



**Trauma beyond the biomedical paradigm.
Avenues for a subject-oriented and contextual trauma
approach.**

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Preface

The inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as an official diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1980 triggered a resurgence of interest in trauma research, stimulating the production of a huge amount of empirical data and a range of theoretical innovations over the past three decades. Interestingly, these intensive research efforts stem from a variety of scientific disciplines, which, according to Vincenzo Di Nicola (2012a), can be roughly divided into two large traditions. On the one hand, psychological trauma has, of course, been extensively studied from an explicitly *clinical* perspective. This research pole encompasses disciplines such as the neurosciences, cognitive and behavioral psychology, clinical psychiatry, psychoanalysis and so on. On the other hand, and rather atypically for a psychiatric disorder, trauma has increasingly become a topic of interest for *cultural* fields of enquiry such as literature research, holocaust studies, women's studies, and postcolonial research. Needless to say, these various disciplines and, on a larger scale, the clinical and cultural poles of trauma research, are characterized by radically divergent values, epistemological assumptions, methodologies, beliefs and aims – to a degree that it would be justified to speak of two separate 'trauma communities', each with a distinctive and irreducible understanding of trauma, despite their commonalities and interrelations (Di Nicola, 2012b). Whereas the clinical research pole is largely associated with a positivist and empiricist approach to trauma rooted in a biomedical model, the cultural pole is more influenced by social constructionist and postmodern scientific paradigms.

The combined research efforts of the last three decades can therefore be said to have given birth to a body of knowledge that, with a wink to Jacques Lacan's (1949) mirror stage theory, is best described as a *corps morcelé*: an amorphous, split or divided corpus that cannot be identified as a whole when viewed from the vantage point of whichever of its constituent parts. In other words, the sprawling knowledge of trauma that is produced in these various fields of inquiry cannot be integrated into a single, unified discourse, due to the lack of a point of reference from where such an operation could occur. As Dominick LaCapra (2001) observed: 'no genre or discipline "owns" trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it' (p.96).

My own research starts from the observed tension between cultural and clinical accounts of trauma. Because of the distinct perspectives on the same phenomenon, their juxtaposition offers somewhat of a ‘parallax view’; the shift between both vantage points apparently puts the scrutinized object in motion. When we consider the points at which these traditions diverge in their understanding of trauma, then the underlying presuppositions of both, which often remain implicit, suddenly light up with great clarity. Moreover, it has been argued that the gap that separates both approaches discloses something about the studied phenomenon itself: from this point of view, the observed lack of integration in the corpus of trauma knowledge is not merely the result of the different perspectives from which trauma is studied, but rather indicative of a split or gap in the concept of trauma itself (Di Nicola, 2012a). Every attempt to describe and localize this gap, for instance by means of the introduction of a dichotomy (for example, cultural versus clinical; moral versus theoretical (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009); mimetic versus antimimetic (Leys, 2000)) brings a degree of order to the confusing multitude of trauma studies and theories, without however exhausting the tensions internal to trauma. As Di Nicola shows, each posited dichotomy is ‘shifting, porous and unstable’ (2012a, p. 103): it will always give rise to cases that cannot be allocated to either of the proposed poles of the dichotomy. Psychoanalytic theory is a good case in point: although it is first and foremost a clinical theory, its insights are often adopted in cultural work on trauma.

It follows that in the confrontation with this gap, my goal is not to attempt an impossible Hegelian-style *Aufhebung* of the tension between the thesis and its antithesis. Nor is it even to aid in the construction of a ‘common ground’ or bridge between them. The idea is rather that the inter-implication of both traditions disrupts their respective independent flows; it lays bare a number of aporias that are otherwise easily missed. The goal is ultimately to subvert a number of distinctions and divergences that separate both traditions, for example the purported discrepancy between clinical-therapeutic and sociopolitical goals in clinical and cultural accounts of trauma respectively. In line with the general rationale of this project, I believe that the disruption caused by juxtaposing both outlooks is a motor force for theoretical innovation.

Part I of this dissertation focuses on the etiology of trauma, with special attention given to two intertwined problems: Criterion A of the PTSD diagnosis and delayed traumatic reactions. An account of the psychoanalytical idea of logical time throws new light on these issues.

Parts II and III focus on trauma in its relation to politics and ethics. It is my contention that recent philosophical analyses of the dynamics of rupture in sociopolitical change can be put to use to incorporate the political dimension in our understanding of trauma. Whereas trauma is ordinarily understood as a rupture on a psychological, intra-individual level, these philosophical theories make use of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to comprehend how rupture appears on a trans-individual, collective or societal level – and how this constitutes a possibility and a prerequisite for the creative invention of new political or economical structures. Whereas current psychological trauma approaches have been criticized for obscuring and neglecting the sociopolitical aspects of trauma recovery, philosophical theories of rupture and cultural trauma theories are at risk of downplaying the suffering of those caught up in movements of radical social change – in favor of an emphasis on the creative possibilities of such disruptive moments. I believe the choice between a psychological and a sociological level of analysis and intervention to be a false one. Through a discussion of Lacanian psychoanalysis, I hope to show where this dichotomy becomes unstable, and how this can broaden our understanding of trauma recovery as an ethical endeavor with political consequences, beyond a medico-technical framework.

G.B

Introduction

The concept of trauma has become ubiquitous in contemporary society. Whenever a sudden, unexpected and horrific event disrupts the normal run of things, the language of trauma is deployed by professionals and lay-persons alike in an attempt to make sense of the unthinkable. More generally, it has been argued that in our postmodern times, the scientific disciplines of medicine and psychology have increasingly taken over religion's primary role of providing meaning and coherence for a world continuously shaken up by the unforeseeable. This is evidenced, for instance, by the observation that 'therapeutic forms rather than religious ceremonies are becoming the predominant cultural rites that accompany public and private events' (Pupavac, 2004, p. 495).

The old, biblical proverb that 'God works in mysterious ways' still echoes the ways in which religion used to assure people that the senseless would be revealed to be meaningful after all, once our human restraints were transcended in the hereafter. If God is dead, then he can no longer perform this pivotal task of holding the world together, of being the universal *hypokeimenon* or *subjectum* of everything that is – or at least of providing the semblance of possibility of such a harmonious unity in which everything has purpose and makes sense, by grace of the bestowment of some sort of divine Order that allocates everything its rightful place. In the vacuum left behind in the West by God's demise, then, science can be said to be the prime candidate to take upon itself this abandoned function of providing meaning and guaranteeing order. Understand that this is not necessarily science *per se*, as it is practiced by scientists themselves, but rather the way in which this form of human activity is recuperated and put to work in popular discourse (that is, scientism). The chorus of pre-modern religiosity with its returning theme of a unifying One continues to stir up deep-rooted desires for a universe that closes in upon itself, one that, in the final analysis, will be shown to make a whole. Deep down we still believe that everything happens for a reason, and science has now become the instrument on which we rely to unearth the obscured links in a supposedly complete causal chain. God's proclaimed death, then, did not prevent the suffusion of theological images and sensibilities in the sciences of modernity, as can be seen for instance in the fantasy of Nature as a cosmic One-All ruled by unbreakable, timeless laws (Johnston, 2013). It is no longer God but Nature itself that is believed to guarantee the rationality and

ultimate cohesion of reality. Science, then, is identified as our means to access these securing eternal laws of nature. We put our faith in it to guide us through our existential predicaments. As we will see, the psy-sciences occupy a central position in this dynamic, with trauma as the central concept to think the effects of a confrontation with a point of radical incomprehensibility.

The word trauma is, confusingly, often used in two distinct ways. In lay terminology, it often denotes a type of event that is considered both out of the ordinary and inherently destructive. Originally, however, psychological trauma referred to a type of pathological reaction towards such a devastating event. Trauma is what happens to a person's psychological functioning when he or she is confronted with something that defies his or her ability to grasp. In cognitive psychology this is seen as a failure to 'process' a certain type of data related to the traumatic event. Subsequently, this unprocessed material is thought to incessantly haunt the psychic system, disrupting its normal functioning and inciting a cascade of maladaptive sequelae, in a repeatedly thwarted attempt to finally conclude this obstructed mental processing. In other words: the psyche is understood as, ideally, an integrated or unified system that smoothly combines external data with internal objectives to guide behavior. Trauma describes what happens when an incommensurable element enters and disturbs the psychic space. When we are confronted with the boundaries of our capacity to process something, simply because it literally concerns the impossible that nevertheless took place, trauma describes the potential psychic consequences of this encounter: the shattering experience of a profound sense of meaninglessness and dislocation. Ideas of integrative unity and its disruption are thus central to these phenomena.

When today disaster strikes and cracks suddenly appear on the purportedly smooth surface of life, it astonishes no-one that the representatives of the disciplines of (trauma) psychiatry and psychology are called upon to enter the field. Today, no-one is surprised to find that thousands of psychosocial workers are dispatched to far-away, non-Western countries in the aftermath of natural disasters or violent conflicts, in an attempt to attend to the local population's psychological needs (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). As Derek Summerfield (1998, p. 1580) duly noted, the rise of trauma work in humanitarian operations is rooted in the aforementioned way that 'medicine and psychology have displaced religion in Western culture as the source of descriptions and explanations of human experiences'. The disciplines of psychiatry and clinical psychology have come to proffer the culturally sanctioned answers

to the impossible questions of life's contingencies. Science takes the place of religion in the precise sense that it is called upon to provide sensible answers at times when there are none. But more importantly, the scientific apparatus serves as a guarantee for the validity of these answers: it offers us *authoritative* answers in which we can trust.

As part of the shared belief system of Western societies, the idea of trauma is experienced as both self-evident and natural. This means that we expect the human response to adversity to be universal across times and cultures. Consequently, the inclusion of trauma psychiatry in humanitarian aid campaigns, which started only at the end of the 1980s, appears to be both logically and morally justifiable. This innovation was premised on the assumption of a distinct 'psychological fallout' of war and catastrophes for whole populations (Summerfield, 1997). Moreover, what was known about trauma suggested that this type of wound does not heal simply with the passing of chronological time, but needs to be addressed in its own right.

It came as a great surprise when researchers found that the application of interventions based upon this supposedly universally valid trauma framework resulted in paradoxical (that is, harmful) effects when applied in both Western and non-Western settings (for example, Bisson, Jenkins, Alexander, & Bannister, 1997; Bracken, 2002; Herbert, et al., 2001; McNally, 2009; McNally, Bryant, & Ehlers, 2003; Raphael & Wilson, 2000; Rose, Bisson, Churchill, & Wessely, 2002; van Emmerik, Kamphuis, Hulsbosch, & Emmelkamp, 2002). Such findings, among others, prompted a series of critical analyses of the assumptions behind the contemporary dominant conceptualization of traumatic pathology, the diagnosis of *Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome* or PTSD. As a result, a great number of conceptual and practical deficiencies that haunt this biomedical trauma model have been identified by trauma scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds. The current project is built around a selection of a number of interrelated core problems associated with the PTSD approach to trauma.

First, the construct of PTSD is closely tied to a specific conception of the etiological mechanism behind traumatic pathology. Basically, the *raison d'être* of PTSD as a distinct diagnostic entity is the idea that this type of suffering is the effect of exposure to a particular sort of stressor/event, which produces the condition in a rather straightforward, quasi-automatic or mechanical fashion. However, this basic assumption, which is at the core of our contemporary understanding of trauma, has become untenable in the light of a series of empirical findings gathered in the decades following PTSD's introduction as a separate mental disorder in the DSM-III. Against the prevailing intuitions, research learned that

traumatic pathology cannot be explained by the extraordinary nature of the event in itself: such encounters are far more frequent than expected, even in Western societies, and only a minority of those exposed go on to continue long-term traumatic pathology. ‘Something else’ must be taken into account to make sense of this unexpected yet consistently reproduced observation. Presumably, the resultant reaction (pathology or resilience) derives from the specificity of the encounter between a singular subject and a particular event.

A second core issue with PTSD is that it effectuates a problematic *decontextualization* that determines the manners in which we understand and respond to these phenomena. At the level of the definition of PTSD itself, for instance, there is the conceptual annulment of the peculiarities of any given etiological stressor, in favor of an emphasis on the commonalities between traumatic responses at the level of pathological mechanism and symptom manifestation. The idea that different types of events can cause the same symptoms through a similar etiological pathway – one of the core ideas defining the PTSD construct, which ties back to its historical background – can lead to negligence of the manners in which the specificities of the social, cultural, political or economical context of the stressor play a part in both the origin and outcome of trauma, as well as in processes of recovery.

Third, the emphasis on the *individual* as the locus of scrutiny and intervention in Western psychotherapeutic approaches has been argued to be unfit to address the problems that surface in the wake of a collectively suffered event, as is the case with political violence, large-scale disasters, and so on. Furthermore, the emphasis on individual psychology is antithetical to responses that aim to alter the social conditions associated with various forms of distress. An increasing number of trauma scholars have argued that traumatic pathology does not occur in a vacuum, and that successful recovery from trauma requires the recognition of the importance of an individual’s relations to the Other (a Lacanian concept that refers to other people as well as to the socio-symbolic order in which we are immersed).

Fourth, these decontextualizing and individualizing operations have been argued to have a political effect in themselves, as they produce a focus on immaterial recovery (that is, a change in someone’s individual psychological functioning) over material recovery (the modification of a trauma-generating context). Trauma psychiatry therefore risks becoming a *depoliticizing* instrument in service of the status quo.

Taken together, these points of criticism suggest the need

- (1) to develop additional or alternative etiological models for traumatic pathology, so that the subjective dimensions of trauma can be conceptualized and taken into account;
- (2) to acknowledge and incorporate the influence of culture and context in trauma definitions and interventions;
- (3) to depart from a limited focus on the individual in trauma theory;
- (4) to reintroduce the dimension of the political in trauma interventions.

What is needed, then, is conceptual work on trauma that takes into account subject, context and culture, and that helps to envision how sociopolitical change on a collective level is related to (individual) processes of recovery. It is my contention that the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework proves very powerful to deal with these issues, primarily because of its unique conception of both the subject and the Other as the locus of the symbolic order in which the subject is constituted.

The identified needs in the field of trauma studies translate into the following research questions:

- (1) What are the shortcomings of a trauma model that excludes the subject? How can we reintroduce the subject in our understanding of (the etiology of) trauma?
- (2) How can we acknowledge and take into account the role of context in the etiology and recovery from trauma?
- (3) Is it possible to think trauma recovery in a way that transcends the exclusive focus on the individual?
- (4) In relation to this: how can we take the political dimension of trauma into account?

These questions will be addressed by means of a series of conceptual studies. First, I will work out the discussed criticisms in more detail. To this end, I will take my cue from various sources, amongst which the most recent empirical findings with regard to psychological trauma. The fact that these findings contradict most, if not all, of the core assumptions on which the PTSD-model of trauma is based, highlights the urgency and relevance of this research project. This is compounded by the central place the PTSD-model takes in, for example, humanitarian aid campaigns, forensic psychiatry and legal issues. In addition to

empirical findings, I use philosophical analyses to clarify the foundations of the PTSD-approach, and historical studies of the developments in trauma research to place the current impasses in a broader context. Second, I take recourse to an alternative theoretical point of reference to throw new light on the discussed issues with the PTSD-approach. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis are the privileged partners in this endeavor. The choice for these frameworks is motivated in the text when they are introduced.

In order to grasp the delicate and central nature of the first issue (the quasi-mechanical etiological model that stresses the external event as the ‘uniformly most potent causal factor’ in trauma), we start off in Chapter 1 with a brief historical sketch of how trauma theory evolved, hand in hand with developments in the moral climate of the societies in which the question of trauma surfaced. This historical introduction will clear the ground for what follows, as it enables the contemporary reader to question the reification of the current PTSD framework. We tend to take our current understanding of trauma as something neutral and evident, something that can be readily and objectively extracted from the phenomena in question – a strictly scientific truth. However, a brief glance at the history of trauma studies, with all the difficulties and heated debates that characterize its protracted and laborious coming to be, quickly destabilizes this intellectually debilitating idea. Traumatic pathology has been conceptualized in many different ways over the last century, whereby the temporarily prevailing outlook is often in sync with a determining socio-cultural, political or economic context. Moreover, a major point of contention throughout these historical meanders has always been the relative import of person-specific/internal and contextual/external factors in the causation of traumatic conditions.

This, at the most basic level, already underscores that many different readings of these phenomena are possible, and that our current understanding of trauma is the product of a lengthy process of construction rather than being an unproblematic ‘discovery’ or inference. The question then remains if, through this historical development, we have asymptotically reached the “objective” truth of traumatic phenomena, in the sense of a gradual rapprochement between representation (theory) and a reality that exists in independence of theory. Although this outlook is often adopted, other researchers suggest that the success of PTSD is less related to its incremental specular truth-value (*adequatio rei et intellectus*) than to its ability to capture and materialize a series of unspoken assumptions permeating our so-called ‘post-traditional culture’. The historical sketch of the evolutions in trauma theory,

carried out in Chapter 1, thus puts into perspective the current etiological model of trauma, and shows how it is enmeshed in a delicate debate concerning the role of the affected person and the external event in the causation of this type of distress. This will be my point of entry to discuss a series of difficulties associated with the linear etiological model underpinning PTSD. Going against the historically determined major premise of PTSD (the external event as the uniformly most potent etiological agent), trauma scholars should somehow reintroduce *subjective* dimensions if we are to make sense of the counterintuitive empirical findings regarding the dynamics of traumatic etiology. However, the question as to how these ‘subjective dimensions’ should be envisioned was left largely unanswered heretofore – partly because of the (unwarranted) dread that asking questions about the ‘subject in trauma’ could revive the old tendencies of ‘blaming the victim’ for his or her own suffering. Through a discussion of Sigmund Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which was taken up and elaborated by Jacques Lacan in his work on the *après-coup* and the *point de capiton*, I aim to show in the second chapter that an external event must always acquire some sort of ‘psychic traction’ in order to wreak havoc in someone’s psychological functioning. This claim does not deny the importance or validity of trauma models that emphasize the peritraumatic sensorial overload as an important causal factor for trauma; it is rather an addition to these models as it draws attention to something which is often-times neglected, or perhaps hidden behind the brutality of the external event in question. In sum, my discussion of trauma and the psychoanalytical conception of logical time aims to provide a few coordinates to locate the subject in trauma, and to show that the recognition and identification of a subjective dimension in trauma does not simply deny the impact or responsibility of the external intrusion. In a nutshell, Part I of this dissertation targets the etiological assumptions of the PTSD model and proposes the utility of a Lacanian conception of logical time to reintroduce the subject in our comprehension of traumatic phenomena.

In Part II of this book, I elaborate on the remaining core criticisms directed at the hegemonic trauma model of PTSD (see above). To recapitulate: the construct of PTSD, in its biomedical approach to trauma, effectuates a problematic individualization, decontextualization and depoliticization that determines the manners in which we understand and react to these phenomena.

I start off in Chapter 3 by unearthing the factors that contribute to the decontextualizing and depoliticizing effects of the PTSD diagnosis. To this end, I localize PTSD in the biomedical

approach to mental illness, which was adopted for the creation of the third edition of the DSM (the edition in which PTSD made its first appearance in 1980). I describe how this biomedical approach, in the context of trauma, leads to types of interventions that neglect and obscure the political dimensions involved in both the genesis of and recovery from trauma. This analysis aims to show that far from being neutral and value-free, PTSD-informed interventions have very real political consequences, as they reinforce the political and economical status quo and foreclose alternative modes of responding to these situations. It is precisely because PTSD purportedly describes a reality that transcends particular contexts and cultural determinations, that is, because of its avowed universality and neutrality, that it is able to serve as a disempowering political instrument – in the sense that to claim ‘that one is beyond ideology’ is itself the ultimate ideological gesture. It follows that the application of the knowledge associated with PTSD, for instance in humanitarian aid campaigns, must be handled with great care. The discussion in Chapter 3 renders the link between trauma and its often neglected political dimension more palpable, suggesting the need for a conceptualization of trauma that includes it.

In Chapter 4, French philosopher Alain Badiou’s (2001) work allows me to tie the discussed problems of PTSD’s decontextualization and depoliticization to a more general crisis of ethics in the West. I thereby agree with Fassin and Rechtman’s (2009) compelling thesis that evolutions in trauma theory should always be read against the background of an equally developing societal moral climate (see Chapter 1 as well). I offer a reading of the current success and omnipresence of trauma discourse as reflective of the prevalence of the ethics of human rights as the dominant moral compass for our times. Although this ethical doctrine seems self-evident to a contemporary eye, given its emphasis on the prevention of suffering and death, Badiou’s controversial analysis suggests that it ultimately amounts to a nihilistic resignation that must be resisted. The success of this doctrine is tied to the catastrophic consequences of the utopian projects of the 20th century. Badiou laments that the resultant fear of collective action in the name of a shared cause has left us with a type of ethics that is essentially negative, defensive and conservative. This ethical doctrine, then, is founded on a number of basic assumptions and related to a series of undesirable consequences that bear a striking resemblance to those discussed with regards to PTSD. It turns out that a well-defined ethical position is at the heart of several problems affecting PTSD, which presents us with the injunction to think anew the interrelatedness between the fields of trauma, ethics and politics

– a project to be carried out in Part III of this dissertation.

The objective of the third and final, psychoanalytically inspired part is not so much to develop a ‘better’ alternative to existent practices, but to provide a conceptual framework that clarifies the manners in which these the fields of trauma, ethics and politics are related. This will require an elaboration of how the psychiatric level (of the particular, the individual) can be articulated with the sociological level (the universal, the collective). The main hypothesis driving this work is that Lacan’s concept of the real is at the intersection of trauma, ethics and politics. The analysis of this concept will throw new light on the issues laid out in Part II.

In Chapter 5, I discuss Lacan’s evolving views of the real, while introducing a number of other key Lacanian concepts that will be of use in what follows. I discuss the two major conceptions of the real: ‘presymbolic’ and ‘postsymbolic’. It becomes clear that the real should not be taken as the ultimate referent of external reality, but rather as a productive negativity that dislocates the representation of external (symbolic-imaginary) reality. Subsequently, I go on to show how this notion of the real generates an interesting take on trauma that diverges from the more familiar, biomedical trauma discourse. As will become clear, the Lacanian approach to trauma breaks with the familiar inside/outside, self/other and individual/collective dichotomies. Furthermore, as described in Chapter 2, it introduces a non-linear conception of time to make sense of the counterintuitive dynamics of trauma.

In Chapter 6, I scrutinize the paradoxical notion of an ‘ethics of the real’, which refers to Alenka Zupančič’s (2000) denomination of the particular form of ethics that derives from Lacan’s elaboration of the subject. Already here, we see an intriguing connection appear: the real is defined simultaneously as traumatic on the one hand, and as the condition of possibility for the subject, and thus of ethics as such, on the other. This chapter aims to elucidate this estranging logic, which leads to the identification of the Lacanian real as characterized by the dual function of ‘productive destruction’.

In Chapter 7, I aim to show the centrality of this same concept in the movements of politics. According to Yannis Stavrakakis (1999; 2007) and others, it is a disruptive encounter with the real that initiates time and again a process of symbolization – along with the ensuing hegemonic struggle between alternative symbolizations of this real. Rupture, in this way, is connected with sociopolitical innovation. However, the traumatic impact of such large-scale, societal ruptures has not been explicitly addressed within these socio-political theories. The

juxtaposition of Lacanian trauma theory and philosophical contributions on rupture-predicated societal change allows us to think the ‘moment of the political’ in its relation to trauma recovery.

The category of the real, then, is at the centre of the interconnections that proved so difficult to account for in the PTSD-model of trauma. In Chapter 8, I describe some of the consequences of this interrelatedness centered around the real. First, I argue that many psychological theories of trauma commit a logical fallacy in their description of the process of trauma recovery, claiming that the psychological buildup needs to be remodeled so that it can accommodate the ‘new trauma information’. In this move, they take as a given that which must first be constituted by the subject: the content or ‘meaning’ of the traumatic episode. Second, I argue that Lacan’s notion of the *act* can be put to work to conceptualize this neglected but primordial aspect of trauma recovery. Furthermore, I demonstrate that it is this moment of the act that opens up the path towards collective action and social change. The incorporation of the dimension in the act in trauma recovery, moreover, requires us to take up an alternative ethical position.

Part I

Traumatic Etiology and Logical Time

1

Between Railway Spine and PTSD

Abstract: A hundred years ago the world witnessed the start of an armed conflict unlike anything that preceded it. A series of initiatives to commemorate the human suffering involved typically used the framework of psychic trauma to understand what had transpired. Although such a move seems obvious to the contemporary eye, the author argues that it was by no means straightforward at the time of the conflict itself. In this chapter, a brief account of the history of trauma studies is provided, with a focus on two crucial moments: (1) the railroad accidents in the 19th century, which gave rise to the idea of Railway Spine, and (2) the controversy regarding Shell Shock in World War I. This historical review allows the author to formulate four conclusions that call into question the tendency to reify our current understanding of traumatic phenomena.

In 2014, the world commemorated the start of World War I (WWI), an armed conflict that in no way resembled anything that went before. The level of technological development at the start of the 20th century had made possible military interventions with an unseen destructive impact. These new technologies of destruction produced vast numbers of casualties amongst both civil and military populations, on a scale that was previously unimaginable. The

confrontation between the power of modern machinery and the fragility of the human organism thereby led to what we can call ‘the discovery of the psychological’. The omnipresence of death, the pieces of human bodies scattered throughout the land after another violent encounter, the accumulation of dead bodies that could not be ‘processed’ fast enough, the inertia of a trench war and the everlasting anxious anticipation of those caught up in it, the numerous amputations and the mutilated faces that needed care, and so on: all of this constituted the dark soil in which a type of pathology, which was at the heart of a heated debate even before the war, flourished like never before.

When today we look back on this conflict, and try to imagine the human suffering involved, it is almost natural to apply the framework of ‘psychological trauma’ to make sense of things. To a contemporary eye, it is hardly surprising that the horrors of WWI left psychological scars in those exposed. It is evident that soldiers suffered from their war experiences. Moreover, it is also quite straightforward that these psychological problems derive from the nature of the suffered events as such. At the time of the conflict itself, however, there existed no consensus as to how these phenomena should be understood and treated. What we think we know about the phenomenon of psychological trauma, a hundred years after this conflict, has been developed in a very cumbersome manner – often under impulse of such large-scale, tragic events. This already indicates that the way in which we understand traumatic phenomena today in no way flows from the nature of the investigated object in an obvious or unmediated fashion. In this first chapter, I will briefly discuss a few structuring moments in the history of trauma studies. It will become clear that academic and societal debates on trauma mostly center on the question of etiology, and thus responsibility for the observed pathology.

Railway Spine

From 1830 onwards, travelling by train in Great-Britain became increasingly popular. In this time frame, steam power was used for the first time on a large scale in both industry and transport. In liberal Great-Britain, the railway sector was allowed to develop according to the ‘laissez-faire’ principle, unhindered by outside regulation. Safety measures were not imposed by the state, and in a context of heavy competition between the various railway companies,

costs were cut in both maintenance and personnel (Siemerink-Hermans, 1998). All of this made travelling by train a perilous enterprise at that time: unsuspecting travelers could find themselves in an inferno in the blink of an eye, when their trains collided or derailed. Given that the train wagons consisted of little more than shaky wooden structures that offered no protection to those inside, damage to the passengers was enormous. The first railroad accidents were major, catastrophic events that caused dismay and outrage all over Europe: accidents of this magnitude were an unseen, new phenomenon (Luckhurst, 2008). The upcoming popular press magnified and utilized the dramatic quality of these accidents, which stirred up strong emotional reactions with the public (Siemerink-Hermans, 1998).

From 1846, railway companies were legally obligated to reimburse travelers for the injuries inflicted by the accidents. In this context, medical doctors were confronted with a large group of people who claimed to have been seriously injured in a train crash, but for whom no clear physical cause for their quasi-neurological ailments could be found. Hence, the railroad companies rejected their claims as unfounded. This was often followed by a lawsuit, in which a shocked and sympathetic jury usually allocated the entire requested financial sum to the claimant. As such, the nature of these symptoms became the centre of a heated debate at the end of the 19th century.

John Erichsen, a British professor in Surgery, was responsible for diagnosing the injuries and symptoms that were ascribed to railway accidents. He divided the patients in three categories:

1. those cases in which the neurological tissue was visibly damaged by the physical impact of the accident;
2. cases he supposed to be caused by the jars and shocks of the accident, but in which no neurological damage could be found, even post mortem;
3. cases in which people simulated their symptoms to receive financial compensation.

Erichsen (1875) reported that the observable symptoms in all groups were identical. Whereas the first group clearly suffered physical injuries because of the impact of the accident, and thus were entitled to financial compensation, the third group was not genuinely affected and could not lay claim to any form of compensation. The second group is the mysterious one: there is enough doubt to acknowledge their suffering as 'real', as 'not simulated', yet no organic cause could be detected. How, then, should their symptoms be comprehended? First of all, the presented complaints were highly diverse: paralysis, spasms, anesthetics, melancholy, sudden blindness or deafness, and so on. It is this diversity of the clinical tableau

that necessitated to find an explanation within the nervous system. Erichsen (1875, p. 156) was confronted with ‘nervous’ symptoms without any detectable neurological cause, which developed after a train crash. What was the mechanism behind these clinical phenomena, taking into account that in a large subset of individuals symptoms only developed many weeks after the actual disaster (so-called ‘belated onset’ (p. 157))? It is not sufficient to say that symptoms were caused by the accident; such a statement is meaningless unless it is framed within a theoretical network that stipulates the mechanism according to which the outer world affects the inner world of the patient. Moreover, the theoretical model must be able to explain why these symptoms only developed in some survivors of the railway accident, whilst others remained unaffected.

The most straightforward explanation was offered by Erichsen himself. He suggested the existence of organic lesions that could not be detected with the technological means of the time (Erichsen, 1875). This explanation is logical and aligned itself with the emergent and increasingly authoritative scientific disciplines of anatomy and physiology. Erichsen ascribed the symptomatic attacks to microscopic lesion of the spinal cord, caused by the physical impact of the accident. Hence, the name Railway Spine or Railway Brain, which captures in one term both the cause and the substrate of the injury. In other words: Erichsen’s explanation de facto suspended the distinction between the first and second category: in both groups, injuries were organically determined, and people from either group had a right to financial compensation. He was convinced that future technological innovations would confirm his hypotheses (Siemerink-Hermans, 1998).

Nevertheless, it is important to take into account the third group suggested by Erichsen: those who fabricated their pathology for personal financial gain, the frauds, the malingerers – whose nervous system could in no way be distinguished from the cases in the second group. The first large-scale encounter with the series of phenomena that gave rise to the idea of psychological trauma was in a context in which the distinction between real patients and cynical malingerers was to be made. As a result, everyone who sought out the help of a medical doctor in the aftermath of a railway accident was met with a fair dose of skepticism and suspicion. Moreover, the necessity to differentiate between frauds and authentic victims was interwoven with the question of financial compensation: who or what was responsible for these symptoms? Financial compensation was only warranted if the claimant was genuinely ill and if this illness was the direct result of the accident.

Medical science, which was called upon to explain these phenomena, determined whether or not financial compensation was provided. Any specification of the involved pathophysiological mechanism cannot but identify the ‘final cause’ of this form of suffering. Erichsen’s proposal was simple, elegant and convincing. Symptoms followed the accident in a mechanical fashion: from the impact on the body and, more specifically, the nervous system, to the subjective experience of debilitating symptoms. Only those whose nervous system was affected, developed the syndrome. Despite the appeal and increasing popularity of this model, other voices quickly entered the debate.

Herbert Page, a surgeon as well, suggested that so-called Railway Spine had psychological causes rather than anatomical. He stressed the role of fear at the time of the accident, as well as the desire for financial gain as the determining factors in this sort of pathology (Page, 1883). Bear in mind that the theoretical network of psychology was far from developed at the end of the 19th century. Roger Luckhurst (2008, p. 23) underscores that even though Page’s ideas might appear closer to modern conceptions, ‘his insistence that the psychical traumas of railway accidents were forms of hysteria came from transparently pecuniary motives’, as Page had been the surgeon for the London and North Western Railway Company for nine years when he wrote his book.

German psychiatrist Hermann Oppenheim claimed that the changes in the nervous system were ‘functional’ rather than structural, and thus related to a disturbed functioning of the nervous system, an idea that opened up perspectives for treatment and even complete recovery. It was Oppenheim who proposed and succeeded in changing the name for this kind of pathology to ‘traumatic neurosis’ (Luckhurst, 2008). The famous French doctor Jean-Martin Charcot was very interested in the reports on the effects of railway accidents, written by his British colleagues. However, he did not endorse the creation of a new diagnostic category to account for these cases. In Charcot’s eyes, all of the described symptoms were identical to those he had longtime discovered and described in the context of hysteria. In the victims of the railway accidents, he saw confirmation of his controversial hypothesis that hysteria could affect men as well as women. The fact that all of these cases arose in the wake of a specific external event did not warrant the inference of a new nosological category for Charcot. His conclusion was the opposite: all cases of hysteria presumably developed after such an inciting, ‘traumatic’ incident. This incident was merely the agent provocateur that kick-started the always-already present yet latent hysterical predisposition in these patients.

In other words: a variety of psychological theories associated Railway Spine with hysteria, which was in itself already a highly suspicious disorder often classified as a form of malingering or ‘neuromimesis’. Moreover, traumatic pathology was associated with such notions as bad faith, simulation with the goal of personal gain, and so on. Some of these early psychological theories went as far as to say that the prospect of financial gain was the sole cause of the development and persistence of the medical complaints. This was referred to as claim neurosis or sinistrosis (a sort of condition of the will) (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). This same condition was suggested to be even more frequent in the context of factory accidents, where the encounter between man and machine often led to atrocious scenes.

The associations with hysteria and claim neurosis de facto lifted the opposition between Erichson’s second and third suggested category: both groups were considered to be simulating their complaints. Psychological theories accounted for the fact that only some of the survivors reacted in a shameful, hysterical manner to the railway accident, while others appeared unaffected, by use of the stopgap of heredity and ‘degeneration’ – a rather common move at the turn of the 19th century. The consequences of this position were vast: according to psychological theories, the railway accidents were no longer seen as the direct cause of the suffering, but reduced to a proximate, inciting factor that activated an individual vulnerability regarded as the real cause of the pathology (see Charcot’s notion of the agent provocateur). Hence, the railway companies, in the final analysis, could not be held accountable for these problems – and were no longer legally obliged to pay damages.

World War I and Shell Shock

In the previous section, I established that in the years before WWI, presumptions of simulation, bad will and financial motivations were widespread in the field of traumatic neurosis. The term Shell Shock stems from the second major founding moment in the history of psychological trauma. Military doctors were confronted with large numbers of soldiers who presented with injuries surmised to be related to their being in the proximity of explosions of heavy artillery shells (Young, 1995). Although they presented the same symptoms as soldiers with head and brain injuries, for instance, no such head wound could be detected in these cases. In analogy with Railway Spine, the name Shell Shock ties the

observed effects to a specific cause. Doctors suggested that the observed pathological phenomena were caused by shockwaves that caused undetectable cerebral lesions (Leese, 2002). Symptoms ranged from blurry and limited vision, episodes of uncontrollable crying, involuntary tremor, loss of smell and taste, to retrograde and anterograde amnesia, and many more (Luckhurst, 2008). The physical explanation model for Shell Shock was gladly accepted and defended by those affected: in a horrible trench war, where death was inevitable, evacuation on medical grounds was often the only way to make it out of their predicament alive and without the stigma of mental weakness.

Although this condition was named after an external, violent and physical cause, the manner in which it was treated once again evidences the link with hysteria, which is an internally caused, psychological condition. The enormous and ever-increasing amount of Shell Shock cases, sometimes even observed in soldiers in training who were nowhere near the battlefield or heavy explosions, put the biological, straightforward explanation under a lot of pressure (Leese, 2002). Psychological theories quickly took over, and the idea that psychopathology could only develop in those that have a pre-existent 'neuropathic soil' once again took root. Consequently, it was the soldiers' hereditary predisposition which was considered the ultimate cause for their affliction, rather than the war experiences in themselves. War was only the window through which the weakness of these men became visible. Further support for a psychological mechanism and the hypothesis of mental weakness was found in the observation that this condition could spread through an entire battalion in no time, through some sort of 'neuromimesis' or simulation (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). The question that occupied military doctors was thus never what sort of experiences could lead to long-term psychopathological effects, but rather what type of soldier would display such an unmanly, shameful reaction in response to fulfilling his patriotic duties.

The military authorities were, of course, concerned by the idea that these men, who, after all, were not visibly injured, were trying to evade their duty by feigning their illness. Evacuation on medical ground was often the only way to avert certain death. The primary role of medical personnel in the army consisted in sorting out those who were genuinely wounded from those trying to evade their duties by feigning mental conditions or even by mutilating themselves. Just as in the context of Railway Spine, doctors were primarily concerned with detecting frauds.

Importantly, organic explanations resulted in the removal of the Shell Shocked soldiers from the frontline, in analogy with the physically injured. As a result, fighting forces quickly threatened to be depleted. War psychiatry, which adapted itself to the patriotic ideal, was forced to change its theories in order to be compatible with the expectations of the military regime (Luckhurst, 2008; Young, 1995). Psychological theories of Shell Shock interpreted the symptoms as an affliction of the will or (later, under influence of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory) as an unconscious desire to forsake duty and flee into illness. Once again, this type of explanation focuses on the characteristics of those who present with this condition: they are seen as people of bad moral fiber who try to evade battle. An illness of the will could be overcome by strengthening the will, most often by means of brutal 'persuasive therapies' such as faradism, which involved the administration of electric shocks onto the affected, dysfunctional body parts of the soldier. If this did not work, the voltage would be gradually increased. The same technique was utilized as a disciplinary measure when the soldier showed too little motivation to heal, or when he simply did not recover quick enough. A bonus of these therapeutic practices was its disencouraging potential (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). The criterion for recovery entailed the soldier's confession of his weakness, and his willingness to return to the battlefield. A successful treatment is a treatment that satisfies the desires of the military government, that is, getting the soldier ready to go fight. Refusal of treatment equaled an act of desertion, and was thus punishable by execution.

Towards PTSD

I will only discuss the rest of the history of trauma theory very succinctly. The success of psychoanalysis in the interbellum rendered the idea that Shell Shocked soldiers were driven by conscious motives to avoid their duties untenable (Leys, 2000). Hence, it made no sense to make them confess their ill intentions and to give up their simulation with brutal methods. The driving force behind their affliction was not their conscious motivation, nor the events in themselves, but a power beyond their control. The roots of Shell Shock, in popularized versions of psychoanalysis, lay in the soldiers' childhood. Their violent war experiences only rendered their condition manifest, yet they were not the true 'cause' of their difficulties (Leys, 2000). The idea was that something in the unconscious of these soldiers made it impossible to fulfill their function in the war. Once again, the emphasis laid on what distinguished the sick

soldier from his more able counterpart, and this supposedly had something to do with his repressed desires, wishes and anxieties (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Trauma was still an individual reaction of an abnormal human being confronted with an moral duty that he could not carry out. Although traumatic neurosis was recognized to be a genuine mental disorder, it was something that followed in the wake of horrible experiences, but was not ultimately caused by them. Possible recovery from this condition required the slow and difficult process of psychoanalytical treatment. Undoubtedly an improvement to the intimidating techniques of before, but nevertheless a stigmatization to those subjected to it.

In the context of World War II, psychoanalysis was hardly a suitable form of treatment. The old, tried 'treatments' soon became fashionable again (Luckhurst, 2008). During this time, the term combat fatigue surfaces in war psychiatry, which suggests that a couple of days of rest and a good warm meal would suffice to enable the soldier to resume his duties.

It was the encounter with the survivors of the concentration camps that would radically alter the societal perception of trauma patients (Luckhurst, 2008; Young, 1995). Secondary gain, overdeveloped narcissism, financial motivation and so on: none of the stigmas of traumatic neuroses were applicable to these broken people who emerged from the worst of places. A new paradigm was required to make sense of their suffering. It could no longer be ignored that the nature of the experiences that these people suffered were, in themselves, sufficient to cause mental problems. This revolutionized the way trauma was comprehended: the emphasis shifted from the affected person to the event as the primary etiological agent (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Importantly, the societal attitude of respect, of willingness to hear, did not generalize to those who were afflicted by other tragic or violent events. The affliction of those who emerged from the Holocaust was considered to be uniquely tied to the Holocaust; hence the name given to this syndrome, Concentration Camp Syndrome.

PTSD

Before the inception of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, each type of 'traumatic stressor' was tied to its own, specific syndrome. A few already came up in the preceding sections: Railway Spine, Shell Shock and Concentration Camp Syndrome. Other examples are Rape Trauma

Syndrome or the Battered Wife Syndrome (Herman, 1997). Each stressor was considered unique and distinctive.

At the time of the development of the third version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the Vietnam Veteran movement and the feminist movement advocated for the inclusion of traumatic psychopathology in the manual. However, there was not enough time nor money to acquire the necessitated empirical evidence to ground the proposed condition. The strategy to more or less meet the required scientific standards set forth by the DSM-III's task force consisted of collecting evidence to argue the equivalence between the experiences of veterans on the one hand, and the survivors of the concentration camps (and other groups) on the other (Young, 1995). In other words, the idea started to take shape that the problems encountered by Vietnam veterans could be a manifestation of the same condition that afflicted the survivors of other violent incidents. In this way, the advocates of the new diagnosis could make use of already developed empirical evidence concerning other disorders to argue their case and to provide the new diagnosis with a minimal scientific foundation (Kutchins & Kirk, 1997).

Hence, the basic yet revolutionary idea of PTSD is the following: that all these different external influences operate according to the same etiological mechanism to produce a similar effect. The diversity in etiological events is conceptually annulled to stress the uniformity in both the pathophysiological mechanism and in the symptomatology (Herman, 1997). As such, PTSD became a diagnosis for an ever-expanding range of problems that were all united by one single characteristic: that the cause of these problems was external. PTSD is a condition that almost automatically flows from the nature of the traumatic event itself. This train of thought is reflected in the name, which drops the latter part of the former 'traumatic neurosis' diagnosis; neurosis always implies a subjective element in the development of psychopathology.

The discussed fragments from the history of trauma studies illustrate that it was by no means straightforward to cancel out the differences between an array of different etiological events and to treat them as uniform in their capacity to cause mental problems. The violence of war, the horror of concentration camps and torture, domestic abuse, rape, sexual abuse, natural catastrophes, traffic accidents, being mugged in the street, a difficult child labor, verbal sexual intimidation and even the shock of receiving bad news from a doctor: all of these events are stripped from their specificity to stress their similarity. The obvious downside of this problem

is that the social, economical and political contexts that gave rise to the abuse are thereby obscured, in favor of a biomedical, technical approach to the problems at hand (Craps, 2013).

The DSM-III task force, of which Robert Spitzer was the chairman, came to the conclusion that the external stressor was the only, or at least the most decisive, etiological factor for PTSD. The former ‘abnormal reaction’ soon became the normal, expected response to an abnormal situation – in analogy with the attitude towards the victims of the Holocaust. The stress on the abnormality of the situation simultaneously stresses the normality of those affected. This is the great accomplishment and merit of the PTSD-model of trauma: it ascribes victimhood and incites patience and respect in the other, as opposed to suspicion, stigmatization and rejection.

The price to be paid for this is the infamous ‘Criterion A’ of the PTSD diagnosis, which limits the type of events that are deemed ‘inherently traumatic’ and thus potentially give rise to genuine ‘traumatic pathology’. This will be my starting point in the next chapter, where I will go into the problems related to this particular criterion.

Conclusion

This chapter provided a brief account of the history of trauma studies, from which a number of observations can be made. First, this history learns that theories of trauma have always been affected by the dominant societal outlooks of the time. As Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) worked out, the history of trauma should always be studied ‘double’: parallel to the scientific development of trauma theory runs the development in the societal attitude towards those who present with these phenomena. The acceptance of ideas and theories concerning trauma hinges on how these people are viewed: as malingerers and frauds, as passive victims, or even as privileged witnesses to a side of human existence which is ordinarily hidden from sight.

Symmetrically, theoretical frameworks influence the manner in which these patients are perceived. Trauma theory is therefore never a merely academic matter: it determines to a large extent how those who present with this type of pathology are approached in a medical context. In addition, trauma theory has had large-scale societal effects, for instance in the

enormous impact that the PTSD construct has had on forensic psychiatry and legal issues in the United States (Pitman, Sparr, Saunders, & McFarlane, 2007).

Second, history learns that political, social and economical factors consistently played a part in our understanding of trauma. These circumstances generate a context in which some ideas thrive better than others. As discussed, our contemporary understanding of trauma in no way flows directly from the phenomena under scrutiny. A number of different and competing explanatory models are possible, and the choice between distinct alternatives cannot always be made on the basis of scientific arguments. In the context of the railroad accidents, it became clear that economical motives played a part in the acceptance and popularity of some models at the expense of others. In World War I, it was a political and military need that influenced the way in which trauma was dealt with, both at the level of theory and practice.

Third, the meanders of the history of trauma studies show how hard it is to pin down this particular research object in a single theory. If trauma must indeed always be studied in a double manner, as Fassin and Rechtman argue, then we cannot but affirm that in our times, there is a large degree of consensus between the dominant trauma model of PTSD on the one hand, and the societal perception of those who suffer it on the other. To a contemporary eye, the PTSD-model feels correct and self-evident. This is why it is always surprising and unnerving when its fundamental assumptions are contradicted in empirical studies, or when interventions based on these models do not produce the positive effects that were expected (see Chapters 2 and 3). Every discussion of the validity of the PTSD-model has become very delicate, and never fails to arouse intense emotions – most likely because of the fear that questioning our contemporary understanding of trauma might once again revive the ghosts of the past, the old stigmas of personal weakness and so on.

In this light, let me conclude by stating that the current findings regarding trauma seem to deliver a piece for a puzzle that already appears complete. Perhaps when we scrutinize trauma, we are not driven by what is missing from our knowledge, but rather with a repeated confrontation with something that offers a discomforting surplus. It is this extra piece of the puzzle, this enigmatic ‘too much’ that we cannot accommodate into our contemporary framework, that urges us to rearrange the pieces time and again.

2

Logical Time and Delayed Traumatic Reactions

Abstract: The Freudian concept of Nachträglichkeit is central to the psychoanalytical understanding of trauma. However, it has not received much attention within the contemporary field of trauma studies. This paper attempts to reconstruct the logic inherent to this concept by examining Freud's remarks on the case of Emma. Furthermore, it is argued that Nachträglichkeit offers an interesting perspective on both (1) the well-established yet controversial finding that traumatic reactions sometimes follow in the wake of non-Criterion A events (so-called minor stressors or life events) and (2) the often-neglected phenomenon of delayed-onset PTSD. These two phenomena will appear to be related in some instances. Nachträglichkeit clarifies one way in which traumatic encounters are mediated by subjective dimensions above and beyond the objective particularities of both the event and the person. It demonstrates that the subjective impact of an event is not given once and for all but is malleable by subsequent experiences.

In 1980, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was included as a new diagnostic category in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1980). The diagnosis rests on the core assumption

that a diverse yet limited set of traumatic events (defined in Criterion A: the ‘stressor criterion’) is causally linked to a distinct clinical syndrome (Criteria B through D: the ‘symptom criteria’). The DSM explicitly adopts a restrictive approach to the stressor by defining a set of requirements that an event must meet in order to be acknowledged as ‘traumatic’¹. In other words, the fact that an experience directly precedes the emergence of traumatic symptoms does not suffice for it to qualify as a traumatic event. Although the exact definition of Criterion A has changed considerably throughout subsequent editions of the DSM, this particular assumption has always been retained (APA, 1987, 1994, 2000, 2013). Consequently, according to the DSM, cases where the full clinical picture of PTSD develops in the aftermath of an event that does not meet Criterion A (referred to as non-Criterion A events, life events, or minor stressors) ought to be classified as Adjustment Disorder (AD) rather than PTSD (APA, 1987, p. 249) – since there can only be a post-traumatic syndrome in the aftermath of a ‘truly’ traumatic event. The DSM thus implies that the traumatogenic potential of an event can be deduced *a priori* by charting the objective particularities of the situation.

More specifically, an event is considered to be (potentially) traumatic only if it involves a confrontation with actual or threatened death or (sexual) violence (APA, 2013). The rationale for this approach rests on the belief that Criterion A events have a unique etiological effect in comparison to less dramatic life events, ‘and that there is a quantitatively and qualitatively different relationship between these two types of events and consequent psychopathology’ (Van Hooff, McFarlane, Baur, Abraham, & Barnes, 2009, p. 77). More precisely, the central claim is that individual vulnerability plays a less important role in precipitating PTSD than in bringing about other psychiatric disorders (McFarlane & de Girolamo, 2007, p. 137). Put simply, PTSD is caused by the objective particularities of the event as such, while in AD a subjective vulnerability factor plays a more prominent role.

Such a view is partly supported by the finding that the probability of developing PTSD is dependent on the type of event involved: some events (such as torture) produce the disorder more frequently than others (for example, car accidents), suggesting that there is something traumatogenic inherent to these events (without any reference to the affected person). The observed differences in conditional probability for developing PTSD represent one possible measure for ‘trauma severity’. Significantly, sexual assault has been consistently found to be the most pathogenic stressor among participants of general population surveys (Breslau,

Troost, Bohnert, & Luo, 2013). However, it should be noted that conceptually ‘there is no true objective assessment of severity that is totally divorced from response, because a rough assessment of the modal response to any particular event is typically understood to be a rough index of its severity’ (Ozer, Best, Lipsey, & Weiss, 2003, p. 69)ⁱⁱ. The idea of trauma severity is tied to the conception of a dose-response relationship between traumatic event and subsequent pathology, which underpins the central claim of the PTSD construct.

The study of the history of the concept of psychological trauma in Chapter 1 revealed that the introduction of PTSD in DSM-III put a provisional end to the long-lasting debate concerning the relative contribution of the event and the characteristics of the person as etiological factors in favor of the event (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, pp. 77–97; Luckhurst, 2008, pp. 59–76). The text of DSM-IV-TR clarifies that the nature of the exposure to the traumatic event provides the most important factor to account for the likelihood of developing the disorder (APA, 2000, p. 466), an idea that has become generally accepted in Western society (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 4). As a direct result of this claim, the PTSD diagnosis wields a political and juridical power. It has often been remarked that it is rare to find a psychiatric diagnosis that anyone would like to have, but that PTSD is one of them (Andreasen, 1995). For many people, the diagnosis of PTSD serves as an important tool for acknowledging their distress and determining liability, and the construct has had a dramatic impact on forensic psychiatry and law (Pitman, Sparr, Saunders, & McFarlane, 2007). Because it is suggested that subjective vulnerability plays a negligible role in developing PTSD, the responsibility for the distress can be attributed to an external agent that will then be required to provide some form of restitution. Should less severe stressors be acknowledged to cause PTSD, then the causal emphasis risks being shifted away from the stressor towards personal predispositions and frailties. This would ‘undermine the very rationale for having a diagnosis of PTSD in the first place’ (McNally, 2009, p. 598). Hence, a restrictive stressor criterion has been retained in the recently released fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5; APA, 2013), despite many criticisms. It is feared that adopting a non-restrictive approach to the stressor would ‘trivialize the PTSD diagnosis and defeat the purpose of the original DSM-III construct by permitting people exposed to less stressful events to meet the A Criterion’ (Friedman, Resick, Bryant, & Brewin, 2011, p. 753).

However, empirical research does not corroborate the idea that traumatic pathology is limited to a well-defined set of events. It is a robust finding that Criterion A events do not lead to

long-term psychological distress in the majority of cases (McFarlane & de Girolamo, 2007; Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008; Shalev, 2007). Conversely, a variety of non-Criterion A events have been consistently reported to potentially produce the full clinical picture of PTSD (Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008). Van Hooff et al. (2009) found that the majority of studies ‘reported similar or greater mean PTSD scores and/or PTSD prevalence in individuals reporting non-traumatic life events compared to those who report Criterion A1-events’ (p. 78)ⁱⁱⁱ. Criterion A is thus neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for developing the clinical syndrome of PTSD. Consequently, considerable debate exists about whether or not non-Criterion A events should be accepted as traumatic stressors (Van Hooff et al., 2009). As empirical evidence showed that traumatic pathology cannot be accurately predicted on the basis of event characteristics alone, researchers attempted to identify resilience and vulnerability factors of the affected person that influence clinical outcome. However, in a comprehensive review Ozer et al. (2003) concluded that less than 20% of the total variance in clinical outcome after experiencing a traumatic event can be explained by the combination of all hitherto-known predictors (particularities of both the event and the person). The other 80% is unaccounted for, which basically means that it is impossible to predict who will develop traumatic pathology after which event. Ozer et al. (2003) conclude that this is consistent with the possibility that ‘factors unique to the combination of the person exposed and the nature of the exposure are the determining factors in understanding who becomes symptomatic and who does not’ (p. 66). In other words, traumatic pathology is the result of a highly personal, subjective encounter that cannot be reduced to a calculus of objective parameters. This is corroborated by the finding that it is not the nature of the event per se but rather the individual’s emotional response that is associated with PTSD symptoms (Boals & Schuettler, 2009; Maercker, Beauducel, & Schutzwohl, 2000). Accumulating empirical evidence points in this direction as it suggests that subjective interpretation plays an important part in precipitating PTSD (Boals & Schuettler, 2009; Ehlers & Clark, 2000; van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 2007). These findings call into question the centrality of the nature of the external event and of a simple dose/response relationship to account for traumatic pathology, while pointing to the importance of psychological factors. Conceptual analysis is needed in order to interpret the results of these empirical studies. In this chapter, Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* is deployed precisely to allow us to envisage one possible manner in which subjective interpretation intervenes in the etiology of traumatic pathology.

A second and related controversy concerns the phenomenon of delayed-onset PTSD. This refers to individuals with persistent PTSD who reported no or few symptoms in the first weeks, months, or even years following the event. DSM-IV defines delayed-onset PTSD as the development of the clinical syndrome 6 months or more after the traumatic event, although the evidence base for this particular cut-off was negligible (Carty, O'Donnell, & Creamer, 2006). The phenomenon of a 'delayed reaction' to trauma has been described as a core feature of traumatic pathology throughout its entire history (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Luckhurst, 2008; Young, 1995), and contemporary empirical studies have also confirmed the importance of this phenomenon (Andrews, Brewin, Philpott, & Stewart, 2007; Berninger et al., 2010; Carty et al., 2006; Yehuda et al., 2009). A systematic review concluded that, on average, 38.2% and 15% of PTSD cases are delayed in military and civilian samples respectively (Andrews et al., 2007). Despite the historical and clinical relevance of this phenomenon, few studies have taken delayed-onset PTSD as their primary focus, and little is known about what distinguishes the delayed- and immediate onset forms of the disorder (Andrews et al., 2007). Ehlers and Clark (2000) have proposed an influential cognitive theory on the development of PTSD which also addresses delayed reactions. They suggest that delayed-onset PTSD may develop in some people due to a subsequent event which gives the original trauma a more threatening meaning. The temporal dynamic involved in Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* dovetails with this cognitive re-appraisal model of delayed traumatic reactions, while adding important nuances and subtleties to it.

The central claim of this chapter is that *Nachträglichkeit* provides interesting perspectives on both traumatic reactions following non-Criterion A events and delayed-onset PTSD – two phenomena that will appear to be related in some instances. In both cases, the concept introduces one possible mechanism by which subjective interpretation intervenes in the etiology of trauma, above and beyond the objective characteristics of the event and the person. *Nachträglichkeit* was chosen because it is central to the psychoanalytical understanding of trauma. Despite the overall acknowledgment of the impact of psychoanalysis on the history of trauma studies, *Nachträglichkeit* itself has not received much attention within this field. This might be due to the inconsistent and more or less problematic translations of the term (a neologism coined by Freud), which include 'deferred action', 'après-coup', 'afterwardsness', 'retroactive temporality', 'belatedness', 'latency', and 'retrospective attribution' (Eickhoff, 2006). These translations generally emphasize only one

aspect of the far-reaching implications of this construct, thereby obscuring other relevant dimensions. Therefore, in what follows, we opt to retain the original term. The notion of *Nachträglichkeit* was primarily elaborated through Freud's work on psychological trauma, which in turn is deeply intertwined with his study of hysteria. This work will be the starting point for our reconstruction of the logic of the construct. Subsequently, we briefly turn to Jacques Lacan's logic of signification (Lacan, 1957a, 1957b, 1957–58, 1960) in order to further clarify the manner in which subjective interpretation plays a part in certain instances of traumatic pathology.

***Nachträglichkeit*: The Case of Emma**

Freud developed his theories of both psychological trauma and hysteria simultaneously, mainly in two articles on the 'Neuro-Psychoses of Defence' (Freud, 1894; 1896a) and also in his co-publications with Josef Breuer (Freud & Breuer, 1893). For Freud, every case of hysteria 'can be looked upon as traumatic hysteria in the sense of implying a psychical trauma' (1893, p. 34). In making this assumption, he was strongly influenced by the ideas of French neuropathologist Jean-Martin Charcot on traumatic hysteria (Libbrecht & Quackelbeen, 1995). Freud was convinced that patients with hysteria suffered from psychological traumata that had not been sufficiently abreacted (Freud, 1893, p. 38). Interestingly, he found that each hysterical symptom was due to a psychic trauma reviving an earlier traumatic event. At this point, he introduced the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* to explain the mechanism of the symptom formation in these patients. Essential to this notion is that an initial event only becomes traumatic, in the sense of exerting its full pathogenic power, at a later stage in psychical development, when the initial event to which the subject was unable to react adequately is revived by a subsequent encounter. *Nachträglichkeit* thus refers to the process by which pathology develops following a trauma that is constituted through *two* etiological moments instead of one (Mather & Marsden, 2004). Importantly, not the real nature of the original event is of major importance, but the way in which the experience affects the psychical being. It is not 'what had happened' but the way in which the subject responded or reacted to this experience that determined the effects of the so-called traumatic encounter.

In the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud, 1895a) we find a description of the case of Emma on which we wish to elaborate in order to clarify this notion. Emma Eckstein was a Viennese woman from a well-known bourgeois family who sought out Freud's help when she was 27 years old. Her treatment spanned approximately three years, from 1892 to 1895 (Appignanesi & Forrester, 2005, p. 138). At the time of her therapy with Freud, Emma was subject to a 'compulsion of not being able to go into shops *alone*' (Freud, 1895a, p. 353). She explained this symptom by producing a memory from the time when she was 12 years old – shortly after the onset of puberty, Freud remarks. The relevant passage reads as follows:

She went into a shop to buy something, saw the two shop-assistants (one of whom she can remember) laughing together, and ran away in some kind of *affect of fright*. In connection with this, she was led to recall that the two of them were laughing at her clothes and that one of them had pleased her sexually. (Freud, 1895/1975a, p. 353)

Given as a first explanation for her pathology, this scene raises a few questions. Freud concludes that this memory explains neither the compulsion nor the determination of the symptom. However, further investigation revealed a second memory that was chronologically prior to the first:

On two occasions when she was a child of eight she had gone into a small shop to buy some sweets, and the shopkeeper had grabbed at her genitals through her clothes. In spite of the first experience she had gone there a second time; after the second time she stopped away. (Freud, 1895a, p. 354)

The production of the second memory is anticipated by the first through various associations, which Freud discusses extensively. He concludes that the laughing of the shop-assistants had unconsciously activated the older scene through the evocation of the grin with which the shopkeeper had accompanied his assault. Importantly, this reviving of the older scene 'aroused what it was certainly not able at the time, a *sexual release*, which was transformed into anxiety' (Freud, 1895a, p. 354). Curiously, the only element of the older scene that reached Emma's consciousness was the least significant one: her clothing. The one that actually mattered (that is, the assault), in the sense of potentially producing an adverse effect on the girl, was thus replaced by a symbol. Freud saw as the cause of this pathological process (the repression of the important element and its replacement by a symbol) the release of

sexual excitation, which somehow reached consciousness but was falsely attributed to one of the shop-assistants. For Freud, it is clear that this sexual excitation is linked

to the memory of the assault; but it is highly noteworthy that it was not linked to the assault when this was experienced. Here we have the case of a memory arousing an affect which it did not arouse as an experience, because in the meantime the change [brought about] in puberty had made possible a different understanding of what was remembered. (Freud, 1895a, p. 356)

The astonishing idea that Freud puts forward here is that ‘a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma *by deferred action* [nachträglich]’^{iv} (Freud, 1895a, p. 356). Freud assumes that the cause of this state of things is the retardation of puberty as compared with the rest of the individual’s development, because the changes of puberty bring with them a different understanding of the scene.

