

# Interview met Ron Eyerman

Rogier van Reekum

Ron Eyerman has been one of the principal figures at the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology. Building on American functionalist theory as well as Continental traditions (hermeneutics and structuralists in particular), he and others – Jeffrey Alexander, Philip Smith – have been developing an eclectic and ambitious project of cultural sociology. In it, they seek to uphold the macrosociological ambitions of Parsonian sociology, while at the same time taking into account all the anti-teleological critique which can be lodged against such ambitions. Ritual and performance have been a seminal points of focus in this project. Performing rituals is important not only because rituals link up the societal system to bodily and symbolic praxis, but also because they introduce emotions and transformative power into an otherwise overly deterministic and static social theory.

Eyerman's work has focused on social movements, music, art, performance, contentious politics and the affective dimensions of social life. In 2008 he published *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh: From social drama to cultural trauma* (Duke University Press, 2008) in which he analyses the assassination of Theo van Gogh and the ensuing reactions as a social drama. Furthermore he tries to show how this mediated event touched upon narratives constitutive of Dutch society. During a short stay in the Netherlands, Rogier van Reekum sat down with him for a conversation about his a new book in the making, Wilders' success in the Dutch elections and the difficulties of managing rapid social change.

*RvR: Since the assassination of Theo van Gogh the social drama, which had already been going on for a long time, has not led up. Constantly, there are new installments. What do the concepts of social drama and cultural trauma offer in understanding this process? What is the seminal perspective that they bring?*

RE: Well, right now I'm finishing my new book, which is a comparison of six assassinations. A seventh case will appear separately because I'm not sure if it fits in with the rest. It's about two assassinations in San Francisco. The one is Harvey Milk and the other is George Moscone, the mayor of San Francisco [Both were killed by Dan White on November 27, 1978]. The question in this case is why Americans remember Harvey Milk and don't remember George Moscone. When Moscone was mayor he was much more well-known than Harvey Milk. So why is it that now there is a Harvey Milk Day in California and school kids need to spend time talking about Harvey Milk? What the concepts of social drama and cultural trauma do is that it gives us a framework to ask questions like this. The murders were a tremendous drama at the time. In Victor Turner's model: there was a breach, then there was an attempted resolution, and all that implied. But Turner's model focuses on and stops at the process of reconciliation. He's a functionalist, interested in equilibrium and talking about how a society gets back to some kind of consensus about things. In this same sense, social drama gives you a model to

look at the occurrence. Cultural trauma, however, gives you a historical and future-oriented perspective. Cultural trauma is much more about the consequences and the results. So what I try to do in the book is to analyze six cases of social drama involving assassinations and to see in which of these cases we can talk about a cultural trauma. That is, a cultural trauma defined as a public discourse in which the foundational narrative of the nation – which is the shared frame of reference in the cases – comes apart. In which of the social dramas is there a widespread discussion that really gets to the foundations of the national collective. My preliminary idea is that in Sweden [assassination of Olof Palme] one can speak of a trauma for the social-democratic party, for the police corps, but not of a national, cultural trauma.

In America, the entire sixties were a cultural trauma: the society is entirely polarized over all of these big questions: “who are we?”, “what kind of society do we want?”. Conservatives, like Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon were saying we were not a sick society, what was needed was law and order not radical reform, while radicals and some liberals said the opposite, both sides argued that something significant must be done. The Netherlands is an interesting case for me, because things are contentious but not as polarized. Here, it is not as clear that you are dealing with a cultural trauma, though I think you are in the midst of something significant regarding the nature of Dutch identity. So it will depend on how stringent one wants to be with the concept, but I think we can talk about a cultural trauma here. So when you began your question with saying that it doesn’t go away. That for me is one defining aspect of a cultural trauma. Even if, in Victor Turner’s terms, there can be some process of healing going on, something remains, perhaps not as an open wound, but at least as a scar. It leaves a trace and has some permanent affect on the remembrance of a collective, its collective conscience.

But these concepts are tools for analysis, they are heuristic devices, even though they describe processes with real effects. So if you want to learn something with regards to policy I don’t know if that could work. For me they are tools for analyzing the effects of shocking occurrences, like political assassinations, civil and natural disasters, revolutions, military occupations and so on.

