Many witnessed the deaths of those around them. They cannot forget, and some are haunted by nightmares and flashbacks to scenes of unimaginable horror. In their dreams they re-live their battlefield experiences and awake again in a sweat. First World War veterans were said to be suffering from shell shock. By the end of that war, 80,000 cases of shell shock had been treated in units of the Royal Army Medical Corps and 30,000 evacuated for treatment in Britain. Some 200,000 veterans received pensions for nervous disorders after the war.² This epidemic led to a reconsideration of psychoanalytic theory, then based on the notion of dreams as the fulfilment of unconscious wishes. Much contemporary work that seeks to understand what is now called trauma stems from

¹ Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 272–3.

² Martin Stone, 'Shellshock and the psychologists' in *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, ed. W. F. Bynum, R. Porter and M. Shepherd (London: Tavistock, 1988), II: 242–71, quoted in Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 41–2.

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this period and from an attempt to understand why traumatic events are re-lived time and time again by survivors.

By the Second World War it was no longer only service personnel (not themselves necessarily volunteers) who were intimately affected by state-organised violence. Aerial bombing campaigns drew civilian populations into the conflict. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 was horrific and overwhelming in its brutality. And the genocidal policies of the Nazi régime in Germany led to the deaths of millions in concentration camps, open-air shootings and ghettos.

In the aftermath of genocide, when a state has turned on people who considered themselves its citizens, the dead have no names and no burial place because their families are killed too. Memorialisation is difficult if not impossible. It can be many years before memory surfaces in the public arena or indeed before there is a willingness to listen to survivors' testimony. States are implicated more thoroughly than in the case of war, both the state in which the genocide occurred and those that stood by while it happened. Nevertheless, eventually, after a lapse of time or a change in the political landscape, a narrative takes shape. Events are named, memorials and museums set up, and the identity of at least some of the victims established.

Following the Nazi genocide of the 1940s, many of the survivors emerged with a compelling need to bear witness and an overwhelming conviction of the importance of doing so. They were largely ignored. It was not until much later that what became known as 'the Holocaust' grew into a topic of fascination. But whereas traumatic stress as a result of combat is thought far-fetched by some, the status of Holocaust survivor has generally had a special aura.³ What survivors have witnessed has long been recognised as 'unimaginable' and 'unspeakable', although these epithets have often served as an excuse for neither imagining it nor speaking about it. The Holocaust has been a largely proprietary event: it was 'narrated by Jews and non-Jews alike as a collective (and sole) property of the Jews, as something to be left to, or jealously guarded by, those who escaped the shooting and the gassing, and by the descendants of the shot and gassed'.⁴ It belongs to the Jews (or to the Jewish state) and others feel debarred from talking about it.

Work by feminists in the 1970s argued that the symptoms of victims of rape and incest were similar to those of combat survivors. After a lengthy

³ In Israel in the 1950s the aura was one of failure: survivors were regarded as 'the epitome of the Jew as helpless schlemiel, a counterexample to the new Israeli Jew' (Yaron Ezrahi, *Rubber Bullets: Power and Conscience in Modern Israel* (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 147.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), viii–ix.

campaign that included Vietnam veterans, the term ‘post-traumatic stress’ was finally written into the American Psychiatric Association’s manual in 1980.⁵ Childhood abuse and trauma, although still controversial, became something that could be discussed, first in women’s groups and later more widely. Sigmund Freud’s work in Vienna in the 1890s had led him to conclude that symptoms of what was then called hysteria in his women patients could be traced back to childhood abuse. He published his findings and conclusions in 1896 in a paper entitled ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’, where he put forward the view that ‘at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are *one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience*. . . . I believe this is an important finding’.⁶ But he did not pursue this line; it was unacceptable to him and to his contemporaries.⁷ He argued instead that women were in some sense responsible for their own abuse. He replaced his original analysis of hysteria (the seduction theory) with theories of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex. Ironically, it was only during his work with shell shock after the First World War that Freud returned to the study of what we now call psychic trauma. Of course, in the case of childhood abuse and rape as with shell shock and earlier with hysteria, the people concerned were regularly regarded as having either caused their traumatic experiences – by their own behaviour, or as a fulfilment of their unconscious wishes – or imagined something that had not actually occurred. Women were accused of having wanted to be raped, soldiers of faking their illness in a cowardly attempt to avoid fighting, and children’s reports were seen as exaggerated and unbelievable.

