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Exploring the Cultural Trauma Theory

The Murder of Olof Palme as an Emergent Cultural Trauma

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Bachelor's degree: SOCK01, 15 hp

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ABSTRACT

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This is a study of the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, not as it actually occurred, but rather how it was mediated through representations in the media. The guiding research question is formulated as follows: *Can the media representations of the murder of Olof Palme be understood as a case of an emergent trauma process?* These representations covers only the first week after the murder. The aim of the study is to explore the theory of cultural trauma in order to find analytical aspects, or elements, that can be put to use in the empirical case, that is the murder of Olof Palme. As such, this study makes use of different theoretical elements from the work of sociologists Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey C. Alexander on the theory of cultural trauma. The focus point is cultural trauma as a socially constructed phenomenon, which is mediated through representation. Which, In this case, regards the representation through the mass media. Due to a limited empirical case, the goal is to find out whether the murder of Olof Palme can be seen as an emergent cultural trauma, rather than a full-blown version.

My conclusion is as follows: Informed by the cultural trauma theory I think there are good reasons and valid empirical proofs to interpret the first week's media representations of the murder of Olof Palme as an emergent trauma process.

Keywords: cultural trauma, olof palme, cultural sociology, collective memory, emergent, trauma

Contents

Acknowledgements	
Abstract	
Prologue	1
1. Introduction	2
1.1 Focal Point, Guiding Question and Aim of the Study	2
1.2 Disposition	3
2. The Theory of Cultural Trauma	4
2.1 Eyerman's Main Contributions to the Cultural Trauma Theory	4
2.1.1 Cultural Trauma and the Formation of African American Identity	4
2.1.2 The Assassination of Theo van Gogh	6
2.2 Alexander's Theory of Cultural Trauma	8
2.2.1 A Preliminary Definition of Cultural Trauma	8
2.2.2 Significant Specifications of the Theory of Cultural Trauma	9
2.2.3 Putting the Cultural Trauma Theory to Use	15
3. Methodology	16
3.1 Theoretically Informed Methodology and Middle Range Theory	16
3.2 Influences and Reflections	17
3.3 Delimitations, Choice of Method, and Sample Selection	18
4. Olof Palme as an Emergent Cultural Trauma	22
4.1 Introduction	22
4.2 Putting the Cultural Trauma Theory to Work – Dagens Nyheter	22
4.2.1 The Nature of the Pain	22
4.2.2 The Nature of the Victim	24
4.2.3 Relation of the Trauma Victim to the Wider Audience	26
4.2.4 Attribution of Responsibility	27

4.2.5 Spiral of Significance, Master Narrative, and Multidimensional Reinforcements	27
4.3 Putting the Cultural Trauma Theory to Work – Arbetet	28
4.4 A Comparison Between Dagens Nyheter and Arbeter	29
5. Summary and Conclusions	30
References	33

Prologue

It is Friday, February 28 1986, at approximately half past six and the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme is returning home after a seemingly normal day at Rosenbad. Palme had recently gone through a period marked by strain: “an increased socioeconomic inequality, submarines intrusions had created opposition within domestic politics and irregularities in Palme’s private tax payments had been questioned”¹. As he proceeds home, he does so alone, without his bodyguards. After having dinner at home, Olof Palme and his wife Lisbet heads into town in order to meet with their son Mårten and his fiancé. The two couples attend the quarter past nine showing of “The Mozart Brothers” at the Grand Cinema. Roughly two hours later, at quarter past eleven, the two couples bid farewell and go their separate ways. Olof and Lisbet Palme walks, arm in arm, southward on Sveavägen. At Adolf Fredriks Kyrkogata they cross the street and continue on Sveavägen on the opposite side of the street. As the couple passes Tunnelgatan a man walks up behind them, raises a gun, and shoots Olof Palme in the back with a single shot at close range. The shot goes straight through Olof Palme’s coat and hits him in the shoulder blades. The bullet continues through his body and rips through the aorta and the trachea. Olof Palme falls to the ground and dies instantly. The gunman once again fires off a shot and the bullet hits Lisbet Palme. The bullet brushes against her back without leaving a serious wound. The perpetrator hesitates for a moment before leaving the scene of the crime. He disappears via Tunnelgatan and to this day he has not been identified².

¹ Östberg, 2008, p. 9. My translation.

² SOU 1999:88, Brottsutredningen efter mordet på statsminister Olof Palme.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Focal Point, Guiding Question and Aim of the Study

Let me start by quoting cultural sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander:

Yet, while every argument about trauma claims ontological reality, as cultural sociologists we are not primarily concerned with the accuracy of social actors' claims, much less with evaluating their moral justification. We are concerned only with how and under what conditions the claims are made, and with what results. It is neither ontology nor morality, but epistemology, with which we are concerned³.

This is not a study of the murder of Olof Palme as it actually occurred. This means that I will not study the murder from a perspective that argues for an ontological reality or discuss any form of moral validity. What is of interest is not what actually happened, but rather, how the event was represented. That is, following the cultural sociologist Alexander, my interest is purely epistemological. I intend to apply specific elements of the cultural trauma theory, as it is formulated and put to use by Alexander and sociologist Ron Eyerman, to a specific empirical case, which is the murder of Olof Palme. The focal point of my study is mediated representations of the murder of Olof Palme in the mass media. Eyerman notices the importance of the media, as he states: "It is through mass media that such attribution is made with maximum effect"⁴. Consequently I have formulated my guiding research question as follows: *Can the media representations of the murder of Olof Palme be understood as a case of an emergent trauma process?* The media representations that are of interest in this study are delimited to two Swedish newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Arbetet*, and covers only the first week after the murder. It is due to such a severe empirical delimitation that my question emphasizes an interest in an "emergent" rather than a "full-blown" cultural trauma.

The aim of my study is to explore the theory of cultural trauma in order to find analytical aspects, or elements, that can be put to use in my empirical case, that is the murder of Olof Palme. It is thus important to point out that this seminal study is to be considered as explorative in two interrelated ways. It is not only my intentions to make an initial exploration

³ Alexander, 2004, p. 9.

⁴ Eyerman, 2008, p. 165.

of the theory of cultural trauma but also to make an explorative study, even if limited, in the empirical field of the murder of Olof Palme. Hence, I look upon the murder as an empirical test case for the cultural trauma theory. It might also be added that this study, my very first exploration into the research area of cultural trauma, is to be considered a stepping-stone for future studies in the field.

1.2 Disposition

In view of the introduction above – focal point, guiding question and aim – the remaining part of the study is disposed as follows. The second chapter introduces the theory of cultural trauma. Its first part presents Eyerman's main contributions to the theory, that is, two empirical studies that put the cultural trauma theory to use, namely: *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) and *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh: From Social Drama to Cultural Trauma* (2008). The second part brings to attention Alexander's outline of a cultural trauma theory presented in the introductory chapter "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma" in the anthology *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004). The second chapter ends with a presentation of those theoretical elements that will be put to use in my explorative study of Olof Palme as an emergent cultural trauma. The third chapter regards the methodological aspects of my study. Issues of interest here are my theoretically informed method, choice of method, methodological reflections and influences concerning my study, and sampling methods. In the fourth chapter I will present my empirical results as well as make an analysis. The focal point here is to utilize specific elements of the cultural trauma theory on my empirical data. In the fifth and final chapter I will put forth my conclusions. I end with some critical remarks concerning my theoretical and empirical explorations and its outcomes.

