Trauma and the Memory of Politics

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For John
Know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know.

- Maurice Blanchot
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1 Introduction: trauma, violence and political community

The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such.

— Slavoj Žižek

In the aftermath of a war or catastrophe comes the reckoning. The dead and the missing are listed, families grieve and comfort each other, and memorials are erected. If it is a war that has been won, commemoration endorses those in power, or so it seems at first glance. Victory parades, remembrance ceremonies and war museums tell of glory, courage and sacrifice. The nation is renewed, the state strengthened. Private grief is overlaid by national mourning and blunted — or eased — by stories of service and duty. The authorities that had the power to conscript citizens and send them to their deaths now write their obituaries.

But returning combatants tell a different tale. Survivors are subdued, even silent. Many witnessed the deaths of those around them. They cannot forget, and some are haunted by nightmares and flashbacks to scenes of unimaginable horror. In their dreams they re-live their battlefield experiences and awake again in a sweat. First World War veterans were said to be suffering from shell shock. By the end of that war, 80,000 cases of shell shock had been treated in units of the Royal Army Medical Corps and 30,000 evacuated for treatment in Britain. Some 200,000 veterans received pensions for nervous disorders after the war. This epidemic led to a reconsideration of psychoanalytic theory, then based on the notion of dreams as the fulfilment of unconscious wishes. Much contemporary work that seeks to understand what is now called trauma stems from

1 Slavoj Žižek, For They Know Not What They Do. Enjoyment as a Political Factor (London: Verso, 1991), 272-3.

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campaign that included Vietnam veterans, the term 'post-traumatic stress' was finally written into the American Psychiatric Association's manual in 1980.5 Childhood abuse and trauma, although still controversial, became something that could be discussed, first in women's groups and later more widely. Sigmund Freud's work in Vienna in the 1890s had led him to conclude that symptoms of what was then called hysteria in his women patients could be traced back to childhood abuse. He published his findings and conclusions in 1896 in a paper entitled 'The Aetiology of Hysteric', where he put forward the view that 'at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience... I believe this is an important finding'.6 But he did not pursue this line; it was unacceptable to him and to his contemporaries.7 He argued instead that women were in some sense responsible for their own abuse. He replaced his original analysis of hysteria (the seduction theory) with theories of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex. Ironically, it was only during his work with shell shock after the First World War that Freud returned to the study of what we now call psychic trauma. Of course, in the case of childhood abuse and rape as with shell shock and earlier with hysteria, the people concerned were regularly regarded as having either caused their traumatic experiences - by their own behaviour, or as a fulfilment of their unconscious wishes - or imagined something that had not actually occurred. Women were accused of having wanted to be raped, soldiers of faking their illness in a cowardly attempt to avoid fighting, and children's reports were seen as exaggerated and unbelievable.

Events that give rise to what we categorise today as symptoms of trauma generally involve force and violence. Often this is a threat to those people involved, their lives and integrity, as in rape, torture or child abuse; sometimes it also involves witnessing the horrific deaths of others, for example in wartime combat or in concentration camps. The victim of trauma feels they were helpless in their enforced encounter with death, violence and brutality. This is not always the case. For example, on the whole, Vietnam veterans were not in situations where they were trapped in the same way as First World War soldiers in the trenches or concentration camp victims. In most cases, they were perpetrators of violence

5 Judith Lewis Herman, Trauma and Recovery: from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror (London: Pandora, 1992), 32.
7 Herman, Trauma and Recovery, 19. Alice Miller discusses this issue and quotes extensively from Freud's 1896 lecture (Miller, They Shall Not Be Aroused, 109–20). I am grateful to Annick Wibben for this reference.

3 In Israel in the 1950s the aura was one of failure: survivors were regarded as 'the epitome of the Jew as helpless schmikel, a counterpart to the new Israeli Jew' (Yaron Ezrati, Rubber Bullets: Power and Conscience in Modern Israel (Berkeley: University of California, 1997), 147.
rather than victims. But it seems that to be called traumatic – to produce what are seen as symptoms of trauma – an event has to be more than just a situation of utter powerlessness. In an important sense, it has to entail something else. It has to involve a betrayal of trust as well. There is an extreme menace, but what is special is where the threat of violence comes from. What we call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger.

