



# Harvey Milk and the Trauma of Assassination

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**Ron Eyerman**

Yale University, USA

## Abstract

This article sets out to explain why after the 1978 assassination of San Francisco Mayor George Moscone and city supervisor Harvey Milk, it is the latter who has achieved world recognition. At the time of their assassination Moscone was the more well-known figure, an American politician with a national reputation. The theories of social drama and cultural trauma are applied in this explanatory process. These theories provide a framework for analyzing how this incident became a significant event locally and nationally. The fact that Milk was one of the first openly gay people to hold public office in the United States meant that his life and death would have significance for a wide group of people. Individuals and organizations associated with gay liberation became carrier groups which created the Harvey Milk story and how it was told. Such carrier groups saw to it that Milk was remembered, and remembered in a particular way.

## Keywords

assassination, cultural trauma, carrier groups, gay liberation, gay movement, Harvey Milk, cultural sociology, memory, narration social drama

If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door. (Harvey Milk)

It is with memory, the last weapon of the dead and the sword of his friends, that we will avenge. (Meir Shalev, quoted in Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2009: 21)

## Introduction

In November 1978, Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk were assassinated at San Francisco City Hall. At the time of his death, Milk was one of the first openly gay men to hold political office in the United States. His life story has since been recounted in books, plays and films; ordained as ‘Saint Harvey’, he has become a symbol of gay liberation and a cult-figure known the world over. Harvey Milk has recently been

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### Corresponding author:

Ron Eyerman, Department of Sociology, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520–8265, USA

Email: [ronald.eyerman@yale.edu](mailto:ronald.eyerman@yale.edu)

honored with both a presidential medal and a memorial day in the country of his birth. George Moscone is largely forgotten outside of San Francisco. In this article, I apply and develop the theories of social drama and cultural trauma to help us understand and explain how and why these murders became a significant event. The framework of social drama (Turner, 1974, 1980; McFarland, 2004) allows one to isolate an incident, like an assassination, and study it from various perspectives and layers of meaning, while the theory of cultural trauma adds to this an historical as well as emotional dimension (Eyerman, 2008, 2011).

As hard as it may be to imagine today, it was not immediately obvious that Harvey Milk would be granted iconic political status – I will discuss how that came to be the case. At the time of the murder, George Moscone was the better known figure. Not only was he the mayor of a major American city, he was also active in state and national politics, known for his liberal ideas and his skills in handling racial, ethnic and sexual conflicts. Harvey Milk had achieved national recognition as one of the first openly gay men elected to public office. In the context of the time, this was a mixed blessing, as homosexuality was even more contentious an issue then than it is today. Even in San Francisco, a city on the verge of becoming the home of the largest concentration of gay people in the country, if not the world, sexuality and sexual politics were still very controversial subjects. In fact, part of Milk's ascent to fame began with his very visible opposition to a campaign that would remove homosexuals from teaching positions in California public schools (D'Emilio, 1993). To run for public office as a gay person, even – or perhaps especially – in a district with a large number of homosexuals was seen as a courageous, dangerous and potentially suicidal act. Indeed, Milk anticipated his own death by assassination. In a message recorded before his death, Milk said:

This is only to be played in the event of my death by assassination. I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for, an activist, a gay activist, becomes the target or the potential target of somebody who is insecure, terrified, afraid or very disturbed themselves. Knowing that I could be assassinated at any moment or any time, I feel it is important that people know my thoughts. ... I have always considered myself part of a movement ... everything was done through the eyes of the gay movement. (musicmedia10, 2008)

It is striking how significant Milk was in shaping both the narrative and the political consequences of his own death. That Milk died in a public building and that he saw himself as representing a movement helps us to understand, but not entirely explain, why he would be remembered and honored in 2008 with a Presidential Medal of Freedom and, in 2009, commemorated by the state of California with a Memorial Day. It is here that the theories mentioned above become useful.