Chapter 2

The Theory of Cultural Trauma

In this chapter I introduce the theory of cultural trauma. I will focus on the two of the main figures behind the theory, namely Eyerman and Alexander. This will be done through a two-part presentation. The first part presents Eyerman's main contributions to the development of the cultural trauma theory, namely his study of slavery and the formation of African American identity respectively the study of the assassination of Theo van Gogh. The second part presents Alexander's theory of cultural trauma as it is laid out in the already noticed chapter "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma". While Eyerman tries to develop the trauma theory by putting its basic elements to work in concrete empirical cases, Alexander tries to formulate a more formalized middle range theory⁵ of cultural trauma. However, my presentation of the trauma theory will not cover the full range of neither Eyerman's nor Alexander's contributions. My reading of their work might best be perceived as, what I would like to call, an *explorative analytical reading*. Such a reading is done in search of theoretical tools, or elements, that could inform my study. Hence, I will end this chapter by bringing together those elements that will theoretically inform my explorative study of Olof Palme as an eventually emergent trauma process.

2.1 Eyerman's Main Contributions to the Cultural Trauma Theory

2.1.1 Cultural Trauma and the Formation of African American Identity

In Eyerman's first book the formation of African American identity is understood through the notion of cultural trauma. "The 'trauma' in question", Eyerman states, "is slavery, not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory"⁶. Hence, in his understanding of the African American trauma Eyerman draws upon the concept of collective memory, a term coined by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945)⁷. The concept focuses on memory as, at the same time, socially constructed *and* spatially and temporally determined. "For Halbwachs", as the American sociologist Lewis Coser formulates it, "the past is a social

⁵ Regarding the meaning of "middle range theory", termed by the American sociologist Robert K. Merton, see chapter 3 on methodology, p. 15.

⁶ Eyerman, 2001, p. 1.

⁷ The concept of 'collective memory' is laid out in Halbwachs collection of essays titled *On Collective Memory*, 1992, p. 41-167.

construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present”⁸. It means, again following Coser, that “beliefs, interests, and aspirations of the present shape the various views of the past (...)”⁹. In others words, a collective memory being socially constructed is a reconstruction of the past by which the needs of the present are fulfilled.

What, then, about the meaning of the memory being collective? Although it is individuals who remember, their memory, according to Halbwachs analysis, cannot be understood without paying attention to the context in which it is situated. The individual is a part of collective life. Thus it is through shared meanings in life that human beings remember. Through the creation of a common past a sense of belonging and unity is created within the group. It means that the identity of a group is deeply influenced by a shared collective memory¹⁰. Accordingly, the African American trauma, understood as a socially constructed collective memory, is not a case of a direct, lived experience of slavery. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century, at some stage in the aftermath of the Civil War, that black intellectuals began the formation of a distinctive African American identity. It means that the trauma of slavery is mediated through representations and becomes a part of collective memory. Hence, in accordance with Halbwachs’ understanding of collective memory and Eyerman’s analysis of the formation of an African American identity as mediated through representations, the past is a stepping-stone by which needs in the present can be fulfilled. In the case of the African Americans, the needs that require fulfillment are, of course, those caused by failed emancipation. There was a need for a sense of belonging, which was achieved by invoking a narrative of a common past¹¹. This is how Eyerman himself puts it in relation to his case on slavery and formation of African American identity as a constructed cultural trauma: “If slavery was traumatic for this generation of intellectuals, it was so in retrospect, mediated through recollection and reflection, and, for some, tinged with some strategic, practical, and political interest”¹². Unity in cultural trauma is thereby understood as a shared collective identity and collective memory that both were mediated through present representations of a regained past¹³. Hence, identity, memory and mediated representations

⁸ Quoted from Coser’s “Introduction” to Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory*, 1992, p. 25.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Halbwachs, 1992.

¹¹ Eyerman, 2001.

¹² Ibid., p. 2.

¹³ Ibid.

become important theoretical elements in understanding the case of Olof Palme as a possible emergent cultural trauma process.

2.1.2 The Assassination of Theo van Gogh

On November 2, 2004, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was killed while cycling to work in the morning rush hour on a busy street in the heart of Amsterdam. The murderer, who also arrived on bicycle, first shot his victim, then slit his throat, and finally, with a separate knife, pinned a five-page note to his body. Written in Dutch verse, the note contained an indictment to Western society and was addressed not to van Gogh but to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali refugee and member of the Dutch parliament, and other well-known politicians. In addition to being an outspoken proponent of Muslim women's rights, Hirsi Ali had written the screenplay for a short film, *Submission Part One*, directed by van Gogh¹⁴.

This quoted paragraph is, in short, the backdrop of Eyerman's book on the assassination of Theo van Gogh and the understanding of it as an event and a social drama that transforms into a cultural trauma. Van Gogh was famous for his cynical and skeptical stand toward Islam and the Dutch government's immigration politics. The assassination brought to surface deep tensions within the Dutch society. These tensions were connected to questions of "Dutchness" and the meaning of multiculturalism in the Netherlands. It had deep repercussions concerning Dutch collective identity¹⁵. However, in this context I will go no further with Eyerman's concrete analysis of the van Gogh case and its specific situatedness in the Netherlands. I will only, in accordance with my suggested "explorative analytic reading", focus on such significant theoretical elements that could inform my study of Olof Palme as an eventually case of an emergent cultural trauma process.

In his study Eyerman applies, in his own words, "three types of analysis, geared to three levels of approach"¹⁶. In my reading of Eyerman's approach I identify a three-step analysis evolving from the concrete happening of the murder, via an event making of the murder as a social drama produced mainly by media representations, to a cultural trauma that reverberates in the wider Dutch society and culture. The first step is described as a "performative approach"¹⁷. It focuses on "the prediscursive performance of action"¹⁸, that is, it seeks answers to questions such as "who was killed and why"¹⁹, "how it was carried out"²⁰, and in

¹⁴ Eyerman, 2008, p. 1.

¹⁵ Ibid..

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

which “setting” it all happened²¹. This first step also tries to find out the meaning of “who”, “why”, “how” and “which” too “actors and audiences”²². The second step concerns an analysis of “how”, in Eyerman’s own words, “these actions were transformed into an event as they were represented and reconstructed through mass media reports and other accounts”²³. The principal interest is still concerning issues like “who was killed and why”²⁴, “but with a focus on media representation and framing”²⁵. This is the social process in which the prediscursive performance is “transformed into a public event”²⁶. Thus the task of the second analysis is, as in the case of the formation of the African American identity, to make explicit the mediation, or, rather, the medialization, of those representations that creates the event and its meanings. In other words, the second step is focusing on how the event is framed by media representation and, hence, how it thereby increasingly turns into a social drama. The third step concerns how the event as a social drama is being transformed into a cultural trauma. Again, as in the case of the formation of the African American identity, the construction of the cultural trauma works through the phenomenon of representations and collective memory. Thus in the third type of analysis Eyerman uses a “macrohistorical approach”²⁷ in which the understanding of the assassination of van Gogh, and the meanings attributed to this event, “turned to the past”²⁸ and to the construction of a “collective memory”²⁹ in the present. In the case of van Gogh the issues of concern were, quoting Eyerman, “the meaning of ‘Dutchness’, of multiculturalism and the very nature of collective identity”³⁰. It is also of importance to mention that, as Eyerman puts it, “already before the murder of Theo van Gogh, debate on the ‘immigrant question’ in the Netherlands had polarized into a clash between Western and Islamic civilizations”³¹. In other words, the understanding of the assassination of van Gogh as a cultural trauma needs to relate to contextual meanings with effects already “there”. By practicing these three steps of analysis – from prediscursive event, via the meaning making of

²⁰ Eyerman, 2008, p. 4.

²¹ Ibid., p. 161.

²² Ibid., p. 4.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 162.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 137.

a social drama, turning into a macro-historical cultural trauma of the present – Eyerman contributes to what he calls, and I fully agree, a “multidimensional analytic approach”³².

