

IN CONVERSATION

## Yale's Jeffrey Alexander on how today's crises might shape tomorrow

By Mike Cummings | JUNE 10, 2020



These are traumatic times. The United States is struggling to contain a pandemic that has

already claimed more than 110,000 lives here and plunged the economy into recession. Meanwhile, Americans are marching in the streets of cities across the country demanding an end to systemic racism and police brutality.

How will these traumatic events shape the country's future? What mark will they leave?

Yale sociologist [Jeffrey Alexander](https://sociology.yale.edu/people/jeffrey-alexander) (<https://sociology.yale.edu/people/jeffrey-alexander>), working with colleagues and students, has developed a theory of cultural trauma that describes the process that unfolds after groups — whether national, institutional, religious, or ethnic communities — experience a horrendous event that indelibly changes their collective identity.

Alexander, the Lillian Chavenson Saden Professor of Sociology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, recently spoke to YaleNews. Interview edited and condensed.

### **Does your theory of cultural trauma apply to the current moment?**

Yes, it does. In the first place, the pandemic has a biological element, which is causing incredible feelings of individual insecurity and anxiety about people's physical well-being. The media has focused on the consequences of these biological and psychological harms, highlighting the ways in which our elected leaders may not be addressing the virus effectively.

The crisis, and the botched response to it at various governmental levels, has triggered more social wounds, however, challenging our various collective identities. It's wounded the collective identity of New York City, which has been hit so hard. On a national level, the crisis has wounded our collective identity as Americans. It is a cultural trauma because it threatens to shatter people's long-held positive beliefs about the United States. It has undermined the belief in the United States as a secure, powerful, democratic, and unified nation.



Jeffrey Alexander

### **Hasn't America's collective belief in American exceptionalism been eroding for some time?**

There's been a threatening sense of dramatic decline that has periodically overwhelmed

Americans for many decades now. It erupted during Vietnam, then went into remission during the Reagan and Clinton years, but rose up again after the disintegration of the post-Cold War euphoria. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 recession, and the rise of China as an economic power have exacerbated it. In its own way, Trump's 2016 presidential campaign was responding to this perceived decline with the slogan "Make America Great Again."

Of course, there's always been a counter-narrative to the greatness of the United States, one that has emphasized the country's history of economic inequality and racial domination. Months before anyone was aware of COVID-19, for example, The New York Times published its extraordinary 1619 Project, which sought to recast the country's founding as the establishment of a slave society. We can see this narrative represented in the mass demonstrations against racial injustice sweeping the nation.

The coronavirus is certainly damaging the collective identity that views the United States as an exceptional nation and global superpower. The sense of decline-trauma emerges when comparing things like death and infection rates among countries. South Korea and New Zealand have responded to the virus much more effectively than the United States. People ask: Why can't we organize such a coherent response at the national level? Why are other countries responding so much more effectively? It's a source of genuine panic and despair about who we are as a collectivity. It makes people question whether we'll be the same country once the crisis is over.

**Your conception of cultural trauma involves a process that continues to unfold once the harmful event has ended. What is that process?**

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**“What happened? Who was the perpetrator? Who were the victims? What can be done so we don't experience this trauma in the future?”**

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It's through “trauma work” that a group determines responsibility. Questions get addressed and re-addressed: What happened? Who was the perpetrator? Who were the victims? What can be done so we don't experience this trauma in the future? Each of these questions is open to disputation, conflicting narratives, and counter-narratives.

The Holocaust provides an example of how perceptions of a cultural trauma can change. In the immediate decades after the Holocaust, Hitler was held responsible, not the German military or the German people. The scope of responsibility gradually widened to encompass all of Germany. Eventually, Western Christianity was viewed as responsible for the Holocaust in some way. This led to a deep reconsideration of anti-Semitism throughout the West — a reconsideration that is crumbling a bit these days, as the collective memory that preserved that trauma process erodes.