As will be elaborated in greater detail below, the theory of social drama allows us to view the murders of Moscone and Milk as an ordered and structured performance in which the actions of individuals are understood as meaningful to themselves and to others in the context of a shared cultural world. It is through reconstructing these frameworks of meaning that we can make sense of what happened and why. This reconstruction can emerge from the point of view of the protagonists as well as from those looking on.

Included in the latter are not only the onlookers at the scene and those immediately affected, such as family members, political constituents, legal authorities and various others, but also the mass media. It is mass media that create the collective representations that most will see, hear, and read.

The specific social spaces in which actions are performed are part of their meaningful nature and must also be included in any reconstruction, as certain actions only make sense in relation to their context. That the murders occurred at San Francisco City Hall was not incidental; from the perspective of social drama, it was a central part of its meaning. The model of social drama can be applied in mechanical fashion, passing through Turner's various stages, from the initial breach to an eventual reconciliation and reformation of a collective identity. My approach to social drama is more contingent, where an initiating occurrence, already dramatic-in-itself, opens a liminal space in which interpretations compete and where several outcomes are possible. There are three levels in this analysis: that of social interaction, where a performative approach is applied (Alexander et al., 2006), a discursive analysis of the way these actions were reconstructed in mass media, and finally an analysis of long-term impact through the theory of cultural trauma (Alexander et al., 2004; Eyerman, 2001, 2008, 2011).

By focusing on the wider contexts and the discursive processes within which collective foundations or 'root paradigms' are articulated, the theory of cultural trauma adds an historical dimension to the analysis (Eyerman, 2008; Wagner-Pacifi, 1986). In this wider perspective, the wounds and scars of previous crises can be called upon to explain the emotional power and impact of the current drama, in what can be called a cumulative effect mediated through collective memory. The systems of collective representation that are called into play in the analysis of a social drama are from the point of view of a cultural trauma laden with emotionally charged memory. They are much more than words on a page or acts upon a stage – they are representations of past actions and experiences that are embedded with emotion, an affective dimension that can be cumulative, making responses to current events much more powerful. With its focus on the dramaturgical and the discursive, as well as its underlying concern with repair and reconciliation, the model of social drama lacks an emotional as well as historical component, something which cultural trauma provides.

Cultural trauma theory also calls attention to collective memory and its construction as part of the meaning struggle, which is at its core. This meaning struggle involves not only how current occurrences will be understood, but also how they will be remembered. The theory helps us identify those carrier groups that are important agents in this process. It will be important not just to identify these groups but also to reconstruct what they actually do. Armstrong and Crag (2006: 736) list three primary activities of those they call 'symbolic entrepreneurs': constructing interpretations of events as important and identifying what about the event is salient; disseminating this particular viewpoint over time and space; and locating these interpretation within 'well-developed commemorative repertoires' to which they have access. From within the theory of cultural trauma, I will map this process in order to explain why it is that Harvey Milk, rather than George Moscone, became the most idealized and commemorated figure to emerge out of the murders at City Hall.

## **That Fateful Monday**

In the late morning of 27 November 1978, the recently resigned city supervisor Dan White walked into San Francisco City Hall and killed Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. A former police officer, White used his old service revolver to murder his colleagues. Leaving the building, he drove to a nearby diner in a car borrowed from an aide on his way out. Soon after White surrendered to old police colleagues, and one of his best friends took his testimony and recorded his confession. Moments earlier, in the same police station, detectives had cheered as a radio bulletin announced the news of the murders, so hated were the two city officials (Weiss, 1984).