This clinical case represents one of the earliest formulations of the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. Freud argued that the girl’s suffering was the result of a psychic trauma — the real novelty being the mechanism he developed as to how this trauma was constituted. He stressed that the immediately preceding event could not possibly account for the enormous distress that followed it and should be given the status of mere ‘*agent provocateur*’^v. It is precisely the observation that ‘less severe stressors’ can cause intense long-term psychological distress that urged Freud to infer the mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit*. The case of Emma illustrates that this concept entails the necessity of (a) two distinct etiological moments in time, (b) separated by a delay or time lag, (c) in which the first scene initially remains without consequence, (d) but is transformed by the subsequent one, and (e) becoming traumatic in a retroactive fashion. Schematically, this theory of psychic trauma can be depicted as follows in Figure 2.1:

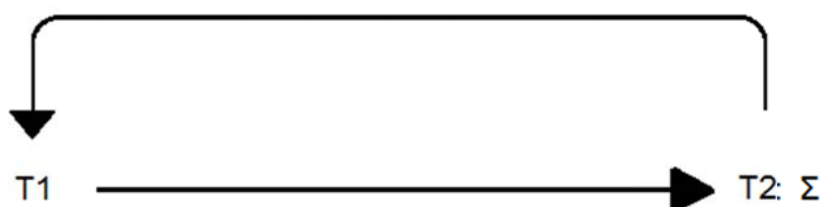


Figure 2.1: The Logic of *Nachträglichkeit*

T1 and T2 denote two distinct moments in time, separated by a chronological gap (symbolized by \rightarrow). T2 is the moment of the traumatic event as classically understood, that is, the scene that directly precedes the onset of traumatic symptoms (designated by Σ in Figure 1). This particular event can only be identified retroactively since there is no way of predicting which experience will be traumatogenic to whom. In the case of Emma, T2 refers to the ‘laughing of the shop-assistants’, an experience that is directly followed by the emergence of her ‘compulsion’. Freud’s capital discovery here is that the pathological power of the second scene at T2 is derived from an earlier experience at T1. However, this first event remained without consequence for many years, indicating that it did not become ‘traumatic’ until after its revival at T2. Freud emphasized that it was *the memory* that *became* traumatic, whereas the experience originally was not, and it did so precisely at the moment of T2. *Nachträglichkeit* thus refers to a mechanism that literally alters the subjective interpretation of the past, in such a way that this altered memory causes new and unexpected effects in the present. This is precisely the point that is missed when *Nachträglichkeit* is translated as ‘deferred action’, since the latter suggests a commonsense, chronological, and deterministic view of subjective time. Deferred action suggests that something is deposited in the individual at T1 that suddenly detonates, like a time bomb, at T2. This is how we ordinarily understand the notion of time, in terms of *duration* with only one dimension, that of succession or diachrony (Chatel, 1995). With its conception of logical time, *Nachträglichkeit* opposes this intuitive notion of linear time. Freud’s concept dictates that what is deposited at T1 only becomes ‘explosive’ through a retroactive investment at T2. We suggest that this mechanism can be logically related to both delayed traumatic pathology and traumatic reactions following non-Criterion A events.

***Nachträglichkeit*, Delayed-Onset PTSD, and Non-Criterion A Events**

Nachträglichkeit presupposes that the effects of a potentially traumatic experience can be delayed by several years and require a second constituent moment in order to arise. Ergo, the belated onset of traumatic pathology does not occur at a random moment in time but is logically determined. Recent studies point in the same direction as they emphasize the importance of life events in precipitating delayed-onset PTSD (Horesh, Solomon, & Zerach,

2011). In particular, life events that are reminiscent of an original stressful experience might ‘activate and unmask latent psychopathology’ (Horesh et al., 2011, p. 864):

Some trauma casualties experience a long latency period during which they preserve good functioning and present little or no PTSD symptoms. However, following this period they may encounter an event (e.g. accident, death of a loved one, terror attack) that is actually or symbolically reminiscent of their traumatic event, and therefore bring it to the forefront again. (Ibid., p. 864)

Likewise, Friedman et al. (2011) suggest that traumatic reactions occurring after non-Criterion A events might be due to a reviving or triggering of an earlier traumatic event. A common yet distressing life event, such as breaking up with one’s best friend (Solomon & Canino, 1990), might then result in full-blown PTSD only because of its associations with a former trauma that is revived and brought to the fore again. Although the principle of *Nachträglichkeit* indeed posits that trauma is constituted in two events, in our view it is not entirely correct to say that the non-Criterion A event at T2 triggers or revives an earlier (latent) trauma that has already been suffered. The event at T2 does not revive dormant old wounds. Rather, it is essential to *Nachträglichkeit* that *the wound is only afflicted at T2 and not at T1*. That is to say, the wounding has not already occurred and somehow been isolated from the rest of the psychic life, as the notion of ‘latent psychopathology’ would suggest. It is only at T2 that the original event is *rendered* traumatic, wounding the subject for the very first time. Thus, we agree that in some instances traumatic reactions following non-Criterion A events are due to an association with an older event. However, the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* suggests that in these cases the non-Criterion A event elicits the formation of a traumatic memory, rather than the reviving of an old wound that was already constituted.

Acknowledging that delayed onset is precipitated by a second event that is reminiscent of the prior one is important, but it leaves a most intriguing question unanswered: why is it that the reviving of the *memory* of the original scene causes traumatic pathology, whereas the *experience itself* did not? How can the surfacing memory produce such massive effects, while the experience itself could not? As Freud phrased it with respect to Emma: ‘Here we have the case of a memory arousing an affect which it did not arouse as an experience, *because in the meantime the change [brought about] by puberty had made possible a different understanding of what was remembered* [emphasis added].’ (Freud, 1895a, p. 356)

Thus, Freud provides us with two pointers to make sense of the retroactive reworking inherent to *Nachträglichkeit*: (a) that the first experience was somehow ‘missed’ by the subject^{vi} and (b) that it is experienced belatedly by a subject that has undergone significant alterations since the time of the initial scene. Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996) strongly argues the case that an event can only evoke traumatic after-effects due to this particular characteristic: that it ‘is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly’ (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). She contends that the traumatogenic potential cannot be situated in either the first or the second event, but is to be located precisely in the gap that separates them. More generally, trauma is understood as ‘the violent intrusion of something radically unexpected, something the subject was absolutely not ready for, something the subject cannot integrate in any way’ (Žižek, 2008, p. 10). Ergo, the impossibility to fully grasp or signify the distressing experience at the time of its occurrence is associated with trauma. What typifies delayed traumatic reactions – and this contradicts current views of traumatic etiology – is that this initial absence of signification does not directly lead to pathology. Rather, it is the belated *understanding* that initiates traumatic symptomatology. In the next section, we turn to Lacanian theory to shed more light on this peculiar mechanism.

At this point, it is important to remark that although one instance of the ‘missed encounter’ can indeed be the ‘precocious sexual experience’ (Freud, 1896b, p. 154) – that is, a sexual experience that occurs when the individual does not yet have the means to understand it – it is not the only one. For example, Freud himself for some time supported the idea that hysterical traumata could be caused by experiences that impinged on the person while in a ‘hypnoid state’. This state is characterized by the fact that the ideas which emerge in it are very intense but are cut off from associative communication with the rest of consciousness (Freud & Breuer, 1893, pp. 12–17). The idea of a ‘missed encounter’ is also corroborated by the finding that dissociation *during* the traumatic event (so-called peri-traumatic dissociation) is one of the most powerful predictors of clinical outcome (Brewin & Holmes, 2003). In sum, *Nachträglichkeit* presupposes that at the time of its occurrence, certain aspects of the initial event could not be grasped by the person and were missed, for various reasons (precociousness, being overwhelmed, dissociation, and so on). As a result, the person cannot define or position him- or herself with regard to these unclaimed aspects of the distressing experience.

A Lacanian Perspective on the Precocious Sexual Experience

Let us now proceed by sketching the structure of the process of *Nachträglichkeit* as deduced from the example of Emma. First, there is a distressing event at T1 that cannot be fully understood at the time of its occurrence because the subject lacks the necessary symbolic means for it. Despite the fact that the subject cannot make sense of what is happening and becomes overwhelmed, the event leaves behind some sort of a ‘mnemic trace’. From within a Lacanian framework, this first episode is engraved in memory by the promotion of a single signifier or representation that comes to signal and cover up the original lack of understanding (Verhaeghe, 2008). This single signifier, which is metonymically chosen by the subject, hems in or borders the hole of the nonsensical experience. In Emma’s case, this could be the linguistic element ‘clothing’ or the visual trace of the shopkeeper’s grin, something that simultaneously points to and obscures the original mystifying scene^{vii}. It is crucial to grasp that this single signifier or representation remains ‘mute’, as it does not become associated with other elements that would confer meaning upon it. Lacanian theory teaches that by itself, any element of the psychic system is senseless (Fink, 1995; Vanheule, 2011a). Only in the concatenation of a signifying chain can an element receive a temporarily fixed signification (Lacan, 1957–58, 1959). Thus, the first experience is retained in a very specific way: as a single signifier that borders the nonsensical event and that is unable to articulate itself with the rest of the psychic material. It is not accessible for conscious recollection, as it cannot be brought into articulation with the group of signifiers (or representations) that constitutes the Ego. Importantly, the effect of a signifier being unable to associate itself with other elements is not restricted to the impossibility of understanding the scene it designates. In Lacan’s logic of signification, the subject as such is an effect of the concatenation of signifiers (Lacan, 1957–58; 1960). Hence, as long as the scene at T1 cannot be signified through association with subsequent elements, it cannot be ‘lived’ or experienced, subjectively speaking; it remains asubjective.

Due to the failure to bestow meaning on the event, to understand it, to *realize* what has happened, the subject (as an effect of the concatenation of signifiers) is excluded from it. Ultimately, the event can be said *not to be subjectively experienced at the time of its occurrence*. It is a missed encounter, or an ‘unclaimed experience’, as Caruth (1996) calls it. Hence, the experience initially remains without long-term consequence. Nevertheless, the person who underwent the event is obviously troubled by it, which is evidenced by the acute

reaction of distress and fright and by the fact that the scene leaves a mnemonic trace. The initial experience opens up an enigma; it raises a question. This question is pending and awaits an answer – sometimes for years. All of this is reminiscent of Jean Laplanche's (1999) notion of the 'enigmatic signifier'.

As time passes, the affected person acquires the keys to unlock the mystery of the original scene. In the example of Emma, it is a coincidence, a contingent meeting, which results in the *realization* of the first scene – realization, in the sense that the new experience gives birth to an understanding of what the subject had missed in the first experience. But more essentially: through this understanding, it is as if the potentially traumatic aspects of the scene that were not experienced at T1 are now fully experienced at T2. The subject, through T2, receives access to the traumatic truth of the T1 event *for the very first time*. The T1 experience starts to be lived as a new subjective event. Therefore, at T2, both T1 and T2 *happen* simultaneously. Only through the association with a second event at T2 can the subject draw a conclusion as to the signification-value of the first scene, and only then can this scene produce a traumatic impact. Precisely at that moment, the moment of realization, the memory of T1 becomes traumatic. Up to that point, the memory of T1 was opaque and subjectively inaccessible. Therefore, T2 is the moment where the past, which had been anticipated, is finally signified – albeit in a very peculiar manner, as we will see.

Thus considered, it becomes clear that the person does not carry a dormant old wound after the experience at T1. He or she is only psychically wounded at the moment of realization, where the wound is materialized through signification. The traumatic past, although spoken of by analytic discourse in a suggestive manner as 'repressed', 'doesn't have any substantial existence outside of the immanence of the present in which it achieves actualization' (Johnston, 2005, p. 54). The first event does not lie dormant in the preconscious, waiting like a time bomb to pathologically detonate. What matters in delayed traumatic reactions is not the past 'as such', in its factual purity, but the way past events are included in the present, synchronous field of meaning: 'Something which was at first perceived as a meaningless, neutral event changes retroactively, *after the advent of a new symbolic network*.... into a trauma that cannot be integrated' (Žižek, 1991a, pp. 221-2, emphasis added). Consequently, it can be said that the former event does determine the present (and therefore can be called virtually or latently traumatic) but only insofar as

the very mode of this determining is *overdetermined* by the present synchronous symbolic network. If the trace of an old encounter all of a sudden begins to exert an impact, it is because the *present* symbolic universe of the subject is structured in a way that is susceptible to it. (Žižek, 1991a, p. 202)

In contrast with current theories, we therefore conclude that the initial absence of meaning, the event as not-fully-understood, is distressing but not traumatic in itself. It is only when it is comprehended at T2 that it becomes so. This distinction is of capital importance. The experiences at T1 set the stage for a subjective event that has not yet come to pass. Only at T2 does this subjective event commence – and trauma may then indeed be conceptualized as a failure to ‘close’ or to finish this event. Hence, the traumatic event is both belated and unfinished. In the moment of realization a traumatic truth is revealed which threatens to shatter the subjective feeling of consistency.

The default manner in which trauma is comprehended in contemporary psychological theories stresses the incompatibility between the ‘new trauma-information’ (which, in the above framework, is constituted at T2) and the views of the self and the world that preceded this realization (see, for example, Brewin & Holmes (2003), Ehlers & Clark (2000) or Janoff-Bulman (1992)). In other words: the traumatic rupture is understood as a conflict between two irreconcilable discursive formations. And indeed, the described linkage between a moment of ‘realization’ on the one hand, and the emergence of traumatic pathology on the other, seems to point in the direction of a trauma determined by a massive and unbearable *surplus of meaning*, rather than the more familiar view of trauma as the site of an impossibility of meaning. Charles Shepherdson (2008) offers an interesting reading of this mechanism in his book *Lacan and the Limits of Language*. In the light of his line of reasoning, the traumatic moment at T2 is a moment in which ‘two chains of signifiers, previously kept apart, are suddenly made to intersect’ (p. 35). Yet what is produced in this moment of realization? Whereas ordinarily, the linking-up of two (chains of) signifiers produces an effect of meaning, Shepherdson argues that the traumatic realization produces a *hole* in the place of meaning:

Instead of a metaphor, a spark of meaning, something impossible suddenly emerges from this intersection of signifiers, a hole or cut in the universe of meaning, a cut that is linked to an obscure knowledge [...], a forbidden knowledge that remains excluded the moment it appears.

This is the manner in which we are to understand Lacan's notion of the traumatic real: not as a 'presymbolic' (unmentalized) field of raw experience before it is psychically processed, but as something that immanently arises out of the symbolic itself as a strange sort of surplus (see Chapter 5). The defining characteristic of this real as an internally produced excess is that it cannot be recuperated or accommodated in the pre-existent symbolic-imaginary framework from which it arose. This is precisely what makes it traumatic: the encounter with the real requires a restructuring of the subject. Although the real is not without a link to this meaning-generating system, insofar as it can even be considered its *effect*, it is simultaneously something that escapes or transcends this field of meaning – in a movement that we could call 'transcendence-in-immanence'^{viii}. In other words: from the current symbolic network, an unbearable surplus is generated that cannot be accommodated in that same symbolic structure.

The entire issue of recovery from trauma then boils down to how to deal with this estranging surplus – a matter that will be taken up in part III of this dissertation.

Suffice to say that what opens up in the moment of traumatic realization at T2 is an 'unbearable truth', something that cannot be supported. This unbearable real launches the subject in a prolonged 'time of comprehension' (Lacan, 1945), awaiting a conclusion. The real that is opened up in the traumatic truth demands a subjective response, which, as Žižek points out, ultimately boils down to the birth of a new subject (Žižek, 2008).

Limiting example

In one of their papers Bessel van der Kolk and Alexander McFarlane (2007, pp. 6–7) briefly discuss the case of a woman who had been raped (a Criterion A event at T1) but who did not develop long-term psychological distress in the immediate aftermath of the ordeal. Yet, many months later, she received news that the same violator had made another casualty; only this time, he had not only raped but subsequently also murdered his victim. It was not until after this second constituent moment (T2) that the woman developed the full clinical syndrome of PTSD, several months after the actual assault. Whereas the horrible experience at T1 was initially not traumatic when judged by its clinical consequences, the *memory* of the experience became traumatic but only at T2 as it was re-signified. The subjective past was literally altered, which produced new and unexpected effects in the present. The woman's traumatic

reaction was thus not the direct result of her experience at T1, but rather of the subjective rewriting of this experience at T2. Importantly, this case suggests that it is not always the physical impact or the particularities of the situation that somehow ‘cause’ the traumatic consequences in an unmediated fashion. Rather, it is the manner in which this situation affects the person that is of prime importance. And this subjective impact can be modified as the memory of the event itself is subject to influences from the present.

When we compare this example of delayed-onset PTSD with the mechanism we sketched in relation to Emma’s case, some discrepancies catch the eye. Emma’s original scene happened under very specific circumstances: it was what Freud called a ‘precocious sexual experience’, which means that at that particular age she did not have the symbolic tools at her disposal to comprehend what was happening. During the second encounter, with the shop assistants, she did possess these tools, which made a belated understanding possible. According to Freud, the delayed traumatic effect is contingent on the crossing over of a mythical point in the structuring of the subject: pre- and post-puberty (Freud, 1896b, p. 152). This clearly cannot be extrapolated to van der Kolk and McFarlane’s example. Here, the T1 incident occurs when the person is mature, and still a ‘missed encounter’ or a belated understanding is possible – as her delayed traumatic reaction shows. It seems plausible that, in contrast with Emma’s case, the woman initially succeeded in signifying and coping with the incident at T1. However, the additional information at T2 called into question her initial appraisal of the situation and revealed that she too had ‘missed’ certain horrific aspects of the situation as it occurred. The realization of this unclaimed side of her experience altered its entire significance, rendering it traumatic in the sense described above (the absolute incommensurability between an excessive, real element and the pre-existent symbolic-imaginary framework). Thus, the main differences between Emma and van der Kolk and McFarlane’s example are that in the latter case (a) the T1 event happened after the so-called definite Oedipal structuring of the subject and (b) a subjective memory had already been formed, whereas with Emma the experience had only been rudimentarily held onto by a single, un-subjectifiable signifier. That a memory had already been formed does not prevent the victim from developing delayed-onset PTSD through a re-signification of the event. Signifiers can always be added to the signifying chain, and the latest elements will retroactively determine the impact of the formerly produced signifiers (Vanheule, 2011a).

Discussion

Our analysis of the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* led to the conclusion that in some instances delayed-onset PTSD and traumatic reactions following non-Criterion A events are logically related to each other. The case of Emma illustrates that the pathological weight of an apparently trivial situation can derive from an association with an earlier distressing experience that remained without consequence for many years. In such instances, the non-Criterion A event causes traumatic pathology by instigating the formation of a traumatic memory of a formerly distressing event. When the diagnostician only focuses on the incident that immediately precedes the emergence of the symptoms, this can result in the ‘agent provocateur’ erroneously being taken for the sole etiological event. And if this immediately preceding event has no ‘traumatic face validity’ (i.e., satisfying Criterion A), then the distress might go unrecognized as being an instance of traumatic pathology.

Secondly, a focus on the surface manifestation of the symptoms can exacerbate underdetection of psychological trauma even further. For example, Emma’s ‘compulsion’ would hardly appear as an instance of traumatic pathology to a contemporary eye. Perhaps she would be diagnosed with ‘Specific Social Phobia (Anxiety Disorder)’. This illustrates that the clinical picture that develops after a traumatic experience can be very diverse. Van der Kolk and McFarlane (2007) make a similar point as they consider the rather marked differences in symptomatic expressions among Vietnam combat soldiers belonging to different ethnic groups. More generally, the impact of cultural differences on trauma and recovery has been firmly established by a vast body of research (for an overview, see Stamm & Friedman, 2000). Taking these two remarks together, it appears safe to assume that many cases of delayed traumatic reactions go undetected and are rather classified as Adjustment Disorder, depression, other anxiety disorders, or conduct and developmental disorders in children and adolescents. Therefore, the clinician is required to invest in highly individual case formulation in order to recognize and make sense of the traumatic impact of various experiences – beyond a restricted focus on the immediately preceding event and the surface manifestation of the symptoms.

As discussed, charting the objective particularities of the event and/or the person cannot predict clinical outcome. Subjective dimensions surface as paramount in understanding who becomes symptomatic and who does not. *Nachträglichkeit* offers one way to imagine how the

impact of a situation on a person cannot be predicted by a priori parameters and is highly particular to their unique combination. Moreover, it clarifies that the subjective impact of an event is not given once and for all, but is always open to subsequent alterations through the ascription of a new signification-value.

Next, Freud inferred *Nachträglichkeit* in the very specific context of the precocious sexual experience. By emphasizing the reality of the traumatic scene in early infancy, before the structuring of the subject in the Oedipal phase, he sought to ground the difference between normality and psychopathology in whether or not such an infantile trauma had occurred. This is known as Freud's 'seduction theory' of psychoneuroses. In it, the primordial trauma functions as the point of origin for all subsequent pathology – phobia, obsessive neurosis, hysteria, etc. (Freud, 1896b, pp. 151–6). At that time, Freud suggested that the potentially traumatogenic nature of such an experience was primarily due to its precociousness, suggesting that sexuality is only traumatic when it is encountered too soon. In other words, the missed encounter that caused subsequent pathology was the effect of an unpreparedness of the subject due to its prematurity at the time of the occurrence. As psychoanalytical theory developed, the structural nature of psychological trauma became emphasized, blurring the boundaries between normality and pathology. Lacan theorized that the sexual is *always* potentially traumatic – not only for the infant who lacks the necessary symbolic means to deal with it (Lacan, 1972–73). Rather, it is the symbolic system in its entirety that structurally lacks the elements to adequately deal with certain aspects of our existential predicament, more specifically: sexual identity, the sexual relation, and death (Lacan, 1959, pp. 459–61). As such, the possibility of an 'unclaimed experience' or missed encounter is not limited to a specific time frame in the life of a person: the symbolic means to protect the speaking being against all intrusions of the real simply do not exist and thus cannot be acquired through development. It follows that the mechanism described in Emma's case functions beyond the Oedipal point of discontinuity.

Surprisingly, then, Lacan's identification of the points at which the symbolic is structurally lacking dovetails with the restrictions on the traumatic stressor specified in the Criterion A definition: both suggest that psychological trauma is always tied to the registers of sexuality and/or death. Consequently, it can be surmised that non-Criterion A events that result in traumatic pathology are (unconsciously) associated with these fields of existence, even when these connections are remote and not easily traceable. As is well-known, the question remains

whether the aforementioned association should be limited to ‘real’ events in the past that have left a mnemic trace (as was the case with Emma), or whether another type of mechanism is possible. More specifically: can a non-Criterion A event (such as losing your job or getting divorced) be traumatic simply because of its place in the logic of the affected person’s drive economy or fantasy life, without referring to a ‘real’ incident? This is precisely what Freud suggested after the abandonment of his seduction theory, and it constitutes the exact mirror-image of the contemporary view of trauma. Put aphoristically: trauma without an event on the one hand, trauma without a subject on the other. In any case, the possibility that a non-Criterion A event is traumatic without reference to a ‘real’ prior event cannot be excluded. The traumatic capacity of such a life event must then derive from the fact that it suddenly and unexpectedly traverses the strict determination inherent to the unconscious. Lacan argued that while the contingent experiences of the real seem perfectly arbitrary at the phenomenal level of the conscious ego, the timeless unconscious cannot but assign significance to them. As soon as chance encounters are taken up in the psychic system and brought into connection with other unconscious materials, an order is bestowed on them – in that the logic of the unconscious prescribes what elements can follow in light of what went before^{ix}. In a similar vein, the prescriptive determination of the unconscious can be envisaged through the conceptualization of the fundamental fantasy, which is understood as a window through which we perceive reality. This framework is a highly particular construction that protects the subject from a confrontation with the traumatic real (Fink, 1995; Jonckheere, 2003). As such, the specificities of the phantasm strictly determine the possibilities of what can and cannot arise in the subjectively constituted field of reality. The fundamental fantasy stipulates what *cannot* be grasped and made sense of. Trauma, in this case, can be understood as the emergence of an element that shatters the framework that allows us to make sense of the world and to position ourselves and the other within it. It is the confrontation with the ‘impossible’ that disrupts the logic of the unconscious and that resists any form of reintegration into this system. The traumatic can thus be seen as an ethical injunction to subjectivize the chance phenomena that have proven to be incommensurable with the former structuring of the subject (that is, the automatic logic of the primary processes at work in the unconscious): it is that which requires the precipitation of a new subject(ive structuring). Given the specificity of each person’s psychic build-up (fundamental fantasy and signifying chain), it can be surmised that similar events affect different persons in varying and unpredictable ways.

On the other hand, the finding that some experiences are more frequently related to the development of PTSD than others (i.e., severity) is not incompatible with analytical theory. However, the latter provides an explanation for this finding by linking it with the propensities of the symbolic system. This move emphasizes that what is pathological in these types of events can be defined only in relation to the psychic system that encounters them. In a time when the causal emphasis of traumatic pathology rests heavily on the nature of the event, *Nachträglichkeit* underlines that a traumatic encounter is always constituted by two parties: the event but also the subject. No event is traumatic in and of itself; it is only traumatic in relation to a subject. This might seem trivial, but it is of prime importance. It implies that traumatic pathology cannot be accounted for by an a priori knowledge of the objective characteristics of any situation. Comprehending traumatic reactions necessitates the study of the place of the traumatic event in the course of a person's life, the manner in which it affects the whole of that person's knowledge about the self and the world. Since this is of a highly individual nature, it cannot be generalized in order to predict how a certain situation will impact on the next person. However, the mistaken idea that we can predict and limit what types of events are traumatic by charting their particularities – as evidenced by the existence of a Criterion A definition – has now become a self-evident truth (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009), with far-reaching implications. For instance, it justifies the massive efforts in humanitarian missions of psychologists and other mental health workers in the aftermath of natural disasters (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995; Bracken & Petty, 1998; Summerfield, 1999, 2001; Watters, 2010).

Trauma confronts us with the unimaginable and the uncontrollable. Trying to predict traumatic pathology tends to go in the same direction: it opens up a register that is not accessible and even resists the logic of calculation. The real is never where it is expected, and the place where it does arise is of a highly subjective and singular determination.

Part II

The Biomedical Approach to Trauma and the Ethics of Human Rights

3

Beyond the Biomedical Trauma Approach

Abstract: The hegemonic biomedical approach to trauma, encapsulated in the psychiatric category of PTSD, is argued to individualize, decontextualize and depoliticize the effects of distressing experiences. The view of PTSD as a scientifically backed construct supports its claims to universality and neutrality and thereby allows it to function as a disempowering political instrument in servitude of the status quo. However, the empirical base to infer PTSD as a distinct psychiatric category is lacking, and the cultural-historical determination of the construct contradicts its supposed universality and neutrality. Humanitarian help based on this model neglects a focus on ‘material recovery’, in the sense of the the transformation of the wounding social, political or economic system that gave rise to the suffering.

The feminist trauma theorist Judith Herman was amongst the first to insist, in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1997), on the necessity of a political movement alongside the practices of studying and treating psychological trauma. She argues that ‘advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and

denial' (p. 9). In this sense, *Trauma and Recovery* is itself a political book: it starts from the controversial thesis that mechanisms on the social and individual level work together to deny or repress the truth of trauma, which is rendered literally unspeakable. The intriguing thesis put forward in *Trauma and Recovery* is that the process of healing from trauma is essentially embedded in a wider sociopolitical framework that must always be taken into account.

However, psychological trauma research in general has not picked up the claim that recovery from trauma necessarily entails a political dimension. The eclipse of the politics of trauma recovery is reflected in the ubiquitous use of various treatment programs that focus on the intrapsychic processing of the traumatic experience without taking the sociopolitical context into consideration. Indeed, it has been argued in recent years that the dominant Western framework for thinking trauma recovery, epitomized in the psychiatric construct of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), risks robbing the traumatized of their political agency rather than securing a place for it (Craps, 2013). This claim is related to a more general critique targeting the tendency in the disciplines of clinical psychology and psychiatry to render invisible the 'true' external/social causes of human suffering. Western notions of psychopathology, heavily influenced by and embedded in a long-standing biomedical tradition, identify the individual as the locus for therapeutic intervention, rather than the social conditions associated with various forms of distress (McKinney, 2007; Pupavac, 2004; Summerfield, 1997). Additionally, the basic psychotherapeutic stance, in the wake of Sigmund Freud's discovery of the talking cure, is to be wary of patients' attempts to externalize the causes of their suffering, as this enables them to avoid confronting the manner in which they are subjectively implicated in the problems they experience. As such, the individualizing, internalizing and decontextualizing trend captured in the notions of 'medicalization' and 'psychologization' forms an antonymic pair with the called-for (re)politicization of various forms of human misery. When applied to PTSD, this tension-generating dichotomy becomes ever more pressing, since this particular type of psychopathology is regarded as primarily externally determined on the one hand (Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008), while simultaneously treated as an intrapsychic disorder on the other (Young, 1995). Although it is acknowledged that in some cases the sociopolitical environment causes the subjective distress, 'contextual considerations seldom fit into formal trauma-and-recovery paradigms' (Montiel, 2000, p. 96). In what follows, I intend to show that these difficulties (the focus on the individual, the neglect of cultural and contextual factors,

and a general disinterest in engaging with the social conditions that caused distress) derive from the biomedical approach that dominates the way we think about trauma.

The political dimension of trauma recovery is most salient in contexts of collective disruptive events that cause pain, loss and suffering, such as natural disasters, armed conflicts, state-organized terror, civil war, and so on. Note that the attention given to trauma in these contexts is a rather recent phenomenon within the humanitarian sector. There was no mention of it in manuals of refugee health as recently as the early 1980s; the psychotherapeutic turn in humanitarian aid is often situated only in the early 1990s. For instance, Doctors without Borders first deployed psychiatrists and psychologists in December 1988, in the aftermath of the earthquake in Armenia (De Vos, 2012, p. 102). After this first intervention, mental health became one of the organization's primary goals. However, throughout part II of this dissertation, it will become clear that even in contexts of individual trauma, the use of medical technologies to address this type of suffering imposes a framework that obscures the political and ethical sides of trauma, which, in line with Herman's (1997) main assertion, are nevertheless always present.

How, then, was trauma 'discovered' as an international humanitarian issue? This is not a gratuitous question, as it entails a declarative act that not only recognizes but *establishes* the fact that war-affected populations are at risk of being traumatized *en masse*. Evident as it may seem, how do we know that war and natural catastrophes cause traumatic pathology that needs to be addressed with Western psychological technologies? The importation of trauma programs in the 1990s did *not* follow the affected populations' expressed demand for this kind of help. Vanessa Pupavac (2004) argues that the imperative for international psychosocial programs lay in sociocultural 'developments within donor countries and debates in their humanitarian sectors over the efficacy of traditional aid responses' (p. 491). She points out that it was the benefactor who identified the need for trauma projects in these settings, based on our supposedly universally applicable, scientific understanding of trauma itself, which obviously raises moral questions about who has the power to define the problem: whose norms, knowledge and priorities guide the offers of assistance? As Jan De Vos (2012, p. 104) remarks, it did not take long for critics to suggest that trauma psychiatry was a covert form of *neocolonialism*, due to its tacit imposition of Western cultural norms. Those who defended the idea of trauma responded to this accusation by claiming that they were simply busying themselves with universal realities (De Vos, 2012, p. 104). Sound scientific and evidence-

based research concerning PTSD was claimed to transcend cultural and anthropological differences (for example, de Vries, 1998). The scientific status of PTSD thus serves to safeguard the purported neutrality of the interventions predicated on this model; the question regarding PTSD's empirical status, along with its claims to universality, therefore has a political side to it. The biomedical approach to illness and distress cannot be uncoupled from the debates concerning the political dimension of trauma interventions.

The third edition of the DSM, which appeared in 1980, was developed in line with the central tenets of the biomedical framework. Significantly, this was the edition in which PTSD was first included as a distinct psychiatric diagnosis. The so-called 'biomedical turn' in psychiatric diagnostics was part of a strategy to enhance the scientific image of psychiatry, which had been heavily discredited in the 1960s and 1970s by a series of 'anti-psychiatric' experiments (Kirk & Kutchins, 1992; Vanheule, 2014). In the next section, I will discuss some of the core beliefs on which this model is predicated.

The Biomedical Model

In *The Rise of Causal Concepts of Disease* (2003), K. Codell Carter describes how in the nineteenth century the idea took root that diseases are best understood by means of causes that are '*natural* (they depend on forces of nature as opposed to the willful transgression of moral or social norms), *universal* (the same cause is common to every instance of a given disease), and *necessary* (the disease does not occur in absence of its cause)' (p. 1). In the early nineteenth century, individual diseases were defined by a pattern of prominent signs and symptoms, and every disease was believed to have a range of remote and proximate causes: each instance of a disease was claimed to be caused by a series of conditions particular to the case in question. The question was 'why does *this person* get the mumps?', as opposed to 'what causes the mumps?' The idea that there would be one universal, necessary and sufficient cause that explains every episode of a single disease was simply unthinkable. The only way this could be conceived was *by defining diseases in terms of their causes* rather than in terms of symptoms. This powerful evolution in medical thinking, which put etiology centre stage, constitutes an attempt to transform medicine in order to fit scientific requirements. In medicine, this goal could be accomplished because the etiological agents (bacteria, viruses, genetic mutations) could themselves be identified and objectively distinguished from each

other. The greatest advantage of such an approach is that it makes possible consistent and uniform strategies of intervention that target these specific causes (in both prevention and treatment).

Within the field of psychopathology, the attempt to define disorders as nosological entities will always be associated with the name of Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926). In analogy with the medical model, this German psychiatrist thought of mental disorders as natural disease entities with an independent existence. Mary Boyle (2002) rightly identifies the Platonic roots of such a stance: reality is considered to be universal and unchanging, while perceptions are always relative and imperfect. This position leads to ‘ontological theories of disease’ that pose ‘the existence of natural and unvarying disease entities, separable from the person, and whose presentation [is] uniform across sufferers’ (Boyle, 2002, p. 9). Each disease entity is thought of as a discrete and separate unit, defined by its own distinctive cause, symptoms, course and outcome. Kraepelin sought to find the essence of every mental disorder, a defining trait that is both necessary and sufficient to make the diagnosis, an intrinsic or underlying quality that causes an entirety of other, more superficial characteristics (Ellis, 2001).

However, whereas Kraepelin initially believed that every distinct mental disorder would eventually be explained by a specific genetic mutation or a specific neurobiological marker, in line with the etiological standpoint described by Carter (2003), over a hundred years of research has failed to identify such an unequivocal sign for a single psychiatric diagnostic category (Dehue, 2008; Kupfer, First, & Regier, 2002; Vanheule, 2014). Etiology in the field of mental problems has been found to be complex and multidimensional: research indicates a variety of risk factors on different levels, such as genetic, molecular, neuronal, psychological, social and cultural factors (Lemaire, 2014). The absence of two-way pathognomic signs or symptoms, that is, of indicators that are both necessary and sufficient to diagnose a specific disorder, poses great difficulties for psychiatry’s scientific status.

In absence of such findings regarding etiology or pathophysiology, mental disorders have been defined by a number of nonspecific signs and symptoms that appear to correlate on more than chance level. The (forced) choice to remain agnostic with regard to etiology, in favor of a description of the readily observable surface phenomena, was the major intervention that marked the much-discussed break of DSM-III with its predecessors^x. The explicit goal of this move was to augment the reliability of psychiatric diagnostics (Kirk & Kutchins, 1992). The downside of this approach was that mental disorders became defined on the basis of shaky

symptom constellations, which, by themselves, offer little information as to the validity of the proposed categories (Boyle, 2002). Despite these limitations, there is a tendency to reify the mental disorders in the DSM: the labels are often used as if they refer to underlying natural disease entities that *cause* the clinical tableau in a straightforward fashion, whereas in fact they simply represent the name given to a particular cluster of symptoms (Hyman, 2010).

Mental Disorders as Natural Kinds

Ontological psychiatric theories assume that the forms of mental disorder found in the West are basically the same as those found elsewhere: their nature is not significantly modified by social and cultural influences stemming from either the patient's or the researcher's context. Theory is believed to be external to the facts under observation, in the sense that the basic data of psychiatric research (that is, symptoms and syndromes) 'exist prior to and independent of psychiatric theory' (Bracken, Giller & Summerfield, 1995, p. 1075). Western psychiatric diagnoses are frequently taken to be 'natural kinds' that exist independently of any cultural determination. This is nicely illustrated by the inclusion of a 'Glossary of culture-bound syndromes' in appendix I of the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000, pp. 897-905^{xi}). The explicit reference to a limited set of culturally determined afflictions retroactively confers the status of 'cultural independency' on everything that went before. Psychiatry and clinical psychology assume that the deductive-nomological scientific method makes possible the delineation of the universal aspects of mental illnesses, in independence from subjective values, ethnic or social bias and so on (Bracken, 2002). Knowledge about these data, generated through the implementation of established scientific methodologies, is regarded as neutral, value-free, and universal.

Do the mental disorders described in the DSM capture a reality that exists independently of the classification system itself? Is the order imposed by the DSM upon the multiform variety of clinical symptoms something artificial and culturally dependent, or does it reflect an order which was always-already there, inscribed in nature? The preoccupation with establishing a classification that describes natural kinds in part derives from practical considerations: if the ideal of 'carving nature at its joints' were achieved, clinical intervention would become a lot easier. In analogy with physical medicine, psychological problems could then be approached as individual cases of a limited range of already established psychiatric disorders, which

would allow predictions as to the (generic) cause of the disorder and the most efficient course of treatment. In other words: the idea of natural kinds allows for a generalization of the produced knowledge concerning etiology and treatment.

When applied specifically to trauma, the described assumptions suggest that PTSD has a universal and timeless character, which translates into claims such as: it has been around from the earliest times; people in the stone age suffered from PTSD just as people from the 21st century do; people across the globe react with more or less the same symptoms when faced with adversity, generated through a quasi-identical pathophysiological mechanism; and so on. The assertion that PTSD reflects a universal human response to distress suggests that it is possible to predict the impact of war, violence and disaster on Western and non-Western people alike. Moreover, it supports the idea that there exist universally applicable medical technologies to address this form of suffering. It is important to emphasize that the cornerstone of these presuppositions is the scientific method through which psychiatric knowledge is gathered: this method is believed to guarantee the latter's accuracy and validity. Before we delve into a discussion of whether or not PTSD meets the scientific standards that warrant its inference as a medical syndrome, I will briefly discuss two more assumptions of the psychiatric trauma approach that lead to a few undesirable consequences: its assumption of a universal subject and its cognitive framework.

The Universal Subject and its Vulnerability

At its core, psychiatry is very much determined by Cartesian dualism, the idea that the inner and outer world are ontologically separated from each other (Bracken, 2002). The *res cogitans*, the substance of our minds with the capacity for thought, is believed to exist in isolation from the external world, although it is not without a relationship to this world. Trauma psychiatry presupposes the existence of some kind of inborn *universal human subject* that is affected by distressing experiences in more or less the same way across different times and places. This human subject is not considered an effect of the social, political or cultural context in which it is embedded: it is fundamentally a priori, isolated and autonomous. As such, the similarity between people from different cultures is emphasized, whilst difference and diversity are downplayed. Furthermore, it is immediately clear that the main trait of this universal human subject is its vulnerability: the individual inhabitants of

violent crises are seen as fundamentally at risk of traumatization, and part of the impetus for psychosocial humanitarian work is the desire to prevent or attenuate the impact of horrific events on the fragile human mind. This will prove important for the discussion of the ethical stance associated with PTSD in the next chapter.

Cognitive Theory

Contemporary understandings of psychopathology are highly influenced by *cognitive psychology*, which views mental problems as the result of dysfunctional beliefs or faulty information processing (Bracken, 2002; Brewin & Holmes, 2003). Cognitive theory approaches the human mind as an information processing system. It uses the computer as the privileged metaphor to illuminate our mental processes. Within this theoretical framework, mental ‘schemata’, ‘cognitive scripts’ or ‘unconscious schemas’ (that is, the software running on the computers) are believed to organize our sensory experience in a ‘theory-driven’ way, a process that generates a meaningful and orderly world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In other words, according to this view, meaning is produced within *individual* minds, it is dependent on the person-specific schemas and their interaction with the outer world. In these schemata, our deepest convictions and most fundamental assumptions about the world are condensed (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Through these structures, raw experience is ordered into coherent meaning. Mental schemata help the person to understand the world and to orientate him or herself in it.

It is through this cognitive lens that traumatic experience is generally understood within contemporary (psychological) theories: trauma occurs when something happens that contradicts our most fundamental assumptions about the world (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). For instance, that the world is just and good; that the world is meaningful; that we have a degree of control over what happens to us in an ‘action-outcome contingency’; that good things happen to good people; and so on (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). The central idea is that a traumatic event offers ‘information’ that cannot be reconciled with the pre-existent schemata: the conflict between the inner beliefs and the reality of the trauma generates tension and distress. In other words, the traumatic event cannot be assimilated into the existent schemata; its processing is blocked. The iconic symptoms of re-experiencing the event (in nightmares and flashbacks) are comprehended as a series of belated attempts to finish the obstructed

processing of the event. This ‘completion tendency’, which is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud’s (1920) concept of repetition compulsion, will continue with its work until ‘the situation or the models change and the reality and the schema of that reality reach accord’ (Bracken, 2002, p. 55).

In line with these theoretical premises, cognitive therapy for trauma attempts to facilitate the obstructed processing of the traumatic event (Foa & Rothbaum, 1998). Where trauma is defined by the fact that the meaning of the etiological event cannot be grasped, because it cannot be assimilated within the existent intra-individual schemata, what ideally must be achieved is the re-evaluation and modification of these schemata so that they can accommodate the new trauma information (Christopher, 2004; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004). Meaning must be allowed to emerge where it has failed to do so, and this process is conceived to take place *intra-individually*: the affected person’s private mental schemata must be changed to enable recovery. To achieve this, cognitive therapy usually involves some sort of psycho-education and training: the therapist helps the patient to understand the way his/her own psyche functions, and how it sometimes works against him or her. The patient is given homework and exercises to be carried out between sessions, with the goal of stimulating an objective and systematic examination of his or her own thoughts. During this process, cognitive distortions are laid bare and new, more functional ways of viewing the world are learned. One major consequence of the adoption of a cognitive framework in the context of trauma treatment is therefore the focus on the individual as the primary locus of intervention: it is in the individual’s mind/brain that violence is problematically inscribed, and it is there that it must be treated. This framework can therefore be said to *individualize* and *psychologize* the effects of horrid experiences on people (for example, Bracken, 2002; Summerfield, 1999).

In the following sections, I will turn towards a series of problems related to the core assumptions on which the PTSD construct is predicated. First, the universality and neutrality of the diagnosis have been called into question. Second, the individualistic focus has been argued to be counterproductive to deal with (collective) trauma and issues of meaning: context appears to have a central place in both etiology and recovery from trauma. Third, the use of a technical framework to counter the effects of distressing experiences has been identified as problematic.

Problems with Universality

The claim that PTSD captures a universal reality is linked with the idea that it is a scientifically established clinical syndrome. Remember that it is this claim that justifies the export of this trauma model into non-Western cultures. The arguments against this are multiple. First, when measured against the requirements of the scientific paradigm from which it stems, PTSD lacks empirical support. Rather surprisingly, the predictions made on the basis of this model were not borne out by scientific research. The empirical base to infer the construct of PTSD, in other words, is simply not there. Second, historical analyses show the variety in symptom expression after exposure to intense and violent events, and also indicate that political, economical and social factors consistently play a part in the manners in which we understand traumatic pathology and organize its treatment (see Chapter 1). In other words: trauma theory has always been heavily influenced by the moral and cultural climate of the society in which it was developed, and this equally applies to PTSD. Taken together, this suggests that PTSD is a cultural construction rather than a ‘natural kind’.

The Validity of PTSD

The biomedical paradigm suggests that the knowledge produced and validated through the scientific apparatus is objective and neutral. Hence, it is warranted to ask whether or not the claim that PTSD captures a ‘universal reality’ is backed up by empirical findings? In an impressive and comprehensive review study, Gerald Rosen and Scott Lilienfeld (2008, p. 838) ‘ask the critical question of whether PTSD, as a hypothetical construct, is the best means of “carving nature at its joints”’. Note that in phrasing matters in these terms, they accept the general tenets of the scientific tradition in which the construct is embedded: their aim is to provide an *internal* critique of PTSD’s validity. They answer their opening question by means of a thorough examination of the nomological network surrounding PTSD, that is, the entire range of external validating criteria that have been proposed in the scientific literature to distinguish PTSD as a separate diagnostic entity. This includes

- (a) the specificity of precipitating events, (b) relations between precipitating events and clinical symptoms, (c) discriminant validity (absence of excessive comorbidity)

from other conditions, (d) psychophysiological reactivity, (e) neuroendocrine and brain imaging findings, and (f) distinctive features of traumatic memory. (p.838)

These six characteristics constitute the necessary and sufficient conditions to infer a PTSD diagnosis: each one of them could advance the claim that PTSD is distinct from other conditions such as other anxiety disorders. Whereas PTSD is essentially defined as a specific set of symptoms that emerge after the confrontation with a specific type of precipitating event, the nodes (d) to (f) show attempts to tie the PTSD construct to other, more reliable and independent observations (signs as opposed to symptoms). A comprehensive review of research on each of the nodes in the theoretical network of PTSD thus accumulates in a systematic review of the construct validity of the diagnosis itself. Note that to assess the validity of PTSD is not to question the reality of the pain and suffering of those who are diagnosed with it, or who could be. The idea is rather to show that the claims that underpin PTSD's many usages (its scientific status, its objectivity and neutrality) are not defensible from a scientific point of view. Furthermore, the difficulties encountered in the process of validating this construct are very instructive; they show us where our intuitive understanding of trauma is disconfirmed. As such, the fact that empirical evidence diverges from what we expect challenges us to question anew our theories of trauma.

To be brief: according to Rosen and Lilienfeld (2008), contemporary research indicates that most every core assumption underlying the diagnostic construct of PTSD has met with questionable support, if not falsification. It seems that one major merit of the construct is that it has stimulated intensive research efforts – which, ironically, call into question every assumption on which the concept was based:

PTSD was originally believed to follow only specific types of traumatic events, but this assumption has been disconfirmed. Traumatic events were generally believed to be the largest contributor to clinical outcome, but this is not the case. Evidence for a dose-response relation between stressors and symptoms has been inconsistent and equivocal. PTSD is defined by symptom criteria that overlap substantially with extant conditions, such as depression and better established anxiety disorders (for example, specific phobia). Concerted efforts to identify distinct pathogenic processes that underlie PTSD, including research on neuroanatomy, psychophysiological markers and memory processes have met with mixed results, if not outright failure. In short, research has called into question most if not all of the construct-to-manifest indicator

nodes within the nomological network surrounding PTSD. (Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008, p. 853)

From a scientific standpoint, PTSD has little appeal to the status of hypothetical construct, syndrome or disease entity. PTSD does not simply reflect scientifically gathered, objective knowledge. This conclusion by no means denies the fact that horrible experiences cause pain and suffering and may produce long-term psychological problems; it only shows that (1) the creation and success of PTSD is not merely the result of scientific evolutions in our understanding of trauma, and (2) that this framework, despite its merits, cannot explain a number of empirical findings. An empirical investigation of the construct validity of PTSD thus undermines the claims of universality and neutrality that underpin its many usages.

The History of Trauma Studies

Historical accounts of the pathological effects of people's exposure to the horrors of war seldom make reference of the re-experiencing symptoms that are nowadays viewed as most uniquely related to traumatic pathology (Bracken, 2002). In contradiction with the idea that the clinical picture associated with horrible events is universal and thus timeless, historical accounts of the aftereffects of war and violence show a series of psychological and physical reactions that digress substantially from those enlisted in PTSD. Take, for instance, the medical literature on *Soldier's Heart* (also known as *Da Costa's syndrome*) produced during the American Civil War: the symptoms of this syndrome, which are now regarded as physical manifestations of an anxiety disorder, included shortness of breath, palpitations, sweating and, most characteristically, chest pains (Mackenzie, 1916). In addition, recall that trauma was considered to be at the root of an entire range of symptoms under the flag of *conversion hysteria*, which included paralyses, contractures, muscle weakness, blindness, mutism, seizures, spasms and so on (Luckhurst, 2008). These symptoms, which arose in the aftermath of large-scale railway accidents, for instance, or in the context of *Shell Shock* during the First World War, are far removed from what we consider to be the 'typical' traumatic symptoms nowadays (see Chapter 1). It appears that somatic symptoms are described much more frequently in both medical and non-medical historical literature about these issues. At a minimum, this points to a variation across history with regard to how people are affected and respond to these kinds of events. Furthermore, the non-existence of a universal response at the

level of symptom manifestation has been confirmed by more recent empirical studies, which found that culture has an impact on symptom expression in trauma (Stamm & Friedman, 2000). Kulka and colleagues (1990), for instance, found clear differences in symptom expression (and vulnerability) among Vietnam veterans from different ethnic groups.

A historical account of the events that led up to PTSD's first inclusion as an official diagnosis in DSM-III reveals that this latest trauma construct does not escape a substantive degree of contextual determination (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Kutchins & Kirk, 1997; Luckhurst, 2008; Young, 1995). Young (1995), for instance, argues that PTSD was *created* at a particular time, in a particular place and according to a particular moral and political agenda. As Summerfield (1999) puts it: 'PTSD was as much a sociopolitical as a medical response to the problems of a particular group at a particular point in time, yet the mental health field rapidly accorded it the status of scientific truth, supposedly representing a universal and essentially context-independent entity.' (p. 1450) The unearthed influence of the sociocultural context on the particular definition of PTSD further undermines its status as a natural disease entity that exists independently of any contingent historical context (see Chapter 1). It contradicts the positivist idea that the psychiatric knowledge inscribed in the DSM is the exclusive result of objective scientific evidence.

A historical perspective on trauma thus learns that (1) there is no universal trauma response and that (2) PTSD is not merely the result of scientific inquiry, but equally the product of a specific social and political context. This 'background agenda' is at odds with the DSM's position that disorders are enlisted on the basis of scientific argumentation (Bracken, 2002, p. 47). In addition, the previous section learned that (3) the construct validity of PTSD leaves a lot to be desired for. When taken together, these findings contradict the picture of PTSD as a 'natural disease entity'. Western psychiatric knowledge about trauma cannot simply be regarded as neutral, objective or universally valid. As such, its application in non-Western contexts risks a form of neo-colonialism, in which local knowledge systems are measured against this foreign standard.

Individualization versus Contextualization

It is well-known that the location of the individual ‘at the centre of Western morality and cosmology’ is not something universally shared across cultures (Bracken, Giller, & Summerfield, 1995, p. 1074). Many non-Western systems of thought embrace a notion of the self and of its relationships to others and to the outside world that is incommensurable with the particular conception of individuality that has become so self-evident in the West. This further undermines the proposed universality of PTSD.

As the cognitive framework suggest that meaning is something “conferred” on it [reality] by the schemas, or programs, running in individual minds’, trauma is viewed as acting on individual minds and therapy is oriented towards ‘restoring or renewing the schemas in discrete individuals’ (Bracken, 2002, p. 209). As a result, the consequences of major social upheavals are individualized and psychologized: the emphasis is not on the modification of a problematic social, political or economical system, but on psychological adaptation to the demands imposed by distressing events.

Furthermore, the therapeutic arsenal of psychiatry and clinical psychology (exposure, cognitive reappraisal, reduction of emotional arousal, and so on) risks increasing the isolation of those who suffer ‘by encouraging a narrow focus on their own memories, thoughts and beliefs’ (Bracken, 2002, p. 210). The further disruption of social networks, brought about by the *individualizing* framework of PTSD, has been put forward as a convincing explanation for the paradoxical (negative) effects of PTSD-based interventions in humanitarian missions (Bracken, 2002; Summerfield, 1999; Watters, 2010).

The emphasis on the individual in trauma derives from the idea that meaning is generated through the interaction of a person’s mental schemata with the external environment. The idea that meaning arises in the isolation of one’s private mind is opposed by accounts that emphasize the importance of *context* in the constitution of sensible human reality. Bracken (2002), for instance, uses Heideggerian philosophy to argue that meaning is created socially, through our immersion in language, culture and our social roles. Despite the merits of the cognitive approach to trauma, then, the danger is that it neglects the social and communal dynamics influencing both the development of and recovery from traumatic pathology. Summerfield (1999) equally asserts that the individualist focus of PTSD eclipses the cultural dimension of suffering in times of war and other crises. The manners in which people respond

to disruptive events is shaped to a large degree by their culture: ‘people do not passively register the impact of external forces (unlike, say, a leg hit by a bullet) but engage with them in an active and problem-solving way’ (Summerfield, 1999, p. 1454). If we take seriously the claim that meaning is something generated through our practical engagement with the world, and not in the isolation of one’s mind, what does this imply for the manners in which we comprehend trauma, and the manners in which we attempt to address it?

If we follow Bracken’s thesis, then the loss of meaning entailed in trauma is caused by a disruption and disintegration of our social networks. In this sense, any intervention that furthers individualization and separation should be avoided; trauma rather requires the re-establishment of social bonds, of a community, of new ways of life. Western therapeutic techniques, which encourage the individual person to turn ‘inwards’ and focus on his or her private loss and suffering, run counter to the protective and regenerative powers of these social and moral networks. What is needed more than anything else, then, in contexts of loss of meaning and trauma, is the ‘rebuilding [of] a practical way of life’ (Bracken, 2002, p. 218). Bracken argues that recovery from violence and trauma happens all the time as communities rebuild their lives after war: ‘It is in the regaining of an economy, a culture and a sense of community that individuals find a way of living in the wake of terrible suffering’ (2002, p. 219). If meaning is generated through our interaction with the social context, and not in the solitude of our own minds, then the emphasis on the individual in trauma psychiatry may very well make things worse. Furthermore, it necessarily obfuscates action on a more collective, political level.

The conceptual erasure of differences related to the traumatic stressor, which is implied in the very definition of PTSD, reinforces the disorder’s already-present *decontextualizing* potential. The core idea of PTSD is that a set of highly diverse external influences equally produce a typical traumatic symptomatology, through a similar etiological mechanism. As such, the diversity in etiological events is downplayed to stress the uniformity of the condition at the level of symptom manifestation and the pathological mechanism involved (see Chapter 1). Within this model, a range of dissimilar types of events are treated as uniform in their capacity to cause a specific form of psychological distress, including the violence of war, the horror of concentration camps and genocide, torture, domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse, natural disasters, traffic accidents, being mugged, a difficult labor (with a healthy baby), verbal sexual intimidation and even the shock of receiving bad news from a medical

doctor (Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008). The context and particularities of the etiological events themselves are considered of secondary relevance. The PTSD model, in other words, fails to take into account ‘how distress is mediated by political or religious convictions, cultural beliefs, social circumstances and previous experience of adversity, and not simply by the distressing events themselves’ (Shepherd, 2000 in Pupavac, 2004, p. 494). The lack of cultural and contextual sensitivity has been argued to be a general shortcoming of the DSM’s approach to psychological problems (Vanheule, 2014), and it becomes specifically problematic in the context of collectively suffered disruptive events and their sequelae.

Technological Interventions

Positivism aims at the formulation of universal laws that allow us to understand, predict and control the phenomena of interest. As such, it translates the world into a technical idiom. Psychiatry’s positivist background suggests that each mental disorder is characterized by its own symptoms, etiology, prognosis and treatment. The goal is to develop interventions that target the specific pathological mechanism involved: protocols that can be applied in all cases of a given disorder. In other words, the goal is the development of specific interventions for well-defined problems that will reliably lead to the desired outcome. In this view, the subject is radically separated from his or her own psychological problems. Recovery becomes a matter of administering the correct therapeutic agent in the right dose.

The effort to develop and administer a form of ‘psychological first aid’ in humanitarian missions is predicated on the belief that certain experiences, due to their sheer intensity, overwhelm the processing capacities of the individual mind. If not properly attended to, these unprocessed experiences are thought not to spontaneously resolve, and to potentially lead to new cycles of violence and trauma. Psychological first aid, such as a variety of debriefing methods, attempts to prevent the development of PTSD and similar phenomena, and to attenuate the impact of what transpired (McNally, Bryant, & Ehlers, 2003). At this point, we should ask ourselves the simple question what this form of intervention *is* in its essence. Not: what are its principles, but, on a more basic level, what do psy-professionals actually *do* when they apply psychological first aid?

What immediately catches the eye is that psychosocial interventions often involve some sort of ‘education’ and/or ‘training’. The victims of an external event are brought to formulate their problems in the uniform medico-technical language of PTSD. They learn to ‘recognize’ and ‘measure’ the symptoms of trauma, and are handed ways to deal with them. Jan De Vos states that in most cases, this amounts to little more than ‘getting people to talk’ (2012, p. 106). By means of a philosophical analysis he concludes that psychological first aid is a logical impossibility. The classical way to ignore and circumvent this impossibility is to seek refuge in some form of psycho-education. In the case of posttraumatic reactions, this means that ‘the treatment of the wounded has to pass through knowledge-distribution and education’ (De Vos, 2012, p. 107). Most trauma programs first seek to *reach* the target audience, in order to *educate* them, to spread *information*, to develop in them an *understanding* of their own condition, to *learn* how to deal with it, to help to *understand* the thoughts and feelings that are propounded to surface, to *normalize* and *validate* these feelings and reactions, to find practical ways to deal with them, to observe behavior, to control anger, to let go of fear and aggression,... De Vos holds that when faced with the impossibility of psychological first aid, the target audience is instead *educated* in psychological theories. This requires the beneficiaries of psychosocial aid to assume the dual position of being both the object and the subject of psychology; they are compelled to adopt the gaze of academic psychology and scrutinize their inner life worlds in the terms provided by the benefactor. The survivor is expected to develop a theoretical understanding of his or her situation, and the internalization of psychological theories is assumed to be healing in itself. The problems faced are thereby translated in a technical jargon: when you become knowledgeable of what is happening to you, it becomes possible to rationally intervene in the maladaptive chain of events to which you are otherwise blindly subjected. The idea is that people should be helped to transcend their own psychology through the adoption of the observational position of the psychological gaze. This analysis leads De Vos to conclude that in the end, psychological first aid boils down to ‘the administration of psychology’ (2012, p. 107). Note that in this model, the confrontation with the traumatic ‘gap’ in meaning, with the impossibility of meaning, is believed to be remediated by the administration of normative psychiatric knowledge.

The best-known psychological first aid program is called debriefing, which relies on three therapeutic components and an array of different techniques: ‘ventilation in a context of group support, normalization of responses, and education about post-event psychological reactions.

The technique consists of reviewing the traumatic experience, encouraging emotional expression, and promoting cognitive processing of the experience' (Kaplan, Iancu, & Bodner, 2001, p. 825). This brief description contains all the elements discussed by De Vos: ventilation, dispersal of knowledge through psycho-education, normalization, and so on. Despite the increased utilization of models such as *Critical Incident Stress Debriefing* and *Critical Incident Stress Management* in ever-expanding contexts, scientific evidence for these types of interventions is equivocal at best, even in contexts where the background assumptions of the dispersed knowledge are shared (for example, Bisson, Jenkins, Alexander, & Bannister, 1997; Bracken, 2002; Herbert, et al., 2001; McNally, Bryant, & Ehlers, 2003; Raphael & Wilson, 2000; Rose, Bisson, Churchill, & Wessely, 2002; Rose, Brewin, Andrews, & Kirk, 1999; van Emmerik, Kamphuis, Hulsbosch, & Emmelkamp, 2002). Moreover, such interventions have been argued to interfere with natural recovery processes (Bisson, Jenkins, Alexander, & Bannister, 1997; Mayou, Ehlers, & Hobbs, 2000), which suggests that they are liable to further traumatize those on the receiving end.

In physical medicine, the patient has no need to be knowledgeable about anatomy, surgery, and so on. In psychology, the entire technique and praxis is based upon bringing the subject in contact with the background knowledge. As such, psychological assistance offers a normalizing and normative model, reflected in well-known and well-intended assertions like 'It is normal to feel like...', 'you need to understand that...', and so on. Psychosocial aid thus *prescribes* the appropriate emotions and how to deal with them: it communicates what the academic perspective deems the norm. De Vos (2012) holds that the political meaning of psychosocial help rests in the fact that (1) it imposes a number of limited, normative signifiers in which the other is alienated, and (2) it places the recipients of aid in the specific role of the student. In other words, the mere *form* of this type of aid allocates the respective actors a predefined position in a power relation, in which the recipients are rendered passive and silent. In the end, De Vos concludes that 'the psychosocial turn in humanitarian help is the fundament of a thoroughly politicized humanitarian help, while it simultaneously depoliticizes the terrain itself' (2012, p. 163-4, own translation).

If the technology of psychological first aid, in the final analysis, amounts to the 'administration of psychology', then this leads to a series of difficult moral questions. First of all, the imposition of a foreign knowledge to frame the problems of a person or a given community communicates that the local systems of knowledge are inferior to the alien ones.

