

## Was the election a 'shattering' experience for you? There is hope, says a Yale sociologist

By Bess Connolly Martell | JANUARY 27, 2017



Jeffrey Alexander, the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology and a co-director of Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology

With the presidential inauguration in the nation's rear view mirror, some Americans are still finding themselves traumatized by the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States.

The choice of the real estate mogul and reality television personality to lead the country has been a "shattering" experience for many liberal Americans — leading them to experience a cultural trauma, or a wound to their collective consciousness,

according to Jeffrey Alexander, the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology and a co-director of Yale's Center for Cultural Sociology.

A cultural trauma is not simply an individual sense of despair, says Alexander: It occurs when the collective identity of a group is severely challenged, feeling like it might be damaged irrevocably. "This is about the feeling of who 'we' are," he explains. "If we feel our idealized social world has been attacked, and people 'like us' are threatened, then our cultural identity is deeply undermined."

"Newspapers, television, and social media are critical institutions for constructing collective identity," says Alexander. Most major newspapers and public opinion polls communicated confidence that Hillary Clinton was going to win. The scope of their error was shocking, and for many Clinton supporters it undermined their sense of reality.

Alexander notes that there are many examples of cultural traumas throughout time, among them the Great Recession of 2008, which was not only an economic problem, but also left many Americans questioning whether or not the United States was still a great country.

Alexander takes ideas from the humanities and incorporates them into his theories in cultural sociology, such concepts as narrative, code, performance, and material symbol. He brought these concepts into the classroom during the fall semester in his two courses, "The Civil Sphere" and "Material Culture." As the election drew near, Alexander asked his students to distance themselves from their own personal, emotional commitments and instead to view the campaign through the lens of cultural sociology as a "normal" process that creates an intense polarization between "pure" friends and "polluted" enemies.

"I asked my students to consider how Trump became a powerful iconic symbol that mesmerized one lot of Americans and terrified another," Alexander explained. "In order to understand the campaign – not just participate in it – I wanted my

students to put themselves into the minds and hearts of the other side — which is very hard for any of us to do — especially during such a hard fought and polarizing election.” In this way, he believes, cultural sociology can actually contribute to democratic solidarity: “The test of a democracy is not whether progressives are always in power but whether it can move forward and be stable despite the back-and-forth pendulum swings.

“Cultural sociology,” he says, “aims to interpret social meanings, but since these collective representations are invisible, you need to focus on linguistic and material symbols that are circulated by communicative institutions.”

Alexander continues: “Yale is a giant collective symbol. It is an invisible spirit, a collective consciousness, but we need this symbol to attach to material things for us to have a sense of belonging. It’s not the buildings in themselves that connect us to Yale, it’s these material things becoming symbols, which are filled with meaning and can be shared. Yale’s president, professors, students, sports teams and, of course, the famous bulldog do the same thing.

“We know we are part of a world because we connect to symbols,” says Alexander. “The interesting thing about the president of the United States is that he is not just a party leader or chief executive but a collective representation, one that symbolizes the identity United States.”

That puts those who opposed the winning candidate in a painful, sometimes even traumatic position, says Alexander. “For the liberal population in the United States, the two terms of Barack Obama gave them a sense that they were on a progressive path of amelioration. For the liberal part of the United States Trump was very intensively symbolized as the opposite of everything that they have come to respect, and to have him now become the dominant collective representation is overwhelming.”

How, then, do those who didn’t support Trump’s election deal with this dissonance

between who they feel they are and this new representation of their country?

“There can be hope,” says Alexander, “if a new narrative is created that promises a way forward.” Inside such a narrative arc, says Alexander, new opportunities can be created for experiencing solidarity with the millions of other people who opposed the results of this election. “The opposition can have power if they can materialize and narrate their own values against what they experience as the defining values of the newly dominant power.”

---

CAMPUS & COMMUNITY

SOCIAL SCIENCES

#### MEDIA CONTACT

---

Bess Connolly Martell: [elizabeth.connollymartell@yale.edu](mailto:elizabeth.connollymartell@yale.edu), 203-432-1324

---

**Yale**

Managed by the Office of Public Affairs & Communications

Copyright © 2018 Yale University · All rights reserved · [Privacy policy](#)