### **How might that process play out in this case?**

The narrative struggle over the coronavirus will unfold over time. What happened? Trump says not a lot, assuring us that everything was handled extremely well. That's one point of view. Another is that we saw a crumbling of our public health infrastructure. Institutions like the Centers for Disease Control have shown themselves to be completely inadequate. We're hearing stories of how people in European countries feel sorry for us. This all gets folded up into this trauma-drama of the decline of the United States.

Then there's the debate over responsibility. Who's responsible? Is it China? Is it Trump? Is it Democratic mayors and governors, as some conservatives argue? There will continue to be a tremendous struggle over these competing narratives. Certain narratives will gain more purchase and legitimacy than others over time.

### **You've theorized that cultural trauma can create a broader sense of solidarity within and between social groups and societies. Do you think the current crises will lead to a shared sense of empathy?**

We never know how these processes will play out. But one of the narratives that I've identified with regards to the coronavirus crisis is that everyone is in it together. The pandemic affects rich and poor. People are wearing masks not only to protect themselves but everyone around them. People sheltered in place to protect themselves and others. People by and large consented to closing down much of our economy. That suggests solidarity.

There's a strong argument that we need to improve our health infrastructure on behalf of everybody once this crisis is done. It's linked to issues concerning inequality, such as the notion that people shouldn't lose their health insurance when they lose their jobs. The pandemic has highlighted racial disparities and economic inequality in a very sad way.

Essential workers are putting their lives on the line to provide food and healthcare services. They are often low-paid workers who don't have any choice but to go to work. In a sense, it's a drama of injustice playing out before us. Such a dramatic social drama has the potential to generate greater solidarity.

**How have the mass demonstrations against police brutality and racial injustice contributed to the unfolding cultural trauma?**

The killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police officer triggered a traumatic explosion that was layered on top of the COVID-19 crisis, underscoring some of its narratives, contradicting others. It's fascinating how one individual's terrible, tragic death has triggered a new collective trauma. Like the pandemic, it has made many people question whether we're a truly great nation. To others, it demonstrates something that they've long believed: that the United States is an inherently racist nation. We'll go through the same process of weighing competing narratives to determine responsibility for the conditions and incidents that led to this moment.

**President Trump has called for confronting demonstrations with military force. Peaceful protestors were forcibly moved from Lafayette Square near the White House to facilitate a presidential photo-op. How did that moment contribute to the sense of trauma gripping the nation?**

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It represented a real raising of the stakes. I'm thinking of the four-star military leaders, like James Mattis or Michael Mullen, opposing Trump's support for using the U.S. military to suppress the protests. They expressed concern that American democracy is teetering on the edge. They called it the singular crisis of our time. It shows just how threatening and traumatizing things have become.

In terms of the staging of the national corona-drama, it's fascinating, if also counter-intuitive, that Trump was really the only true actor on the national stage. Now, with the layering of



these recent anti-racism protests, there has emerged a second actor — the group called “the people,” a new heroic protagonist that has mounted nationwide demonstrations. The new collective actor is composed of prominent individuals, like the generals who have spoken out, and also Joe Biden, but it is also composed of the immense crowd of anonymous American citizens peaceably marching in the streets.

Now that this second actor has emerged, the meaning of the national trauma-drama is changing. Trump is still central, but his status is being powerfully challenged. During the exclusively coronavirus period, he was often seen as bumbling, a foolish and sometimes even a comic figure. Now, for many Americans, he's become more sharply etched as an anti-democratic symbol — even a symbol of evil.

Of course, Trump has pushed back against this narrative, trying to pose “the people” as unpatriotic antagonists and himself as hero. A few days ago, I was worried that he would succeed, and would leverage the racial unrest to position himself as the powerful champion of law and order. I'm heartened by the fact that two-thirds of Americans say they support the demonstrations and believe they are justified. With Trump increasingly portrayed as an anti-civil antagonist, the trauma-drama that is now unfolding has the potential finally to push the president off the historical stage.

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