This can be devastating because who we are, or who we think we may be, depends very closely on the social context in which we place and find ourselves. Our existence relies not only on our personal survival as individual beings but also, in a very profound sense, on the continuance of the social order that gives our existence meaning and dignity: family, friends, political community, beliefs. If that order betrays us in some way, we may survive in the sense of continuing to live as physical beings, but the meaning of our existence is changed. Commonplace solutions to do with what we are and what life might be provided by culture, religious beliefs, patriotic sentiment or close family relationships are overwhelmed. Any illusion of safety or security is broken. Events seen as traumatic seem to reflect a particular form of intimate bond between personhood and community and, most importantly, they expose the part played by relations of power. For the child, abuse involves betrayal by the person the child should most be able to trust. For the conscript, it is the state that breaks faith and deceives. Both cases involve relations of power.

Witnessing violence done to others and surviving can seem to be as traumatic as suffering brutality oneself. Here a sense of shame is paramount. The survivor feels complicit in the betrayal perpetrated by others. In this sense the survivor of a rape or of incest is ashamed for the protagonist of violence against them as well as for themselves. Taking part in violence oneself can evoke a similar shame – as was the case with Vietnam veterans – though this of course is not at all to be equated with witnessing violence done by others. The camp survivor is filled with shame for the deeds done by the guards, and because the inmates were powerless to prevent them. As Primo Levi remembers, ‘the shame...drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch or submit to some outrage: the shame...that such a crime should exist, that it should be exposed irrevocably into the world of things that exist’. The combat veteran has not only seen his comrades killed or mutilated but has himself brutally slaughtered enemy soldiers – and in some cases betrayed his own supposed code as a warrior (or as a person) when he has terrorised and victimised civilians.

Events of the sort we call traumatic are overwhelming but they are also a revelation. They strip away the diverse commonly accepted meanings by which we lead our lives in our various communities. They reveal the contingency of the social order and in some cases how it conceals its own impossibility. They question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of. Those who survive often feel compelled to bear witness to these discoveries.

On the whole, the rest of us would rather not listen. A frequent excuse is that the horrors survivors testify to are too terrible. They are ‘unimaginable’: we need not listen because we cannot hear. Robert Antelme, describing the encounter of the American liberators with camp survivors at Dachau in Germany at the end of the Second World War, says that the word ‘unimaginable’ is ‘the most convenient word. When you walk around with this word as your shield, this word for emptiness, your step becomes better assured, more resolute, your conscience pulls itself together.’ But in particular those who would try to prevent survivors from speaking out are the powerful, those who have perhaps more of a stake than most in concealing the contingency of forms of social and political organisation. This may include, for example, governments who have sent soldiers into battle, men who benefit from a structure in which women and children are subservient and vulnerable, states who have turned on a section of their own citizens in genocides or deportations. The testimony of survivors can challenge structures of power and authority. Moreover, this challenge can in some regards transcend boundaries of culture and social group. It is what Michel Foucault referred to as ‘the solidarity of the shaken’.

On the other hand, do contemporary forms of political community have an ironic connection with the events that we have been discussing? Do political communities such as the modern state survive in part through the scripting of these events as emergencies, or even, indeed, as traumatic? Or even by the production of events that can appear as exceptional, beyond
the norm? In modern political communities in the west, our faith in the social order and our search for security are invested in systems that themselves are productive of and produced by force and violence. This point is no surprise to women of course, who have long had to separate their notions of safety from the patriarchal structures in which they live. Battered women would not recognise the picture of the family as a source of protection and stability, for example. The contemporary form of political community, the state, relies for its existence on the assumption that it can compel its citizens to fight (and die) for its sovereignty. It proffers security in return for obedience. As a political unit it is produced and defined by organised violence. States are founded on violence, whether it takes the form of war, revolution or civil conflict. And although once formed a state may appear peaceful enough, internally and externally, physical violence remains a too. that only the state is allowed to use. Attempts by others—vigilante groups, opposition movements, criminals—to use violence are seen as unacceptable. In Max Weber’s definition, "the state is that human community which (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a certain territory." The right to use violence, in other words, is the prerogative of the state. And it makes use of this prerogative. For example, the modern modern-state works by processes of enforced exclusion, and it can change the definition of who precisely will be excluded at any time. Exclusion does not always entail expulsion: there is also the excluded ‘enemy within’, a label famously used by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in Britain at the time of the miners’ strike in 1984. The modern state, then, is a contradictory institution: a promise of safety, security and meaning alongside a reality of abuse, control and coercion.

