

# The Psychology and Politics of Trauma

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Time Slot:	Tuesdays, 4:30 p.m.
Language of Instruction:	English
Contact Hours:	45
ECTS Credits:	6

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## Course Description

Trauma has had various lives in the past century. It has meant different things to different people – doctors, experts, historians, writers, communities and, of course, individuals. Its effects are deeply personal, and attempts to understand it have led to insights into the structure of memory, personhood, and a range of diagnostic symptoms. Yet its lives have, especially since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, become increasingly political and politicized, too. What exactly is trauma, and how do we come to terms with its immense influence in determining the way we think about justice, healing and the relationship between victims and perpetrators? These questions have particularly shaped German and European histories. In the former's case the slow process of "Vergangenheitsbewältigung" (coming to terms with the past) has been central to a post-war and then, 50 years later, a post-reunification national identity that has, through various processes, been required to confront the genocidal trauma inflicted by the Third Reich. Colonialism and its legacies too have played a great role in determining the nature of Europe's relationship to the world, and here too one finds that psychic wounds have played decisive roles in directing the course of history.

In this course we explore trauma through multiple disciplinary perspectives. We explore its historical origins, our shifting understandings of its etiology, as well as the way it is inherited and transmitted. Various approaches – psychoanalytic, historical, literary and anthropological – will offer multiple windows into the way trauma dovetails in and out of people's experiences and collective identities. How it becomes part of the way we tell stories about ourselves and others, and how systems of reparation, recuperation, and justice are established in its wake. By centering the role of biography and narrative, we will learn how trauma reveals existentially crucial aspects of identity and belonging. The city of Berlin, which is haunted by various great and terrible historical events, will be another anchor for our exploration. Much has happened here, and much continues to be shaped by competing memories of past violence, loss and devastation. It is a city where the past is frequently felt as a heavy and weighty presence, and excursions to various sites of attempts at commemoration and memorialization will be a central supplement to our reckoning with the treacherous terrain of memory opened up by our investigation of trauma.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Place trauma in its historical context, understanding how the category was conceived, and the various ways in which our understandings of it have changed over time.
- Understand the way memory works, and how trauma creates a range of psychic shadows, from guilt, to self-denial, repression, and retaliation.
- Assess the various ways in which trauma has become a political instrument, both in terms of how it becomes a central part of group identities, as well as how it contests a blurry moral discourse around justice and victimhood.
- Come to terms with the various ways in which narrative, biographical and collective, have been used to think about what it takes to heal from trauma, and why and when these attempts succeed or fail.

## Note on Content

In line with our evolving understanding of the nature of trauma and its triggers, we found it fitting to include the following "trigger warning" (and disclaimer) for this course:

In the duration of the course, we will cover various sensitive and painful topics. These will range from genocidal and colonial violence, discrimination, the inter-generational transmission of trauma, violence of war and flight, as well as sexual violence. Prospective students should be prepared to be, at times, disturbed by the content, or find certain

readings overwhelming. In this case, you may always reach out individually to the instructor. Please keep in mind, however, that this course is designed as an academic and abstract analysis of trauma, not as an introduction to overcoming trauma.

## Student Profile

Should be in their fourth semester of college/university education or beyond.

## Assignments and Grading

Active Participation: 200 Points

Independent Project Report: 100 Points

Midterm Exam: 200 Points

Term Paper: 350 Points

Term Paper Presentation: 150 Points

Completion of the Midterm Exam as well as the Term Paper is needed for a grade.

FUB Grade	Points of 1,000
1.0	980-1,000
1.3	950-979
1.7	900-949
2.0	850-899
2.3	800-849
2.7	750-799
3.0	700-749
3.3	650-699
3.7	600-649
4.0	500-599
5.0	< 500

## Attendance

Attendance in class is **mandatory**. We also expect you to be **punctual** out of respect to both your instructor and your fellow students. An absence for more than half of a particular day's session will be considered an absence for that day.

If you cannot attend class because you are ill, please **notify your instructor** by e-mail (not via messenger service or through another student) before class. Any absence **without a notification** of your instructor before class will automatically be considered **unexcused**.

Absences because of **illness** are **excused**; however, for the **third** sick day and every other sick day after that (per course), you will need to turn in a **doctor's notice** ("Attest" in German) in order for them to count as excused, too. It is **your** responsibility to keep track of your absences and to know when a doctor's note is required. No doctor's notice issued more than three days after the day of illness will be accepted.

If you miss an **exam** due to an excused absence, your instructor and the FU-BEST team will arrange a make-up exam for you; you may also be entitled to a term paper **deadline extension**. If you, however, do not fulfill all course requirements needed for a grade by the (later) date determined by the program, passing the course is no longer possible.

Please also note that if you miss **more than half** of a course's sessions (even if due to excused absence), passing the course is no longer possible.

Personal travel and visits by relatives or friends are **not** accepted as reasons for absence (i.e., absences for these reasons always count as **unexcused**).

Regarding **unexcused** absences, please note the following:

- Any unexcused absence has consequences for at least the participation portion of the grade.
- Two unexcused absences lead to a lowering of the course grade by a fraction.
- Three unexcused absences will result in a 5.0 (equivalent to an "F") on the transcript.