This simply flows from the *form* of the intervention. It is the product of a discourse in which the other is reduced to the object of a supreme knowledge that precedes him or her, in which he or she is alienated. Second, given its focus on the individual, the *content* of the dispersed knowledge risks furthering the disintegration of the already destabilized and dislocated social networks (see above). Third, the well-intended administration of psychological/psychiatric knowledge once again raises the specter of *neocolonialism*: in international humanitarian contexts, it is the Western benefactor who holds the power to define the problem and to provide a solution. Psychiatry lays claim to the truth of the involved suffering and pain and thereby silences other, less powerful voices. Finally, even in Western settings, the technical approach to trauma recovery is questionable. According to Bracken (2002), this is so because our reliance on technology is itself implicated in the specific *vulnerability* of the Western individual to succumb to problems of meaning; therefore, we should be wary of turning to it for solutions. Throughout this book, I will argue that the technical paradigm negates the paramount *ethical* dimension involved in trauma recovery.

Psychologization Means Depoliticization

In the context of major societal upheavals such as war and violent conflict, the psychiatric/cognitive framework psychologizes not only the consequences of and responses to these events. In recent years, the *causes* of such conflicts have been psychologized as well, to the degree that war and violence are sometimes comprehended as a potential manifestation of ‘psychosocial dysfunctionism’ and treated as ‘mental health emergencies’. Pupavac (2004, p. 498) summarizes the logic behind these claims as follows: ‘trauma is regarded as significant for not only impairing the development and mental well-being of the individual, but the future development and well-being of the society as a whole’. The sense of urgency permeating this discourse points to the idea that ‘rapid intervention can prevent the development of serious mental problems, as well as subsequent violence and wars’ (Summerfield, 1999, p. 1457). The claim that ‘unresolved traumatic experiences are likely to ignite new hatred and new wars’ is, according to Summerfield, an extreme consequence of approaching war with a gaze borrowed from the psychiatric clinic. He draws attention to the fact that there exist no empirical data ‘to demonstrate increased rates of psychiatric morbidity and antisocial behavior across exposed populations as a standard consequence, let alone

whether talk therapies are preventive' (1999, p. 1457). The idea that war represents a mental health emergency derives from our understanding of trauma rather than from empirical observation.

The view of war as a mental health emergency entails a psychologizing move that has become commonplace in Western thought. Mihalīs Mentinīs (2013), for example, shows with great clarity how the so-called 'Greek crisis' is commonly couched in a rhetoric that identifies the 'deficient psychology of the Greeks' (p. 4) as the root of the country's problems. Mainstream media continuously repeat the message that what is required for Greece to surmount its sordid economic situation is a modification of the psychological make-up of its inhabitants: 'in the bourgeois psy-discourse the 'Greek' is constituted as a deficient being that needs to be radically re-educated, re-trained and radically changed if he/she is to survive in the new global conditions' (p. 5). Obviously, this psychologizing discourse is inherently depoliticizing, as it forecloses as a potential solution any form of action on a collective, societal level. The desire for social experimentation and societal reconfiguration, according to this discourse, betrays a political immaturity and an unproductive unwillingness to psychologically adapt to the economic spirit of the times. In sum: what needs to change is not the neoliberal, capitalist system but rather the 'national selfhood' of the Greek, so that he or she can fit the entrepreneurial requirements of modern-day society. This is but one example of how sociocultural and sociopolitical phenomena are reframed as psychopathology on European terms (Summerfield, 1999). As De Vos (2012) aptly remarks, in the psy-sciences the political and socioeconomic reality is reduced to the individual; material conditions and power relations are replaced by intrapsychic processes.

The question arises whether the present referral to war-affected populations as traumatized is helpful in formulating appropriate responses. Higginbotham and Marsella (1988, p. 553) state that 'investing authority in biomedical reasoning about human problems eliminates explanations of disorder at levels of psychologic, political and economic functioning. Consequently, problems with origins in poverty, discrimination, role conflict and so forth are treated medically'. Humanitarian psychiatry relocates phenomena from the social to the biopsychomedical realm. The imposed psychiatric framework of trauma closes down alternative avenues of intervention as it opens up a medical one. The narrow focus on individual psychology 'ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse' (Craps, 2010, p. 55). Put differently, humanitarian psychiatry privileges

‘immaterial recovery’, that is, some form of cognitive restructuring that consists in having the sufferers confront their painful memory and integrate it into their life stories so that ‘psychological healing’ becomes possible, over ‘material recovery’. The latter refers to

reparation or restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system. Insofar as it negates the need for taking collective action towards systemic change, the current trauma discourse can be seen to serve as a political palliative for the downtrodden. Survivors are pathologized as victims without political agency, sufferers from an ‘illness’ that can be ‘cured’ within existing structures of institutionalized psychiatry. (Craps, 2010, pp. 55-6)

Thus, although the infusion of trauma theory in humanitarian aid can be argued to have a *depoliticizing* effect on the situations in which it is deployed, it is paradoxically the exact same feature that turns it into a potential instrument of ideology and power – in servitude of the status quo. The idea that psychiatry concerns itself with ‘universal realities’, that it is ‘beyond ideology’, is the ultimate gesture of ideology itself (Žižek, 1989). Such a claim carves out an impossible, transcendental position for itself from where it is possible to speak with an unquestionable authority. Questions of values are thereby transposed to the plane of scientific investigation and truth, which makes them harder to debate. De Vos (2012) claims that the humanitarian worker attempts to adopt a position of being the mere servant of a knowledge that covers the whole field of being itself. As such, he or she is caught up in the production of what Agamben (1998) calls ‘bare life’: In De Vos’ (2012, p. 114) words:

the refusal of any higher Causes in the so-called post-ideological era is the biopolitical move at its sharpest. As we consider the ultimate goal of our lives as life itself, this stance cannot but become caught up in the production of *homo sacer* [...]. The psy-worker, convinced he is merely tapping into scientifically proven universals, reduces the other to bare life, to *homo sacer*.

This ties the psychologizing and depoliticizing operations of the PTSD-framework to a more general ethical crisis in the West, related to the ‘refusal of higher Causes’. This will be the topic of the next chapter.

Conclusion

Although trauma has become somewhat of a commonplace or a ‘shared truth’ in the West, it has proven difficult to substantiate this truth with empirical evidence. Whereas we expected the response to radically disruptive events to be universal, it turns out to be highly diverse. Where we believed that ‘almost anyone’ would develop long-term pathology in the confrontation with a series of well-defined, horrific events, it turns out that it is impossible to predict the outcome of such confrontations (see Chapter 2). Where we suspected that only a limited range of experiences could give rise to trauma, it turns out that other life events can equally produce the entire clinical tableau associated with trauma. And finally, when we intervene on the basis of what we believe is a universal truth, it turns out that the effects of these interventions are not as beneficial as expected and might even impede processes of recovery.

The biomedical approach in which PTSD is embedded attempts to gain objective knowledge about the phenomena that it studies. The production of this sort of knowledge requires the acceptance of a series of assumptions that are not universally shared. Furthermore, as soon as the acquired knowledge is implemented in concrete situations, it imposes a medico-technical framework that renders some aspects visible while it inevitably obscures others. As such, the choice for a particular scientific paradigm can never be neutral, because it concerns the power to define the problem and its solutions. In the case of PTSD, the underlying presuppositions stimulate an emphasis on the individual; a preoccupation with immaterial recovery; an inability to take the context into account; a technical approach that misses the ethical dimensions of trauma recovery; and a depoliticization that serves the status quo of a given political and/or economical reality. It is precisely because PTSD purportedly describes a reality that transcends particular contexts and cultural determinations, that is, because of its avowed universality and neutrality, that it is able to serve as a disempowering political instrument. Academic knowledge thereby legitimates a series of interventions which, despite claims to the contrary, can never be politically neutral.

These points of criticism, and the desire to address them, serve as the driving force for the current project. Can we reinstate the often neglected dimension of the political in trauma recovery? How is psychological healing related to large-scale societal transformation? In Part

III of this dissertation, I argue that Lacan's concept of the real can be utilized to think through these difficult matters in a novel and productive fashion.

In the next chapter, I will scrutinize the moral and ethical dimensions involved in this practice. Taking my cue from French philosopher Alain Badiou's (2001) critique of contemporary liberal-humanist ethics, I will argue that the spectacular rise of trauma over the last 35 years – to such an extent that ours is an 'age of trauma', trauma being the ultimate emblem for our times (Di Nicola, 2012a) – is concomitant with the dominance of the human rights discourse as the sole moral compass for our times. In other words, it is no coincidence that trauma psychiatry emerges, at this moment in time, as an important partner in the management of conflicts and in attempts at peace-building. In fact, from within a certain 'ethical ideology', as Badiou would call it, trauma treatment has become the logical answer when faced with questions of instability and rupture. As will become clear, the remarkable contemporary preoccupation with psychological trauma in its ever-increasing number of guises and the omnipresence and supposed universality of the human rights doctrine are two sides of the same coin. Many of Badiou's points of criticism targeting contemporary ethics will thus inevitably echo the shortcomings of the PTSD-model, touched upon in this chapter.

4

Defensive Ethics

Abstract: French philosopher Alain Badiou's (2001) work allows me to tie the problems of PTSD's decontextualization and depoliticization to a more general crisis of ethics in the West. The ethics predicated on the doctrine of human rights is shown to be inherently negative, defensive and debilitating. The similarities between this ethical position and the practices associated with PTSD are drawn out, and the current success and omnipresence of trauma discourse is argued to be reflective of the prevalence of the ethics of human rights as the dominant moral compass for our times. It turns out that a well-defined ethical position is at the heart of several problems affecting PTSD, which presents us with the injunction to think anew the interrelatedness between the fields of trauma, ethics and politics.

Alain Badiou's *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (2001) remains to date one of his more successful and bestselling books. It starts off with a polemical charge against contemporary ethics in its relation to the discourse on human rights (pp. 1-39). Badiou observes that ethics, today, has become a matter of busying ourselves with these rights, of making sure that they are respected. Despite the seductive power of this doctrine, rooted in its apparent self-evidence, Badiou contends that it must be uncompromisingly rejected. This is

because, in his analysis, it operates as an ideological support for the current political situation by presenting as potentially evil any organized political collectivity that seeks to challenge the prevailing way of the world (that is, parliamentary democracy and neoliberal economics) and its absolute injustice. Similar concerns regarding this discourse of the rights of man^{xii} have been formulated by, among others, Dominic Lecourt (2001) and, as Jacques Rancière (2004) remarks, Hannah Arendt (1951), who devoted a chapter of her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to the ‘Perplexities of the Rights of Man’. In what follows, we will first describe Badiou’s characterization of this form of ethics and the purported reasons for its dominance in our times. Next, we aim to show that the discourse of trauma is one of the most powerful representatives of this orientation, its avatar on the ground, one of the prime manners in which the ethical ideology of today is practically translated or applied *in situ*.

Contemporary Ethics: Characterization and Situation

The term ‘ethics’ traditionally denotes a branch of philosophy that investigates the best way for human beings to live and how to judge what kinds of actions are right or wrong in particular situations. According to Badiou (2001, p. 2), ethics designates today a principle that, in a vague and fuzzy way, governs how we relate to and comment on a variety of historical, techno-scientific, social and other situations. He detects two major strains at the root of this principle. The first is related to the discourse of human rights and is founded on the work of Immanuel Kant. The second can be referred to as the ‘ethics of the other’ and has its origin in the theses of Emmanuel Lévinas. These two strains most easily meet in their agreement to organize ethics around the prevention of suffering and death. Although the merits of such a stance seem self-evident, Badiou asserts that it ultimately amounts to a nihilistic resignation that must be resisted. In what follows, I will summarize Badiou’s analysis of this type of ethics.

At the core of this doctrine lies the presupposition that human beings possess a universal, a priori ability to discern Evil. The assumed consensus regarding what is evil then provides the basis from which to develop an - inherently defensive - ethics: good is what intervenes visibly against these forms of evil. The good, here, only has a secondary status: it is derived from evil and not the other way around. Human rights are essentially rights to non-evil. Basically, then,

this discourse spells out what must *not* be done; it indicates what is forbidden. At the same time, however, it struggles to formulate a positive alternative. This emphasis on the prevention of suffering and death thus produces a strictly negative conception of ethics, and, ultimately, of the human being itself (Hallward, 2003, p. 256).

Indeed, one of the major philosophical problems with this position is that it necessitates the presupposition of a universal human subject, the identification of which is subordinated to the recognition of the evil that is done to him or her. As such, this ethics defines man as a victim, or as ‘the being who is capable of recognizing himself as a victim’ (Badiou, 2001, p. 10). For Badiou, this is unacceptable, because ‘the status of victim, of suffering beast, of emaciated, dying individual equates man with his animal substructure, [...] reduces him to the level of a living organism pure and simple’ (Badiou, 2001, p. 11). We could say, with Arendt, that human beings have not one but two lives: first, we have bare, physiological life (*zoe*), but, additionally, we are characterized by a life that surpasses this bare existence, the political life of speech and action (*bios*). The Aristotelian distinction between *zoe* and *bios* was placed in the spotlight more recently by Giorgio Agamben (1998), whose work on biopolitics allocates a central role to the concept of ‘bare life’ (*homo sacer*). The point is that the rights of man confuse these two lives, which ultimately means the reduction (or denial) of *bios* to sheer *zoe* (Rancière, 2004). In relation to this, Alenka Zupančič (2000) remarks that the pre-modern ethical maxim par excellence was that of ‘the master’: sadder than to lose one’s (biological) life is to lose one’s reason for living (that is, *bios* as a particular way of life as an individual or a group). In other words: according to the pre-modern ethical maxim, when one has to choose between honor and life, one should never choose life and lose, for the sake of living, all that makes life worth living. Modernity, then, offered no alternative to the discourse of the master besides the feeble maxim ‘the worst thing one can lose is one’s own life’. The latter maxim, which identifies the preservation of ‘bare life’ as the highest value, ‘lacks both conceptual force and the power to “mobilize”’ according to Zupančič (2000, p. 5).

Badiou ties the return to the doctrine of the natural rights of man to the collapse of revolutionary Marxism and all the forms of progressive engagement that it inspired. If the ethical consensus is founded on the recognition of evil,

it follows that every effort to unite people around a positive idea of the Good, let alone to identify man with projects of this kind, becomes in fact the real source of evil itself. Such is the accusation so often repeated over the last fifteen years: every revolutionary

project stigmatized as ‘utopian’ turns, we are told, into totalitarian nightmare. Every will to inscribe an idea of justice or equality turns bad. Every collective will to the Good creates Evil. (Badiou, 2001, p. 13)

In other words: evil is what happens when we collectively try to bring about, in reality, the Good. To make ourselves the bearer of a ‘positive idea’ (what Badiou calls a ‘truth’) and to try to change our worldly reality to fit this notion: was this not the recipe for the horrors of 20th-century totalitarianism? The Holocaust and the Gulag linger in our collective memory, amongst other atrocities, as a traumatic reminder of what the will to the good has produced in the past. Evil is proclaimed to be tied up exactly with the ‘life of great actions and noble words’, that dimension of life which exceeds our bare existence as living beings. In this manner, contemporary ethics, as the struggle against an a priori recognizable Evil which, in its turn, is linked to collective projects around a positive notion of the Good, makes it very hard to envisage any transformation of the way things are now. The price paid by the ethics of the rights of man, Badiou (2001, p. 14) concludes, is ‘a stodgy conservatism’: ‘the ethical conception of man [...] prohibits every broad, positive vision of possibilities. What is vaunted here, what ethics legitimates, is in fact the conservation by the so-called West of what it possesses.’ In other words, Badiou recognizes the political impact of the ethics of human rights, its potential to undercut any form of militant engagement with a shared cause.

It follows that any genuine ethics, for Badiou (2001, pp. 11-12), is ‘antihumanistic’, in that it necessitates the affirmation of a superhuman or ‘immortal’ aspect of the human. In fact, it is this ‘immortal’ aspect, which in Badiou’s philosophy only comes to the fore when man is sustained by a truth that surpasses him yet passes through him, that defines the human being as human, as something more than just an animal: ‘To forbid him to imagine the Good, to devote his collective powers to it, to work towards the realization of unknown possibilities, to think what might be in terms that break radically with what is, is quite simply to forbid him humanity as such.’ (2001, p. 14) Here, we witness a remarkable inversion of the starting positions: the human rights discourse is claimed to violently reduce man to his animal substructure, a being for whom basic comfort and the continuance of life are deemed the highest value. Conversely, an antihumanist position affirms man in the potential of becoming something more than just an animal, and situates his humanity exactly in the realm that exceeds his bare existence.

It should be remarked that it is not only the contemporary equation of man with his status as victim that bothers Badiou; on a more fundamental philosophical level, he questions altogether the existence of a universally recognizable human subject, possessing rights that are somehow ‘natural’. Thinkers such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan, who have all influenced Badiou’s own strand of antihumanism in some way, have repeatedly debunked this idea of a natural or spiritual identity of Man, and, as such, the very foundation that underlies the assertion of the existence of ‘natural rights’ and the notion of universal ethics. Their analysis led to the conclusion that ‘the humanism of human rights and ethics in the abstract sense were merely imaginary constructions – ideologies’ (Badiou, 2001, p. 5). Nevertheless, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, these authors’ critical, antihumanist position did not lead them to embrace a kind of cynicism, an attitude of resignation or indifference to the suffering of people. As Badiou (2001, p. 6) aptly remarks, all three of them were ‘militants of a cause’. Paradoxically, then, the dismissal of the existence of man and his natural rights ‘is not incompatible with rebellion, with dissatisfaction with the established order, or with a committed engagement in real situations’ (p. 6).

Additionally, and not without an echo of the criticisms directed at the PTSD construct in the previous chapter, Badiou takes issue with another Kantian aspect of the human rights discourse, namely its universal underpinnings. This point of departure renders contemporary ethics unable to address the singularity of situations as such, ‘which is the obligatory starting point of all properly human action’ (Badiou, 2001, p. 14). When the barbarity of a situation is considered only in terms of human rights, we lose sight of the fact that we are always dealing ‘with a political situation, one that calls for a political thought-practice, one that is peopled by its own authentic actors’ (Ibid., p. 13). Universality appears to push towards decontextualization in its emphasis on similarities rather than discrepancies. Moreover, the effacement of the political nature of the situations involved is often accompanied by the production of a derogatory judgment concerning the people caught up in it:

it is perceived, from the heights of our apparent civil peace, as the uncivilized that demand of the civilized a civilizing intervention. Every intervention in the name of a civilization requires an initial contempt for the situation as a whole, including its victims. And this is why the reign of ‘ethics’ coincides, after decades of courageous critiques of colonialism and imperialism, with today’s sordid self-satisfaction in the ‘West’, with the insistent argument according to which the misery of the Third World

is the result of its own incompetence, its own inanity – in short, of its subhumanity. (Badiou, 2001, p. 13)

Contrary to this stance, Badiou proclaims that ‘there is no ethics in general’ (Ibid., p. 16). There is only ethics related to singular situations. The ethical question is how we treat the possibilities of a given situation.

I will not go into the details of Badiou’s critique of the second strand constitutive of present-day ethics, that is, the Levinian ethics of the Other. Badiou analyzes the generalized emphasis on the ‘recognition of the other’, the ‘respect for differences’ and ‘multiculturalism’, along with the pervasive demand for ‘tolerance’, to be philosophically untenable – primarily due to its religious underpinnings. Furthermore, the attempt to veil or suppress the religious character of an ethics based on the primacy of the Other over the Same leads to a series of suspicious consequences. Badiou observes that, for example, the right to difference is accompanied by a genuine horror in the face of any sustained manifestation of difference: ‘African customs are barbaric, Muslims are dreadful, the Chinese are totalitarian, and so on’ (2001, p. 24). The celebrated other is acceptable only insofar as he is a ‘good’ other, ‘which is to say, what, exactly, if not the same as us?’ (Ibid., p. 24). More fundamentally, then, the problem is that the respect for differences defines an identity, and that the respect for differences only applies to those differences that are reasonably consistent with this identity. Because of this and similar problems, Badiou comes to the characteristically uncompromising conclusion that ‘the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned’ (Ibid., p. 25), in favor of the more difficult endeavor to think an ethics that recognizes the same.

Ethics thus designates today, either as the consensual representation of Evil or as the concern for the other, ‘the incapacity, so typical of our contemporary world, to name and strive for a Good’ (Ibid, p. 30). Badiou identifies three interrelated features of this discourse that render it nihilistic: (1) the failure to provide a positive account of the good beyond the abstract notions of security and order, (2) its complacency about ‘necessity’ and resigned acceptance of the status quo, and (3) its dependence on the notions of happiness and the absence of death. Against this, he affirms that ‘it is only by declaring that we want what conservatism decrees to be impossible, and by affirming truths against the desire for nothingness, that we tear ourselves away from nihilism’ (2001, p. 39). Correspondingly, the rest of *Ethics* is devoted to

the development of an antihumanist, positive ethics in line with the postulates of his own philosophical system (as developed mainly in Badiou, 1999; 2005; 2009a; 2009b).

PTSD and Human Rights

There are a great deal of similarities between the criticisms raised against PTSD on one hand, and Badiou's charge against contemporary ethics and the discourse of human rights on the other. First, both discourses presuppose the universal human ability to *a priori* recognize instances of evil/trauma, independent of the social, cultural, economic and political contexts involved. In the case of PTSD, this is reflected in the idea that it is possible to determine a series of inherently traumatic events (due to their objective characteristics) while excluding others (see Chapter 2). As discussed above, the human rights discourse symmetrically claims that human beings possess a universal, a priori ability to discern evil. Second, this reliance on readily observable instances of evil/trauma in both cases leads to interventions that focus on salient markers of evil/pathology, in disregard of the contexts that caused them. In the absence of a collective, positive project, both the discourse of human rights and the PTSD-model of trauma tend to focus on the treatment of symptoms rather than causes. Third, the emphasis on vulnerability in both cases define a hypothesized universal human subject in its capacity for suffering. Both discourses rely on the notion of an inborn, isolated and a-contextual psychological subject characterized by its fragility. This once again neglects the influence of context in the determination of subjectivity, and it risks reducing the other to his or her status of victim. Both discourses, then, are involved in the biopolitical production of the *homo sacer*. These similarities open up the possibility to question the ethical dimensions involved in trauma psychiatry.

The a priori of Trauma and Human Rights

In Chapter 2, I discussed the restrictive approach taken with regard to the traumatic stressor in the DSM definition of PTSD. Criterion A, which serves as a 'gatekeeper' for the diagnosis, delineates a limited series of events believed to cause traumatic pathology in and of themselves, due to their inherent characteristics. The claim that interests us here is that we can

intuitively and reliably identify the sort of situations that give rise to traumatic psychopathology *a priori*. At the heart of the humanitarian enterprise lies the certainty about the Western benefactor's ability to justly detect traumatic situations from an objective, outside position; to gauge the resultant psychological effects of exposure to these situations; and, finally, to successfully treat these persistent pathologies through the use of medical and psychological technologies developed in the West. Indeed, a traumatic event was first defined rather succinctly as something 'generally outside the range of usual human experience' that would 'evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone' (APA, 1980, p. 236, p. 238). However, subsequent research rather counterintuitively learned that (1) exposure to Criterion A events was quite common, even in Western societies and that (2) only a small portion of people exposed to such events developed long-term traumatic pathology. In the DSM-IV field trials, for example, 93 per cent of a community sample reported experiencing a Criterion A event, whereas only 10.3 per cent met criteria for lifetime PTSD (Kilpatrick, et al., 1998). Exposure to a Criterion A event *does not lead* to the development of the symptom cluster in the majority of cases: it is not a sufficient condition (see Chapter 2). Additionally, studies have shown that is not a necessary condition either: the whole clinical picture associated with PTSD has been observed to develop in the wake of an entire series of non-criterion A events, such as marital disruption, affairs, divorce; collapse of adoption arrangements; employment related stressors and money problems; bereavement; childbirth; frightening Halloween television programs; and so on (Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008). This suggests that, against our expectations, what constitutes a traumatic event for a specific person *cannot* be decided on the basis of a pre-existent list of objective event characteristics.

Despite the fact that the idea that we can recognize traumatic events *a priori* has not been corroborated by empirical research, it continues to have strong appeal. Its truth somehow seems to transcend the facts, as we continue to operate on this basis. This evokes the exemplary caricature of a well-intending mental health worker who arrives at the scene in the aftermath of a massive natural disaster and expects the local population to be traumatized by the destructive event. However, he or she finds that – strangely – none of them reports any psychological complaints. From the surprising absence of an expected response, he or she concludes that the target audience must be 'denying' or 'suppressing' their inevitable psychological wounds. This line of reasoning is actually rather straightforward and derives from the benefactor's background knowledge and expectations, which compellingly prescribe

the appropriate responses for those assisted (in the context of the death of a loved one, the same bias has been identified with regards to the ‘suspicious’ absence of grief (Bonanno, 2008)). It is my hypothesis that the stubborn insistence of this idea, in the absence of genuine scientific arguments, is caused by *moral* factors. The reason why it is so difficult to accept or incorporate these counterintuitive findings is that the PTSD-framework mirrors the moral climate of our times, which is founded on a belief in the *a priori* of evil.

Symptom versus Cause

In the previous chapter, the cultural determination of PTSD was brought to the fore. The emphasis on the individual and the notion of an a-contextual, universal subject were argued to be inherited from a Cartesian understanding of the world, rather than simply part of human nature. The use of ‘trauma lenses’ to make sense of reality was thereby criticized: to view the world from the perspective of traumatic stress arguably leads to a decontextualized, a-historical, and individualizing approach to problems interwoven with political and economic realities. The same now applies to the more general ethical principle of our age: the ‘human rights lens’ makes us focus on the decontextualized symptoms of war, violent conflict, natural disasters and so on. Bereft of a shared positive project, the only course of ethical action for post-traditional societies appears to be defensive and negative, with a focus on local, visible instances of Evil without taking the context into account. In humanitarian psychiatry, the absence of an emancipatory project puts the focus on erasing on an individual level the (psychological) manifestations of violence and conflict.

This is not without a parallel to the generalized strategic move made by the DSM task force in preparation of the third edition of their diagnostic manual. As discussed, in order to restore the scientific image of psychiatry by improving the reliability of diagnoses, the DSM Task Force decided that diagnostics should no longer be based on *etiological* reasoning, but rather on the reported complaints and the readily observable surface symptoms (Kirk & Kutchins, 1992). This diagnostic practice tends to promote a form of therapeutics that aims primarily at symptom reduction, without adequately taking into account the underlying factors that caused these pathological manifestations in the first place (Vanheule, 2014). In the absence of an elaborated conceptual theory that allows for an analysis of the singular dynamics of the case in question, it becomes hard to envisage how to address the processes at the source of the

patient's suffering. In privation of a more 'positive project' to define and guide therapeutic actions, then, the only criterion for therapeutic success becomes the elimination of a series of salient markers of distress.

The universalist assumptions of both the human rights discourse and Western psychiatry, and the emphasis on purportedly readily observable indicators of distress/evil, effectively perform a decontextualizing and depoliticizing operation of severance, which simultaneously serves as an ideological instrument in servitude of the status quo. The framework of PTSD severs the cause from the consequences, as it suggests that the former's specificities have no real impact on how the treatment of the latter should be conducted (see Chapter 1). In the human rights discourse, the emphasis on a series of a priori discernible markers of Evil potentially leads to forms of intervention restricted to treating isolated problems at a surface level, and such an approach fails to take into account both the context and the subjectivity of those involved. This has both political and ethical consequences, in that it proscribes a course of action that eclipses alternative routes of intervention. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to conceptualize (collective) trauma in a manner that safeguards a contextual understanding of the problems at its root and acknowledges those involved as political actors. Trauma theory must enable interventions in the sociopolitical contexts themselves, which in turn implies a different form of ethics.

The recourse to an a-contextualized understanding of suffering/evil has been constructed as an answer to a 'crisis of humanitarianism' in the early 1980s, which arose from the realization that humanitarian aid was '*de facto* entangled with biopolitics' (De Vos, 2012, p. 102). In other words: it was no longer tenable that humanitarian aid, as it was conceived before the psychosocial turn, was a neutral business. The focus on purportedly universal aspects of being, reflected in both the human rights discourse and the academic knowledge of PTSD, served to counter these attacks and to reaffirm the status of humanitarian aid as something which merely neutrally and objectively tends to the 'real' needs of people. However, for reasons discussed, the psychosocial turn did not succeed in its aim to resolve the crisis of humanitarianism. Mark Duffield (2004, p. 13) contends that 'the insistence that humanitarianism is "neutral" and separate from politics, means that humanitarianism can only grasp human life as bare life. By excluding the political, humanitarianism reproduces the isolation of bare life and hence the basis of sovereignty itself.'

Is there a way in which we can think the consequences of violent conflict and war in a way that allows for contextualization and thus political action? Or is this antithetical to the manner in which psychiatry and psychology function *in situ*? In other words: is psychological/psychiatric trauma intervention necessarily depoliticizing, or can we find ways to re-establish the political dimension in recovery processes from trauma? These questions will be picked up in Part III of this dissertation.

The Universal Subject/Victim in the Post-Traditional Vacuum of Meaning

Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009), in *The Empire of Trauma*, trace a dual genealogy in the history of the invention of post-traumatic stress. The first strand is well-known and consists of the scientific and theoretical evolution in trauma research. Fassin and Rechtman convincingly argue that, for a correct understanding, this genealogical line needs to be supplemented with a second strand that continuously interacted with it. This second strand concerns evolving social and moral conceptions, such as changes in the attitudes to misfortune and to (the authenticity of) those who suffer it (see Chapter 1). With PTSD, then, both strands are integrated in what has become ‘an established commonplace of the contemporary world, a shared truth’ (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 2). In their reading, the definition of PTSD perfectly mirrors the moral and sociocultural climate of Western societies around the turn of the 21st century. On a theoretical level, it is assumed that the external event is the most important etiological factor to account for this pathology in a quasi-direct, mechanical fashion (see above). This stance is mirrored in the societal attitude towards those subjected to such events: they are seen as innocent victims and treated with patience and respect. The trauma theory encapsulated in the construct of PTSD and the moral attitude towards the people who present with these symptoms thus appear to be perfectly in tune at the beginning of the 21st century.

Throughout this and the previous chapter, I have discussed several problems with this model, both empirical and practical in nature. The victim status, which does allow for a limited, well-defined type of political and judicial power (see Green (2006) for a description and a polemical, liberalist critique of this particular status), comes at a cost: although it sometimes allows for forms of compensation to redress the grievances of victims (Pitman, Sparr, Saunders, & McFarlane, 2007), the use of PTSD as a lever for certain political/economical

claims for instance first necessitates the acceptance of the medical framework, of being labeled mentally disordered, along with the implicit acknowledgment that what needs to change to allow for recovery is the individual's victim psychology. In short, if someone is reduced to his or her status as a victim, this reduction cuts away the possibility of alternative forms of political agency. As Edkins puts it: 'In contemporary culture victimhood offers sympathy and pity for the surrender of any political voice' (2003, p. 9).

In line with Fassin and Rechtman's dual genealogy of trauma and Badiou's analysis of the human rights discourse, I claim that what was 'discovered' via the detour of PTSD was the very 'truth' of postmodern existence: bereft of any great collective project, the West is left in a perilous vacuum of meaning without any clear answers and an inability to act. This dovetails with Bracken's suggestion that trauma, which is essentially a 'crisis of meaning', is the prototypical existential condition of Western, post-traditional societies (Bracken, 2002; see also Pupavac, 2004). Bracken holds that cultures differ with regard to their degree of 'ontological security': the presence of a shared religious, political or cultural orientation towards life purportedly offers a protective sense of coherence, whereas the absence of such orientations leaves cultures under the permanent threat of pervasive and disheartening crises of meaning. In other words, the bankruptcy of the 'great stories' in the West (the fall of what Lacan would call the 'paternal function' (see, for example, Lacan, 1956a, p. 230; 1959, p. 483; 1960, p. 688)) may have left us particularly vulnerable for traumatic ruptures (Nolan, 1998; Verhaeghe, 2015). Bracken surmises this to be the inheritance of postmodernism, which systematically calls into question the meaningfulness of our world and the grounds of our knowledge. In traditional societies, by contrast, the presence of collective, overarching cultural frameworks is said to produce a protective armor of meaning and purpose that promotes resilience of character (Verhaeghe, 2008). PTSD, in this light, becomes the archetypal syndrome of the Westerner's condition, stripped bare of the unraveling symbolical swathes that used to envelop him or her. Ergo, the hegemony of trauma, or the observed omnipresence of crises of meaning, may very well be an effect of the Western gaze which perceives its own condition everywhere it looks. The spectacular rise of trauma discourse then derives from the fact that it captures and plays out the repressed 'truth' of postmodern reality – rather than being the effect of advances in our scientific understanding of these phenomena, an idea that is untenable in the light of the arguments advanced in the Chapters 1 and 3. This truth is of a moral nature.

Furthermore, when viewed from this angle, the so-called ‘universal’ subject behind the doctrine of human rights, which is also at the heart of the construct of PTSD, is revealed to be a culturally determined type of subjectivity. This subject’s supposed vulnerability, isolation, and characteristic capacity for suffering constitutes a telling reflection of contemporary Western culture more than anything else. In this sense, the dispatching of psychologists and psychiatrists to far-away countries, based on a purportedly universal vulnerability to traumatization, is an enterprise that always-already incorporates the culturally determined vision and verdict of (Western) experts. It is an intervention that contains and *plays out* the benefactor’s analysis of the needs of the local population – which are rather the needs of so-called post-traditional societies more than anything else. In other words, the intervention is the enactment of an unacknowledged truth, an *acting-out* in the psychoanalytical sense of the term: something that ordinarily escapes consciousness and can only be grasped indirectly, precisely by *staging it* and then critically returning to it. The enactment constitutes or realizes its truth: ‘the ritual is the collective performance of the analysis’ (De Vos, 2012, p. 98), albeit an analysis that was necessarily incomplete at the time of its performance. Only in retroaction can the truth which drove this process be discerned in the misrecognition that founded it (a logic that will be worked out fully in Chapter 8). The exportation of the PTSD-model of trauma aids in the construction of a particular type of subject (the victim) and a culturally determined view of reality as something always on the verge of plunging into meaninglessness. The success of PTSD-informed interventions in humanitarian aid campaigns reflects the West’s inability to come up with a ‘positive’ project beyond a focus on the salient symptoms of distress caused by an apparently inescapable political and economical system.

The problems with the PTSD-model of trauma, described in Chapter 1, thus appear to be intimately connected with a well-defined ethical position. Hence, the development of a trauma model that incorporates context, subject and political agency requires us to think anew the relations between trauma, ethics and politics – a project to be carried out in the second part of this book.

Conclusion

Badiou advocates a type of ethics which is inherently ‘positive’, in the sense that it privileges a notion of the Good, from which evil is then derived, instead of the other way around. He defines the ethical subject as a subject of militant engagement in servitude of a supposedly ‘universal truth’ which, nevertheless, is always instantiated locally, in singular situations or worlds. In any case, the difficulties discussed in Part II of this dissertation point out the need to think through trauma recovery in a way that incorporates contextual determination and political agency. It is my contention that this can only come about when we adopt a different ethical position, one that makes up on the ‘motivational deficit in morality’, as Simon Critchley (2007, p. 49) calls it (the inability to motivate subjects to engage themselves for a ‘cause’ within the boundaries of secular liberal democracy). Trauma recovery, in my view, requires the occurrence of and fidelity to an ethical act that breaks with the pre-existent meaning-generating framework by introducing something new and incommensurable. The necessity of this type of break derives from the fact that the pre-existent framework was rendered invalid by the traumatic experience of rupture. In other words: a traumatic rupture entails an ethical injunction to which the subject cannot but respond. Trauma, just like the Badiouian event, entails a ‘demand that is received from the situation, for example a situation of political injustice’ (Critchley, 2007, p. 42). However, although such a demand arises in a singular situation, it is not reducible to that situation; the demand is addressed to everyone and thus universal. This is the ethical and political force inherent to situations of (traumatic) rupture.

The linkage of trauma with theories of the act and the event is sustained by their relation to the Lacanian concept of the real, and it permits the ethics involved in trauma recovery to be approached as a ‘process of the formation of ethical subjectivity, where a self *commits* itself with fidelity to a concrete situation, a singular occurrence that places a demand on the self’ (Critchley, 2007, p. 49).

I will work out this idea in Part III of this dissertation, through a conceptual analysis of Lacan’s notion of the real in its relation to trauma, ethics and politics respectively. Although this enterprise is inevitably conceptual or theoretical by nature, it is my hope and belief that the Lacan-inspired understanding of trauma has practical implications for both individual and collective trauma interventions.

Epilogue

In recent years, a number of innovations have been proposed and implemented in trauma programs precisely to address some of the aforementioned shortcomings of the hegemonic PTSD-model. Since it is beyond the scope of this book to discuss these varied theoretical and practical contributions in sufficient detail to do them justice, I will only briefly mention some of them. Amongst them are an array of approaches that leave the strict framework of PTSD behind in favor of a more flexible understanding of trauma, tailored to the specificities of the affected *culture* (for example, Brown, 2008; Kirmayer, 1996; Kirmayer, Lemelson, & Barad, 2007; Nader, Dubrow, & Stamm, 1999; Rhoades & Sar, 2006). These approaches generally devote a lot of effort to descriptions of the historical and philosophical backgrounds of the people who are identified as in need of help. An understanding of the beliefs and practices of the community in question is regarded as important to all phases of effective intervention: ‘It is essential to the accuracy of assessment and to the effectiveness of initial and ongoing interventions’ (Dubrow & Nader, 1999, p. 3). Moreover, cultural awareness is deemed necessary to prevent additional harm in the process of assessing and treating trauma itself (that is, secondary traumatization). Practices that work in one culture may lead to failure or even adverse effects in another.

Culture is sometimes regarded as throwing up *barriers* against the smooth functioning of ready-made treatment modalities that usually ‘work’ with a Western target audience. Alternatively, it is seen as a vast reservoir of *resources* that can be utilized within the framework of treatment, either by combining traditional healing approaches with Western psychological methods or by utilizing them as therapeutic tools in themselves. Local rituals are here comprehended through a psychotherapeutic frame: they are recuperated as culturally-tailored *techniques* to bring about a desired effect. In other words: traditional cultural practices are incorporated in the framework of psychology and traumatology and given meaning against this conceptual background. Local people are *educated* about their own rituals and traditions; they learn to comprehend these activities by means of the psychological gaze and knowledge. Within this perspective, it is still up to the practitioner to learn, in time, ‘what is of value and what is not’ so that he or she ‘will be able to discard, keep, and embellish the household resources and their funds of knowledge for the benefit of the client’ (Velez-Ibanez & Garcia Parra, 2014, p. 93). Part of the impetus for relying on these resources is the acknowledgment of the value of ‘thick social relationships as stress buffers and their

direct effects on mental well being' (p. 80). In this description, the sophisticated, Western health worker is placed in a superior position as the expert who, from an ultimate meta-perspective, is able to judge the relevance and pragmatic value of traditional healing methods and rituals for the process of recovery from trauma.

I will not go deeper into these matters here. It is clear that a greater sensitivity for the cultural background of the target audience avoids a series of pitfalls that derive from a universalist understanding of trauma. Moreover, cultural sensitivity promotes alternative modes of intervention that are more in line with the belief system of those affected. If trauma is a breach in meaning, and if this meaning is collectively constituted and culturally determined, then it makes more sense to address crises of meaning *within* these frameworks themselves – and not through the imposition of a foreign knowledge system in its stead. Nevertheless, I think it is wise to remain vigilant in face of the very real threat of sliding back into an alienating praxis.

Efforts have been made to construct *holistic* approaches that integrate psychological dimensions with economic development and political change. A variety of *psychosocial* programs start from the idea of a close, ongoing circular interaction between an individual's psychological state and his or her social environment (Agger, 2001). Positive changes in the social context are surmised to have ameliorating effects on the psyche and vice versa. Notably, in contemporary literature on peace-building, treatment of post-traumatic stress is viewed as paramount in any attempt to construct a stable, social equilibrium (see above). The creation of a number of *truth commissions* explicitly abandons the focus on the individual in favor of forms of healing on a communal/national level. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that if we want to break with the technological approach described above, this cannot be accomplished merely by trading in a psychotherapeutical framework for a sociotherapeutical one. In both cases, it is outside knowledge that identifies the locus of the rupture and hence the appropriate therapy (inside versus outside). The question is if we can somehow subvert this dichotomy.

The political struggle over *memory*, which takes place after the traumatic events themselves, is another related field of investigation that has flourished in recent years (see, for example, the work of Ron Eyerman, Jane Goodall and Jenny Edkins). Literature on *testimony* and critical witnessing unearth the political dimension of (collectively) coming to terms with experiences that challenge the limits of our understanding (see, for example, the work of Jane

Kilby, Elizabeth Dutro and Veena Das). Furthermore, the political charge of trauma work has been reflected in the call for trauma workers and psychotherapists to leave their position of neutrality in favor of an engagement with the injustices that constitute the soil of the distress encountered in the consulting room. This is usually referred to with the term *advocacy*: the clinician or consultant becomes an advocate for trauma survivors, giving a voice to those who otherwise go shrouded in silence. Fassin argues that the infusion of trauma language in international politics is not so much an addition of a ‘psychological and cultural representation to the moral and political representation of the facts’ (2008, p. 532), but rather a new modality for moral and political action *in itself*. His point is that the language of psychiatry in general and the concept of trauma in particular serve as key instruments for strategically giving form to the experiences of victims of war, disaster and famine – the goal being the construction and effective promotion of a cause, primarily through the solicitation of affects in the target audience. Thus, in Fassin’s analysis, mental health specialists are mobilized in humanitarian missions in part because their presence is regarded as essential in exposing the consequences of violent crises, and to condemn what they are witnessing.

All of these different strategies attempt to incorporate context and political agency in our understanding of and engagement with trauma. In what follows, I will present the reader with a Lacanian psychoanalytical framework to think through the interrelatedness of trauma with ethics and politics. Although some of the aforementioned approaches sometimes utilize certain aspects of Lacanian theory, the novelty of my proposal lies in the emphasis on the centrality of the *act* in recovery from trauma. This notion allows me to combine trauma theory with philosophical inquiries into the dynamics of rupture and political transformation. At the same time, it clarifies how individual recovery can be related to large-scale societal change.

Part III

The Dislocations of the Real

In Part II, I established the necessity to thoroughly think through the intersections between three apparently distinct fields: trauma, ethics and politics. For someone who is familiar with psychoanalysis, the intertwinement between psychopathology, ethics and the larger socio-cultural framework does not appear out of the ordinary. Psychopathology, according to Lacanian theory, is always situated in the relation of the subject to the Other, where the latter refers simultaneously to the symbolic system of language and to the significant others with whom we engage. Although psychoanalysis obviously works primarily with the individual, its particular conception of how this individuality is constituted opens onto the cultural and political contexts that determined it. When one is immersed in the specificity of Lacan's thought, a range of generally accepted dichotomies are difficult to retain. His notion of the subject, for instance, turns the intuitive understanding of inside and outside upside down. The topological models Lacan presented in his final seminars can be seen as attempts to transcend such all-too-familiar and problematic dualities. The main thesis that I wish to develop in what follows can be formulated rather succinctly: at the heart of the intersections between trauma, ethics and politics is the category of the real.

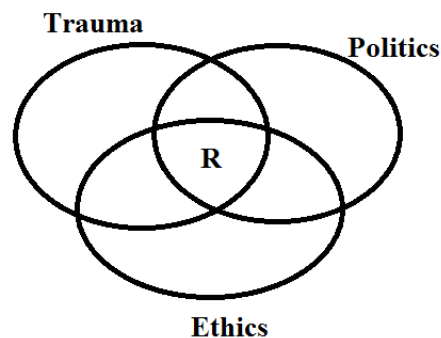


Figure 5.1: The fields of trauma, ethics and politics meet in their shared determination by the real.

This hypothesis derives from the observation that the real has been brought into relation with each of these domains, either by Lacan, at separate instances in his teachings, or by those who further elaborated his concepts. Some of the relevant ideas are rather familiar, for instance the central claim that trauma is caused by a confrontation with the real. Others are more difficult to grasp, such as the idea that the subject's condition of possibility is an encounter with the traumatic real. Despite the fact that each of these fields has been brought in articulation with the real at distinct points, the consequences of these articulations with regards to trauma have

not been drawn. This will be the main goal of the rest of the current project. In order to accomplish this, it will first be necessary to define the category of the real itself. In the following chapter, we will trace Lacan's progress in mapping out this elusive concept, with special attention as to why he considers it to be traumatic. In Chapter 4, I will describe the logic that led him to develop an 'ethics of the real'. Lastly, the determinative role of the real in politics will be discussed. After we have discussed the real's relation to each of these domains separately, it will become possible to establish the manners in which they mutually implicate each other and to address some of the difficulties laid out in the previous chapters.

The choice to emphasize the dimension of the real in this work is made for conceptual reasons. It can be argued that other concepts, most notably the subject and the Lacanian act, can equally be placed in the intersection of trauma, ethics and politics. This is due to the fact that both are closely related to the real, and I will inevitably touch upon them as I progress. However, I have opted to put the emphasis on the latter concept because of its central place in Lacan's theory of trauma – which remains the primary focus of this project.

5

The Traumatic Real

Abstract: In this chapter, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's evolving views of the real are discussed, while a number of other key Lacanian concepts such as the barred subject and the Other are introduced. The two major conceptions of the real, a 'presymbolic' and 'postsymbolic' version, are discussed in depth. Through this discussion, it becomes clear that the real should not be taken as the ultimate referent of external reality, but rather as a productive negativity that dislocates the representation of external (symbolic-imaginary) reality. This notion of the real generates an interesting take on trauma that diverges from the more familiar, biomedical trauma discourse. The Lacanian approach to trauma breaks with the familiar inside/outside, self/other and individual/collective dichotomies. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic elaboration of the real in relation to trauma introduces a non-linear conception of time to make sense of the counterintuitive dynamics of trauma.

In *Le Désir Foudroyé*, French psychoanalyst Sonia Chiriaco (2012) clarifies the specificities of the Lacanian psychoanalytical approach to trauma by means of a series of clinical case studies. She argues that the strength of this framework lies in its unique emphasis on the presence of a subject behind the victim of trauma. Going against the grain of contemporary

trauma theory, Lacanian psychoanalysis does not exclusively focus on the traumatic event in itself, but rather on what the (unconscious) subject has done with it or made of it. During the analysis, the subject must attempt to articulate the real that was encountered in all its brutality and senselessness. In the diversity of case studies discussed, Chiriaco makes visible that the subjective experience of what constitutes a trauma is always singular, and that the psychoanalytical endeavor aims at the invention of a unique solution to exit the traumatic impasse. Psychoanalysis holds that even in trauma, there is a certain implication of the subject in its suffering. Acknowledging this gives back a minimal form of responsibility and agency to the subject, the road to revive the desire which was ‘struck down as if by lightning’ (*foudroyé*) by the trauma.

Chiriaco’s book opens with a short vignette about Lea, who suffered from traumatic symptoms after her house burned down completely. Lea appears to be frozen in the moment where she witnessed this spectacle, lost for words and thoughts. The same memory repeats itself in all its crudity time and time again: she came home with her family after a night out, and did not understand at first that it was *her* house caught on fire. From far away, she had perceived the fire and heard the sirens. She arrived at her house too late, only to see the roof coming down and the remains burn out. There was nothing left to do but watch the disaster take its course. In the aftermath of the event, Lea was supported by many family members and friends. She was advised to take comfort from the fact that there were no casualties. It was a fortunate coincidence that no-one was home that night! But in the nightmares that followed, Lea always arrived too late to save her house.

When she sought out the help of an analyst, Lea knew perfectly well what had happened that night. She knew why she was anxious and could not sleep. She knew that the fire was caused by an electric short-circuit. Yet something opaque persisted, despite the fact that she had produced a verbal account of what happened many times over. Everything was reconstructed, yet her sorrow and anxiety did not subside because of it. In the presence of the analyst, Lea once again recounted the events of that night. She said she had lost everything. The analyst refrained from any commentary, and simply asked: ‘Everything?’ An utterly small detail then surfaced: behind the grotesque brutality of the fire and the ashes was hidden an old photograph from when she was only a child. In the picture, she radiantly smiled at the photographer – her father. The precious object that was lost in the fire is what this photo represents to her, something secret and radically intimate: the gaze of her father, who had died

many years ago. The trauma of her burning house reduced itself to the trauma of the loss of her father's gaze, which was kept alive in the seemingly insignificant photograph. Lea is surprised, because when her father died, she did not nearly suffer as much as now.

In the analysis that followed, Lea reconstructed the twists and turns of her 'Oedipal drama'. She realized how much she had always been suspended on this childhood smile, offered to her father. The picture assured her of her father's love, on which she kept relying long after his demise: 'Her very being reduced itself to that smile, the real negative of the absent father's gaze.' (Chiriaco, 2012, p. 13, my translation) What is at stake here is not merely the violent destruction of Lea's house. Her suffering did not stop through the repeated reconstruction and narration of the events that factually took place that night. The impact of the loss of that photograph can only be understood when it is taken as a second logical moment that re-actualizes her father's disappearance, which she never actually grieved. The second moment acquires its force through the associations with a prior loss that was never symbolized (see Chapter 2).

This short vignette introduces a number of key Lacanian ideas for the study of trauma. For example, it shows that trauma is always related to the unexpected, the surprising. Trauma entails an encounter that suddenly disrupts the continuity of life. It concerns an event that cannot be recuperated in the symbolical chain that makes up a person's history, but manifests itself as a meaningless hole in that chain. Additionally, it shows that trauma is not simply the direct effect of a horrible external event on the individual. Every external event must acquire some sort of psychical traction in order to wreak its havoc; it must always necessarily be inscribed in the singularity of a person's psychological and libidinal functioning. Lacan approached trauma as an encounter with the real, and although this real always has relation to the fields of sexuality and death, it is impossible to predict the impact of an event on the basis of a set of *a priori* event characteristics. The traumatic real, in other words, must be thought in an intricate relation to the symbolic and imaginary registers that it traverses. In addition, Chiriaco's vignette also highlights the importance of so-called logical time in the psychoanalytical approach of trauma, as something different from linear, chronological time. Retroactivity plays an important part in understanding both genesis and treatment of trauma from a psychoanalytical perspective. Taken together, this culminates in the acknowledgment of the place and function of the subject in trauma – although it must be stressed that the term

subject has a very precise meaning in Lacan's work, one that diverges from its common usage (see below).

In this chapter, I will discuss the category of the real, the key Lacanian concept to think trauma. For those who are not acquainted with Lacan, I will briefly situate his work first, along with a few other concepts that will prove useful in what follows (for example, the subject, the Other, and so on). The bulk of this chapter, however, will be devoted to the two predominant readings of the real encountered in Lacan's work. The real is first and foremost described as a realm of immediate experience, a state of being before the intervention of language or representation. Here, the real becomes something that is gradually lost as the developing child becomes more and more ensnared in symbolic-imaginary reality. Such an understanding of the real as something 'presymbolic' is rather intuitive and certainly has a didactical value, primarily because it adheres to a linear ontogenetic perspective. Despite its merits, there are a number of difficulties associated with it, which I will highlight throughout the text. The second reading of the real, as something 'postsymbolic', abandons a linear, diachronic perspective to understand the relations between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary, in favor of an emphasis on their interdependence. The starting point of this approach is that, as human beings, we are always-already caught within language. As such, the real only ever makes its presence known through its reverberations in the symbolic and imaginary orders.

Introducing Lacan

The name of Jacques Lacan will forever be connected with his *retour à Freud*, in which he attempted to retrieve the essence of psychoanalysis' discovery through a (post)structuralist reading of Freud's original texts. During this enterprise, he gradually developed his notions of the symbolic order, the imaginary order, and the real. The real is arguably one of the central, determining concepts in Lacan's work. However, as will become clear in what follows, due to its very nature we can only ever accurately describe it by tracing the multiple ways in which it is conceived through the articulation with a series of other (psychoanalytical) concepts. The introduction of the central notion of this study will therefore require a few detours through the Lacanian conceptual apparatus.

Within Anglo-Saxon academia, Lacan is perhaps best-known as a thinker of the symbolic order. It is through the uncovering of the workings of structure at the heart of our most intimate self-experience, that the French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst came in touch with those aspects of human existence that are irreducible to structure or language (Shepherdson, 2008). Lacan followed the path of symbolic determination as far as he could, which enabled him to see where structure leaves off and something else enters the scene – precisely as that which resists and disrupts structure. This is, incidentally, not without parallel to what happens in the process of an analysis itself: it is insofar as this practice of speech mobilizes the imaginary and the symbolic, that is, the field of *semblants*, that the real of a particular analysand is brought into question (Soler, 2014).

When discussing Lacan's work, one must keep in mind two different points of view adopted by Lacan scholars. The canonical reading, inspired by the teachings of Jacques-Alain Miller (for instance, 2007), schematically divides his work in distinct periods or stages. This periodization emphasizes the drastic changes made during the course of his theoretical elaborations. Traditionally, the 'early Lacan' is identified with an emphasis on the symbolic, whereby the unconscious is approached as a linguistic system governed by strict laws. The shift to the 'later Lacan' is located in his eleventh seminar on *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), where the real and the drive become the main focus of his attention. The 'last Lacan' is associated with a recourse to knot theory and topology to account for the interrelations between the real, the symbolic and the imaginary (Lacan, 1974-75, 1975-76). Here, the three registers are taken as mutually constitutive and interdependent. In opposition with Miller's division, however, it can be argued that all the developments in Lacan's latest work were there in an anticipated form right from the start, and that the evolution in his theory is nothing but the arduous elaboration of what was already contained in the beginning (Verhaeghe, 2001). This outlook is defended, for example, by Tom Eyers (2012), who refutes the traditional historical narrative to make sense of Lacan's work and endeavors to show that every stage of his theoretical development can be understood as a continuous attempt to delineate more accurately the real as the object of psychoanalytic inquiry.

Both outlooks have their merits and disadvantages. Despite their differences, they share common ground in their acknowledgement that (1) the real has been conceived in multiple ways throughout Lacan's oeuvre, and that (2) due to its very nature, it is difficult to provide a

direct conceptualization or definition for it without relying on other concepts or notions. These points are related: the register of the real is difficult to discuss precisely because it is conceived as the register which cannot be expressed in language or captured in an image. It only ever reveals itself as a surplus or an excess, thus, in relation to something else. As Stavrakakis (1999, p. 73) says: ‘although the real is per definition irreducible to the field of construction and representation, it nevertheless shows itself in the first instance – and indirectly – through the kinks and inconsistencies of the latter’s functioning’. Or, in the words of Richard Boothby (2001, p. 295): ‘As essentially unthinkable and unrepresentable, the real can only be conceived negatively, in terms of disturbances of the imaginary and the symbolic.’ The real makes its presence known through its episodic interruptions into the imaginary and symbolic fields of representation (Andreescu, 2013). Throughout his teachings, Lacan attempted to identify this real dimension of human existence from multiple angles and in relation to a series of different concepts, always unsatisfied with his previous attempts to get a hold on it.

Every development in Lacan’s theory, whether it constitutes a qualitative break or a gradual progression, always derives from an impasse encountered in his prior work. This, in itself, is already an example of how the real continuously resurfaces and dislocates each and every attempt to describe and think through a field of experience by means of a representational system. Lacan’s ongoing work in progress culminated in a theoretical corpus with significance for a number of domains, exceeding the framework of psychoanalysis pure and simple. For instance: in order to account for the difference between his approach and the Ego-analytical methods of his time, Lacan (for example, 1957a; 1959) elaborated a theory of the divided subject which can and has been put to use in various fields of inquiry. Likewise, his particular conception of how social reality is constructed at the level of meaning and discourse digresses from other theories of social constructionism, as it emphasizes that not everything is reducible to language: there is always a remainder, something that escapes the level of socio-symbolic representation (Stavrakakis, 1999). This account of reality as linguistically constructed yet always necessarily incomplete (a feature captured in the notion of the ‘barred Other’ (Lacan, 1958-59, 1962-63, p. 136)) has inspired theoretical innovations in an array of disciplines distinct from psychoanalysis. Amongst them are discourse studies (for example, Parker, 2005) and cultural studies (for example, Barker and Galasinski, 2001), postcolonial critique (for example, Hook, 2012; Spivak, 1999; Bhabha, 1994), feminist theory

(for example, the work of Elisabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva); political theory (for example, Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Žižek, 1989), and so on. Due to the particularities of Lacan's conception of the subject and the Other (the field of the symbolic where the signifying chain originates and the subject is constituted), the levels of individual and collective analysis become inseparable. His subject is no longer an inborn, autonomous entity that exists prior to and in independence of the social order in which it abides. The subject is rather an effect of this social order: it is formed through its interaction with the Other. As such, Lacan's notion of the subject is both contextual and historical – an important digression from the problematic, purportedly universal subject of psychology that underpins both PTSD and the doctrine of human rights. Both the divided subject and the barred Other will prove to be powerful concepts to think through trauma in an innovative manner in what follows.

The substantiated hypothesis driving the current project is thus that Lacan's concepts (such as the real) not only provide us with a productive outlook on the dynamics of psychopathology and its treatment (such as trauma), but that they open up towards other fields of interest (such as politics and ethics) and enable us to think through their interrelations. Although Lacanian theory is first and foremost a clinical theory, to be worked on and put to use by psychoanalysts, it is undoubtedly so that many of its insights are relevant for other disciplines as well – encompassing those that do not primarily focus on or intervene at the level of the individual. It is my contention that Lacanian theory can contribute to a better understanding of how trauma responses on both individual and collective levels are sometimes interwoven.

Clearly, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to reconstruct the different turning points in Lacan's work in general and/or concerning the real specifically, along with their many implications. I gladly redirect the interested reader to a number of high-quality works that have done just that, in particular the monograph *Lacan and the Concept of the Real* by Tom Eyers (2012)^{xiii}. Instead, I will limit myself in what follows to a discussion of two primary forms in which the real appears within Lacan's oeuvre: *presymbolic* and *postsymbolic*. Both are important to illuminate why, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, trauma is understood in relation to the real. As we will see, the hypothesis of the real as inherently traumatic is intimately connected to the thesis that both the subject and reality must come into being by means of the signifier, that is, in reliance on the Other^{xiv}. Neither subject nor reality exists independently of or prior to the symbolic order of language. Moreover, Lacan holds that because of their dependency on a symbolic order which is itself structurally incomplete, both subject and

reality are inherently instable structures, marked by an irreducible lack (Laclau, 1990). The general strategy for dealing with this incompleteness and insecurity involves the imaginary order, which covers over this structural lack through fantasies that offer a promise of wholeness and closure. A traumatic event, then, suddenly pulls away the imaginary cover that grants a degree of stability to the self and the social order. Moreover, the place where this traumatic element is encountered is determined by the symbolic order itself: the real manifests itself where the symbolic bumps up against its own internal limit. Elaboration of these opening thoughts requires a discussion of how the subject and the social order come into being from a Lacanian perspective, and how trauma disrupts these structures underlying comprehensible experience.

I will now go on to further introduce a few useful concepts and themes, which were first encountered and theorized within the context of psychoanalysis. Next, I turn towards a discussion of the two most salient readings of this real and the view of trauma that derives from each.

Lacan the Psychoanalyst

It is important to always bear in mind that Lacan's theoretical edifice was developed against the background of his work as a psychoanalyst. Psychoanalysis is a praxis of speech wherein the person seeking help is charged with the task of saying whatever comes to mind during the session. This technique of free association quite rapidly reveals that what arises in the field of consciousness is affected by 'another scene', which Freud (1900, p. 535) designated as the unconscious. What the person on the sofa intends to say is continuously disrupted by elements that appear to be out of place, nonsensical, foreign. The wager of psychoanalysis is that these seemingly senseless elements do not appear out of the blue: laws and principles that can be uncovered and systematized strictly determine their emergence. Through the practice of psychoanalysis, Freud (1917a, p. 143) discovered that the human being, this strange animal that speaks, is not 'master in its own house': he is not even free to say what he wants, as his conscious discourse is constantly affected by an unconscious to which he ordinarily has no access whatsoever. The conscious ego, then, is not all that we are, as speaking beings. Even in the intimacy of our 'own' minds, we do not coincide with ourselves. As subjects of language, we are essentially barred or split.

The material on which the analyst operates is language, or, more precisely, speech (language in action). Lacan uses the term *signifier* to denote the material substrate that carries the meanings we wish to communicate. Referring to the work of structuralist linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, Lacan (for example, 1957b) insists that a signifier, by itself, does not mean anything. The link between the particular sound pattern of a word (the material signifier) and a specific concept or idea (the signified) is strictly arbitrary and contingent on the specificities of its enunciation. It is only when placed in a network of differential relations with other elements that any signifier acquires a temporarily fixed signification. Speech, for Lacan, can be taken as a chain of signifiers, and it is the chain itself that interprets each of its elements. For instance: an element that surfaces in a dream (a signifier or representation, *Vorstellung* in Freud's terminology) does not simply refer to an object in waking reality, nor does it point to some sort of predetermined, universal referent or meaning. Its significance is strictly dependent on the always shifting relations with other elements in the dreamer's discourse, as produced during the analysis. This is elaborated in Lacan's (1957-58, 1960) 'logic of signification': it is the unraveling chain of associations that, in a retroactive movement, produces the meaning of what went before (Figure 5.2).