Though some might have cheered, these cold-blooded killings shocked the city and the nation at large. That public officials could be gunned down in their offices during working hours was devastating, especially in a city still recovering from other tragic news. Eight days prior, the mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, in which more than 900 people died, had been initiated by a well-known city resident and former public official – Jim Jones, pastor of San Francisco’s People’s Temple. The news of ‘Jonestown’ filled the headlines of the city’s two leading newspapers for the entire week. On 18 November, California Assemblyman Leo Ryan, himself a former mayor of San Francisco, had been murdered by members of the People’s Temple. There were rumors that hit squads from the Jones congregation were in the city targeting other public officials, with Mayor Moscone said to be a prime target.<sup>1</sup>

To enter City Hall with a concealed weapon and a pocket full of shells and avoid the metal detector at the front entrance, Dan White climbed through a basement window. Dressed in his best three-piece suit, the well-known White moved easily through the building. He came unannounced, yet was somehow expected at the mayor’s office. A few days earlier, in a fit of anger and disappointment, White had resigned his post; he had since changed his mind and Moscone agreed to consider re-instating him. But now there were rumors that Moscone would appoint someone else, and White wanted to confront the mayor about this. Indeed, Moscone had called a press conference for that afternoon to announce the new supervisor, and it was not Dan White. Although Moscone and Harvey Milk had conspired about the new appointee, Milk was also being misled as to just who the person might be. White was furious over this deception. He was let into Moscone’s office, where he was told of the decision. Moscone then suggested they move to a more comfortable back office to have a drink, presumably to soothe the disappointment. After sitting for a moment in these intimate quarters, White rose to his feet and shot Moscone at close range, the first shots knocking his victim to the floor. In all, White used four of the five bullets in his revolver. He then walked down the hallway to where his own office and that of Harvey Milk were located. White invited Milk into the hall and from there they moved into White’s old office. ‘What the hell are you doing to me?’, White yelled, ‘Why do you want to hurt my name, my family. You cheated me ...’ (Weiss, 1984: 253). He then drew the newly reloaded revolver and shot Milk five times, in much the same manner as Moscone, with a final shot to the head to make sure.

Though a jury would later find otherwise, the style of these murders was that of an execution. When later asked why he did not just punch Moscone and Milk in the nose instead of shooting them, White replied that would have been unfair, since he was so

much larger than either of them. This may sound ridiculous, but it is more understandable given a culturally bound sense of fairness relating to size and physical strength. Killing someone with a gun, especially for someone with the proper training, might seem more just, since it was less dependent on physical prowess. If this was about honor, then a revolver was the appropriate weapon for an ex-policeman, just as City Hall in broad daylight was the appropriate setting. Fists or even a knife would have made these killings more personal and less professional and, while they were personal, the killings were carried out in a manner befitting a trained and disciplined professional.

## The Players

Dan White was 32 years old when he shot Moscone and Milk. The son of a firefighter, he was raised in a Catholic household consisting of nine children in a working-class district on the southeastern outskirts of San Francisco called Visitacion Valley. While some things had changed by the mid-1970s, many things remained the same. Weiss (1984: 39) describes the neighborhood this way: '[I]n 1977 you would ... still have to search diligently to find a registered Republican, a college graduate or somebody who earned more than \$20,000 a year'. After a troubled youth, White was a star athlete in high school and served seven years (1965–1972) as an enlisted man in the US Army, including a tour of duty as a paratrooper in Vietnam. When he returned to San Francisco, White joined the police force but resigned following conflicts with other officers, whom he found too brutal and cynical about their work. In what was the final straw, he accused a fellow officer of mistreating a black prisoner. White then followed in his father's footsteps and became a firefighter. In 1977, White won the election for city supervisor in the newly created District 8, which incorporated his old neighborhood with those surrounding it. He campaigned as a conservative Democrat in a time of growing concern with urban violence and demographic shifts. Many of his constituents were worried about such changes and White promised to restore their neighborhoods. Just before the election, White's image was featured in the local media when he rescued a woman from a burning building. He was deemed a hero just as his father had been. With this unexpected publicity, White won the election handily. One frustrating year later, after failing to live up to his campaign promises and much bickering with his fellow supervisors, he suddenly resigned his position.