## Literature

Digitized readings posted on the online learning platform Blackboard.

Spiegelman, A. (1987). *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. 1: My Father Bleeds History*. Penguin Books.

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Course Schedule

Calendar	Topics, Readings, etc.
Session 1	<p><b>Introduction: Trauma and Biographical Breaks – an Interdisciplinary Approach</b> Our Focus: Trauma Induced by Identity-Related Ruptures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No Readings, suggested to watch: <b>What is trauma? The author of “The Body Keeps the Score” explains   Bessel van der Kolk   Big Think:</b> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJfmfkDQb14">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJfmfkDQb14</a></li> </ul>
Session 2	<p><b>What is Trauma?</b> Trauma has, today, become a word regularly used to describe experience of a particular negative intensity. Yet as a diagnostic term, trauma is a relatively recent category. What exactly do we mean when we invoke it? What are its histories, and how can we reconcile its different meanings?</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Freud, Sigmund (1960) Fixation upon Traumas. In <i>A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis</i> (pp. 284-296). N.Y.: Washington Square Press.</li> <li>Leys, R. (1994). Traumatic Cures: Shell Shock, Janet, and the Question of Memory. <i>Critical Inquiry</i>, 20(4), 623–662.</li> <li>Nathan, T., &amp; Grandsard, C. (2006). <i>PTSD and fright disorders: Rethinking trauma from an ethnopsychiatric perspective</i>. <a href="https://www.ethnopsychiatrie.net/TN&amp;CG_PTSD.htm">https://www.ethnopsychiatrie.net/TN&amp;CG_PTSD.htm</a></li> </ul>
Session 3	<p><b>Identity and Biography: Stories About Our Selves</b> Narratives are central to the way we make sense of who we are, where we belong, and where we are headed. Yet they also often paper over the gaps, holes, and inconsistencies of experience and its lived reality. What can we learn from the way narrative emerges as a genre through which selfhood is articulated, and what do these genres tell us about the silences of trauma?</p> <p><b>Note:</b> In this session, students are required to submit a topic for their final term papers. Nothing is written in stone, of course, but having an idea at this stage of what interests you will also make your reading through the rest of the course more purposeful.</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>White, H. (1990). The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality. In <i>The Content of the Form</i> (pp. 1–25). Johns Hopkins University Press.</li> <li>Sebald, W.G. (1996) <i>The Emigrants</i>. N.Y.: New Directions. (Two chapters: Dr. Henry Selwyn, Paul Bereyter)</li> </ul>
Session 4	<p><b>Trauma: Memory and the Collective</b> How does memory work? More specifically, what is the structure of trauma in relation to memory? Can a community have a memory, and if so, can it be traumatic? What would it require to make such a claim, and where might such arguments take us?</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Kirmayer, L. (1996). Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation. In P. Antze &amp; M. Lambek (Eds.), <i>Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory</i> (173-199). Routledge.</li> <li>Halbwachs, M. (1980). <i>The Collective Memory</i>. New York: Harper &amp; Row. (pp. 50-87)</li> <li>Herf, J. (1997). <i>Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys</i>. Harvard University Press. (pp. xi-13)</li> </ul>