Events that give rise to what we categorise today as symptoms of trauma generally involve force and violence. Often this is a threat to those people involved, their lives and integrity, as in rape, torture or child abuse; sometimes it also involves witnessing the horrific deaths of others, for example in wartime combat or in concentration camps. The victim of trauma feels they were helpless in their enforced encounter with death, violence and brutality. This is not always the case. For example, on the whole, Vietnam veterans were not in situations where they were trapped in the same way as First World War soldiers in the trenches or concentration camp victims. In most cases, they were perpetrators of violence

⁵ Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (London: Pandora, 1992), 32.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Aetiology of Hysteria’, quoted in Alice Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society’s Betrayal of the Child*, trans. Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum, new edn (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 117.

⁷ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 19. Alice Miller discusses this issue and quotes extensively from Freud’s 1896 lecture (Miller, *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*, 109–20). I am grateful to Annick Wibben for this reference.

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rather than victims.⁸ But it seems that to be called traumatic – to produce what are seen as symptoms of trauma – an event has to be more than just a situation of utter powerlessness. In an important sense, it has to entail something else. It has to involve a betrayal of trust as well. There is an extreme menace, but what is special is where the threat of violence comes from. What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger.

This can be devastating because who we are, or who we think we may be, depends very closely on the social context in which we place and find ourselves. Our existence relies not only on our personal survival as individual beings but also, in a very profound sense, on the continuance of the social order that gives our existence meaning and dignity: family, friends, political community, beliefs. If that order betrays us in some way, we may survive in the sense of continuing to live as physical beings, but the meaning of our existence is changed. Commonplace solutions to do with who and what we are and what life might be provided by culture, religious beliefs, patriotic sentiment or close family relationships are overwhelmed. Any illusion of safety or security is broken. Events seen as traumatic seem to reflect a particular form of intimate bond between personhood and community and, most importantly, they expose the part played by relations of power. For the child, abuse involves betrayal by the person the child should most be able to trust. For the conscript, it is the state that breaks faith and deceives. Both cases involve relations of power.

Witnessing violence done to others and surviving can seem to be as traumatic as suffering brutality oneself. Here a sense of shame is paramount. The survivor feels complicit in the betrayal perpetrated by others. In this sense the survivor of a rape or of incest is ashamed for the protagonist of violence against them as well as for themselves. Taking part in violence oneself can evoke a similar shame – as was the case with Vietnam veterans – though this of course is *not at all to be equated with* witnessing violence done by others.⁹ The camp survivor is filled with shame for the deeds done by the guards, and because the inmates were powerless to prevent them. As Primo Levi remembers, ‘the shame . . . drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch or submit to some outrage: the shame . . . that such a crime should exist, that it should be

⁸ Young, *Harmony of Illusions*, 283.

⁹ See, for example, Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989), 2.

introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist'.¹⁰ The combat veteran has not only seen his comrades killed or mutilated but has himself brutally slaughtered enemy soldiers – and in some cases betrayed his own supposed code as a warrior (or as a person) when he has terrorised and victimised civilians.

Events of the sort we call traumatic are overwhelming but they are also a revelation. They strip away the diverse commonly accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities. They reveal the contingency of the social order and in some cases how it conceals its own impossibility. They question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of. Those who survive often feel compelled to bear witness to these discoveries.