As we saw, some feminists came to the conclusion that relations between the sexes are like a war, with the casualties being rape victims, battered wives and sexually abused children. The parallel between women and war veterans was used in the 1970s and 1980s to draw attention to the plight of women and the widespread exploitation of patriarchal power by men, which had, apart from the early work by Freud and Joseph Breuer on hysteria, been neglected. If we push the similarities further, taking the insights gained from the study of sexual abuse in families and applying them to other events categorised as traumatic, what do we find? What if,


instead of likening family relations to a war, we compare the treatment of populations in wartime with the treatment of women in families? It turns out that we have a parallel exploitation of power in political communities, which we might call political abuse. Political authorities are using their power over their citizens to abuse and torture them or to compel them to take part in abhorrent acts, acts which violate their sense of self-worth and which provoke intense shame, humiliation and anger. According to US Marine veteran Michael Norman, survivors of Vietnam were angry. They were not unlike survivors of previous wars, however. Their anger was not new. It was ‘old, atavistic. We were angry as all civilised men who have ever been sent to make murder in the name of virtue were angry.’ States abuse citizens on the battlefield, in captivity, in concentration camps. The modern state cannot be assumed to be a place of safety, any more than the patriarchal family can. Political abuse in one parallel sexual abuse in the other. Both give rise to what we call symptoms of trauma.

In both cases what has happened is beyond the possibility of communication. There is no language for it. Abuse by the state, the fatherland, like abuse by the father within the family, cannot be spoken in language, since language comes from and belongs to the family and the community. Survivors of political abuse in the contemporary west have something compelling to say, but it is something that is unsayable in the vocabulary of the powerful, and it is dangerous to the political institutions in place. The use of the term ‘unsayable’ in relation to trauma is not only an excuse to avoid the need to listen to what is being said. It also reflects the view of survivors that what they have been through cannot be communicated. Communication takes place in language and language itself is social and political, not individual. Relations of power are produced through and reflected in language. Words get their meaning from their place in chains of meaning, through their associations with other words based on sound, metaphor and layers of usage. Meaning can shift and words can be rearticulated with new associations and contexts. For language to work at a particular time and in a particular context, it is necessary for there to be a linguistic community that shares or’s subject to something that will temporarily fix meanings. There has to be some provisional agreement, accepted ideology or central authority structure that will halt the fluidity of terms and make language meaningful. In psychoanalytic theory it is

15 Quoted by Herman, Trauma and Recovery, 27.
not just language that works like this. The unconscious mind is structured like a language; in other words, who we think we are is shifting and fluid, until fixed by the social context or the dominant group. But this group does not exist independently of the people of whom it is made up. We produce this group at the same time as becoming members of it. By assuming a community exists we produce one. By situating ourselves as citizens of a state or political authority or as members of a family, we reproduce that social institution at the same time as assuming our own identity as part of it. As we have seen, in what we call a traumatic event this group betrays us. We can no longer be who we were, and the social context is not what we assumed it to be. It is not all-powerful, it does not have all the answers: in fact, its answers are flawed. As Jean Amery puts it: ‘Every morning when I get up I can read the Auschwitz number on my forearm. . . . Every day anew I lose my trust in the world.’ The cause of his oppression and restlessness is society: ‘it and only it robbed me of my trust in the world’. As a survivor of catastrophe, he lives in constant fear of its return: ‘nothing can again pull me into the slumber of security from which I awoke in 1935’. It has become plain to a survivor that the appearance of fixity and security produced by the social order is just that: an appearance. Of course, the language we speak is part of the social order, and when the order fails apart around our ears, so does the language. What we can say no longer makes sense; what we want to say, we can’t. There are no words for it. This is the dilemma survivors face. The only words they have are the words of the very political community that is the source of their suffering. This is the language of the powerful, the words of the status quo, the words that delimit and define acceptable ways of being human within that community.