*RvR: So it seems that in this kind of analysis the question of memory is crucial. It is all about what is and isn’t remembered and why, almost like a selection process, a particular version of a drama endures and others drop off, like in the case of George Moscone.*

RE: Right. What I want to do is to bridge an emotional dimension to a more discursive one, but I also distinguish this approach from the psychoanalytic and the naturalist or common-sense approach to trauma. What happens in these shocking occurrences where there is a rupture in the taken-for-granted and a breaking of a collective habitus? Well, in our society the mass media plays an extremely important role in offering narratives, telling us who’s responsible, who are the perpetrators, who are the victims, what’s the meaning of this incident. They turn an occurrence into an event. Mass media are the first ones on the scene to give you a storyline. In those first moments or even hours when something has happened they turn a real time occurrence into a narrated, out of time story. I looked at

the radio broadcasts right after Pim Fortuyn was murdered. First they reported he was stabbed, then that he was shot. Maybe it was a Muslim, or maybe not. In all of such murders there is total confusion at first. It's the mass media who make something out of that. I try to show in my books that they already have their own scripts handy. There are also other carrier groups [groups that "carry" and thus sustain ideas, norms, narratives, myths, explanations, etc.], to borrow a term from Max Weber, active in attempting to create and shift narratives in this meaning struggle. Well placed persons, experts, 'friends of victim' try to shape how a traumatic incident is framed. Political elites are also active in this meaning struggle, as they attempt to manage a potential crisis.

In America the 'assassination script' was formed with Abraham Lincoln's assassination at the end of the Civil War. With the rise of visual media, most significantly TV a real shift occurs, which is apparent with the assassination of John Kennedy. This has set the form for how the media handles assassinations, not only in the U.S.. Out of what Turner calls liminal spaces, time out of time, comes a pre-scripted story. When, in the case of Fortuyn it turned out that the killer was an environmental activist this shifted the narrative, raising the issue of whether 'the movement' was involved. The subsequent focus on that movement and a possible conspiracy is one of the effects of this. For example the book *Eco Nostra* [by Peter Siebelt, 2003], which attempts to influence the interpretation, and thus the meaning, of the Fortuyn assassination.

*RvR: Would you agree that the mass media have a systemic bias? That is, a bias that doesn't stem from journalist's intentions or corporate interests, but one that has to do with the kinds of stories that the system as a whole tends to select?*

RE: With regards to assassination I would say so, although cautiously. The stories will be different in different national media also depending of the timing, depending on what else is going on. Also there is the structure of the national media itself. Mass media in the Netherlands seems to me to be a little less sensationalist than the US or, most especially Great Britain. But in general, media like to personalize, they like to find responsible people, they like to find personalities and name individuals. There is a bias toward individual and psychological explanation. This bias is political, as well as cultural. Cultural in the sense that we like to simplify, we like simple explanations, we like one victim and one perpetrator, while at the same time we liked to be teased by conspiracy, hence the love of political thrillers in popular culture. But on the other hand – and I don't know if this is systemic – this definitely serves the interest of the dominant authority and the dominant culture. So in the case of the assassination stories, it is important that there be a single assassin – not a conspiracy, conspiracies are bad for those holding political authority – that the killer be a loner, an isolated individual acting on their own, mentally unstable suits them better. That is what people are looking for, both those in authority and those regular citizens. In the case of the Palme assassination in Sweden, conspiracy theories are rife, because the killer was never found. But if you're in the authority you don't want that kind of a story. It might be brought up, but then dropped as quickly as possible. Better the killer is a marginal individual, than a member of a group with the police corps, as some Swedish

thriller writers suggested. Now, I don't know if that's a conspiracy on the part of the authorities, but there is certainly an inclination: Better to have a sick and lonely individual, than a group, especially one of your own. So, one would say, let's encourage that. As I said, this is cultural and also political. It's not necessarily consciously conspiratorial, but the inclination and the scripts are already there and available. There are narratives that come into play, unconsciously, when reporters start reporting a story and when authority performs its role and these work in the favor of certain explanations. Of course, there are alternative media that are looking for other things, but they obviously have a hard time getting into the mainstream.

*RvR: On a normative note, would you say that personalization and who-done-it stories in the mass media are detrimental to democracy?*

RE: I would say it's detrimental to democracy if the press was speaking with one voice, like a chorus. I know that in the Netherlands there is this long tradition of distributing radio and TV time across societal groups. Sweden has a similar tradition, with public funds distributed across the social and political spectrum; new divisions are evolving. I was just speaking with Dick Pels and he was worrying about Groen Links, because it only appealed to a select group of people, who share opinions and a life style. Not only the media, but also political parties can develop pre-formed scripted messages.

