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The Double Whammy Trauma: Narrative and Counter-Narrative during Covid-Floyd

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by Jeffrey C. Alexander (New Haven)

“ Brendan Hermanson, 51, a construction worker for three decades, has come through the pandemic healthy and employed. At home in Milwaukee, where he lives with his grown son, he tries to tune out the hostile politics in the country and wonders if he should bother to vote again for President Trump in November or “sit back and watch it crumble” The American experiment is teetering. “It’s all screwed,” said Mr. Hermanson, who is white. “It seems to me that we’re pretty close to a fall” In interviews with more than two dozen voters in key political battleground states, Republicans, Democrats and independents of diverse ages, races and social classes expressed worries that their nation had careened off track, with problems no election could easily solve. Fiercely polarized over public health, public safety and, perhaps, truth itself, many people are united in their collective anxiety.

– [“Left, Right or Center, Voters See a Bleak Future”](#)

Forty years ago, in *A Distant Mirror*, Barbara Tuchman’s haunting account of how the Black Death dropped the curtain on the Middle Ages, she insisted that “an event of great agony is bearable only in the belief that it will bring about a better world,” and if “it does not,” she argued, then “disillusion is deep and moves on to self-doubt and self-disgust” (1978, p. 131). That warning, issued more than four decades ago, vividly describes the situation we are in today. The overwhelming concern of most Americans is whether a better America will emerge from the trauma of Covid and racial violence that Anthony Fauci recently characterized as the “[double whammy](#)”. If Americans do not believe their agony has produced a better world, not only disillusion but social upheaval will follow.

Trauma can be physical, attacking the body, and it can also psychological, undermining the emotional security of the self. Each level of trauma has been at the center of American attention since the Covid crisis exploded in early March.

Most visible has been the biological. In the 14th century, nobody had any idea what caused the Black Death or how to treat it, much less how to prevent it from ever happening again. Today, thanks to biological science, we know the pandemic is a virus that takes over cellular RNA, manufacturing millions of new viral cells that attack the respiratory system while keeping the body’s immune system at bay. Because science understands the biology of our trauma we also know how to protect ourselves from it – social distance, masks, handwashing. We do not yet know how to cure the illness, nor how to prevent this physical trauma from occurring again. But the combination of scientific medicine and big pharma capitalism makes us pretty confident – for Anthony Fauci, to a “near certainty” – that eventually we will know these things and be able to resolve Covid trauma at the level of the body.

Emotional trauma has also exploded during the time of Covid. The human psyche translates fear of biological injury into high anxiety. Ontological security is undermined by precarity. The paranoid imagination runs rampant. Waves of fear and trembling wash over our psyches. Reports about such emotional experience has permeated factual and fictional media throughout the crisis.

“ A third of Americans were showing signs of clinical anxiety or depression at the end of April, according to an emergency weekly survey of American households carried out by the Census Bureau to measure the pandemic’s effects. In early May, half of those surveyed said they felt “down, depressed, or hopeless,” double the number who responded that way in a 2014 national survey. “This is the scariest thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” Erik Widener, 28, the manager of a restaurant in Doylestown, Pa., said on his way to work last week for the first day of the state’s reopening for food-service establishments.

– [“Left, Right or Center, Voters See a Bleak Future”](#)

There is a new genre of Covid nightmares. Prescriptions for psychotropic medications are up. So is alcohol consumption. We know a great deal about emotional responses to the corona virus, even if this knowledge is far less precise than our biological understanding of the virus itself. What people suffer from is an anxiety disorder related to traumatic stress, something like a real time version of PTSD. There are therapies to treat this condition, chemical and interpersonal, but nothing can prevent it from reoccurring. Fear of biological danger and death, and maintaining social isolation to prevent it, trigger emotional trauma. Feeling physically vital and emotionally connected to others is essential to ontological security.