What survivors seek is perhaps impossible. They seek a way of resistance. For some, Sarah Kofman for example, this means a way of ‘writing without power’. Such a writing or speech was forbidden in the concentration camps, ‘yet also withheld, preserved, protected against all striving, all corruption, against all violent abuse that might have exposed it to the suspicion of playing along with boundless violence, and therefore have discredited it forever’. Such a way of speaking implies a form of community that does not entail a circuit of power between oppressors and victims, a community that does not produce forms of subjection where human beings are indistinguishable from what Giorgio Agamben calls

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It is a form of community that is hardly found in the modern western state.

What the state attempts in contrast is a normalisation or medicalisation of survivors; we shall see an example of this in Chapter 2. The aim is recovery, or the reinsertion of survivors into structures of power. Survivors are helped to verbalise and narrate what has happened to them; they receive counselling to help them accommodate once more to the social order and re-form relationships of trust. In the case of the military these days, those suffering from symptoms of traumatic stress are treated swiftly with the aim of being returned to active service within a matter of hours or days. If this fails, then the status of victim of post-traumatic stress disorder serves to render the survivor more or less harmless to existing power structures. In contemporary culture victimhood offers sympathy and pity in return for the surrender of any political voice.

The concept of trauma oscillates between victimhood and protest and can be linked with or articulated to either. Its invocation registers a movement in the boundaries of acceptability of the use and abuse of violence in relations of power and forms of authority or political community. When there is a mismatch between expectation and event we have what is experienced as a betrayal – or in other words, as traumatic. This is not a sufficient condition for us to call something ‘trauma’ of course, though we soon get into difficulties if we try to probe further into the matter of scale. We end up asking impossible questions such as ‘Can one measure trauma? Is there a hierarchy of trauma?’ Nevertheless, when our expectations of what community is, and what we are, are shown to be misplaced, then our view of ourselves has to be altered – or we have to fight for political change, in other words a reformulation of community.

The traumatic dimension of the political

This book explores the connections between violence, the effects of trauma that it produces, and forms of political community. It aims to contribute to understandings of the particular way in which power, the social order and the person are constituted in the contemporary west, through a study of practices of trauma, memory and witness. Its focus is

17 Jean Amery, At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Reality, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (London: Granta, 1999), 94.
18 Amery, At the Mind’s Limits, 100.
19 Ibid., 95
20 Kofman, Smothered Words, 41.
22 During the Second World War the American Army Medical Corps treated psychiatric casualties with food, rest and reassurance before they were returned to their units, usually in a couple of days. Young, Harmony of Illusions, 92.
firmly on western conceptions of personhood and political community in the modern period. It does not examine, except in passing, how practices of trauma or memory may have been exported beyond what might be considered the geographical bounds of a western paradigm, nor does it discuss, except to point up the specificity of a western approach, how people seemingly located outside that paradigm differ in their practices. Of course, these distinctions (west and the rest) are arbitrary and contestable, and they reflect a western tendency to dichotomise at the same time as promoting western power relations. There are many people located within the contemporary west in geographical or ideological terms who would not adopt what I am regarding as ‘western’ conceptions of self and society.

By taking as its route an examination of extreme situations and events seen as traumatic, the book reflects Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of contemporary sovereign power as based on a state of emergency or exception.24 His work is discussed in Chapter 5. My examination of practices of memorialisation and testimony arises out of and is framed against a more general interest in the formation of sovereign power and western subjectivity or personhood. The form of power that underlies the modern state and the violence it entails often goes unanalysed in political science or international relations studies. Both political science, in its focus on the internal (supposedly peaceable) workings of the state, and international politics, with its concern for external conflict and war, seem to ignore the production of the self and the state, which takes place at the traumatic intersection between peace and war, inside and outside.25 The way we see the democratic state rests on not questioning that particular form of political community or the forms of individuality or personhood on which it is based.

