

**КРИЗИ, КАТАСТРОФИ, КУЛЬТУРОЛОГІЯ ТРАВМИ
CRISES, DISASTERS, CULTURAL STUDIES OF TRAUMA**

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Olha Briukhovetska

PhD (Philosophy),
Senior Lecturer at the Department of Cultural Studies,
Faculty of Humanities,
National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA),
Kyiv, Ukraine

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9213-2662>
olha.bryukhovetska@ukma.edu.ua

**Cultural Trauma
between Experience and Meaning**

Abstract

The article offers a critical reassessment of cultural trauma theory, focusing on Jeffrey Alexander's influential formulation and its claim to provide a universal framework for understanding collective trauma. It argues that this theory is best read as a neofunctionalist appropriation of the cultural turn, in which trauma is recast as the product of successful public representation rather than as lived experience. The article describes this shift from experience to meaning as a form of "discursive determinism" and traces its ethical and conceptual consequences, showing how an originally critical constructivism is transformed into a diagnostic, system-building paradigm. Although the critique is motivated by the Ukrainian context of war and long-term colonial violence, the article's primary contribution lies in sharpening broader questions about the relation between experience and meaning.

Keywords: cultural trauma, collective trauma, collective identity, cultural turn, constructivism, critical theory, neofunctionalism, trauma, event, experience, meaning, narrative, discourse, discursive determinism.

Problem Statement. In the Ukrainian context of a prolonged full-scale war, the question of trauma inevitably comes to the forefront of the humanities. Mass traumatization of the population requires not only therapeutic work with individual physical and psychological injuries, not only reflection on how these individual traumatic experiences are represented in culture, but also the consideration of trauma at the level of collective experience: the numerous ways in which the war changes the forms of our shared life and our self-understanding, transforming culture as a whole in the broadest sense of the term. Such consideration also necessarily opens up territories of earlier painful experiences, often half-forgotten or normalized, which likewise call for recognition and reflection.

Against this backdrop, the theory of cultural trauma, proposed in the early twenty-first century by a group of sociologists led by Jeffrey Alexander, may appear appealing: it offers an extensive conceptual vocabulary for describing how communities experience painful events, and how these events become part of collective identity, shaping public narratives of suffering and responsibility. Presenting itself as a universal and readily applicable model, the theory of cultural trauma claims that cultural trauma is “an empirical, scientific concept, suggesting new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions” (Alexander 2004, 1). It is no coincidence that Ukrainian scholarship published after the full-scale invasion increasingly turns to the theory of cultural trauma developed by Alexander and his colleagues. Ukrainian researchers seek to apply this theory in various directions: from analyzing cinematic representations of the Russian invasion (Demura 2024) to interpreting long-standing practices of Russification as a traumatic intrusion into the cultural fabric (Boichenko 2025).

However, this raises the question of whether the theory of cultural trauma, in fact, offers an adequate and productive way of conceptualizing such traumatic experience. Despite its universalist claims, the theory of cultural trauma has very clear limits, which are not always acknowledged by its authors. Moreover, as will be shown below, the understanding of cultural trauma proposed by Alexander is internally inconsistent, and this inconsistency permeates the entire theory built upon it. Applying this theory as a ready-made universal model inevitably reproduces the contradictions embedded within it, and it is particularly important to articulate this in the Ukrainian context, since the experience of an ongoing war and of colonial violence that has long been silenced does not necessarily fit into the conceptual framework that the theory offers.

State of Research. The concept of cultural trauma was proposed to describe how collective experiences of suffering are interpreted and integrated into collective memory. It was formulated by a working group of five prominent sociologists of culture led by Jeffrey Alexander, which also included Neil Smelser, Bernhard Giesen, Piotr Sztompka, and Ron Eyerman. They co-authored the foundational volume, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Alexander et al. 2004), which presents both the conceptual basis of cultural trauma theory and examples of its application. The volume opens with

a chapter by Jeffrey Alexander, in which he outlines the main principles of cultural trauma theory; in the following chapter, Neil Smelser defines the specificity of this approach in comparison with psychoanalytic understandings of trauma. In the applied part of the book, the authors demonstrate the theory's potential by analyzing various cases of cultural interpretation of collective suffering: Ron Eyerman examines the formation of African American identity as a response to the experience of slavery in the United States, Bernhard Giesen explores the expansion of responsibility for Nazi crimes in postwar Germany, Piotr Sztompka addresses the acceptance of social change in post-communist Poland, Jeffrey Alexander analyzes the universalization of the Holocaust as a tragedy of all humankind, and Neil Smelser studies American society's reactions to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