It will also be of my concern to try to read the case of Olof Palme through these three levels of approach. However, as already mentioned in my introduction, my study, due to its design, will not be able to draw any conclusions concerning the existence of a full-blown cultural trauma in relation to the murder of Olof Palme. I will only be able to find out whether it is possible or not to state an existence of an emergent cultural trauma process in the media during the first week after the murder in March in 1986. Thus I will try to follow Eyerman’s strategy to describe and analyze the event as a social process eventually turning into an emergent cultural trauma – especially so in terms of the making of a collective memory. In these descriptions and analysis I will delimit my focal point to how the murder of Olof Palme was represented in the media. I will of course have more to say about the empirical design of my study in the next chapter on methodology.

I will end this section by adding yet another conceptual idea formulated and used by Eyerman in his book on the assassination of van Gogh. The actual concept is *accumulated trauma*³³. It refers to, quoting Eyerman, “an accumulating ‘traumatizing potential’ in relation to a series of events, such that a number of incidents experienced as a series and connected through a narrative adding to their cumulative effect might result in a cultural trauma”³⁴. In other words, and related to my case of the murder of Olof Palme, other traumatizing events within the Swedish historical and contemporary context might make a series that accumulates the possibility of an emergent cultural trauma process.

2.2 Alexander’s Theory of Cultural Trauma

2.2.1 A Preliminary Definition of Cultural Trauma

Alexander initiates the formulation of his theory with the following definition:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways³⁵.

³² Eyerman, 2008, p. 23.

³³ Ibid., p. 166-169.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 163.

³⁵ Alexander, 2004, p. 1.

In accordance with my reading, this opening definition³⁶ constitutes cultural trauma in terms of five significant and interwoven elements. Firstly, it starts with a group of people being subjected to what they perceive as “a horrendous event”. Secondly, this event must be recognized and felt by “members of a collectivity” as being horrendous. Third, for the event to be a cultural trauma it must be deeply felt in such a way that it “leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness”. This mark upon the “group consciousness” is, fourthly, supposed to influence the “memories” of this group, or collectivity, “forever”. Fifth, and last, the at this point, undoubtedly so, existing cultural trauma will, due to the effect of the collective memory, also change the “future identity” of the actual suffering group and, eventually, a wider, enlarged collectivity.

According to this initial definition it is possible to state that the murder of Olof Palme can only be seen as a cultural trauma if these five elements, or indicators, is a part of the social process that constitutes it. However, as it has already been pointed out, the empirical design of my study does not make it possible to make statements on whether an eventually emergent cultural trauma process in the case of Palme is existing and everlasting. Neither can it be used to decide whether an everlasting collective memory will shape the future of those that eventually upholds it³⁷. This is the reason why I keep reminding the reader that my empirical interest only concerns an eventually emergent cultural trauma process.

2.2.2 Significant Specifications of the Theory of Cultural Trauma

Guided by the intention to deepen my account of Alexander’s cultural trauma theory I will now take the reader on a short journey through what I would like to call *significant specifications* of the trauma theory³⁸. These specifications, nine in number, concern the scientific character and applicability of the theory, criticism of other approaches and interrelated arguments on trauma as a possible outcome of social construction produced and carried by human agency, different institutional arenas and differentiated audiences. The specifications also refer to the issue of mediated representations, signification, and a master narrative. It all ends with notions of a collective memory that have not yet been touched upon,

³⁶ This definition is, Alexander points out, to be “developed here”, 2004, p. 1.

³⁷ Alexander, 2004.

³⁸ It is important to point out that I consider Alexander’s trauma theory to be a “work in progress”, and, hence, not in any sense a completed theory. This fact is already emphasized in the title of Alexander’s actual chapter, namely, “*Towards [my italics] a Theory of Cultural Trauma*”, 2004, p. 1.

namely, collective memory as something contingent and continuously contested. Not all, of course, will be of relevance for my empirical case. However, as already pointed out, it is a part of my aim to explore the state of the current cultural trauma theory.

a. A scientific theory universally applicable: According to Alexander his cultural trauma theory is “a scientific”³⁹ and “an empirical”⁴⁰ theory. As such it “suggests new meaningful and causal relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions”⁴¹. It is also of relevance to state that he considers the theory to be universal and, hence, applicable in all parts of the world. “Collective traumas have”, Alexander writes, “no geographical or cultural limitations”⁴². Accordingly it must be justified to explore the theory in relation to my, even if delimited, Swedish empirical case of Olof Palme.

b. A critique of lay trauma theory: Alexander formulates his theory’s basic assumption against the backdrop of a critique of what he sums up as “lay trauma theory”⁴³. The common denominator for this lay theory is the belief that events that are traumatic have a more or less given “natural fallacy”⁴⁴ to be so. Thus according to the lay theory the trauma potential is understood as an intrinsic part of the events themselves. Alexander rejects any form of lay trauma theory and argues for a more “theoretically reflexive”⁴⁵ alternative.

c. Cultural trauma as a social construction: In accordance with Alexander’s initial definition cultural trauma is always to be understood as something that is socially constructed. It means, as we already picked up from Eyerman, that social construction is to be understood as a social process in form of mediation through representations. Thus, it is only through representations that the experience of the traumatic event can be conveyed. As Alexander puts it, “imagination is intrinsic to the very process of representation”⁴⁶. What is of interest here, he states, is “neither ontology nor morality, but epistemology”⁴⁷. Again, the harmfulness of an event is not determined by the event itself, as it is argued in lay trauma theory. It is rather the

³⁹ Alexander, 2004, pg. 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 27.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 2-8.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

layers of meaning that are assigned to it that define its damaging effects and trauma character. Hence, again, a cultural trauma is a social construction by the means of mediating imaginations and representations. Thus, in Alexander's own words, "for traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises"⁴⁸. This is the quintessence of cultural trauma understood as a sociocultural construction. Meanings must be ascribed to an event in order to make it traumatic. Hence, the formation of an emergent trauma is a social process in which an event is credited as traumatic. This trauma process occurs, as Alexander formulates it, in the "gap between event and representation"⁴⁹. From this follows that the construction of collective identity "involves a cultural reference"⁵⁰, and, accordingly, "only if the patterned meanings of collectivity are abruptly dislodged is traumatic status attributed to an event"⁵¹.

d. Social actors, carrier groups, and claim making: The ascription of trauma – claim making – to an event is a process that involves human agency informed by systems of meaning. These claims are made by reflexive social agents and conveyed to other members of the collectivity, and, eventually so, also to enlarged collectivities in the wider society. Alexander calls these actual groups of agents "carrier groups"⁵². According to the cultural trauma theory these groups can originate from different parts of the social structure. They "may be elites"⁵³. They may be "denigrated and marginalized classes"⁵⁴. They may also be "prestigious religious leaders or groups whom majority has designated as spiritual pariahs"⁵⁵. These groups may also be generational or determined by different institutions⁵⁶. No matter what conditioned them, they are, quoting Alexander, "the collective agents of the trauma process"⁵⁷, and as such they act like speakers telling a story. Therefore these claim makers can come from a wide range of social, economic and political backgrounds. The story told is one of a terrible wrong that has been done to them and that threatens their collective identity. It is a wrong that

⁴⁸ Alexander, 2004, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 10.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² This is a term borrowed from Max Weber's sociology of religion. See Alexander 2004, p. 11.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid. Alexander writes about "generational" respectively "institutional" determinations.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

needs to be rectified. Hence, the act of conveying the trauma claim has a lot in common with a speech act⁵⁸.

e. Institutional arenas: The claim making representations produced by carrier groups are mediated through different institutional arenas, such as religious, aesthetic, legal, scientific and state bureaucracy⁵⁹, which in turn are influenced by “stratificational hierarchies”⁶⁰. One institution is of particular importance: the mass media. “Mediated mass communication allows”, Alexander writes, “traumas to be expressively dramatized and permits some of the competing interpretations to gain enormous persuasive power over others”⁶¹. The mass media thus often plays a significant roll in the trauma process, such as in Eyerman’s both empirical trauma cases, that is, both in the formation of African American identity and in the Dutch case. Not the least due to the possibility of evocative claim making reaching wide audiences in the public sphere⁶².

f. Audiences: Audiences listening to the claim makings from speakers, individuals or representatives of carrier groups and institutional arenas, is taking the form of the general public. They are, Alexander states, “putatively homogeneous but sociologically fragmented”⁶³. The situation in which the speech act is carried out is related to the specific structural situation in which it is situated. It is historically, culturally and institutionally dependent. The speaker intends to convince the audience that it, in fact, has been traumatized. This is how Alexander puts it:

In doing so, the carrier group makes use of the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and opportunities provided by institutional structures”⁶⁴.