Unlike Dan White, Harvey Milk was not a local hero. Milk first moved to San Francisco from New York in 1969, two years after the 'Summer of Love'. He returned to stay in 1972. Born in 1930 to a Jewish household in Woodmere, a Long Island suburb of New York City, Milk was 48 years old when he was killed. Like White, Milk was also a high school athlete and saw military service during wartime. Milk was a naval officer during the Korean War, after graduating from college. Where White was self-enclosed and inward looking, Milk was gregarious and outgoing. After military service, Milk returned to Long Island and taught mathematics in high school. In the early 1960s, he worked on Wall Street and was highly successful in the financial world. A conservative Republican, he worked on Barry Goldwater's campaign during the latter's unsuccessful presidential bid in 1964. At this time, Milk was living an openly gay lifestyle. By 1969, Milk had left Wall Street and, together with a friend, a theater stage

manager, moved to San Francisco with the touring company of the Broadway musical *Hair*. From a Goldwater conservative Milk had transformed himself into a counter-culture hippie. A 1972 *New York Times* article covering developments in the theater described Milk as a 'sad eyed man – another aging hippie with long hair, wearing faded jeans and pretty beads' (Gruen, 1972: 14). Making the move to San Francisco permanent, Milk opened a camera store on Castro Street, in the heart of a vibrant and expanding gay community. At the time of the Watergate hearings, angry at the local bureaucracy and the direction of national politics, Milk decided to run for elected office. He ran as a liberal Democrat and as openly gay. On his third try, Milk was elected to represent the Castro district as city supervisor.<sup>2</sup> By this time he had cut his hair and retrieved some of his earlier political beliefs. No longer the hippie but a small business owner with a social conscience and an interest in the civil rights of minorities, Milk could more easily represent the largest segment of his constituency, young, well-educated gay men, as well as others in his district.

Like Dan White, George Moscone was a local hero. Born in San Francisco in 1929 in an Italian-American household, Moscone attended Catholic schools and was a star high school athlete. He had just celebrated his 49th birthday when he was killed. A lawyer by training, Moscone entered politics in 1960, when he ran for the California State Assembly as a Democrat. He lost that election but garnered a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1963. In 1966 he was elected to the California Senate, representing a San Francisco district. Re-elected in 1970, he also served as Senate Majority Leader. He was a liberal Democrat in the Kennedy mold, known for his legislation concerning minority rights, including those of homosexuals. Moscone became Mayor of San Francisco in 1975, when he defeated the conservative candidate John Barbagelata and also Diane Feinstein, a more centrist Democrat who would succeed him after his death. Moscone won by the very small margin of 3000 votes and would acknowledge the significance of the gay vote in his victory (D'Emilio, 1993: 72). In recognition, the newly elected mayor appointed Harvey Milk 'to an important City Hall post as a member of the Board of Permit Appeals' (Castells, 1983: 144). Moscone was also helped in winning the election by members of the People's Temple, who distributed leaflets around the city for Moscone and other liberal candidates. Jim Jones would be rewarded for these efforts with an appointment as Chairman of the San Francisco Housing Commission. Later reports suggested voter fraud in connection with the People's Temple (Binder, 1978: 12). Jones also supported the election of Harvey Milk. Moscone made some other controversial appointments as mayor, including that of a liberal police chief, something that made him very unpopular with rank-and-file officers. Members of the police force were also angry with the mayor for his support of minorities, including gays and lesbians, both on the force and in the city generally. Moscone and Milk saw themselves and each other as part of a liberal coalition against big business and the tourist industry; included in the latter was Diane Feinstein as well as Dan White, whom they saw as her protégé. In spite of this, both tolerated White at first, thinking that some common ground could be forged, especially concerning the protection of local neighborhoods. The longer the political term wore on, however, the more problematic these relationships became. No one really knew where Dan White stood; perhaps he did not even know himself.