As the above list suggests, the theory of cultural trauma is illustrated by rather heterogeneous cases that encompass qualitatively different phenomena, with varying temporal, geographical, and positional distance from the immediate experience of suffering. What they share is not the specificity of experience but the conceptual framework into which these cases are placed. The authors of *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* present their understanding of trauma as radically different from all previous approaches, which Alexander describes as "lay trauma theory" (Alexander 2004, 2). In contrast to this, Alexander and his colleagues place their primary emphasis on distinguishing between a painful collective experience and the meaning ascribed to it in the process of cultural representation, reserving the term "cultural trauma" precisely for this symbolic level. In other words, cultural trauma here appears as a discursive construct: not the painful event itself with its real consequences for communities, but the meaning generated in the process of interpreting the event. The positions of the theory's authors and adherents, however, do not always coincide regarding the degree of such emphasis on discursive processes: for instance, Ron Eyerman, perhaps the most prolific scholar of cultural trauma, partly counterbalances it by also paying attention to emotional responses to painful experience (Eyerman 2012; Eyerman 2019; Woods 2019).

The not-always-clearly-articulated divergences among the authors of cultural trauma theory have subsequently allowed commentators to speak of the existence of not one but two, or even more, distinct theories of cultural trauma (Sciortino 2018; Madigan 2020). In particular, Todd Madigan proposes distinguishing between two versions of cultural trauma theory: one focused on traumatic events, and another oriented toward traumatized societies; according to Madigan, the difference between them lies in whether profound changes in a group's identity have taken place (Madigan 2020, 52). This approach may help to describe different ways of applying the theory, yet it does not address the deeper conceptual problems that will be at issue in this article.

Reviews of the volume *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* were generally positive (Bartmanski 2007; Ben-Yehuda 2005; Hirschberger 2018; Tota 2006; Steensland 2005), although some reviewers cautiously pointed to an insufficient elaboration of the methodological foundations of constructivism

(Ben-Yehuda 2005, 1849). However, there is a curious anachronism regarding the concept of cultural trauma itself: it began to be actively criticized even before this volume appeared, that is, before Alexander and his colleagues made their joint research project public. The main critic of this notion of cultural trauma prior to the formulation of cultural trauma theory was the German historian Wulf Kansteiner, who published a few polemical texts on the subject (Kansteiner 2004; Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2008). Although by cultural trauma he primarily meant postmodern trauma theory within literary deconstruction, many of his reservations turn out to be relevant to the constructivist theory developed by Alexander and his colleagues, and I will therefore dwell on them in more detail.

Although Kansteiner briefly mentions Ron Eyerman's work on the legacy of American slavery (Eyerman 2001; Kansteiner 2004, 207–208; Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2008, 235–236), his main target is not the still little-known sociological theory of cultural trauma, but the already well-established literary deconstruction. His primary polemical engagement is with the approach of Cathy Caruth (Caruth 1995; Caruth 1996), for whom, in Kansteiner's view, trauma is important not as a problem of acknowledging the victims' experience and of healing, but as a privileged example of the postmodern collapse of signification (Kansteiner 2004, 203). Kansteiner rejects this use of trauma because it blurs the boundary between the group that has suffered violence and the audience that empathizes with it. In his opinion, Caruth and other representatives of deconstruction offer a "model of cultural trauma, one which is stripped further of any concrete suffering, and which turns us all into accomplished survivors" (Kansteiner 2004, 203). Such an optic, he argues, radically distances the concept of trauma from the reality of violence and suffering, turning it into part of a broader poststructuralist emphasis on discursivity — a tendency that, as we will see, also characterizes the theory of cultural trauma developed by Alexander and his colleagues, despite the many differences from postmodern trauma theory, the discussion of which lies beyond the scope of this article.

The most thorough and consistent critique of the sociological theory of cultural trauma per se has been offered by the German sociologist Hans Joas, who very precisely identified its central flaw. This flaw, not unlike the one identified earlier by Kansteiner, lies, according to Joas, in the fact that the theory of cultural trauma does not clearly distinguish between the real consequences of trauma — whether individual or collective — and the cultural construction of memory about this trauma (Joas 2005, 371). In what follows, I draw on Joas's argument, expanding and specifying it in my own analysis.