⁵⁸ Alexander, 2004, p. 11-12.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 15-20.

⁶⁰ “Stratificational hierarchies” refer to “uneven distribution of material resources and the social networks that provide differential access to them” (ibid., p. 21).

⁶¹ Alexander also points out some limitations in the mediation through the mass media. The representation is under influence of the demand for “objectivity” within the field of journalism (Alexander, 2004, p. 21). Furthermore, as the trauma process evolves in the mass media it can stir up immense opposition and create an intense debate. Establishing who the victim is might lead to a conflict as different groups find themselves pitted against each other or a specific group is pointed out as the perpetrators (ibid.).

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

With these tools at hand, the first step is convincing the own group of its traumatization. Once this has been successful the work towards spreading the claim to other groups within the general public begins⁶⁵.

g. The trauma process can be characterized as a “spiral of signification”: According to Alexander the trauma process, in my words, “the emergent trauma process”, relies on, a “spiral of signification”⁶⁶. An actual carrier group needs to tell a convincing story. The success of such a story is dependent “on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification”⁶⁷. Constructing a compelling and successful story is a complex process, a process that can be plagued by conflict and opposition as conflicting narratives clash for the right of creating a new master narrative. In order to coerce a wider group the story needs not only to be contingent, but meaning that can reach out to wider collectivities must also be ascribed to it.

h. A new master narrative: An important and decisive aspect of a successful “spiral of signification” is “the creation of a new master narrative” that could carry a strong message and reach out to the suffering group and other collectivities. According to Alexander there are four main representations, or questions, that are “essential to the creation of a new master narrative”⁶⁸. These are:

- *The nature of the pain*⁶⁹: What has befallen the afflicted group and what does it mean to the greater collective that the group is a part of?
- *The nature of the victim*⁷⁰: “What group of persons was affected by this traumatizing pain”⁷¹? Is it limited to a specific group or is the trauma shared with others? If so, are these other groups also specific or is the victim “‘the people’ in general”⁷²?
- *Relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience*⁷³: What is the relationship between the victim and the greater collectivity? “To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations

⁶⁵ Alexander, 2004, p. 12.

⁶⁶ A term coined by sociologist Kenneth Thompson: “A way of publicly signifying issues and problems which is intrinsically escalating, i.e. ‘it increases the perceived potential threat of an issue through the way it becomes signified’” (Thompson, 1998, p. 16.).

⁶⁷ Alexander, 2004, p. 12.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 14.

experience an identity with the immediately victimized group”⁷⁴? There is a need for a shared base of values in order for the audience to accept and take a part in the particular trauma narrative.

- *Attribution of responsibility*⁷⁵: A successful narrative demands a perpetrator. Who afflicted the damage? “This issue is always a matter of symbolic and social construction”⁷⁶. A trauma narrative has, in some way, an exclusive tendency and needs an opposing part. In other words, there is a need to identify who performed the “deed”.

i. Collective memory as a constant process. Ultimately the trauma process leads to a revision of the collective identity. In doing so the collective will look back on a collective past. “A collective memory is thereby”, quoting Alexander, “not only social and fluid but deeply connected to the contemporary sense of the self”⁷⁷. This means that when the most intense identity revision has past there is a return to a more routinized condition. As things calm down and the discourse of a cultural trauma might lessen its grip upon society. However, the trauma might live on as a part of a collective memory, and a new collective identity might be “rooted in sacred places and structured”, by the help of, “ritual routines”⁷⁸. Thereby the cultural trauma becomes commemorated in monuments and museums, but no longer does it stir up the same powerful emotions. This is, what Alexander calls, the “triumph of the mundane”⁷⁹. Even if the trauma settles, it can still play an important roll as it can help resolve problems in the future. By becoming mundane, the trauma opens the door for others to get involved and thus widening the circle of who “we” are. This is how Alexander states it:

Whether any or all of these structures actually come into play is not itself a matter of structural determination. It is subject to the unstructured, unforeseeable contingencies of historical time”⁸⁰.

The formation of traumas as well as the keeping of such traumas alive and well is made possible by “contingent historical facts”⁸¹. In other words a created cultural trauma might not be forever.

⁷⁴ Alexander, 2004, p. 14.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 24.

⁸¹ Ibid.

2.2.3 Putting the Cultural Trauma Theory to Use

It is thus my intention to use this theory for an empirical analysis of the murder of Olof Palme as a possible case of an eventually emergent cultural trauma process. In accordance with my introduction to this chapter, as well as in accordance with my explorative analytical reading, I will now bring together the different theoretical elements that will inform my empirical case. From Eyerman's study on the formation of African American identity the core elements of concern, for my study, are: *collective identity*, *collective memory*, and *mediated representations*. From his book on the assassination of Theo van Gogh I find two elements that are of great interest to my study: the *three levels of approach* and the concept of *accumulated trauma*. From Alexander several elements will be used, amongst others: cultural trauma as a *social construction*, *carrier groups*, *claim making*, *institutional arenas*, *audiences*, "*spiral of signification*", and *master narrative*, including, for the master narrative essential four representations.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this chapter I intend to give an account of my methodological considerations. It will be done in three parts. Firstly, I argue for the importance of a theoretically informed methodology. In my reading, this stance is an integrated part of the theory of cultural trauma as a middle range theory. Secondly, I am going to discuss eventual influences that could have an effect on my study. Topics of interest here are the limited theoretical and empirical field in which I have taken an interest and my relationship toward Olof Palme. Third, and last, I will mainly present delimitations, choice of method and the sampling procedure being used. In this last part I also discuss different considerations related to the sampling.

3.1 Theoretically Informed Methodology and Middle Range Theory

This study rests on the assumption that theory and method are inseparable, that they are inevitably intertwined. Accordingly, the sociological subject under investigation should be determined by a theoretical *and* a methodological approach. In my case, the method is pervaded by my theoretical approach.

I understand the cultural trauma theory as a theory of the middle range. Sociologist Robert K. Merton conceived the notion of middle range theory as a means toward resolving “the dilemma between abstract ‘grand theory,’ [...] and the narrow-empirical data gathering, which dominated some subdisciplines of sociology”⁸². Hence, Merton’s approach tries to overcome the differences between the lack of theoretical awareness in some forms of empirical research and the exceedingly enthusiastic and all-inclusive aspirations of grand theory. Most of all he aimed at criticizing the latter⁸³. This is how he formulates it:

The sociological theorist *exclusively* committed to the exploration of high abstractions runs the risk that, as with modern *décor*, the furniture of his mind will be sparse, bare, and uncomfortable⁸⁴.