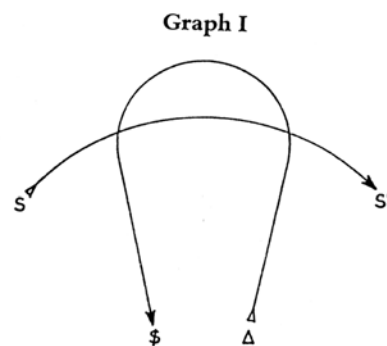


Figure 5.2: the logic of signification

The retroactive meaning-effect emerges only at the point where the chain (S-S') is punctuated. Moreover, through this generation of meaning, *subjectivity* (\$) is produced. The subject is thus an effect of the chain: the subject does not produce speech, but speech produces the subject. In this way, Lacan's subject is correlative to the symbolic order (the chain of signifiers), whereas the ego, as we will see, is tied to the imaginary order (given its function of misrecognition and its reliance upon the image). It bears repeating that this 'subject of the signifier' cannot be inborn or natural, as its appearance is strictly dependent on

the functioning of language. As Vanheule (2011a, p. 47) remarks, subjectivity according to Lacan is therefore ‘not a constancy or permanency. It needs to be created time and time again by using the signifier’. Subjectivity has an event-like status.

Lacan thus breaks with referential theories of language that focus on the relationship between words and the things in the world that they designate. In line with structuralist linguistics, he claims that meaning is not generated by the things in themselves: language does not simply name things that are already there in the world. Instead, language divides the world up in particular ways to produce for every social group what it calls *reality*. Each particular language, or broader, each particular symbolic or social order, has its own way of accomplishing this (Edkins, 2003). What is crucial, however, is that none of these symbolic systems are ever complete. Reality itself is always ‘lacking’; something is always necessarily excluded from its scope. This limitation is structural: it is not a contingent failure that could be remediated. Lacan stresses that the symbolic system of language cannot close in upon itself: the Other is ‘barred’ just like the subject. An element is always missing from its structure, and it is precisely this feature that allows the system to function (Miller, 2012a). What cannot be represented, what falls between the cracks of the symbolic system, is what Lacan designated as the real. It concerns something ‘impossible’ that disrupts every attempt to construct both reality and a stable identity through representation (Stavrakakis, 1999).

The real, then, must be distinguished from what is commonly called reality. Reality is considered the effect of symbolical action upon the real, which is said to *cut into* the latter’s smooth surface, generating divisions, separate zones, distinguishable entities and distinct features (Fink, 1995, p. 24). Reality must come into being, it must be created by language. What cannot be said, in other words, is not part of reality. Given that the real is per definition antonymic to the symbolic, it cannot be part of this linguistically constructed reality. Strictly speaking, the real for Lacan *doesn’t exist*, since he defines existence as a function of language (Fink, 1995). By contrast, Lacan (1975-76, p. 26, 34) will say that the real ‘*ex-sists*’, which means that it is outside of or apart from our reality^{xv}. Whereas the symbolic order and the concomitant reality are structured, as language introduces differences and creates order, Lacan’s real is ‘without zones, subdivisions, localized highs and lows, or gaps and plenitudes: the real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric, woven in such a way as to be full everywhere’ (Fink, 1995, p. 24).

When starting to speak in psychoanalysis, the new analysand is faced with his own submission to a symbolic system that exceeds him or her. Where we believe ourselves to be free, autonomous beings, the speech in analysis reveals that what we say is determined by a series of influences from the past which are no longer in our control at times of deliberation. In addition, the experience of psychoanalysis learns that as human beings, we are irresistibly and repeatedly drawn to certain activities that are against our own interests and that make us suffer (this is what Freud (1920) called the *death drive*, elaborated by Lacan (for example, 1970) as *jouissance* and related to both the real and to trauma). It is by grace of the transference to the analyst, which Lacan (1964, p. 232) redefined as the analysand's supposition that the analyst *knows* the opaque meaning and source of the former's symptoms and difficulties (a supposition that elicits the analysand's love for the analyst), that the analysand continues to produce speech in order to form a belated understanding of these estranging phenomena. As such, the analytic process reconstructs the paradoxical logic behind the unconscious formations.

Lacan re-examined Freud's original texts and suggested that primary unconscious processes such as displacement and condensation are equivalent with linguistic operations such as metonymy and metaphor. It compelled him to famously conclude that 'the unconscious is structured like a language', and to systematize the laws that govern this symbolic mode of thinking. The structuralist thesis that orients this endeavor holds that the individual, as it is usually understood (that is, the conscious subject of psychology), is merely 'a derivative effect of structuring forces operating on a level beyond its grasp' (Hallward, 2012, p. 13). The signifier and the symbolic order, according to Lacan, cannot be conceived of as constituted by man. It is rather the other way around: man is constituted by the symbolic. In this way, the conscious ego is considered a merely 'structured' and not a 'structuring' configuration. The same applies to the realm of meaning in which we consciously dwell: for Lacan (1957b), the symbolic level of the signifier has primacy over the signified, which only arises as an effect of the former's action.

Lacan's project necessitated him to make explicit his ideas regarding what it is that drives the human being; how desire is constituted and oriented during human development; how fantasy organizes a person's mode of enjoyment; how reality must necessarily be constituted for every individual; and so on. The conceptualization of how psychoanalysis works requires the elaboration of a theory of what it is that makes the speaking being suffer; what it is that he or

she asks when he comes to see a psychoanalyst; what it is that occurs in a psychoanalysis and how the analyst operates; what a psychoanalysis potentially has to offer in the end; and so on. I only briefly mention these many questions – and there are a great deal more – to show how an attempt to rigorously think through the psychoanalytical experience leads to a panoply of issues regarding human nature, reality and so on, issues with relevance exceeding the framework of psychoanalysis per se.

Lacan developed answers to these and other questions in opposition with the psychoanalytic establishment of his time, which he suspected to be moving in a direction at odds with the crucial insights garnered by Freud. He vehemently argued that Anglo-Saxon psychoanalysis had adapted itself to the ideals of bourgeois capitalism, promoting the development of a strong and mature Ego able to deal with reality in an ‘adequate’ or normalized fashion (Van Haute, 2002). A first period of Lacan’s work, if we follow Miller’s (2007) historical division, was arguably dedicated to describing the opposition between those supposedly *imaginary* forms of intervention whereby a person is alienated to some sort of outside norm, and the *symbolic* process by which the relation between the (unconscious) subject and the order determining it (the Other) comes to the fore. For Lacan (1957b), the set-up of psychoanalysis is designed to produce the conditions of possibility for the latter to occur. An emphasis on meaning (which is considered only a derivative effect that belongs to the imaginary register) and so-called objective reality during the analysis can easily obstruct the exposition of the symbolic matrix in which the subject is entangled, and therefore should be rejected. Lacan’s advice is to pay attention to the specific signifiers that are used and to observe the manners in which they regularly resurface in the analysand’s discourse, without jumping to conclusions as to the underlying meaning (hence his technical guideline ‘*Gardez-vous de comprendre!*’, ‘don’t try to understand!’ (Lacan, 1956b, p. 394).

Nevertheless, Lacan soon learned that this focus on symbolic structure, notwithstanding its merits, cannot be the entire story of psychoanalysis. In order to avoid the pitfall of ‘interminable analysis’, which refers to Freud’s (1937) observation that the analysand’s speech has the propensity to go on forever without reaching a satisfactory resolution, every analysis should lead to a confrontation with the limit of symbolic determination, a point where an encounter with the real of *jouissance* is orchestrated. The subject of psychoanalysis, then, is not simply ‘structural man’; it is an embodied being marked by language and suffering from a truth that involves the object of fantasy and the paradoxical, corporeal

enjoyment (*jouissance*) tied up with it (Soler, 2014, p. 5). It was only by acknowledging the dimension of the real that Lacan was able, *au delà de* Freud, to define a possible endpoint for the psychoanalytic cure, one that differed from any form of adaptation or alienation to an outside norm. Importantly, the manner in which Lacan conceived the end of the analytic experience is linked to trauma: he surmised that the cure should be oriented towards a confrontation with both the lack in the Other and the subject's estranging *jouissance*. Both are instances of the real, which means that this confrontation verges on the unbearable and the traumatic. Strange as it may sound, Lacanian psychoanalysis pushes toward this confrontation, which entails the so-called destitution of the subject (Lacan, 1967-68), because it is only at this point that a break with the subject's prior modes of functioning becomes possible. These ideas will be picked up and worked out in the final chapter of this book.

Without further ado, I will now turn to a discussion of the *presymbolic* real in its relation to the mirror stage theory of the subject. This will allow for a first understanding of how Lacan thinks trauma as the resurfacing of something which is ordinarily hidden from sight. The reading of the real as some sort of prediscursive or presymbolic field is quite widely spread in secondary literature on Lacan. Here, the real is conceived as something with an independent existence, which can be gradually drawn into socio-symbolical reality. However, parts of it always 'stay behind' and 'remain real' as they cannot make the transition to the symbolic. The contingent confrontation with these unprocessable elements is considered to be potentially traumatic.

The Presymbolic Real

The *presymbolic* real is construed as a domain of immediate experience, 'a level of brute reality that never reaches consciousness without being filtered through representation – by memory, by the ego, or by various internal neurological pathways that mediate and organize our sensory experience' (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 29). For the human being, this primordial real is said to be organized and structured through the symbolic and imaginary registers that represent and distort it. As such, we never simply have unmediated access to the world. The prism of language and our past experiences always fractures the manner in which we apprehend both external and internal cues. This means that how things are in themselves,

without this form of mediation, can only be construed and projected back from within the confines of our current symbolic-imaginary framework. In this reading, the real comes very close to Kant's notion of *das Ding*: it is what lies beyond our representations, the thing-in-itself before it is transformed by our faculties for understanding. In fact, Lacan himself, in a reference to Freud's *Project* (1895a), designated the real with the term *das Ding* in his Seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis (1959-60). It is important to keep in mind, however, that he appropriates *das Ding* not as something essential that provides a solid ontological ground for our representations, but to denote an excess produced by the action of the signifier.

The Symbol is the Murder of the Thing

The purportedly smooth surface of the presymbolic real is divided into 'separate zones, distinct features, and contrasting structures' through the action of the signifier (Fink, 1995, p. 24). This applies equally to the internal realm of the body as to external reality: their undifferentiated, chaotic quality is organized and regulated through the Other. The symbols of language cancel out the real and thereby create reality: by using symbols, we negate the thing and substitute for it with a representation. Thus, following Bruce Fink, we could define the real in a preliminary way as 'that which has not yet been symbolized' (1995, p. 25). By drawing the real into symbols, we annihilate it. Nevertheless, this 'murder of the Thing', the transition from the real to the symbolic, is necessary to allow us to make sense of our life-world (Lacan, 1953-54, 1964-65). For Lacan, meaning is strictly dependent on language, as it is considered an imaginary effect of the symbolic concatenation of signifiers.

The real in this account is something that can be progressively 'realized' over the course of a person's life, in the aforementioned sense that reality is the effect of symbolic and imaginary action. Importantly, however, this process never reaches completion. A remainder always persists alongside the symbolic, because certain aspects of being formally resist this transition: they remain 'real', fixated outside of symbolic-imaginary reality. Paul Verhaeghe (2001, p. 59) argues that because the symbolic order is predicated on the phallus as the primary symbol or signifier, everything therein must be expressed and represented in phallic terms. Consequently, there are no adequate signifiers for femininity, for fatherhood, and for the sexual relation. These matters remain 'real' because the symbolic order, in its reliance on the phallus, lacks an adequate representation for them. Therefore, each and every subject will

have to produce its own tentative answers to these aspects of life in the imaginary order: ‘the fantasy is a defensive attempt to give meaning to a part of the real that resists to the Symbolic’ (Verhaeghe, 2001, p. 53). Fantasy occupies a central place in Lacan’s theory, as it determines how someone constructs his or her intersubjective world (for example, Lacan, 1957-58, 1964-65). Hence the strange entanglement of fantasy and reality in psychoanalysis: whereas fantasy is ordinarily understood in opposition with reality, psychoanalysis emphasizes that it is only through fantasy that reality acquires a degree of consistency. Fantasy attempts to close the gap that is produced at specific points by the incompatibility between the symbolic and the real. It is a defensive construction that veils the lack at the heart of human experience, in order to prevent a potentially traumatic confrontation with it. Already at this point, it is worth pointing out that the same dynamic can be found on a larger scale as well: every culture is marked by specific *collective fantasies* that attempt to give form to the impossible elements of the real. This will prove important when we discuss the real in its political dimension in Chapter 7.

The Presymbolic Real of the Body

One particularly fruitful understanding of the presymbolic real derives from the psychoanalytical account of the subject-formation. A central psychoanalytical claim with regards to human development is that there is no such thing as an inborn identity, no ready-made relation to one’s own body and drives, and no direct or unmediated access to what is commonly called reality. Instead, both identity and reality must be idiosyncratically constructed through the relationships with the caregivers. They are both essentially verbal: ‘each human being is a story and lives in a narrative reality’ (Verhaeghe, 2008, p. 174). Importantly, the construction of reality and identity occurs in tandem with the intervention of the symbolic order on the body. Indeed, before the body comes under the sway of the signifier, it is viewed as the prime example of the presymbolic real. In the course of socialization, the real body is overwritten with the Other’s signifiers, whereby the chaotic ‘polymorphous perversity’ (Freud, 1905) that characterizes it is organized and pleasure becomes localized in specific zones (Fink, 1994).

The starting point of psychological development, according to Freud (1895a), is an original experience of displeasure produced by an array of insistent internal needs such as hunger or thirst. In the first few months following birth, the infant is defenselessly delivered to a

multitude of bodily urges and sensations that produce an unpleasurable rise in somatic tension. These ‘turbulent movements with which the subject feels he is animated’, as Lacan (1949, p.95) calls them, concern a ‘real tension, a component of the drive by which the primitive subject is characterized’ (Vanheule, 2011b, p. 4). Furthermore, the human infant is marked by a lack of motor coordination that renders him or her completely helpless and dependent. The state of being before the intervention of the Other is thus characterized by a fragmented and chaotic experience of bodily irruptions in combination with the lack of proper means to deal with the somatic tension they produce (for example, Lacan, 1954-55).

The child’s response to the rise in bodily tension is prototypical: he or she cries out. It falls to the other (the caregiver) to interpret the cry and to produce a ‘specific action’ (for example, feeding) that will more or less relieve the inner tension (Freud, 1895a, pp. 317-321; 1926, pp. 169-172). Verhaeghe (2008) underlines that in this way, the somatic drive is taken up in an intersubjective relation right from the start. The Other of language is called upon to formulate an answer to the movements of the unstructured drives. However, any answer produced always necessarily falls short of relinquishing the tension of the drive in full.

Freud’s theory of anxiety neurosis stipulates that the somatic tension of the drives transforms into anxiety when it cannot be dealt with through psychical (symbolical) representation (Freud, 1895b; 1926). This production of traumatic anxiety is described as automatic, purposeless and meaningless. Since the infant necessarily lacks the symbolical tools to deal with somatic sexual tension, as these are only acquired to a greater or lesser degree during ontogenetic development, every human being is subjected to this experience of being flooded by a senseless anxiety in his or her early life. Verhaeghe (2001) recognizes in this universal condition a ‘structural trauma’ that forms the driving force behind the development as a speaking being. The idea is that *our own* drive is traumatic if it cannot be dealt with through psychological elaboration, as is the case with the newborn. Indeed, Freud’s descriptions of trauma and the drive respectively share an emphasis on the sudden, overwhelming rise of excitation and pressure that has to be released somehow (Freud, 1905, p. 168; 1917b, p. 275). The difference is that whereas trauma is commonly associated with an external agency, the rise in somatic tension of the drive is produced internally. When this increase in stimulus cannot be discharged through psychological elaboration, this may result ‘in permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates’ (Freud, 1917b, p. 275). The time before the word is thus not a realm of harmony and endless bliss, as it is sometimes imagined.

Even before the arrival of the signifier, being is already split: ‘it’s not as if the natural world were in a state of equilibrium before humans began to speak and disrupted it’ (Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012, p. 11). The illusion of a prior harmony is itself already an effect of the emergence of the signifier.

The Mirror Stage

The presymbolic, traumatic real of the infant’s body is thus intimately connected with the arousal stemming from the partial drives before they are regulated by the Other. The pre-verbal child does not possess an organized experience of his or her body. Lacan’s mirror stage theory (1949, 1953-54, 1961a) stipulates that the drives only become regulated through the process of identification with a specular image found in the outside world. This identification simultaneously constitutes the ego and, as such, provides the basis for an integrated bodily awareness and its accompanying sense of identity. Lacan draws on the research of his contemporaries in developmental psychology to claim that this pivotal moment, in which a child’s developing cognitive capacities allow for the recognition of one’s own self-image in the mirror, occurs between the age of six and eighteen months (1949). Whereas the infant experiences its body as a fragmented kaleidoscope of unpleasurable tensions at first, the reflected image in the mirror contrastingly shows the body as a Gestalt, a unity. Through the recognition that this image is ‘oneself’, and by identifying with it, the ‘proto-ego’ is constituted (Eyers, 2012). Lacan (1961a) stresses that this kind of self-recognition and identification is only possible when a minimal form of symbolic mapping is already in place^{xvi}. The Other thus plays an integral part in the constitution of the ego via the image.

The infant’s paramount discovery of his or her own mirror image is accompanied by a sense of triumph and satisfaction: through identification, the child transforms its fragmented experience of inner chaos in the experience of the body as a whole. Ergo, identification serves as a defense through misrecognition: by focusing on the coherent and stable image, the human infant actively denies or misrecognizes his own incapacity and internal chaos in favor of a (false) sense of mastery. Importantly, this installs an enduring tendency for misrecognition and a ‘generalized search for unity in the world, which actually distorts the experience of reality’ (Vanheule, 2011b, p. 2). The idealized image of the self is the precipitation of the I or the Ego in a primordial form, to paraphrase Lacan (1949, p. 76). It is important to note that the material that represents this body to the subject comes from the outside; in this sense, the

core of what constitutes the human being as such is something ‘foreign’. This is one instance of psychoanalysis’ notorious *decentration* of our innermost selves. Our very being as a separate ego is founded on an external ‘alter-ego’. As such, inside and outside become two intertwined dimensions, which is captured in the newly coined term *extimacy* (Lacan, 1959-60, p. 139): the supposed intimate kernel of our being is revealed to be something external and alien. This will be compounded by the fact that the subject, as distinct from the ego, equally depends on the signifier (that is, the Other) for its emergence (for example, Lacan 1957-58).

The Subject of the Signifier

The formative series of identifications, which attempt to secure a sense of identity and continuity, are never entirely successful. A distance continually resurfaces between the ideal image of the self (unified and in control) and the actual lived experience of the fragmented and uncoordinated, real body (Shepherdson, 2008). Because a stable identity cannot be guaranteed by alienation in the image, the only recourse for the child is to turn to the symbolic level of language in the hope of achieving an adequate representation in the world of words. The search for a stable identity thus continues in the realm of the signifier, which determines and structures the subject (in contrast with the ego, which was associated with the image). However, this escape route ultimately leads to a new impasse: the subject’s identity is connoted, but never denoted exactly by language (Vanheule, 2011a). The subject as constituted in language never achieves a state of fullness, in part because the condition of possibility for its appearance is an act of subordination to the laws of the signifier. Moreover, the subject is dispersed over the signifiers that constitute its chain.

The human being’s entrance into the field of language implies a certain loss. Stavrakakis (1999) argues that what is sacrificed is ultimately the signified as such: the possibility of being fully represented in the symbolic order, of finding in it the signified that univocally captures the singularity of the subject, granting a stable platform for one’s identity. Likewise, the signified of the signifier ‘reality’ is sacrificed as well: as speaking beings, we only have access to a linguistically constructed reality, with no direct access to what lies beyond it. As such, both the subject and reality are structurally marked by lack. The crux is that symbolic identification through the signifier, as an offered solution to the ambivalence encountered in

the imaginary, ultimately (re)produces lack-of-being instead of ‘filling’ it with some decisive content. At a bare minimum, what is lost is the unmediated access to the things in themselves, to a hypothesized real that exists beyond our representations.

The mirror stage theory, then, elucidates our repeated claim that the individual, just as social reality itself, is not simply ‘given’. Both are the product of social construction. However, the process of *identification*, either through the image or through the signifier, does not lead to the consolidation of a stable *identity*, but rather continuously makes the lack-of-being re-emerge in each attempt (Stavrakakis, 1999). Moreover, the impossibility of identification to result in a final identity is precisely what drives the process forward in an endless cycle. Lacan argues that insofar as human beings rely on language to ground their identities and to construct their realities, they are continuously confronted with lack: to be a human subject is essentially to be a subject of lack. However, this implies that this same subject is constantly trying to compensate for this lack at the core of his or her being, through a series of identification acts that, nevertheless, always necessarily fail (Stavrakakis, 1999). Eventually, this structural lack of being, which persists in ‘the division of the subject and the conflicting representations it is made up by’ (Vanheule, 2011a, p. 4), will be misrecognized and covered up by the formation of a series of fantasies that promise unity, coherence and stability (Lacan, 1957-58, 1964-65).

The Return of the Real

The dual conception of the body, divided between a represented, accessible body on the one hand and a ‘real’ body affected by an obscure *jouissance* on the other, allows us to circumscribe, at this level, the nature of trauma as an intrusion of the real. As stated, the traumatic is what cannot be taken up in the image or the signifier and thus persists as real. Or, symmetrically, trauma is the result of a failure of the symbolic-imaginary system of representation to deal with an aspect of the real. The latter formulation emphasizes that what constitutes a traumatic event is dependent on the specificities of this system. This dovetails with the empirical and clinical finding that the ‘same’ event, at the level of external characteristics, may be traumatic for one person but not for another (see Chapter 2).

As discussed, the experience of the body as a unified totality is not something natural, yet must come into being in relation to the Other. Nevertheless, once constituted, it becomes the

background against which a discordant element can be identified. That is to say: once the seemingly harmonious bodily system is in place, every experience that *traverses this unity in a radical way* is a potentially traumatic intrusion of the real. Indeed, Freud, in discussing trauma, referred to the notion of a stimulus barrier or a psychologically ‘protective shield’ that prevents disturbing stimuli to reach consciousness. Trauma is then defined as ‘any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. [...] The concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli’ (Freud, 1920, p. 29). An event is traumatic when it overloads the psychic system with vast amounts of excitation, to the point where normal processing becomes impossible and the protective barrier is pierced. Just as in the preverbal infantile state, the excitation that cannot be psychically bound elicits the affect of automatic/traumatic anxiety. This anxiety is so intense that it is experienced as life-threatening: the subject is at risk of disappearing or dissolving in its toxicity. In analogy with this quasi-neurological Freudian definition, Lacan (1949) holds that the body image itself functions as a barrier against the real of the body. When this defensive function suddenly fails, the body is no longer experienced as a whole: the symbolic-imaginary veil is suddenly lifted, revealing the body as something fractured, foreign and disintegrated. Given the fact that a person’s sense of being a consistent and stable entity is founded in part on the integrity of the body image, it follows that the breaching of this structure potentially undercuts the ordinary mode of experience built around the self as its centre (Lacan, 1949, 1961a).

Such descriptions of trauma are well-known. Their most salient feature is that there must always be something in relation to which a trauma is defined, some kind of barrier to be penetrated. This obviously complicates every reading of the real as traumatic ‘in itself’: the real is only ever traumatic in relation to something else, for instance the psychical structures that constitute the continuity of the body image and the ego. In this regard, the intrusion of the real is something on the cusp between the somatic and the psychic, it concerns an unacknowledged dimension of the body that suddenly breaks through and reaches consciousness. The real is thus not absolutely lost; it asserts itself and ‘disrupts the systems of representation set up to encode and process it’ (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 30).

Importantly, the confrontation with this so-called presymbolic real does not manifest itself as the fullness of an ultimate referent or meaning: since it is beyond any possible signification or positive characterization, it only ever reveals itself as a lack, as a ‘hole’ in the chain of

signifiers that supports the emergence of the subject (Lacan, 1964). As such, the subject of the unconscious is suspended, because its supporting chain breaks. Symmetrically, the ego, which is considered an imaginary formation and associated with the realm of meaning, can be disrupted by the opaque senselessness of a return of the real. The purported stability and coherence of the ego is thereby shown to be nothing but an illusion. Taken together, this implies that trauma has everything to do with the symbolic and the imaginary registers: the real is encountered specifically at the points where something is lacking. Consequently, the real and trauma should be studied starting from the limits and impasses of these registers.

The Impasse of the Real-in-itself

The link between the presymbolic real and the infant's experience before the intervention of the Other poses a few problems for Lacanian theory. To be brief, Lacan argues that both the subject and the ego, and, more generally speaking, organized consciousness as such, only come into being as effects of the signifier. The implications of this claim are vast: in order to become a person, to become an individual, to reach the level of human existence properly speaking, one must necessarily be constituted in and through language. In fact, this ultimately boils down to the idea that a person not only has to die two times, as Lacan (1963) worked out in his writings on the Marquis de Sade, but also has to be 'born' at least twice. First, the human being is obviously born in the biological sense, as an organism (what we called *zoe* in Chapter 4) . Yet besides that, we are born a second time, when we are drawn into the symbolic order and the flame of an organized consciousness is lit (*bios*). For Lacan (1961a), reflexivity and consciousness are strictly dependent on the second type of birth, on the constitution of the ego and the unconscious subject during ontogenesis. Naturally, this begs the question as to 'who' is performing the acts of identification that purportedly lead to the precipitation of the ego and the subject (Frank, 1989). In this way, Lacan's theory is in danger of reintroducing through the backdoor precisely the type of 'inborn subject' that it tried so hard to circumvent in its emphasis on the primacy of the Other.

Given that the world we consciously inhabit is the signified world of meaning, there is no possibility of knowing or saying anything about what preceded the advent of language, since 'we' were simply never there. Whenever we reflect, think or speak, we always do so from within our current position in the symbolic order. As such, when we conceptualize the

preverbal real as a time before the word, we cannot but fall back on ‘the categories and filters’ provided by the symbolic (Fink, 1995, p. 24). When trying to imagine a state before the word, we inevitably take our current selves with us: ‘Once the signifier emerges, what came before begins to exist in the terms that the signifier introduces’ (Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012, p. 11). Thus, the thesis of a presymbolic real can never be more than an afterward construction, derived from our experience as beings of language. It is our existence in language, which is necessarily marked by lack, that produces the mirage of a presymbolic real unaffected by lack.

If we agree that our experience is always-already dependent on language, then the only way in which *we* are ever confronted with the real is through its reverberations in the systems of representations that are already in place and that support our existence. Like I argued in the previous section, it is against the background of a unified system that the real ‘returns’ as a disruptive, traumatic element. As such, the real ceases to be equated with a simple notion of prelinguistic reality. If the real is defined as the impossible to represent and therefore traumatic, then its status is not simply independent of the symbolic-imaginary order. The real cannot be thought in independence of the symbolic and the imaginary: the Lacanian trio must be conceived as mutually constitutive. This is what the term ‘postsymbolic’ refers to: the real only exists as a result of symbolization, as the detritus that this operation leaves behind in the form of an excess, a remainder or a surplus-effect. At the same time, however, it can only be encountered as a lack, from the standpoint of socio-symbolic reality.

The difference between the two versions of the real, in their relation to trauma, can be illuminated by Slavoj Žižek’s (2006) reference to Einstein’s transition from the special to the general theory of relativity. In the former, the curvature of space is explained as the effect of matter: the presence of matter ‘curves’ space (in the sense that only an empty space would be ‘non-curved’). In the general theory of relativity, however, the causality is reversed: matter is no longer the cause but rather the effect of the curvature of space. When applied to trauma this means that the symbolical system is not incoherent because of the disruptions of a foreign, outside element, as a reading of the presymbolic real (cf. the special theory of relativity) might suggest. The turn towards the postsymbolic real (cf. the general theory of relativity) implies that the traumatic impact of a scene is rather the *effect* of an already existent curvature of the singular subjective space, that is, an effect of the structure of the symbolic order itself.

I am well aware of the difficulty of this turn-around. Whereas the account of the presymbolic real has a degree of familiarity to it, the idea of a postsymbolic real is rather counterintuitive. I will introduce it by returning for a moment to the context of psychoanalysis and the technique of free association. This will allow me to indicate how the real is located *vis-à-vis* the symbolic chain; how the determination inherent to the symbolic chain circumscribes an impossibility to be identified with the (postsymbolic) real. To conclude, I will describe the view of trauma that derives from this articulation.

The Postsymbolic Real

Someone who enters psychoanalysis often does so because he or she suffers from a symptom that is barely understood. The symptom presents itself as a ‘hole in meaning’, a piece of nonsense that one cannot get rid of. Likewise, other productions of the unconscious such as parapraxes, bungled actions or dreams equally constitute ‘units outside meaning’ (Soler, 2014, p. 36). They pop up on their own accord in an anomalous fashion, seemingly out of nowhere. The analytic work of free association consists in connecting this unit with others that confer meaning upon it (Lacan, 1953-54). Soler (2014) convincingly argues that ‘every time a parasitic element surfaces in intentionality, it will summon the associative work that produces meaning by revealing the phantasy’ (p. 69-70). Prior to the analytical work, a senseless unit appears as a One in isolation, an opaque monolith. Only by recuperating it into a chain of associations does the analysand recover (a morsel of) its unknown meaning.

When the analysand is confronted with something unthinkable or unmasterable (for instance, a symptom), the transference implies a supposition of knowledge and the expectation that this knowledge can remediate the ‘hole in what he thinks he knows about himself’ (Soler, 2014, p. 41). This knowledge concerning the analysand’s intimacy is transferred onto the person of the psychoanalyst. Conversely, the analyst supposes this knowledge to free association: it is the unraveling chain of the analysand’s discourse itself that somehow ‘knows’, that somehow produces this knowledge (Lacan, 1964). The latter supposition refers back to the fact that so-called ‘free’ association is not free at all. In the chain unfolding during free association, particular *jouissance*-laden signifiers systematically and automatically return. This resurfacing of the same elements suggests that their emergence is not coincidental, but driven

by an unconscious knowledge and wanting-to-say (*vouloir-dire*) (Lacan, 1953-54, p. 242). According to Lacan, the determination in free association is orchestrated by the signifier, and the seemingly senseless elements traversing conscious discourse in fact express unconscious desire. The signifiers that return time and again owe this promotion to the specificities of the life of the particular subject in question. They are the signifiers of the Other in which the subject is alienated, the signifiers that structured the drives of the subject (Declercq, 2000). In his later work, Lacan (1972-73) arrived at the idea that signifiers are laden with the drive (*jouissance*), apart from the meaning they entail. Each signifier thus ‘carries both structure and drive’ (Vanheule, 2011a, p. 152). However, *jouissance* is not distributed equitably across the signifying chain: some signifiers are charged with *jouissance* more than others, and this quality is what drives their incessant recurrence throughout the productions of the unconscious. The surprising elements that surface during free association are thus not without a logic: in the symbolic process of concatenating signifiers, what can and cannot appear is bound to certain laws or rules. There is some sort of determination at work in the unconscious, some kind of ‘action of the structure’ as Miller (2012b) calls it. Nevertheless, the real driving force behind these movements is something ‘beyond’ the chain itself. In this way, determination is distinguished from causality.

Tuche and automaton

The crucial distinction between symbolic determination on the one hand, and real cause on the other, can be approached through the Aristotelian notions of *tuche* and *automaton*, which Lacan discusses in *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964, pp. 53-64). The articulation of *tuche* with *automaton* is helpful to imagine the real as something ‘internally excluded’ from the symbolic order.

The *automaton*, for Lacan, is the network or chain of signifiers in which the symbolic order (the Other) is incarnated. Here, signifiers are combined incessantly according to certain rules or laws that determine the possibilities of circulation and production. Through the elaboration of a series of graphs, Lacan (1954-55, 1957b) showed that when a series of chance events (for example, the pluses and minuses as results of a coin toss) are encoded (by grouping them in pairs or triplets), then it becomes possible to predict what can and cannot follow a certain

group. Take, for instance, the following arbitrary series (the results of a number of coin tosses, whereby ‘+’ stands for heads and ‘-’ for tails):

Series X: + + + - + + - - + -

The result of a coin flip is uncontrollable, since it is determined by ‘so many variables that no feasible, finite list of conditions can be singled out as the cause’ (Dennett, 2003, p. 85). Hence, it is a randomizing device, used in Lacan’s graph to simulate the pure contingency of the real. A second series Y is created by grouping the chance outcomes in overlapping pairs, assigning to the pair ++ the value 1, to +- or -+ the value 2, and to -- the value 3 ^{xvii}. If we write these codes underneath the heads/tails chain, we get the following series, in which each number refers to the plus or minus sign directly above it, in conjunction with the plus or minus immediately to that sign’s left:

Series X: + + + - + + - - + -

Series Y: 1 1 2 2 1 2 3 2 2

From this small example, it becomes clear that a category 1 set of tosses (++) cannot be immediately followed by a category 3 set (- -). Likewise, whereas a category 2 can be followed by either a 1, 2 or 3 category, a category 3 cannot be followed by a category 1. Thus, within the series Y, an order emerges that prohibits certain possibilities while allowing for others. Although series Y is constructed over a strictly coincidental series, and furthermore, although the series Y has no impact on the results of the associated coin toss, it nevertheless introduces a set of rules and laws. One more example: if we start the series of tosses off with a 1 (++) followed by a 2 (+-), we can only find a 1 again in the chain after *an even number of 2s* (See Fink (1995, p. 18)). In this way, we could say that the series Y keeps track of, remembers or even *counts* its previous components. Arguably, the emergent order thus signals the function of some sort of (cybernetic) memory that remembers what can and cannot follow a specific combination (Verhaeghe, 1989). Lacan’s (1960) subject of the unconscious is the afterwards effect of this march of the signifiers.

Thus, although the first, encoded series of pluses and minuses is established contingently, the coding of this series installs a syntax, an order with clearly defined possibilities and

limitations that is not inherent to the ‘pre-existing reality’. As such, within the second, coded series Y (the symbolic level of representation), a deterministic effect is produced that apparently transcends the original coincidence. The chain itself ‘spontaneously’ produces its own determination: the possibilities and impossibilities derive from ‘the way in which the symbolic matrix is constructed, that is, the way it ciphers the event in question’ (Fink, 1995, p. 19). Hence, the term *automaton*: that which moves out of itself (Lacan, 1964, pp. 53-4). When applied to free association in the psychoanalytic cure, the automaton model indicates that it rather concerns a type of ‘automatic association’ (Verhaeghe, 1989).

One clinically significant consequence of this model is that once a form of symbolic knowledge is introduced into the real (by means of a ciphering or counting), pure coincidence ceases to exist (Lacan, 1964, pp. 54-5). An unexpected encounter, determined solely by external factors that seem accidental from the perspective of the victim of circumstance, is immediately caught within the pre-established symbolical determination of the subject in question, the ‘matrix of unconscious significance’ as Adrian Johnston calls it (2005, p. 26). The valence and potential effects of such a contingent encounter derive from this symbolical background. Obviously, this has important repercussions for the way in which we think traumatic etiology: the impact of an external event similarly depends on the manners in which it interacts with this pre-existing matrix. Ergo, it is impossible to predict beforehand whether or not a particular event will cause traumatic effects or not, based on a set of *a priori* event characteristics (see Part I).

The model of the automaton is located within Lacan’s structuralist project, in which he attributes unilateral causal power to the signifier. Signification or meaning, which we experience at the level of consciousness, is not primary for Lacan. The question is not what the productions of the unconscious (symptom, lapsus, dream, and so on) mean in themselves, nor what their nature or essence is. Lacan aims to show that their meaning is a derivative effect of the structure imposed by the signifier, of the ciphering of the unconscious (for instance, Lacan, 1953-54; 1956a), . Psychoanalysis attempts to reveal the primacy and causal power of the signifier in its stupidity; to reveal the subject’s submission to that which lies beyond meaning. What distinguishes Lacan’s project from others that focus on the structuring forces of the symbolic is his sustained attention to those aspects of experience that remain un- or understructured, to ‘absence, lack, displacement, exception, indetermination, and so on’ (Hallward, 2012, p. 3), which is why he is often associated with post-structuralism. In

Seminar XI, this underdetermined aspect is called *tuche*. With reference to the determination of the automaton, the *tuche* denotes what is excluded from appearance, what cannot be said, the impossible. In its movement, the automaton *produces* this impossible that lies beyond the chain. In a sense, the chain behaves as if what is excluded were the ‘truth of everything that the chain produces as it beats around the bush’ (Fink, 1995, p. 27). What remains outside the chain can therefore be said to *cause* what is on the inside. Structurally speaking, something must always be pushed outside for there to even be an inside.

Tuche is thus associated with the notion of causality. Lacan’s account of *tuche* and automaton sharpens a dichotomy, and the question is how both poles are connected with each other. On the one hand, we have structure: the automatic functioning of the signifying chain. On the other, we have something that causes the automaton while at the same time interrupting its smooth functioning: *tuche*. The symbolic chain automatically leads to an encounter with the *tuche*, albeit one that is always missed. The chain leads to a place where it does not bump up against something substantial, but against a point where the expected final signifier, the *point de capiton* that would reveal the full truth of the subject, is lacking. The automaton describes a circular path that always arrives at this destination, the point of *rendez-vous* with the real. However, the nature of this encounter is such that ‘nobody ever shows up’, so to speak. The final signifier is lacking, and this lack is ordinarily covered over through the workings of fantasy. The return of the signifier, determined as it is by the machinations of the symbolic, thus denotes a kind of repetition that simultaneously serves as an avoidance of and an appeal to an encounter with the real. The signifying chain of the automaton both eludes and designates the central place of the real. The crux is that this real beyond the chain is what drives the process forward. The cause, in Lacan’s (1964, p. 22) account, always concerns something indeterminate, something anticonceptual or indefinite. Instead of finding the solidity of a determinate cause at the endpoint of the chain, some sort of substantial prime mover, we only find a hole or a gap.

The Incalculability of the Real

The discussion of *tuche* and automaton is vital for the current project, as it shows that the traumatic real is something outside of, but not without a relation to language. Moreover, it indicates a particular understanding of the real as something *produced* by the fact that human

subjects are constituted through language (that is, a *postsymbolic* real). The productive tension between structure and something ‘internally excluded’ that disrupts and propels the former can be approached in a multitude of ways, but the central idea always remains the same. Whereas structure allows for a degree of predictability, of calculability, the real of *tuche* is per definition incalculable.

In trauma, we deal with an event that overthrows the pre-existing order in which it emerges – and this applies equally to the individual and the collective level. What was valid in the symbolically constructed reality is suddenly and brutally contradicted, because the traumatic encounter is per definition an encounter with what was deemed ‘impossible’ from the perspective prior to its onset (see Lacan (1964, p. 280): ‘the real is the impossible’). Nevertheless, the impossible did happen. This means, for one, that the invalidated laws or rules that governed the pre-existing order of things cannot be relied upon to guide a way out of the traumatic predicament. When action can be decided upon the principles of a certain symbolical order, we are safely within the realm of *calculation*, where things follow one another in a more or less predictable, comprehensible and overseeable fashion. As Calum Neill (2011, p. 118) puts it: ‘Calculation relies on the pre-given, it is internal to the logic of the system’. A traumatic encounter is defined by the fact that the pre-existent ‘logic of the system’ was proven insufficient to deal with what has occurred: it is because the traumatic event cannot be assimilated or recuperated in this system that all sorts of psychopathological reactions emerge (for example, re-experiencing of the event, hyperarousal, emotional numbing)^{xviii}. Hence, a way out of the trauma cannot be predicated upon this pre-existent logic, but must necessarily be based on a *decision*, which is defined negatively as ‘not of the order of the calculable’. A decision is ‘that which must necessarily be taken at the limit of the system’ (Neill, 2011, p. 118). Whereas calculation is ‘the enactment of or on the basis of formulae or prescription’, that ‘which would follow from a rule or law’, a decision (to calculate, for instance) is itself not of the order of the calculable, but is indicative of something outside the law, beyond the symbolic order, of the real (Neill, 2011, p. 118). When a decision is at stake, there is no solid ground to launch from, simply because this ground was gobbled away in the rupture of the pre-existing order. Hence, the foundation for such a decision can be no other than the subject itself^{xix}. These claims will be further substantiated when we discuss ethics in the next chapter and the Lacanian act in Chapter 8.

In terms of the opposition automaton/tuche, we can say that the process of concatenating signifiers is calculable: signifiers surface and resurface, insist and permutate, and their procession is not coincidental but structurally determined. The tuche, by contrast, is a gap that obeys no law. It is a real without rational principle or order, an encounter that takes place as chance, coincidence, contingency. It is the impossible to symbolize, reduce or digest, and it 'always returns to the same place' (Lacan, 1964, p. 280). It can be located where meaning falls, in uncertainty. The tuche manifests itself when something disrupts the working of the automaton, something unforeseen that cannot be traced back to or explained in terms of the symbolic laws of the automaton. Nevertheless, it is precisely this 'hitch' or 'obstacle' that provides the impetus for the activity of the chain (Lacan, 1964, p. 54). This led Lacan to conclude that 'there is cause only in something that doesn't work' [*Il n'y a de cause que de ce qui cloche*] (Lacan, 1964, p. 22) *from the perspective of the automaton*. Cause, then, should be distinguished from that which is already determined in a system. Properly understood, it is something exterior to the system itself. Imagine a line of domino tiles standing upright next to each other: the organization of the system is such that when one tile is toppled, a linear and predictable chain reaction is set in motion which results in all the tiles falling in succession. For Lacan, cause is no longer present once the system is 'put to work' and every falling tile inevitably contacts with the adjacent one. The 'real' cause of the entire domino process is something which put the determined sequence in motion. Or, alternatively, something that interrupts the entirely calculable chain of events once it has started. This *primum movens* can be said to function as cause, but only insofar as it could also *not* have happened.

When discussing this domino example, we obviously find ourselves on the *outside* of the automatically functioning symbolic system that is represented by the line of standing domino tiles. We are not part of the chain and from that perspective, we can indeed identify and name that 'something' which is foreign to the system (a child, for example) but which caused it into existence and set it in motion for the sake of its own pleasure. As subjects of language, however, there is no vantage point outside the symbolic realm that we can occupy in order to capture what it is that lies beyond. We can only attest to the fact that the symbolic register is not sufficient in itself and that it is sometimes disturbed or dislocated, which testifies to an unknowable and unreachable point beyond signification.

Traumatic Rupture

The description of the presymbolic real enabled an understanding of trauma as the resurfacing of an unbearable *jouissance* located at the level of corporeality, something that suddenly disrupts the smooth surface and coherence of the arduously constructed body image. The dynamic between an experience of continuity (as provided by the ego and the body image) and something real that suddenly disrupts this experience can be extrapolated to other dimensions. The main idea here is that both the experience of oneself as a solid entity and the coherence of reality, as prime examples of apparently continuous entities, can be interrupted in an unforeseen way. What underpins this idea is the claim that being itself is marked by an irreducible lack, and that the constitution of both reality and identity as something substantive requires the installation of a fantasmatic screen to cover up the instability that lies underneath. This screen can, however, be ripped apart. Such ruptures are encountered in many different forms, on many different planes. When such a rupture occurs, trauma is one possible outcome.

The postsymbolic real thus signals the constitutive incompleteness of any symbolic structure. In Lacan's ontology, being itself is marked by a gap, which is repeated by the emergence of the signifier. Lack is thus doubled: the lack of being cannot be remediated by the Other, which is itself barred or incomplete. The imaginary register obscures this doubled lack through the content of signification. It establishes a 'signified world of meaning' that we 'consciously inhabit' (Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012, p. 13). The primary characteristic of the imaginary is its ability to erect an experience of the world as coherent and stable: a world without gaps or rents. As Lacan puts it: 'It's in the Imaginary that I locate the support of what is consistency' (Lacan, 1975-76, p. 50). The imaginary allows us to approach the world 'in pursuit of recurrent patterns of meaning' (Vanheule, 2011a, p. 158). This inclination towards images, appearances and unity is purportedly rooted in the experience of the body image (see above). The disturbance of the harmony provided by the imaginary provokes unease (Ibid.).

Traumatic rupture occurs when the natural flow of things is suddenly interrupted by the impossible. As such, the real is not reducible simply to 'something out of the ordinary' that traverses our expectations. The definition of a traumatic event, through the concept of the real, as the impossible which nevertheless occurs has many and far-reaching consequences (Lacan, 1964, p. 280). It means that the very 'background for understanding' must be reworked to

make possible a reading of what happened. Because the magnitude of the rupture in trauma is so vast, it implies a change in the coordinates of what is possible and what is not. In turn, this necessitates a particular form of subjective activity that, because of its very nature, has political ramifications. In Chapter 8, these ideas will be taken up and worked out.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an outlook on Lacan's difficult notion of the real in its many facets. The real can be thought of in terms of something that *ex-sists* outside of language and continuously disrupts representation. Moreover, it is this very disruption, this failure to represent, that continuously stimulates a series of never-ending attempts at representation. The real is defined as the impossible, and it manifests itself in a strictly senseless fashion: its occurrence is entirely unpredictable in that it cannot be derived from the laws that govern the situation in which it arises. Its traumatic force lies in its formal radicality: a traumatic encounter changes the coordinates of what was deemed possible. It prevents the pre-existent symbolic-imaginary system to perform its function of 'ignorant misrecognition' (*méconnaissance*) (Lacan, 1953-54, p. 53). The lack at the core of being is suddenly laid bare and the smooth surface of meaning is disrupted. The field of experience becomes affected by something that testifies to non-meaning, by an opaque and senseless disturbance. Moreover, lack can no longer be covered up by the traversed pre-existent logic. From this, I propose to define trauma as *that which demands a restructuration of the subject in its relation to the Other*.

In the next two chapters, I will discuss the real in its ethical and political aspects respectively. This will lay the groundwork for the elaboration of the Lacanian act in Chapter 8.

6

Lacan's Ethics of the Real

Abstract: In this chapter, I investigate the paradoxical notion of an 'ethics of the real', which refers to Alenka Zupančič's (2000) denomination of the particular form of ethics that derives from Lacan's elaboration of the subject. In psychoanalytic theory, the real is defined simultaneously as traumatic on the one hand, and as the condition of possibility for the subject, and thus of ethics as such, on the other. This estranging logic is elucidated, which leads to the identification of the Lacanian real as characterized by the dual function of 'productive destruction'. The psychoanalytic experience allows me to pinpoint the precise point where ethics and the traumatic real come together: only where the analysand is confronted with the (traumatic) lack of guarantee behind the symbolic order, the subject is called forth to respond with a truly subjective act that reorganizes his or her desire and mode of functioning.

The title of this chapter refers to Alenka Zupančič's (2000) book, which situates and typifies the ethics particular to psychoanalysis, as developed by Lacan mainly in *Seminar VII* (1959-60). In what follows, this paradoxical notion of an 'ethics of the Real' will be scrutinized, whereby the primary focus on trauma is momentarily abandoned. Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of this excursion will be to illuminate the interrelations between trauma and ethics. In

Chapter 4, I argued that the practices associated with the PTSD-construct dovetail with the assumptions underpinning today's prevailing ethical stance, encapsulated in the human rights doctrine. A brief discussion of Badiou's critique of this type of ethics laid bare the problems associated with it, despite its merits: the emphasis on vulnerability reduces those affected to the position of victims and strips them bare of their agency. In turn, this risks producing a general attitude of 'nihilistic resignation' that obstructs the envisioning of alternatives, and thus serves to consolidate the status quo. The framework of PTSD was thereby shown to be interwoven with this particular ethical position – in contrast with the popular outlook that considers it a merely technical, value-free construct. Given the problems associated with both PTSD and this type of ethics, a search for alternatives is warranted.

The central claim of this book is that the concept of the real is at the heart of the intersections between trauma, ethics and politics. In what follows, the goal is to chart the manner in which the real is related specifically to the field of ethics. As established in the previous chapter, the real is the central Lacanian concept to think trauma. It thus comes as a surprise that this same concept is propounded to be the driving force behind a specific type of ethics associated with psychoanalysis. How are we to understand this claim? How can something that is 'inherently traumatic' be, at the same time, the very foundation of ethics? Importantly, what does this imply for our understanding of trauma and the manner in which we deal with it? What place do ethics take in the manner in which we address trauma? These preliminary questions orient the following sections. Our point of entry will be a description of the so-called ethics of the real. In secondary literature, the works of Zupančič (2000), Marc De Kesel (2002) and Calum Neill (2011) constitute its most notable articulations, which we will use as a springboard for what follows. Zupančič's work will be the primary point of reference for this chapter, as her line of reasoning renders vivid in a very clear and direct way the point where the real intersects with ethics. The discussion of the real within ethics necessitates a terminological distinction between morality on the one hand, and ethics on the other. As Neill (2011) remarks, morality is concerned with concrete and sturdy notions of what constitutes right or wrong. Most often, this translates in a set of particular edicts or prescriptions which are consolidated in tradition. Ethics will be revealed to be what lies beyond these particular conceptions of the good, beyond the concrete *content* of the moral codes in question.

Kant's ethics of desire

According to Zupančič (2000), Lacan's elaboration of the ethics of psychoanalysis takes as its point of departure the Kantian break with 'traditional ethics'. This break is twofold. First, Kant acknowledged that the moral imperative is not concerned with the *possibility* of fulfilling certain obligations: morality is inherently a demand for the impossible. As such, he discovered the dimension of desire, as something that endlessly circles around an impossible real, to be central to ethics (Zupančič, 2000, p. 3). Second, Kant rejected the view that ethics concerns itself with the 'distribution of the good': it is not about wanting the good for others as one conceives it for oneself. Both Kant and Lacan rally against utilitarian and standard Christian ethics that try to ground ethics in some calculus of pleasures or gains. As such, their position is in turn very much out of sync with the dominant moral outlooks of our times, which remain strongly influenced by Jeremy Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's forms of utilitarianism. The latter is the paradigmatic example of a consequentialist ethical theory, wherein the moral worth of an action is judged by its resultant outcome: the best course of action is the one that maximizes a positive effect in terms of utility. For instance: 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number' as the measure of right and wrong. By contrast, Kant attempted to ground his ethics in the adherence to a rational principle merely for the sake of duty, which is why it is often considered an example of deontological ethics. Zupančič (2000) argues that Lacan started off from Kant's analysis of the logics of desire in ethics, in order to take an additional step into the realm of the drive as central to ethics. In this endeavor, however, Kant remained the most important philosophical reference point for Lacan, and a large portion of this chapter will therefore be devoted to some of the former's main ideas.

The opening question to be addressed is the following: how is desire related to ethics? The traditional answer is that human desires are excessive: they constitute a dangerous, disruptive force that must be kept in check through the formation of and adherence to a moral code, so that our behavior is kept free of all excess. The unbridled living out of desires is deemed problematic because it interferes with the rights, preferences and happiness of others. Therefore, ethics appears to be involved with a gradual turning away from one's egotistical inclinations towards more and more sociable goals. Kant will turn this idea upside down: ethics will not keep our conduct free of excess, but it is, in itself, excessive by nature. As I will show, this claim derives from his particular conception of 'the good'.

The Categorical Imperative

Kant (1785) famously developed the idea of the ‘categorical imperative’ as the single moral obligation. Categorical imperatives are principles that are intrinsically valid; they are good in and of themselves and must be obeyed by everyone in each and every situation, regardless of the personal interests or desires involved. From the categorical imperative, all other moral obligations are subsequently generated. Importantly, this principal purportedly allows us to judge or test the ethical character of a specific action. The best-known formulation of the categorical imperative reads as follows: ‘Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law’ (Kant, 1785, p. 31). Thus, when I am faced with a difficult choice, I should make explicit the maxim that supports a specific course of action, after which I should rationally investigate whether or not a world in which everyone acts in this same manner is feasible (that is, the universality criterion). If contradictions or irrationalities arise in this imaginary world, then the principle is not valid and should not be acted upon. In this manner, Kant attempted to found ethics as a principle of *reason*, so that it no longer required to be grounded on an external guarantor such as God or Nature. Rationality, for Kant, is the principle of humanity.

Importantly, the categorical imperative is ‘an end in itself’: it is not a means to some other need, desire or purpose. This is a crucial point. Kant holds that it is not enough for an action to be in accord with duty or with the law to qualify as ethical, for what counts is the motivation behind this action: what drives the choice for it? Such a compelling force is called a *Triebfeder*, a ‘drive’ or an ‘incentive’, a general term that encompasses everything from the most basic needs to the most elevated ideas (Kant, 1788, p. xlviii). Kant (1797, p. 51) insists, in a move that seems peculiar at first, that our actions are *pathological* when we are under the sway of such incentives. It follows that in our ordinary lives, our normal, everyday actions are always more or less pathological, propelled as they are by a series of drives or incentives that have nothing to do with the categorical imperative as such. It is worth stressing that the pathological equally encompasses common incentives such as pleasure or happiness (of the self and of others), as these exert a robust influence on the human will that differs from the mere ‘duty’ to adhere to the categorical imperative. It is not that the motivational force or appropriateness of such feelings is negated, but rather that when duty is concerned, they should not be allowed to determine the choice of action. For Kant, the only valid ethical incentive for action, the only non-pathological incentive, is ‘the Idea of duty arising from the

law' (Kant, 1797, p. 46). So, in this reading, if we are to determine whether an act is ethical or not, we simply have to ask ourselves the question which in fact determines our will: duty or some other, pathological influence (Zupančič, 2000). In contrast with the utilitarian ethical position, right or wrong is here not decided by the outcome of an action, but by the motives of the person who carries them out. When the personal appraisal of the consequences becomes the driving force of one's comportment, this constitutes a pathological motive according to Kant, and hence does not amount to 'the ethical' as such.

A brief pop culture illustration can make this more clear. In the American television series of *Spartacus*, we witness the arrival of the main character as a slave in a *ludus*, where he will be trained to become a gladiator. After he passes the test to determine that he is worthy, he swears the *sacramentum* of the gladiator brotherhood and becomes part of the group. Due to his racial background as a Thracian and his haughty and cocky attitude, Spartacus quickly develops a feud with the undefeated Gallic champion of the region, Crixus, a fellow resident at the same *ludus*. The hatred between both men rises as Spartacus becomes so skilled in combat and successful in the games that he is soon crowned the new champion of Capua, during a time when Crixus is out of action, recovering from his battle wounds. One night, Spartacus is caught by surprise in the seclusion of the *ludus* as an assassin sneaks up behind him and attempts to strangle him. By pure coincidence, Crixus walks in upon the scene. Within the framework of regulated battle, in training or during the games, Crixus had many times attempted to kill Spartacus himself – wanting nothing more than to be done with the obnoxious Thracian that took over his hard-earned position and status within the *ludus*, to the point even that Crixus is to be sold to a less prestigious *lanista*. At this juncture, Crixus has several options and is compelled to make a choice. He can just leave the scene and let Spartacus die, without anybody ever knowing he was there and could have intervened. For Kant, this would be a pathological option. Contrastingly, there are several scenarios where he could act in accordance with duty by intervening and saving Spartacus, without however reaching the level of the ethical because he is driven by selfish motivations. For example, he might believe that by saving Spartacus he might regain some of the lost respect and status he enjoyed before, thus potentially preventing the transaction to offload him to a lesser House; or he might want to save Spartacus from the assassin, only so that he himself can kill him in the arena in due time and get his personal revenge. Although his course of action would then be in accordance with duty, it is in all such cases not 'ethical' in the Kantian sense, because duty

is not the sole motive. The third possibility is that Crixus simply recognizes his duty and saves his ‘brother’ – for no other reason than because it is his duty to do so. This would, incidentally, not imply that he thereby relinquishes any of his personal feelings towards the person of Spartacus. That Crixus in fact made a Kantian ethical choice in this fictive sequence is suggested by the dialogue that follows his rescuing intervention. The baffled Spartacus’ question as to why Crixus ‘would save a man whom he hates’, is answered as such: ‘I did not save Spartacus. I saved a brother who shares the mark’. After which Crixus turns away in disgust – once again strengthened in his conviction that Spartacus does not understand what it means to be a gladiator, and is not worthy of being a member of the brotherhood, nor of his popularity with the crowds. However, these personal opinions and motives did not play a part in Crixus’ decision to act, which was exclusively given in by duty (Woods, 2010).

The essential Kantian stipulation that morality is a matter of motivation refers to the distinction between the legality and the morality or ethical character of an action: ‘The mere conformity or nonconformity of an action with law, irrespective of the incentive to it, is called its *legality* (lawfulness); but that conformity in which the Idea of duty arising from law is also the incentive of the action is called its *morality*’ (Kant, 1797, p. 46). The legality of an action does not concern itself with motivations: all that matters is whether or not the action is conform with law. The ethical dimension of an action thus lies beyond this correspondence between action and law: in relation to legality, ‘the ethical always presents a surplus or excess’ (Zupančič, 2000, p. 12). But what is the nature of this excess? As we have seen, it has something to do with the driving force behind an action: the will should be determined solely by ‘the form of the moral law’. Kantian ethics demands not only that action is conform with duty, but also that ‘this conformity be the only “content” or “motive” of that action’ (Zupančič, 2000, p. 14). To recapitulate and schematize this, consider the following theses, put forward by Zupančič (2000, p. 16):

In conformity with duty (the legal)

In conformity with duty *and* only because of duty (the ethical)

These phrases highlight that the ethical for Kant asserts itself as a supplement. This supplement appears to be a ‘pure waste’, in that it does not serve any purpose: in the end, the comportment of the subject remains the same, as do the consequences of the actions, despite any possible difference in his or her motivations. The bottom line is that ethics is based on

some sort of wasteful excess that isn't good for anything but, nevertheless, makes all the difference (ethical or not).

Demand the Impossible

We can now start to see why Kant demands the impossible in his conception of ethics: how can we ever be sure that we are not (unconsciously) driven by a pathological motive in our actions, even when those actions appear to be in line with the categorical imperative? With reference to the example from *Spartacus*: how can we ever be sure that Crixus was not (unconsciously) driven by some (disavowed) egotistical inclination (for example, to regain his prestige)? How can we disregard our self-interest, or the well-being of those that we cherish and love? A second and related problem that arises is Kant's attempt to distinguish a proper ethical drive. As we have seen, all empirical 'contents' of the will, its 'matter', are regarded as pathological. Kant's ethical alternative is that 'form' comes to occupy the position formerly occupied by matter, that form itself has to function as a drive: 'form itself must be appropriated as a material surplus, in order for it to be capable of determining the will. [...] the form of the moral law has itself to become "material", in order for it to function as a motive force of action' (Zupančič, 2000, p. 15). How, then, can something which in itself is not pathological, because it has nothing to do with the pleasure principle as the usual mode of subjective causation, come to be the drive of a subject's actions? How can the pure form of duty, in other words, assume the place and function formerly occupied by pathological elements? As Zupančič remarks, if the latter would operate as a motive for the subject, we would no longer have to worry about the first problem concerning the almost impossible task of the 'purification of the will' (2000, p. 16).

At this point, the parallel with Lacan's conceptualization of the object *a* can be drawn. Object *a* is the ephemeral object that 'drives' desire forward. Its status is ambiguous: although it is called an object, it is not an object that we encounter in real life. This is why it is called the object-cause of desire: because it can never be given as such, it insists and forms the continual basis that supports desire's endless search for 'something else' (Lacan, 1962-63). Lacan states that the ordinary objects that we engage with are related to the dimension of 'demand'. However, after demands have been met, something inevitably stays behind, which is precisely desire in its pure state (Lacan, 1958, p. 580). The object of desire, then, is simultaneously 'a

rock and a lack'; something that is propounded to 'exist', although it can never be reached and thus continues to be lacking (Shepherdson, 2008). In other words: it is the positivization of a negativity, just as Kant's *real Triebfeder*, the ethical motive of 'the form of moral law', is the positivization of the absence of every other *Triebfeder* (Zupančič, 2000). The only 'true' object-drive of the will is nothing but this empty form. The absence of content thus, in both cases, begins to function as a positive, *material* incentive.

The emphasis on motivation in Kantian ethics opens onto the problems of desire and freedom. We have seen that the ethical is concerned not only with what it is that we want when we act in a certain way, but also with *the way that we want it*. However, this assertion leads us to another difficult question: are we free to desire what we want?

The Dispossession of our Intimacy

When dealing with ethics, the question of the subject inevitably takes centre stage. More specifically, we must busy ourselves with the difficult notion of freedom: when, if ever, are we truly acting as free agents? This is a crucial question in contemporary intellectual life. Are we the authors or even the owners of the thoughts and impulses that arise in our minds? Is the fact that 'there is thinking' going on in our heads the effect of some kind of (human) agency? Phenomenological enquiries argue that this is not the case: thoughts pop up when 'they' want to pop up, and not when 'I' expect them to do so (Feyaerts & Vanheule, 2015). Such observations led Lacan (for example, 1964, p. 35-6) to question Descartes' contention of the *cogito*: the fact that 'there is thinking' does not justify the claim that it is 'I' who am doing the thinking. It would be more accurate to say that 'it thinks' in my place. The I, then, is not the root of thoughts, but rather a position *taken in response* to thoughts (Neill, 2011, p. 27).