Despite these and other methodological and conceptual difficulties, the theory of cultural trauma has gradually acquired the status of a research paradigm, applied to numerous historical and contemporary cases in different regions of the world. The Holocaust has become one of the most emblematic examples of this theory: as perhaps the most extensively examined instance of collective trauma, whose belated recognition and subsequent universalization serve, for Alexander, as a persuasive confirmation of his constructivist

program (Alexander 2004; Alexander 2009). In addition to this, the theory of cultural trauma has also been applied to other collective experiences of suffering, including American slavery (Eyerman 2001) and ongoing racism (Onwuachi-Willig 2016), global, local, and civil wars (Eyerman et al. 2013), political assassinations (Eyerman 2008; Debs 2013), natural and technological disasters (Eyerman 2015; Zhukova 2016), the return of colonial settlers to metropolitan centers after decolonization (Eyerman and Sciortino 2020), the destruction of cultural monuments (Debs 2012), and so on.

Academic interest in cultural trauma theory is evidenced, among other things, by Google Scholar search results. In January 2026, a search using the keywords “cultural trauma theory” returned more than two million results. The programmatic chapter by Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” which opens the volume *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, appears first in this search and has accrued nearly three thousand scholarly citations. The sheer scale of this reception makes a critical reassessment of the theory’s premises not only possible but necessary, especially when it comes to its application to the Ukrainian context.

Purpose Statement. The aim of this article is to offer an assessment of the universalist claims of cultural trauma theory. In particular, I seek to show that cultural trauma theory, at least in Jeffrey Alexander’s version, is much more closely tied to a neofunctionalist appropriation of the cultural turn in sociology than to the study of collective (let alone individual) trauma. As will be demonstrated below, this appropriation has ethically questionable consequences.

Main body. A closer look at cultural trauma theory reveals that its conceptual foundations are quite unstable – a weakness that Todd Madigan aptly describes as “theoretical muddiness” (Madigan 2020, 45). In attempting to address this issue, Madigan inadvertently formulates what will become the core of my critical analysis: he notes that at the heart of this theory lies a “foundational question as *whether cultural trauma has occurred in a particular society*” (Madigan 2020, 47). Madigan does not question the adequacy of this very formulation and instead focuses on how to provide a more precise answer to it. By contrast, it is important for my purposes to take a step back and problematize the presuppositions of this question. Another helpful phrase I borrow from Madigan is “social diagnoses” as a description of what results from the application of cultural trauma theory (Madigan 2020, 47). Again, it is crucial to underscore the difference between our approaches: whereas Madigan is concerned that different versions of cultural trauma theory led to different social diagnoses of the same phenomenon, I, by contrast, am troubled by the fact that theory as such is oriented toward diagnosis. I am less interested in the solution Madigan proposes to what he sees as a problem of cultural trauma theory, for he offers this solution in order to refine the “social diagnoses” it provides. Instead, I am concerned with the fact that the question of whether cultural trauma has “occurred” in a given society is taken as self-evident and left unexamined. Why should cultural trauma theory be oriented toward diagnosing a community in the first place? Why is its fundamental question about

trauma framed in terms of “has occurred” or “has not occurred”? These are precisely the questions that, in my view, need to be asked if we wish to dispel its theoretical muddiness.

To approach these questions, I will first, following Hans Joas’s insightful critique, situate the concept of cultural trauma along an axis whose poles are experience and meaning, or event and interpretation. It is important to note that the non-simultaneity of experience and meaning is a fundamental aspect of human existence in culture. People always discover the meaning of events after the fact, and this meaning can change. In situations of trauma, the interval that culture typically “stitches together” can become insurmountable. Trauma ruptures the connection between an event and the possibility of integrating it into existing frameworks of understanding; it blocks the operation of the meaning-making machinery that ordinarily works continuously within everyday consciousness. This is why trauma gives rise to a sense of speechlessness, of frozen time, of an inability to convey one’s experience in words, and at the same time to compulsive repetition in images, dreams, and bodily reactions, as has been repeatedly noted by both culturally oriented trauma theorists and clinical practitioners (Caruth 1995; Caruth 1996; Felman and Laub 1992; Herman 1992; van der Kolk 2014).

For the authors of cultural trauma theory, this gap between experience and meaning becomes a reason not to attend more carefully to experience, but effectively to cancel it: the real consequences of a traumatic event dissolve into the process of signification, and traumatization is understood primarily as the symbolic representation of trauma. The legitimate question of why some historical events (the Holocaust, September 11) acquire the status of cultural trauma, while others – such as the mass killings of civilians in Nanjing in 1937–1938 – remain on the periphery of global memory, is something Alexander seeks to resolve not by analyzing differences in the resources and capacities of victims, but by examining discursive and symbolic processes, which he understands in a very specific way: as an impersonal “system of collective representations” that functions as the main determinant. Speaking about the causes of the Holocaust’s universalization, he asserts: “It was neither emotional repression nor good moral sense that created the early responses to the mass murder of the Jews. It was, rather, a system of collective representations that focused its beam of narrative light on the triumphant expulsion of evil” (Alexander 2004, 214). In this formulation, emotional responses, moral intuition, and the experience of victims are consistently relegated to the background in favor of an impersonal “system of representations” – a gesture whose conceptual context I will locate below.