On the whole, the rest of us would rather not listen. A frequent excuse is that the horrors survivors testify to are too terrible. They are 'unimaginable': we need not listen because we cannot hear. Robert Antelme, describing the encounter of the American liberators with camp survivors at Dachau in Germany at the end of the Second World War, says that the word 'unimaginable' is 'the most convenient word. When you walk around with this word as your shield, this word for emptiness, your step becomes better assured, more resolute, your conscience pulls itself together.'¹¹ But in particular those who would try to prevent survivors from speaking out are the powerful, those who have perhaps more of a stake than most in concealing the contingency of forms of social and political organisation. This may include, for example, governments who have sent soldiers into battle, men who benefit from a structure in which women and children are subservient and vulnerable, states who have turned on a section of their own citizens in genocides or deportations. The testimony of survivors can challenge structures of power and authority. Moreover, this challenge can in some regards transcend boundaries of culture and social group.¹² It is what Michel Foucault referred to as 'the solidarity of the shaken'.

On the other hand, do contemporary forms of political community have an ironic connection with the events that we have been discussing? Do political communities such as the modern state survive in part through the scripting of these events as emergencies, or even, indeed, as traumatic? Or even by the production of events that can appear as exceptional, beyond

¹⁰ Primo Levi, *If This is a Man and The Truce*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Abacus, 1987), 188.

¹¹ Robert Antelme, *The Human Race*, 289–90, quoted in Sarah Kofman, *Smothered Words*, trans. Madeleine Dobie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 38.

¹² Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 56.

the norm? In modern political communities in the west, our faith in the social order and our search for security are invested in systems that themselves are productive of and produced by force and violence. This point is no surprise to women of course, who have long had to separate their notions of safety from the patriarchal structures in which they live. Battered women would not recognise the picture of the family as a source of protection and stability, for example. The contemporary form of political community, the state, relies for its existence on the assumption that it can compel its citizens to fight (and die) for its sovereignty. It proffers security in return for obedience. As a political unit it is produced and defined by organised violence. States are founded on violence, whether it takes the form of war, revolution or civil conflict. And although once formed a state may appear peaceable enough, internally and externally, physical violence remains a tool that only the state is allowed to use. Attempts by others – vigilante groups, opposition movements, criminals – to use violence are seen as unacceptable. In Max Weber's definition, 'the state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory'.¹³ The right to use violence, in other words, is the prerogative of the state. And it makes use of this prerogative. For example, the modern nation-state works by processes of enforced exclusion, and it can change the definition of who precisely will be excluded at any time. Exclusion does not always entail expulsion: there is also the excluded 'enemy within', a label famously used by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain at the time of the miners' strike in 1984. The modern state, then, is a contradictory institution: a promise of safety, security and meaning alongside a reality of abuse, control and coercion.

As we saw, some feminists came to the conclusion that relations between the sexes are like a war, with the casualties being rape victims, battered wives and sexually abused children. The parallel between women and war veterans was used in the 1970s and 1980s to draw attention to the plight of women and the widespread exploitation of patriarchal power by men, which had, apart from the early work by Freud and Joseph Breuer on hysteria, been neglected.¹⁴ If we push the similarities further, taking the insights gained from the study of sexual abuse in families and applying them to other events categorised as traumatic, what do we find? What if,

¹³ Max Weber, *Weber: Political Writings*, trans. Ronald Spiers, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Spiers (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 310–11.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James Strachey and Alix Strachey, The Penguin Freud Library, vol. III, ed. James Strachey and Alix Strachey (London: Penguin, 1974); Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

instead of likening family relations to a war, we compare the treatment of populations in wartime with the treatment of women in families? It turns out that we have a parallel exploitation of power in political communities, which we might call political abuse. Political authorities are using their power over their citizens to abuse and torture them or to compel them to take part in abhorrent acts, acts which violate their sense of self-worth and which provoke intense shame, humiliation and anger. According to US Marine veteran Michael Norman, survivors of Vietnam were angry. They were not unlike survivors of previous wars, however. Their anger was not new. It was 'old, atavistic. We were angry as all civilised men who have ever been sent to make murder in the name of virtue were angry.'¹⁵ States abuse citizens on the battlefield, in captivity, in concentration camps. The modern state cannot be assumed to be a place of safety, any more than the patriarchal family can. Political abuse in one parallels sexual abuse in the other.¹⁶ Both give rise to what we call symptoms of trauma.

