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Arthur G. Neal. *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century.* Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1998. xi + 224 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7656-0287-9; $81.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7656-0286-2.

Reviewed by John Bodnar (Indiana University, Bloomington)
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Managing National Trauma

The impact of massive episodes of trauma upon societies occupies much scholarly attention these days and with good reason. This century–"the American century"–is not one to boast about. Despite monumental advances in technology, science, and living standards, catastrophic wars and massacres have eroded attempts to simply assume that the advance of civilization can inevitably lead to the end of barbarism. Conclusions about the century must inevitably be ironic rather than optimistic. Political and cultural life in the developed nations of the world at least tend to reflect this sense of sarcasm and uncertainty. Meanings tend to be twisted and tangled. What nations stand for is by no means clear or clearly articulated.

Arthur Neal's effort to explore the impact of traumatic events upon modern America, therefore, is a welcome contribution to our understanding of just how disruptive events like wars, depressions, or political assassinations alter the stability of social life. Neal is strongest when he moves through the theoretical realm of "events that had a major impact on the institutional structure of society." He argues that national traumas are events that disrupt a social system to such an extent that it commands the attention of all citizens and subgroups. National traumas do to a nation, in Neal's opinion, what personal traumas do to individuals. They alter the collective sense of stability and replace feelings of safety and security with perceptions of danger, chaos, and crisis. He explains carefully that the difference between a national trauma (like World War II) and a personal one (like the death of a loved one) is that the former is shared with other citizens.

Neal recognizes that nations as well as individuals can be scared by such events. Thus, he attempts to look at the impact and legacy of catastrophic incidents on both national and personal levels of experience. He suggests that people cannot ignore or dismiss a national trauma and that such affairs almost inevitably lead to attitudes of anxiety, anger, sadness, and fear on both a private and public basis. In part, these feelings are the result of a resulting crisis in meaning as boundaries between order and chaos, good and evil, and the sacred and profane become "fragile." Everyday life loses whatever capacity it has to sustain notions of a stable present and future. He further argues that "under conditions of national trauma, the moral underpinnings of a society" are subject to review. And because of this potential for moral chaos, nations often attempt to restore a sense of order by creating sacred symbols, such as Arlington National Cemetery or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, that acknowledge the sacrifices that have been made on a personal level and transform a sense of personal loss into some notion of national or collective good.

The value of Neal's theoretical discussion, however, is not brought to bear upon the discussion of specific traumatic episodes such as the "The Great Depression," "The Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor," "The Communist Menace," "The Assassination of President Kennedy," or "The Vietnam War." Neal has interesting things to say about each of these affairs and others but his discussions tend to recapitulate what the historic details of these events were more than explore the ways in which they caused anxiety and fear on a personal and collective basis and the ways in which they were recalled and forgotten. Thus, he tells us about the economic hardship caused by the Great Depression and the fact that it effectively undercut ideals of material progress that dominated the 1920s. But we get no systematic examination of how the event was internalized by victims or by the wider culture. It seems that it would be more than appropriate here to offer some explanation of what American culture did with the depression. Certainly much of it was forgotten during the prosperity of World War II, as Neal says. But there is a substantial body of work that explores how the legacy of the thirties was internalized among its victims that is not pursued here. For instance, homeownership became a highly es-

teemed among those who lost or almost lost their homes during the decade. And one wonders why visitation to the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial in Washington is so strong if the trauma of the depression was so forgotten.

The same patterns is evident in the book's discussions about World War II and Vietnam. We get more about history and less about trauma and memory. It is surprising in a chapter on World War II to read nothing about the high anxiety that marked the immediate postwar years over the existence of the atomic bomb or the tremendously large cultural discussion that took place in the American cinema. One need only watch the film *The Sands of Iwo Jima* closely to realize that Americans were by no means ready to completely put the trauma of the conflict behind them. In this feature film, a marine hero is constantly criticized for his devotion to the corps and his indifferent attitude toward his family. This study has more to say about Vietnam Veterans Memorial and, therefore, about remembering that war. Neal does capture the sense of opposition to traditional or heroic patterns of remembering war that marked the origins of the monument. But we do not get a more nuanced discussion of the political poles that had to be reconciled before the monument was built; the image of the war in the national culture remains unexplored.

Neal concludes with an essay on collective memory and makes the point that national traumas prove that "the social order is fragile and subject to disruptions in unexpected ways." I certainly agree with this point. But the concern of this social psychologist with the "social" to the exclusion of the political and the cultural appears to limit the potential of his basic paradigm to fully explain how trauma disrupts national societies and forces efforts at reconstructing the social order. It is the rich dimension of the cultural politics of trauma, anxiety, disruption and reconstruction that begs for attention here.

For instance, scholars now recognize that national discourses have been dominated in recent decades by the tropes of enemies and victims. In the aftermath of two world wars, citizens have looked for explanations for all of the death, carnage, bombings, and genocides. In some cases, extreme attempts have been made to distance a nation or its people from responsibility for death and devastation, in part because trauma was often perpetrated by one group of citizens against another within a nation. I would suggest that among the major disruptions that Neal talks about in this century was the recognition that evil or violent enemies were potentially everywhere–inside and outside national boundaries. Neal gets at this issue somewhat when he talks of the fear of communism after World War II. But the problem must be taken to a much higher level of abstraction: how is the ongoing problem of violence managed and understood in a national culture? How is the existence of all forms of violence explained and what explanations dominate others in a given time? And how is the existence of some forms of violence forgotten or ignored?

We have some striking clues about this. In postwar Japan, national responsibility for atrocities was kept from public discussion in favor of images that portrayed the Japanese as victims (implicitly of an American enemy). In Germany after World War II, the Holocaust was largely denied and many Germans transformed themselves into victims by arguing that they too suffered at the hands of the "Nazis." Yet, there is oral history evidence of feelings of personal guilt and shame on the part of ordinary Japanese and German citizens. Thus, there is a real need to explicitly compare public and private forms of remembering of traumatic events. In the United States, public memorials over World War II tended to convey images of heroism and patriotic sacrifice. Narratives in popular culture, however, opened up a vast discussion of how the war victimized Americans themselves and revealed their own proclivity for violence. Anyone who thinks that the entire World War II generation felt like those who opposed the original plans for the Enola Gay commemoration at the Smithsonian should read Normal Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* or Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.

But that is not all. If the discourse over enemies and victims is central to nations like the United States today, we need to know what discussions have been put aside. In the 1930s, the political culture was dominated by arguments over the rights of workers and the need for government to insure a just society as a basis of national progress. What happened to the discourse between the classes or the one over rights and progress? And how were versions of the past invoked to bolster the claims of one side or another? Certainly many films of the thirties invoked memories of past American traumas like the Civil War to reinforce faith that trauma (and economic devastation) could be overcome in the present as it was in the past. Memories of trauma calmed realities of trauma. Who was responsible for such exercises in cultural gymnastics and how is that process sustained today? Indeed, Neal has contributed to a central issue of our times, but the overall quest for understanding how societies and nations rework trauma has a long way to go.

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