⁸² Sztompka in Alexander et al., 2004, p. 255.

⁸³ Merton, 1957.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

As an alternative the middle range theory should oppose this notion and aim to derive conclusions from limited ranges of data and construct theories for particular cases⁸⁵. The theory should be informed by the phenomenon that is studied. Hence, the relation between theory and data is to be understood as a “two-way traffic’ between social theory and empirical research”⁸⁶. From this also follows that a theoretically informed methodology rests upon a central part of Alexander’s understanding of “theoretical logic”⁸⁷, namely that: “[a]ll scientific data are theoretically informed”⁸⁸, and, accordingly, that “[e]mpirical commitments are not based solely on experimental evidence”⁸⁹.

As such, the application of a theory of cultural trauma on the empirical case of Olof Palme must undoubtedly result in that the method by which I proceed ought to be theoretically informed.

3.2 Influences and Reflections

The following quote is credited to the Irish author Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and is taken from literary critic Harold Bloom’s work *The Anxiety of Influence* (1997):

Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him⁹⁰.

By no means do I intend to use this quote in the same way as Bloom does. That is, I do not intend to base my discussion on Bloom’s concept of the anxiety of influence⁹¹. Rather, I intend to use the quote to emphasize and discuss the different sources of influences I have had in my work. Considering the limited group of people working with the theory of cultural trauma, there is always a risk of becoming too dependent on their work. Their “sins” and words become mine; I am only a vessel by which their ideas are being mediated, “an echo of

⁸⁵ See Sztompka’s book *Robert K. Merton. An Intellectual Profile*, 1986, p. 243.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Alexander, 1982.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.30.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Bloom, 1997, p. 6.

⁹¹ The anxiety of influence refers to the influence by which poets are under by preceding poets and existing poetry. A work that is genuine and groundbreaking is considered as strong poetry and “comes out of a complex act of strong misreading” (Ibid., p. xxiii.). Unlike strong poetry, weak poetry is lacking in originality and is to be considered as “mere imitation”(Ibid., p. xxiv.).

someone else's music"⁹². However, I do not find this to be an immediate risk. Rather, I find this to be a possibility to make a difference in the field of cultural trauma theory. By working with a theory in the making one has the possibility to influence the direction it takes – especially by utilizing it in concrete empirical cases. However, I will not deny the risk of adopting theories without being reflexive, which is something that I have tried to avoid.

Another consideration that needs to be made is regarding my relationship toward Olof Palme. I have always had a special relationship to Palme as a person. Growing up in a social democratic home has certainly influenced me in my selection of topic for this study and in my writing. My relation to Olof Palme is thereby not an unproblematic one. I do not have any personal memories of Olof Palme. I was only three years old at the time of his death. However, my sister, close to three years older than me, can still to this day remember my parent's reaction. It's her first memory of ever seeing them cry. This memory lives on as an integrate part of our families collective memory. Therefore, undoubtedly so, Palme has a special place in the formation of my identity. Somehow he represents a sort of break from an idyllic time of past innocence: this project has been an emotional journey, a trip to the past, but still rooted in the present. Despite this personal relationship to Olof Palme I don't find that it has a negative effect on this study. Palme's "soul" is not mine and the "passions" I feel are not his. The aim is to study representations in the media. It is not to answer questions of who Palme actually was and what he stood for. Neither is it to recall memories of my past childhood. My research interest is taken from an epistemological stance and my bias does, therefore, not interfere with my study and its outcomes. This is an exploration of the theory of cultural trauma that is applied to an empirical case, namely the murder of Olof Palme. My interest in Palme has, however, played a significant part in the selection of my research topic. It has, using a concept by the famous sociological classic Max Weber (1864-1920), "value relevance"⁹³.

3.3 Delimitations, Choice of Method and Sample Selection

As I have repeatedly stated, the focus of my study is to examine whether there was an emergent trauma process in the media during the first week after the murder of Olof Palme. In

⁹² Bloom, 1997, p. 6.

⁹³ See, for instance, Denzin & Lincoln 2005, p. 141.

doing so I will delimit my study to a specific institutional arena, namely the mass media⁹⁴. Furthermore, I have limited my study to two Swedish newspapers. Firstly, *Dagens Nyheter*⁹⁵ (“Daily News”), which is the largest daily newspaper in Sweden. It has an independently liberal editorial page⁹⁶. Secondly, *Arbetet* (“The Work”), which was the largest daily Swedish social democratic newspaper until its demise in 2000⁹⁷. Hence, the choice of newspapers is based on political alignment and national distribution⁹⁸. With these two newspapers as a basis, articles⁹⁹ were chosen for a content analysis, a method of which I will have more to say below. According to Martyn Denscombe, professor in social work, a sampling frame is necessary in able to generate a population from which a sample can be made. This sampling frame needs to be relevant, precise and comprehensive¹⁰⁰. Therefore, I have chosen articles that are, in my own words:

- *Relevant*, to my study with regards to the murder of Olof Palme.
- *Precise*, in that the articles of interest are those that display tendencies toward an emergent cultural trauma process.
- *Comprehensive*, the sampling frame should be complete; all significant articles should be included¹⁰¹.

The time frame within which the articles are chosen is the first week after the murder, that is, to remind the reader, the first week of March in 1986. By applying the above stated approach I acquired 183 articles from *DN* and 206 from *Arbetet*. All these articles were printed out, and, hence, I hold a paper copy of them all. These articles, in total 389, were found in different sections of the newspapers. Hence, they represent categories such as news articles, editorial or political commentary, art and cultural essays, chronicles and, in a few cases

⁹⁴ It might be of importance to add the information that other institutional arenas than the media will be mentioned and dealt with in my empirical descriptions and analysis. This is so due to the fact that other institutional arenas, such as religious and political, are given voices – being represented – in the media articles that are being analyzed.

⁹⁵ From now on referred to as DN.

⁹⁶ Internet address 2 & 3.

⁹⁷ *Arbetet* went bankrupt in 2000 after several years of failing circulation and financial deficiency. (Internet address 1).

⁹⁸ I am well aware of the fact that DN has a national distribution while *Arbetet* was a regional newspaper.

However, *Arbetet* had a wide circulation through out Sweden, as it was the largest social democratic newspaper.

⁹⁹ I define an article as a distinctive text with an explicit headline, this means that the articles vary in size and may or may not include pictures.

¹⁰⁰ Denscombe also uses a fourth criteria, the sample frame needs to be actual, which means that the sample should not hold unwarranted information and should be updated. This demand does not fit into my study, as my focal point regards how the murder was represented in the media in 1986. Hence, updated information should be excluded.

¹⁰¹ Denscombe, 2000, p. 27. My translation.

announcements, or, even, advertisements. Consequently, the different categories of articles will represent different “voices” and mass media “logics”, such as political, “objective” news reporting, more essayist and philosophical, or commercial. In this study I will not make analytical comparisons between different categories of articles. Informed by the cultural trauma theory in its current shape, as pointed out at the end of my theory chapter, I will focus on medialized representations in form of an eventual “spiral of signification”¹⁰² that might reverberate through the media and constitutes a possible “new master narrative”¹⁰³ that, in turn, could be interpreted as an emergent cultural trauma process. Furthermore, comparisons will be made between *DN* and *Arbetet*. The question, then, is whether newspapers with different political profiles and editorial agendas might develop different “spiral of signification” and “meta narratives”, or if they possibly represent similar tendencies. It might, of course, also be the case that there will not be any common threads and themes at all. But, again, the reader has to keep in mind that the study only concerns the first week after the murder.