The account of statehood in the liberal view is a story of individual citizens banding together to form democratic institutions which (more or less) represent the views of those citizens and which (more or less) have their interests at heart. The state possesses power (and can use violence), in this narrative, because the people legitimise its authority. However, according to a Foucauldian view, power is not centralised but dispersed; it is not something that can be possessed, but a relationship.26 We should speak of relations of power, not of power plain and simple. Because it is

a relation, power always exists alongside resistance. How does this play out in the trauma situation? In this case it means that what happens is not straightforward; there is not a perpetrator and a victim with no ambiguity. That in many ways is what is most difficult. Primo Levi talks of the concentration camp as a ‘grey zone’ where all feel implicated in some way in what happens.21 As far as memory is concerned, how we remember a war, for example, and the way in which we acknowledge and describe what we call trauma can be very much influenced by dominant views, that is, by the state. However, it is not determined by them: their influence, and the state structure itself, can be contested and challenged. Forms of statehood in contemporary society, as forms of political community, are themselves produced and reproduced through social practices, including practices of trauma and memory.

Like the liberal account of the state, the form of personhood that fits alongside it often goes unchallenged too. The sovereign state in the modern world relies on a notion of a separate, autonomous, sovereign individual. But this is a historically specific concept of personhood, one that arose alongside state structures and particular family organisation in the early modern era.28 Other accounts question this liberal view, and argue that the person or ‘subject’ does not exist independently of or prior to the social order, but is formed through its interaction with that order. A further position regards both social order and person as inherently incomplete and insecure. According to this account, which derives from psychoanalytic work, in the west both state and subject pretend to a security, a wholeness and a closure that is not possible. From this point of view, an event can be described as traumatic if it reveals this pretence. It is experienced as a betrayal.

In the psychoanalytic account the subject is formed around a lack, and in the face of trauma. We become who we are by finding our place within the social order and family structures into which we are born. That social order is produced in symbolic terms, through language. Language does not just name things that are already there in the world. Language divides up the world in particular ways to produce for every social grouping what it calls ‘reality’. Each language – each symbolic or social order – has its own way of doing this. Crucially, none of these are complete; none of them can find a place for everything. This is a logical limitation, not a question of a symbolic or social order being insufficiently developed. Completeness or closure is impossible. There is always, inevitably, something that is missed out, something that cannot be symbolised, and this is one part of

24 Agamben, Homo Sacer.
28 Walker, Inside/Outside.
what psychoanalytic theory calls 'the real'. In its birth into the symbolic or social order, into language, the subject is formed around, and through a veiling of, that which cannot be symbolised <the traumatic real>. The real is traumatic, and has to be hidden or forgotten, because it is a threat to the imaginary completeness of the subject. The ‘subject’ only exists in as far as the person finds their place within the social or symbolic order. But no place that the person occupies – as a mother, friend, consumer, activist – can fully express what that person is. There is always something more. Again, this is not a question of people not fitting into the roles available to them and a call for more person-friendly societies. Nor does it concern multiple or fragmented identities in a postmodern world. It is a matter of a structural impossibility. If someone is, say, a political activist, there is always the immediate question of whether they are sufficiently involved to count as an activist: don’t activists have to be more committed, to take part in more than just demonstrations, shouldn’t they stand for office? On the other hand, are they perhaps more than an activist – does that description do justice to what they are, to their role in the party? There is always an excess, a surplus, in one direction or the other. However, we choose on the whole to ignore this – to forget this impossibility, and to act as if completeness and closure were possible. We hide the traumatic real, and stick with the fantasy of what we call social reality.

As I have argued elsewhere, the political is that which enjoins us not to forget the traumatic real but rather to acknowledge the constituted and provisional nature of what we call social reality. Politics refers to the sphere of activity and institutions that is called ‘politics’ as opposed to ‘economics’ or ‘society’. Politics is part of what we call social reality. It exists within the agendas and frameworks that are already accepted within the social order. The political, in its ‘properly traumatic dimension’, on the other hand, concerns the real. It refers to events in which politics of the first sort and its institutions are brought into being. This can be the day-to-day production and reproduction of the social and symbolic order. This continual process has to take place; the social order is not natural, it doesn’t exist unless it is produced continually. The political also takes place at moments when major upheavals occur that replace a preceding social and legal system and set up a new order in its place. At such points, the symbolism and ideology that concealed the fragile and contingent nature of authority collapse altogether and there is a brief interregnum before the new order imposes a different form of concealment.