The initial thesis – which at first glance appears innocuous – that events do not “speak” for themselves but become meaningful through processes of interpretation is radicalized by Alexander into the claim that events are not traumatic by nature at all; traumaticity emerges as the result of a particular kind of cultural attribution. As Hans Joas aptly notes, in this configuration Alexander effectively opts for one pole in a false dilemma between ignoring

interpretive mediation and merely “reconstructing cultural constructions” (Joas 2005, 373). Joas himself proposes to overcome this dilemma by clarifying the dynamics of the articulation of experience, a line of inquiry he elaborates in another study (Joas 2002), which merits separate discussion but lies beyond the scope of this article.

Alexander’s choice, however, turns out to be inconsistent. In the often-cited definition of cultural trauma that opens his programmatic chapter “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma,” he appears, by contrast, to return to the language of experience and to emphasize how an event is lived through by members of a collective:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (Alexander 2004, 1)

This definition is intuitively clear and seems to show sensitivity to the experience of suffering: war, genocide, mass repression, or colonial violence obviously exert a lasting impact on how communities perceive themselves and others. Yet subsequently, as in the plot of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, the key words in this definition begin to mean something quite different, and at times even the opposite of their original sense. In fact, the remainder of Alexander’s programmatic chapter is devoted to dismantling the intuitive understanding of trauma embedded in his own definition, although the author himself appears not to notice this inconsistency.

Following the zigzagging logic of Alexander’s argument, we discover that (cultural) trauma does not “occur” but is constructed: “For trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society” (Alexander 2004, 2). We then learn that events, however painful they may be, cannot in principle be called traumatic: “events are not, in and of themselves, traumatic” (Alexander 2004, 8). This means that the “indelible marks” events leave on group consciousness and that, according to the initial definition, were supposed to play a decisive role in determining whether “cultural trauma occurs” ultimately have, for Alexander, no direct relevance to cultural trauma. At best, these indelible marks are merely raw material for its subsequent construction; at worst, they are simply constructs that may or may not come into being. Any straightforward causal claim that the experience of a traumatic event leads to trauma counts, for Alexander, as an instance of what he calls “the naturalistic fallacy of the lay understanding” (Alexander 2004, 8). The entire “professionalism” of his own approach effectively relies on its rebuffing: “It is upon the rejection of this naturalistic fallacy that our own approach rests” (Alexander 2004, 8). As we will see, however, this simple negation of the “naturalistic fallacy” leads to another extreme, and its mirror reversal, which by analogy can be called the “constructivist fallacy.”

In his critique of cultural trauma theory, Hans Joas observes that the only genuine innovation in Alexander’s definition is what Joas calls the

“subjectivization” of trauma; the key term here is the verb “feel” in the formula “when members of a collectivity feel” (Alexander 2004, 1; Joas 2005, 367). We can further specify that even with respect to this word Alexander remains inconsistent: feeling is too closely tied to the sphere of experience, whereas Alexander repeatedly insists that traumatization properly occurs in the symbolic dimension of representations: “The persons who compose collectivities broadcast symbolic representations (...). These group representations can be seen as ‘claims’ about the shape of social reality, its causes, and the responsibilities for action such causes imply. The cultural construction of trauma begins with such a claim” (Alexander 2004, 8). As already noted, for Alexander it is crucial that cultural trauma is not the result of a group’s experience of pain but “occurs” only through the socially mediated attribution of meaning. An event becomes “traumatic” only when it acquires this status through processes of signification in culture, at the discursive level. Joas’s thesis about the subjectivization of trauma should thus be refined: the central innovation of cultural trauma theory is what might be called discursive determinism, and this form of monocausality generates serious ethical problems, which I will address shortly.

So far, we can formulate an interim summary: what proves decisive for the diagnostic verdict toward which cultural trauma theory is oriented is not the experience of the event itself, but whether trauma has been constructed in culture. The diagnosis is very simple: if no such construction has taken place, then cultural trauma “has not occurred.” The accurate observation that painful events of comparable magnitude are, in some cases, accompanied by the construction of a narrative – what Alexander and his colleagues call cultural trauma – and, in other cases, are not, does not prompt them to ask “why does this happen?” Instead, this observation is used as an argument in favor of the claim that trauma is primarily a construct, a mode of signification rather than experience itself. From this perspective, within cultural trauma theory the expressions “traumatic experience” or “traumatic event” amount to a contradiction in terms.