There is still another level of trauma that Covid has triggered. There is a lot of talk around it, but it has rarely been explicitly thematized, either by experts or people down in the weeds of everyday Covid life. Yes, trauma is biological and emotional, but it can also be *social*, challenging the collective identity that anchors a group’s cultural security. The stories we have been telling ourselves about ourselves are turned upside down, sometimes our very collective existence seems called into question. Cultural trauma is a wound to “us,” however this “us” is defined. To take a commonplace example, in New Haven, where I live, it has been a great shock to the community that a restaurant named “Clarks” has shutdown. The gritty, down-at-the-heels landmark on Whitney Avenue has been a mainstay of Yale social life for 75 years. To give another example, of more serious import: During the three months of crisis and shutdown many New Yorkers experienced the traumatic disappearance of their city. “Can this be New York City?” they exclaimed at the sight of empty streets, darkened theatres, and lifeless shops.

But it is the *national* level of collective identity that concerns us here, the cultural trauma that is afflicting *America*, not as a collection of individual bodies and psyches, but as a social group. Covid has challenged the story Americans have long told themselves about the greatness of our nation. It unfolded against the already gnawing fear of decline that has haunted our collective consciousness since the late 1960s, challenged militarily by Vietnam, economically by Japan, and politically by presidential corruption and racial strife.

In the liminal space of collective trauma, social actors compete, not only over resources and statistics, but over the narrative control that allows cultural domination. When President Trump campaigned for the presidency, he promised to “Make America Great Again”. As his re-election loomed, he prepared to campaign on the story that he had succeeded. Faced with Covid, Trump made every effort to maintain this triumphant narrative, engaging in repeated performances of denial. When objective developments undermined the verisimilitude of this narrative strategy, Trump shifted rhetorical gears, casting himself as the heroic protagonist in a story about victory over polluting enemies – the virus, the Democrats, the governors, the Chinese. Reality cannot disprove cultural constructions, but it can make them seem less plausible. Rising infection and death rates dampened the applause required to provide Trump’s presidential performance with the seamless appearance of dramatic success. Other heroes – first scientists, then governors – emerged who seemed for many Americans to speak a more powerful truth, a story about a weakened nation and a derelict president who had failed to keep Covid at bay and to fight it forcefully once it emerged. This counter-narrative, intimating an America in decline, gathered force as the national response to Covid was debilitated by fragmentation and humbled by social inequity. It became a tidal wave after Minneapolis police murdered George Floyd on Memorial Day, the holiday honoring Americans who had made the ultimate sacrifice for the nation. The anti-racism protests are a counter-performance to Trump’s presidential performance, challenging his triumphal narrative of national purity and strength with a story about failure, national weakness, and the danger of American decline.

During the first, exclusively Covid phase of collective trauma, President Trump was the principal character on the American stage. Against his claims of heroism, the counter-narrative cast him as bumbler, dissembler, and fool. The cresting wave of protest against police brutality – which created a traumatic double-whammy – cast the president as evil, a racist autocrat threatening the country’s democratic identity. The “people” emerged as a major character in the trauma-drama’s liminal space, a powerful civil-protagonist confronting Trump, now portrayed as anti-civil antagonist. The growing dramatic power of this counter-narrative, and the sacred purity attributed to character of the “people” threatens to push the president off the historical stage.

Cultural trauma is a contingent, open-ended social process. How it is crystallized in the collective consciousness and what its outcome will be, materially and institutionally, cannot be determined in advance, and after it

does become crystallized it may continue to change. What exactly happened? Who were the victims, who the perpetrators? What can we do to ensure that something like this will never happen again? From a naturalistic, common sense perspective, the answers to such questions seem obvious, but from a cultural-sociological perspective they are not. Answering each question is subject to enormous social disputation, to contradictory coding and conflicting narration, narrative and counter-narrative, performance and counter-performance.

Answering these questions assigns social responsibility and points to possibilities for institutional change. When the death camps were first reported, the mass murder of the Jewish people was attributed to Hitler and the Nazis, and the Holocaust trauma was circumscribed to the theater of the second world war. In the years after, as the trauma of the Holocaust began to permeate Western consciousness, the category of perpetrators expanded beyond Hitler and Nazis to Christian civilization as whole, and the category of victims expanded to include Jewish victims of anti-Semitism everywhere, for all time. Preventing this trauma from ever happening again now meant something very different than creating post-war European peace. It meant dismantling anti-Semitism and incorporating Jewish people, for the first time in human history, fully into Western social life.