As discussed, it is pivotal to Kantian ethics to define what it is that drives us in our comportments. Why did we choose this or that course of action? Although we cannot be sure that we have included all relevant factors, we often act as if it is possible to establish a valid account of causes and motives for a specific behavior, a sufficient schema that enables us to understand *why* we acted the way we did. The influencing factors can then be divided into external circumstances that limit our options and push us in certain directions on one hand, and internal impulses and deliberation that appear to offer some degree of freedom and choice

on the other. The problem, however, is that the existence and impact of internal factors not necessarily implies 'freedom' in a straightforward fashion. Is this not the ground-shaking discovery of psychoanalysis, that what arises in the field of consciousness does not come 'out of the blue', but must necessarily be thought in relation to 'something beyond' consciousness that determines its appearance? If there is some sort of psychical determination behind our conscious mental phenomena, then the latter cannot be regarded as 'free' in any meaningful sense. These issues are as urgent and relevant today as ever, and they are debated extensively and passionately in the contemporary sciences of life (see Dennett, 2003 for a discussion).

For Kant (1785, 1797), human beings as part of nature are subject to the laws of causality. He views most of our deepest convictions and inclinations as pathological. As discussed, we only act free if we are not driven by these (unconsciously) determined impulses. To claim that you are free because you 'do what you want' misses the point entirely: namely, that you are not free in what it is you want. Is what we want, for instance, not curbed by the pleasure principle – perverting the dynamics of need satisfaction in service of survival (De Kesel, 2002)? In the final analysis, the human will is arguably always more or less under the spell of some (pathological) representation like pleasure or happiness. In other words, we cannot find the basis for our freedom in our psychology, because our inner world is, against commonsense intuition, just as affected by causal chains beyond our control as the outer world. Saying that a subject acted in a free manner because his behavior was 'internally motivated', in other words, *caused* by 'representations, desires, aspirations and inclinations' (Zupančič, 2000, p. 24), does not enable us to find freedom in any sense, for the simple reason that these internal factors are themselves subject to a strict form of (psychical) determination. Psychological causality points to a being 'under necessitating conditions of past time which are no longer in his power when he acts' (Kant, 1788, p. 122).

Take for example the dynamics in a case of drug addiction. Imagine a man who might wish to end the diabolical spiral of substance abuse when going to bed in the early hours, after yet another night of excess. When this conviction arises in him, it is absolutely true: he is fully convinced that he cannot go on like that. He might even call up his family and declare his good intentions, only to find himself, a couple of hours later, in a state of wanting to resume the habit and use again. This does not contradict his previous exclamations; what he wants for himself simply changes along the rhythm of something 'foreign' inside him – whether we understand this as the physiological aftermath of years of addiction, or as a series of learned

conditioned responses that activate craving, and so on. Addiction shows in an extreme way that we are not ‘free’ to choose what it is that we want – something ‘fickle’ inside us chooses for us. Alternatively, take the case of a man, described by Bruce Fink (2003), who enters analysis with the complaint that he cannot stop masturbating to a homo-erotic and fetishistic fantasy which, in his everyday life, is completely alien to him. This man does not ‘choose’ to ‘enjoy’ this particular fantasy, as this enjoyment estranges him and makes him suffer. It rather appears that the fantasy chose him. To put it somewhat prosaic: a speaking being is a poem rather than a poet (Soler, 2014), someone who is written rather than the author of his thoughts. Although these examples are taken out of the field of psychopathology, it should not be overlooked that the same applies to thoughts and feelings which are deemed normal or adequate: they too arise on their own, following a logic or a determination to which we have no direct access.

Kantian ethics, then, upholds that one must first of all face this dispossession of one’s ‘own’ intimacy. We must acknowledge that we are not ‘Master in our own house’, to paraphrase Freud’s famous dictum (1917a, p. 143). Although this insight has now been generally accepted on a theoretical level, it continues to stir up uncomfortable feelings. At the level of our everyday interactions, the idea that we are ‘in control’ of ourselves, along with everything that this implies, proves very hard to abandon – even for those who conclude from these observations that ‘free will’ (and thus the very idea of personal responsibility and the possibility of ethics) is only an illusion (Dennett, 2003). The latter appear to have no other choice than to ‘go along with the crowd’, as they continue to act, against their better judgment, *as if* free choice was real.

The Ethical Subject

Nevertheless, this is only half of Kant’s story: he does not give in to defeatism or nihilism as he maintains the possibility of subjective freedom, and thus, of ethics (Zupančič, 2000). Kant argues that the feeling of ‘guilt’ that arises when one has made a mistake, even if this mistake is caused unintentionally by oversight or ignorance, points to the awareness that one could have done otherwise (Žižek, 1998). The feeling of guilt indicates that something inside the person ‘accuses’ him or her for the committed action, signaling that he or she was in possession of his or her freedom – despite the possible extreme and inescapable pressures of

necessity that influenced him or her. The discussed guilt here has a very precise signification: it concerns the fact that 'we can feel guilty even for something we knew to be "beyond our control"', when we are carried along by 'the stream of natural necessity' (Zupančič, 2000, p. 26). In this sense, *that* we feel guilty is more indicative than *what* we feel guilty of. Zupančič argues that this guilt is mirrored in the fact that analysands sometimes feel guilty not only for the content of their unconscious desires, but 'because of the very frame which sustains this kind of "psychological causality"'. It is as if they felt *responsible for the very institution of the "psychological causality" which, once in place, they cannot but submit to*, to be "carried along" by.' (Ibid., p. 26, emphasis added)

This is a difficult yet essential point. Freedom is purportedly located precisely in this split between 'I couldn't have done anything else' and 'nevertheless, I am guilty' (Zupančič, 2000, p. 27). Here we meet with the paradox of Kantian ethics: only at the point where I become aware of the fact that I am carried along by the streams of necessity, can I become aware of my freedom. Thus: on the one hand, Kant incessantly reminds us of the fact that we are not free, even in our most intimate psychological being. On the other, he maintains that we are nevertheless responsible for all of our actions. In sum, with Zupančič's appropriation of Freud's (1923) maxim^{xx}: 'Man is not only much more unfree than he believes, but also much freer than he knows' (2000, p. 39). Where man believes himself to be an autonomous ego, at the level of psychological causality, he must find that all of his 'spontaneous' actions and undertakings are linked to the law of natural causality. Zupančič (2000, p. 28) calls this the 'postulate of de-psychologizing' or the 'postulate of determinism'. Instead of being free in the intimacy of our conscious minds, we find that we are determined by the Other as a causal order beyond our control. But at the very point that we admit to this foreign determination, we are confronted with a 'crack' in the Other, with the Other's lack – and it is precisely there that we can find the autonomy and freedom of the subject. The task is to discover where the subject plays an active part in causal necessity.

To be brief: the subject can only experience him- or herself as a divided subject to the degree that he or she has gone through the experience of being 'caused' by a structure that pre-exists and transcends him or her. Through this experience, one can discover oneself to be something impossible, something which denies the most fundamental aspect of human existence. That is: an entity lacking freedom and autonomy, a mere object on which circumstance operates. However, this movement of de-psychologization is never complete, as there always persists

some kind of left-over element, which can serve as the basis for the ethical subject to appear. From this reading, it follows that the ethical subject needs to be teased out, needs to be brought into existence along a certain path. It must be ‘made to appear’, as it is normally occluded from sight. In the end, the subject must come to recognize the part that he or she plays in what appear to be the laws of natural necessity. Whenever we are ‘driven’ along by some kind of *Triebfeder*, whether it is pathological or not, we must always presuppose a subjective ‘act’ that instituted it as a sufficient cause (that is, instituted it into the maxim that guides the subject’s action). This is what the elusive idea of ‘*being responsible for the very institution of the “psychological causality” that cannot be resisted*’ is about. Even when we act in line with a principle of ‘self-preservation’, we cannot simply uphold that this is a genetically ‘caused’ comportment. Kant holds that it entails a subjective decision that gives this principle the authority to dictate our actions. To illustrate this, picture a man who explains the fact that he incessantly cheats on his wife by referring to his evolutionally developed, hard-wired male programming, which incites him to spread his genetic material as widely as possible: can we honestly say that this man is irresistibly driven by his genetic build-up? Obviously, at many instances we are not aware of which specific maxim determines our choices. This maxim is often left implicit, but it is nevertheless not impossible to recover it through reflection.

In other words, there is no ‘cause of the cause’: ‘it may well be that you were dragged along by the torrent of (natural) necessity; but in the final analysis it was you that made this cause the cause’ (Zupančič, 2000, p. 34). It is only because the cause of the cause (the Other of the Other) is lacking, that the subject is called upon to take upon itself the responsibility for this missing guarantee, this lack of necessity. This does not mean that a person consciously ‘chooses’ the maxims that guide his or her actions. For example, Jacques-Alain Miller (1995) discusses a case of a man for whom the psychoanalysis revealed that his object choices were always determined by a singular trait: he was attracted to women who somehow represented death. Sometimes he liked a woman because of her pale skin, another because she was ‘the corpse of the party’ (the one who stood unmoved while everyone else was dancing and having a good time), and so on (Miller, 1995, p. 238). The analysis of this man revealed that somehow his object choice was determined by an unknown maxim that made a ‘death trait’ function as a drive. When confronted with a woman marked by this peculiar trait, this man simply could not resist. This ‘decision’ must be ascribed to the subject, although it cannot be

located in historical time, nor has it ever been experienced as such. It is an 'unconscious decision', which obviously raises the question whether or not the 'conscious I' is responsible for it.

To complicate things further, there is a strange temporal dynamics involved with this 'act' of the subject that institutes the cause as cause. This type of act is propounded to be the act *of* the subject, while at the same time this act is the 'condition of possibility' for the subject's arrival: the subject is said only to arise as an *effect* of this act. This is reminiscent of Freud's thesis of the *Neurosenwahl*: the specific dynamics of an unconscious structure are consolidated at a mythical point in time where a 'subjective response' to castration supposedly occurs (Freud, 1913a). Freud maintained that the difference between neurosis, psychosis and perversion flows precisely from the kind of response given with regard to the threat of castration (respectively repression, foreclosure and disavowal). Here, also, the neurotic/psychotic/perverse subject only comes into being as the effect of this choice, while we must necessarily consider it as something *chosen by* this very same subject. That this counterintuitive temporality is not a trivial or merely academic matter, is evidenced in the fact that without this postulate, psychotherapy as a praxis becomes impossible (Verhaeghe, 2001, pp. 50-1; Reisner, 2003).

The emergence of the (ethical) subject is thus only possible because the Other is lacking or incomplete. Whereas our intimate phenomenological experience gives us the impression that we are free agents, making our own choices on the basis of internal data, we find that this conscious inner life is strongly determined by a causal order beyond our control – and thus cannot serve in a straightforward manner as the basis for our freedom. However, there is a gap at the heart of the symbolic system that sustains us as thinking and speaking beings of language: the element that guarantees this order is missing. For Lacan (for example, 1964), *the experience of this lack constitutes a traumatic encounter with the real*, which is the condition of possibility for the emergence of the subject. The subject, in this confrontation, is required to act, to somehow respond to the abyss that opened up. Simultaneously, the subject is declared to be nothing but the precipitation of this very act. In conclusion, we find that the real dimension at work in ethics is to be located precisely at the point where something is lacking in the chains of symbolical determination, which requires the supplementation of the subject's act.

Passage to Lacan: Kant *avec* Sade

Although Lacan (1963) applauds the acknowledgment of the place of desire and the subject in ethics, he identifies a series of interrelated problems associated with Kantian ethics, which he discusses by scandalously juxtaposing Kant with his unexpected ‘other’: the infamous Marquis de Sade (Lacan, 1963). This pairing appears absurd at first: what could possibly be the relation of Kant’s stringent ethical attitude with Sade’s seditious project of unlimited pleasurable violence? Is there, more broadly, Žižek (1998) asks, a line to be drawn from Kant’s formalist ethics, in its insistence on the autonomy of Reason, to the atrocities of the 20th century wherein killing became a ‘neutral business’^{xxi}? Lacan puts these difficult questions on the table to tease out what he considers certain unacknowledged aspects of Kantian ethics, from its disavowed premises to its ultimate consequences. His point of entry links up with the famous Kantian example of the gallows, discussed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788, p. 44):

Suppose someone alleges that his lustful inclination is quite irresistible to him when he encounters the favored object and the opportunity. [Ask him] whether, if in front of the house where he finds this opportunity a gallows were erected on which he would be strung up immediately after gratifying his lust, he would not then conquer his inclination. One does not have to guess long what he would reply.

Lacan (1964, p. 659) counters this reasoning by referring to the clinic of psychoanalysis, where it is not unusual to meet with a subject who can only (sexually) ‘enjoy’ when violating some kind of prohibition, and who is thus constantly faced with the possibility of being (metaphorically) ‘hanged’. Here, gratifying sexual passion ‘involves the suspension of even the most “egotistic” interests’ (Žižek, 1998, p. 14). In a sense, the subject is driven by something destructive beyond his control: we cannot simply say that he acts to maximize his own enjoyment or well-being. It is rather exactly the opposite: he is driven by an unconditional command to seek a gratification which is located beyond the pleasure principle, which does not serve the person’s ego in any way. We are dealing here with what Lacan called *jouissance*: a force that can make us act against our own well-being and ‘pathological interests’. Because this *jouissance* is a form of suffering, the whole situation changes its character, and the meaning of the moral law itself is completely altered (Zupančič, 2000, p. 99). The question, then, is the following: if the subject acts only because of an unspecified

desire, which is oriented towards a strange type of object that is nothing but the positivization of a negativity (see above), can we then call this an 'ethical act' in the Kantian sense? Is this subject's 'passion' ethical, taking into account that for Kant nothing but the moral law can induce us to put aside our pathological interests and accept our own death? For Lacan, the answer is a definite yes: *jouissance* is not opposed to the law, but is itself the very kernel of the law^{xxii}. Furthermore, he claims that this dimension of 'ethical passion', which he first discovered in Sade, is inherent to the Kantian theoretical edifice as such, and not just some coincidental manifestation or unjustified appropriation (Žižek, 1998).

The root of the problem, Lacan argues, is that Kant fails to take into account the 'subject of enunciation' of the moral law – the one who utters the statement (Lacan, 1959-60, p. 64, p. 82). For Kant, this issue seems meaningless, because the categorical imperative is seen as an 'impersonal command' which comes 'from nowhere'. Sade, then, makes explicit this function of the moral law's 'enunciator'. According to Žižek (1998), it is precisely because the function of enunciator is taken up by a sadistic executioner/torturer in this oeuvre, that the content of the categorical imperative, the maxim to be followed, radically switches from Kant's respect for the other as an end-in-itself towards Sade's reduction of the other as a means for exploitation. The crux of the matter is that the categorical imperative must always be posited *by someone* who is called upon to act in a specific situation. As such, the problem of enunciation is intertwined with the movement between the particular and the universal.

Is the truth of Kantian ethics, then, and the point of Lacan's juxtaposition of Kant with Sade, that Kant's 'impersonal' Law is nothing but the edict of a maleficent superego that sadistically enjoys the subject's impotence to meet the required standards? Should the enunciator of the categorical imperative be identified with this sadistic superego? Or is this not what Lacan is after? The point that he seeks to make with the 'with' is not so much that Kantian ethics ultimately and necessarily digresses in some Sadean nightmare orchestrated by the superego. On the contrary: Lacan aims to show the dangers *of not following through with Kantian ethics stringently enough*. What Lacan (1963) recognizes in Sade is the perverse attitude of assuming the position of object-instrument of the Other's desire. Crucially, this move only becomes possible because Sade does not take full responsibility for what he proclaims to be his Duty: the Sadean perverse subject puts his or her maxim in the mouth of the Other.

Kantian ethics notoriously leave open the content of what is right and wrong, of what needs to be done at the level of concrete action. This is often identified as its greatest weakness, but it also makes up its greatest strength. The categorical imperative functions as an open structure: it does not directly tell me *what* my duty is, it merely tells me *that* I should accomplish my duty. However, to be useful in particular situations, it must be filled with some kind of empirical content, which, because of the nature of the ethical principle itself, is then elevated to the form of universal necessity: ‘Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law’... This means that, ultimately,

it is not possible to derive the concrete norms I have to follow in my specific situation from the moral Law itself - which means that the subject himself has to assume the responsibility of ‘translating’ the abstract injunction of the moral Law into a series of concrete obligations. (Žižek, 1998, p. 21)

In this movement, by inventing its universal or necessary dimension, a particular or contingent object is elevated by the subject to the ‘dignity of the Thing’, which is Lacan’s definition of sublimation (Lacan, 1959-1960, p. 112).

As discussed, Kant holds that we cannot shy away from our duty by hiding behind the image of our fellow-man. For example: ‘telling the truth’ is a perfect duty according to Kant, which means that it holds true in each and every circumstance. This is so because lying would contradict the reliability of language as such, which is deemed unacceptable as it undermines the principle of rationality itself (Zupančič, 2000). From this, it notoriously follows that when a professed murderer informs you of his plans to kill your wife, and asks you to tell him where she is, according to the categorical imperative you are obliged to answer truthfully (in this Kantian example, for the sake of the argument, not giving an answer is excluded, so that the choice is limited to lying or telling the truth). The categorical imperative here once again shows its ‘inhuman’ face, as it holds that moral actions cannot be judged by the expected consequences but simply pertain to duty. Examples like these show that one of the main reasons why we continue to act ‘pathologically’ is because of our estimation of the consequences that our actions will hold for other people. If we do not act in a strictly ethical way, it is because in the end we meet with the final ‘obstacle’ of the good of our fellow-man^{xxiii}. We thus find ourselves once again confronted with a paradox: can it ever be my duty to relinquish my duty? Are there circumstances where I have no choice but to concede on my duty, because it would be unacceptable given the consequences of following through with it?

If we follow through on Kant's line of thought, it is always faulty to uphold that there was no other choice, that through the force of circumstance I could not have acted otherwise. We are always guilty when we give way on our duty, even if we believe ourselves justified in doing so.

Lacan, in his reference to Sade, alerts us that the reverse should also be accounted for: we cannot hide behind our duty, and use duty as an excuse for our actions. The latter is the basic stance of perversion: 'I am sorry to do this to you, I am only doing this because the Other demands it of me, it is beyond my control, it breaks my heart to do this but I must', and so on. The perverse subject presents himself as the instrument of the Other, as the one who ensures the Other's enjoyment, thereby disavowing the surplus of enjoyment that he himself derives from carrying out his 'sacral' task. In this perverse logic, it is the Other who enunciates the law and makes the subject his instrument. The only answer to such a perverse stance, as Zupančič (2000, p. 59) points out, is to ask: '*where is it written that this is your duty?*' Remember that Kant's ethics uphold that duty is only that which the subject makes his duty. Thus: we cannot hide behind an *a priori* constituted 'truth' or unbreakable Law that stipulates what we are to do no matter what the situation is. Here we arrive at the source of the problem, which lies in the idea that the categorical imperative is a test that unambiguously tells us what our duty is, and thus provide us with an 'objective' guarantee.

When Kant holds that to tell the truth is a perfect duty, this seems to imply that this principle has been 'tested' through the machinery of the categorical imperative, so that it henceforth can function as some kind of 'commandment' to be followed by everyone in each situation. It is precisely the proclamation of this sort of universal commandment that allows for the perverse subjective position: 'I could not do otherwise than follow my unconditional duty, I was but the instrument of a Will that surpasses my own'. Lacan's point is that this contention is precisely not Kantian enough (thereby implicating that Kant himself shied away from following his own line of thought to its radical endpoint). The ethical can never be consolidated in a series of everlasting commandments (*morality*), because such a list could never account for the role of the subject in the constitution of the universal or the law (*ethics*), that is, the subject's act of enunciation. This is what Neill (2011) has in mind when he discusses the 'impossibility of ethical examples'. In his seminar on ethics, Lacan (1959-60, pp. 243-87) discusses the case of *Antigone* at length, close-reading Sophocles' ancient Greek tragedy. The ethical message of this play has been debated extensively. Some elevate

Antigone's insistence to bury her brother to the paradigm of the ethical act – as she appears unmoved regarding the consequences that this insistence will bring upon herself. Because this particular brother was killed in an insurgency against the city of Thebes, the new king Creon declared that he was to be treated as a traitor and his body left to rot outside the city walls. Antigone determined this to be unjust and adamantly pursued plans to bury her brother herself, thereby only appealing to the 'laws of the Gods' to justify her actions. As a result, Creon ordered for her to be buried alive. Despite her knowledge of the fatal and horrific consequences that she would face, Antigone persisted in her conviction – in defiance of the cruel and stubborn king. Is Antigone's example to be admired and followed or not? Lewis Kirshner (2012, p. 14) sharply remarks that instead of being an admirable model, Antigone seems 'closer to a fanatic, someone who conceivably needs an analysis', given the fact that her desire seems fixated or frozen in an absolute certainty that borders on delusion. Nevertheless, it is alluring to read this play as an 'ethical example' to be followed by others. And indeed, a case can be made that Antigone's act exhibits many of the traits of a truly subjective, ethical act: for instance the fact that it is desire made manifest, that she appeals to something 'beyond signification' that is of the order of the Real to explain herself, that she does not 'cede on her desire', that her act alters the contours of what is deemed possible, and so on. Žižek (for example 1991b, 2000, 2002) finds this reading seductive; he recognizes in Antigone the transgressive gesture that marks a 'true' act in his view.

Neill, however, takes things in another direction, as he convincingly argues that the space of ethics cannot be reduced to being simply 'contra the law'; if this were true, then it would be strictly *determined* by the law or the system. The ethical is something beyond the law or system, beyond the couplet of good and evil. Whether the subject acts in conformity with the law, or against it, the essential point remains the same: both require the subject's assumption of, and as, the cause or justification of that action. Even when we act in accordance with the law, we must take upon ourselves the decision to subscribe to the existent practice or norm. The ethical entails the assumption of cause by the subject, without appealing to some sort of (Other) foundation for his or her action. The ethical is the point at which the subject assumes upon itself the impossible place that would guarantee the law. Now, if the ethical consists in this moment of assumption of the cause of one's existence as a subject, then it follows that the very idea of an 'ethical example' is nonsensical. To confer upon Antigone the status of an example to be followed (or to be opposed), is to make of her act a *rule* or a *law*: for example,

‘Thou shalt transgress the symbolic’. Whenever an example to be followed is formulated, it is recuperated to a law. As such, it loses precisely that which made it ethical in the first place: the moment of declaration or enunciation that necessarily accompanies it. Lacan’s discussion of *Antigone* thus does not aim at providing the reader with a moral code to be followed. The significant ethical dimension of the play lies rather in *Antigone’s beauty*: in all of her splendor, *Antigone* evokes a series of emotions in the spectator, stirring up his or her desire (De Kesel, 2002). She does not provide us with an example to be followed, but rather discloses the tragic shape of human desire. *Antigone* shows that desire eventually leads to the place *beyond* the good, that desire’s ultimate goal is not compatible with the self-preservation of the desiring subject (Lacan, 1959-60, pp. 270-87) . She shows that the death drive, or *jouissance*, is operative in our desire for the good and, thus, in ethics (De Kesel, 2005). As such, her aesthetic quality is of ethical value: it allows the audience to experience the limit of the real, without being completely sucked into it to the point of disappearance. The ethical dimension of beauty consists in the fact that it demands a (subjective) response from this other.

From voluntarism to *jouissance*

So far, we have discussed the manners in which Lacan critically approached Kant’s ethical project. Kant’s neglect of the difference between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the enunciated (the symbolic identity the subject assumes through his statement) was thereby identified as the source of a range of problems. It is precisely at this point that Lacan will depart from Kantian ethics, to give it a twist that takes it beyond the level of desire and into the dimension of the real. In relation to this, we have seen the danger that resides in the view of the categorical imperative as a guaranteeing test that tells us once and for all what our duty is. Such a view implies that the ‘universal’ is already given, and must merely be translated into the concrete situation of the here and now. The opposite appears to be the case: it is only through the ethical moment that the universal is posited as such. The paramount concept that will allow us to think how the escape from the real is possible, once its abyss has opened up, is the Lacanian elaboration of the ethical or subjective act (see Chapter 8).

Kant also discussed the notion of the act, but concluded that an act of ‘radical good’ or ‘radical evil’ could never be achieved in human mortal existence. He presupposed an

inseparable link between the ability of performing an ethical act and the purity of the will of the person involved (Zupančič, 2000). Hence, he concluded that this type of act is out of reach for human beings, as its condition of possibility is a ‘holy will’. The latter can only be imagined as the mythical endpoint of an endless, asymptotic pursuit to achieve ethical perfection and freedom, which necessitated Kant to postulate the ‘immortality of the soul’ (Zupančič, 2000, p. 75). By contrast, Lacan posited that the ethical act is not beyond the possibilities of the human being. Ethical acts do occur. Contra Kant, however, he maintained that this occurrence is not the result of the divine or diabolical *will* of the subject. If someone acts in an ethical manner, it is not because he or she is an angelic creature: such a romanticizing reading derives from a *voluntaristic* understanding of what takes place in the act. Lacan placed *jouissance* at the heart of ethics, and *jouissance* is not a matter of the will. In fact, Kant’s soldering of the ethical act to the (holy) will of the subject, the requirement of a subject ‘equal to the act’, implies once again the effacement of the distinction between the level of the enunciation and the level of the statement discussed earlier. Subsequently, this effacement is excluded as impossible: it can, as such, never be reached in ordinary human existence. Lacan will argue that, to the contrary, the ethical act does not abolish this split, but rather discloses it, makes it present. He stresses the fact that the subject is *alienated* in its ‘own’ act (1967-68), that the subject is ‘not “the hero” of his act’ (Zupančič, 2000, p. 101). Put differently, we might say that the subject is ‘realized’ or ‘objectified’ in the act. As such, the Kantian requirement of a holy or diabolical will as the condition of possibility for accomplishing an ethical act is no longer pertinent. Lacan breaks with Kant’s view that the coincidence of the will with the Law is the condition of an ethical act.

In the following chapters, the notion of the Lacanian act will be discussed in greater detail. Just like the real, it will be an important concept to tie together the registers of trauma, ethics and politics. For now, it suffices to acknowledge the logical point where it becomes a possibility and the liaison function that it performs. I will discuss these by summarizing the main ideas of this chapter in their relation to the category of the real.

Conclusion

Lacan showed that the possibility of both the subject and the ethical is related to the fact that the symbolic system is found lacking. The element that guarantees this system, the so-called 'Other of the Other', does not exist. There is, in other words, an element missing from the symbolic structure, which is the precondition for it to function (Miller, 2012a). From this, it can be deduced that the real is an *effect* of the symbolic, something that only comes into being in relation to representation (cf. Chapter 5). The symbolic, here, is structured in a way that produces some kind of excess, some surplus or remainder. The real itself has a paradoxical double nature: it is a *void* (something lacking) which is subsequently transubstantiated into an *object* that materializes this negativity (Lacan's concept of *objet a*). The dimension of the real, then, in which both subjectivity and ethics are lodged, is to be situated in the fact that the law is *an-archival* or without grounds (*arche*). It is the failure of this system to found itself that makes the ethical possible. Only in the encounter with the lack of the Other can the subject experience itself as subject (Neill, 2011). When Zupančič identifies Lacanian ethics as an 'ethics of the Real', she thus refers to 'an attempt to rethink ethics by recognizing and acknowledging the dimension of the Real (in the Lacanian sense of the term) as it is already operative in ethics' (2000, p. 4), and not to an ethics that elevates the real to the status of a psychoanalytically defined 'good' to be pursued (De Kesel, 2005).

Psychoanalytic theory holds that the confrontation with this gap is traumatic: it engenders what Freud called a 'traumatic anxiety' that threatens to destroy the subject (see above). The symbolic-imaginary system, which 'houses' the subject of the signifier, is per definition incapable of providing the means for confronting this lack. In the midst of this chaos, then, an act or a decision is required to supplement the deficiency of the symbolic. Through the act of the subject, the missing 'cause of the cause' is installed. This response is the potential emergence of the ethical. The gist of Lacan's argument here is subtle and must not be missed: a true act is only possible at the moment when the strict determination by the chains of symbolical necessity is broken. As discussed, we are looking for the point where the subject can be considered to be 'free', the point where his or her own *causation* becomes a possibility. This will be addressed in more detail when we critically investigate the concept of the act in what comes.

The ethical moment is intrinsically related to the breach in the symbolic or the law. This implies that it cannot exist simply in isolation or complete independence of the law. Symmetrically, Neill (2011, p. 225) continuously stresses the necessity of re-inscribing the act in the symbolic: 'in order for the subject to have understood to have experienced the act or to have experienced itself as acting this would necessitate the act's (re)inscription in the symbolic'. Therefore, the ethical is not a stable 'realm' in which we can dwell, it is not something that we can take up once and for all. Just as the unconscious and the subject, the ethical is characterized by its pulsating nature. As discussed in relation to the impossibility of ethical examples, it is something that must be taken up time and again. The ethical act passes back and forth between the limit of the symbolic, at which the real awaits, and the point of reinscription in a field of representation that is fundamentally altered by its intervention. For this reason, it can serve as a transitory concept which, with regard to trauma, allows us to think what is involved in breaking away from the deadlocks of the real. In this manner, the ethical is emphatically put at the forefront of what is at stake in trauma. One of the main problems associated with PTSD is precisely that it approaches trauma as a technical problem, which is to say what, exactly, if not that the dimension of the ethical has been purportedly extracted from it? Lacan's psychoanalytical elaboration of trauma precisely enables us to put the disavowed question of ethics in trauma back on the table.

7

The Lacanian Real in Politics

Abstract: This chapter deals with the centrality of Lacan's concept of the real in the movements of politics and societal transformations. An engagement with the works of philosophers such as Stavrakakis, Žižek and Laclau allows me to demonstrate that a disruptive encounter with the real is the driving force behind socio-political processes of symbolization. As such, the concept of rupture is connected with sociopolitical innovation. However, the traumatic impact of such large-scale, societal ruptures has been left unaddressed within these socio-political theories. The tension between psychiatric and socio-political concerns in the face of the contingent dislocations of the real are rendered tangible. The juxtaposition of Lacanian trauma theory and philosophical contributions on rupture-predicated societal change allows me to identify of the 'moment of the political' in trauma recovery.

In the spirit of the previous chapter, I will now turn towards the place of the Lacanian category of the real in the field of politics. The link with trauma will become evident much sooner in this chapter, specifically when I discuss the formative role of shared fantasies in social groups – and the deteriorating effects that follow the traversal of such foundational structures. In recent years, several authors have argued that it is precisely in such moments of

(traumatic) rupture that *the political* surfaces, as something distinct from and constitutive of *politics* as we know it (for example, Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012; Johnston, 2009; Laclau, 1990; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Stavrakakis, 1999).

The primary goal of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the general rationale behind the claim that the Lacanian real is operative at the heart of politics. Luckily, a growing number of academic contributions have explored this difficult terrain over the past three decades, following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's pioneering 1985 study *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, in which the significance of Lacanian theory for political analysis was first argued. Slavoj Žižek (1989) subsequently signalled the importance of this study to a broader audience in his first book written in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, and spent a lot of time and effort to further elaborate this emerging field of investigation. For our immediate purposes, Yannis Stavrakakis' 1999 book *Lacan and the Political* offers an excellent introduction to the juxtaposition of political theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

When Lacan's work is discussed directly with regard to politics, this is usually limited to his interventions at the level of the psychoanalytical institution. Admittedly, Lacan's stance *à propos* the psychoanalytical establishment of his time on the one hand, and his position with regard to his own legacy on the other, are amongst the most telling of the scant pieces of information at our disposal to reconstruct his personal political views and engagements – supplemented by a few explicit and skeptical remarks made to an audience of students in the feverish context of May '68. Although such historical and biographical fragments may indeed tell us something about Lacan's private political convictions, such as his distrust of utopian fantasies, this is not what primarily concerns us here. The relevance of Lacan's work for political theory does not derive from his biography. The goal of this chapter is rather to elucidate what Lacanian theory, and more precisely, the category of the real, implies for the manner in which we think politics. Much like with ethics, it will appear that the real is already at work in politics, and the primary task is to clearly delineate its unacknowledged place and function, for example in the impasses arising in this field. Indeed, the Real will once again reveal itself to be a Janus-faced concept, equally stumbling block and propeller for the movements that effect social change.

This line of thought could be summarized with an appropriation of Zupančič's preliminary definition of the 'ethics of the real', discussed in the previous chapter: 'is it possible to determine a "politics of the real", which attempts to rethink politics by recognizing and

acknowledging the dimension of the real as it is already operative in politics'? Note that putting things in this manner circumvents a common problem associated with bringing together psychoanalysis (or psychology, for that manner) and the political: the reduction of the level of the social to an analysis at the level of the individual. 'Psychological reductionism', that is, understanding sociopolitical problems through recourse to an underlying psychological essence, is generally to be avoided or at least handled with great care and caution. Psychoanalysis is surely not a stranger to such reductionist exercises, in which society as a whole is treated as a patient, characterized by a collective unconscious and prone to all sorts of 'psychopathological' reactions (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 1). Such approaches are often appealing and fascinating, and they have a long and illustrious history in psychoanalysis – arguably set off by Freud himself, given that several of his (later) writings can be seen as attempts to bridge the gap between models of the individual psyche and cultural and political phenomena (Freud, 1921, 1927, 1930, 1939). To Freud, academic disciplines such as sociology are ultimately reducible to forms of 'applied psychology', as they deal with 'the behavior of people in society' (Freud, 1973, p. 216). Lacan, by contrast, was much more reticent in his judgment and radically diverges from Freud in his approach to the social or 'external' level, as will become clear in what follows. It is worth pointing out that the reverse operation should also be handled with care, that is, treating the individual as a mere effect of forces operating on a societal level, for instance when violent and destructive behavior (for instance, the radicalization of Muslim youth in Western society) is comprehended as the result of low economic status or failed integration policies. Such forms of 'sociological reductionism', despite their merits, can lead to an unintentional dismissal of the individual responsibility involved in such phenomena.

Although it is wise to refrain from directly explaining social phenomena through psychology and vice versa, the very fact that it is so seductive alerts us to a problem that will keep us occupied in what follows: how are the levels of the individual and the collective, of the psychological and the social, related to each other? This is not a straightforward question, and part of Lacan's innovative potential derives from the fact that he turns this relation inside out and upside down, to the point that the dichotomy between internal and external is difficult to maintain. The primary Lacanian conceptual novelties that enable this alternative approach are tied up with a particular understanding of both the 'barred subject' and the 'barred Other', which we already touched upon in the previous chapters.

The idea of a Lacan-inspired ‘politics of the real’ becomes all the more relevant when juxtaposed with the problematic of trauma. If the real, as the central Lacanian category to think the traumatic, is operative in politics, we might wonder how this impacts our understanding of (collective) trauma and the manners in which we address it. More precisely: does the acknowledgment of the real as a register at the intersection of trauma and the political allow us to address the political difficulties associated with the PTSD approach to trauma, discussed in Chapter 3? In what follows, the necessary preliminary work will be carried out for opening up new avenues for trauma interventions that incorporate the political dimension and the focus on material recovery in their design. The strategy for accomplishing this will be to focus on the consequences of Lacan’s conception of the real for a number of key concepts in Lacanian political analysis: respectively the subject, the ‘objective’ level of social reality, fantasy and ideology. This ultimately amounts to the proposed distinction between *politics* on the one hand (the space of sedimented practices and institutions such as citizenship, elections, political parties, and so on) and *the political* on the other (the constitutive moment in which the definition of politics itself and the organization of social reality takes place) (Laclau, 1990; Stavrakakis, 1999, 2007). The instant of the political will be argued to be a particular modality of an encounter with the real, which in turn allows us to rethink the political aspects of trauma.

Lacan’s Sociopolitical Subject

Most contemporary projects that approach the collective or sociopolitical level (what we could call the ‘external level’) from a Lacanian angle take as their point of departure Lacan’s notion of the subject. As discussed, the latter offers a unique outlook on the inter-implications between the individual and the social because it does not equate the subject with the individual or the conscious ego. The central thesis is that the subject is essentially barred or split: in contrast with the traditional notion of an essentialist, ‘psychological’ subject that is transparent and representable to itself, Lacan emphasizes the gap that exists between subjectivity and the conscious ego. The subject, for Lacan, is an empty *locus* that comes into being only through the logic of the signifier. Moreover, identity formation is itself the result of an interplay between two distinct operations, alienation and separation: the identification with or separation from the Other’s signifiers (Lacan, 1964).

The political significance of the theory of the barred subject is the following: every attempt to constitute an identity is dependent on the identification with and/or separation from ‘socially *available* discursive constructions’ (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 36), such as ideologies, patterns of consumption, social roles, gender roles, and so on. Hence, the subject becomes the place where the so-called ‘politics of identification’ take place. Instead of a (psychological) essence marking the individual psyche, Lacan (1957b) posits an irreducible and constitutive lack at the heart of human subjectivity, which can only be filled by sociopolitical objects of identification. It is precisely with this move that Lacan manages to avoid an ‘essentialist reductionism of the social to the individual level’ (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 37). Importantly, this Lacanian subject is contextually and historically conditioned, given its dependence on the socially available discourses that shape it.

The caveat is that the level of social discourse or language is not up to the task of filling the gap that marks the subject: just like the subject, the level of the symbolic is marked by an irreducible lack. This is what Lacan revealed as the ‘big secret of psychoanalysis’: the big Other, the symbolic order, is itself structurally lacking, incomplete or ‘barred’ (Lacan, 1958-59). It is only a collection of stories and roles without an ultimate, definitive design or plot. The symbolic is structured around a traumatic kernel, a central lack. Something is missing from its structure, that is, the element that would guarantee its consistency. The lack in the subject is thereby doubled by the lack in the Other. This will be explored in more detail in what follows.

The Missing Other of the Other: The Split Object

Language and social discourse have priority over the subject: the latter only comes into being by grace of the alienating images and signifiers that are socially available. Likewise, *social realities*, according to Lacan, are not simply or immediately ‘given’, but rather the product of social construction: the symbolic creates realities as that which is named by language and can be talked about (Fink, 1995, p. 25). Reality is always constructed at the collective level of meaning and discourse. Stavrakakis points out that social constructionism, as a theory of knowledge, is based on the recognition of this social relativity of knowledge and its associated reality (1999, p. 11). What distinguishes Lacan’s theory from other theories of social constructionism is the place he preserves for the category of the real: there will always

be a remainder, something that cannot be expressed in language or (re)constructed, something that escapes the symbolic order and *ex-sists* (for example, Lacan, 1972-73, p. 22, 1975-76, p. 36). As discussed in the previous chapters, this lacking element functions as the cause of the system. From a Lacanian perspective, the symbolic and fantasmatic dimensions of our social reality do not cover the whole extent of human experience. Lacan's Other is thus not conceived as a closed circuit or totality: it is essentially 'barred'.

The Outside of Constructionism

Stavrakakis (1999) argues that in this way, Lacan circumvents a paradox produced by the idea that 'there is nothing outside social construction' (p. 66). If the latter position is defended, then a certain essentialism takes root, as 'on the one hand it [social constructionism] reduces everything to the level of construction and, on the other hand, it occupies a meta-linguistic or essentialist position outside construction' to make this claim (Ibid.). The problematic touched upon here is a version of the 'non-existence of meta-language', or the fact that 'the Other of the Other does not exist' (Lacan, 1957-58). In order to make the claim that, for example, everything is reducible to symbolic-imaginary construction, one needs to speak from a position that is not reducible to construction – a position denied by the constructionist argument itself.

The only way out of this impasse is the acknowledgment of something external to constructionism or symbolic reality. Lacan's concept of the real attempts to define such an externality, without however returning to a new form of essentialism: his real is not a solid base 'on which the superstructure of reality constructions is erected' (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 66). By contrast, it is defined as the impossible to represent *and* to avoid. The acknowledgment and conceptualization of such a paradoxical exteriority is not only necessary to avoid essentialism, but also to provide an account of the *cause* that governs the production of new social constructions.

This real cause is manifested whenever a problem or crisis dislocates the field of representation, when something unforeseen 'destroys a well-ordered social world and dislocates our certainties, representing a crisis in which we experience the limits of our meaning structures' (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 67). These dislocations are constitutive in the sense that they stimulate the search or desire for new social constructions. Indeed, social

constructionism only makes sense if both the vulnerability of the social order and the importance of a moment of negativity are recognized (Laclau, 1990). The encounter with lack, in the rupture of a given social world, stimulates a desire to suture it, to fill it with new social constructions, which is why such dislocations are considered productive in their destructiveness – a claim that obviously raises somewhat of a paradox. That the Other is barred means that every possible social reality is always at risk of being *traversed*, that is, of meeting with that part of the real which escapes its boundaries and dislocates its form of structuring. For Stavrakakis and others, it is in the moment of disruption that ‘the political’ surfaces and resurfaces time and again.

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is precisely the lacking nature of the symbolic that allows for the emergence of the subject. One way to deal with this lack, at the level of identity, is through a series of identification acts that attempt to ‘fill’ it, to cover it up. The fact that a stable identity can never be reached keeps the flame of desire burning: the failure of identification is precisely what supports desire as such. If a ‘final’ identity were procured, this would be the end of desire as the motor force behind the continuous activity of the subject.

By analogy with the impossibility to construct a stable identity at the individual level, we could say, with Laclau (1990), that society as such is an ‘impossibility’. It can never achieve a ‘final’ and stable signification. Once more, we meet with the real in its negative aspect: whenever we construe meaning through language or representation, there persists a remainder that cannot be articulated or captured. This kernel of negativity that shines through and internally disrupts the symbolic register is, at the same time, the engine that drives the process of symbolization forward. Dislocation, and the lack it creates in our representations of reality, stimulates new attempts to construct novel representations. Lacan’s concept of the real thus reveals that ‘understanding social reality is not equivalent to understanding what society is, but what prevents it from being’ (Laclau, 1990, p. 44). The stumbling block of the real generates an endless series of new attempts to construct this impossible object. Therefore, ‘this play between possibility and impossibility, construction and dislocation, is structurally equivalent to the play between identification and its failure which marks the subjective level’ (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 68-9).

The Promise of Jouissance

The other side of this story, which has been largely neglected so far, concerns *jouissance*. The cyclical process of identification/construction and its failure is driven by a desire to achieve a state of *fullness*. It is the entrance into the field of language and social reality, that is, our constitution as subjects marked by lack (through an act of submission to the law of the symbolic), which retroactively gives rise to the myth of a presymbolic, purportedly ‘full’ *jouissance* able to remediate this lack. The primary agent of castration is thus language itself, and not some sort of contingent, personalized other: ‘The organism’s passage through and into language *is* castration, introducing the idea of loss and absence into the world’ (Leader, 1996, p. 148, emphasis added). It is our advent as speaking beings which creates a loss that is ‘at the center of civilization and culture’ (Fink, 1995, p. 100): the lack of *jouissance* allows for the emergence of desire sustained by fantasy, the motor force behind cultural development.

A small word of caution is warranted here. Accounts like these are always at risk of unintentionally reinforcing some kind of utopian liberation fantasy, as if they form an argument to cast off the repressive mores that stand in the way of true, unlimited enjoyment. They seem to signal that lack can be circumvented, as it is tied up with the limitations imposed by the ‘paternal function’ (that is, the imposition of symbolic law). This is, however, far from what Lacan had in mind (1959-60, p. 184). He claims that total *jouissance*, as such, is impossible for the speaking being: if it were ever reached, the subject would be annihilated. The trick is that through the intervention of the paternal function, something inherently impossible is prohibited in a seemingly redundant fashion (Lacan, 1959-60, p. 176). Nevertheless, this prohibition creates the illusion that the impossible *could* be attained, were it not for the obstacles and barriers imposed from outside (Verhaeghe, 2009). The Law makes us believe that what is impossible really exists and is merely forbidden. As such, it supports fantasy and desire. Desire is tantamount to the law: as the latter prohibits ‘the maternal object’, the emblem for a forbidden *jouissance* imagined to be ‘total’ in the classical Oedipal account, it simultaneously installs her as something desirable. This entails somewhat of a ruse: although the desirability of the maternal object is an effect of the imposition of the law, her constitution as the ‘taboo object’ is organized in such a way that she appears as *always-already desirable*, prior to and independent of the law, as some sort of ‘natural’ love object. Nevertheless, her exceptional status only derives from the symbolic structure as such^{xxiv}. The

so-called ‘lost’ object of fantasy, which would enable a total enjoyment, never existed as such: it is only ever posited retroactively. Lack comes first and gives rise to the idea of fullness, and not vice versa (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 43). Or: the so-called ‘lost’ object concerns a past that was never actually present (LaCapra, 1999), it signals a structural *absence* defensively interpreted as lost.

The necessary act of exclusion to enter the field of social reality *installs* the fiction of total enjoyment. It is the promise of this *jouissance* that stimulates desire. However, when we pursue this desire in reality, we are always confronted sooner or later with the sad realization that ‘this is not it’, leading to the continuous displacement from object to object (Lacan, 1958, p. 580). It is the structural failure to retrieve the always-already lost (and thus structurally absent) object that keeps desire going.

The promise of a ‘return to a state of fullness’ not only plays a crucial role at the level of the individual. *Jouissance*, desire and fantasy are determining factors at the level of the collective as well. For instance, the political significance of the promise of *jouissance* lies in the observation that the success of political movements is often tied up with their ability to manipulate a kind of collective ‘symptomatic enjoyment’. One way to accomplish this is by painting a convincing picture of the lost paradise, combined with the assertion that it is within reach. Populist parties promise the final termination of the antagonisms and problems that haunt society and the return to a state of harmony and tradition. The proposed program for achieving this typically involves the eradication of something identified as standing in the way of the coveted harmony, some sort of scapegoat equivalent to the symptom in psychoanalysis: the Jew, capital, immigrants, and so on (for example, Žižek, 2014). Ideology taps into the enjoyment tied up with the fantasy of total harmony. It does so by disavowing the structural nature of the real (that is, castration) and proposing a ‘final solution’ for social antagonisms. In contrast with such an *imaginary* stance, which involves the confluence of the categories of ‘loss’ and ‘absence’, as Dominick LaCapra (1999) pointed out, a *symbolic* subject position recognizes the inevitability of lack and the impossibility to construct any definitive answers. The latter position is marked by an acceptance of symbolical castration, of the impossibility of total *jouissance*, of ever retrieving the putative lost object. This means that every critique of a political or ideological system must go beyond a purely deconstructive level: ‘it requires a mapping of the fantasies supporting this system and an encircling of its symptomatic function’ (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 81). In other words: understanding the

movements of politics and ideology requires that we take into account the *jouissance* involved, that we work out how *jouissance* and certain privileged representations are related.

The idea that social reality is itself structurally lacking finds its pendant in the pivotal role ascribed to fantasy in psychoanalytic theory. Only through fantasy can a more or less stable and coherent reality system be established. Indeed, for Lacan, as we have seen, fantasy is not in opposition to reality (in contrast with the common usage of the term). Fantasy, by contrast, is the necessary supplement that makes reality cohere: 'It is because reality is articulated at the symbolic level and the symbolic is lacking, that reality can only acquire a certain coherence and become desirable as an object of identification, by resorting to fantasy.' (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 46) Fantasy remediates for the mark of castration or real lack in the symbolic by positivizing it. As such, it gives the social world consistency and appeal. However, this fantasmatic form of dealing with the Other's lack is not infallible: it can be overthrown by events that are incommensurable with fantasy's meaning-generating, defensive framework. The pertinence of such moments of rupture is double. First, it has been argued that events of this type are traumatic. Second, it is precisely this moment of rupture that allows us to circumscribe the foundational moment of the political. In what follows, I will situate the role of fantasy in the construction of social reality. Subsequently, I turn to a discussion of rupture in its traumatic and political dimension.

Fantasy and Social Reality

The previous sections dealt with the crucial Lacanian idea that the lack at the level of the subject is doubled by the lack in the Other. Consequently, the human condition is characterized by a quest for a lost and impossible enjoyment not affected by lack. Lacan elaborated the notion of fantasy to describe a scenario in which an encounter with this longed-for *jouissance* is staged. Fantasy thus fulfills an essentially defensive role: it attempts to make bearable the doubled lack effected by castration (Lacan, 1964-65). Stavrakakis (1999) emphasizes that this is not to say that fantasy actually succeeds in 'filling up' the Other's lack, for this is structurally impossible. It is rather that fantasy disavows this impossibility by presenting us with its object 'as a metaphor of our lacking fullness'; it offers us the mirage of a mythical object that could administer a 'full enjoyment'. *Objet petit a*, as Lacan called it, the object-cause of desire (1964, p. 243, p. 268), is understood as a materialization or

positivization of symbolic lack, which (falsely) promises an enjoyment beyond castration and thereby creates the illusory consistency of the world.

Nevertheless, even in fantasy the encounter with the object is always staged as a future possibility. We never *actually* succeed in retrieving it. The fantasy's promise always remains just that: a whisper of a never-actualized possibility that sustains desire. As Stavrakakis (2007) puts it eloquently: fantasy offers the 'presence of an absence' (the mirage of a mythical object that is 'out there' somewhere) to mask the 'absence of a presence' (the non-existence of total *jouissance*) (p. 78). What constantly emerges from this exposition is that when harmony is not present, it has to be introduced through a fantasmatic social construction in order for reality to cohere. As argued in Chapter 5, this need for harmony and continuity purportedly derives from the fact that the ego is itself constituted through identification with a unified image, whereby the underlying experience of fragmentation and discontinuity is misrecognized (Lacan, 1949). This foundational move installs an overall 'tendency toward misrecognition' and a 'generalized search for unity in the world, which actually distorts the experience of reality' (Vanheule, 2011b, p. 2). Other explanations point to 'something in *human nature* that puts a bonus on order, routine, repetitiveness, continuity, standardization, predictability' (Sztompka, 2000, p. 457, emphasis added), because these conditions purportedly satisfy a 'craving for existential security' (Ibid.). Lacanian theory offers an explanation as to why this existential security is always at peril.

Although fantasy is commonly understood as something highly individualistic, in the sense of an eminently private and intimate affair kept hidden from others, a few scholars have drawn attention to the collective aspects of fantasy as well (for example, Ernest Bormann (1985), Jacqueline Rose (1996), Todd McGowan (2007) and Slavoj Žižek (2008)). They claim that our social world is underpinned by shared fantasies crucial for understanding 'the functioning of sociopolitical life[,] as the phantasy structure shapes the narratives of communities' (Andreescu, 2013, p. 211). In turn, these narratives reinforce the associated fantasy as they make up 'the context of the socialization of the members of the community' (Ibid.). Fantasy is said to create a shared sense of identity, community and common consciousness. As such, it plays an important part in our self-definition. Rather than being confined to the intimacy of one's psychology, then, fantasies are claimed to be present on a higher-order, communal level as well. On both levels (the individual and the societal), however, their role remains the same: they make bearable the lack in the Other while sustaining and orienting desire. Andreescu

(2013) argues that a political system only functions to the degree that it channels and captures human desire, usually by making reference to a utopian and lost state of harmony and unity.

The Tissues of Social Life

In this section, I will link the described collective fantasies to the notion of *social trauma*, conceived as the rupture of the ‘tissues of social life’ (Andreescu, 2013). This requires a small detour to situate notions such as social, cultural or collective trauma. As is well known, the etymology of the word *trauma* goes back to the Greek word for wound. The term did not appear in medical literature until the 17th century, to denote an externally caused bodily wound with tissue damage, that is, a physical wound that involves the penetration of the skin barrier. The idea of psychological trauma is essentially the result of the metaphorical application of the concept trauma to the domain of the psyche. Freud (1920) already suggested the existence of a stimulus barrier or protective shield that prevents our minds from becoming overloaded with sensorial input and keeps noxious stimuli out. The efficiency of our psychological functioning depends on this protective shield: it would be unbearable to experience the endless multitude of sensations that continuously impinge on us from both the external and internal worlds. These stimuli need to be filtered out and reduced to manageable proportions. Recall Freud’s definition of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920, p. 29): ‘any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. [...] The concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli’. Freud (1917b) believed that an event is traumatic when it overloads the psychic system with vast amounts of excitation, to the point where normal processing becomes impossible and the protective barrier is pierced. Although this Freudian definition is nearly 100 years old, it is not far removed from the dominant contemporary understanding of trauma, given its physiological undertones. Psychological trauma theories analogously pose the existence of defensive, meaning-generating barriers and define trauma as the sudden destruction of these structures (Brewin & Holmes, 2003).

In recent years, notions such as social trauma, collective trauma, community trauma and cultural trauma have become increasingly well-known and popular (for example, Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004; Erikson, 1995; Eyerman, 2003). Ostensibly, the idea of social trauma is the effect of a further extension of meaning, brought about by a

new metaphor: that the ‘tissues of social life’ can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of the mind and body. This implies that the tissues of social life ordinarily perform a defensive barrier function, just like our skin or Freud’s proposed neurological blocking mechanisms: they shield the members of its community from a confrontation with something that threatens the community’s integrity. Stef Craps and Gert Buelens (2008) note that there are basically two fundamentally different perspectives on this type of trauma. Whereas some see it as a straightforward extension of psychological trauma to the collective level (as, for example, in the work of Dominick LaCapra, Kai Erikson and Linda Hutcheon), others view it as a social construction pure and simple – far removed from any sort of relation to the individual psyche (see, for example, the work of Ron Eyerman, Jeffrey Alexander and Neil Smelser).

From a Lacanian perspective, what needs to be kept at bay is the lack in the Other. As discussed above, this notion emphasizes that there is no external guarantee to ground a specific symbolic order. Consequently, every social structure necessarily comes into being through a groundless, subjective act that must be ‘forgotten’ in order for the structure to function. For Lacan, being itself is split, and the coherence and continuity of both identity and reality require a misrecognition of this ontological lack through the development of a fantasmatic framework. Furthermore, a fantasy is only convincing if, once it has been put into place, we can forget that it is a fantasy. Social trauma is defined, then, as a rupture in the protective fantasies that ordinarily ‘glue’ a community together, so to speak, and that conceal the contingent nature of this community’s particular sociopolitical organization (Andreescu, 2013, p. 215). From a Lacanian perspective, the tissues of social life are composed of such constitutive collective fantasies and their associated, shared narratives. One small example: the Western organization of family life is concomitant with shared fantasies and narratives regarding what a(n ideal) father, a mother, a daughter, a brother and so on should be. More broadly, the tissues of social life can be equated with the notion of culture. Indeed, sociologists have been at the forefront of describing the dynamics of large-scale societal ruptures through the concept of cultural trauma (for example, Alexander, Eyerman, Giesen, Smelser, & Sztompka, 2004).

Social or cultural trauma is considered to derive from forms of radical social change marked by a characteristic temporal quality, substance and scope, origin and mental frame (Sztompka, 2000). Examples are revolution, collapse of the market, radical economic reforms such as

nationalization or privatization, forced migration, genocide, terrorism, assassination of a political or spiritual leader, the opening of secret archives that reveal a horrid truth about the past, revisionist interpretations of national traditions, and collapse of an empire or a lost war (Sztompka, 2000, p. 452). Note that such events, which have the potential to cause cultural trauma, do not automatically or necessarily actualize this potential. The societal effects of these events depend on the manners in which they are *perceived and experienced*. Nevertheless, all of these major upheavals share the defining potential to perform a rupture within the pre-existent social order. Whether or not a break with the previous order is traumatic depends ‘on the *relative degree* of such a break or displacement, as compared with the preceding measure of order, or as compared with the expectations concerning the continuation of order’ (Ibid., p. 457). In addition, it is worth pointing out that more local events such as incest, parental neglect and (sexual) abuse equally take place against the background of a collectively shared framework dislocated by such events.

At first glance, the idea of social trauma has the potential to circumvent many of the problems associated with the hegemonic biomedical approach to trauma, discussed in Part II: individualization and psychologization of suffering, decontextualization and depoliticization in treatment approaches, culminating in an emphasis on immaterial rather than material recovery. First, social trauma focuses primarily on the collective instead of the individual level. Second, it does not assume that the impact of an event can be deduced on the basis of a series of *a priori* parameters, but takes the social, cultural and political context into account to develop a case-by-case understanding of the problems to be addressed. Lastly, it investigates the ways the damaged ‘tissues of social life’ can be restored, rather than taking the individual psyche as the locus of intervention. It accomplishes this by acknowledging the survivors as political agents and thinking interventions on the level of the Other (the field of the symbolic), for example in the focus on forms of remembrance and commemoration.

Despite the appeal of this approach, it opens up a whole new array of difficulties. Specifically: how is this social tissue and its traumatic wounding to be imagined? If we follow Lacan’s basic tenets, we should try to understand them in a strictly *materialist* fashion, that is, insisting that there is nothing alien to matter. The idea of a ‘social tissue’ risks drawing us back to conceptions of some sort of extra-physical, immaterial dimension of transcendent being (for example, the notorious idea of some sort of Jungian collective unconscious, or a type of Durkheimian reification of the Institution), which should be avoided if we hope to

approach these matters scientifically. Another, related question that we must ask ourselves is whether or not the breach on the communal level is related to the individual (traumatic) experiences of those who make up the community, and if so, how? In other words: is the emphasis on the social tissues of life anything more than the shift from a psychiatric perspective to a sociological one, which is arguably the direction taken by scholars such as Eyerman? Or can we find a way to articulate both levels with each other?

The Fabric of Fantasy

Shared fantasies are *materialized* in the calibrated ways in which the members of a community address desire, in their common views of and interactions with the world, in their social practices, in the positions they take towards social authority, and so on. In short, they are materialized in what we commonly call '*our way of life*', the way we organize our feasts, our rituals, our initiation ceremonies and so on. In these routines and practices, the unique way in which a community organizes its enjoyment becomes visible.

Given that the social order is not natural in any sense, but rather something provisional, it must be produced and reproduced on a day-to-day basis. The tissues of social life are only the performative effect of the subject's activity. Jenny Edkins, in her book *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (2003), argues that both the subject and the social order in which the subject finds a place are perpetually constituted retroactively: neither exists as a fixed entity in the present moment. Instead, both are always in the process of formation:

The person is formed, not through a process of interaction with the social order (since that would mean thinking of the social order as already there), but by imagining or supposing that the social order exists. This supposing by the individual is what brings the social into being. [...] But supposing that the social exists does not only produce the social order, it also, simultaneously, brings the individual into existence too. (p. 13)

This dovetails with Žižek's emphasis on the 'virtual' character of the big Other, in that it only exists insofar as subjects *act as if it exists*:

[The big Other's] status is similar to that of an ideological cause like Communism or Nation: it is the substance of the individuals who recognize themselves in it, the

ground of their whole existence, the point of reference that provides the ultimate horizon of meaning, something for which these individuals are ready to give their lives, yet the only thing that really exists are these individuals and their activity, so this substance is actual only in so far as individuals believe in it and act accordingly. (2006, p. 10)

By grounding fantasy in a series of activities, rituals, and so on, these authors provide it with a material basis: fantasy is not located simply in the minds of people, nor is it to be found in a transcendental realm of being. Fantasy is materialized in our social activity, in the artifacts that we produce, in the ways that we organize space, in the routines that we establish, and so on. These activities and objects co-exist with fantasy structures that invest them with meaning. It is clear, then, that major social changes, which interrupt daily routines and destroy the ‘material body’ of a society, have an impact on the social and cultural body as well (that is, the fantasies sedimented in the interrupted practices and destroyed spaces). Andreescu (2013) describes that social or community trauma occurs, more generally speaking,

when an old social order, together with the fantasy that supports it, suddenly loses validity while a new one is not yet established. This is a moment of an encounter with the emptiness at the core of and the inconsistency characterizing any social organization. The encounter exposes a community to the extent to which what was considered ‘matter of fact’, ‘natural’, or ‘personal’ is strictly a social construction. For instance, aspects that were thought to be deeply personal, such as one’s desire, phantasies, identity, and social network, are exposed as intimately linked to and shaped by a law, which, at the moment of radical social change, is rendered flawed and arbitrary. (p. 212)

She continues: ‘In this sense, cherished life goals could be exposed as part of an oppressive “common sense”. In a radical social change one realizes to what extent his/her dreams and desires were shaped by and belonged to the order which is crumbling.’ (2013, p. 212) Radical social changes have the potential to expose how the core of our intimacy (our values, desires, identities and so on) is determined by a symbolic order that exceeds us. Where we believe ourselves to be free (in what we want, for example), we suddenly realize the degree to which we are dependent on the Other. This is reminiscent of the dynamics described in the previous chapter: recall that the moment of the ethical depends precisely on the recognition of this unexpected determinism (the postulate of de-psychologizing). Moreover, the realization of

our dependency on the Other is compounded by the simultaneous exposition of the arbitrary character of this Other, of its unfounded and incomplete status. Combined, this impacts the ‘individual’s sense of ontological security offered by the position one occupies within the symbolic order’ (Andreescu, 2013, p. 212), which is ordinarily achieved by routinizing social relationships (Mitzen, 2006).