## The Trial

The issue of why Dan White killed George Moscone and Harvey Milk was central to the trial held in San Francisco's Hall of Justice in spring 1979. Since White had turned himself in and confessed to the murders directly after the fact, there was no question of his guilt. The issue was not if White murdered the two public officials but why. The prosecution and the defense argued over White's life – whether or not he would die in the gas chamber – not if he had killed the two men. The issue of whether or not this was assassination and not merely murder was never articulated, perhaps because of a tacit agreement not to bring the sensitive issue of local politics into the courtroom (Weiss, 1984). For the prosecution, the matter was settled – the facts added up to murder in the first degree and the death penalty. White had clearly intended to kill, and he came to City Hall fully armed and prepared to do so. He had knowingly avoided the metal detector, appeared calm and determined, reloading his weapon in between the killings; all this pointed to premeditative murder.

For the prosecution, White's motivation was revenge; he wanted to punish those who had taken away his political position. The defense argued otherwise; White was an upstanding citizen and a 'good person' who had not intended to commit murder but had been driven over the edge of sanity by financial pressure and family responsibility. White was portrayed as an honest man, unable to carry out his masculine duty in the pressure cooker of local politics. This viewpoint had already been articulated in a headline in the *San Francisco Examiner* (28 Nov. 1978: 1) the day after the murder: 'Dan White: "casualty of pressure"'. Such 'pressure' could make anyone 'snap'. Carrying a weapon in a hostile and threatening atmosphere, as San Francisco was portrayed at the time, was described as normal, and when questioned about this, former board president and current mayor Diane Feinstein admitted to having done so on occasion.

Feinstein also testified that White was not the type of man to shoot people. White's mental state at the time of the murder was thus important, and several psychiatrists were called to testify that White was driven to murder by factors outside his control. The most controversial was the so-called 'Twinkies Defense', named after a popular sugary cake, where it was claimed that a high intake of junk food could result in diminished mental capacity. This was the same 'diminished capacity' defense strategy employed by the attorneys for Sirhan Sirhan ten years earlier, though with no mention of junk food on that occasion. When White's recorded confession was played in court his sobbing claims of being under tremendous pressure from work and family responsibility moved many to tears, including the members of the jury. The effect, unanticipated by the prosecution but planned by the defense, was to turn sympathy from the actual victims to White himself. The perpetrator was now victim, driven by uncontrollable emotion to commit murder. From this perspective, George Moscone was not killed because he was mayor of San Francisco. Likewise, Harvey Milk was killed neither because he was city supervisor nor because he was an openly gay politician. By the same reasoning, Dan White did not commit murder as a politician, but as an individual who snapped under pressure and acted in a despondent state.

The jury found Dan White guilty of voluntary manslaughter and the judge sentenced him to seven years and eight months in prison. In prison and in one of those ironies of

history, Dan White and Sirhan Sirhan, the killer of Robert Kennedy, would become jogging partners and good friends (Weiss, 1984: 422). White was released from prison in 1984 and returned to San Francisco soon after. Two hundred police officers in riot gear stood outside San Francisco City Hall, 'just in case' when the announcement was made of his release on parole (Gorney, *Washington Post*, 3 January 1984). In October 1985 he committed suicide in the garage of his house, while listening to a tape playing the Irish folk tune, 'The Town I Loved So Well'.<sup>3</sup>

## Reactions

If White's defense attorneys were able to convince the carefully selected jury (anyone with a 'pro-gay' attitude was carefully weeded out) that he acted in a momentary rage and murdered for political or cultural reasons, this was not how others viewed things. The broadly conceived San Francisco gay community reacted to the verdict in a very different way than to the murder and the trial. These deaths were cause for a massive outpouring of sorrow and mourning. Milk's funeral gathered tens of thousands of people in a peaceful candlelight march through the Castro. The march made for an unforgettable sight, row after row of people with candles in hand walking slowly through the darkened streets, the flickering lights stretching for miles. Five months later, when the verdict was announced, there was another massive outpouring of emotion, this time of anger. Police cars were burned, the windows of City Hall broken and the building itself set on fire, resulting in what has come to be called the White Night Riots. Like the murders themselves, the highly anticipated announcement of the verdict evoked distinctive responses, as vividly described by Mike Weiss (1984: 405):

Radio and television stations interrupted their regular programming beginning at 5:30 for bulletins ... On a live radio hookup, Clive Jones [an aide to Milk] said: 'This means that in America it's all right to kill faggots.' The police band radio also announced the verdicts and somebody began to sing: Oh Danny boy, the pipes are calling ...