The way that time figures in the psychoanalytic account is interesting. A certain non-linearity is evident: time no longer moves unproblematically from past through present to future. In a sense, subjects only retrospectively become what they already are – they only ever will have been. And the social order too shares this retroactive constitution. The subject and the social order in which the subject finds a place are both in a continual process of becoming. Neither exists as a fixed entity in the present moment, as the common-sense view in western culture might lead us to expect. Both are always in the process of formation. This is because the two are so intimately related. The person is formed, not through a process of interaction with the social order (since that would mean thinking of the social 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. We have to imagine that: others will respond to us before we speak, but it is only our speaking, of course, that enables them to respond. But supposing that the social exists does not only produce the social order, it also, simultaneously, brings the individual into existence too. When our speaking elicits a response, we recognise ourselves as subjects in that response. This recognition is belated when viewed through the lens of a linear temporality: it is not at the moment we decide to speak that we see who we are, but only a moment later, when we get a response. The response tells us not who we are now, since we are no longer that – we have already changed. It tells us who we were, at the moment when we spoke. This is the sense in which we never are, we only ever will have been. Like the distant stars, whose past we know from the light that has taken millions of years to reach us but whose present we can only guess at, we can only know what we were, not what we are. And even that is also a guess, of course. In a similar way, when we listen to a sentence being spoken, we can predict what is being said, but we cannot be sure we were right until the sentence is completed and over. Some forms of speech – rhetoric and jokes for example – play on that unpredictability.

The uncertainty and unpredictability that this involves can be unsettling. In the rational west, we tend to seek certainty and security above all. We don’t like not knowing. So we pretend that we do. Or that if we don’t we could, given sufficient scientific research effort and enough money. We forget the uncertainties involved and adopt a view that what we call social reality – which Slavoj Žižek calls social fantasy – is basically knowable.

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29 Jenny Edkins, Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1999); Jenny Edkins and Véronique Pin-Pat, 'The subject of the political', in Sovereignty and Subjectivity, ed. Jenny Edkins, Navini Perrram and Véronique Pin-Pat (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 1–19.
30 Slavoj Žižek, The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology (London: Verso, 1999), 190.
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We adopt an ontology—a view of being and the nature of things—that depends on a progressive linear notion of time. Things can 'be' in our modern western sense only in the context of this temporality. They 'are' because they have a history in time, but they are at the same time separate from that history.

But central to this solution to doubt (forgetting) as we have seen. The fantasy is only convincing if, once it has been put in place, we can forget that it is a fantasy. What we are forgetting—some would say deliberately—is the real, that which cannot be symbolised, and that which is produced as an excess or surplus by any attempt at symbolisation. We do not remember the trauma that lies at the root of subjectivity, the lack or gap that remains, even within what we call social reality. This position leads to a depoliticisation. We forget that a complete, non-antagonistic society is impossible. We strive for completion and closure, often at any price. There are a number of ways in which this is done, according to Žižek.32 The first is communitarian attempts to produce a close homogeneous society—arche-politics. Political struggle disappears because everyone agrees on everything. The second, most common in the liberal west, Žižek calls para-politics. Here the political is replaced by politics. Standardised competition takes place between accepted political parties according to pre-set rules, the prize being a turn at executive control of the state bureaucracy. Politics becomes policing or managerial control. In the third—meta-politics—political conflict is seen as a shadow theatre, with the important events taking place in another scene, that of economic processes. Politics should be cancelled when economic processes have worked themselves out (as scientific materialism predicts) and matters can be decided by rational debate and the collective will. Finally, we have ultra-politics, where political struggle becomes warfare, and the military are called in. There is no common ground for debate and politics is militarised.

If we are to resist such attempts to 'gentrify' or depoliticise the political we have to recall the constituted, provisional and historically contingent nature of every social order, of every ontology. This position, which Žižek calls 'traversing the fantasy', 'tarrying with the negative' or fidelity to the ontological crack in the universe, is uncomfortable.33 It involves an acceptance of the lack of trauma at the centre of the subject and the non-existence of any complete, closed social order.