A cultural struggle over what has happened during the Covid crisis, who are the victims and who the perpetrators, is being fought out right now, before our very eyes. President Trump and his chorus are chanting a bitter story about division, retrofitting the polarizing rhetoric, politics, and policies that brought the right-wing populist to power and defined his first term. In the narrative they are spinning, region is turned against region, red against blue, white against black, party against party, and police and army against citizens. The President has cast himself as the avenging angel of white people who imagine themselves suffering the trauma of race replacement. Playing to type as a furious, enraged, and enraging demagogue, the President has defined Covid as ideological confrontation, proposing to resolve our trauma by getting Americans back to business and allowing the rural dwelling citizens of red states to roam free. The Trump production team is narrating the second wave of trauma in the same way. They portray white people as victims, blacks and liberals and urban protestors as perpetrators, and law and order as the solution that will make our traumatic experience go away.

The anti-Trump counter-narrative casts the President as amoral and selfish, an authoritarian ruler whose brutish power is contested by highly educated truth tellers and grassroots heroes – scientists, health care workers, and food service employees. Opposing the rhetoric of division and diminution, this counter-plot tells a story about expanding social empathy, everyday heroes, and widening civil solidarity. The victims of Covid trauma are all of us, regardless of region or race. We are all in this together, experiencing the same fear and trembling. The pandemic affects rich and poor alike. Young people shelter in place to protect older people. People wear masks not only to protect themselves but everyone around them. People shut down the economy willingly, not because the government forced them to, and not only out of concern for their own health

but from concern for the health of coworkers, customers, and employees, for the health of the whole nation, the United States itself. In a column headlined, “The People Are Leading the Leaders,” *New York Times* David Brooks challenged “the impression that America is bitterly divided.”

“ America is less divided than it was before the pandemic ... The big story now is that regular Republicans are not following the Trumpian Taliban in their shrill cries to reopen everything immediately. Americans in red and blue states are staying home at nearly exactly the same rates. There is little correlation between whether a state is red or blue and how it is doing in fighting the disease.

– [“Ordinary People Are Leading the Leaders: America looks better from the bottom up”](#)

Two months earlier, in the first weeks of the national trauma, his fellow columnist Roger Cohen also emphasized wholeness over division.

“ It’s coming apart. *Take care of it.* We don’t give up. We are connected to one another and to generations past and future, there are no strangers here.

– [“There Is Now Way Out but Through”](#)

In this anti-Trump reading of national trauma, the antagonist is not merely the Covid virus, but anti-democratic leaders, like the President and his supporters, who seek to narrow empathy, to constrict the circle of the “we,” to undermine the newly enhanced civil solidarity that is blossoming before our very eyes. “Donald Trump Is Our National Catastrophe,” the *Times* Editorial Page headlined on June 6th, atop a biting indictment by conservative Bret Stephens (“[Donald Trump Is Our National Catastrophe](#)”). But the category of perpetrator responsible for our trauma, according to this counter-narrative, is expanded beyond anti-civil leaders; it also includes the nation’s healthcare system, which has left untreated and uncared for so many who throughout the crisis have so valiantly served. And the category of victims has enlarged beyond simply people who have been infected. It has come to pointedly include the economically disadvantaged and racial minorities. As Covid has highlighted the deleterious health consequences of inequality, changes not only in health care provision but in the nation’s stratification system are being demanded. People shouldn’t lose their health care if they lose their jobs. Essential workers putting their lives on the line suffer higher rates of infection and death. Where’s the fairness? Where’s the solidarity? Inside the framework of this counter-narrative, a drama of injustice is playing out before our very eyes. Catharsis can be achieved only if institutions are reformed to reflect our heightened feelings of expanded

solidarity. “For a while” now, the *New Yorker*’s art critic Peter Schjeldahl wrote in mid-April, we “have been reminded of our oneness throughout the world and across time with all the living and the dead.” (“[Out of Time: Mortality and the Old Masters](#)”)