Consistency is not Alexander’s strong suit, and this is why the phrase “traumatic event” nevertheless slips into his vocabulary and appears without any reflection alongside his insistence that events are not traumatic. More precisely, Alexander uses the expression “traumatic event” six times in his chapter (Alexander 2004, 4, 5, 6, 24, 27), and not once does he question it. The last and most telling of these occurrences, which appears in the chapter’s final sentence, is worth quoting in its broader context. In this sentence, Alexander sums up his efforts to demonstrate that cultural trauma theory is not confined to privileged communities – “first world” societies and groups with the resources to construct trauma – but allegedly has a universal character:

The theory of cultural trauma applies, without prejudice, to any and all instances when societies have, or have not, constructed and experienced cultural traumatic events, and to their efforts to draw, or not to draw, the moral lessons that can be said to emanate from them. (Alexander 2004, 27)

It is worth noting that the unexpected formula “cultural traumatic events” appears only in this final sentence of the chapter and is not used anywhere else in the volume. This solitary occurrence is nonetheless revealing: it vividly illustrates the inconsistently eclectic character of Alexander’s argumentation, which attempts to hold together mutually incompatible claims while completely ignoring their incompatibility. Let us recall the zigzag logic of this argument. First, in his definition of cultural trauma, Alexander asserts that “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event,” effectively presupposing a causal link between an event and its consequences. Then, in the main body of the chapter, this link is rejected as a “naturalistic fallacy,” events are declared to be “not, in and of themselves, traumatic,” and trauma is defined purely as a cultural construct. Finally, these mutually exclusive claims are “stitched together” in the hybrid formula “constructed and experienced cultural traumatic events,” where the event is not merely traumatic but “culturally traumatic” and is simultaneously constructed and experienced – precisely in that order. This way of “reconciling” incompatible statements conceals the theory’s internal inconsistency rather than resolving it, creating an impression of conceptual coherence where there is in fact a logical contradiction.

However, it is important to stress that the problems of “discursive determinism” do not originate with cultural trauma theory; they reflect a broader tendency of the cultural turn, the powerful transformation in ways of thinking about the place and role of culture that took place in the second half of the twentieth century across a wide range of disciplines. In contrast to crude “economism” or “economic determinism” (the now largely forgotten euphemism used by mid-twentieth-century Western leftist intellectuals to refer to the Stalinist version of Marxism), the cultural turn emphasized the autonomy of the sphere of production of meaning, with its own specific symbolic efficacy. There is no space here to map the entire territory of the cultural turn – or rather the series of “turns” in the plural, as Doris Bachmann-Medick suggests in her helpful and well-researched cartography (Bachmann-Medick 2016). As I have argued elsewhere, the cultural turn can be productively understood as a stage in a movement of a pendulum set in motion by the linguistic turn: by the late twentieth century this impulse had exhausted itself, and the pendulum swung in the opposite direction – toward embodiment, affectivity, visuality, materiality, experience, and so on (Briukhovetska 2024). In this article, I will offer only a brief, targeted excursion along this pendular trajectory to situate cultural trauma theory within it.

Two foundational books for the cultural turn appeared in 1973: Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (White 1973) and Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1973); each elaborated the implications of symbolic efficacy for history and anthropology respectively. In both cases, the impulse of the linguistic turn is clearly felt: language is conceived as a relatively closed system of signs, while the “referent” – that which lies beyond the utterance – is systematically bracketed out. In a depoliticized version of analytic philosophy, this is formulated by Richard Rorty, who writes in the preface to the collection *The Linguistic Turn*, which he edited:

Since traditional philosophy has been (so the argument goes) largely an attempt to burrow beneath language to that which language expresses, the adoption of the linguistic turn presupposes the substantive thesis that there is nothing to be found by such burrowing. (Rorty 1967)

In a later, politicized version of the linguistic turn, this stance is radicalized into a consistent discursive monism, as in Laclau and Mouffe, who in their influential 1985 work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, engaging polemically with the late Foucault, categorically declare:

Our analysis rejects distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices. It affirms: a) that every object is constituted as an object of discourse insofar as no object is given outside every discursive condition of emergence. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 107)

This constructivist impulse to deny any non-discursive reality delineates the horizon of discursive determinism within which, albeit much later, cultural trauma theory is also formulated.