<p><b>Session 5</b></p>	<p><b>Migration, Relocation, Escape: Trauma and Space</b>  Migration and flight are often moments of profound existential ruptures. They introduce a “before” and “after”, a splitting of the self that is also a splitting of identity, home, and desire. What would it mean to think of these ruptures as traumatic, and what does healing look like in the aftermath of emigration and flight?</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bialas, U., &amp; Sohail, J. (2022). Flucht Nach Vorne (seeking Refuge in the Future): Trauma, Agency, and the Fantasy of Onward Flight Among Refugees in Berlin. <i>Ethos</i>, 50(4), 480–495.</li> <li>• Giordano, C. (2014). On the Tightrope of Culture. In <i>Migrants in translation: Caring and the logics of difference in contemporary Italy</i> (pp. 33–71). University of California press</li> </ul>
<p><b>Session 6</b></p>	<p><b>MIDTERM EXAM</b></p>
<p><b>Session 7</b></p>	<p><b>Discrimination, Self-Denial, Persecution, Guilt</b>  Trauma is often shadowed by psychic structures of repression and disavowal. Sometimes trauma may be legitimated and given credibility. At other times, it is denied, either by institutions, societies, or victims themselves. More puzzlingly, if trauma can be inherited, then can the guilt for its perpetration? What happens to the configuration of victims and perpetrators in such complex situations of inheritance, and what is the relationship between guilt, persecution, trauma and justice? In this class we explore this question via traumatic histories experienced by certain communities. We look at the Algerian experience of French colonialism, the question of the inheritance of guilt and persecution in the case of a post-war Germany being made to confront the crimes of the Holocaust, and the case of queer asylum seekers, whose stories descend into silence in contexts where law fails to make room for their suffering.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> In this session, students will be required to provide an outline of their final term papers.</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Johnson, T. A. M. (2011). On Silence, Sexuality and Skeletons: Reconceptualizing Narrative in Asylum Hearings. <i>Social &amp; Legal Studies</i>, 20(1), 57–78.</li> <li>• Fanon, F. (2004a). Colonial War and Mental Disorders. In <i>The Wretched of the Earth</i> (pp. 181–235). Grove press.</li> <li>• Chasseguet-Smirgel, J. (1989). The Green Theater: Essay on Collective Manifestations of Unconscious Guilt. In <i>Sexuality and Mind: The Role of the Father and Mother in the Psyche</i> (pp. 109–128). Karnac.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Session 8</b></p>	<p><b>Stories Untold: Trauma and Collective Historical Evaluation</b>  Evaluations of one’s historical past must often confront traumatic events. The question: “who are we” can even become conditional on a certain relationship to collective trauma. Narratives that look to bring such events into accounts of belonging must find ways to confront the void left by the traumatic wound. Germany is often not thought of as having been on the receiving end of trauma, and yet its cities were levelled, and many – particularly women – were also on the receiving end of violence at the hands of the soldiers that brought an end to the Third Reich. Then of course there is the question of the fall of the Wall and the so called “end of history”. Reunification has not been a straightforward process, and for many from the former “East”, the experience of the shock of reincorporation into capitalism found little purchase in the optimism that formed the dominant narrative of a post-Soviet world. What can we make of such experience, how does it surface, and what happens if it is repressed instead?</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sebald, W. G. (2002, October 28). A Natural History of Destruction. <i>The New Yorker</i>. (12 pages)</li> <li>• Welzer, H. (2005). <i>Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance</i>. American Jewish Committee. (pp. 1-24)</li> <li>• Boyer, D. (2006). <i>Ostalgie</i> and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany. <i>Public Culture</i>, 18(2), 361–381.</li> <li>• Optional (CW: a challenging intergenerational account of sexual violence) Borneman, J. (2015). <i>Cruel Attachments: The Ritual Rehab of Child Molesters in Germany</i>. The University of Chicago press. (pp. 3-22).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Session 9</b></p>	<p><b>Making Oneself Heard: Storytelling and Healing</b> The talking cure has long been central to various psychoanalytic and psychiatric approaches to healing from trauma. But how does one story-tell the unspeakable? What if the stories we choose to tell are not our own, but the weight of their significance is nonetheless carried by us?</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spiegelman, A. (1987). <i>Maus: A Survivor's Tale. 1: My Father Bleeds History</i>. Penguin Books.</li> <li>• Hynes, S. (2005). Personal Narratives and Commemoration. In J. Winter &amp; E. Sivan (Eds.), <i>War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century</i> (pp. 205–221). Cambridge University Press.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Session 10</b></p>	<p><b>Creating Community: Societal Institutions Against Trauma</b> How do societies recover from great crimes? What does justice look like, and how do we hold people to account when the crimes and criminals are too great to number? Memorialization, commemoration and truth and reconciliation committees have so far been our way, yet how do these work? What can we do to avoid the pitfalls of empty symbolic gestures? Is it possible to set up collective modes of accountability?</p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Borneman, J. (2011). Modes of Accountability: Events of Closure, Rites of Repetition. In <i>Political Crime and the Memory of Loss</i> (pp. 3–33). Indiana University Press.</li> <li>• Young, J. E. (1992). The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today. <i>Critical Inquiry</i>, 18(2), 267–296.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Session 11</b></p>	<p><b>Trauma Politics and the Contemporary</b> Trauma is not as innocent as it seems. Its meaning has regularly changed over the past century, and much of its significance today has to do with its political subtext. Can someone who commits a war crime be traumatized by what they have done? Does this collapse the distance between victim and perpetrator? If trauma has a political life, then how does it relate to its diagnostic one? In this class we will zoom out to see the way trauma has been instrumentalized by political movements, and how this entanglement has changed the meaning of trauma in turn.</p> <p><b>Note: Final term papers are due</b></p> <p><b>Readings</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fassin, D., &amp; Rechtman, R. (2009). <i>The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry Into the Condition of Victimhood</i>. Princeton University Press. (pp. 1-40)</li> <li>• Rothberg, M. (2011). From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory. <i>Criticism</i>, 53(4), 523–548.</li> </ul>

<b>Session 12</b>	<b>What isn't Trauma?</b> Not everything can be trauma. Yet given how significant the political and existential stakes of making a claim to trauma can be, this can be hard to say. The fact is that thinking of all negative experience through the language of trauma produces disturbing results. To end our exploration, we ask if there are other ways we can narrate loss, shock and violence. Where might these paths take us? <b>Readings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sehgal, P. (2021, December 27). The Case Against the Trauma Plot. <i>The New Yorker</i>. (10 pages) <a href="https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot">https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/01/03/the-case-against-the-trauma-plot</a></li><li>• Malabou, C. (2012). <i>Ontology of the accident: An essay on destructive plasticity</i>. Polity Press. (pp. 1-38)</li></ul>
<b>Session 13</b>	<b>Paper Presentations and Discussion</b> In this class we will discuss your final papers, you will present your work and ideas and receive feedback from your instructor and peers

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