In both cases what has happened is beyond the possibility of communication. There is no language for it. Abuse by the state, the fatherland, like abuse by the father within the family, cannot be spoken in language, since language comes from and belongs to the family and the community. Survivors of political abuse in the contemporary west have something compelling to say, but it is something that is unsayable in the vocabulary of the powerful, and it is dangerous to the political institutions in place. The use of the term 'unspeakable' in relation to trauma is not only an excuse to avoid the need to listen to what is being said. It also reflects the view of survivors that what they have been through cannot be communicated. Communication takes place in language and language itself is social and political, not individual. Relations of power are produced through and reflected in language. Words get their meaning from their place in chains of meaning, through their associations with other words based on sound, metaphor and layers of usage. Meaning can shift and words can be re-articulated with new associations and new contexts. For language to work at a particular time and in a particular context, it is necessary for there to be a linguistic community that shares or is subject to something that will temporarily fix meanings. There has to be some provisional agreement, accepted ideology or central authority structure that will halt the fluidity of terms and make language meaningful. In psychoanalytic theory it is

¹⁵ Quoted by Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 27.

¹⁶ Of course, the notion of 'abuse' relies on the possibility of a legitimate, contractual power. Michel Foucault, 'Two lectures', in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977* by Michel Foucault, ed. Colin Gordon (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 78–108; 92.

not just language that works like this. The unconscious mind is structured like a language; in other words, who we think we are is shifting and fluid, until fixed by the social context or the dominant group. But this group does not exist independently of the people of whom it is made up. We produce this group at the same time as becoming members of it. By assuming a community exists we produce one. By situating ourselves as citizens of a state or political authority or as members of a family, we reproduce that social institution at the same time as assuming our own identity as part of it. As we have seen, in what we call a traumatic event this group betrays us. We can no longer be who we were, and the social context is not what we assumed it to be. It is not all-powerful, it does not have all the answers: in fact, its answers are flawed. As Jean Amery puts it: 'Every morning when I get up I can read the Auschwitz number on my forearm. . . . Every day anew I lose my trust in the world.'¹⁷ The cause of his oppression and restlessness is society: 'it and only it robbed me of my trust in the world'.¹⁸ As a survivor of catastrophe, he lives in constant fear of its return: 'nothing can again lull me into the slumber of security from which I awoke in 1935'.¹⁹ It has become plain to a survivor that the appearance of fixity and security produced by the social order is just that: an appearance. Of course, the language we speak is part of the social order, and when the order falls apart around our ears, so does the language. What we *can* say no longer makes sense; what we *want* to say, we can't. There are no words for it. This is the dilemma survivors face. The only words they have are the words of the very political community that is the source of their suffering. This is the language of the powerful, the words of the status quo, the words that delimit and define acceptable ways of being human within that community.

What survivors seek is perhaps impossible. They seek a way of resistance. For some, Sarah Kofman for example, this means a way of 'writing without power'. Such a writing or speech was forbidden in the concentration camps, 'yet also withheld, preserved, protected against all straying, all corruption, against all violent abuse that might have exposed it to the suspicion of playing along with boundless violence, and therefore have discredited it forever'.²⁰ Such a way of speaking implies a form of community that does not entail a circuit of power between oppressors and victims, a community that does not produce forms of subjection where human beings are indistinguishable from what Giorgio Agamben calls

¹⁷ Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (London: Granta, 1999), 94.

¹⁸ Amery, *At the Mind's Limits*, 100. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 95

²⁰ Kofman, *Smothered Words*, 41.

'bare life'.²¹ It is a form of community that is hardly found in the modern western state.