According to sociologist Alan Bryman, the size of the sample is determined by several different considerations. One of the most important is the time available for the study. Another consideration is the need for precision. The goal is to attain a manageable sample that will be sufficiently precise¹⁰⁴. Thus, in order to take account for the time available and still try to satisfy Bryman’s methodological demands, I have used the method of stratified random sampling¹⁰⁵. Although the principle of sample selection is mainly used in survey research it can also be applied to document selection¹⁰⁶. Firstly, I considered the articles from *DN* and *Arbetet* as two different strata. Within each strata I have made a systematic sample where every tenth article was chosen. As mentioned above, the “population” comprised a total of 389 articles, 183 in *DN* and 206 in *Arbetet*. Hence, the sample used in this study holds 19 articles from *DN* and 21 articles from *Arbetet*. After having done this sample I proceeded with a content analysis of the selected articles.

¹⁰² Alexander, 2004, p. 11.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Bryman, 2001.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

When using a content analysis in order to study documents the most common approach is to differ between quantitative and qualitative approaches¹⁰⁷. Quantitative content analysis “is an approach to the analysis of documents and texts [...] that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner”¹⁰⁸. Hence, in this case the categories and themes are determined by fixed structured category schemes¹⁰⁹. The qualitative content analysis, on the other hand, refers to “a searching-out of underlying themes in the materials being analysed”¹¹⁰ and is used as to gain “insight regarding which arguments, viewpoints, attitudes or values that plays a central roll in different texts”¹¹¹.

In my study I will apply a qualitative content analysis. This analysis is used “for identifying reoccurring features in the different elements of text and these are grouped in different categories or themes”¹¹². With the help of these generated categories and themes as well as concepts, an understanding of the text and its eventual underlying themes can be teased out. The goal is to point out the structures of meaning that inform the text. In my case, these structures of meanings, categorizations and concepts will be developed in close relation to the cultural trauma theory. In the end I hope to reveal an interesting answer to my guiding research question while at the same time fulfill the aim of the study.

Finally the reader might want to question why I chose a sample selection strongly related to quantitative research while at the same time mainly doing a qualitative content analysis. Basically I think the English sociologist John Goldthorpe is right when he argues that it is a good thing, also for qualitative researchers, to know what the meanings generated represents in a wider context¹¹³.

¹⁰⁷ Grönmo, 2006.

¹⁰⁸ Bryman, 2001, p. 177.

¹⁰⁹ Grönmo, 2006.

¹¹⁰ Bryman, 2001, p. 381.

¹¹¹ Grönmo, 2006, p. 132. My translation.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 192. My translation.

¹¹³ See Goldthorpe’s chapter “Sociological Ethnography Today: Problems and Possibilities”, in Goldthorpe, 1999, p. 65-94.

Chapter 4
Olof Palme as an Emergent Cultural Trauma
Empirical results and analysis

4.1 Introduction

The presentation of my empirical results and analysis is disposed in two parts. In the first part I will be looking at the claim making in *DN* during the first week after the murder. I start out with this claim making in terms of the four representations that according to Alexander, determines the construction of a master narrative. I will then make somewhat more concentrated claims concerning the master narrative that reverberates through the four representations. The way this master narrative is supported by different carrier groups and institutional arenas will also be laid out. In the second part, which, delimited by time and space, is shorter and in character more summarizing, I compare the empirical and analytic outcome of the *DN* with that of *Arbetet*. Along with my presentation, and in accordance with the prescribed logic of qualitative analysis, I construct some analytical concepts of my own. It might also be a good thing to add that my main empirical interest concerns, to relate to Eyerman, the murder as a social process transforming the event, through media representations, into an eventually emergent cultural trauma. Hence, this chapter aims at laying the empirical and analytical ground for a more distilled answer to my guiding research question, that is, whether or not the media representation of the murder of Olof Palme can be understood as a case of an emergent cultural trauma process. However, due to time and space available in this study the empirical account will be very brief and hinting rather than “thick” and “deep”. A more summarized and concluding answer to this question will though have to wait until the sixth and final chapter.

4.2 Putting the Cultural Trauma Theory to Work – Dagens Nyheter

4.2.1 The Nature of the Pain

The meaning of *the nature of pain*, to remind the reader, is determined by two interrelated questions: what has befallen the afflicted group? And, what does it mean to the greater collective that the group is a part of? I will give account of this first form of representation by three significant illustrations of what tends to reverberate through most of the *DN* articles independently of the writer and what kind of article it is. The first one is a political

commentary published the first day after the murder. It starts out dramatically by stating that Olof Palme was shot “at close range”¹¹⁴ and “is suddenly, beyond our understanding, dead”¹¹⁵. It then continues:

The image of Sweden as a protected corner of the world, safe in its lack of deep social disturbances, has been shook at times when the political violence have touched our country. However, what happened Friday night lacks parallel and makes our own existence feel more insecure then before¹¹⁶.

The second illustration comes from a TV critic. “This was a first of March”, he writes, “that no one amongst us shall forget”¹¹⁷. The headlines of the news – “Palme murdered – shot down in the open street by an unknown man” – felt, he states, “like a punch of the fist”¹¹⁸. This is how the actual critic concludes:

And so finally, violence stepped into Swedish politics, and things will never be the same again. The shot fired against Palme was as much a shot fired against democracy and trust, that is, the things we have taken for granted in Sweden and that took years of toil and pain to create¹¹⁹.

Accordingly, he ends by saying, “we all experienced the course of events when Sweden was brutally awaked from 55 years of dreaming the good society”¹²⁰.

My third illustration comes from a chronicle in which the writer proclaims: “Sweden... not Sweden... things like these can only happen abroad. It cannot happen here”. “As long as I live”, the chronicler states, “I will remember every detail around that sleepless night that followed the telephone call I received Friday night”¹²¹. It is, I think, very easy to see how the claim making in the DN articles give very evocative answers to the meaning of the nature of pain. There are, I will argue, six evident tendencies. Firstly, there is the representation of a changed Sweden. Sweden is no longer a country characterized by trust and consensus. This claim could be distilled as a *historical turn towards insecurity*. As expressed in one of the DN articles: “And so finally, violence stepped into Swedish politics, and things will never be the

¹¹⁴ “Olof Palme död”, 1986.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Stugart, 1986.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Kåll, 1986.

same again”¹²². Also, “the image of Sweden as a society of trust and innocence has been shattered by this event”¹²³. Secondly, there is a widespread feeling of *shock and existential awareness of loss*. This is the case, not only as individual experience, but also in terms of a reverberating experience of a nation. This is, as an example, expressed in claims like “a deeply shocked nation”¹²⁴. Third, the afflicted group, as it is constructed and represented in *DN*, is not primarily about Palme himself or his family, even if it is mentioned, neither, or even less, about the Labor movement or the social democratic party. Rather, the afflicted group is constructed around the concept of “we” in Sweden. Hence, the claim making is constructing an *all-embracing “we”*. Thus, the afflicted group, the “we”, is put forward in terms of having to do with the whole of Sweden, that is, all Swedes. Fourth, it is obvious that there is a strong *dramatization logic* involved in the claim making. The concept of “drama” is itself used in several articles. The event is definitely so given a “horrendous status” and thus becomes a drama, or even: “a horrible drama”¹²⁵. Fifth, there is also a strong emphasis on *collective memory making*. The readers are given a lot of “food for thought” on how Sweden was before the murder, and what it has become now, after the horrendous event. Finally, the claim making also seems to put hope into and express a *possibility of a recovering Sweden* – especially so against the backdrop of the dramatized collective memory making and its representations of a great past to be reclaimed. However, and this might be an analytic point of importance, the reclaiming of the past might only possible through a strong awareness of an emergent trauma process. As one of the *DN* articles puts it: “Sweden as a well-organized and balanced country is disturbed. However, this will be rectified over time”¹²⁶.