The invalidation of core fantasies by major social changes disrupts the (local) universe of meaning (Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012), because the central anchoring points around which meaning used to coalesce are invalidated. This will be discussed in the next section.

Anchoring Points

Lacan denoted the privileged elements in a discourse, around which meaning is constructed, with the term *master signifiers* (see Lacan, 1969-70 for an elaboration of his discourse theory). In his theory of signification, meaning endlessly shifts as signifiers are concatenated in a chain (Lacan, 1957-58, 1960). However, at points in which the discourse is punctuated, the meaning of each element of the chain is temporarily fixed and retroactively established. The term *point de capiton* denotes the retroactive movement by which specific signifiers are given a prominent role in a discourse (Lacan, 1960, p. 681), in that they become the points from which the meaning of whole chains of signifiers is established: ‘Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier [...] It’s the point of convergence that enables everything that happens in this discourse to be situated retroactively and retrospectively.’ (Lacan, 1955-56, p. 268). One of the goals of Lacanian psychoanalysis is exactly to enable the analysand to recover the unknown master signifiers or anchoring points that organize the whole constellation of bizarre symptoms and incomprehensible suffering that troubled the subject. The most famous and often revisited elaboration of how a neurosis is structured around a nodal signifier is Freud’s (1909) case study of the *Rat Man*, in which the signifier ‘rat’ continuously returns in the series of compulsive thoughts and worries that trouble this analysand (*Heiraten, Raten, Spielratte, Rattenmamsell*, and so on). Frédéric Declercq (2000) recounts the case of a man whose entire life story revolves around the signifiers ‘playing by myself’. As he told the analyst: ‘at home, I got very little attention from my parents. I always had to *play by myself* in my room.’ (p. 25, my translation) This resurfaces, for instance, in this analysand’s insistence on the subjective importance of *playing* all kinds of instruments.

However, he is surprised to find that he loves playing music in a band or orchestra, but really hates to rehearse ‘by himself’. More generally, he can only enjoy leisurely activities when they are shared with others. Although he loves motorcycles, for instance, he refuses to take up this activity ‘because it is something one enjoys *by oneself*’ (p. 25, my translation). The analysis reveals that a whole series of apparently separate threads converge in and are organized around such master signifiers.

In the same way, each political or social discourse requires a (partial) fixation of meaning around certain ‘nodal points’, as Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 112) call them, without which these discourses would disintegrate into nonsense and chaos. Although there would be no meaning without such privileged signifiers, the existence of a *point de capiton* never produces an eternally stable meaning, but merely a relative and temporary *fixation*. Nevertheless, the latest fixation is often experienced as the mythical, final one. Stavrakakis (1999, p. 61) underlines that whereas the function of the *point de capiton* is ‘necessary (or universal) in structural terms, its particular content (the signified produced by its signifying predominance) is not a matter of mirroring a pre-existing objective reality but of hegemonic struggle’.

In a traumatic rupture, these anchoring signifiers suddenly lose their validity. The entire framework that made sense of the world is dislocated, which leads to ‘the suspension or invalidation of institutions, norms, principles, rules, plans, and identities’ (Andreescu, 2013, p. 213). The individual’s sense of ontological security, offered by the position one occupies within the symbolic order, is thereby threatened. Our existence as individuals depends on experiencing ourselves as a whole and continuous person in time, which leads to a sense of agency. Symbolic identity grants the individual a *sense of self*, as a citizen of a state, for example, as a member of a religious community, a member of a family, and so on. It is by embodying this symbolic identity that the institution and social order is reproduced, while a sense of security for the individual is gained. In this sense, we start to see how the disruption of the social order as a whole, for instance in times of war or state-organized terror, is intertwined with the potentially traumatic loss of identity and security, both at the individual and the collective level. Major upheavals dislocate the routines of daily life, in often dramatic ways. Patterns of acting and thinking are changed, whilst old values are questioned. A disturbance of the social order involves a betrayal of trust: the powers that we relied on to protect us from harm prove to be unreliable. This is evidenced at the level of the community but equally in cases where the family itself ‘is no longer a source of refuge but a site of

danger' (Edkins, 2003, p. 4). Such events cause the social authority of the Other to collapse. In sum, there is an intimate bond between personhood and community.

Productive Destruction?

A topic of debate within both philosophy (for example, Andreescu, 2013; Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012; Stavrakakis, 2007) and psychological literature on 'post-traumatic growth' and resilience (for instance, Ayalon, 2005; Christopher, 2004; Joseph & Linley, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Vellacott, 2007; Reissman, Schreiber, Schultz, & Ursano, 2009), is whether or not (traumatic) ruptures should be viewed as something more than exclusively destructive. Although the encounter with rupture necessarily constitutes something disruptive and negative, something that shakes the foundations of both the subject and its reality, a number of Lacan-inspired philosophers have argued that it also has a productive quality (among them Badiou; Johnston; Laclau; Mouffe; Stavrakakis; Žižek). Rupture is seen as opening up a possibility of social and political creation and re-articulation. In fact, the 'moment of the political' is argued to be dependent on such a confrontation with the negativity of the real.

Does trauma have a 'productive' dimension? Proponents of theories of 'post-traumatic growth', a research domain in itself, certainly seem to think so (Christopher, 2004; Joseph & Linley, 2006). Trauma, in these psychological models, is thought to derive from a tension-generating incongruence between the 'trauma information' and the 'existing models of the world'. Recovery then requires the alleviation of this antinomy, which, if the 'existing models of the world' are accommodated to fit the 'new trauma-related information', purportedly leads to mental schemata that are viewed as more realistic, effective, functional or adaptive compared to the pre-trauma schemata.

However, in a recent essay on the responses to the Paris *Charlie Hebdo* killings (for *The London Review of Books*), Slavoj Žižek (2015) calls for the abandonment 'of the idea that there is something emancipatory in extreme experiences, that they enable us to open our eyes to the ultimate truth of a situation'. He refers to a memorable passage in the memoir *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, in which Ruth Klüger (2003) describes a dispute with an advanced PhD candidate in Germany. Klüger's interlocutor recounts that he once met with a survivor of Auschwitz, who, to his surprise and dismay, cursed the Arabs and held them all in contempt. The PhD candidate could not understand how someone who came from

Auschwitz could talk like that. Klüger vigorously responded by asking: ‘What did he expect? Auschwitz was no instructional institution... You learned nothing there, and least of all humanity and tolerance. Absolutely nothing good came out of the concentration camps.’ (Klüger, 2003, p. 65)

In line with Žižek’s analysis, I think it is safe to assume that horrific experiences do not necessarily lead to ‘personal growth’, catharsis, or the development of humanitarian values. The fallacy in theories of post-traumatic growth, in my analysis, is the silent assumption that the traumatic event provides ‘corrective information’ to the pre-existent models of the world. This assumption suggests that ‘growth’ is a matter of drawing the right lessons from the trauma. By definition, however, trauma communicates no discursive information whatsoever. The traumatic event resists recuperation into any type of pre-existent meaning or knowledge. It does not open up a window that provides a more realistic or adaptive outlook on the self and the world. The reverse is true: trauma shatters the fantasmatic window through which we ordinarily perceive reality and ourselves. When this frame is shattered, nothing can be perceived. Trauma should not be romanticized with claims that survivors have a direct route to some sort of privileged, intimate knowledge or truth that is not accessible nor communicable to others.

Pace Žižek, however, and in line with an emergent field of research (for example, Andreescu, 2013; Badiou, 2009; Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012; Johnston, 2009; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), I argue that the confrontation with the lack in the Other *can* be productive. The invalidation of the previous order, along with the fantasies that sustain it, opens up a zone of indetermination – if only for a brief interregnum. Recall that according to Lacan (1964), real cause as *tuche* is present only where the ordinary currents of determination (the automaton) are disrupted. It is the dislocation of established representations that stimulates the creative formation of new sociopolitical constructions. In this zone of indetermination, a subjective, ethical act is possible and even *demandé*, in that there is no option ‘not to respond’. It is here that the *political* as such takes form. Different acts with different consequences are possible at this point. However, there is no way of calculating what the right course of action is, nor what a given course of action will lead to. This is so because calculation necessarily relies on the pre-given, which was rendered invalid by the emergence of the traumatic event (see above). A successful act is arguably one that changes the coordinates of what was deemed possible, one that changes the world in such a way that a reading of the traumatic event – eventually –

becomes possible. This would be an act that differs from any attempt to quickly install a new form of concealment, which would be a reactive attempt to return to the *status quo ante*. If what appears in trauma is by definition unintelligible and formless, in the sense that it cannot be perceived in terms of the interpretative framework that preceded it, then recovery from trauma requires a form of subjective activity that goes beyond a focus on intrapsychic mentalization or verbalization, one that creates a new situation or world that permits a belated access to the event. As I will argue in the next chapter, this is a process that cannot take place entirely intrapsychologically. It necessitates operations in the sociopolitical reality itself.

The main difference between this view and the one defended in post-traumatic growth rests in the sustained emphasis on indeterminacy. It is precisely the acknowledgment of the insufficiency of all forms of previous knowledge, and all that this entails, that opens up a gap in which the ethical and political can appear. Let us now move on to the definition of the political in relation to the real.

Encountering the Real: The Moment of the Political

Throughout this chapter, the real has been defined in its negativity, as the limit of signification. Our social construction of reality acquires a degree of ontological consistency only in reliance on a specific fantasy frame. A dislocation of this frame occurs when signification breaks down in an encounter with the real. In such a moment, the illusion that closes the gap between the real and the symbolic loses validity. It is the disruption of a discursive field, in a moment of negativity, that stimulates this field's movements. Social constructionism is structurally dependent on something beyond its field that causes its dynamic: the moment of dislocation or rupture is considered the condition of possibility for social and political creation (Laclau, 1990). At the same time, however, these dislocations are 'traumatic in the sense that "they threaten identities"' (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 75): they impact the social and subjective identities that depend on the pre-existent symbolic order.

The moment of the political is thus intrinsically connected to rupture, crisis or dislocation. It is manifested in the tension between a given sociopolitical reality and an unrepresentable real that dislocates the former. The political arises as a possibility in the face of the failure of a former identity or social construction to fence off the lack at the core of our being. The

emergence of this lack, in a moment of crisis, precipitates a desire to rearticulate the dislocated structure: ‘stimulating, in other words, human creativity, becoming the condition of possibility for human freedom’ (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 54). Social reality, as a sedimentation of meaning, ‘exists in an irreducible dialectic with the moment(s) of its own dislocation’ (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 67). Take as a starting point of this dialectic the temporary status quo of a (political) reality, always-already affected by antagonisms and zones of uncertainty intrinsic to this particular discursive structure. This more or less stable and seemingly unified system is always at risk of being traversed by something ‘internally excluded’. Such an internally excluded event falls beyond the field of meaning established by the parameters of the pre-existent symbolical framework. As such, it dislocates the symbolic-imaginary reality and creates a *lack* in the discursive order, which in turn stimulates the need to ‘suture’ this lack anew. The *political*, as a concept, designates the transition from the confrontation with negativity and lack in a moment of rupture to the positivization of this real through a subjective act. In the moment of the political, the subject assumes upon itself the responsibility to formulate an answer to the senselessness of the real.

We find ourselves here at the heart of the whole problematic of trauma: how can something that is ‘no-thing’, something that is impossible from the standpoint prior to its occurrence, something formless, ungraspable and ephemeral, in short, a void – how can a void be positivized or otherwise worked through? How can the un-symbolizable be symbolized?

There are many different ways of responding to the confrontation with the real. Trauma can be viewed as an inability to formulate an adequate response to the real, for whatever reason, with the result that one remains ‘within the rupture [...] without the security of a place in the world’ (Andreescu, 2013, p. 213). In this light, the completion tendency (or Freud’s death drive) discussed in Chapter 3 becomes a repeatedly failed attempt to return to the status quo ante. However, these attempts structurally fail: the resistance against this assimilation is purely formal. Trauma is what necessitates a reconfiguration of the subject in its relation to the Other.

The default answer to a confrontation with the lack in the Other is arguably a call to return to some sort of completion or closure, often at any price (see Edkins, 2003, p. 14). This requires that we ‘gentrify’ or depoliticize the political by ‘forgetting’ the ‘constituted, provisional and historically contingent nature of every social order, of every ontology’ (Ibid.). This position refuses, denies or suppresses the lack which was laid bare in the dislocation by a real event.

From a psychoanalytical standpoint, this entails the attempt to return to an *imaginary*, fantasmatic subject-position to attenuate the traumatic impact of the confrontation with the real. When the previous defensive fantasy formation has become untenable, it is sometimes possible to arrive at a new form of fantasmatic closure, and this undoubtedly has pacifying and thus therapeutic effects. The price to be paid, however, is the eclipse of the grounding and productive moment of the political itself. Ergo, the question has been posed whether or not alternative kinds of responses to the real are possible. Is it possible to resist the attempt to gentrify and depoliticize the moment of the political? Can we move from an attempt at fantasmatic closure and an imaginary subject-position towards lack to a symbolic subject-position that acknowledges and assumes (in the sense of the French word *assomption*) the unfound nature of every social order? Can we, in other words, accept the traumatic lack at the basis of our subjectivity? Can we somehow accept the non-existence of the Other of the Other? This is indeed the gamble of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as we will see in the next chapter. Lacanian psychoanalysis aims at a confrontation with the real, precisely because it is only at this point that the subject is called forth to respond with an ethical act. However, the outcome of this process can never be forced or predicted. Nevertheless, the idea is that Lacanian psychoanalysis can help in the assumption of symbolic castration: the process by which the lack in the Other is acknowledged and kept open. This entails a *separation* from the Other – rather than to take refuge in a new alienation. Likewise, academic work on the politics of memory in the wake of large-scale traumatic events sometimes make the case that a re-inscription in linear narratives should be resisted in favor of, for example, strategies of ‘encircling the trauma’ (Edkins, 2003, p. 15). This dovetails with Žižek’s work on ‘traversing the fantasy’, in which he transposes Lacan’s musings on the possible endpoint of a psychoanalytic cure to the level of the collective (for example, see Žižek, 1989).

A Moral Conundrum

Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck (2008, p. 230) draw attention to the apparent incongruity between the clinical psychiatric trauma approach on one hand, which attempts to deal with the suffering of the traumatized through a form of narration, and the deconstructive, cultural trauma approach on the other, which is less interested in ‘curing’ those who suffer, but rather uses trauma as a concept that provides ‘unprecedented insight into the human

condition'. Whereas psychiatric literature on trauma emphasizes the need to 'close off' the gap opened by the traumatic events, cultural trauma appears to advocate keeping this gap open, because of the social and political opportunities and the epistemic power ascribed to this (traumatic) gap. Both discourses thus appear to move in opposite directions. Empirical psychiatric research suggests that personal healing depends on closure, whereas cultural trauma theory suggests that the possibility of social change hinges on a resistance to the mechanisms of closure and forgetting (Edkins, 2003). Is personal healing antithetical to political change? And if so, what should be given priority? Should we invest our resources in attempts to aid the traumatized by attending to their psychological wounds, knowing full well that this risks depoliticization, as discussed in the opening chapters of this book? Can we honestly argue that a direct focus on the suffering should be ignored in favor of interventions on a higher-order, collective level? Or should we attempt to combine both, in the sense of psycho-social trauma interventions? The moral conundrum observed by juxtaposing cultural trauma theory with trauma psychiatry is that the very survival of the trauma victim appears to depend on a swift reparation of his or her trust in human systems of signification, which contradicts the value of perceiving and remembering the relativity of these systems and the possibility of the political.

Kansteiner and Weilnböck (2008, p. 230) observe that the 'aestheticization and valorization of trauma' appears ruthless and cynical in this light. Proponents of cultural trauma theory are often (explicitly) uninterested in the therapeutic process as such. Their interest lies elsewhere, namely in that trauma is viewed as a privileged moment connected to *truth*: whereas human beings normally apprehend their life-world through always deforming representations, the breakdown of our cultural systems of signification is seen as a rare and valuable moment of authenticity in which we can perceive reality 'directly'. As such, trauma has an air of revelation about it: it shows us the limits of human culture. Sadly, it is impossible to 'understand' the truth revealed, let alone to represent or communicate it. Every return to the symbolical is understood as a form of 'betrayal' of the real kernel and truth of trauma, a misrepresentation more than anything else. Linear narrative is approached with an attitude of suspicion, primarily because of its ideological function and its association with state power (Edkins, 2003). Taken together, this paints the picture of a false dilemma between a comforting and healing, imaginary 'lie' and the sustenance of a painful and discomforting, yet highly valuable, symbolic truth rooted in the acknowledgment of lack. The disjunction

between the psychiatric and the cultural approach to trauma appears to be predicated on a different ethical stance, related to a specific conception of truth. Kansteiner and Weilnböck go so far as to suggest that the abstract theories of trauma in the study of culture and history serve to distance oneself from the horror of trauma as it is encountered empirically, with real people and real events.

Psychoanalytic theory is often appropriated to inform and support deconstructive theories of trauma, in which narrative is seen as a tool of repression and misinformation rather than as enlightening and therapeutic. This appears odd, to say the least: is psychoanalysis not, after all, a praxis of speech, an attempt to ‘treat the real by the symbolic’ (Lacan, 1964, p. 6)? Although the real is indeed linked to truth in Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is not the ‘undistorted’ truth of an unspeakable and unrepresentable ‘presymbolic real’, as argued in Chapter 3. Neither is it to be found in the void of some sort of ‘postsymbolic real’, conceived as the negative moment wherein the limits of signification are encountered. Truth involves precisely the repeated movement between the lack encountered in trauma and the *acts* produced in response to this lack. There can be no truth, no responsibility and no ethics without making the transition to the symbolic after the confrontation with the real. As Neill (2011, p. 218) puts it: ‘In order for an act to involve the responsibility which would render it ethical, this moment of inscription in meaning must be retroactively read into and assumed in the very decision to act’. In other words: truth cannot be found in an attempt to remain in the nothingness of the void. It requires an act in response to the void, which must be re-inscribed in a symbolic field whose organizing principle is changed by this very act. As will become clear, this particular Lacanian answer to the debate laid out by Kansteiner and Weilnböck enables us to exit the false dilemma between the therapeutic considerations of psychiatry and the deconstructive, political goals of cultural trauma theory.

Dealing with Lack

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly discuss an article by Florentina Andreescu (2013) in which she proposes four ways to deal with traumatic social change in its relation to fantasy formations: restoring a narrative thread, giving the enemy the face of one’s lover, emancipation possibilities and death as structure of fantasy invalidation.

As described above, the usual way to deal with trauma involves an attempt to include the traumatic events in a narrative. This applies to both the individual and the collective level. The person or community attempts to deal with the gap that has been revealed by ‘writing it over’, by disciplining it in a linear, chronological account. Andreescu gives the example of how a commercial clip featuring Clint Eastwood, broadcasted during the halftime of the 2012 Super Bowl (American football) game, attempted to give meaning to the severe and surprising breakdown of the allegedly secure and stable American capitalist system by use of an American football metaphor:

It’s halftime. Both teams are in their locker room discussing what they can do to win this game in the second half. It’s halftime in America, too. People are out of work and they’re hurting. And they’re all wondering what they’re going to do to make a comeback. And we’re all scared, because this isn’t a game. (Chrysler, 2012 in Andreescu, 2013, p. 217)

Andreescu argues that the clip covers over and disciplines the apparent inconsistencies within the symbolic, capitalist order. The metaphor suggests that the cause of the traumatic rupture within economic reality is the nation’s lagging behind in the competition with a non-specified other (Ibid., p. 217). This other purportedly intends to take away the enjoyment and security of the American nation: it is an antagonistic other that requires the people to come together and collectively respond to its threat. As such, the narrative of the clip can help to build a strong basis for community, albeit a community marked by sharp binary oppositions. The first strategy thus consists of suturing the ruptured or dislocated space. As discussed above, some authors believe that every form of narrativization implies giving up ‘the special truth accessed through the encounter with the Real’ (Andreescu, 2013, p. 217). The integration of the traumatic memory into other memories can be seen as a way of forgetting the traumatic episode, rather than remembering it. The moral issue raised by Kansteiner and Weilnböck (2008) is whether or not tales of heroism and sacrifice should be rejected out of hand, even if those affected by the crisis would like to embrace such stories and rebuild their confidence and belief in the ‘fictitious’ social order and its linear time.

A second way to deal with collectively experienced traumatic rupture is to refrain from narratives that offer clear explanations and solutions and to remain ambiguous about these issues. Andreescu recognizes this strategy in certain Bosnian works of fiction dealing with the traumatic aftermath of the 1990s civil war^{xxv}. Instead of clearly identifying an enemy or a

culprit, these films problematize the aberrant logic that assigns people to one side or the other of a conflict. The enemy is shown to be a human being of flesh and blood, rather than a malevolent, inhumane other. Trauma and conflict are depicted as formative of communities, bringing people closer to each other. In a similar vein, Andreescu heralds Ismel Prcic's novel *Shards* as a work that testifies to the estranging temporality of trauma, refusing a return to the chronological time of ordinary narrative, associated with ideology and the state. In this second approach, then, 'dealing with trauma [...] entails refraining from covering over the traumatic wound or disciplining it with linear narratives, but, instead, it encourages marking its presence, lingering over, and encircling it again and again' (Andreescu, 2013, p. 219). The idea is that we must remain 'open' to the impossible character of the traumatic past, to acknowledge it and to 'allow it' to return and disrupt linear narratives. In this way, we can attempt to access a knowledge 'not available in narrative memory' (Ibid., p. 220).

A third way of dealing with traumatic social events is to embrace the invalidation of old identities, desires, dreams and so on. The awareness that the social order is ultimately unfounded and that the big Other does not necessarily hold all the answers can be viewed in a Lacanian light as the aforementioned 'traversal of the fantasy' (*la traversée du fantasme*). Because of the discussed central importance of fantasy, which regulates our enjoyment and relation to the Other, Lacan conceived the possibility that this foundational framework is reconfigured at the end of the analysis. This reconfiguration requires a distinct type of subjective activity, which Lacan theorized with his concept of the act. A successful subjective act has the power to change the entire organizing principle of the pre-existent world, as it introduces something formerly unthinkable. The valence and significance of all the terms by which we used to understand the situation is thereby affected: 'it transforms what counts as significant in the framing of a situation' (Ibid. p. 220). This is the line of thought that I will pursue in the next chapter, as it offers the possibility to tie traumatic rupture to 'emancipation possibilities' and sociopolitical innovation, the eclipse of which the construct of PTSD has been repeatedly critiqued for.

The final outcome discussed by Andreescu involves a total eradication of the very 'structure of phantasy, pattern of thought, or matrix at the base of narratives produced in a social space' (2013, p. 221). As it is this matrix that creates and sustains the subject, the destruction of this matrix equals nothing less than the death of the subject. An example of such a ruthless traumatic destruction concerns the Native American community. The program of ethnic

cleansing, involving massacres, genocide, pandemics, forced relocation and so on, carried out over multiple decades, has created severe problems for the Native American community to continue ‘life in the Symbolic’. There is no way back: the destruction of the sociocultural life-world was so complete that it amounts to ‘symbolic death’: the total erasure of one’s identity. This is reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman (1989) and Orlando Patterson’s (1985) work on the concept of ‘social death’ in relation to the Holocaust and slavery respectively.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the rupture caused by radical social events was connected to the moment of the political. Although the dislocation of the collective fantasies that underpin sociopolitical reality is potentially traumatizing, in that it affects the kernel of our identity, many scholars have argued that it has a productive side as well. Controversial as it may sound, new communities and bonds can be forged in the fires of trauma. The moment in which the big Other is shown to be lacking opens up a zone in which social and political experimentation becomes possible and desirable. Nevertheless, there is a delicate debate surrounding these theories. The insistence on a sustained ‘openness’ to trauma appears to neglect the therapeutic effects of interventions that re-install the validity and reliability of the symbolic order.

In the next chapter, I intend to show how Lacan’s concept of the act enables us to grasp how clinical, therapeutic work is not incompatible with political agency and novelty. Every Lacanian psychoanalysis inevitably leads to a confrontation with the lack in the Other. Perhaps this orientation is what distinguishes it from psychotherapeutic approaches. Surprisingly, the treatment is explicitly organized to guide the subject to the traumatic point where signification breaks down. This betrays a unique ethical position: only at the point where the crack in the Other appears, is change possible. Only then is subjectivization necessitated and can the relation to the Other be redrawn. In the face of lack, a specific form of act is required. It is here that trauma, the ethical and the political intersect in the real.

8

Trauma, Act and Event

Abstract: In this chapter, the Lacanian and Žižekian conceptualizations of ‘the act’ are combined with Badiou’s theory of the event to develop a contextual and politically enabling understanding of trauma. The interweaving of trauma, event and act allows me to show the ways in which individual recovery can be connected to large-scale societal changes. Furthermore, the use of Badiou’s theory of the faithful subject clarifies that the acknowledgment of the dimension of the act in trauma recovery necessitates the adoption of a well-defined, positive form of ethics. The elaboration of this framework opens up new avenues to think through the process of trauma recovery in an innovative and productive fashion.

The previous chapters introduced Lacan’s concept of the real and related it to the fields of trauma, ethics and politics respectively. In Chapter 5, it became clear that the real cannot simply be equated with the external referent of our representations in the sense of the Kantian *das Ding*. Although the real by definition resists recuperation in the symbolic, it should not be conceived as a natural realm of being before it is contaminated and disrupted by the intervention of the signifier. Rather, the real is a strange sort of surplus created by our advent as beings of language, a dimension of being that only ever presents itself as a ‘lack’ in the

signifying chains building up the plane of social reality. In Chapter 6, I drew primarily from Zupančič's work to argue that Lacan grounded his specific conception of ethics in this lack. The fact that 'there is no Other of the Other' (Lacan, 1957-58) (that is, no external guarantee to ground the specific maxim that motivates our actions) necessitates the supplementation of some sort of 'act' that compensates for this lack. In what first appears as a paradoxical claim, the subject is considered the after-effect of this ethical act. Subjectivity and ethics are thus intimately connected with the limits of the symbolic-imaginary order; it is where this order 'lacks' something that the subject is called into being in a moment of terror. Finally, in Chapter 7, I introduced the idea that the mechanisms of trauma, first described at the level of the individual psyche, equally function on a higher-order, collective level. Cultural trauma theory, as a prime advocate of this idea, is not so much concerned with the clinical-psychotherapeutic dimension of trauma: it does not aim at directly alleviating the suffering of populations affected by shared, horrible experiences. When the idea of trauma is applied to higher-order levels of analysis, it rather functions as a lens through which the human existential condition and historical movements can be perceived and analyzed. The upshot of such an approach is that it links the moments of severe disruption of the normal state of things (for instance in potentially traumatic situations of radical social change) with 'creative' or 'productive' destruction (Eisenstein & McGowan, 2012): it is only when an existent framework is dislocated that the contingency and insufficiency of this frame is perceived. Moreover, the confrontation with the lack in the Other instills the desire to suture it once again, which requires the creative invention of new sociopolitical representations and structures. In this way, collective trauma models provide an alternative outlook that potentially remediates the depoliticizing effects associated with the dominant biomedical trauma approach. However, this focus on the productive and thus 'positive' potential of traumatic ruptures is seen by others as morally and practically untenable, as it seems to 'celebrate' the most destructive of experiences as opportunities to break free from the representational constraints of our 'Cartesian prison'; a rare moment to get out of our own heads and to gain direct access to a truth beyond representation. As such, the suffering involved is apparently downplayed or placed on a second level with regard to the value of the 'truths' encountered in trauma.

Is there a way to think how psychotherapeutic change can be compatible with political agency, rather than obfuscating it? Can we draw from the accumulated knowledge and

exciting ideas in philosophical and sociological theories on ‘evental’ change, that is, change through some kind of rupture with ‘what is’, so that the political dimension of trauma recovery can be accounted for? What stands in the way of appropriating these theories to remediate the shortcomings of the PTSD approach to trauma? In this chapter, I will argue that Lacan’s notion of *the act* plays a pivotal role as a mediating concept between real lack and symbolic-imaginary reality. Because of its particular characteristics, this concept throws a different light on the problems discussed throughout this dissertation. The chapter starts off with an introduction to the act as described by Lacan. Next, I will follow Žižek’s elaboration and systematization of this rather underdeveloped Lacanian notion. We will find that Žižek himself, finally, turns to Alain Badiou’s theory of the event to think through the consequences of the act. These three authors will provide me with the conceptual resources needed to spell out the subtleties of what is involved in traumatic recovery, and how this relates to both ethics and politics.

The Origins of the Act

The act is one of the key terms resurfacing through the entirety of Lacan’s teachings. Adrian Johnston (2009) observes that it functions as a nodal signifier in Lacanian discourse. However, its consistent reiteration in an array of theoretical and clinical contexts ‘risks concealing an unstable, less than fully consistent set of shifting significations assigned to it’ (Johnston, 2009, p. 144). In this section, I will provide a brief overview of the different usages of the term throughout Lacan’s work and discuss its primary characteristics.

The first manner in which the act appears, as early as Lacan’s first seminar in 1953-54, is via the notion of ‘full speech’ (p. 50). In the context of an analysis, Lacan contends that the analysand’s discourse continuously shifts between empty speech (*parole vide*), a type of ‘chatter’ which remains within the imaginary realm of everyday signification, and full speech (*parole pleine*), which reflects the symbolic dimension of language ripe with surprising aspects of meaning (*sens*). Full speech is marked by the occurrence of important, Hegelian-style, performative ‘*speech acts*’ whereby the act of saying (the enunciation) corresponds with what is spoken (the enunciated) (Lacan, 1953-54). Importantly, such acts transform the subjectivity of the speaker: he or she becomes what he or she says in the very act of saying it. As the analysand attempts to formulate the truth of his or her desire (which, incidentally, is

structurally impossible given ‘desire’s incompatibility with speech’ (Lacan, 1961b, p. 535), he or she inaugurates out of nowhere a new dimension of subjectivity (Johnston, 2009, p. 144).

During the following early seminars, Lacan often equated the act with what is known as ‘acting-out’ in a clinical context. Acting-out denotes a transferential reaction of the analysand in which an unconscious message-to-be-deciphered is ‘played out’ in real life (in the sense of being staged) in what constitutes a call for interpretation (Lacan, 1962-63). The acting-out is a subjectively inaccessible solicitation of a response by the analyst, who is the addressee of this message. It is transferential in that it often surfaces in the wake of something missed by the analyst: what the analyst’s interpretation missed in the words of the analysand presents itself anew and on a different plane (that is, in actions), in an attempt to be ‘heard’ after all. Acting-out is thus primarily demonstrative, oriented toward the Other (Lacan, 1962-63, p. 145). Moreover, the significance of this type of act is determined by the pre-existing context in which it takes place. As such, acting-out does not break with the symbolic-imaginary framework already in place. It stages ‘a fantasy-like scenario transpiring within the already-there presence of socio-symbolic mediums of meaning’ (Johnston, 2009, p. 146).

From the fourteenth seminar onwards, Lacan started to explicitly distinguish acting-out from *the act* proper, although this evolution was anticipated in the previous seminars (Johnston, 2009). I will attempt to characterize Lacan’s notion of the act through a series of interrelated defining traits. First, unlike acting-out, the act is not the manifest expression of an underlying, already-established subjective intention or state. Whereas acting-out expresses a previously present form of subjectivity, which failed to be picked up in

spoken discourse, the act should be viewed as something that precipitates subjectivity rather than being its product. More precisely, the subject, for Lacan, is defined by its desire, and it is only in the wake of an act that desire comes into existence. In this manner, a true act ‘transforms’ the subject, in that the subject that arises from the act cannot be identified with the subjective forms prior to its occurrence. In line with the description of the performative speech act, the more general notion of the act entails that the actor is transformed at the level of his or her subjective structure and/or desire.

Second, the act is inherently linked to the register of the symbolic, albeit in a double-edged way. Importantly, it brings ‘something new’ into the world: the act calls into existence a new

signifying structure. However, it does so by forcing a radical *shift* of the symbolic prior to its occurrence. The act positively performs what was previously considered to be ‘impossible’; it presents or demonstrates something uncanny that disrupts and destabilizes the existent signifying structure. Because it undermines the pre-existent socio-symbolic Other, it always has a ‘transgressive’ dimension to it. To clarify this point, Lacan distinguishes the act from mere ‘action’, which is always readily inscribable in the pre-established framework, in the normal run of things. The act’s disruption signals its *real* aspect: although it is tied up with the inauguration of a new symbolic order, the act necessarily passes through a moment of (real) negativity with regard to the prior socio-symbolic reality. The transformation of the symbolic can therefore be said to rest upon a transitory suspension of the organizing principles of extant configurations of reality: the act *performs* a destabilizing break with this previous structure. Nevertheless, it also has a productive, symbolic side to it, as it introduces a previously unthinkable element into the symbolic field that, if properly worked out, will modify the organizing principle of a given reality and thereby generate a new signifying structure. This relates to the first defining trait discussed above: it is this shift in the symbolic that effectuates the mutation of the subject. In the changed symbolic structure, a new desire can be inscribed, if only ever after the (f)act (Johnston, 2009).

Third, the act takes place precisely at the point where one is confronted with the real, more precisely, the aspect of the real captured in the idea of the missing Other of the Other (Lacan, 1957-58, pp. 474-5, 1967-68). It transpires in complete solitude: there is no Other to guarantee its being appropriate, correct, just, successful, and so on. The act always involves a gamble, a risk, precisely because it cannot found itself on extant systems of knowledge or justification. Viewed from the standpoint of the pre-existent situation, the act appears as nonsensical at the time of its occurrence – because its sense cannot be grasped within the limits of the situation’s signifying capacities. Furthermore, Lacan (1966-67, p. 67) contends that the act is opaque to the one who carries it out as well. The act is not the result of calm, dispassionate deliberation; it is not a decision made consciously after the pros and cons have been carefully weighed. This means that the act can only be ‘subjectivized’ *after* the fact. Only then is it possible to, in a retroactive movement, reflect on and take responsibility for what transpired. Surprisingly, however, in Lacan’s account, the act is often if not always accompanied by an ‘effect of disavowal’ in its wake, an inability on the part of the newly emerged subject to acknowledge the gesture that founded its existence (Johnston, 2009). As

we will see, it is on this point that both Žižek and Badiou, in their attempts to systematize and elaborate the underdeveloped notion of the act, differ from Lacan, in the sense that both philosophers emphasize the subjective figures that arise in response to the act, along with the sustained forms of activity accompanying them. This activity following in the wake of the act, however, depends on the acknowledgment and denomination of the evanescent break with what was (as opposed to its disavowal).

The act has been primarily worked out as it functions in the context of psychoanalysis, that is, as the *act of the analyst* (Lacan, 1967-68). The latter is considered of prime importance to momentarily and repeatedly break up the analysand's interpretative fantasmatic framework, along with the grip of the debilitating *jouissance* tied up with it. In other words, the act of the psychoanalyst suspends the frame that produces satisfactory meaning-effects during the process of free association, in order to separate the analysand from the enjoyment inherent to signification as such (*joui-sens*) (Lacan, 1990, p. 16). Such interventions serve to disrupt the satisfaction obtained in the psychoanalytic experience itself, which is deemed necessary to avoid the pitfall of 'endless analysis' (Verhaeghe & Declercq, 2002). In this move, however, the analyst simultaneously dissolves the very structure that supports his or her position as a transference object, as a *sujet-supposé-savoir*. The act of the analyst thus effaces the actor, who is said to be reduced to nothing more than a 'waste product' (*déchet*) of this process^{xxvi}. Because the act dissolves the symbolic-imaginary coordinates that ordinarily serve to anchor one's identity in relation to the Other, it disrupts the ordinary modes of subjectivity and makes something new possible.

Note that the act, in this manner, bears an uncanny formal resemblance to the traumatic event itself, in that both undermine or 'traverse' the fantasy that ordinarily covers over the lack in the Other. The most apparent differences between both, however, are that the degree of rupture associated with the psychoanalytic act is arguably of a lesser intensity; and that the act breaks with the pre-existent reality in a more controlled manner compared to the 'wild' traversal by a traumatic episode. Lacanian analysis proceeds through a repeated confrontation with minimal, piecemeal shocks that cumulatively violate the fantasy rather than being concluded by one majestic, sublime act of the analyst. In this regard, Soler (2014) draws attention to the fact that the unconscious 'speaks but it does not conclude' (p. 71); the end is not merely decided by the discovery of a 'final signifier' or a final truth. The analysis is at its point of closure when there is no longer any 'analysand libido', defined as 'that which runs

after truth' (Soler, 2014, p. 71). With reference to Sándor Ferenczi, we could say that the analysis must 'die of exhaustion'; it must run out of gas (Ferraro & Garella, 2009). These ideas suggest that the traversal of the analysand's fantasy is not merely situated at the level of meaning and signification, but, importantly, affects the modes of *jouissance* of the subject. The repeated confrontation with the non-existence of the Other, stimulated by the analyst's acts, serves to soften the grip of a particular mode of fantasmatic enjoyment.

Nevertheless, the question remains how the 'exhaustion of the analysand libido' affects the manners in which the unconscious functions. These are very difficult questions concerning the finality of the psychoanalytic experience. Is there some sort of qualitative transformation of the subject at the end? And if so, how does this come about? Lacan continuously struggled with these questions and formulated a series of tentative answers throughout his teachings. At different stages of his trajectory, he identified the finality of the psychoanalysis with traversing the fantasy; the deflation of the *object a*; a new 'throw of the dice' that inaugurates a new form of enjoyment; identification with the symptom; the formation of a *sinthome* as a new way of knotting the registers of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic; the 'desire of the analyst' as the product of a fully terminated analysis; and so on. Nevertheless, we can see that in all of these rather elusive solutions, Lacan attempted to formulate a *qualitative* break with what went before, a sort of subjective transformation that differs from a mere modification within the coordinates of one's functioning prior to analysis. 'Exhaustion' can therefore not be the entire story of the analysis' finality, unless this petering out of so-called analysand libido is viewed as having far-reaching effects on the manners in which the person functions and orients him- or herself in real life. The quantitative logic of 'running out of analysand libido' must somehow be linked to a qualitatively different mode of functioning, to the precipitation of a new form of subjective structuring.

The act of the analyst takes centre stage in recent technical writings on Lacanian psychoanalysis^{xxvii}. It is theorized to be 'supported by the desire of the analyst', the idea being that it is only by grace of the psychoanalyst's own passage through the psychoanalytic experience (and thus, by grace of the desire that was formed during this process) that he or she is able to perform this act when confronted with the anxiety-inspiring non-existence of the Other – an unavoidable encounter in the course of any full-fledged analysis (Lacan, 1967-68). A clinician who has not followed through with his or her own analysis until the very end is believed to be in danger of forming an (unconscious) alliance with the analysand, in a mutual

attempt to flee from the traumatic real permeating the analysand's discourse. The analyst's own analysis purportedly produces his or her capacity to endure this confrontation, to restrain from any attempt to cover it up – so that it falls to the analysand to respond to it. In my reading, however, this notion of the 'desire of the analyst' as a support of the act is rather problematic, as it circumscribes the act as reflective of or supported by an already-established, underlying subjectivity/desire. This obviously contradicts the Lacanian claim that the act is productive of subjectivity/desire rather than its effect. The gist of the argument nevertheless stands: it is the analyst's task to endure and even stimulate the surfacing of the analysand's real, albeit in manageable doses, when the analysand is 'ready' for this confrontation, so that the analysand is required to respond to the opened-up nonsensical abyss. The rationale is that the analysand must be brought to face this lack of guarantee, the absence of the Other of the Other, because this is the point where he or she is called forth as a subject and where a transformative act becomes possible.

One more remark should be made at this point: the analyst's act is incalculable and unforeseeable for both parties. It should not be viewed as some sort of masterful, strategic gesture that pinpoints and exploits the fragile anchoring points of an analysand's discourse. Even for the analyst, his or her act is opaque and unpredictable (Žižek, 1999, p. 376). In this way, what constitutes an act is dependent on the manners in which it resonates with the other, in the effects that it brings about. What constitutes an act for one person and in one specific context, can be an empty gesture for another; it is only subsequent developments that allow us to make this verdict.

Why is the clinical practice of Lacanian psychoanalysis increasingly oriented around these traumatic separations from the Other, if not because it views our attachment to the Other, our alienation in its signifiers, and the paradoxical enjoyment tied up with this attachment, as the root of our sufferings? Moreover, is the implicit message of this stance not that it is only through a confrontation with this unveiled lack that a 'new throw of the dice' becomes possible for the analysand? The suspension of the Other, the confrontation with real lack, *compels* a subjective response from the latter. The act of the psychoanalyst, and the separation it entails, produces a moment of anxiety in which a new desire *can* take form, one that no longer suspends itself from the untenable fantasmatic framework that gave meaning and direction to the analysand's life up to then. Note, however, that this potential outcome (a proper, transformative act of the analysand) is by no means guaranteed: the default response

to this suspension appears to be an attempt to reinstate the big Other, a recourse to a former guarantee. This reactionary move is reflected in the movements of transference: once the traumatic gap appears, for instance through a nonsensical element that suddenly surfaces and disrupts the flow of associations, this will summon anew the associative work that produces meaning by revealing the fantasy. The lack encountered stimulates an expectation, a mirage of truth. Verhaeghe and Declercq (2002) work out that the subject's choice, in confrontation with real lack, consists of either persisting in a *belief* in the symptom and the Other, or in an *identification* with the real kernel of the symptom. To believe in the symptom is to believe in the existence of a final signifier that reveals the ultimate signification and sense of the estranging element. In other words, this type of subjective response holds on to the idea that the Other is guaranteed, that it is not marked by lack, that it can be made to cohere. The idea of an identification with the (real kernel of the) symptom is an attempt to formulate a mode of subjective functioning that departs from the adherence to the (lack of the) Other, which comes down to the inauguration of a new subject which 'tries to come and go with the Real of the *jouissance* dictated by its own drive, without falling back in the previous trap of stuffing it full of signification' (Verhaeghe & Declercq, 2002, p. 70). Whereas belief in the symptom signals a recourse to an *imaginary* subject-position, identification with the symptom refers to a symbolic subject-position that accepts the non-existence of the Other^{xxviii}.

This is why analysis often takes so long: it is only through the repetition of this transferential and *jouissance*-saturated circuit that a paradoxical attachment – to the Other, to the fantasy and the *jouissance* it produces – can be abandoned – or not. If the outcome were decided in advance, we would be dealing with a psychotherapeutic *technique* that forces its 'object', the point at which it impacts, in a predictable direction. In psychoanalysis, by contrast, the analyst merely attempts to confront the analysand with the point where he or she is faced with an impossible choice. The fact that things can go either way at this point testifies to the ethical dimension involved: the lack of guarantee signals the distinction between therapeutics as a technico-medical enterprise and psychoanalysis defined (quite counterintuitively to a contemporary eye) as an 'ethical' practice.

If the end of analysis involves a transformation of the subject and indeed, the precipitation of a new desire, then this can only be the result of an act-in-response, this time of the analysand him- or herself. The elaboration of the 'act of the analyst' thus minimally shows that one person's act compels a response from the other/Other: the nature of the act, its suspension of

the Other, is such that it entails an ‘ethical injunction’; one cannot but react to it. However, there is no determinate, predictable outcome of the analyst’s act, in the sense that no-one can surmise the effects it will have on the analysand. As argued, different sorts of responses are possible in confrontation with the abyss of the real. The analyst’s act does not enforce a particular type of response, then, but it does involve a ‘forced choice’, in the sense that one is obliged to react. The subtlety of psychoanalysis as a praxis thus comes to the fore; it cannot *force* anyone to make a specific choice, yet it attempts to create the condition of possibility to make such a transition. To further complicate matters, recall that the ‘choice’ discussed here is rather paradoxical, in the sense that it concerns an ‘unconscious choice’ that can only be retroactively subjectivized^{xxix}. The analysand, as a conscious ego, cannot make this ‘choice’; it is not a matter of voluntaristic activity. In the confrontation with the real, it is the unconscious that responds – which is why Lacan considered the status of the unconscious *ethical* (1964, p. 34). The problematic touched upon here is reminiscent of a point of contention in Badiou’s philosophical system, as we will see: the question if the reliance on the occurrence of an event, which cannot be forced and therefore needs to be awaited, does not lead to a form of quietism or passive withdrawal (see below).

Let me conclude by summarizing this argument. The analyst’s act guides the analysand to an encounter with the real by short-circuiting the fantasy. I contend that one possible reaction to this encounter consists of a transformative act, one that introduces a new element into the symbolic order, something previously considered impossible. Because this element from then on testifies to the fact that the impossible *did* happen, it has the power to radically alter the organizing principle of the associated reality. This second instance of the act, which transpires in a state of terror or anxiety, enables one to ‘exit’ the void of the real which was momentarily opened up by the analyst’s intervention, without returning however to the forms of subjectivity that preceded it. In other words, I claim that Lacanian psychoanalysis is structured in such a way as to make this confrontation with real lack possible, because this encounter is regarded as the condition of possibility for a radical, restructuring, ethical act on the side of the analysand him- or herself. Analysis, simply put, aims at subjectivization: it calls forth/produces the subject in a traumatic encounter with the lack of the Other, a subject considered the after-effect of a certain type of act. The didactical separation of the act into two distinct moments made here (one of disruption, one of conclusion) must not be taken too strictly: the aspects of suspension (negativity) and conclusion (positivity) often go hand in

hand. Recall, for instance, Antigone's act, discussed in Chapter 6, which breaks with the Other while simultaneously making explicit and affirming an alternative ethical choice. Antigone actively *performs* the impossible, she makes the impossible appear in full intensity, in its actuality, in the here and now. The break with the pre-existent can thus be achieved by *presenting* something formerly impossible, by adding something to the former situation – and not merely by subtracting something from it. The psychoanalytic act is a Janus-faced concept characterized by a real, negative side of disruption, and a productive, positive side directed at transformation of the symbolic.

Clinical Illustration

Chiriaco (2012) describes the case of Nina, who, since she was eight years old, had suffered incestuous assaults from a maternal uncle who resided in her parental home when she was a child. This uncle, the beloved younger brother of her mother, frequently took Nina in his room, locked the door, undressed and touched her. The abuse continued until she was twelve years old and she finally dared to say 'no' to him. Before this moment, she remained silent; out of fear, but most of all because the words to think or say what happened did not exist. It concerned the unthinkable, the unrepresentable of which she knew that it was forbidden and which left her feeling ugly, dirty, ashamed, disgusted and terrified. Although she had already recounted this history to another therapist, this disturbing past was revived when she became a mother herself, in her late thirties.

I will not go into all the details of Nina's case, nor will I discuss the entire course of the psychoanalysis itself. What I wish to illustrate here, is the manner in which Nina's unconscious responded to this traumatic real through the formation of a fantasy that covered over its enigma, a subjective response that made it possible to ascribe a certain meaning to it. This reparative fantasy is not something of which Nina was aware; it was only by recounting the vicissitudes of her love life and professional endeavors that she was able to (re)construct it in the safety of the consultation room. Nina's love life always took the same form: she became the mistress (*la maîtresse*) of married men, a position she acknowledged to enjoy. The element of risk, the hide and seek, the sneaking around: it entailed a passion that she liked. This organization of her love life, which repeated itself throughout the years, abruptly came to a stop late in her thirties, when she met the man who would become the father of her

child: *Florent*. It troubles Nina that his name is reminiscent of her abusive uncle's, *Laurent*. Whereas Nina used to be the mistress, her marriage with Florent placed her in the position of the cheated wife. Not that Florent was hooked to another woman; his true partner was the bottle. What he desired and enjoyed was alcohol, before anything else.

In the analysis, Nina often wondered how she made it out of her incestuous childhood so well – in the sense that she was able to have a satisfactory sexual life and had always functioned professionally. She reconstructed that when she finally said no to the uncle, this procured a transition: the Other could no longer make use of her without her consent. She remembered that after another traumatic episode at school, where she was harassed by a group of boys who isolated her in the restroom and took off her clothes, thereby delivering her once again to the Other's *jouissance* without defence, she was plunged in shame and silence. But then, she realized something: 'It was like I found it normal that boys are like that, normal that *I attract them*. I was *a prey*.' (Chiriaco, 2012, p. 34, my translation) This utterance, produced in the analysis, captured in a retroactive movement the fantasy that organized her love life up to then. It is a fantasmatic construction that enveloped the senseless, traumatic events to which she was submitted; a minimal theory, an attempt to infuse some sense in the senseless. She was the one who attracted men. With this minimal yet paramount shift: in her 'no' to the uncle, she became the master (*maîtresse*) of this fate: she accepted being the prey of men, but only insofar as she got to decide herself whether or not she would allow herself to be caught. This game between the prey and the hunter became pleasurable: she loved to seduce and be seduced. Thus, to paraphrase Chiriaco (2012, p. 35, my translation): 'even if the sexual abuses oriented her existence, they did not hinder her from having a satisfying sexual life'. It was the formula of her fantasy that enabled Nina a way out of an eternal fixation in the position of the object of the Other. This fantasy coated the traumatic real with a symbolic-imaginary layer, so to speak. Yet it was only by grace of the sustained activity of 'working-through' the material produced during free association, that she succeeded in formulating it consciously, and recuperate and subjectivize its truth.

One negative consequence of this fantasy, which helped her to be active, lively and feisty, was that it radically separated love from sexuality. Nina never felt lovable. Despite the pleasurable, fantasmatic masquerade that made her desirable, she was convinced that below the mask there was nothing to be loved. She attracted and trapped men through sex, yet she desired to be loved and never achieved that goal. In a dream produced during the analysis, she

was tinged by a stain that she could not get rid of, no matter how hard she tried. She immediately associated this with her uncle's transgressions, but, in a second time, equally with her own reaction towards him: why could she not say no? Why did she submit for so long? She had prematurely taken some of the responsibility for what had happened to her as a child (Chiriaco, 2012, p. 37). This distances her from the position of a victim mere and simple, yet it opens onto something real that takes her beyond the defensive, fantasmatic framework that fascinated and helped her, but for which she had paid a price. The fantasy was a screen to defend against the real that lingered beyond. When she became aware of this fantasy, the dream further destabilized it.

Nina's 'act', in this case, is first and foremost what constituted the fantasy. It concerns the subjective response to the experience of being passively delivered to the Other's enjoyment. It consists of an interpretative twist that suddenly, apparently out of nowhere, enabled the elaboration of a framework through which Nina could orient herself *vis-à-vis* the traumatic real. Note that this act, which is often called subjective, that is, the act *of* the subject, is in fact something that occurs in an *a-subjective nowhere*. The subject is the effect of the act; it is only in the subsequent meanders of the desire inaugurated by the act that the subject can retroactively recognize herself in it. The fantasy, which remained largely unconscious until Nina was able to capture it in a minimal phrase during the analysis, oriented Nina's professional, romantic and sexual life. She was able to derive a form of enjoyment from it, yet this came at a price. Moreover, this particular fantasmatic answer, despite its undeniable merits, seized to contain the traumatic real at a significant point in her life (when she became a mother). Something opaque and disruptive suddenly resurfaced and prompted Nina to seek out help. Secondly, the dream produced during the course of the analysis confronted Nina once again with what waited beyond this fantasmatic frame; it pointed towards a real element that could no longer be contained within this fantasy. This confrontation with the real stimulated a new act, which enabled her to break with her previous subjective position and re-orient her life.

This clinical vignette shows that every psychoanalysis entails a double movement: in the process of free association, links between apparently disparate elements suddenly appear, which causes meaning and sense to arise where there formerly was none. This ultimately amounts to the reconstruction of what Lacan (1957-58) called a 'fundamental fantasy', a small, compact theory which can be captured in a minimal sentence, a framework that orients

desire and organizes enjoyment. The fantasy draws out certain subjective positions along which one can circulate. But analysis does not stop here, in the meaning and satisfaction provided by the fantasy. In the process of uncovering the fantasy, its limits are laid bare as well. The analysis is oriented around that which lies beyond the fantasy: it targets a confrontation with the real. Although there is no description of an ‘act of the analyst’ in this small vignette, the reported dream serves a similar function: it distorts the fantasy, it lays bare its weak spots and reveals it for what it is. Psychoanalysis is oriented towards a renewed confrontation with the traumatic real that awaits beyond the fantasy – because it is only in this confrontation that a new, singular solution to this real can be produced, one that breaks with the impasses of the former fantasmatic solution. Equally, this means that psychoanalysis requires the analysand to relinquish the *jouissance* that derives from this fantasy. The confrontation with the real allowed Nina to break with the identification of being ‘the Other woman’. A series of decisions followed in the wake of this decision. She left her ‘unfaithful’ husband in a refusal to be the cheated wife, thereby abandoning the subjective position she consistently occupied in the past. She discovered that she loved to study, and decided to seek a companion to share this new life with.

Far removed from the context of psychoanalysis pure and simple, it was Žižek who identified the *political* possibilities of Lacan’s conceptualization of the act – given its role in breaking with a pre-existent representational reality and the inauguration of a new symbolic order.

Žižek’s Political Act

The appropriation of a concept developed in the specific context of psychoanalysis as a tool for political theory is illustrative of Slavoj Žižek’s often debated style, marked by a continuous and apparently careless ‘shifting of gears’ between two levels of analysis. However, as argued above, Lacan’s theory undermines the intuitive distinction between individual and collective levels of human existence, which is probably why Žižek considers it justified to make such transitions without risking the reduction of one level to the other or making certain ‘category errors’^{xxx}.

The political value of the act lies in its capacity to rewrite the very rules governing what is and is not possible in a given sociopolitical reality. Once again, this underscores that the act

operates within the symbolic: it produces effects in this structure precisely because it transgresses its rules. As such, and in line with what was said about traumatic ruptures, the act destabilizes the big Other by revealing its flaws, inconsistencies and vulnerabilities. The interruption of the predictable cycles that govern a particular reality forces a transformation upon the regulated systems (Johnston, 2009, p. 110). In addition to this moment of negativity, however, the act also introduces something new into reality – something of which the status is not entirely clear but will need to be worked out.

Žižek's act roughly preserves the traits defined by Lacan. He agrees that the subject is, as such, 'not included' in the act. That is to say, the act does not arise out of a preconfigured subjectivity, but rather out of an asubjective nowhere. The subject only engages with its 'own' act in a retroactive movement. Put differently, the subject is not the active performer or 'hero' of the act, but rather an after-effect of this event (Zupančič, 2000). In addition, even for the one who carries it out, the act is never predictable or anticipatable. Johnston (2009) argues that this is so because the parameters of the framework of a given symbolic order, which are normally used to anticipate and define events, are shattered if and when an act happens. Or, to put it differently, it is impossible to decide, in the here and now, whether an action will turn out to qualify as a 'genuine act' in retrospect. It is subsequent history that makes this verdict, as we will see in what follows. That the subject is not 'the hero' of the act raises a number of difficult questions. If it is not the conscious subject who carries out this gesture, then who or what does? And can we, as self-conscious, volitional actors, influence the occurrence of such an act? Can 'we' do anything at all? Or is the message rather that we have to 'wait' for the act, given that it transpires 'in the mode of an anonymous "it happens", rather than as the outcome of intentionally guided forms of practice' (Johnston, 2009, p. 111)? Does the idea that the act is formative of subjectivity, then, not lead to a form of 'quietism', that is, the attitude of waiting for something benign to happen and taking no action because of this promise? As we will see, a similar concern has been voiced with regard to Badiou's theory of the event and the particular conception of subjectivity that derives from it. Recall the similar paradox encountered in the context of psychoanalysis: the act/event cannot be forced to happen. Nevertheless, psychoanalysis works towards the possibility of this moment, and its particular strategies to achieve this might be instructive for political theory as well.

Another often-debated aspect of Žižek's elaboration of the act concerns the manners in which it relates to the symbolic order. A considerable part of Žižek's work is devoted to the idea that

a given socio-symbolic reality should not be viewed as a homogeneous, stable, harmonious system, only disrupted in exceptional circumstances by strictly external intrusions (for instance, Žižek, 1989, 1993, 1999). Žižek repeatedly stresses that such moments of crisis, which seem to be brought on by contingent, external factors, are moments in which the *internal* incoherence of the entire system comes to light. Žižek views the social order as always-already ripe with conflicts, antagonisms and tensions. It is itself heterogeneous and inconsistent: society, as such, does not exist. In other words: crises immanently arise out of the ‘ordinary’ being of society; they are the immanent effect of the internal logics of the structure. It is the function of collective fantasies or ideology to hide these points of fragility, or to recast them as contingent, externally caused glitches. Recall the metaphor of Einstein’s special and general theory of relativity: the symbolic space (or society) is not ‘curved’ or fractured because of the contingent, external intrusion of ‘real’ elements (matter). The idea that a smooth, ‘uncurved’ symbolic space is within reach, if the intruder/obstacle could be eliminated, is what ideology or fantasy would have you believe. Žižek (2006) claims that the causality should be reversed: ‘real’ fractures only appear because the ‘space’ of the symbolic is always-already curved. The primary function of ideology is precisely to treat an identified dysfunction as an external intrusion and not as the necessary result of the system’s functioning.

Žižek’s reading of the act emphasizes the moment of negativity that tears away the imaginary cover of ideology to reveal the Other’s lack of foundation and its insufficiency. He thereby acknowledges that it is always against the background of a given socio-symbolic context, marked by its internally determined zones of fragility, that an act intervenes. Just as the real cannot be conceived in itself, but only in relation to a symbolic-imaginary system that determines the points where it can potentially emerge, so what constitutes an act is equally dependent on the context in which it takes place. This in turn implies that ‘the *same* gesture can be an Act or a ridiculous, empty posture, depending on the context’ (Žižek, 2002, p. 152). Think, for instance, of the climactic scene in Stanley Kubrick’s epic drama film *Spartacus*, when the slaves, asked by Crassus to identify and give up their leader, each stand up to proclaim ‘I am Spartacus’, and then compare this to the rather pathetic *#jesuisCharlie* after the 2015 Charlie Hebdo killings in Paris. However, that a concrete act is always situated in a specific context is not to say that it is completely *determined by* this context. If the latter were the case, then the form and outcome of the act could indeed be calculated and guaranteed.

Given that the act ‘retroactively changes the very co-ordinates into which it intervenes’ (Ibid.), there can be no such guarantee; the act involves a radical risk. Žižek claims that it is precisely this dimension of risk, the chance that the act will ‘radically misfire’ (Žižek, 2002, p. 153), which is unbearable to many in the contemporary West. An act without risk, however, is an ‘Act without the Act’ (Ibid.); it is nothing more than an empty gesture. Are all the self-declared *Charlies* genuinely prepared to side with the cartoonists if a terrorist were to ask them who it was that drew Mohamed? The act cannot be taken up in the contemporary logic of preserving only the positive while expelling the negative, for instance when we drink coffee without caffeine, soft drinks without sugar, beer without alcohol, and so on.

Although Žižek acknowledges the importance of the preceding symbolic context with regard to the act, he is less clear about what follows the act’s momentary suspension of this order. Neill (2011) argues that Žižek considers the act’s intervention as something ‘absolute’, in the sense that he leaves no room for the subsequent, necessary *re-inscription* of the act in the Symbolic (its positive side). For Žižek, any such re-inscription misses the radical nature of the act. Neill, however, contends that this insistence on a complete and indefinite suspension of the big Other brings Žižek’s act closer to Lacan’s concept of the *passage à l’acte*, which entails the dissolution of the subject and thereby the impossibility of the ethical (Lacan, 1962-63, pp. 135-53). If each and every re-inscription in the symbolic ‘betrays’ the act, then suicide is indeed the only act that always succeeds (Lacan, 1990, p. 66-7). In contrast with this line of argument, the ethical import of the act is only realized if a moment of inscription into a permuted field of meaning is retroactively read into and assumed in the very decision to act. Johnston (2009) argues that Žižek’s hesitation to accept a moment of re-inscription in the symbolic is linked to the idea that an act not only reconfigures the field of the symbolic while maintaining its terms, but that it involves a transformation of the very contours of the symbolic itself. In other words, the act is not simply the performative modification of reality or the symbolic, but rather an intervention in the very structuration of reality itself. The transfigurations of the act cannot be reduced to a re-shuffling of the elements that were already in place, in the sense that new elements occupy different positions within the same ‘playing field’. Such an intervention leaves the ‘transcendental regime’ of the symbolic space intact. The act, as it were, changes the rules of the game itself. The difficulty encountered here is associated with the idea that only a (real) negativity can disrupt sociopolitical reality. As we will see shortly, Badiou’s theory of the event makes clear that a positive, new emergence (for

instance, the (symbolic) name of the event) can equally cause a dislocation of the preceding framework – in the same movement in which it generates a new reality.