What the state attempts in contrast is a normalisation or medicalisation of survivors; we shall see an example of this in Chapter 2. The aim is recovery, or the reinsertion of survivors into structures of power. Survivors are helped to verbalise and narrate what has happened to them; they receive counselling to help them accommodate once more to the social order and re-form relationships of trust. In the case of the military these days, those suffering from symptoms of traumatic stress are treated swiftly with the aim of being returned to active service within a matter of hours or days.²² If this fails, then the status of victim of post-traumatic stress disorder serves to render the survivor more or less harmless to existing power structures. In contemporary culture victimhood offers sympathy and pity in return for the surrender of any political voice.

The concept of trauma oscillates between victimhood and protest and can be linked with or articulated to either. Its invocation registers a movement in the boundaries of acceptability of the use and abuse of violence in relations of power and forms of authority or political community. When there is a mismatch between expectation and event we have what is experienced as a betrayal – or in other words, as traumatic. This is not a sufficient condition for us to call something 'trauma' of course, though we soon get into difficulties if we try to probe further into the matter of scale. We end up asking impossible questions such as 'Can one *measure* trauma? Is there a hierarchy of trauma?'²³ Nevertheless, when our expectations of what community is, and what we are, are shown to be misplaced, then our view of ourselves has to be altered – or we have to fight for political change, in other words a reformulation of community.

The traumatic dimension of the political

This book explores the connections between violence, the effects of trauma that it produces, and forms of political community. It aims to contribute to understandings of the particular way in which power, the social order and the person are constituted in the contemporary west, through a study of practices of trauma, memory and witness. Its focus is

²¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998).

²² During the Second World War the American Army Medical Corps treated psychiatric casualties with food, rest and reassurance before they were returned to their units, usually in a couple of days. Young, *Harmony of Illusions*, 92.

²³ Tim Woods, 'Mending the Skin of Memory: Ethics and History in Contemporary Narratives', *Rethinking History*, 2, no. 3 (1998): 339–48; 345.

firmly on western conceptions of personhood and political community in the modern period. It does not examine, except in passing, how practices of trauma or memory may have been exported beyond what might be considered the geographical bounds of a western paradigm, nor does it discuss, except to point up the specificity of a western approach, how people seemingly located outside that paradigm differ in their practices. Of course, these distinctions (west and the rest) are arbitrary and contestable, and they reflect a western tendency to dichotomise at the same time as promoting western power relations. There are many people located within the contemporary west in geographical or ideological terms who would not adopt what I am regarding as 'western' conceptions of self and society.

By taking as its route an examination of extreme situations and events seen as traumatic, the book reflects Giorgio Agamben's analysis of contemporary sovereign power as based on a state of emergency or exception.²⁴ His work is discussed in Chapter 5. My examination of practices of memorialisation and testimony arises out of and is framed against a more general interest in the formation of sovereign power and western subjectivity or personhood. The form of power that underlies the modern state and the violence it entails often goes unanalysed in political science or international relations studies. Both political science, in its focus on the internal (supposedly peaceable) workings of the state, and international politics, with its concern for external conflict and war, seem to ignore the production of the self and the state, which takes place at the traumatic intersection between peace and war, inside and outside.²⁵ The way we see the democratic state rests on not questioning that particular form of political community or the forms of individuality or personhood on which it is based.

The account of statehood in the liberal view is a story of individual citizens banding together to form democratic institutions which (more or less) represent the views of those citizens and which (more or less) have their interests at heart. The state possesses power (and can use violence), in this narrative, because the people legitimise its authority. However, according to a Foucauldian view, power is not centralised but dispersed; it is not something that can be possessed, but a relationship.²⁶ We should speak of relations of power, not of power plain and simple. Because it is

²⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

²⁵ R. B. J. Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

²⁶ Foucault, 'Truth and power', in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Gordon, 109–33. For an overview see Barry Hindess, *Discourses of Power: from Hobbes to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).