4.2.2 The Nature of the Victim

The nature of the victim refers to three integrated questions: What groups of persons was afflicted by this traumatizing pain? Is it limited to a specific group or is the trauma shared with others? If so, are these groups also specific or is the victim “the people’ in general”? However, in this second type of representation I will only focus on the victim in terms of Olof Palme. In the first representation above I have already touch upon the victim in broader terms – as an all-embracing “we” of Swedes. I will though, in the next section return to the issue of the victim in terms of the victim’s relation to the wider audience.

¹²² Stugart, 1986.

¹²³ “Olof Palme död”, 1986.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Stugart, 1986.

¹²⁶ “Olof Palme död”, 1986.

I will present four illustrations that make explicit the claim making of the nature of the victim as Olof Palme. The first illustration is from an announcement from the Swedish Social Democratic Party published in DN in order to commemorate Olof Palme.

Olof Palme's efforts have meant a great deal to the development of the Swedish welfare society. However, we also remember his international efforts. With Olof Palme our country gained a greater voice in the rest of the world. In this time of insensible violence, he strengthened the cause for peace and reason¹²⁷.

The second illustration relates to a political commentary published the first day after the murder. The commentator describes Palme as a man who "was known all over the world as standing for Swedish solidarity with socioeconomically and politically suffering peoples and this to a much greater extent than we Swedes tend to understand"¹²⁸. He continues by saying that:

He, who often held so touching and convincing speeches against violence and for the reconciliation between countries and power blocs, has now himself fallen victim to a man of violence. [...] In many ways [Palme] was an eccentric person, a politician devoted to agitation and challenges, always full of life and vigor, eager and energetic, he led his great movement and the country¹²⁹.

The third illustration concerns statements on Olof Palme's personal character formulated by a social democratic party colleague. She remembers Olof Palme as "an extraordinary high-spirited human being"¹³⁰. He is also likewise described as "always being an interested and fascinated individual who could not avoid a political discussion"¹³¹. The last one regards a liberal commentator's description of Palme's character in terms of "the capability to listen to his opponents, and to take in critique and find positive use of it". According to this critic he also had an "extraordinary sense of reality". This critic also points out Palme's ability to take on a position of "non-self-interest"¹³². Accordingly, the understanding of Palme could not be reduced to his social democratic political faith.

From these four illustrations five tendencies can be extracted by which an answer can be given regarding the nature of the victim. Firstly, Palme is represented as a man to be recognized for his international reputation and commitments. He is known in the whole world

¹²⁷ Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarparti, 1986.

¹²⁸ "Olof Palme död", 1986.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarparti, 1986.

¹³¹ "Måste få fast mördaren", 1986.

¹³² Nycander, 1986.

as no other Swedish politician. Thus Palme is, *an internationally well-known politician* with a reputation. Secondly, Olof Palme is greatly admired and acknowledged for his proved international solidarity toward suffering peoples in the third-world. But also due to his work towards reconciliation between countries and political power blocs. Hence, in the representation he comes through as *a role model* in international development and policy. Third, Palme is depicted as being a *character* denoted by vigor and eagerness, seen as energetic and full of life. These representations aim to convey an image of a man with a strong character – a man to be respected, liked and admired. Fourth, Olof Palme is not only a man with a long political career he is also represented as a politician who was *dominating the political scene*. For a long time, the media tells us, he has been a central and dominating character both within his party, the nation and the international political scene. Fifth, and last, Olof Palme is set forth as having a record of *working for justice and humanity*. He is known among both his own political allies and critics as someone who worked hard for justice and humanity. Definitely so, the nature of the victim, understood as Olof Palme, is strongly reverberating through the media articles.

4.2.3 Relation of the Trauma Victim to the Wider Audience

In this third part, the representation in question is the *relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience*. This representation is, to remind the reader, informed by the following two questions: What is the relationship between the victim and the greater collectivity? To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group? How this representation is formatted will only be illustrated by one example – an example that to a very great extent is representative of the spirit of the most of the sampled articles on how people from a variety regions, cities and neighborhoods, with different political majorities, came together for collective mourning and rituals. In the TV pages, two days after the murder, a critic described the gathering and mourning people by the scene of the crime:

Mourning masses of people started to queue up in front of the government building (Rosenbad) to sign letters of condolences. The camera swept slowly alongside the queue where the mourning and resolute Swedish stood. Some of them wept openly, others expressed deep anger. [...] We became an audience to a horrible drama¹³³.

For a claim to be compelling, following the demands of the cultural trauma theory, the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience must be established. I find that this

¹³³ Stugart, 1986.

relationship is strongly established. The victim Olof Palme as he came to be represented in the media, was making claims clearly related to a wider audience in the Swedish society. Thus, the “we”, as an all-including collectivity of Swedes – a gathered nation – became the *audience to a horrible drama*¹³⁴.

4.2.4 Attribution of Responsibility

“A successful narrative demands a perpetrator”. Thus in accordance with the cultural trauma theory there is a need of an *attribution of responsibility*. The question in need of an answer is: Who afflicted the damage? In this study I have decided to leave this fourth representation aside. This is mostly due to the fact that the *murderer was and still remains unknown*. That being the case is by all means of great significance. However, it would demand a specific analysis that must await future studies.

4.2.5 Spiral of Signification, Master Narrative and Multidimensional Reinforcements

A successful outcome of a cultural trauma process, that is, the creation of a vibrant trauma, is dependent on the social construction of a compelling framework of claim making in all of the representations described above¹³⁵. If that is the case, which I think I have verified, we have, thanks to what Alexander calls a “spiral of signification”, a strong “master narrative”, that facilitates, in my case, an emergent cultural trauma. Thus, I consider the all-embracing outcome, and effect, of what I have labeled...

- the historical turn towards insecurity
- the shock and existential awareness of loss
- the all-embracing feelings of “we-ness”
- the dramatization logic
- the making of a collective memory
- the possibility of a recovering Sweden
- the internationally well-know politician, the role model, and the character Olof Palme who dominated the political scene in his work for justice and humanity, and
- the all-including collectivity of Swedes who in the medialized claim making came to be the audiences to a horrible drama.

¹³⁴ “Olof Palme död”, 1986.

¹³⁵ I am very well aware of that the fourth representation is not given a compelling answer in my empirical data and analysis. It might then also be argued that it is possible to state a cultural trauma without having the support of an attribution of responsibility.

...to be that spiral of signification that, in terms of a master narrative, constitutes my belief in the existence of an emergent cultural trauma. To this could also be added the strong appearance of different carrier groups and institutional arenas that independently of each other spread the same master narrative gospel. For instance cases such as different political parties and their representatives, the labor movements, and work places in Sweden, and abroad.

4.3 Putting the Trauma Theory to Work – Arbetet

So far my empirical data and analysis have only concerned *DN*, the largest independently liberal newspaper in Sweden. The question then is how the murder of Olof Palme was represented in *Arbetet*, the daily social democratic newspaper. Simply put, the claim making in *Arbetet*, with reference to the demands of the cultural trauma theory, is *yes* also, at least in terms of a common master narrative practically the same. However, due to delimitation in time and space I will only give some hinting empirical evidence to this fact.

Nature of the pain:

What we – maybe too naively – didn't think could happen in Sweden is now a fact. It happened an ordinary Friday afternoon in Stockholm¹³⁶.

The murder of Olof Palme has filled us with the sense of deep grief¹³⁷.

Those standing to lose from Olof Palmes death are many – his family, the Swedish Social Democratic Party, who lost its chairman, the country, who lost its prime minister and leader of parliament¹³⁸.