32 Žižek, The Ticklish Subject, 190.
33 For the ontological crack, see Slavoj Žižek, The Plague of Fantasies (London: Verso, 1997), 214; for tarrying with the negative, Slavoj Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1983), 237; and for traversing the fantasy, see, for example, Slavoj Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London: Verso, 1989), 126.

Introduction: trauma, violence and the political

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like opposite poles of a dichotomy. Like remembering and forgetting, each implies the other: they are inextricably entwined. Trauma time is inherent in and destabilises any production of linearity. Trauma has to be excluded for linearity to be convincing, but it cannot be successfully put to one side: it always intrudes, it cannot be completely forgotten. And similarly, trauma time cannot be described in the language we have without recourse to notions of linearity, as we saw when discussing the retroactive production of the subject. Memorialisation that does not return to a linear narrative but rather retains the trace of another notion of temporality does occur. It is found when the political struggle between linear and trauma time is resolved not by a forgetting of trauma and a return to linearity, nor by attempting the impossible opposite—speaking from within trauma—but by a recognition and surrounding of the trauma at the heart of any social or symbolic order.

Practices of trauma

After traumatic events, there is a struggle over memory. Some forms of remembering can be seen as ways of forgetting: ways of recovering from trauma by putting its lessons to one side, refusing to acknowledge that anything has changed, restoring the pretence. In the next chapter I look at remembrance and veterans' accounts in Britain and Australia after the First World War, and at one of the responses to Vietnam veterans in the United States. In Britain, remembrance practices continue some eighty years after the 1914–18 war. They involve families as well as veterans themselves. Accounts of the war drawing on veterans' experiences have been written. An Australian study shows that memories that veterans relate depend on and interact with the public context of their remembering, and this leads to a discussion of the nature of memory. Memory is not straightforward, especially in the case of traumatic memory. The second part of Chapter 2 considers trauma and how post-traumatic stress is produced as a condition that can be diagnosed—and cured. The effect of this in the case of Vietnam veterans is to depoliticise their memories; a form of disciplinary control is instituted. This is an example of how hegemonic power can control and subjugate memory.

In the most part, memorialisation of war is a practice that reproduces stories of national glory and heroism. It produces linear time, the time of the state. But does it always do that? Is this contested? Don’t these accounts have a far too unquestionably consensual view of the political community? In Chapter 3, I examine in detail two examples of memorials where at some time at least this narration of the national story did not happen: the Cenotaph in Whitehall in London, a memorial to the fallen of the British Empire in the First World War, and the US Vietnam Veterans Memorial in the Mall in Washington, the Vietnam Wall. In both cases it turns out that the role and form of the memorial were contested, and that the struggle was precisely over the processes of bearing witness to the horror of war, or forgetting it and inscribing a narrative of sacrifice and heroism. In each instance, the function of the memorial has changed through time but both have involved a certain openness to unanswered and unanswerable questions. Both can be described in part at least as encircling the event, marking its place without narrating it as part of a linear story or national myth. Both can also be seen to be later co-opted into the dominant account: they have both come to stand for the status quo. The Vietnam Wall has spawned look-alikes, in particular, ironically enough, a monument to law enforcement officers, also in Washington. The Cenotaph was daubed with graffiti during anti-capitalist protests, when it was seen as a monument to imperial wars.

Memorials to war, even to defeat, can inscribe the national myth or the imagined community. What happens when what is to be commemorated is a genocide rather than a war? How is an event like this to be embodied in stone? In Chapter 4, I examine memorials to the Irish famine, American slavery and the Nazi genocide, and the controversies and debates over how those events could be commemorated or remembered. Here memorials become abstracts some are designed to disappear, or are inverted and buried; others are never built, like the Berlin memorial where nothing has yet been constructed. Fine art and particularly installation work attempts to find other languages of remembrance. The story does get told, for example, in museums, films and at concentration camp sites. A number of powerful groups attempt to appropriate it for their own political or commercial purposes, and the voice of the survivor can be co-opted into one narrative or another. I examine three museums, in Washington, London and New York, all of which opened in the 1990s. Despite attempts by scholars to question what representations were appropriate, it came to be accepted that there was one narrative history of the Holocaust and that it had to be told. I examine debates over the so-called Holocaust industry, and the ownership of 'the Holocaust', and consider whether confronting Holocaust deniers such as David Irving serves to confine our engagement to questions of historical fact, enabling us to avoid dealing with the more difficult issues raised by survivors. At the end of the chapter, I examine a recent film account of the Dachau camp museum and its self-appointed guide, Martin Zaidenstadt. This film illustrates my argument that to require irrefutable proof of testimony is to fail to hear what is being said.