More moderate voices occasionally sought to soften the radical denial of non-discursive reality characteristic of the cultural turn. Thus, in 1973 Stuart Hall insisted: “Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse” (Hall 1991, 121). Later, in 1981, Fredric Jameson formulates the same point with regard to history, which “is inaccessible to us except in a textual form, and (...) our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization (...)” (Jameson 2002, 35). In these cautious formulations, the reality “beyond” discourse is not abolished, yet discourse remains the only route of access to it, so these formulations do not move very far away from discursive determinism.

By the 1980s and early 1990s, the cultural turn and its constructivist program had already secured a place in academia, despite resistance from more conservative intellectual circles. For critical movements such as feminism, the emphasis on the constructedness of identities had an obvious emancipatory appeal: in 1985, looking back on the path traversed by second-wave feminism, Laura Mulvey notes that for her generation it opened up a way of thinking about femininity and masculinity not as biological givens but as the result of social and symbolic constructions, which made it possible to imagine women’s oppression as contingent rather than inevitable (Mulvey 1985).

At the same time, already in the early 1990s there emerged several crucial (though still limited) attempts to criticize constructivism from within critical theory itself, which go significantly further than the cautious formulations of Hall and Jameson. In 1993, the anthropologist Michael Taussig became one of the first to articulate a much sharper critique of constructivism, insisting on a return to experience. Taussig does not reject the promise of the constructivism of the preceding two decades, but he clearly points to its limits:

When it was enthusiastically pointed out within memory of our present Academy that race or gender or nation... were so many social constructions, inventions, and representations, a window was opened, an invitation to begin the critical project of analysis and cultural reconstruction was offered. And one still feels its power even though what was nothing more than an invitation, a preamble to investigation has, by and large, been converted instead into conclusion (...). The brilliance of the pronouncement was blinding. Nobody was asking what's the next step? What do we do with this old insight? If life is constructed, how come it appears so immutable? (Taussig 1993, xvi)

Taussig accurately captures the internal inconsistency of the erasure of experience that I term discursive determinism, as well as its ultimate impotence, when the assertion that the world is “constructed” replaces the question of how it might be reconstructed. His words anticipate the broader sense of fatigue with the emphasis on discursivity that, by the end of the twentieth century, gave rise to a series of “anti-linguistic” turns: the pendulum of intellectual interests began to swing in a direction opposed to language (Briukhovetska 2024). Against this backdrop, cultural trauma theory can be understood as a belated variant of the cultural turn, inheriting its discursive determinism at a moment when this program had largely exhausted its emancipatory potential. By the late 1990s, this shift was conceptualized in the volume *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Bonnell and Hunt 1999), which in effect turns the page on the cultural turn and outlines new, experience-oriented directions for the study of society and culture. Tellingly, the afterword to this collection is written by Hayden White himself, one of the founding fathers of the cultural turn.

Around this same time, Alexander, who had made his name as a neofunctionalist, began actively integrating a constructivist vocabulary into his own approach. In this respect, Alexander's intellectual trajectory is highly revealing. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the cultural turn was a radical intellectual phenomenon associated with the curriculum wars and efforts to open academic space to marginalized groups, he emerged as the chief promoter of neofunctionalism, oriented toward describing ordered, relatively conflict-free systems. In 1985 he introduced the very term “neofunctionalism,” defining it as “a self-critical strand of functional theory that seeks to broaden functionalism's intellectual scope while retaining its theoretical core” (Alexander and Colomy 1985, 11). This theoretical core of functionalism includes, among other things, faith in the possibility of an objective description of society and in the secondary nature of conflict in relation to systemic integration – assumptions that made functionalism, and with it its neofunctionalist modifications, a convenient theoretical mouthpiece for the status quo. During the turbulent period of the curriculum wars, when the cultural turn was the project of an intellectual avant-garde, Alexander, with his neofunctionalism, spoke for the sociological mainstream. In 1998, when the cultural turn had run its course, Alexander declared his break with neofunctionalism in the book *Neofunctionalism and After* (Alexander 1998) and moved toward

constructivism. The question, however, is how deep this break with neofunctionalism really was, and whether it might not be more accurate to speak here of a neofunctionalist appropriation of the cultural turn.