People stare at the large bloodstain that stands as the only trace of the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister, Olof Palme¹³⁹.

It is a great loss for democracy, but the struggle in its name will continue on¹⁴⁰.

Nature of the victim:

Olof Palme's deep international knowledge and awareness, his engagement and intensity made him an extraordinary political persona¹⁴¹.

The loss of Olof Palme is hard. He was a symbol of justice and progress in the whole world¹⁴².

¹³⁶ Wåhlander, 1986.

¹³⁷ Silver, 1986.

¹³⁸ Pernbro, 1986.

¹³⁹ Wåhlander, 1986.

¹⁴⁰ Pernbro, 1986.

¹⁴¹ "Röster om Palmes död", 1986.

¹⁴² "Arafat: En svår förlust", 1986.

Relation of the trauma victim to the wider audiences:

The truth is that his political deed must foremost be considered a continuous struggle for affinity and consensus¹⁴³.

A lot of people are crying. The scene of the murder: drifts of flowers, posters, proclamations, anger, powerlessness, despair¹⁴⁴.

Everyone is talking about the unlikeliness of the event, the shock that no one has yet been able to overcome¹⁴⁵.

Attribution of responsibility:

We still do not know why, we still do not know who the perpetrator is. The only thing we all can agree upon is that the murder is done by an outermost mentally ill person informed by the outmost shady ideas¹⁴⁶.

I think these quotes speak for themselves. Undoubtedly they can be seen constituting a spiral of signification turning into a multidimensional master narrative – the claim making that makes an emergent cultural trauma process a vibrant and living thing.

4.4 A Comparison Between *Dagens Nyheter* and *Arbetet*

Lastly, are there, despite the strong resemblance in the way *Dagens Nyheter* and *Arbetet* make claims about Olof Palme, any obvious differences? My preliminary analysis suggests a smaller discrepancy. This possible difference concerns the nature of the victim and the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audiences. It might be that *Dagens Nyheter*, especially so on the editorial page, put a stronger emphasis on Olof Palme as a more distantly respected adversary. In *Arbetet*, on the contrary, Olof Palme is, possibly, to a greater extent represented as “one of us”. However, this conclusion is in need of further studies and an in depth analysis. However, if this appointed difference is to be found as valid, it would be quite natural to ascribe it to the different political views of the two newspapers, that is, a liberal respectively a social democratic view.

¹⁴³ Månsson, 1986.

¹⁴⁴ Wåhlander, 1986.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Pernbro, 1986.

Chapter 5

Summary and Conclusions

I started this study with a short description of an event: the murder of the Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme on March 28th in 1986. I then claimed that my study was not to be concerned with the murder in terms of how it actually occurred. Accordingly, my research is not about what actually happened, why it happened or who the perpetrator was. Rather, my focus concerned how the event was presented. I described the focal point of my study as the mediated representations of the murder of Olof Palme in the mass media. The aim of my study was to explore the theory of cultural trauma, as laid out by Eyerman and Alexander, and to put it, at least in some of its unavoidable parts, to use in my empirical study of Olof Palme. Hence, I decided to look upon the murder as an empirical test case for the cultural trauma theory. A cultural trauma, as has been stated, is a socially constructed phenomenon, which is mediated through representation. In my case mediated through the mass media. This means that the cultural trauma potential of an event is not determined by the event itself but rather, it is the layers of meaning that are assigned to it that creates it. However, as I have pointed out repeatedly through out my study, my test case, as it is designed, is limited. I have only studied medialized representations in two daily newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Arbetet*, during the first week after the murder. Obviously it becomes impossible to draw any conclusions concerning the existence of an eventually full-blown cultural trauma. Thus I formulated my guiding research question in the following manner: *Can the representation of the murder of Olof Palme in the media be understood as a case of an emergent trauma process?* The keywords here are of course “emergent” and “process”. In accordance with my empirical design it is only possible to draw conclusions concerning an eventual emergent cultural trauma in process – a trauma in becoming, in its “embryonic” form.

I am now, finally, in a position to formulate a more synthesized answer to my research question. *Informed by the cultural trauma theory I think there are good reasons and valid empirical proofs to interpret the first week's media representations of the murder of Olof Palme as an emergent trauma process.* My main argument is that my empirical findings strongly support Eyerman's and Alexander's cultural trauma theory. Especially so in terms of the event being socially constructed as an emergent trauma through a solid master narrative

and explicit claim making strongly reverberating through most of the sampled articles in both *DN* and *Arbetet*. Undoubtedly so, there is an obvious resemblance as well as strong articulation of an all-embracing “we” suffering a horrendous event befalling the Swedish society. It is also of importance to add how all speech acts throughout the sample tends to be expressed in a very evocative way. Undoubtedly so, the event turns into a social drama that transforms into a “master-narrative” constructed cultural trauma. It does so with strong support from a collective memory articulating a lost innocence of the past. At the same time there are also strong expressions for the possibility of regaining an open and democratic Sweden built on integration and solidarity. All the constituting elements of the cultural trauma theory are there. Taking account of the whole process leading up to my conclusion of an emergent cultural trauma, the sensitizing concept of “spiral of signification” makes sense. I would also like to emphasize that I find the similarities between *DN* and *Arbetet* much more profound than the differences. However, this might of course not be the case in the history that was to be unfolding during the decades after the murder. Hence, due to the delimitation of my design, there are many more empirical studies that need to be done. Would my conclusion on an emergent cultural trauma process be sustained if I had broadened my empirical studies also to include TV and radio, and other possible carrier groups and institutional arenas? Yes, I think so, but I do not have empirical proof available to make such a conclusion valid. And what about the master narrative a decade later? What about the narrative now in 2008? Which way did the emergent trauma process go? Did it develop further, becoming stronger, or did it simply decrease? Even disappear? Or is it just slumbering, in a more or less hidden collective unconscious, in wait to come alive again? And if slumbering, what does such an awakening demand? What about claim makings within different carrier groups, and socially differentiated audiences? It is probably much more socially and politically differentiated now than at the time of the murder, but, again, I do not really know. Is the murder of Anna Lindh, the social democratic Minister of Foreign Affairs, who died due to a knife attack in a shopping mall in the central part of Stockholm September 11 in 2003, intervening in the ongoing trauma making? Perhaps there is a possibility of an, using Eyerman’s concept, accumulating trauma? Or is both the murder of Palme and Lindh already forgotten? Or, after all, is it possibly still alive, but only as a hidden injury imbedded in the collective memories – carried by whom? Yes, unfortunately, I have to leave the reader with an uncountable amount of research questions to seek out. I have, to remind the reader, just begun my exploration of the trauma theory. I therefore want to emphasize that I consider this study to be a stepping-stone for future studies, hopefully, to come.

I would lastly like to round up with a quote from Alexander's latest project – *The Civil Sphere* (2006) – in which he formulates a new theory of how to understand civil society.

We need a new concept of civil society as a civil *sphere*, a world of values and institutions that generates capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time. Such a sphere relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of principle, not experience, because of our putative commitment to common secular faith¹⁴⁷.

I do think that the case of Olof Palme as an emergent cultural trauma process needs to be understood within the context of such a civil sphere, that is, as a revitalization and repair of a civil sphere understood as a symbolic structure – a meaning system in the meaning of a “social fact” – for, as Alexander puts it, “social criticism and democratic integration at the same time”. Despite all our differences, in terms of backgrounds, forms of life, politics and preferences, hopefully cultural traumas, as in the emergent case of Olof Palme, might, after all, inspire to social hope for democracy, justice, and solidarity. It might also bring some new light to one of the most basic and, hopefully, long-lasting question in sociology: what makes a society possible?

¹⁴⁷ Alexander, 2006, p. 4.

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