If memorials on the whole (not always, of course) support the imaginary community and reproduce the status quo, testimony is generally
expected to function as a criticism of state power and its abuse. In Chapter 5, I examine how the structure of testimony and the question of survival have been analysed. The imperative to bear witness encounters two problems. First, the survivor is not in a position to bear witness: by definition, he or she has not suffered the extremities that others, those who did not survive (those who Primo Levi calls ‘the drowned’) suffered. Second, there is no language in which to express what the survivor wishes to say. The testimony is a witnessing of the void or the impossibility of closure and listening to testimony has to take the form of listening to something that is not there. However, those who did not survive are the true witnesses, and this paradox forces a rethinking of what is meant by human being. It also leads to the conclusion that by virtue of its very structure testimony is a challenge to sovereign power. The testimony of survivors of the concentration camps is paradigmatic here, and is found in various forms: video testimonies, literature and second-generation accounts. How much do these forms of testimony—which include truth and reconciliation commissions and oral testimony in the aftermath of Third World development projects—how much do they allow the survivor a voice? Do they not rather result either in traumatic events being rendered a spectacle, a monstrousity, or alternatively, in trauma being legalised and medicalised?

Contemporary culture has been described as a testimonial culture, as well as a culture of victimhood, with the proliferation of programmes such as the Jerry Springer Show. There is a rush to collect testimony of war crimes almost while a conflict is taking place. It sometimes seems that we watch ourselves standing by while atrocities are committed—as in Kosovo, for example—safe in the knowledge that there is a war crimes tribunal in place that will avenge the deeds. I examine Giorgio Agamben’s argument that sovereign power (the modern state form) operates by the production of ‘bare life’, as exemplified in the concentration camps but found in another form in other instances of modern life. In the second part of Chapter 5, I show how in the Kosovo intervention in the 1990s the production of trauma was part of the production of sovereign power, in this case not state power, but the sovereign power of a supra-national body, Nato.

In Chapter 6, I return in conclusion to sites of memory and landscapes of political power, this time not individual war memorials and cemeteries but entire cityscapes such as the Mall in Washington and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Here, in a return of the repressed, we find political protest brought directly to the sites of state or imperial memory and symbolism. The protests reclaim memories of trauma and rewrite them as a form of resistance. The story is never finished: the scripting of memory by those in power can always be challenged, and such challenges are very often found at moments and in places where the very foundations of the imagined community are laid out. They often take the form of self-consciously non-violent forms of protest. Sometimes the result is violent repression, as in Beijing in 1989. Occasionally, instead, there is a moment of possibility; an opening to trauma time and a recognition of the contingency of political community.

The events at the World Trade Centre in New York and at the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001 were the obscene reverse of non-violent protest. What happened was the return of trauma itself to the symbolic landscapes of impregnable imperial power when extreme, gratuitous violence was used against civilians in the centre of the cityscapes of New York and Washington. Whereas in Tiananmen Square, civilians were faced with soldiers face-to-face, attempting to persuade them not to behave as instruments of state power but as individuals, in New York hijackers took ordinary citizens of all nationalities and turned them into instruments for, and casualties of, indiscriminate political violence. In this sense, the hijackers behaved very much as states do when they engage in the bombing of civilian areas or in sending conscripts into battle. And in so doing, they made it easier for the state to claim that any violence might choose to use was legitimate. The events had two contradictory effects. First, they brought trauma into the heart of the safe areas of lower Manhattan, disrupting the linear narrative of security and state control. But, second, they opened the way for the state to move quickly with its offer of revenge and retaliation as a suitable and legitimate answer to that traumatic tear in the fabric of normality. Survivors were in an impossible position. The opening to trauma time and the recognition of the contingency of political community were followed immediately, even simultaneously, by the reaffirmation of solidarity and nationhood. It was difficult to distinguish calls for a recognition of the trauma from calls for revenge.