A closer look at Alexander's neofunctionalist project reveals the same eclectic and inconsistent style of thinking that also manifests itself in cultural trauma theory. Alexander's neofunctionalism appears as a loosely organised package that integrates elements of various, often mutually incompatible traditions – from structural functionalism to Marxism – while preserving a basic commitment to a descriptive model of society as a system of interrelated parts that sustain overall order. Critics have repeatedly drawn attention to the eclectic character of this construction: neofunctionalism, Fauske notes in particular, seems to aim at incorporating everything that classical functionalism was once criticized for lacking while at the same time preserving its name and genealogy (Fauske 2000, 245). We observe the same eclectic inconsistency in the way Alexander appropriates the cultural turn: a constructivist vocabulary is combined with a neofunctionalist worldview oriented toward maintaining systemic integration. In effect, cultural trauma theory, with its emphasis on impersonal “systems of representations,” amounts to yet another cosmetic update of functionalism, now recast in the vocabulary of constructivism.

At the conceptual level, this generates serious problems. The constructivist vocabulary appropriated by Alexander clashes with his functionalist mode of thinking, which is oriented toward building systems. Constructivism – at least in its earlier, critical versions – was a fundamentally anti-systemic way of thinking; its task was to expose the constructedness of any systems, not to offer yet another overarching scheme in their place. It is precisely this critical component that is missing from Alexander's constructivism and from that of other authors of cultural trauma theory. They replace a critical optic with a diagnostic one: they are primarily interested in whether cultural trauma has “occurred” in a given society, that is, whether it has been constructed or not. Like a psychiatric diagnostic manual, they offer a set of criteria by which a social “diagnosis” can be made. Yet on what basis are these criteria formulated, and why should they claim universality? These questions are virtually never addressed by the authors of cultural trauma theory. They simply posit what Neil Smelser calls “the textbook features of cultural trauma as we have come to understand them” (Smelser 2005, 267).

At this point, the ostensibly constructivist character of cultural trauma theory reveals its own inconsistency and comes into conflict with its functionalist thinking, oriented toward building general schemas. If everything is a construct, then the “features” of trauma described here – defining the nature of pain, the character of the victim, and questions of responsibility – should themselves have the status of variable frameworks that change from context to context. Instead, in cultural trauma theory they are presented as virtually universal and necessary conditions for “successful” traumatization. Despite its professed constructivism, these elements function like quasi-natural laws in the functionalist vein, operating independently of specific historical contexts. Having distanced itself from the “naturalistic fallacy” at the level of events, cultural trauma theory falls into a similar fallacy at the level

of concepts: instead of a “nature of trauma,” we are given a “nature of trauma discourse,” which behaves like a new, unquestioned essence – effectively a new “naturalism,” merely displaced into the realm of representations.

This functionalist version of discursive determinism effectively cancels experience, and this has even more serious ethical consequences than those Kansteiner identified with respect to deconstruction (Kansteiner 2004; Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2008). Cultural trauma theory, which ostensibly aims to give voice to traumatized communities, turns their experience into a secondary effect of “systems of representation.” According to Alexander’s logic, people do not suffer and become traumatized directly; they come to feel traumatized because a certain configuration of public discourse, shaped by cultural and political actors, conveys to them a narrative in which their group is designated as a victim. Within this optic, the victim of trauma is not the one who has lived through catastrophe, but the one who is inserted into a particular narrative about it. An even more radical erasure of the difference between victims and external observers takes place: within cultural trauma theory, all participants appear as players in the representation of trauma.

By turning trauma into the outcome of a “successful” communicative campaign, this theory inevitably undermines the privileged status of victims’ experience. Testimony ceases to be a source of truth about trauma and is transformed into a fragment of symbolic capital that can be deployed to promote a particular version of the past. Accordingly, a group that has suffered violence but lacks the cultural resources to project its experience into public space is, by this logic, not traumatized at the collective level – cultural trauma, supposedly, has not occurred.

In the sphere of memory of genocides, mass repressions, or colonial violence, this has particularly dangerous consequences. If trauma is conceived solely as the result of construction, then any alternative reconstruction of the past, even openly revisionist, can claim equal validity, provided it manages to mobilize sufficient symbolic resources and gain support in the public arena. From the standpoint of the theory, the difference between a narrative that seeks to do justice to victims’ experience and one that denies or minimizes this suffering loses its ontological weight: both appear merely as different offers of meaning. The moral distinction between them is described as a clash of different codes, rather than as an opposition between truth and falsehood or between memory and denial – a logic that, in the era of “post-truth,” proves especially open to manipulation.

None of this is a side effect; it follows from the internal logic of Alexander’s belated constructivism. The event becomes “raw material” for representation, and what he calls trauma becomes merely a particular type of narrative about this event. Accordingly, experience becomes literally an epiphenomenon of language: feelings, suffering, bodily and psychological consequences have no weight of their own; their significance depends entirely on whether they are incorporated into a “successful” narrative. According to the logic of cultural trauma theory, which claims that events “are not inherently traumatic,” the real suffering of people – their pain, losses, violations of bodily integrity,

destruction of homes and of their familiar world – is not sufficient to speak of trauma. It is not experience but successful or unsuccessful representation that renders an event traumatic.