Though these opposite reactions reflected two separate constituencies, the meaning was essentially the same; Dan White had gotten away with murder. For the police corps and the gay community, or at least for groups within these constituencies, Dan White and Harvey Milk were representative figures, and their fate reflected upon those they represented – a police officer had been exonerated and a gay man had been assassinated. Within this polarization, the figure of George Moscone began to fade into the background.

The rioters outside City Hall who were chanting, 'Dan White was a cop', 'Avenge Harvey Milk', and 'Kill Dan White' (Weiss, 1984: 408), looked past the individuals whose names they shouted, invoking social categories and identifying themselves with one and against the other. The actions described inside the courtroom as the act of one individual against another were here negated and redefined. From this vantage point, White acted as a representative of a group with a distinctive view of the world, and he murdered in their interests. This appeared to be confirmed in the reactions of at least some in the police corps and in the city at large. His victim, Harvey Milk, was from this

point of view killed for more than narrow political reasons; he was killed because of what and who he represented, confirming what he had predicted himself.

But what exactly did Harvey Milk and Dan White represent? The 1960s and '70s marked a major transition in San Francisco. From a city dominated by its harbor and run by a Democratic political machine, it had slowly been transformed into a tourist and convention city, with a service-oriented economy. Working-class occupations and neighborhoods began to decline, and along with Asian immigrants, more highly educated young people began moving in. Immigration and westward migration has long been part of US history but, for the most part, this was a new sort of migrant, better educated, individualistic and highly self-defining. A large sub-group amongst these migrants consisted of young gay men, many with middle-class backgrounds and college degrees, ready to take their place in the growing service sector.

In one sense, Harvey Milk represented this group, but in another he did not. Though well educated and with a background in finance and investment, Milk came to San Francisco from New York more as part of the 1960s counter culture than the 1970s gay migration. He came to escape the corporate world, not to join it. To mark this he grew a beard and long hair and opened a second-hand camera store in what was then a neighborhood in transition. As mentioned above, after being defeated in a couple of elections, Milk modified his public persona. He campaigned for City Supervisor in a newly created district, clean-shaven and in second-hand, three-piece suits. In addition to the gay residents, he counted amongst his supporters the local unions, including the firefighters. He campaigned against the 'downtown machine', as well as the 'Uncle Toms' of the gay movement. As Frances Fitzgerald (1986: 56) eloquently put it:

As an outsider running against liberals, he became at once a fiscal conservative and a populist: he was for 'the little people' in the neighborhoods against the downtown interests and the landlords: he was for better schools, better city services for the elderly ... but in the end his main supporters were the thousands upon thousands of young gay men settling in the Castro.<sup>4</sup>

What Milk had in common with them was his sexual orientation, but he differed from many in his political views. For him, the gay movement was a counter-cultural movement and he viewed gays as a marginalized and oppressed minority who should seek coalition with other minorities. This feeling was in part generational, but it was not incidental that Harvey Milk was Jewish, for this feeling of being a minority amongst other minorities has as much to do with liberal Jewish sentiment as with generational politics. In contrast, many of the newly arrived gay men had another perception of themselves and seemed less interested in coalition politics.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, despite the homophobia of the dominant culture, they viewed themselves in positive rather than negative terms, as discriminated against professionals and business owners whose interest in equality appeared to center largely on sexual orientation. At least at first, what fused Milk with this new generation of gays was primarily how they were viewed by others, not necessarily how they viewed themselves. He became their leader, and later their martyr and icon, because he was gay and proud of it, not because they necessarily shared a broader worldview. For this movement and for the mass media, homosexuality was Milk's

defining characteristic – his name could not be mentioned without also mentioning his sexual orientation.