The gruesome police murder of George Floyd occurred inside this wrenching national drama of plot and counter-plot, division and solidarity, disparity and justice. Creating a national convulsion, a play within a play, it intensified the collective trauma that Covid has created, directing the spotlight of the counter-narrative to illuminate 400 years of racial suffering and domination. Can America be a great nation if its solidarity is defined by the color of a person’s skin rather than the content of their character, in the words of Martin Luther King? Is it “God bless America,” or “goddamned America?” as Barack Obama’s Chicago preacher, pastor Jeremiah Wright, dangerously asked. Is our trauma about anarchy or injustice? Are the victims Americans of color or property owners, police or protestors in the streets? Who are the perpetrators of this second traumatic wave? Is it whining liberals and treasonous protesters or institutional racism, the whites who put it into place, and the politicians and government officials who continue to defend it? Has the MAGA movement been disreputably disrupted, or is America a racist nation with the chickens finally coming home to roost?

The second trauma wave has heightened the sense of what is at stake. Four-star military leaders, like James Mattis and Michael Mullen, attack the President for using the army to suppress protest, accusing Trump of violating the constitutional right for peaceful assembly at the core of America’s democratic identity. National leaders issue jeremiads that portray American democracy as teetering on the edge. Describing this moment as the singular crisis of our time, they dramatize the deepness of our national wound. The President and his team of counter-performers write plots, cast characters, and create what they hope are evocative *mis-en-scenes*. Trump clears Lafayette Park so he can pose grim faced before an Episcopal church with Bible in hand. Al Sharpton delivers a fiery sermon at one of several funeral ceremonials dedicated to depicting the courage and gallantry of George Floyd.

But it is the audience of American citizens closely watching these contending performances who have the final say, who decide which performance is authentic, which narrative seems real and which not. During the first days of racial protest, it seemed that Trump might succeed in leveraging the unrest to position himself as the heroic champion of law and order, riding the new wave of white resentment into the White House for a second term. By the second week in June, news media were reporting a different reaction. A large majority of Americans supported the protests, identifying with the protagonists of the counter-narrative and the moral of its plot. As the *New York Times* reported Friday, June 12th:

“ Mr. Trump has portrayed protesters as “terrorists” and extremists while praising most law enforcement officers as “great people.” Yet in a Monmouth University poll released last week, 57 percent of Americans – including a majority of white people – said the anger that led to the protests was completely justified. Even among self-described conservatives, 65 percent said the protesters’ frustrations were at least somewhat justified. [And] the data is even more striking among younger people. In a new Washington Post-Schar School survey, 41 percent of Republicans over 55 said they believed the killing of Mr. Floyd reflected a broader problem. That figure grew to 52 percent among Republicans under 55, however. There is a similar generational gap among independent voters.

– [“As Americans Shift on Racism, President Digs In”](#)

Collective traumas are sociological, not biological. Made, not born, they are determined neither by natural law nor material force, but, rather, by continuous cultural construction. Yet, while the meaning-making between now and November cannot now be foretold, we do know what it will be about. As our national drama plays itself out, it will crystallize the meaning of the double whammy of Covid and George Floyd. Until the votes are counted on Tuesday, November 3rd, we remain inside the fog of culture war, responding to competing constructions of narrative, performance, and character, to arguments about whether America is still great, never was, or can be made great again. And by whom. The “people against Trump” is a powerful narrative. Will an actor emerge who can successfully perform “the people” as the electoral campaign proceeds? If the Democrats are to win, Joe Biden will have to step out of his basement, stop missing his marks and mumbling his lines. Biden will have to become an heroic character who convincingly declares that it is possible to transform our world. Only if the erstwhile Democratic Party candidate can become dramatically compelling can American institutions be so repaired that our double-whammy trauma will never happen again.

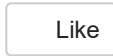
Biography

Jeffrey C. Alexander is the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology at Yale University. Working in the areas of culture, politics, and social theory, he is the founder and co-director of Yale’s Center for Cultural Sociology and co-editor of the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*. Among recent works are *Trauma: A Social Theory* (2012) and *What Makes a Social Crisis? The Societalization of Social Problems* (2019).

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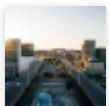
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