*RvR: One of the more striking aspects of the last elections was the way in which Wilders combined a discourse of, what in America one would call, hate speech with a platform of self-declared hope and optimism. How would you gage that kind of a connection?*

RE: Not that this is necessarily connected to Wilders, but just as a way to think about longing: I recently went to the resistance museum in Amsterdam and one of the things they have there is a gigantic photo of a Dutch Nazi demonstration, attended mostly guys, middle aged men. They also show the numbers of the Dutch involved in this movement, which are quite impressive, and they have various quotes about why these people were involved in this. One of the quotes was: "I joined because of the collective singing and the sense of belonging". I think a study of neo-Nazis would reveal something similar. So it wasn't or isn't so much an ideology that appeals as something else: a sense of community, as the Birmingham School showed in their studies of youth subcultures. A longing for community and solidarity might well be a universal human need. The question is why people feel drawn to this kind of organization, subculture or movement? There has been a long debate about such things in the Netherlands and I saw an article about this in the NRC this weekend by two cultural sociologists [Dick Houtman & Peter Achterberg<sup>1</sup>]. They pointed out that Wilders is attractive to those who feel left out, who feel that society and history are moving past them, without them. This feeling of being past by, being left out lends itself to alienation and a longing for something else. This is what the early theories of social movements in the United States, developed by Parsons, Smelser and others, tried to show. Such

1 NRC *Handelsblad*, Politici schiepen een kloof tussen henzelf en de politiek. June 19, 2010.

popular movements they argued were all about the strains of modernization and of modernity itself, which turned some into winners and some into losers. Social movements in their eyes, especially the Nazi-movement, were movements that offered hope and belonging to the marginalized. In this sense, there exist a number of individuals whose feel marginalized who can be turned into a group, and in this sense appropriated by those who would be political leaders. From this point of view, Wilders gives these individuals a sense that there is “a train moving, come on board”. This is sometimes labeled populism.

Now, here I want to say something about populism. There is a real difference between American and European populism. The concept itself has a relatively positive connotation in America and a relatively negative connotation here, because here it's associated with demagoguery and right wing extremists. In the US the term was originally associated with the left and had a lot to do with people that felt left out, at the mercy of big business and big government. In many ways Obama is an American populist: offering hope and change, saying that Washington is the problem, big corporations are the problem, the little guy on Main Street is being left out and we, the people, are the ones who really own this country. A bit of Woody Guthrie and Bruce Springsteen! In Europe, populism is associated with the right, but also with political demagoguery, with leaders like Wilders, this was actually something that Fortuyn fought against, at least as far as the labeling was concerned. There is a different idea of populism when appealing to an audience in a society where the Constitution says “We, the people”. Then there's the issue of free speech. In Europe there are laws that are much stricter, than the U.S. The American Civil Liberties Union, which is a left-liberal organization, will defend neo-Nazis. An appeal to free speech was also the issue with Theo van Gogh and it is very clear from the monument that was put up in the park [Oosterpark, Amsterdam]. And now they are going to take Wilders to court for some of the things he has said publicly. Where the boarder goes between free speech on the one hand and public decency and moral responsibility on the other is one we will be struggling with for a long time.

*RvR: You seem to work in very different national contexts. How do comparisons work when the things you're comparing – for instance, the assassinations – are historically speaking unique instances. How can such comparisons yield analytical perchance? And which kinds of comparisons would you recommend in order for us, here, to learn more about our situation?*

RE: Well, it depends on whose asking that question. I'm going to fall back on my earlier Habermasian approach here. Depending on your knowledge interest you would do different things. Right now, we're talking about assassinations and cultural trauma. In general, cultural trauma can be both good and bad depending on who's looking. If you're interested in managing traumatic occurrences and handling crisis, there is something to be learned, for example. Say that I could show there was no cultural trauma in Sweden after the assassination of Olof Palme. And one of the reasons why there wasn't, was that the very day it happened there was an immediate political transition: the front page of the largest daily newspaper carried a picture of Palme's body on the street in Stockholm and of the stun-

ned next in command assuming office, with the reigning Swedish King standing behind him, as if to say “the nation goes on”. And in the US, the same occurred after John Kennedy was killed. Vice President Lyndon Johnson took the oath of office on the plane at Dallas International Airport and then flew back to Washington. Johnson had been in the same motorcade in which Kennedy was killed and first media reports had him also wounded. All this was famously captured with the picture of him and Jacqueline Kennedy standing beside him with her husband’s blood still on her dress. These transitions aren’t sufficient, but there are necessary to show that there’s political continuity and stability, and to show it immediately. In the Netherlands, of course, those assassinated were not heads of state, so there was no need to show political transition, but there was a need to show calm and the face and voice of political and moral authority did its best to convey that.

