TRAUMA IN SOCIAL LIFE

Challenges for Historical Sociology

In recent decades, trauma has become an organising principle of global cultures. Sociological scholarship has generally approached this phenomenon either as the spread of a cultural framework through which particular experiences and emotions are defined as traumatic, or as an expression of suffering rooted in systemic and structural violence. Drawing on the forthcoming book *Trauma in Social Life*, this presentation develops an approach situated at the intersection of lived experience and cultural categorisation. Central to this perspective is the historical emergence of a *traumatic imagination*: a disposition to experience the present counter-factually, through the imprint of painful pasts.

The presentation introduces this framework and examines the challenges trauma poses for historical sociology. Drawing on soldiers' autobiographies from Western Europe and North America, spanning the early nineteenth to the early twenty-first century, it first traces historically specific ways in which suffering takes shape through the interplay between lived experience and its potential designations: modes of traumatisation. Then, the presentation outlines a theory of trauma in relation to social change. Drawing on the examples of sexual assault and ecological catastrophes, it proposes a model that can serve as a conceptual and empirical starting point to understand traumatic processes both historically and sociologically.

The presentation concludes by proposing a renewed task for the social sciences: to approach mental health as a site of political reflexivity and subversion.

AUTHOR

Baptiste Brossard is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of York. His forthcoming book, T*rauma in Social Life*, will be published by Polity Press in November 2026. He is also the co-author of Explaining *Mental Illness: Sociological Perspectives* (with Amy Chandler, Bristol University Press, 2022), co-convener of the British Sociological Association mental health study group and member of the editorial boards of journals *Sociology* and *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*.

TIME, DATE, PLACE

Thursday, 29 October 2026, 16:00 CEST
The seminar will be held on Zoom

Please register for attendance here.