Johnston (2009) maintains that as Žižek attempted to elaborate the Lacanian act, the limitations of this never fully systematized notion became apparent. In order to specify the strange relation of the act with the symbolic, Žižek turned to Badiou's theory of *the event* to further clarify his position. Badiou's event is in many aspects strikingly akin to Lacan's act, which even prompted Žižek to identify Badiou as 'the theorist of the Act' (Johnston, 2009, p. 143). For the purposes of discussing trauma recovery in its political and ethical dimension, Badiou's notion of the event has the advantage of being embedded in a systematized philosophical system. In what follows, I will discuss a few of Badiou's key ideas, which resonate with the Lacanian insights discussed throughout this book. Just like the real in its relation to the symbolic Other, Badiou attempts to think the dynamic between a given state of things (a situation or a world) and the emergence of something incommensurable with this prior state which he calls the event. In this way, the Badiouian detour offers a way to recapitulate what we have discussed from a different angle^{xxxii}. The added bonus, however, is that it simultaneously offers a more comprehensive framework to theorize the *process* of the act – so that we can put this concept to use in concrete contexts.

Badiou's Theory of the Event

French philosopher Alain Badiou occupies a somewhat peculiar position relative to his contemporaries because his work draws upon both analytical and continental philosophical traditions. His first major book, *Being and Event*, was only translated into English seventeen years after its original French publication (2005, pp. xi-xiv). The title of this work readily marks a dichotomy that is of interest in the context of our discussion of trauma and the act: ontology or the science of 'being-qua-being' versus the event – which is seen as a rupture in being, as that which is 'not-being-qua-being' (Badiou, 2005, p. 173). It is through this opposition between being (or 'world') and event, grounded in a newly developed ontology based on Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory, that Badiou attempts to address the two major questions that drive his philosophical project. Firstly, how is it possible that radical change immanently arises out of specific 'situations', rather than 'being procured from some unspecified transcendent other place' (Johnston, 2009, p. 6)? And secondly, how can we

reconcile the notion of a subject with (post-structuralist and constructivist) ontology (Badiou, 2003a; 2009a)? In the end, his philosophical project, which scrutinizes the tension between formalization/structure and disruption/novelty, is an attempt to elaborate a theory of change that allows for the development of an ethic. As we will see, Badiou argues that it is only through the gap between being and event that subjectivity (and concomitantly, ethics) becomes a possibility for human beings.

I will first introduce the dichotomous terms ‘world’ and ‘event’. The manner in which Badiou describes this antinomy is highly reminiscent of the aforementioned rupture between a pre-existent meaning-generating symbolic-imaginary system and an irreducible, uncanny traumatic episode. In order to grasp the manner in which Badiou theorizes these concepts, it is necessary to underline the distinction between ontology on the one hand, as the science of *being-qua-being* or absolute being ‘in itself’, and the order of presentation on the other, as the ‘ontic’ in a Heideggerian sense, which is concerned with specific ‘beings’. Badiou holds that pure being is ‘inconsistent multiplicity’, whilst presentation (the ontic) requires that multiplicity is made consistent (Badiou, 2005, p. 25). Presentation or appearance, then, is always the result of a *count* or an operation, some kind of organizing activity. Importantly, there are infinite ways of counting the inconsistent multiple, and this under-determination gives rise to an inexhaustible multitude of worlds, each of which is co-existent with a specific ‘transcendental’ (the name for such an organizing principle). This is why Badiou declares that ‘ontology is mathematics’, and why he is so interested in set theory: because it is about ways of counting. For Badiou, set theory delineates the very laws of being itself, meaning the laws that pertain to the formation and organization of any group or any multiple – in total indifference to what it is that is being ordered. Ontology, then, is the study of the features shared by any order of presentation whatsoever, ‘which amounts to the same thing as saying that it studies the conversion of what there is of pure being into something consistent and structured’ (Pluth, 2010, p. 37). However, as ontology studies the laws of composition of *all* organized multiples, it can never become a study of any *singular* situation.

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou (2009a) expands the reach of his philosophy by formalizing the way that being-qua-being (and its supplements: event, subject and truth) appears or exists within a specific world or situation. While existence is usually thought of as an ontological category, Badiou claims, in line with Lacan (1973-74^{xxxii}), that it is rather a category of *appearing* (not of *being*) (see also Chapter 5). This has a major consequence: within this line

of thought, it is possible for some things to ‘exist more’ or ‘less’ in a world than others, depending on their place in the world's transcendental. Furthermore, existence is always localized: to exist is to appear in some ‘there’, with respect to other appearances. The transcendental measures the ‘degrees of identity or difference among a multiple and itself, or between a being-there and other beings’ (Badiou, 2009a, p. 102). Each world or situation is thus characterized by a particular ‘transcendental structure’ that indexes or organizes the interrelations between its various elements (as such, a world's transcendental should not be considered something separate from its world).

In sum, the most crucial feature of a situation or world is the fact that it is a system of organization, a way of counting and structuring the pure multiple. As Ed Pluth (2010, p. 75) remarks in this regard:

for any world, no matter how inhuman, the same principles of organization (the same ‘logics’) adhere: there is a transcendental for that world, there are minimal and maximal degrees of appearing in it, there are relations of dependence, synthesis, and so on that can all be formalized.

More concretely, *world* is the name for a general status quo ante characterized by an equilibrium. It refers not only to that which actually surrounds us, but equally to the ensemble of possibilities that are determined in it (what can and cannot appear). Importantly, worlds are characterized by their own internal tensions: within a world, not everything is clear and consonant. Furthermore, each world has its own authorized ways of managing dissent and domesticating the unknown.

The view that any given world or situation is characterized by a series of immanently generated tensions and antagonisms fits nicely with Žižek’s description of fantasmatically construed (sociopolitical) realities. In Lacanian theory, the symbolic-imaginary constitution of reality in relation to the Other appears to have a function similar to Badiou’s transcendental regime, namely, rendering a confusing chaos consistent. However, as Pluth (2010) reminds us, set theory is

ultimately indifferent to the way in which human beings perceive and carve up the world conceptually or linguistically. It allows being qua being to be carved up in all sorts of different ways that have nothing to do with what we perceive and how we need to organize our experience. (p. 49)

Against this more or less consistent background which is called a world or a situation, Badiou's notion of the *event* designates the sudden, unexpected and incomprehensible appearance of something that has no place in it. As Johnston (2009, p. 10) puts it, the event is 'a happening that isn't authorized either by the mathematical-ontological order of "being qua being" (*l'être en tant qu'être*) or by the logical system of transcendental structures regulating the play of appearances within circumstances in a given world'. Formally, this description comes very close to the manner in which trauma itself is defined. The main difference, however, is Badiou's emphasis on the positivity of the evanescent event. The event always has a positive valence for Badiou, because it is considered the immanent appearance of an eternal 'truth', granting those who become its subjects the possibility of becoming 'immortal' in the sense described in Chapter 4. Trauma, on the other hand, is associated with death and finitude, with the destruction of subjectivity.

Whereas Badiou (2005) first defined an event by focusing on its intrinsic properties, in *Logics and Event* he came to characterize it through the status of its effects in a world: *event* is the name for something that has the potential to dramatically change the world within which it surfaces. More specifically, Badiou (2009a) stipulates that the changes procured by an event (through the activity of a subject) include modifying the very manner in which appearances in that world are ordered: 'evental changes redistribute the assignation of degrees of existence in a world, thereby creating another world through installing a different transcendental regime' (Johnston, 2009, p. 24). An event is the sudden appearance, with maximal intensity, of a previously inexistent element of a given world. Therefore, it reveals the radical contingency of any way of ordering the multiple and has the potential to change all the other appearances and degrees of existence. In other words, the event announces the possibility for a new world to arise. This clearly dovetails with the Žižekian and Lacanian descriptions of the act, although it puts more stress on the positivity of the rupture (in the sense that the break derives from the impossible, evanescent appearance-in-disappearance of an unfathomable 'something', an excessive supplement to the pre-evental world).

There are many ways to make the related concepts of world and event more tangible. For example, what constitutes an event can be conceptually distinguished from the more general notion of a *fact* (Pachoud, 2005). If the world is understood as a general transcendental regime that constitutes what is and what is not possible (that is, what can and what cannot appear), then facts are occurrences that can be entirely explained from within the existent

framework. They can be intelligibly located within the analyzable, foreseeable cause-and-effect chains unfolding themselves within the confines of a specified system. By contrast, the event cannot be understood on the basis of that which is already in place: it is the intrusion of a seemingly uncaused X that resists re-inscription back into these same chains. In short, the distinction between an event and a fact can be made through reference to the consequences (that is, the degree of change) that it has for the world in which it takes place. In the same vein, a *modification* contrasts with an event because it only affects the appearances of its world, not its transcendental regime. Recall, in this regard, Lacan's distinction between acts and actions, which exhibits a similar logic.

In conclusion, Badiou's philosophy of change offers a very detailed and powerful account of how to think the dynamics of rupture – explicitly situated on the macroscopic level between world and event rather than limited to the micro-level of the individual. The event is described as the unforeseen breakthrough of what was previously judged to be 'impossible', that is, a transgression of the transcendental regime of the pre-existing world. Badiou's event shares this characteristic with both trauma and the act. These concepts are all marked by a certain *excess* with regard to the world in which they appear. After the discussion of the theoretical building blocks provided by Badiou's philosophy, I will propose a manner in which they can nevertheless be conceptually distinguished from each other.

There Is No Such Thing as 'Trauma Information'

What typifies a traumatic reaction, and what is re-asserted by Badiou's theory of the event, is that the traumatic event cannot be entirely grasped from within the interpretative background that is present at the moment of its occurrence. Badiou's event can only be comprehended retroactively, because any understanding of it can only take place on the basis of a new horizon of possibilities that is generated by the event^{xxxiii}. In exactly the same way, a trauma is antonymous with the symbolic-imaginary framework that preceded it. The consequences of this antagonism can hardly be overstated: a traumatic episode ultimately destroys the symbolic-imaginary identity of the affected person, which is sometimes argued to amount to the death or erasure of the subject itself (Žižek, 2008).

The sharp line drawn between world and event in Badiou's theory allows us to revisit the remark concerning the paradoxical notion of 'new trauma-related information'. When viewed

through the lens offered by Badiou, it becomes clear that cognitive theories of post-traumatic growth, which describe trauma recovery as a process of assimilation of or adaptation to the purported ‘new trauma-related information’, presuppose as a given what can only be the result of an as-of-yet unspecified process. The information that a trauma supposedly delivers is basically unknowable from within the pre-existent world in which it emerges. Framed in this manner, the question becomes how ‘something that is nothing’ from the standpoint of the pre-evental situation can have such profound effects on the world in which it surfaces.

As I have already hinted, Badiou’s philosophy stipulates that ‘reading’ the event requires the advent of a ‘new world’ that is somehow instigated by this event. Likewise, I claim that recovery from trauma requires the production of a new interpretative background from which the trauma can be dealt with. However, I have not yet addressed the question where this new world, which is of capital importance for recovery, comes from. I will approach this issue through Badiou’s elaboration of the ‘subjectivization of the event’. The bulk of the rest of this chapter will be devoted to this theory, thus preparing the way for understanding the act involved in traumatic recovery.

The Subject and the New Present

Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds* (2009a) formalizes the ways in which the subject appears in a world. I will primarily focus on the structure of the ‘faithful subject’^{xxxiv}, as this particular subject-form is said to produce, through its sustained efforts, the new present that allows belated access to the meaning of the event (that is, its ‘truth’). According to Badiou, at the origin of each subject’s appearance lies, as a necessary precondition, an event. In fact, the formal theory of the subject is a theory of ‘subjectivization’: it deals with the advent of a subjectivity that is grounded in the situation it is part of. Badiou’s subject is thus not a universal feature of structure as such, but a rarity, something which arises only in exceptional conditions when a Truth-Event disrupts the ordinary run of things (Žižek, 2012, p. 621).

As explained above, the event is what appears only in its disappearance; it has no reality or sense within the world as it stands; it is elusive and cannot be the object of factual knowledge, evidence or proof. In terms of Badiou’s philosophy: whether or not an event belongs to a certain world or situation (that is, its status) is undecidable or pending. Hence, for the event to

have any consequences (and for something new to come about), a response from within the original situation or world is required in the form of an ‘intervention’, a term that denotes the declaration that an event *does* belong to its situation (Badiou, 2005, p. 202).

Subjectivization starts with a decision: yes, I acknowledge that an event has taken place, and I name it ε . The name of the event is called its *trace* (often denoted ε), and it is only through this *act* of naming that the event, which is inherently ephemeral, subsists in time as a mark *for* the subject. However, and this is a subtle yet essential twist, according to Badiou, the subject is not so much the one who chooses and names, as that which emerges as a *result* of the *act* of naming – which recalls Lacan’s (1967-68) description of the subject in the ethical act. In sum, it is through the ‘intervention’ that something of the event itself ends up being presented in the situation or world: ‘the act of nomination of the event is what constitutes it’ *for* the situation (Badiou, 2005, p. 203). By being named, an event attains some degree of efficacy, some minimal presence in a situation. The name becomes the stand-in for the event, and it is only thanks to this subsisting mark that the evanescent event can ever have any consequences on the multiples of the situation. As such, the notion of intervention attempts to construct a bridge between the non-being of an event and a situation or world as an order of presentation (Pluth, 2010). Importantly, this is centered around the emergence of a new signifier, the trace. I would propose that the positive, productive side of the Lacanian act should be located precisely at the level of this interface. In this sense, it should not be equated with the Badiouian event *per se*, but rather with the ‘intervention’ that generates a trace.

Furthermore, the nature and status of this evental name must be highlighted: both an event and its signifiers are indiscernible and undecidable from within the here and now of the yet-to-be-modified world. As far as the established knowledge-regime is concerned, the name of an event is nothing more than a gibberish ‘empty signifier’ without referent. Badiou argues that the name will only be assigned a referent or a signification in the future anterior, when the new world has been fully actualized. Subjectivization thus involves a counterintuitive, paradoxal temporality: the names of an event amount to additions to the pre-evental situation, and their correctness can only be judged from the perspective of the new world inaugurated by this event and produced through the prolonged efforts of the faithful subject.

To cut a very complex and multi-faceted account of the process of subjectivization short: after this instant of subjectivization (which refers to the flash of the intervention, or, as I propose, the act *per se*), a long and arduous process must take place in which this name is brought into

relation with other multiples in the situation, ‘forcing’ its presence in the situation. This could be called a ‘subject-process’, which refers to the continuation, within a structure, of the disruption that began with the subjectivization. I propose that this prolonged subjective activity provides a new outlook on the difficult yet essential Freudian concept of ‘working-through’ (*Durcharbeiten*) (Freud, 1913b). The faithful subject engages itself in a fidelity or truth procedure: it scrutinizes the multiples of the situation from the standpoint of its eventual supplement, considering which ones are affected by the event and which ones are not (Badiou, 2009a, pp. 50-4). Fidelity, in Badiou’s philosophy, requires the performance of ‘a series of decisions about the elements of the situation in question, asking whether each one is modified by the event or not’ (Pluth, 2010, p. 97). Through this process, a ‘truth’ is gradually exposed, which groups together all the terms of the situation which are positively connected to the event. This, in turn, results in the establishment of a new present: a new world governed by a different transcendental regime that changes the degrees of visibility (or existence) of its elements. As such, things that were previously unthinkable and *de jure* inexistent suddenly become represented in the (new) situation. Note that the event does not bring about a new world on its own; it is essential that this requires a series of acts (decisions which cannot rely on established knowledge to authorize themselves) in a singular situation. When translated to the context of trauma, then, recovery is not the result of the direct verbalization of the undigested experience, but rather of the creation of a new (social) context that allows for it to be read. This requires both the flash of an intervention/act and the sustained activity of working-through or forcing new bits of knowledge.

Forging a Trace: From the Event to the Act

The articulation of the event with this specific notion of a subject shows that the motif of the abrupt cut is necessarily extended with the long-term endeavor to ‘force’ one’s circumstances to respond to the breaks in the default order of things. Importantly, this is not an enterprise that takes place entirely intrapsychically. Badiou’s theory stipulates that this new present is produced through a series of subjective acts that concern the other – a form of activity which he attempts to capture in the ‘matheme of the faithful subject’. In this modality of the subject, the trace of the event motivates and dictates the choices and actions one makes. Essentially, the faithful subject explores the consequences of what has happened in the event, engendering

the expansion of the present and exposing, fragment by fragment, a truth (Badiou, 2009a, pp. 50-4).

But does this, then, not commit the same mistake that was identified in theories of ‘post-traumatic growth’? If recovery from trauma requires the installation of a new world that only comes about through a series of subjective acts under the auspices of the evental trace, then how can one know how to act, considering that the trace is both a declaration that an event has taken place and the initial attempt to name it? As we have seen, from the standpoint of the pre-evental world, the name of the event is ‘non-sensical’ as it does not have any referent in that situation. Furthermore, even if the trace could be accurately formulated and comprehended at that particular time, there persists an unbridgeable gap between the event’s name, as a guiding principle, and its application in real-life decisions involving either yes or no. Suffice to say that promoting the activity of the faithful subject in order to generate a new present leads to a renewed paradox concerning the temporality at work in recovery: the trace of the event, just as the ‘new trauma-related information’, is necessarily posited at a moment in chronological time where it cannot yet be surmised – due to the lacking interpretative framework that this requires at that particular moment. The act (of naming the event, for example) always seems to ‘run ahead’ of what will retrospectively *have been* in light of the context that is created as its consequence, a feature that is called ‘anticipatory certitude’ (Pluth & Hoens, 2004, p. 185). Thus, although the ‘principle derived from the trace’ is said to drive and motivate the faithful subject, there is essentially no way to directly access the content of this principle anymore than the aforementioned ‘new trauma-related information’.

One possible solution to this problem is acknowledging that the trace of the event, as the result of the intervention (as per Badiou) or the act (as per Lacan), is not an objective reflection of the ‘true’ nature of the event, but rather something that is *coined*, in the sense of a linguistic invention of an expression that is used for the first time. Indeed, Badiou (2003b, p. 114) acknowledges that there is always, in every truth procedure, a poetic moment because we always have to find a new name for the event. Translating this into a more familiar, psychological frame of reference, we could say that, from a Lacanian point of view, the speaking being, to get a preliminary hold on the event, *forces* a signifier on what has happened. This signifier comes to simultaneously point to and obscure the (traumatic) event. It is a signifier that is stamped on the experience, deforming it in a sense and unavoidably reducing it, but rendering it within the realms of language and the symbolic. This enigmatic

left-over of the vanished event is sometimes referred to as its symptom or mark (Roffe, 2006, p. 335). A trace is thus *forged* that comes to designate the event and stand in for it. Note that this obligatory passage of the event through the signifier is a *forgery*: in order for the truth of the experience to be accessed, it must be hit with a signifier that will inevitably miss it to a certain degree. There is no guarantor of truth in this attempt, just as there is no unmediated access to the traumatic truth as such. The forging of the trace is a subjective act *par excellence*: it produces something new *ex nihilo*. Furthermore, it bears repeating that this sort of subjective act is not that of a deliberate, conscious subject. At the moment of the act, the subject is, as Alenka Zupančič (2000, p. 104) observes, “objectified” in this act: the subject passes over to the side of the object. [...] In an act, there is no “divided subject”: there is the “it” (the Lacanian *ça*) and the subjective figure that arises from it’. Another way of saying this is that there is no subject or ‘hero’ of the act (at the time of its occurrence): it is only *after the act* that someone can find the subjective position from which to look back at and assume responsibility for it. Nina’s example, described above, comes to mind.

The subjective act cannot ground itself on anything that is already in place in the symbolic order at the particular time of its occurrence. The trace, which appears to be the guiding principle that commands the acts and decisions of the faithful subject, should therefore not be taken as an assured, fail-safe compass that guarantees the desired outcome, for it is itself already essentially a product of the subject’s activity.

The Anticipated Certainty of the Subjective Act

So far, we have elaborated on three essential features of the act, which are interrelated. First, the act brings something new into the world. Second, it is characterized by a logical temporality that is distinct from normal, chronological time. And third, the act appears to arise *ex nihilo*, without the possibility for it to ground itself in the knowledge that preceded it. To further our comprehension of this concept, we will now return to the Žižekian reading of Lacan’s subjective or ethical act. The act comes very close to the Badiouian concept of forcing, as ‘anticipatory certitude’ is the hallmark of both (Pluth & Hoens, 2004, p. 185). However, for my purposes, the return to Lacan’s conceptualization is preferable at this point, as it readily emphasizes the importance of this type of act in the context of the clinical encounter (Lacan, 1967-68).

In the previous section, I argued that the trace driving the subjective act is a creation rather than an objective reflection of the traumatic event. However, despite this apparently arbitrary and *ex nihilo* character, the subject does succeed in arriving at what can only be called a truth. With reference to Žižek (1991c), we could argue that *truth arises from misrecognition*. Žižek alludes to the fact that truth, because of its epistemological and ontological status, can never be approached directly but always requires some sort of detour through which it is created. For example, in order to produce the knowledge that we desire about the meaning of our symptoms, the process of psychoanalysis requires the (illusory) supposition by the analysand that this knowledge *already* exists – more precisely, it is thought to exist in the transferential person of the analyst (which is why Lacan (1964, p. 225, 232, and so on) introduces the concept of *sujet-supposé-savoir*, the subject-supposed-to-know, to redefine the notion of transference). This misrecognition forms the impetus for the analysand to speak, and by doing so, he or she discovers that in the end the analyst was a figure of his or her imagination and obviously does not possess the truth concerning his or her very being. But also, through this process of dissolving the transference, he or she stumbles upon the meaning and unacknowledged gratification of his or her symptoms – almost by accident or as a side-effect, as it were. The latter is thus only obtained through the founding misconception that this knowledge already existed *in the analyst*. As such, this knowledge is projected into a point in the future, from where it appears to return as the analysis produces the signifying frame that gives the symptoms a proper symbolic place and meaning: ‘Transference is then an illusion, but the point is that we cannot bypass it and reach directly for the truth. The truth itself is constituted through the illusion proper to the transference.’ (Žižek, 1991c, p. 189) The analyst is thus someone who sustains the analysand’s misrecognition and who even goes so far as to deceive him or her on this point. But ultimately, through this ‘swindle’ (*escroquerie*), the analyst keeps his or her word as the analytic process produces a morsel of the desired truth about the meaning of the symptoms. It is the symbolic elaboration in the analysis which decides retroactively what the symptoms will have been. Hence, there is a strange temporality at work in this instantiation of the truth: the subjective mistake, error or misrecognition ‘arrives paradoxically before the truth in relation to which we are designating it as “error”, because this “truth” itself becomes true only through – or, to use a Hegelian term, by mediation of – the error’ (Žižek, 1991c, pp. 190-1).

The same thing can be said of the subjective acts that we are discussing. The temporal paradox that is at work in the recovery from trauma consists of this one thing: that one has to *decide* on what it is that has happened, at a time when the knowledge to do so is absolutely lacking. It is this feature that makes recovery from trauma an ethical matter, in the sense discussed in Chapter 6. Moreover, Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and Badiou's philosophy alike hold that the subject only appears in the midst of this very lack (Neill, 2011, p. 193). Recovery from trauma, then, essentially involves a decision as to what has happened. And, in line with Žižek, this decision cannot but be erroneous (more precisely, from the standpoint of the pre-evental world its proclamation is nonsensical). However, only through this (mis)recognition of what has happened, and by remaining faithful to it, can the subject finally arrive at the truth and implications of the trauma. Thus, the first attempts to deal with the trauma are necessarily premature in that they always seem to come too early. Nevertheless, the appropriate moment cannot arise but through a series of premature or failed attempts. In this way, the aforementioned quietism, of which the theory of the act/event is sometimes accused, is countered: one is obliged to perform a series of actions of which only time will tell if one of them amounts to an act proper. There can be no act without activity.

These claims add an important dimension to the hackneyed notions of verbalization and mentalization in trauma recovery. Verbalizing the trauma, in my reading, is a subjective act of creation that is essentially without grounds, rather than the development of an understanding that correctly matches the 'objective reality' of what has happened. It is precisely this dimension of the act – and, along with it, its political implications, as we will see – that is obscured when the 'new trauma-related information' is taken as a given rather than as necessarily constituted. At the moment of the subjective act itself, there is no guarantee of its truthfulness. The act involves a wager and can never be the result of mere calculation, as the latter relies solely on the pre-given that was rendered futile by the confrontation with the real.

At this juncture, Badiou's reliance on mathematics proves particularly useful. The concept of forcing (akin to the *process* of the Lacanian act), which Badiou deploys to describe the activity of the faithful subject, actually refers to a technique in set theory invented by mathematician Paul Cohen. Basically, it addresses how the undecidable can be decided upon after all, and Cohen's accomplishment was to show that such a decision can be legitimate. We have seen that the names used in a truth procedure are 'additions' to the pre-existent situation, whose correctness can only be settled in a future anterior sense. A statement that is

undecidable in one situation may be veridical (or demonstrably false) in a new one. Forcing authorizes and legitimates claims about indiscernible multiples – not proving or verifying them, but giving them a status that is better described as suspended than as undecidable (Pluth, 2010). The faithful subject engaged in the labor of forcing thus operates *as if* the present situation were already completely reworked from the standpoint of the eventual truth. Whereas both the event and its signifiers are indiscernible in the here and now, they become verifiable (and, perhaps, veridical) in the light of the knowledge-regime of the new world. In Badiou's (2003c, p. 65) own words:

I call the anticipatory hypothesis of the generic being of a truth, a forcing. A forcing is the powerful fiction of a completed truth. Starting with such a fiction, I can force new bits of knowledge, without even verifying this knowledge.

Thus, although the *ex nihilo* character of the act might raise suspicions about the nature of what it produces (for example, its arbitrary and/or constructionist character), forcing actually makes it possible to arrive at a 'truth' that is separated from the specificities of the people involved in its production.

The forcing of new bits of knowledge invests the whole 'pre-trauma world' with new meaning, as it becomes enmeshed in the textures of the new present. On a more psychological level, the faithful subject's acts are associated with the development of new subjective projects and goals, a new orientation of the person's biographical narrative. This is why Lacanian theory speaks of the post-traumatic subject as a subject which survives its own death (see Žižek, 2008): the desire that oriented the biographical narrative up to the moment of the trauma, as that which forms the core of the person's identity, is abolished – only to be reborn through the act. However, the desire that emerges out of the detritus of the trauma and through the act is not the same as the one before; it is a new desire, constituting a new subject and drawing out radically different aims and trajectories.

Again, this new orientation of desire is not something of which the effects are restricted to the psyche of the traumatized person; it is primarily directed outwards, where it addresses the other. Establishing a new present that allows for a subjective appropriation of the trauma is not limited to, for example, intrapsychically developing new schemata. Although an act is primarily an act for the subject, it is always something that, due to its transgressive nature, puts the other on the spot, so to speak. Zupančič (2000, p. 83) remarks:

The act differs from an ‘action’ in that it radically transforms its bearer (agent). After an act, I am ‘not the same as before’. In the act, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not); the act involves a kind of temporary eclipse of the subject. The act is therefore always a ‘crime’, a ‘transgression’ – of the limits of the symbolic community to which I belong.

We have to approach this designation of the act as a ‘transgression’ or a ‘crime’ with great care. What is meant by this is that the act has a formal structure to it that is foreign to the register constituted by the good/bad dichotomy, but nevertheless it may be perceived as ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ because it always represents a certain ‘overstepping’ of the limits of the given symbolic order (or community) in which it takes place. As the act introduces a new present, it brings a change in ‘what is’, and this always implies that the other cannot but react to the novelty that is introduced. This feature opens the door for a re-introduction of the political in trauma recovery.

As Laclau, Stavrakakis, Žižek and others have remarked, the ‘new’ in politics is always related to the emergence of a new signifier, ‘a new ideal which comes to occupy the place of the organizing principle of a discursive field and of associated subjective identities’ (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 59). This idea links up with the above description of the act as similar to Badiou’s ‘intervention’. With the emergence of a new master signifier, ‘the socio-symbolic field is not only displaced, [but] its very structuring principle changes’ (Žižek 1999, p. 262). Note that such a rearticulation of symbolic-imaginary reality is argued to rely upon ‘the contingent dislocation of a pre-existing discursive order, through a certain resurfacing of the traumatic real which shows the limits of the social’ (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 59). The dislocation is the ‘source’ of the intervention. The new signifier responds to a gap that suddenly opens up and produces anxiety. As described in Chapter 7, a traumatic rupture invalidates the nodal points that ordinarily structure the elements of a given sociopolitical reality into a meaningful system. When a new master signifier surfaces, this changes the meaning of those prior anchoring points. The political dimension of an act can thus manifest itself *in language itself* – with the caveat that language, in Lacanian theory, is a material substance. Interventions in the signifier thus directly affect the actual, material units of ideology. Every radical reconfiguration of these elements can therefore be viewed as a direct attack upon the substance of ideology itself (Johnston, 2009, p. 125).

Disentanglement : Trauma, Event, and the Act

Throughout this work, figures of rupture and discontinuity have taken center stage. Trauma is thought to derive from the violent and unexpected confrontation with ‘something’ that cannot be represented. In other words, what transpired in the traumatic event resists recuperation in the former structuration of the subject’s psychical economy. In a variety of psychological theories on trauma, the incommensurability of the traumatic episode with prior meaning-making frameworks is identified as generative of the typical traumatic symptomatology (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). Lacan theorized the traumatic confrontation with the formless, unfathomable ‘beyond’ of representation with the concept of the real. Theories of cultural trauma and other forms of large-scale rupture locate the incommensurability on a trans-individual level rather than a psychological one.

As discussed, the formal characteristics of Badiou’s notion of the event *vis-à-vis* the pre-existing world are highly reminiscent of the described dichotomy between a traumatic episode and the preceding symbolic-imaginary system. Trauma, the event, the act: all of these concepts are ultimately defined by their capacity to *exceed* the pre-given. They all share a moment of negativity, of disruption of the pre-established structure, of suspension of the Other. However, whereas the event and the act are explicitly linked to the production of a new symbolic structure, in part through this fleeting moment of dislocation, this is not the case with trauma in any clear way. The main distinction between trauma on the one hand, and the event/act on the other, lies in their respective valence: whereas Badiou’s event is heralded as the harbinger of positive change (via the local manifestation of an eternal truth), trauma is defined by destructiveness and negativity. Whereas Badiou’s event (and equally, Lacan’s act) *produces* a subject, trauma denotes the subject’s dissolution or destruction. Or even: Badiou’s event opens possibilities, while trauma closes them off (Di Nicola, 2012a). In this light, the delicate discussion concerning the ‘productive dimension’ of trauma can be rephrased as follows: can we legitimately conceive of trauma as an event in the Badiouian sense? Badiou himself is clear on this matter: he firmly rejects any such linkage on the basis of the discussed difference in valence (negativity/death versus positivity/life). From a clinical perspective, we could add that trauma is not ‘productive’ in any straightforward way. One of its defining characteristics is precisely its uncanny resistance to the passing of chronological time: there is nothing inherent to trauma that leads to a ‘conclusion’ in any sense. The exact opposite is the

case: trauma is the impossibility to close off or conclude the past, which is why it returns to haunt the present.

The fertility of juxtaposing trauma with the theory of the event/act lies in the latter's specification of how the unrepresentable/impossible finds its way into a symbolic order that is altered by this transition. The disruption of the Other, whether it is in the guise of a traumatic episode, a situation of radical social change, a Badiouian event or a psychoanalytical act – all of which are instances of the real, in the sense that they are manifested at the precise points of inconsistency of the reality/world at stake – requires the 'flash of an intervention' as well as the subsequent, arduous subject-process, if this disruption is to have a lasting impact on the (sociopolitical) reality at stake. Theories of the act and the event highlight this moment of creative invention that is necessitated yet often overlooked in trauma recovery. Moreover, these theories make tangible the counterintuitive temporality inherent to this process, related to the 'anticipatory certitude' and the concept of 'forcing' discussed above. Lastly, they clarify both the ethical and the political dimension of the subjectivization of rupture.

The act affirms the break with the pre-existent and introduces something new that can only be judged if the prior situation is reworked from the standpoint of this eventual supplement. The necessity of creating a new present for coming to grips with the ephemeral event provides a powerful outlook when applied to traumatic pathology and recovery. The ethical act of naming (the intervention) and the subsequent subjectivization process target the Other: just as the analyst's act requires a response from the analysand, so the act in the face of the traumatic real is an injunction for the other/Other to take up a position. This is the act's political force: it is directed outward, towards the creation of a new 'transcendental regime' and thus a new present or world, rewriting the rules of what is possible and what is not. The invention of a new signifier around which a new field of meaning coalesces is a prime example of the moment of the political, in the sense discussed in Chapter 7.

To conclude this chapter, I will discuss a few examples to render these many points more vivid. First, I will turn to Ron Eyerman's discussion of the cultural trauma of slavery, and show how his expose relates to the central notion of the act. The idea is that Eyerman describes the lengthy political process situated at the level of different and incommensurable symbolic formations, rather than traumatic rupture *per se*. In this way, a brief discussion of Eyerman's cultural trauma theory allows me to further disambiguate the notions discussed throughout my work. Next, I will present a reading of the changes procured in the social

fabric by the 1970s feminist movement, as recounted by Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1997). The Lacanian framework allows us to think through the process and dynamics of societal change in its relation to individual healing. This example makes clear that even those traumatic experiences that take place in the intimacy of one's private family life should be read against the background of an overarching sociopolitical system. In my reading, it is by grace of the subjective acts and the permutations this causes in the field of the Other that the traumas of these women can be worked through.

The Cultural Trauma of Slavery

In *Cultural Trauma. Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Ron Eyerman (2003) meticulously works out how what he calls the 'cultural trauma of slavery' was at the base of an emergent collective identity, through an equally emergent collective memory (p. 1). Slavery, first and foremost, evidently affected those who directly experienced it in horrible ways. But secondly, Eyerman argues, it became 'traumatic in retrospect' (p. 1) for a large collective of people who did not experience it firsthand. His intriguing and controversial thesis is that the individual experiences of the slaves became a cultural trauma only when they were taken up in a collective memory that pervaded the entirety of American society and formed a rupture with the ways in which members of this society viewed themselves and their history. According to Eyerman, cultural trauma thus always necessitates the establishment and acceptance of the 'traumatic meaning' of what happened. He thereby emphasizes the lengthy process by which a series of traumatic experiences is mediated and represented over time. If a traumatic episode in history, which affected a particular sub-group of a given society, is to have an impact on the entirety of this society, in the sense described in Chapter 7, this means first of all that it must be transmitted or dispersed 'within the discourse of people talking about the past' (p. 6):

while this reconstructed common and collective past may have its origins in direct experience, *its recollection is mediated through narratives* that are modified with the passage of time, filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations, which represent the past in the present. (p. 14, emphasis added)

Cultural trauma, in Eyerman's reading, requires representation and mediation: only through the dissemination of the 'traumatic meaning' across the different societal strata can the gap in the Other become visible for all, disrupting the manners in which a certain collective fantasy normally covers over the antagonisms this society harbors within itself. Modern technologies have made the dispersal of such narratives much faster and more efficient. However, if representation and mediation are required to constitute a cultural trauma, this always involves 'selective construction and representation, since what is seen [for instance on television or in newspapers] is the result of the actions and decisions of professionals as to what is significant and how it should be presented' (p. 3). As such, Eyerman holds, 'national or cultural trauma always engages a "meaning struggle", a grappling with an event that involves identifying the "nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility"' (p. 3). Obviously, this process is highly political.

In this view, memory is not stored inside the heads of individuals, but accumulated in discourse as the outcome of people's interactions. This means that the past is collectively shaped, although not necessarily collectively experienced. Moreover, the past is materialized, for instance in spatial organization, artefacts and so on. There are, nevertheless, limitations to 'memory construction' as a social process, constraints imposed by recorded history. Although the past cannot be literally constructed, it can be selectively exploited. The construction of collective memory renders parts of the world visible and others invisible by imposing a structuring, meaning-generating 'frame' on it. Hence, it is a form of power. Who has access to the means of representation, which are 'essential for public commemoration and the framing of collective memory' (p. 12)? Who defines what is seen and what is heard? The moment of the political is often marked by a declaration by which something previously unthinkable and invisible is suddenly presented, something with the power to instigate a protracted political process. In this way, Eyerman's cultural trauma theory offers a way to imagine how, in the case of slavery, the personal was made political.

I agree with Kansteiner and Weilnböck's (2008) critique that Eyerman, in his analysis, makes a conceptual error when he argues that cultural trauma is 'produced and reproduced' through media representations that cause 'a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric' of a relatively coherent group (Eyerman, 2003, p. 2). Eyerman's idea is that representations of an unacknowledged past in films, TV shows, novels and so on are destructive because what they show threatens the existence of the implicated society, or

because it violates one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions, to refer to Neil Smelser's definition of cultural trauma (Alexander et al., 2004). What we are dealing with in these destabilizing representations is not trauma strictly speaking; it involves a rupture caused by the discursive and thus symbolic presentation of something previously invisible or disavowed. In other words: the 'cultural trauma' Eyers describes is the dislocating effect of a novel representation of reality being in an antagonistic relation with the dominant, generally accepted one. It concerns a struggle between two competing and inassimilable symbolical systems. The narratives that represent the trauma of slavery are disruptive in the sense that they traverse the fantasy – along with the enjoyment that it supplies – that ordinarily gives meaning and sense to the nation's history; they require a retroactive reappraisal of this history. What we have here is a political struggle for memory and for truth, played out at the level of the symbolic. Although this clearly involves rupture, I would refrain from calling it traumatic in that it does not entail a confrontation with the postsymbolic real that suddenly makes its presence felt in the symbolic. Rather, it is a destabilization based on a series of ethical and political acts that draw something of a real that was once suffered, by those who actually lived through slavery, in the symbolic. The rupture caused by the (symbolic) products of this act, nevertheless, repeats the initial break on a different level. As discussed, the act shares a formal structure with trauma: it confirms the traumatic break by introducing something new, something that cannot be assimilated within the pre-existent framework. However, it differs from trauma *per se* in that it succeeds in making the jump from one level to the other, whereas trauma is characterized by destruction without salvation. Only through the act is it possible to create a new symbolic context that allows for a retroactive understanding of the traumatic episode and its consequences. This 'jump' is incalculable and uncertain. It only acquires a form of objectivization or validation in the symbolic processes that follow it.

Hence, I propose that the moment of the political (and the act) itself is located *before* the entire social, cultural and political interplay described in so much detail by Eyerman. Trauma is not the clash between two competing *discursive* formations. Such a reading reduces the dimension of the traumatic real to a form of incongruent information. As I have established, such an understanding skips an important step, namely, the paramount move in which something real, in the Lacanian sense of the term, is drawn into the symbolic through an ethical (and, in some cases, political) act. This act introduces something new in the symbolic

that in a sense repeats the initial fracture: what it introduces breaks with what was while it simultaneously opens a path to introduce a new symbolical structure.

In Eyerman's account, this dimension of the act is rendered superfluous. Furthermore, Kansteiner and Weilnböck's point that TV shows and other representations of traumatic episodes are not merely destructive, but sometimes even *formative* of group identities in ways that helped social minorities to gain public recognition for past suffering is apt and underlines that representation of trauma is not simply a reproduction of trauma. These cultural representations are indeed, sometimes, ways to exit the traumatic impasse as they play a role in the reconstitution of, for instance, African-American (in the TV show *Roots*) and Jewish-American (in *Holocaust*) identity. This is exactly the point: beyond the disruptive break caused by these representations, their positive potential lies exactly in their symbolic-imaginary productivity, in that they introduce something that can be faithfully worked out and amount to a 'new present' as Badiou calls it.

For Kansteiner and Weilnböck, because of the positive potential of such cultural representations, they should not be viewed as 'traumatic', not even in a metaphorical cultural sense. I agree that the ruptures caused by these representations are not simply to be equated with 'trauma', although they share the structure of rupture. I view their rupture as the consequence of an act in which something formerly unthinkable is given form. As discussed above, this transition to the symbolic entails a risk, a *jump* from one level to the other, and its truth value or objectivity is never guaranteed but only uncovered through the historical developments that follow in its wake.

Does the emphasis on cultural forms of representation of trauma, and the reverberations of these productions in the fabric of society, conveniently make us 'lose track of the victims and their physicality and mental vulnerability' (Kansteiner & Weilnböck, 2008, p. 234)? I would argue that, minimally, theories of cultural trauma offer detailed accounts of how social, political and cultural change can be predicated upon the manners in which trauma is collectively remembered. Eyerman's case study of slavery, for instance, attempts to reconstruct, decade by decade (and generation by generation), how the trauma of a large yet disempowered minority group slowly found its way into mainstream collective memory, in what constitutes a political process that founded a group identity to support its aggregated demands. Although this discourse provides insights in how the traumatic experience of some can acquire a political traction, its main weakness is purportedly that it severs this process

from an engagement with the suffering and psychological recovery of those affected. This criticism targets the purported belief that political change requires an ethically untenable fidelity to the truth of trauma, which in turn is underpinned by the idea that trauma offers a privileged outlook on a truth beyond representation. Although in my reading trauma indeed has some sort of revelatory effect, in the sense that it invalidates a meaning-giving fantasy framework, this is not a ‘truth’ strictly speaking. It is not an ‘insight’ or an ‘idea’ that can be put to work. It is only through a subjective act that truth comes into play, in a prolonged process marked by a paradoxical temporality. This process flows from a decision, but we have seen that it should not be viewed as something instantaneous. The break of the act must be repeated at several instants, when the emerging subject is confronted with ‘points’, moments in which the confusing chaos of endless multiplicity is filtered through the ‘two’; that the complexity of a situation is reduced to the choice between a yes and a no (Badiou, 2009a, p. 50-2).

The Act of Speaking Out

The speak outs of the 1970s women’s liberation movement can be considered subjective acts in the sense described above. First of all, they undoubtedly brought something new into the world, that is, something that was obviously already happening but was unrecognized up to that point. As Herman (1997, p. 28) writes:

The real conditions of women’s lives were hidden in the sphere of the personal, in private life. [...] Women did not have a name for the tyranny of private life. [...] Betty Friedan called the woman question the ‘problem without a name’.

As such, this problem could be called an ‘inexistent’ from the standpoint of that world’s transcendental. The acts of speaking out by the women’s movement opened up a new time, in which public discussion of the common atrocities of sexual and domestic abuse had suddenly been made possible. Prior to these acts, speaking about these things was unthinkable and even impossible. It fell beyond the ensemble of possibilities that were determined in that particular world. Thus, the act of speaking out brought with it a new present, not only through the revelation of a part of the world that was formerly cloaked or ‘inexistent’, but also by introducing new possibilities in the social field as to what can and cannot be uttered aloud.

The speaking out literally changed the bond with the Other and ultimately the organization of this Other: that of which it was forbidden to speak now became that which should be spoken. What was previously invisible and inexistent suddenly appeared with maximal intensity. This constitutes an event that undermined the traditional, patriarchic organization of family life and the violent suppression of women. In this example, we recognize a pre-trauma world, where such a thing as domestic violence is hardly thinkable even as it occurs, simply because it is not represented in the world's knowledge-regime and there exists no name for it. This world consists of a series of patriarchal narratives, nodal points and fantasies that hide the impossibility to provide definitive answers to the questions regarding sexual identity and the sexual relationship, and that attempt to give form to these impossible real aspects of life. Within this system, women are confined to a very strict place, alienated in a discourse that reduces them to a limited role in a purportedly harmonic and 'natural' family constellation. Patriarchal society is ripe with theories that justify this social organization by stressing the inferiority of women in general. These phallogentric theories produce and affirm fantasies that suture the lack of foundation of this organization of social life.

However, victims of sexual or domestic abuse are subjected to a series of experiences that open up a daunting abyss in which comprehension falls short. This violent string of experiences constitutes an uncanny *something* that exceeds and overthrows the symbolical framework that is in place at the moment of its occurrence. Thus, although the abuse takes place in the private life of individual families, it is not without a relation to the sociopolitical discourse that functions on the macro-level of their community. The traumatic experiences insist on the beyond of this framework, on its lack, its inadequacy. This is heightened by the fact that in the field of the symbolic Other there is no signifier to be found that designates this thing that they are subjected to. On the contrary, when looking for an answer, these women only found a prohibition to speak of these things. What they experience was simply denied or recuperated in the dominant phallogentric framework (for example in a discourse on congenial obligations and so on). We have here, then, the world and the traumatic event that traverses it.

Haunted by these symptoms of a thing that does not exist, what are these women to do? As we have seen, if the truth of the event is to be procured, if a way out of the traumatic impasse is to be discovered, this requires the generation of a trace that holds onto and stands in for the event. Did something really occur? Does such a thing really exist? These activist women

answered affirmatively and proceeded to fight it – first of all by calling it into existence, by dragging it out of the shadows through what they called ‘consciousness-raising’ (Herman, 1997, pp. 28-9). The technique of consciousness-raising took place in intimate and confidential groups of women where speaking the truth was imperative, and it was here that a trace was forged through what we can recognize as a genuine ethical act. As discussed above, the forging of a trace is a subjective act that runs ahead of the certainty that should have authorized it. This naming of what was formerly unthinkable is an act that is faithful to the traumatic event, because it would rather sacrifice the old world than deny the reality of this thing that has yet to become what it will have been.

Once the trace was formed, a growing group of militant women could organize themselves around its truth. This group is the (collective) subject *of* that truth, it is the effect of the act of naming (the intervention). What actions should they take to safeguard and develop this fragile new present that is incommensurable with the old world – if this was indeed their decision? Activist women chose to organize a first speak out on rape in 1971, which approximately 300 people attended at St Clement’s Episcopal Church in New York (Matthews, 1994). Women would come to a speak out specifically to share their own experiences with an audience and to raise their voices, to literally speak out against sexual violence. It must be stressed that at the time of their act, there was no way of telling what the outcome might be. Although the feminists’ speaking out may resemble the strategies utilized by other political pressure groups (for instance those applied in the campaign to end the Vietnam war), this did not by any means guarantee that their emerging truth would be acknowledged. The decision to speak out involved a wager, a point of radical uncertainty that could not be settled by mere calculation. It was an act that could not authorize itself on anything but the desire of the subject in question.

From the perspective of the pre-trauma world in which it had absolutely no place, the act of speaking out came too soon, before the ‘objective conditions’ for such a thing were in place. From society’s point of view, there was a good reason why these unspeakable and unthinkable things were kept secret: bringing them into the light of day could destabilize the existent social order (which, eventually, it did). Consequently, this act was considered ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ by 1970s society: it was transgressive in that it broke the unspoken rules of social interaction and threatened to disrupt the social edifice. Here we see the act’s transgressive, social and – ultimately – political dimension appear. The act puts the other on the spot: it asks

a question that cannot be ignored. How will other women who live through similar experiences react? Will they speak out or remain silent? How does society as a whole respond? Are the testimonies of these women to be taken seriously, or rather discredited and downplayed? The act always has an interpersonal dimension that is tantamount to the elaboration of the new present. It is, in part, through the changes brought about in the social field and the different perspective that this offers that one can come to grips with the traumatic event. Moreover, the reactions of others play an essential role in completing the *process* of the act: only through them does the anticipatory certitude receive some sort of ‘inter-subjective verification process’, desubjectivizing the initial principle of the trace and providing objective evidence for it. The act essentially precedes the certainty that should have led up to the act (Pluth & Hoens, 2004, p. 189). It is the development of a new present that constitutes the context necessary to assess the traumatic experience and recover from it.

This example serves to illustrate the concepts that I have introduced, and to demonstrate how the subjective acts of one or a few persons trying to deal with their trauma can introduce a new present that impacts society as a whole. The truth that is uncovered by the faithful subject’s activity can be picked up by others, who also become a subject of this truth – working either towards its production, its denial or its occultation. The example of the 1970s women’s movement magnifies one aspect of the transgressive nature of the act: that it allows for the gathering of a group of people around its trace, who work together to produce its consequences. The activity of this composite subject can produce huge sociopolitical upheavals that constitute a new world on a macro-level. The example, then, shows how recovery from trauma is not necessarily an exclusively intrapsychic process, but can have far-stretching societal ramifications. It is the restructuration of the Other that allows for coming to terms with the traumatic past.

Finally, we could add an epilogue to this reading of the feminist speak outs. The nature of ‘speaking the unspeakable’ has significantly evolved over the past 30 years – arguably through the prolonged efforts of subjects faithful to a range of emancipatory political truths. Whereas events such as speak outs can be deemed radical and transgressive for 1970s society, contemporary Western culture typically condones and even promotes such disclosures (Rothe, 2011). Indeed, it has been argued that we live in a culture of ‘emotional display’ (Pupavac, 2004, p. 492; Seltzer, 1997). Speaking out has thus become part and parcel of the structure of our world, and this cannot but have significant effects on the power and efficacy of these

practices. In short, what used to be an act, in the context of 1970s society, might have become a mere action in the contemporary world (which has changed precisely because of the former acts) (see also Gibbs, 2014 and Kilby, 2007 for similar arguments) . Additionally, when it becomes (prescriptive) shared knowledge, Herman's emphasis on the necessity to supplement private healing with the public duty to break the conspiracy of silence can lead to new ethical questions: the call to bear witness can, for instance, place a heavy burden on the shoulders of counselors and their patients alike (McKinney, 2007).

Such is the fate of each and every truth: it brings about a new world, which amounts to saying that it somehow passes from the dimension of truth, with its relations to ethics and subjectivity, to the domain of knowledge. Hence, caution is called for when we apply accepted humanitarian formats and established 'know-how' to process, at both an individual and a community level, a diversity of experiences of ruptures.

Closing Thoughts

In this chapter, I worked out an outlook on trauma that draws from Lacanian theory and philosophical writings on rupture and societal change. This framework makes clear that recovery from trauma and sociopolitical action can go hand in hand. Whereas the biomedical framework of trauma was criticized for being individualizing, decontextualizing and, ultimately, depoliticizing, I do not believe that the solution to this problem is simply to forsake a focus on psychological suffering and to trade in a psychiatric level of analysis and intervention for a sociological one. My aim has been to destabilize this dichotomy more than anything else, primarily by means of the particular Lacanian conception of the subject and the Other which allow for a confluence between the level of the individual and the level of the collective.

The decontextualizing operation of PTSD and the biomedical framework is countered by the idea that each community is characterized by its own symbolic-imaginary reality – which is given consistency by a series of singular fantasies, narratives and nodal points. What applies in one culture is not necessarily the case in another. If trauma is minimally defined as a rupture with what was, as the confrontation with an excess that resists recuperation in the pre-existent framework and therefore requires a new structuration of the Other, then it becomes

clear that what is ‘traumatic’ in one culture/for one person is not necessarily so for another. It is impossible to predict beforehand what will constitute a traumatic event, least of all on the basis of a knowledge that has been developed outside of the contexts in which it is applied.

Another strength of this framework is that it allows to ‘expand our understanding of trauma from sudden, unexpected catastrophic events that happen to people in socially dominant positions to encompass ongoing, everyday forms of violence and oppression affecting subordinate groups’ (Craps, 2010, p. 54) – that is, ‘insidious trauma’. The notion of insidious trauma was developed by Maria Root and taken up more recently by Laura Brown, to denote ‘the traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit’ (Brown, 1995, p. 107). Buelens and Craps (2008, p. 3) identify Frantz Fanon’s account of encountering racial fear in a white child a classic example of insidious trauma due to systematic oppression and discrimination. The continual exposure to ‘everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events’ (Brown, 1995, p. 108), for instance in the context of racism, can dislocate the dominant societal discourse in the same sense as a one-shot, major catastrophe does. In this way, trauma theory, which has been developed from the perspective of dominant groups in society, can become more sensitive to the needs of disenfranchised groups.

The individualizing and psychologizing trend in the PTSD-framework has been argued to be ill-suited for the understanding and treatment of collectively undergone disruptive events, such as colonial traumas involving ‘dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide’ (Craps & Buelens, 2008, p. 3). To recognize and address the specificity of these experiences requires the transition from a focus on the individual to the larger social entities. Only then can the focus on immaterial recovery be widened to take into account material recovery. If coming to grips with the trauma requires a questioning and modification of the sociopolitical context that gave rise to the suffered violations, then the effects of trauma interventions must go beyond individual, psychological healing – the ‘salvation of the soul’, as Frantz Fanon called it. In the context of colonial oppression and racism, Fanon argued that the ‘black man’s chronically neurotic state of mind cannot be alleviated as long as the socioeconomic structure that brought it on remains unchanged’ (Craps & Buelens, 2008, p. 4). In Fanon’s own words: ‘There will be an authentic disalienation only to the degree to which things, in the most materialistic meaning of the word, will have been restored to their proper places’ (Fanon, 1967, pp. 11-12).

It is my hope that the proposed Lacan-inspired framework aids in making a step towards trauma interventions that enable social change rather than obfuscating it. As I have argued, this requires a different ethical position, which leaves behind a focus on the visible symptoms of evil in favor of a position which I have characterized through Badiou's fidelity procedure. Although speaking out and interventions into the materiality of language do have an important role to play in the approach of trauma, I agree that large-scale, collective traumas cannot simply be alleviated 'by inviting victims to share their individual testimony' – as is often the case with Truth Commissions, for instance. As Shane Graham (2008) argues, in the context of South Africa, the collective, spatial, and material repercussions of the apartheid era in South Africa must be addressed if healing is to take place. It is the material context itself that needs to be reworked, as it is here that the oppressive, trauma-generating societal discourse was inscribed. Nevertheless, the specificities of the theory of the act make clear that this cannot simply be equated with the substitution of a psychotherapeutic model for a sociotherapeutic one.

9

General Discussion and Conclusion

Part I of this doctoral dissertation focused on the etiology of trauma. A discussion of the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* showed that delayed traumatic reactions and traumatic reactions following a non-Criterion A event are sometimes related. In these cases, the traumatic impact of an apparently trivial event derives from an association with an earlier event which, however, remained without psychopathological consequences for a long time. Traumatic pathology here develops as the result of the belated formation of a traumatic memory of the older event, of the belated ‘realization’ of a peculiar traumatic meaning that cannot be supported by the subject. Whereas Freud initially tied these delayed traumatic reactions to the precocious sexual experience, my analysis shows that the mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit* functions beyond the mythical point of the structuring of the subject in the Oedipal phase. This study argues that it is impossible to predict traumatic pathology on the basis of a set of *a priori* event characteristics. The resultant psychological reaction is always dependent on the specific combination between a stressor and a person. The mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit* thus presents one manner in which personal background and interpretation, and the characteristics of a situation interact to determine the effects of an encounter. Moreover, it shows that the (traumatic) impact of a situation is not given once and for all; the signification-value of an event can be modified as new elements are brought into articulation with it.

In many psychological theories, traumatic pathology is defined as the result of the dislocation of a meaning-giving framework, a confrontation with the limits of meaning. The question then becomes how and where meaning is generated. Whereas cognitive psychological theories emphasize the intrapsychic construction of meaning, other theories underscore the importance of context in the production of meaning. In any case, the shibboleth of trauma appears to be the impossibility to return to the *status quo ante*: each and every attempt to integrate the traumatic event in the pre-traumatic psychological economy/meaning-generating context ultimately fails. As a result, the traumatic event insists. From this, I inferred the definition of trauma as that which requires a ‘restructuration of the subject’ – which, obviously, raises the question as to how this should be further understood. In Part III of this dissertation, I developed a Lacan-inspired framework to show that the restructuring of the subject should not be comprehended as a merely intrapsychic enterprise. It requires the reworking of (the relation of the subject to) the Other.

The study in Chapter 2 articulated a number of empirical findings on trauma with a relatively unfamiliar psychoanalytical concept. From this study, a number of testable hypotheses can be developed for further research. In accordance with an emerging line of research conducted at the Department of Psychoanalysis and Clinical Consulting, case material can be analyzed to see how an event that triggered a series of psychological complaints is tied to other factors in that person’s psychological functioning, as well as to other elements in his or her history. In other words, the study in Chapter 2 suggests the need to invest in *case construction* in empirical therapy research and in the diagnostic and therapeutic clinical process itself. It is the chain of signifiers, the narrative material that is produced during the analysis, that constitutes the context or background against which the singular logic of someone’s problems can be grasped.

The analysis in Part II of this dissertation shows the necessity to go beyond the biomedical perspective of trauma and to develop trauma models that incorporate the subject, the context and the political dimension of trauma. Although a number of recent academic contributions clearly move in this direction, it proves difficult to translate these ideas in concrete interventions that can be applied *in situ*.

In the third and final part of this dissertation, I provided a framework to conceptualize the relations between trauma, ethics and politics. The impetus for this elaboration derived from the analysis carried out in Part II. With reference to the research questions, I sought to

develop an understanding of trauma that acknowledges the importance of context; that transcends a unilateral focus on the individual; and that incorporates the political dimension of trauma. As described in the closing thoughts of Chapter 8, the proposed Lacan and Badiou-inspired model offers an alternative understanding of trauma recovery which, I believe, helps to address these issues.

The concept of the act takes center stage in the final part of this dissertation. It is my contention that this under-theorized notion differentiates psychoanalysis *per se* from psychotherapy as such. It follows that the elaboration of this concept, carried out in Chapter 8, has relevance beyond the context of trauma studies. Therapy research in general could benefit greatly from the idea that the analytical/therapeutic process is discontinuous, and characterized by radical ruptures that separate the subject from the security entailed in the alienation in the Other. The subject can only renounce the paradoxical jouissance delivered by this alienation if his or her relationship to the Other is restructured through a transformative act. This implies that therapy should not be conceived as a gradual, linear or incremental process. On the contrary, as psychoanalysis shows, this experience is an arduous and painful one, as it aims at the confrontation with the point where meaning breaks down. Amidst the fear that accompanies the confrontation with the lack of the Other, and in complete solitude, the subject is given a chance to ‘throw the dice’ once again.

This line of thought clearly goes against the increasingly popular ideas that the patient knows what he or she needs, and that the feelings that immediately arise in the analysand, in response to the analyst’s interventions, constitute a reliable compass to direct the cure. The discontinuous character of the changes procured by the process of a psychoanalysis can be tested longitudinally, for example by collecting empirical data over the entire range of therapy sessions. Narrative material (obtained by *verbatim transcription* of audio-taped therapy sessions) can be placed alongside (quantitative) measures of evolutions in symptom levels and more objective markers (such as cortisol levels). It would be interesting to investigate whether or not a deterioration at the level of symptoms could be observed when a confrontation with the real is at hand. In the same vein, it could be registered in what ways analysands respond to this confrontation, and how this affects the further course of the analysis.

This conceptual study offers an impulse to reorient the debates surrounding psychological trauma. It offers concrete avenues to incorporate the subject, context and political dimension in our understanding of trauma. Although I believe the ideas presented here to be promising,

it is also clear that they also require further elaboration and dialogue with others in the fields of trauma research and trauma interventions to test their utility. The task that lies ahead is to translate the insights of this study into testable hypotheses on the one hand, and practical intervention strategies on the other.

NEDERLANDSTALIGE SAMENVATTING

Trauma voorbij het biomedische paradigma. Denksporen voor een subjectgerichte en contextuele traumabehandeling.

Psychisch trauma werd de afgelopen drie decennia intensief bestudeerd vanuit heel diverse academische disciplines, die we kunnen onderbrengen in een klinische en een culturele onderzoekstraditie. Deze tradities worden gekenmerkt door radicaal verschillende kennistheoretische aannames, waarden, overtuigingen en doelstellingen, en zijn bijgevolg moeilijk te integreren. De academische dialoog tussen beide tradities komt bovendien slechts moeizaam op gang.

Probleemstelling

Onderliggende studie erkent de pertinentie voor de klinische praktijk van een aantal kritieken die voornamelijk in het culturele traumaonderzoek weerklank vonden, en die enkele specifieke pijnpunten van het dominante, biomedische traumamodel (gekend onder de noemer van de *Post-Traumatische Stress Stoornis* (PTSS)) blootleggen.

Ten eerste zijn er vraagtekens te plaatsen bij het *etiologische* mechanisme dat het PTSS-model van trauma onderstut. De bestaansreden van deze diagnose is het idee dat deze vorm van psychopathologie veroorzaakt wordt door blootstelling aan een specifiek soort stressor/gebeurtenis. De stoornis wordt geacht op een onmiddellijke, quasiautomatische of mechanische wijze voort te vloeien uit de confrontatie met een dergelijke stressor. Deze aanname, die het hart uitmaakt van de PTSS-diagnose, is echter moeilijk te weerhouden in het licht van een aantal empirische bevindingen. Onderzoek toonde aan dat trauma niet verklaard kan worden vanuit de uitzonderlijke aard en extreme kenmerken van de gebeurtenis op zich. Vooreerst bleken dergelijke gebeurtenissen zich veel frequenter voor te doen dan initieel gedacht, zelfs in Westerse maatschappijen. Daarenboven ontwikkelt slechts een minderheid van de mensen die aan dergelijke stressor werden blootgesteld langdurige traumatische

pathologie. Onderzoek heeft dus aangetoond dat andere factoren in rekening moeten worden gebracht om het ontstaan van traumatische pathologie te doorgronden. Een traumatische reactie zou te maken hebben met de specificiteit van de ontmoeting tussen een singulier subject en een particuliere gebeurtenis.

