Although the principal contemporary understanding of trauma in both medico-psychiatric fields and mainstream thought is of predominantly American origin, it was a concept that had for a long time been overlooked by discourses in the US. Before the conceptual development of trauma in America during the 1990s, the theory was almost entirely a European one. I believe that it was the unacknowledged failure of its foundational myths that compelled America to adopt and transform the concept of trauma as an explanatory tool for the American cultural psyche in the decade leading up to the 9/11 attacks. As a consequence of what I think to have been a mislabeling, harmful discourses which would have been better assessed and managed with an analytical approach guided by the notion of melancholia were able to ravage American culture.

This chapter serves to delineate where the notion of trauma as a psychological condition originally came from and what components eventually found entry into trauma theory, which will be discussed in the next chapter. In so doing, I trace developments within psychiatry as well as psychoanalysis. As my discussion will show, every developmental step involves a differentiation of trauma from melancholia.

Recalling my earlier discussion that melancholia became most prominent a notion whenever an age felt the need to critique modern life, I would point out that with the onset of an era that early on explicitly referred to itself as “Modernity”, melancholia in a Western context apparently lost much of its illuminative potential. The introspective qualities of melancholia failed to meet the demands of a newly evolving psychiatry interested in the study of the human psyche. Furthermore, melancholia seemed unfit to address, and to some extent absorb, the many shocks attributed to a distinctly modern lifestyle.


**Contextualizing the need for trauma as a concept**

In the consulted literature, there are several competing explanatory narratives as to why trauma evolved as a new psychological affliction in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Canadian philosopher of science Ian Hacking traces the socio-cultural context by examining the various concepts and notions consolidated in the word “trauma” in relation to what he regards to have been central to Western cultures ever since the late nineteenth century: “memoro-politics.” In analogy to Foucault’s notions of “anatomo-politics” and “biopolitics”, Hacking speaks of “memoro-power” resulting from memoro-politics by linking what he calls the science of memory to studies commissioned by state institutions about biographies of citizens that were regarded as disturbing, or even menacing presences within the populace.¹ For Hacking, these studies started with recorded biographies of delinquents in mid-nineteenth century London. He then shifts from the systematic narratives about the lives of criminals to a near-concurrent trend in Paris of recording the life stories of hysterical women – narratives that told “how these women had so often experienced terrible things early in life”.² To some degree, conceptualizations of trauma were successful because they fostered expert knowledge that allowed the state to either cure or lock away disturbing elements in the populace through the interpretation of citizens’ biographies.

Within Hacking’s writing, this control of individual memory is related to the desire to control memory at the collective level: “Communal memory has always played a major role in group identity. Almost any identifiable people has tales of origin.”³ Hacking’s thought gains more force when read in combination with Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (first published in 1983).⁴ Anderson contends

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⁴ A link between Hacking and Anderson is likewise suggested by Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, in the Introduction to the anthology featuring Hacking’s “Memory Sciences, Memory Politics” (see *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, xix ff.).