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DOI

[10.17192/meta.2018.11.7812](https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2018.11.7812)

Publication date

2018

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Middle East - Topics and Arguments

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Matthies-Boon, V. (2018). Towards a Critical Trauma Studies: A Response to Felix Lang. *Middle East - Topics and Arguments*, 11, 159-162.
<https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2018.11.7812>

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ANTI-THESIS

Towards a Critical Trauma Studies: A Response to Felix Lang

Vivienne Matthies-Boon

In this response, I agree with Felix Lang about the need to problematize trauma studies' prevalent and underlying assumptions. However, I suggest that we should go a step further, namely towards a phenomenological account of trauma rooted in Frankfurt School of critical theory. Such an approach enables us to pay attention to the political power dynamics within which trauma studies is enmeshed,

and argue against the reification and objectification of trauma. It also allows for an intersubjective (re)interpretation of trauma that explicitly grounds the experiences of trauma in *social* and *political* contexts.

Keywords: Trauma, Critical Theory, Politics, Phenomenology

First, of all, let me just say that I agree with much of what Felix Lang has written. And so, this anti-thesis is not so much an anti-thesis as a call to take his essay a few steps further. Or dare I say, it is an attempt to move it towards a self-reflexive *political radicalization* of trauma studies. By that, I mean the deliberate attempt to question (and thereby change) the social structures and political values of trauma studies as well as the realities that trauma studies engage with. I argue that those of us working within trauma studies (however loosely defined) should undertake a *self-reflexive* examination of the political biases of our knowledge production and explicitly aim towards a *critical theoretical* interpretation of our practices. I believe that by drawing inspiration from Frankfurt School of critical theory, we can 1) take a stance against the reification and objectification of trauma, 2) pay attention to the political power dynamics within which trauma studies is enmeshed, and 3) argue for an intersubjective (re)interpretation of trauma that explicitly links the self to the social and political world(s).¹ Frankfurt School of critical theory, in its varied forms,² has above all taught us that theoretical knowledge production and socio-political practices are inherently intertwined. And the aim of critical theory is to offer a (never-ending and self-reflexive) critique of the

established political status quo—in which individual, social and political realms are interconnected—with the explicit aim of emancipation and liberation from divergent modes of alienation.

In terms of trauma studies, this means first of all recognizing that trauma as such is not a neutral, objective diagnostic concept, but rather that the very notion of trauma may entail an objectification and reification of divergent experiences and expressions. As Felix Lang and others before him (see Bracken; Craps; Hacking; Young) have argued, the concept of trauma—commonly linked to PTSD—is not politically neutral but a direct result of a particular political struggle—namely the Vietnam War veterans' lobby—which risks projecting onto history and others a universalist conception of trauma that potentially erases differences of experience and expression. In doing so, and through its diagnostic categories, trauma studies validates and invalidates certain experiences of trauma. Not only that, but the diagnostic and medicalizing tendency in much of the trauma studies literature also potentially stigmatizes the *abnormal* traumatized *Other*, whilst reducing philosophical questions of meaning and the soul to issues of malfunctioning brain-wiring (Bracken 34). Moreover, as Susannah

Radstone has pointed out, the eventism inherent in mainstream conceptions of trauma also illustrates its Westocentric underpinnings (Radstone): trauma is an *abnormal* overwhelming event (or short series of events) rather than the structural underpinning of life itself (see Craps). For instance, as Steph Craps remarked, in Sierra Leone the “normal experience is one of oppression, deprivation and upheaval; freedom, affluence and stability—the Western standard of normality—are the exception rather than the rule” (Craps 4). Western trauma interventions were hence sharply criticized by the local population: “You call it a disorder... We call it life” (Craps 4)