Conclusion. As we have seen, the limits of constructivism were broadly recognized several decades ago, prior to the emergence of cultural trauma theory. This recognition opened space for the development of alternative approaches better suited to societies experiencing war or colonial violence. As an alternative to discursive determinism, scholars have proposed approaches that acknowledge the plurality of modes linking experience and meaning: the narrative mode is important but not unique; alongside it, there are somatic, affective, ritual, spatial, and other forms through which experience acquires structure and is transmitted among people and across generations.

On the other hand, although the pendulum of intellectual thought has swung in a direction opposite to language, this should not entail denying the importance of social processes of discursive meaning-making. Rather, it is a warning against a reductionist schema that eliminates one pole of the fundamental rupture between experience and meaning, between event and interpretation. This is precisely why it is important to distinguish what is genuinely productive in constructivist trauma theory from what leads to the erasure of experience. What is indeed crucial is the emphasis on the fact that the way a society speaks about trauma is never neutral or predetermined; that the struggle for the recognition of trauma is at the same time a struggle for the recognition of victims, for changes in norms and political practices; that public narratives, artistic representations, and rituals of remembrance can either aid in working through trauma or entrench denial, stigmatization, or secondary violence. Yet none of these insights require reducing trauma to representation. It is possible and necessary to study social processes of discursive meaning-making without denying the reality of experience as such.

From this perspective, the theory of cultural trauma appears not as a universal framework for understanding traumatic processes but as a symptom of a particular stage in the cultural turn in sociology – a stage at which faith in the constitutive power of language not only reaches a logical extreme and begins to undermine its own premises, but also transforms from a critical tool into a means of administrative diagnosis, abstracting trauma into narrative capital at the cost of erasing embodied suffering and healing.

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Ольга Брюховецька

Кандидат філософських наук,
старша викладачка кафедри культурології факультету гуманітарних наук
Національного університету «Києво-Могилянська академія» (НаУКМА),
Київ, Україна

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9213-2662>
olha.bryukhovetska@ukma.edu.ua

Культурна травма між досвідом і значенням

У статті здійснено критичне переосмислення впливової теорії культурної травми, розробленої Джеффри Александером та його колегами, і поставлено під сумнів її претензію на роль універсальної моделі для розуміння колективної травми. Стверджується, що цю теорію доцільніше розглядати як неофункціоналістську апропріацію культурного повороту в соціології. У цій теорії культурна травма постає наслідком успішної публічної репрезентації: дискурсивним конструктом, який можна діагностувати на рівні наративів і колективної ідентичності (те, що авторка називає «дискурсивним детермінізмом»), тоді як питання втіленого досвіду й зцілення відходять на другий план.

У статті показано, як це зміщення від досвіду до значення супроводжується діагностичним фокусом теорії культурної травми, коли ключовим стає питання не про те, як пережито чи переживається насильство, а чи «сконструйовано» травму в цьому суспільстві. Конструктивістська лексика Александра прочитується крізь призму його функціоналістського, орієнтованого на системність стилю мислення, що виявляє напруження між антисистемністю конструктивізму і його апропріацією для побудови діагностичної системи. Спираючись на дискусії довкола культурного повороту, авторка вводить теорію культурної травми в ширший інтелектуальний контекст. Якщо віра в силу мови конструювати реальність спершу відкривала можливості критичної роботи з культурою, то на пізнішому етапі її однобокість стала очевидною, породивши потребу звернутись до втілених вимірів досвіду.

З цього погляду теорія культурної травми постає не стільки універсальною і готовою для застосування моделлю, за яку вона себе видає, скільки симптомом запізнілої фази культурного повороту, що ризикує перетворити травму на наративний капітал, маргіналізуючи досвід страждання і практики зцілення. Український контекст війни та тривалого колоніального насильства мотивує критику теорії культурної травми, однак головний внесок статті полягає в проясненні концептуальних та етичних питань, важливих для досліджень травми, культури та критичної теорії.

Ключові слова: культурна травма, колективна травма, колективна ідентичність, культурний поворот, конструктивізм, критична теорія, неофункціоналізм, травма, подія, досвід, значення, наратив, дискурс, дискурсивний детермінізм.

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Main research fields: visual culture, trauma studies, film and queer theory, Serhii Parajanov, poetic cinema.



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