Een tweede punt van kritiek betreft het onvermogen van het PTSS-model om de rol van *contextuele* factoren in zowel het ontstaan als de behandeling van trauma in rekening te brengen. Een tweede kernidee aan de basis van PTSS is dat een diverse reeks gebeurtenissen conceptueel aan elkaar gelijkgeschakeld kan worden, omdat al deze gebeurtenissen verondersteld worden dezelfde symptomen te veroorzaken volgens hetzelfde pathofysiologische mechanisme. Deze conceptuele annullering van de eigenheid van diverse etiologische gebeurtenissen kan leiden tot een veronachtzaming van de manieren waarop de sociale, culturele, politieke of economische context een rol speelt in zowel het ontstaan als de verdere ontwikkeling en het mogelijke herstel van trauma.

Ten derde werd de focus op het *individu* in Westerse psychotherapeutische interventies bekritiseerd, omdat deze niet aangepast is aan de problemen die ontstaan na collectieve trauma's als politiek geweld, grootschalige natuurrampen, enzovoorts. Tevens valt de focus op het psychisch functioneren van het individu moeilijk te rijmen met interventies die de sociale oorzaken van diverse vormen van psychisch lijden trachten te wijzigen. In het verlengde van een aantal andere onderzoekers verdedigen we de stelling dat traumatische pathologie zich niet in een sociaal vacuüm voordoet, en dat herstel van trauma een verandering in de relatie van het individu tot de Ander (een Lacaniaans concept dat zowel de anderen aanduidt als de socio-symbolische orde waarin we zijn opgenomen) vereist.

Ten vierde behelzen de genoemde decontextualiserende en individualiserende effecten van het PTSS-model een *politieke* dimensie: PTSS richt de aandacht op immaterieel herstel (een verandering in het psychisch functioneren van het individu), waardoor materieel herstel (in de zin van de modificatie van een traumagenererende context) onderbelicht blijft. Traumapsychiatrie dreigt daardoor een depolitisierend instrument te worden, in dienst van het status quo.

Onderzoeksvragen

Wanneer we deze punten van kritiek samennemen, dan suggereren deze de noodzaak

1. om het bestaande etiologische model voor traumatische pathologie uit te breiden of te modificeren, zodanig dat de subjectieve dimensies van trauma kunnen geconceptualiseerd en geïncorporeerd worden;
2. om de invloed van cultuur en context in ons begrip van en omgang met trauma te erkennen en een plaats te geven;
3. om de gelimiteerde focus op het individu te verlaten;
4. om de politieke dimensie van trauma te erkennen en op te nemen in trauma-interventies.

Om dit te verwezenlijken is conceptueel onderzoek rond trauma noodzakelijk. De onderzoeksvragen van dit doctoraat, aansluitend bij de geschetste tekortkomingen van het PTSS-model van trauma, zijn dan ook de volgende:

1. Wat zijn de tekortkomingen van een etiologisch model dat het subject uitsluit, en op welke manier kunnen we het subject reïntroducteren in ons denken over trauma?
2. Op welke manier kunnen we de rol van context in etiologie en herstel van trauma erkennen?
3. Is het mogelijk om herstel van trauma te denken op een manier die de exclusieve focus op het individu overstijgt?
4. Daarbij aansluitend: hoe kunnen we de politieke dimensie van trauma verrekenen in onze omgang met trauma?

Methode

Aan de hand van een literatuurstudie ga ik nader in op deze vragen. Ten eerste besteed ik de nodige aandacht aan het uitwerken van de genoemde punten van kritiek. Ik maak daarbij gebruik van uiteenlopende bronnen, waaronder de meest recente empirische bevindingen met betrekking tot psychisch trauma. Aangezien deze bevindingen soms lijnrecht ingaan tegen de assumpties die aan de basis liggen van PTSS, en dus de validiteit van dit model ernstig ter discussie stellen, tonen zij meteen de relevantie en de urgentie van dit project aan, temeer

gezien de centrale plaats van het PTSS-model in bijvoorbeeld humanitaire hulpverlening, (forensische) psychiatrie en rechtszaken. Verder maak ik gebruik van filosofische analyses om de grondslagen van het PTSS-construct aanschouwelijk te maken, en van historische studies rond de ontwikkeling van traumaonderzoek om de huidige impasses in een ruimere context te plaatsen.

Ten tweede tracht ik de geschetste problemen door te denken vanuit een alternatief referentiepunt, met de bedoeling er een nieuw licht op te werpen. De Freudiaanse en Lacaniaanse psychoanalyse staan daarin centraal. Historisch gezien heeft de psychoanalyse een belangrijke rol gespeeld in de manier waarop traumatische fenomenen worden begrepen. Dat ze vandaag op de achtergrond is geraakt in het denken rond trauma, heeft mijns inziens te maken met een bepaalde ethische stellingname die haar typeert en die moeilijk te verzoenen is met de positie die inherent is aan het biomedische PTSS-model. Kort samengevat stelt de psychoanalyse dat het subject en de Ander steeds een rol spelen in de ontwikkeling en het herstel van trauma. Het is precies deze dimensie van het subject die buitengesloten wordt in het biomedische model, wat verweven is met de voornoemde problemen. De Lacaniaanse psychoanalyse, en meer bepaald het concept van het reële, vormt een centraal referentiepunt doorheen dit doctoraatsproefschrift. De unieke Lacaniaanse conceptie van zowel het subject als de Ander staat ons toe om de dichotomieën tussen intern/extern en individu/collectief te overstijgen. Tot slot zal ook de filosofische theorie van Alain Badiou, die op bepaalde punten nauw verwant is met het werk van Lacan, een waardevol instrument blijken om een aantal problemen binnen het huidige traumamodel te identificeren en te remediëren. De keuze voor deze conceptuele referentiepunten wordt uitgebreider gemotiveerd waar ze worden geïntroduceerd.

Opzet

In Deel I van het doctoraatsproefschrift wordt ingegaan op de eerste onderzoeksvraag. Hoofdstuk 1 biedt een korte historische bespreking van de evoluties in de theorievorming rond psychisch trauma, om de inzet en de delicate aard van het debat rond etiologie te verduidelijken.

In Hoofdstuk 2 wordt eerst scherpgesteld op de beperkingen van het PTSS-model inzake etiologie scherpgesteld door middel van een lezing van de empirische evidentie ter zake. Daarbij komen de problemen met het Criterium A van de diagnose aan bod, alsook de moeilijkheid om een verklaring te bieden voor uitgestelde traumatische reacties (*delayed-onset PTSD*). Vervolgens wordt, aan de hand van het Freudiaanse concept *Nachträglichkeit* en de psychoanalytische opvatting van logische tijd, verduidelijkt op welke manier de impact van een gebeurtenis op een individu steeds subjectief gemedieerd is. Een grondige bespreking van het mechanisme van *Nachträglichkeit* brengt aldus een onderbelichte dimensie van traumatische etiologie in kaart.

In Deel II van dit doctoraatsonderzoek worden de overige kritieken op PTSS (decontextualisering, individualisering en depolitisering) gekaderd binnen het biomedische ziektemodel dat de psychiatrische diagnostiek richting geeft sedert de uitgave van de derde editie van het gezaghebbende psychiatrische handboek *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1980.

In Hoofdstuk 3 worden, aan de hand van een filosofische analyse, de kernassumpties die aan de basis liggen van het biomedische ziektemodel geëxpliciteerd en in verband gebracht met PTSS. Tevens wordt aangetoond hoe deze assumpties doorwerken in concrete trauma-interventies, en aanleiding geven tot de focus op het individu en veronachtzaming van contextuele en culturele factoren. Tot slot bespreek ik de niet-onderkende politieke dimensie van PTSS-interventies.

In Hoofdstuk 4 worden de in Hoofdstuk 3 besproken kritieken op PTSS in verband gebracht met een ruimere, ethische crisis in het Westen. Via het werk van Badiou toon ik de parallellen aan tussen de kritieken op PTSS enerzijds, en de door Badiou geïdentificeerde problemen met de ethiek van mensenrechten anderzijds. Op basis hiervan formuleer ik de hypothese dat er een welgedefinieerde ethische positie aan de basis ligt van de problemen met PTSS – één die niet aldus benoemd en erkend wordt vanuit het dominante traumavertoog, maar die via het werk van Badiou kan worden geëxpliciteerd als zijnde defensief en negatief. Daaruit volgt dat we, om een antwoord te kunnen bieden op onderzoeksvragen 2 tot en met 4, de relaties tussen trauma, ethiek en politiek kritisch moeten bevragen en adequaat conceptualiseren. Dit vormt de inzet van het derde en laatste deel van dit doctoraatsonderzoek.

In Deel III werk ik een conceptueel kader uit om de relaties tussen trauma, ethiek en politiek in kaart te brengen. De centrale hypothese van waaruit ik vertrek is dat Lacans concept van het reële zich op het snijpunt van deze drie velden bevindt. Een grondige analyse van dit concept biedt aldus een ander perspectief op de problemen die in Deel II werden uitgewerkt. Eerst wordt het reële besproken zoals het zich voordoet in elk van deze velden afzonderlijk. Daarna betrek ik deze drie velden, elk in hun relatie tot het reële, op elkaar.

In Hoofdstuk 5 introduceer ik een aantal Lacaniaanse sleutelconcepten die van pas zullen komen in wat volgt. Ik identificeer en bespreek vervolgens uitgebreid de twee voornaamste opvattingen van het reële die Lacan door zijn onderwijs heen ontwikkelde: een presymbolische en een postsymbolische variant. Vervolgens sta ik stil bij de psychoanalytische traumaopvatting die verbonden is met beide concepties van het reële.

In Hoofdstuk 6 onderzoek ik de paradoxale notie van een ‘ethiek van het reële’. Reeds op dit punt zien we een intrigerend verband oplichten: het Lacaniaanse reële wordt enerzijds gezien als de mogelijksvoorwaarde van het subject en van ethiek als dusdanig, terwijl het anderzijds wordt gedefinieerd als inherent ‘traumatisch’. In dit hoofdstuk werk ik deze tegenintuïtieve logica uit. Daarbij zal duidelijk worden dat herstel van trauma een ‘ethische act’ veronderstelt, en dus niet louter een medico-technische kwestie is.

In Hoofdstuk 7 bespreek ik het concept van het reële in relatie tot politiek. Daarbij sluit ik aan bij een aantal filosofen en traumaonderzoekers die in de verstoringen van het reële de drijvende kracht zien achter innovaties in het socio-symbolische veld. Ruptuur in het symbolische wordt in deze theorieën gelieerd aan politieke innovatie. Echter, de traumatische impact van dergelijke breuken in het maatschappelijke veld, en het persoonlijke leed dat deze veroorzaken, kreeg tot op heden weinig aandacht binnen deze socio-politieke theorieën. Dat brengt ons tot een ogenschijnlijke tegenstelling en een moreel dilemma: waar politieke theorieën het reële zien als de mogelijksvoorwaarde voor verandering, en bijgevolg pleiten voor het zo lang mogelijk openhouden van de kloof van het reële, is het klinisch-therapeutisch devies om dit traumatiserende reële zo snel mogelijk af te sluiten en zo het psychische lijden te verlichten.

In Hoofdstuk 8, ten slotte, breng ik de velden van trauma, ethiek en politiek samen via het concept van het reële. Ik toon aan dat psychologisch-cognitieve traumatheorieën een logische fout maken wanneer ze het herstel van trauma beschrijven als een proces van ‘accommodatie’

aan ‘de nieuwe traumagerelateerde informatie’. Hier wordt een essentiële stap overgeslagen, in de zin dat deze theorieën datgene wat door het subject geconstrueerd moet worden (de betekenis van het trauma) als gegeven aannemen. Ik beargumenteer dat de Lacaniaanse notie van *de act* aangewend kan worden om dit niet-onderkende doch cruciale aspect in de behandeling van trauma te conceptualiseren. Bovendien is het precies deze gemaskeerde dimensie van de act die een alternatieve ethische positie vereist en een pad opent naar collectieve actie en sociale verandering. Op deze manier kan tevens een uitweg geboden worden voor het morele dilemma dat in Hoofdstuk 7 werd opgeworpen.

Resultaten per Hoofdstuk

Uit de historische analyse van *Hoofdstuk 1* blijkt dat evoluties in het denken rond trauma steeds gelieerd zijn aan ontwikkelingen in het morele klimaat van de maatschappijen waarin het vraagstuk van trauma zich aandient. Operationeel uitgedrukt: het dominante vertoog van die maatschappij. Voor de aanvaarding van bepaalde ideeën is het van het grootste belang of de mensen die zich aanbieden met traumatische symptomatologie gezien worden als simulanten, als passieve slachtoffers of als geprivilegieerde getuigen van een zijde van het leven die normaal aan het zicht onttrokken is. Omgekeerd hebben de theoretische denkkaders rond trauma een impact op de manier waarop deze mensen worden gepercipieerd.

Daarnaast zien we dat politieke, sociale en economische gegevenheden steeds een rol spelen in het denken rond psychisch trauma. Deze gegevenheden genereren een context waarin sommige ideeën beter gedijen en aan populariteit winnen – ten koste van alternatieve mogelijkheden. Ons huidig begrip van traumatische pathologie, geconsolideerd in het construct van PTSS, valt niet zomaar eenduidig af te lezen uit deze fenomenen. Verschillende verklaringsmodellen zijn mogelijk, en de keuze tussen alternatieven gebeurt niet steeds op basis van wetenschappelijke argumenten. In de context van de spoorwegongevallen en *Railway Spine* speelden economische motieven een rol in de aanvaarding en populariteit van bepaalde ‘psychologische’ modellen ten koste van andere. Ten tijde van Wereldoorlog I en *Shell Shock* betrof het een politieke/militaire noodzaak die zich daarin liet gevoelen. De definiëring van PTSS werd in grote mate beïnvloed door de wensen van militante drukkingsgroepen, voornamelijk de vereniging van Vietnamveteranen en de feministische

beweging, die niet alleen het eigen lijden erkend wilden krijgen maar ook eisten dat de externe gebeurtenis werd aangeduid als de oorzaak van hun psychische problemen.

Tot slot leert deze historische analyse dat psychisch trauma zich slechts zeer moeilijk laat vastpinnen in een academisch weten. Als trauma dubbel bestudeerd moet worden, dan kunnen we niet anders dan vaststellen dat er op dit moment een vrij grote consensus bestaat tussen het dominante traumamodel aan de ene kant en de maatschappelijke perceptie van deze fenomenen aan de andere. De komst van PTSS stelde een einde aan een reeds lang woekereend en hevig debat aangaande de vraag naar het respectievelijke aandeel van interne en externe factoren in het ontstaan van traumatische pathologie: de externe gebeurtenis werd voortaan gezien als de determinerende factor. Het PTSS-model voelt juist en vanzelfsprekend aan. Net daarom roept het verbazing op als wetenschappelijke studies de grondslagen ervan ondergraven (zie Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008), of als blijkt dat de toepassing ervan paradoxale effecten produceert (Summerfield, 1999; Watters, 2010). Bewustzijn van de geschiedenis van traumastudies maakt het makkelijker om de vanzelfsprekendheid en neutraliteit van het huidige, biomedische traumabegrip ter discussie te stellen.

De bespreking van de empirische evidentie rond traumatische etiologie in *Hoofdstuk 2* doet ernstige twijfel rijzen over de adequaatheid van Criterium A van de PTSS-diagnose. Dit criterium werd ingevoerd om een onderscheid te maken tussen problemen die ontstaan na confrontatie met een ‘minder zware’ stressor of *life event*, en die dus te maken zouden hebben met een specifieke, individuele kwetsbaarheid voor dergelijke gebeurtenis (te diagnosticeren als Aanpassingsstoornis volgens de richtlijnen van de DSM), en problemen die ontstaan na confrontatie met een ‘traumatische stressor’, en dus voortvloeien uit de aard van deze gebeurtenis zelf (PTSS). Het symptomaal beeld is voor beide stoornissen identiek, maar er wordt een ander onderliggend pathologisch mechanisme verondersteld voor beide diagnoses. Deze veronderstelling laat zich echter niet empirisch bevestigen.

Studies tonen aan dat het quasi onmogelijk is om te voorspellen welk soort gebeurtenis traumatiserend zal zijn (in de zin van het produceren van het traumatische symptoombeeld), op basis van een lijst vooraf bepaalde, ‘objectieve’ karakteristieken van de gebeurtenis – wat de zin van een Criterium A ernstig ter discussie stelt. Een traumatische reactie blijkt daarentegen afhankelijk van de ontmoeting tussen een singulier subject en een bepaalde gebeurtenis. De uitdaging is om te conceptualiseren hoe subjectieve dimensies een rol spelen in traumatische etiologie, zonder in de gekende historische valkuilen te trappen (wantrouwen,

stigmatisering, beschuldiging en verwerping van de traumapatiënt). Een analyse van het veronderstelde etiologische mechanisme achter PTSS toont verder aan dat *uitgestelde traumatische reacties* bijzonder moeilijk te verklaren zijn binnen dit model.

Beide kwesties kunnen anders benaderd worden door uit te gaan van *logische tijd* in het ontstaan van traumatische problemen in plaats van vast te houden aan een chronologische (diachrone) tijdsopvatting. Een bespreking van het mechanisme van *Nachträglichkeit*, aan de hand van een Freudiaans klinisch vignet over de behandeling van Emma Eckstein, leert dat uitgestelde traumatische reacties het gevolg zijn van een verlate *realisatie* van de traumatische betekenis van wat ooit gebeurd is. Het betreft hier dus een trauma dat geconstitueerd wordt door twee momenten in plaats van één. Waar de ervaring van die eerste gebeurtenis niet resulteert in traumatische pathologie (en dus niet automatisch ‘traumatiserend’ werkt), blijkt de herinnering aan die gebeurtenis op een logisch verwant moment wel traumatiserend te worden. Het vernieuwende aan deze studie is dat ze duidelijk maakt dat de subjectief toegankelijke herinnering aan de eerdere ervaring slechts gevormd wordt en traumatiserend werkt in het licht van de *huidige* psychische architectuur, die slechts werd opgebouwd *na* het feitelijke voorval. Het is dus slechts in het licht van de actuele psychische opmaak dat de herinnering aan een vroegere gebeurtenis traumatiserend *wordt*, waar ze dat voorheen niet was. Dat betekent dat een gebeurtenis niet ‘inherent’ traumatiserend is, op basis van bepaalde objectieve karakteristieken (intensiteit, geweld, seksualiteit), maar dat het traumatiserende precies schuilt in de manier waarop een gebeurtenis de actuele psychische economie van het subject in kwestie raakt, in de manier waarop ze resoneert met de rest van het psychische materiaal. Tevens toont dit aan dat het initiële ontbreken van betekenis op zichzelf geen aanleiding geeft tot trauma; het is pas wanneer de betekenis van het initiële voorval achteraf wordt gerealiseerd, en niet kan worden geassumeerd, dat de problemen ontstaan.

In *Hoofdstuk 3* beargumenteer ik dat het de vooronderstelde universele validiteit van de PTSS-diagnose is die een bepaalde (depolitiserende) hantering van deze kennis mogelijk maakt. De assumpties van universaliteit, objectiviteit en neutraliteit zijn verweven met het biomedisch ziektemodel, dat psychische stoornissen beschouwt als *natural kinds*: ziekte-entiteiten die in ongewijzigde vorm doorheen de geschiedenis en over culturele grenzen heen een ontologische kern hebben. De primaire data van psychiatrisch onderzoek (symptomen en medische tekens) worden beschouwd als onafhankelijk van de theorie of de methode waarmee ze worden onderzocht. Hoewel PTSS als diagnostische categorie niet voldoet aan de

wetenschappelijke vereisten die binnen dit biomedisch model gesteld worden om een syndroom te infereren, beschikt het niettemin over een wetenschappelijk aura. De claim dat PTSS een realiteit vat die universeel, objectief en neutraal is, functioneert als justificatie voor de manieren waarop dit psychiatrisch traumamodel in de praktijk wordt ingezet.

Mijn analyse leert echter dat PTSS stoelt op een aantal nauwelijks onderkende kernassumpties die niet universeel gedeeld zijn (de focus op het individu, de veronderstelling van een universeel menselijk subject, cognitieve theorie van informatieverwerking, betekenis die intra-individueel wordt geconstitueerd, enz.). Een historisch perspectief toont de culturele bepaaldheid van deze diagnose verder aan (zie ook Hoofdstuk 1). In combinatie met het gebrek aan empirische evidentie om deze categorie te valideren, suggereert dit dat de psychiatrische kennis rond PTSS niet gezien kan worden als universeel, neutraal of objectief: ook PTSS is een culturele constructie, en dit heeft gevolgen voor de interventies die op deze kennis zijn gebaseerd.

Psychologische spoedinterventies komen vaak neer op ‘het toedienen van psychologie’: de lokale populatie wordt onderwezen in psychologische theorieën. De hulpbehoevenden moeten de dubbele positie innemen van tegelijk subject en object van de psychologie te zijn: ze worden geacht de blik van de academische psychologie over te nemen om hun eigen innerlijke leefwereld te onderzoeken in termen die aangereikt worden door de hulpverstrekkers. Deze aliënatie in de betekenaars van de Ander schrijft de gepaste emoties en reacties voor op normaliserende en normatieve wijze. Bovendien zet het de hulpbehoevenden vast in de passieve positie van ‘de student’. Dit mondt uit in een sterk gepolitiseerde humanitaire hulp, die het terrein ter plaatse depolitiseert. Het is precies de claim dat PTSS een universele realiteit beschrijft (en zich dus ‘voorbij ideologie’ bevindt) die toelaat om dit model dwingend op te leggen. De politieke dimensie van PTSS bestaat er dus in dat problemen die hun oorsprong hebben in een bepaalde sociale, politieke of economische context worden geherdefinieerd en gelokaliseerd binnen een biomedisch discours. Terwijl een medische interventieroute wordt geopend, worden alternatieve vormen van interventie afgesloten. Aldus wordt een bepaald economisch, sociaal of politiek status quo in de hand gewerkt. De focus op het individu, die verweven is met de dominantie van een cognitief psychologisch perspectief in het onderzoek naar traumatische fenomenen, zorgt er verder voor dat er weinig aandacht gaat naar sociale en contextuele aspecten in het herstelproces van trauma.

Een korte bespreking van Alain Badiou's kritiek op de ethiek van mensenrechten in *Hoofdstuk 4* legt een aantal parallellen bloot met de problemen rond PTSS die in Hoofdstuk 3 werden uitgediept. In beide gevallen wordt ervan uitgegaan dat de mens in staat is om *a priori* de manifestaties van het kwade/trauma te herkennen, onafhankelijk van de sociale, culturele, economische of politieke context in kwestie. In beide gevallen leidt de focus op gemakkelijk te herkennen manifestaties van het kwade/trauma tot interventies die gericht zijn op de in het oog springende oppervlaktefenomenen die ermee gepaard gaan, zonder een analyse te maken van de context en specificiteit van het probleem. Er wordt met andere woorden op symptomen gewerkt, en niet op oorzaken. In beide vertogen wordt tot slot een universeel psychologisch subject verondersteld dat gedefinieerd wordt in zijn of haar kwetsbaarheid: dit subject wordt gezien als aangeboren, a-contextueel, geïsoleerd en fragiel. Dit zorgt opnieuw voor een gebrek aan aandacht voor contextuele factoren in de determinering van subjectiviteit. Tot slot reduceren beide vertogen de ander tot het statuut van 'slachtoffer'.

Op deze manier vormt zich de hypothese dat het PTSS-model sterk verweven is met de ethische uitgangspositie van het mensenrechtenvertoog. De alomtegenwoordigheid van het mensenrechtendiscours en van PTSS signaleert mogelijks de conditie van de Westerse mens die zich, met het heengaan van de klassieke vormen van autoriteit en de teloorgang van de collectieve, grote verhalen, in een 'post-tritioneel vacuüm van betekenis' bevindt. Als trauma een 'crisis van betekenis' is, dan kan deze stoornis gezien worden als de prototypische existentiële conditie van Westerse, post-tritionele maatschappijen. De spectaculaire opmars en alomtegenwoordigheid van het traumadiscours gedurende de afgelopen drie decennia kan dan gezien worden als een effect van de Westerse blik, die de eigen problemen overal om zich heen ontwaart – eerder dan dat deze het gevolg is van wetenschappelijke vooruitgang op het vlak van de theoretische kennis rond trauma. De analyse in dit hoofdstuk toont de verwevenheid tussen trauma, ethiek en politiek, en suggereert de nood om de relaties tussen deze velden te conceptualiseren.

In *Hoofdstuk 5* leert een lezing van Lacan's gepubliceerde teksten en seminars dat er twee belangrijke opvattingen zijn van het concept van het reële. Het presymbolische reële wordt gezien als een domein van onmiddellijke ervaring, de brute sensorische ervaring die nooit het bewustzijn bereikt zonder gefilterd te worden door symbolische representatie via het geheugen, het ego of diverse neurologische banen die onze zintuiglijke ervaring mediëren en organiseren. Dit presymbolische reële wordt volgens het vroege werk van Lacan

gestructureerd door het symbolische en imaginaire register, die het (*mis*)representeren. Bijvoorbeeld: in zijn theorie over het spiegelstadium stelt Lacan dat identificatie met een geünificeerd lichaamsbeeld de chaotische diversiteit van het reële lichaam overdekt in de vroegkinderlijke ontwikkeling, en dat deze (*mis*)kenning het prille proto-ego constitueert. Trauma wordt binnen de theorie van het presymbolische reële begrepen als het gevolg van een confrontatie met dat stuk van het reële dat niet kan worden gesymboliseerd, dat stuk dat is achtergebleven en nooit de overgang naar het symbolico-imaginaire heeft gemaakt.

De presymbolische opvatting van het reële houdt vast aan een chronologisch perspectief. Echter, het idee van het reële als een domein van het bestaan *voor de komst van de betekenaar of de taal* kan nooit meer zijn dan een achteraf-constructie, gezien we als spreekwezens altijd-reeds in de taal gegrepen zijn. Bovendien mist een definitie van het reële als traumatisch-in-zichzelf het punt dat iets enkel en alleen traumatisch kan zijn in relatie tot iets anders: trauma kan alleen gedacht worden als een breuk met een pre-existerend representationeel systeem. Het postsymbolische reële is dan ook beter geschikt om traumatische fenomenen te begrijpen. Deze opvatting van het reële keert het intuïtieve, traditionele begrip van trauma op zijn kop: het idee is niet langer dat het symbolische ‘verstoord’ wordt door de aanwezigheid van een verstorend, traumatisch, reëel element, maar dat het traumatiserende reële zelf een manifestatie is van de reeds aanwezige ‘verstoring’ die uitgaat van het symbolisch systeem zelf. Het reële is iets dat ontstaat als een soort excès ten gevolge van het proces van symbolisering; het pre-existeert het symbolische dus niet. De drie registers (imaginair, symbolisch en reëel) moeten eerder als gelijkoorspronkelijk worden begrepen. Echter, subjectief kan het reële slechts ervaren worden als een ‘leegte’ in de betekenaarsketting die het pulserende verschijnen van het subject ondersteunt. Mijn studie leert dat de determinering van het symbolische gericht is op een confrontatie met het reële excès dat het produceert, maar dat deze ontmoeting keer op keer een ‘gemiste ontmoeting’ is. Het reële functioneert als oorzaak van de betekenaarsketting.

In *Hoofdstuk 6* traceer ik een ander aspect van het reële, dat door Lacan aangeduid wordt als ‘het niet-bestaan van de Ander van de Ander’ of de ‘gebarreerde Ander’. Daarmee doelt hij op het feit dat er in het symbolische systeem structureel een element ontbreekt, met name dat element dat het zou kunnen funderen. Echter, het is slechts in confrontatie met deze kloof (het tekort in de Ander) dat het subject in leven geroepen wordt, op een punt waar de determinering door het symbolische niet volledig (*pas-tout*) is. Het reële, hier begrepen als het

tekort in de Ander, is met andere woorden de mogelijksvoorwaarde voor het verschijnen van het subject en dus voor ethiek als dusdanig. Het is via de ethische act dat het subject de plaats inneemt van de ontbrekende Ander van de Ander. Daarmee bedoelt Lacan dat wanneer het subject bijvoorbeeld gedreven wordt door een onweerstaanbare ‘externe’ invloed, het nog steeds het subject is dat deze externe drijfveer als maxime voor zijn of haar gedrag geïnstalleerd heeft. De Lacaniaanse psychoanalyse stelt, met andere woorden, dat het subject verantwoordelijk is voor het onbewuste dat hem of haar in een bepaalde richting stuwt.

In dit hoofdstuk worden voorts de Kantiaanse wortels van de psychoanalytische ethiek verduidelijkt. Om als ethisch gekwalificeerd te kunnen worden, moet een daad volgens Kant niet alleen in overeenstemming zijn met de plicht; de plicht moet daarnaast het enige motief zijn voor de daad. Die laatste vereiste is een soort ‘nutteloos’ surplus, dat nergens voor dient (in de zin dat de uitkomst van de daad identiek blijft) maar voor Kant niettemin alle verschil maakt (ethisch of niet). Voor Kant is de categorische imperatief het *rationele* principe dat kan functioneren als een moreel kompas, zonder nog langer te steunen op een garanderende Ander (God, de natuur, enz.). Het principe van de categorische imperatief veronderstelt dat het particuliere (in de zin van een bepaalde actie in de concreetheid van een specifieke situatie) wordt verheven tot het universele (cf. ‘handel slechts in overeenstemming met een maxime waarvan je tegelijkertijd kan willen dat het een algemene wet wordt’). Kant stelt dat de mens pas vrij kan zijn als hij zich losmaakt van zijn eigen determineringen (gaande van de meest basale driften, over diepmenselijke emoties, tot de meest verheven idealen die iemands acties bepalen). Hij stelt daarbij noch de adequaatheid van dergelijke drijfveren noch de motivationele kracht ervan ter discussie; zijn visie is simpelweg dat deze geen rol mogen spelen in de keuze voor een bepaalde actie opdat die als ‘ethisch’ zou kunnen worden gekwalificeerd.

Lacan sluit aan bij deze principes maar bekritiseert Kant op twee punten. Ten eerste stelt hij dat Kant het *subject van het uitspreken* (*sujet de l'énonciation*) van een bepaald maxime uit het oog verliest. Ten tweede stelt Lacan dat ethische daden niet onmogelijk zijn voor de mens, en dat ze – ondanks de kloof tussen de onzuivere wil van het subject en de ethische daad zelf – wel degelijk voorkomen. Kants imperatief lijkt afgeroepen te worden vanuit een ‘asubjectief nergens’. Een gevolg daarvan is dat dit principe opgevat kan worden als een soort lakmoesproef die het ethisch gehalte van een bepaalde handeling voor eens en voor altijd vastlegt. Lacan toont, via zijn studie van Sade, de onhoudbaarheid van deze stelling aan:

ethiek is altijd gebonden aan een concrete situatie en aan een bepaald subject. Het is dus niet zo dat het universele vertaald moet worden om het te kunnen toepassen in concrete situaties; het universele wordt slechts als dusdanig geponeerd via de ethische act van het subject. Het probleem met het idee van universele plichten, die ‘reeds getest’ zijn aan de hand van de categorische imperatief, is dat ze gerecupereerd worden tot het niveau van een wet. Aldus verliezen ze precies de ethische dimensie, met name de *act* die aan de wet voorafgaat en deze fundeert. Via Sade toont Lacan dat het precies het zich verschuilen achter een geconstitueerde wet is dat het perverse genot mogelijk maakt: de pervert loochent het eigen genot en presenteert zich als het instrument van het genot van de Ander, als de trouwe dienaar van de Wet. Dus: waar Kant aantoonde dat een mens zich niet kan verschuilen achter het welzijn van de Ander (of het zelf) om zijn plicht te verzaken, toont Lacan dat het omgekeerde evenzeer niet opgaat. Een mens kan zich niet verschuilen achter ‘zijn plicht’ om de eigen daden te verantwoorden. Ethiek kan, met andere woorden, nooit gerecupereerd worden in een serie voorschriften die door iedereen in elke situatie moeten worden gevolgd (moraal).

De inzet van deze studie over ethiek is de volgende: Lacan maakt duidelijk dat het subject, in de confrontatie met de zinloosheid van het reële en het niet-bestaan van de Ander van de Ander, gedwongen wordt om te reageren met een *ethische act*. Paradoxaal genoeg stelt hij voorts dat het subject een *effect* is van deze act. Wanneer we dit betrekken op trauma, waar het subject eveneens wordt geïnterpelleerd door een zinloos reële, dan volgt daaruit dat het ‘herstel’ van trauma een ethische dimensie omvat. Meer bepaald: het is mijn stelling dat het subject op de inbreuk van het reële moet antwoorden met een dergelijke ethische act – voorbij een focus op een medico-technische verbalisering of symbolisering (zie Deel II). De kenmerken van deze act worden uitgewerkt in Hoofdstuk 8.

In *Hoofdstuk 7* knoop ik aan bij het werk van een aantal filosofen en politicologen die het concept van het reële inzetten om maatschappelijke (politieke, culturele, economische) evoluties te begrijpen. Het idee is dat de realiteit een socio-symbolische en fantasmatisch onderstutte constructie is. Deze sociale constructie heeft de functie om een bepaald ondraaglijk reële te verhullen en om het verlangen en het genot te kanaliseren. Het reële wordt hier geconceptualiseerd als een surplus dat in deze socio-symbolische articulatie wordt gegenereerd, en dat het potentieel heeft om deze specifieke articulatie van de realiteit te ontwrichten. Het reële toont zich van tijd tot tijd wanneer de realiteit wordt gedestabiliseerd door elementen waar het geen vat op heeft en die het niet kan verklaren: het maakt daarmee

een einde aan een welgeordende sociale wereld en ondergraaft de zekerheden waarop deze gestoeld is. Het installeert een crisis waarbinnen we de limieten van onze betekenisverlenende structuren ervaren (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 67). Verschillende auteurs situeren in deze reële dislocaties de *oorzaak* van maatschappelijke veranderingsprocessen: de ontmoeting met het tekort in de Ander, met diens instabiliteit en arbitrariteit, stimuleren het verlangen om dit ondraaglijke reële opnieuw te overdekken met nieuwe representaties. Echter, klinisch gezien is het precies deze confrontatie met het reële (en het imploderen van de symbolico-imaginaire coördinaten die de identiteit van de betrokken personen fixeren) die traumatiserend werkt.

Lacans specifieke conceptie van het subject en van de Ander toont hoe de destabilisering van de sociale orde verweven kan zijn met problemen op persoonlijk vlak. Onze identiteit en subjectiviteit bestaan niet in onafhankelijkheid van de Ander. Wanneer deze Ander wordt ‘ontmaskerd’ en zijn autoriteit verliest (omdat bijvoorbeeld blijkt dat de staat, als ‘vaderlijke’ instantie die normaliter de wet garandeert en de eigen burgers beschermt, zelf de wetten overtreedt of haar burgers aanvalt), kan dit gevolgen hebben op persoonlijk of individueel vlak. Gezien ook de eigen identiteit, verlangens, fantasieën en sociale netwerken intiem verbonden zijn met en gevormd zijn door de Ander, die op een dergelijk moment van ruptuur wordt getoond in zijn tekort en arbitrariteit, zal de destabilisatie van dit overkoepelende symbolische systeem een impact hebben op de persoonlijke ervaring. De eigen intimiteit wordt dan gereveleerd als iets *extiem*: ze is gebouwd op en gevormd naar de wet van een Ander die tot voor de traumatische breuk als absoluut werd ervaren. Wanneer deze Ander wankelt, wankelt ook de ervaring van het zelf – wat kan leiden tot psychische problemen. Nog anders gesteld: sociale rupturen kunnen het gevoel van ‘ontologische veiligheid’, geschraagd door de positie die iemand heeft in het symbolische, ernstig verstoren.

Politieke theorieën die het reële centraal stellen, beargumenteren dat grootschalige maatschappelijke verstoringen toelaten om ‘het moment van het politieke’ te identificeren. Dit ‘politek moment’ duidt de transitie aan van een confrontatie, in een moment van ruptuur, met negativiteit en het tekort naar de positivering van dit reële via een subjectieve act. In het moment van het politieke neemt het subject de verantwoordelijkheid op zich om een antwoord te formuleren op de zinloosheid van het reële. Opnieuw mondt mijn analyse uit in de dimensie van de act, ditmaal als een scharnierconcept om politieke evoluties te begrijpen. De act is één van de mogelijke subjectieve antwoorden op de verstoringen van het reële – een dat radicaal breekt met de betekenisverlenende structuren die onhoudbaar geworden zijn in

het licht van dat reële. Deze dimensie van de act ontbreekt in huidige besprekingen van trauma. Het is mijn hypothese dat dit concept cruciaal is om processen van ruptuur, zowel binnen de kliniek als binnen de maatschappij, te begrijpen.

In *Hoofdstuk 8* wordt deze act geconceptualiseerd aan de hand van het werk van Lacan, Žižek en Badiou. Ik weerhoud daarbij volgende kenmerken van de act. De act is niet de manifeste uitdrukking van een reeds geconstitueerde, onderliggende subjectiviteit of verlangen. Het is slechts via een act dat een bepaald verlangen en een vorm van subjectiviteit ‘neerslaat’. Een act transformeert het subject, in de zin dat het subject *na* de act niet meer hetzelfde subject is van voor de act. Een act is tevens verweven met het symbolische en behelst niet enkel een reële zijde. De act inaugureert een nieuwe symbolische structuur in hetzelfde moment dat hij in de oude structuur een radicale verschuiving bewerkstelligt. De act presteert iets wat voorheen als ‘onmogelijk’ werd aanzien: hij presenteert of demonstreert iets *unheimlich*s dat de bestaande symbolische structuur verstoort en destabiliseert. De act overschrijdt, met andere woorden, steeds de limieten van een gegeven socio-symbolische realiteit. Het is mede de wijziging in het socio-symbolische veld die de mutatie van het subject bewerkstelligt. Ten derde vindt een act steeds plaats op het punt waar men op het reële botst. Waar de Ander getekend is door een tekort, waar de Ander niet (langer) gegarandeerd is, daar moet men in complete eenzaamheid, los van de Ander, een act stellen waarvan de uitkomst nooit gegarandeerd is. De act is steeds onzeker, omdat hij zich niet kan funderen op bestaande kennis. Ook voor de actor zelf is de act opaak en onvoorspelbaar; het is slechts mogelijk om er achteraf, in een retroactieve beweging, verantwoordelijkheid voor te nemen. De dimensie van de act veronderstelt een soort gok, in de zin dat op het moment van de act de uitkomst ervan ongekend is. Echter, de act wordt gekenmerkt door een anticiperende zekerheid: dankzij de veranderingen die de act teweegbrengt in het sociale veld ontstaat de mogelijkheid om de act te valideren. De act wordt verifieerbaar in het licht van het kennisregime van de nieuw-geconstitueerde realiteit.

Doorheen de analyse in *Hoofdstuk 8* wordt aangetoond dat de act een rol speelt in zowel de besloten context van een psychoanalyse als in de macrocontext van politieke veranderingen. De parallel met Badiou's theorie van ‘het evenement’ benadrukt dat een confrontatie met het reële (zoals het geval is bij trauma) niet gereduceerd kan worden tot een incompatibiliteit tussen twee symbolische formaties. Dat betekent onder meer dat de modificaties die vereist zijn in het symbolico-imaginaire steeds moeten passeren door het reële van een act. Zoals

gezegd is het precies deze dimensie van de act die in de gebruikelijke (psychologische) traumatheorieën wordt veronachtzaamd. Badiou's filosofie maakt tevens duidelijk dat het evenement enkel retroactief kan worden gelezen, en dat deze lezing een modificatie van de sociale context veronderstelt. Wanneer we dit toepassen op de problematiek van trauma, dan betekent dit dat herstel niet slechts te maken heeft met de intrapsychische metabolisering van het traumatische incident, maar dat het een herwerking van de sociale context (en de relatie van het subject tot de Ander) vereist. Het is slechts door de constructie van een nieuwe sociale realiteit dat men grip kan krijgen op het reële dat de voorgaande sociale orde heeft doorkruist. Naar analogie met Badiou's theorie over de subjectivering van het evenement, besluit ik dat deze herwerking van de Ander een langdurig en volgehouden proces behelst: na de flits van de act kan er zich een subject vormen dat trouw is aan deze act, en dat deze act articuleert met de andere elementen van de vooraangaande situatie. Op deze manier wordt een nieuwe context stap voor stap gegenereerd.

Discussie

In Deel I van dit doctoraatsproefschrift wordt nader ingegaan op de etiologie van trauma. Daarbij wordt, aan de hand van een bespreking van het Freudiaanse concept *Nachträglichkeit*, aangetoond dat uitgestelde traumatische reacties en traumatische reacties na blootstelling aan een niet-Criterium A stressor in sommige gevallen gerelateerd zijn. De traumatische impact van een ogenschijnlijk triviale gebeurtenis is dan afkomstig van de associatie met een vroegere gebeurtenis, die zelf evenwel gedurende lange tijd zonder pathologische gevolgen is gebleven. Traumatische pathologie blijkt hier het gevolg te zijn van de 'uitgestelde' vorming van een traumatische herinnering aan de lang vervlogen gebeurtenis. Waar Freud trauma initieel verbond met de 'premature seksuele ervaring', blijkt uit mijn bespreking dat het mechanisme van *Nachträglichkeit* ook werkzaam is voorbij de structurering van het subject in de Oedipale fase. Deze studie maakt aanschouwelijk dat het onmogelijk is om traumatische pathologie te voorspellen op basis van een lijst *a priori* parameters; de psychische reactie is afhankelijk van de specifieke combinatie tussen een stressor en een persoon. Het besproken mechanisme toont één manier waarop persoonlijke achtergrond en de kenmerken van een situatie met elkaar interageren om de effecten van een gebeurtenis te determineren. Bovendien toont het aan dat de (traumatische) impact van een situatie niet voor eens en voor altijd

gegeven is; het is steeds mogelijk om de valentie van een gebeurtenis te wijzigen op basis van nieuwe elementen.

Traumatische pathologie wordt in vele psychologische theorieën gedefinieerd als het gevolg van de ontwrichting van een betekenisverlenend kader. De vraag is op welke manier betekenis gegenereerd wordt. Waar cognitieve psychologische theorieën de nadruk leggen op de intrapsychische constructie van betekenis, verlenen andere denkkaders een centralere plaats aan de context om betekenis te produceren. Het eigene aan trauma lijkt er in ieder geval in te bestaan dat er geen weg terug is naar de *status quo ante*. De pogingen van het psychische systeem om het traumatische evenement te integreren in de pretraumatische psychische economie mislukken steeds, waardoor het zich blijft aandienen ter bewerking. Daaruit distilleerde ik de definitie dat herstel van trauma een ‘herstructurering van het subject’ vereist – wat uiteraard de vraag oproept hoe dit verder moet worden begrepen. In Deel III van dit doctoraat werkte ik een kader uit om aan te tonen dat de ‘herstructurering van het subject’ niet louter intrapsychisch dient opgevat te worden, maar dat dit tevens een herwerking van (de relatie van het subject tot) de Ander vraagt.

In Hoofdstuk 2 breng ik een aantal empirische bevindingen uit het traumaonderzoek in articulatie met een weinig gekend stuk psychoanalytische theorie. Uit deze studie kunnen empirisch testbare hypothesen worden gegenereerd voor verder onderzoek. Zo werden reeds een aantal masterproefprojecten gestart waarbij aan de hand van casusmateriaal (*verbatim* getranscribeerde therapiesessies) werd nagegaan op welke manieren de gebeurtenis die de psychische klachten had ingeleid, samenhangt met andere factoren in iemands psychisch functioneren en elementen uit de levensgeschiedenis van de cliënt. De studie beschreven in Hoofdstuk 2 pleit met andere woorden voor de investering in *casusconstructie*, zowel binnen empirisch therapieonderzoek als binnen het diagnostische en het therapeutische klinische proces zelf. Het is de betekenaarsketting, het narratief materiaal dat in de analyse geproduceerd wordt, die de context vormt van waaruit de singuliere logica achter iemands psychische klachten kan worden begrepen.

Het idee dat trauma niet rechtstreeks voortvloeit uit de kenmerken van de gebeurtenis op zich heeft bovendien verregaande implicaties voor de manier waarop humanitaire hulpverlening wordt opgevat. Het is precies het idee dat we de impact van een gebeurtenis op een individu kunnen voorspellen dat deze interventies onderstut. Op deze problematiek wordt nader ingegaan in Deel II van de dissertatie. Daarin wordt voornamelijk duidelijk dat, hoewel de

huidige, dominante traumaopvatting is uitgegroeid tot een ‘gedeelde waarheid’ in het Westen, het niet lukt om deze waarheid ook empirisch te bevestigen. Een aantal problemen met PTSS worden gelinkt aan het biomedische ziektemodel dat sedert 1980 richting geeft aan de psychiatrische diagnostiek (de nadruk op het individu, de preoccupatie met ‘immaterieel herstel’, de moeilijkheden om context te verrekenen, een technische aanpak die de ethische dimensie van traumaherstel mist, en een depolitisering die een economisch of politiek status quo in de hand werkt). Bovendien wordt de hypothese ontwikkeld dat de alomtegenwoordigheid van trauma in onze maatschappij te maken kan hebben met een ‘ethische crisis’ die ‘post-traditionele’ samenlevingen kenmerkt. Deze analyses tonen voornamelijk de noodzaak aan om het biomedische perspectief op trauma uit te breiden met modellen die het subject, de context, en de politieke dimensie van trauma includeren. Hoewel er in diverse academische disciplines aanzetten gegeven zijn om dergelijke modellen te ontwikkelen, is dit in de klinische en praktische realiteit veel minder het geval. Verder conceptueel werk is nodig om concrete interventies te ontwikkelen die in staat zijn om de geïdentificeerde problemen van het PTSS-model *in situ* het hoofd te bieden.

Tot slot wordt in het derde deel van het doctoraatsproefschrift een aanzet gegeven om de relaties tussen trauma, ethiek en politiek te denken. De noodzaak daartoe vloeit voort uit de analyse in Deel II. Daarbij worden de initiële onderzoeksvragen evenwel in het achterhoofd gehouden: de traumabehandeling moet toelaten om context in rekening te brengen; ze moet de focus op het individu overstijgen; ze moet de politieke dimensie van trauma onderkennen. De oplossing voor deze problemen is mijns inziens niet om een psychologische benadering in te ruilen voor een sociologische. Het doel is veeleer om deze dichotomie te destabiliseren. Daartoe steun ik op het Lacaniaanse begrippenkader, met speciale aandacht voor de concepten van het reële, het subject, de Ander, en de act.

De *decontextualisering* die gepaard gaat met de PTSS-benadering van trauma wordt gecounterd door de veronderstelling dat elke samenleving gekenmerkt wordt door een eigen symbolico-imaginaire realiteit. Deze realiteit wordt consistent gemaakt via een serie singuliere fantasieën, narratieven en ‘knooppunten’ (*nodal points* of *points de capiton*). Wat dus geldig is in één cultuur, is dat niet noodzakelijk in een andere. Als trauma minimaal gedefinieerd wordt als een breuk met ‘wat is’, als de confrontatie met een excès dat weerstand biedt aan de recuperatie in het vooraf-bestaande, betekenisverlenende kader, en net daarom een herstructurering van de Ander vereist, dan wordt het duidelijk waarom ‘het traumatische’

voor één cultuur of persoon dat niet per se is voor een andere. Het is onmogelijk te voorspellen wat traumatiserend is voor een ander, en dit geldt des te meer wanneer dit betracht wordt op basis van kennis die werd ontwikkeld in andere contexten dan degene waar ze wordt toegepast.

Merk op dat de hier geschetste benadering tevens toelaat ons begrip van trauma te verruimen om ook ‘gradueel’ of ‘cumulatief’ trauma (*insidious trauma*) een plaats te geven. De laatste jaren hebben diverse onderzoekers de opvatting bekritiseerd dat trauma veroorzaakt wordt door plotse, onverwachte catastrofes – tegen een achtergrond van relatieve stabiliteit en welbevinden. Deze opvatting zou vooral gepast zijn om de trauma’s van mensen in sociaal dominante posities te denken. De notie van cumulatief trauma werd ontwikkeld door Maria Root en recenter opgepikt door Laura Brown, om de traumatogene effecten aan te duiden van ‘vormen van verdrukking die niet noodzakelijk openlijk gewelddadig of bedreigend voor de fysieke integriteit zijn op een enkel, afgelijnd moment, maar die niettemin schade toebrengen aan de ziel’ (Brown, 1995, p. 107, eigen vertaling). De idee van cumulatief trauma zou beter geschikt zijn om belangrijke aspecten van de trauma’s van onderdrukte groepen te vatten. Het besproken model maakt het mogelijk om sensitiever te worden voor dergelijke noden, in de zin dat een breuk met het voorgaande symbolico-imaginaire kader niet gelokaliseerd hoeft te kunnen worden in één specifieke gebeurtenis.

In Deel II wordt de noodzaak beargumenteerd om de huidige focus op het individu te verleggen naar grotere sociale entiteiten, en zo ook ‘materieel herstel’ op te nemen in traumatheorie. Een centraal idee in het kader dat werd uitgewerkt in Deel III is dat herstel van trauma een ondervraging en verandering van de sociopolitieke context die aanleiding gaf tot het ondergaan onrecht vereist. Om dit idee in de praktijk om te zetten moeten we echter vertrekken van een andere ethiek, die zich niet langer blindstaart op de duidelijk zichtbare manifestaties van ‘het kwade’ en die ik heb getypeerd aan de hand van Badiou’s procedure van het ‘trouwe subject’ (*sujet fidèle/faithful subject; procédure fidèle/fidelity procedure*).

De notie van de act staat centraal in het finale deel van deze dissertatie. Mijns inziens is het precies deze nog te weinig uitgewerkte notie die de psychoanalyse differentieert van psychotherapie als dusdanig. De relevantie van de uitwerking van de act in Hoofdstuk 8 overschrijdt dan ook de context van het traumaonderzoek per se, gegeven de centrale plaats van dit concept binnen de klinische praktijk. Het is mijn overtuiging dat therapieonderzoek sterk gebaat kan zijn bij het idee dat de voortgang van het therapeutische/analytische proces

discontinu is, en gekenmerkt wordt door radicale breuken die het subject losmaken van de beveiliging die de aliënatie aan de Ander biedt. Het is slechts door de herstructurering van de relatie tot de Ander dat het subject zich kan losmaken van de paradoxale *jouissance* die deze aliënatie oplevert. Dat betekent dat therapie geen gradueel, incrementeel proces is, waarbij op een eenduidige manier reductie in de klachten en verbetering in het algemene welbevinden wordt bekomen. Een psychoanalyse verloopt moeizaam en pijnlijk, gezien er op de limieten van de betekenisverlening moet worden gebotst – om daar, te midden van de angst die gepaard gaat met de confrontatie met het tekort van de Ander, en in volstrekte eenzaamheid, de gelegenheid te krijgen om de ‘dobbelstenen opnieuw te werpen’.

Een dergelijke visie gaat uiteraard in tegen het aan populariteit winnende idee dat de cliënt weet wat hij of zij wil en nodig heeft, en dat zijn of haar gevoel van welbehagen tijdens de gesprekken een betrouwbaar kompas vormt om de therapie op af te stemmen. Het discontinue karakter van evoluties binnen het psychoanalytische/therapeutische proces kan longitudinaal getest worden door data te verzamelen over de gehele loop van de therapiesessies. Daarbij kunnen inhoudelijke gegevens (uit de transcripties van de sessies) vergeleken worden met evoluties in symptoomniveaus en meer objectieve markers (zoals cortisol-niveaus). Dit kan, onder meer, duidelijk maken dat ‘verslechtering’ op symptomatisch vlak precies optreedt wanneer een confrontatie met het reële zich aandient.

Deze conceptuele studie vormt een aanzet om het debat rond psychisch trauma te heroriënteren. Ze biedt concrete denksporen om het subject, de context en de politieke dimensie van trauma een plaats te geven. Deze ideeën zijn mijns inziens veelbelovend, maar vereisen nog verdere uitwerking en dialoog met het academische veld. Een belangrijke taak is om de geleverde inzichten om te zetten in testbare hypothesen enerzijds, en praktische interventiestrategieën anderzijds.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ For DSM-5, published in 2013, Criterion A has again received important revisions. It now reads as follows: ‘The person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, as follows: (1 required) (a) Direct exposure, (b) witnessing, in person, (c) indirectly, by learning that a close relative or close friend was exposed to trauma. If the event involved actual or threatened death, it must have been violent or accidental, (d) repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s), usually in the course of professional duties (e.g., first responders, collecting body parts; professionals repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). This does not include indirect non-professional exposure through electronic media, television, movies, or pictures.’

(National Center for PTSD, 2013)

ⁱⁱ Other researchers have attempted to define trauma severity more objectively, for example by measuring the duration of the trauma and the number of incidences (Maercker et al., 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ In the previous version of DSM (DSM-IV-TR), Criterion A1 was the component of the stressor criterion that described the range of events that justified the PTSD diagnosis. Criterion A2 described the subjective reaction of the person exposed that was a requirement for receiving the diagnosis. For DSM-5, Criterion A2 of the PTSD definition has been dropped.

^{iv} In German, the passage reads as follows: ‘Überall findet sich, das eine Erinnerung verdrängt wird, die nur nachtraglich zum Trauma geworden ist‘ (Freud, 1895/1950, p. 435).

^v All the events subsequent to puberty to which an influence must be attributed upon the development of the hysterical neurosis and upon the formation of its symptoms are in fact only concurrent causes – “agents provocateurs” as Charcot used to say, although for him nervous heredity occupied the place which I claim for the precocious sexual experience’ (Freud, 1896/1975d, pp. 154 – 155).

^{vi} This is equivalent to the Lacanian notion of ‘la rencontre manquée’ (the missed encounter), which is a fundamental feature of the category of the Real.

^{vii} Adrian Johnston (2005) convincingly argues that a psychical element is a signifier to the extent that its value/meaning is determined by a network of differential relations between it and other elements. Thus, a visual memory trace can function ‘as an unconscious signifier insofar as its significance in a psychical economy depends on its interactive ties with other traces; it doesn’t have to be a word (or word-presentation) to operate in this capacity’ (p. 345).

^{viii} Adrian Johnston (2013, p. 178) proposes this concept as he discusses how the speaking being as a subject is embedded in but not reducible to the human animal as an animal.

^{ix} Lacan called this type of determination the automaton-function of the unconscious, beautifully schematized in his ‘logic of the signifying chain’ (Lacan, 1954 – 1955, 1957/2006c).

^x In *Diagnosis and the DSM*, Stijn Vanheule (2014) works out that an array of theoretical presuppositions drive this project, which renders its claims to “theoretical neutrality” untenable.

^{xi} This was changed into ‘Cultural Concepts of Distress’ in DSM-5, in an attempt to account for the fact that ‘all forms of distress are locally shaped, including the DSM disorders’ (APA, 2013, p. 758). This claim, however, is difficult to reconcile with the general diagnostic approach of the DSM and the clinical interventions it inspires (Vanheule, 2014).

^{xii} In Badiou’s writings, ‘human rights’ and the more archaic phrase ‘rights of man’ are used interchangeably. Both are used to refer to humankind as a whole and thus encompass both sexes.

^{xiii} The work of Bruce Fink (1994; 1997), Danny Nobus (2000), Paul Verhaeghe (2001, 2008), Samuel Weber (2008) and Slavoj Žižek (1989, 2006) come to mind as excellent introductions into the meanders of Lacan’s work.

^{xiv} Incidentally, the same applies to the difficult notion of *jouissance*, which denotes some sort of paradoxical, corporeal mixture of enjoyment and pain. This Lacanian elaboration of Freud’s death drive is often comprehended as something that exists prior to and in independence of the signifier. However, in his later teachings, Lacan emphasized that *jouissance* must be conceived in its dependence on the materiality of language, which translated into concepts such as *lalangue*, the *unary trait*, and *joui-sens*.

^{xv} Bruce Fink draws attention to the fact that, insofar as we name and talk about it and weave it in a theoretical discourse, we obviously give some type of “existence” to that which only ‘ex-sists’.

^{xvi} The identification with an image requires the presence of “proto-Symbolic, pre-Oedipal coordinates” that, for instance, locate an inside versus an outside (Eyers, 2012, p. 16).

^{xvii} A thorough discussion of these graphs can be found in Fink (1995, pp. 16-23, 179-182).

^{xviii} Although this is very reminiscent of the cognitive trauma theories mentioned in Chapter 3, the main difference is that meaning is not simply generated intrapsychically in the Lacanian account, but in a dialectic between the subject and the Other.

^{xix} This is a second pivotal point of divergence with cognitive trauma theories: recovery from trauma cannot come about on the basis of pre-existent knowledge, but requires the passage through the real of an act.

^{xx} '[T]he normal man is not only far more immoral than he believes but also far more moral than he knows' (Freud, 1923, p. 52).

^{xxi} This is reminiscent of Zygmunt Bauman's thesis, worked out in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), that the Holocaust is connected to the project of modernity because of its reliance on procedural rationality, the division of labor, taxonomic organization of species, and the tendency to view rule-following as morally good.

^{xxii} See Lacan, 1959-60, pp. 167-240 for a discussion of the complex and paradoxical relationship between jouissance and the law.

^{xxiii} From this, it follows that a 'successful' ethical act always has consequences for the Other, which will be of prime importance when we return to the general thesis of this study, for instance when we discuss the intersection of ethics with politics.

^{xxiv} Shepherdson uses the example of gold to make the strange status of the taboo object clear: our (symbolical) monetary system is said to rest on a 'gold standard' that materially guarantees or supports the system. Gold can play this part only because it appears to have some sort of 'natural value'. As a material, it stands outside the symbolic system itself and merely gives 'value' to the symbolic elements that circulate in it. The enigma is that gold's special status as something with 'natural value' is an effect of this symbolic system itself: gold is a product or surplus-effect expelled from the symbolical interplay. Thus: gold comes into being via the system, yet in such a way that its origins are hidden, to appear as if it was 'always there' and the system only emerged on its basis. As such, it functions as a (false) 'natural' guarantee for the monetary system (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 21-25).

^{xxv} Specifically: *Fuse* (Žalica et al., 2003), *Go West* (Imamović&Puska, 2005), *Grbavica: The Land of*

My Dreams (Žbanić, Karanović, Lučev, & Ćatić, 2006), and *In the Name of the Son* (Harun Mehmedinovic, 2007).

^{xxvi} 'Nous voyons maintenant cette place où elle est, parce qu'elle peut être occupée, mais qu'elle n'est occupée <qu'au temps> où ce sujet supposé savoir s'est réduit à ce terme, que celui qui l'a jusque-là garanti par son acte, à savoir le psychanalyste, lui, le psychanalyste l'est devenu, ce résidu, cet objet a. Celui qui, à la fin d'une analyse dite didactique relève, si je puis dire, le gant de cet acte, nous ne pouvons pas omettre que c'est sachant ce que son

analyste est devenu dans l'accomplissement de cet acte, à savoir ce résidu, ce déchet, cette chose rejetée.' (Lacan, 1967-68, lesson on January 10, 1968, p. 58)

^{xxvii} See, for instance, the post-Lacanian literature on 'the passe', or the seminars of Jacques-Alain Miller (such as 'De la Nature des Semblants' of 1991-92).

^{xxviii} Although there is a tendency to elevate the symbolic type of response to a desirable ideal, it should be noted that so-called 'imaginary' strategies that succeed in pinning down the estranging real element quickly produce therapeutic, soothing effects. In my regard, Lacan's 'knot theory' moves away from this privileging of the symbolic in the direction of acknowledging the equivalence of the three registers. Similarly, the idea of the 'sinthome' emphasizes the singularity of a subjective solution in the face of the real, a particular form of knotting the registers together – without making any statement about the ways in which this is best accomplished (Lacan, 1975-76). It should be noted that even an 'imaginary' response to the real that suddenly manifested itself in a traumatic encounter necessitates a creative invention: trauma formally resists the return to prior modes of fantasmatic enjoyment.

^{xxix} Unconscious choice, just like unconscious thought, can be considered somewhat of an oxymoron – a philosophical matter that I will not pursue here.

^{xxx} Adrian Johnston (2009, pp. 85-91) describes the philosophical arguments that justify this strategy in more detail.

^{xxxi} Some paragraphs in the following sections have been taken from an article published in *Theory & Psychology* (December 2014, vol. 24(6), pp. 830-851, doi: 10.1177/0959354314548616). This article was written in cooperation with Stijn Vanheule and Stef Craps, who both work at Ghent University.

^{xxxii} See lesson of January 15, 1974.

^{xxxiii} And, as we will see, this new interpretative horizon only comes into being through the disciplined and protracted activity of the faithful subject.

^{xxxiv} Badiou's typology of the subject consists of the faithful subject, the reactive subject and the obscure subject. They are characterized by a differential relation with regard to the truth of the event. The faithful subject works towards its production, the reactive subject towards its denial, and the obscure subject towards its occultation (Badiou, 2009a, p. 50-67).