Having said all this, if we do want to pursue a more critical notion of trauma that is not blinded to its biases and diversity of expressions, we do not have to (re)invent the entire wheel. There is scholarship that we can draw on. Particularly noteworthy here are the philosophical and phenomenological undertakings on trauma by Patrick Bracken and Robert D Stolorow—unfortunately absent from Felix Lang's considerations—which enable us to consider the different ways in which trauma entails the (attempted) breaking of our meaningful engagement with the world. The point here is explicitly not to develop

diagnostic criteria but rather to note how traumatic suffering—including repression and deprivation—might be *existentially* experienced, thereby opening trauma studies up to distinctly philosophical and phenomenological analyses. Particularly when such a phenomenological understanding of experiences of, for instance, an unsafe and unpredictable world, is linked with the critical and explicitly political writings on *continuous traumatic stress* (CTS), the door is opened towards a more political, phenomenological, and reflexive conception of trauma. The term CTS was developed by anti-apartheid activists in South Africa (Straker) and explicitly argues against the eventism of trauma studies through the insistence that in much of the world traumatic experiences are relentless, structural, and continuous (Eagle and Kaminer; Nuttman-Shwartz and Shoal-Zuckerman; Pat-Horenczyk et al.; Stevens et al.; Straker). Importantly, trauma is also often directly perpetrated by or at least informally tied up with the established political orders who frequently reign with a sense of impunity and unaccountability, thereby aggravating traumatic stress. In an anti-diagnostic stance, the activists also insist that the different expressions of traumatic stress are not a pathological but a normal response to political repression, human rights violations, and other forms

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of radical unsafety—from which therapeutic safety cannot be guaranteed. CTS thus urges us to re-evaluate the particularly Westocentric underpinnings of the dominant conception of trauma, and the hierarchies of suffering and alienation it imposes.

Felix Lang is correct to note there is a flattening of trauma, in the sense that much of the mainstream literature on trauma regards these traumatic experiences (from Rwanda to Syria) to be the same as it pays scant attention to the vastly different social, cultural, political contexts and meaning-making practices. Yet, whilst there is a flattening, there is also a hierarchization of trauma that exposes its own political biases. For instance, much of the existing trauma studies literature takes the Holocaust as being the most unique and ultimate pinnacle of trauma. This is not to take away from the gravity of the Holocaust and the systematic destruction of human life as such, but when we consider the relative absence of serious considerations of the slave trade or indeed the Nakba (Sayigh) in the theoretical trauma studies literature—as well as the fact that many of the international centers of trauma expertise are located in Israel (rather than say Gaza or the West Bank)—one cannot help but wonder about the political orientations and purposes of trauma studies

knowledge production itself. The question here is: who has a political voice? Whose voice is articulated and whose voice is heard, and by whom? What does it mean to have a political voice, and is the witnessing that trauma studies calls us to do always emancipatory (Caruth)? Or can it itself lead to further repression and silencing through in- and out-group creations?

It is indeed time that we recognize the power dynamics at play within trauma studies itself: trauma is not a neutral construct, but one whose knowledge production is tied up with social, economic, and political power (like other fields of scholarship). One good starting point is, I argue, to create links between trauma studies and the critical political theory of the Frankfurt School, thereby seeking to avoid the tendency of reification of trauma as a neutral category and highlighting its distinctly political manifestations and implications. Linking trauma more closely to critical theory enables us to explore the dimensions of alienation, reification, and political power imbalances and injustices in varied forms. For instance, in the case of Egypt, directly linking the existential traumatic experiences of activists in post-revolutionary Egypt with Jurgen Habermas's colonization of the lifeworld

enabled an elucidation of the political (counter-revolutionary and strategic) purposes behind the emotional and physical destruction, social atomization, and tactics of polarization and dehumanization experienced by activists (Matthies-Boon and Head). Whilst, vice versa, phenomenological analyses of existentially traumatic experiences can lead to a clarification as to how the destruction of a person's or a group's social and political world contributes to particular processes of alienation and political (de)mobilization—and are thus important for our critical theoretical social and political undertakings (Matthies-Boon). Critical theoretical conceptions of trauma allow us to link the phenomenological experiences of personal estrangement and distress to processes of political alienation and social destruction, thereby deepening our analysis. Hence, the study of trauma is a clear political act, but one that must be situated in a mode of never-ending self-reflexive radical critique—one that does not provide easy answers but in fact continuously raises radically uneasy questions.

Notes

¹ Unfortunately, in the space of this response I do not have sufficient capacity to develop the more precise outlines of a Frankfurt School conception of trauma, but this is the subject of my forthcoming book *Life, Death and Alienation: Counter-Revolutionary Trauma in Egypt*.

² Please note that with Frankfurt School critical theory I include the divergent thoughts and works of the different generations, including (but not limited to) Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Erich Fromm, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser.

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