For the social scientist there is much to be learned here. In which cases do really extreme things follow, like a civil war? It depends on who is assassinated, when, how quickly the transition can go, how stable that transition is, how stable a democracy is. In other words it’s not merely a matter of facts or incidents, i.e. an assassination, but of timing and social and political context. Take Israel, for example, when Prime Minister Rabin was assassinated in an already polarized society, where half the population is happy he was killed and the other half entirely devastated. How do you handle that? I guess what I’m saying is that all these cases are very different and complicated, but from the point of view of how to manage crisis, one can learn a few things, if that’s what you’re interested in. I learned a lot from the work of Maarten Hajer and Justus Uitermark, who talk about performing authority. Immediately after the assassination of Van Gogh the Dutch Queen was in the media, as was the Prime Minister and various religious and community leaders calling for calm. This is a learning experience, about how to perform authority in times of crisis, which of course can also have career consequences for those who do well or badly. In Sweden, various authorities learned how to bury a fallen leader by looking at the Kennedy funeral. The Swedish mass media also learned something about how to report as well as construct such an event. The Social Democratic Party also used the occasion, as the flags of all the locals around the nation were displayed in the funeral procession. For the mass media as well as for this political party, Palme’s funeral was an occasion to represent the nation, to present collective grief and suffering.

*RvR: It’s often said that the Dutch aren’t very good at rituals. They don’t like it, they feel awkward. They don’t know how to do it. Would you agree? What’s your impression? Or is there no such thing as a necessarily good or bad ritual?*

RE: Here, I’ll be a Durkheimian and follow Victor Turner: what’s the function of ritual? Let’s say, the ritual concerns expressing Dutchness, providing routinized practices for expressing the collective and for feeling a sense of belonging. If the Dutch deny that there’s something like Dutchness than maybe these rituals aren’t so prevalent. Yet, rituals might not be so obvious, performed on collective occasions in public, but they’re there nonetheless. Even in the small things, like going out, dressing and walking a certain way, habits which express a collective belong-

ging and are recognized as such, though not in any obvious way. Such practices are ritualized. There is a clear expression and representation of group belonging in these everyday practices. Even though it's an invented and very commercialized tradition, it has become a ritual. This is a way of showing who "we" are. The Dutch might not be good at ritual, but they're pretty good at such displays. In America, school children pledge allegiance to the flag everyday in a formalized ceremony. Maybe, you don't need national belonging. Maybe, the Dutch should focus on being cosmopolitan in a globalized world, after all: it's better for business!

*RvR: I know I'm constantly coming back to the issue of management, but from this kind of perspective one would suggest that apart from policies and legal frameworks, states do need ritual in order to deal with diversity and migration, right?*

RE: I see the Dutch have started doing naturalization ceremonies, marking and celebrating the attainment of citizenship. This is creating rituals around the nation and national identity. The American government has always emphasized the honor attached to becoming an American citizen. Nationalists argue, "How can we be a troubled society when so many are trying to get in"? Nationalization ceremonies welcome people into the community, like belonging to a church. Nationalist movements always favor ritualized practices in order to instill a sense of belonging and pride, making this not only a duty but also a public act.

*RvR: The sword does cut both ways, right? Whereas Wilders, through his particular brand of populism, is forging a sense of belonging; at the same time, he's excluding a big part of the Dutch nationals, card-carrying Dutch citizens. So that's not just complicated for the people who are subjected to that, but it's also complicated for him. He's suggesting that we're all coming back to and rediscovering our Dutchness, but at the same time he's driving a wedge between Dutch citizens.*

RE: Social movements in general, and not only nationalist movements, always face this dilemma: are we going to build the collective around universal or more particularistic criteria. That was one of the tensions in the women's movement. So what will the collective be? If it's going to be a nation, does that designate a geographic phenomenon or is it a cultural phenomenon? In Wilder's case, he is driving a mobilizing campaign around cultural issues. But he is also thinking about how many votes he needs to attain parliamentary seats, so the issue of how to strike a balance between inclusion and exclusion is of prime consideration.

*RvR: One of the most striking things about these last elections was the way in which integration and migration were somewhat downplayed. That had everything to do with the financial crisis and the ensuing currency crises. The main theme of the election became balancing the national budget. Now, even among politicians themselves and certainly among commentators there was a kind of relief about that. They reasoned that at least this takes attention away from the platform of Wilders. Does this shift seem durable to you?*

RE: Well, this would be to really personalize it by saying that it's just about Wilders. As the two cultural sociologists in the NRC pointed out: it's more a question of what and who he represents. This is the typical management response: make it personal, if we get rid of this guy the problem will go away. This thinking also

favors the traditional elites, including leftists, by suggesting that once this trouble-maker is gone we can return to the “real” issues, the material issues that really matter. Cultural and cross-class issues confuse the established elites, so this focus on material interests is great for them. I don’t think this will work, however. Those who Wilders speaks for and to aren’t going to go away easily. Better to recognize this and find a way to deal with it.

*RvR: Once again, this approach is too managerial, too instrumental.*

RE: I would think so, yes.

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