If Dan White viewed himself as representing a threatened, ethnic white working class, he was portrayed by the gay community as homophobic and reactionary, this despite the fact that his campaign manager had been openly gay. For them, White was a police officer and a bigot, who was out not only to represent what they viewed as reactionary economic and political interests but also an equally threatened masculinity. White was identified as a ‘law and order’ politician with a traditional view of family and gender relations. After a few attempts to work with him, this was pretty much how Milk saw him as well. Milk also viewed White as in coalition with big business and the tourist industry, which had no real interest in protecting working-class neighborhoods or occupations. As for what White might have represented for others, Frances Fitzgerald (1986) ends her reportage on Milk and the Castro district with a possible set of motivations that led to White’s murderous actions. What the prosecution could have argued, she writes, was this:

Dan White had resigned from the Board of Supervisors for purely personal reasons. ... Being politically naïve, White did not realize the political consequences of his private decision to quit the board until the real-estate men and the police came to him. What kind of pressure was put on him remains unknown, but the pressure was certainly great enough to make him put himself in the embarrassing position of asking the Mayor to give him his job back after only four days. (Fitzgerald, 1986: 69)

To the extent this is true, it was the dishonor of letting down his friends and supporters in the police and fire departments that led White to kill Moscone and Milk – when the mayor reneged on his promise and when he heard that Milk had lobbied against him. Shame and dishonor were the motivating emotions in this account, with economic and political interests thrown in, which is to say that Dan White saw himself as an honor-bound member of an occupational group with ethnic and class ties. In an article entitled ‘Dan White’s Last Confession’ (*San Jose Mercury News*, 18 September 1998), Mike Weiss recorded White’s 1985 conversation with his friend Frank Falzone, the police officer who had recorded his original confession one hour after the murders in 1978. When asked again what happened the day of the murders, White replied: ‘I really lost it. I was on a mission. I wanted four of them ... Carol Silver – she was the biggest snake of the bunch. And Willie Brown. He was the mastermind of the whole thing.’ Carol Silver was also on the Board of Supervisors and a friend and ally of Harvey Milk, and Willy Brown was a State Assemblyman, a friend and ally of George Moscone. If this is true, it raises not only the issue of White’s motive, but also who the real target was.

## Mediated Representation

After reporting the facts about the murders, much of the early media representations focused on the city of San Francisco, its mayor, and the sexual orientation of Harvey Milk. The front-page banner headline of the *San Francisco Chronicle* the morning after read: ‘City Hall Murders’, Moscone, Milk Slain – Dan White is Held’. All these names

would be well known to readers and there was no need for further elaboration. Under a photograph of White being escorted by police authorities was a smaller headline: 'Feinstein Becomes the Mayor'. To the right of this was a description of the facts as then known and portrait photographs of the two victims. Inside, the *Chronicle* offered reactions from residents and the headline: 'Stunned Silence in San Francisco, The Horror that Swept City Hall'. Many of those interviewed worried about the city's image and that of the state of California, and especially in the national media, this would become a major theme in media representations. Along with the issue of public safety and the security of public officials, shock and sadness was another theme on this first day of reportage. 'It's incredibly shocking ... this feels something like a reprise of the Kennedy assassination' (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 November, p. 2), said one of those interviewed. Many on the steps of City Hall were 'too shocked to speak' to reporters.

The *San Francisco Examiner* published on the afternoon of 28 November carried the banner headline: 'A City in Agony', draped in black. Underneath, in bold letters, it proclaimed: 'White Charged – Faces Death'. Given that most readers already knew the basic facts, its reportage primarily concerned what had happened since, the reactions of individuals, and on the broader background. The *Examiner*'s first-page report on the perpetrator came under the headline 'Dan White: "casualty of pressure"'. White was crying in his jail cell, the story began, and then quoted a city supervisor: 'I think everyone has a breaking point ... and if indeed as it looks, there was a breaking point for Dan, I can understand it'. He went on to characterize White as a 'normal, devoted, young father ... a casualty of pressure'. If Milk was always represented as a 'gay politician', White would be represented as an 'ex-fireman' and a 'family man', a man surrounded by his wife and son, and as this report noted, his parents and his three sisters, who visited him in jail. Writing in 1984, while awaiting White's release from prison, *Washington Post* reporter Cynthia Gorney summarized his media representation as 'a local boy, local hero, policeman, fireman, Catholic schools, Catholic church, wife and child, old San Francisco' ('Waiting for Dan White', *Washington Post*, 3 January 1984: B1). Moscone was represented somewhere between the two, as a 'liberal mayor' and a family man, the latter being something that apparently further angered local police, since Moscone's reputation as a womanizer was something they gossiped about. Summing up the hatred between the San Francisco police and its mayor, Gorney, quoting Mike Weiss, writes:

They hated him because he turned the city over to Them. But that was political hatred, and political hatreds don't run very deep in most cases. With George, it was the added dimension of, 'He turned the city over to them, and he's not good to his wife. Everybody in the city knows he's running around'. (Gorney, 1984: B1)

The unstated 'them' was clearly gays and the other minorities moving into the city.

The news weeklies followed Diane Feinstein's lead in linking the murders of Moscone and Milk to Jonestown, as well as to other violence in the region. A three-page report headlined 'Day of the Assassin' (*Newsweek*, 11 December 1978, pp. 26–28) immediately drew the two together in what it called the 'San Francisco syndrome': 'a mindless streak of violence that has afflicted the Bay Area with nearly 100 bomb blasts and more than a dozen murder victims in the past ten years' (p. 26). The report went on to describe the

murders of Moscone and Milk, complete with a graphic detailing of the events in City Hall. In this reportage, most of the biographical segments focused on Moscone and White, with Milk receiving only a few lines. The prime message, however, was of a troubled city in the midst of turmoil and soul-searching. Juxtaposed to this reportage was a long article, 'Ghosts of Jonestown', which also made the link to San Francisco. The city itself, it seemed, was as much the perpetrator as Dan White. According to the *New Yorker* as reported by Frances Fitzgerald (1986), it was a combination of local political intrigue and long-term structural changes affecting the city that were the root cause of White's murderous act. White was of course the perpetrator at a surface level – no one could deny that – but they suggested there were deeper underlying structural changes in motion which must be accounted for in understanding his actions. These included not only a shifting occupational structure and population but also the reorganization of political boundaries and how all this affected local politics. The City Board of Supervisors had just been restructured to accommodate newly reconfigured districts. It was this restructuring that allowed both Dan White and Harvey Milk to enter the political scene. All the central players in this drama – Dan White, George Moscone and Harvey Milk – were representative figures acting on an unsteady, shifting stage. In such an environment, the positions of victim, perpetrator, and audience gain a little fluidity.

## Memorialization

In addition to the media coverage of the murders and the trial of Dan White, there have been annual memorial celebrations in the city to commemorate the victims. At first, these marches and the accompanying speeches concerned both Moscone and Milk, but as time went on it was the commemoration of Harvey Milk that gradually came to dominate. Why this occurred can be traced to two related processes. On the one side was the mobilizing potential of Milk's memory, which was greater than Moscone's, and on the other, the presence of activists, or movement entrepreneurs, who recognized and drew upon this potential.

By the 25th anniversary in November 2003, the *Chronicle's* headline (p. A1) read, 'City Hall Slaying: 25 Years Later; From Milk's times to our times; It's hard to fathom gains for gay rights since the death of "St. Harvey"'. Reportage focused entirely on Milk, or as they wrote, 'Milk as myth'. Harvey Milk had transcended not only George Moscone and Dan White but also himself; he was now a movement icon and a measure, at least for this newspaper, of the movement's success.

Why was this the case? As a leader and public figure, Milk was no more powerful than George Moscone, and measured in terms of local politics, much less so. There are two factors that help us understand why Milk became such a prominent figure in the public memory, both of them related. The first has to do with the way he died, the victim of assassination in a public place by a man whom he had known and befriended. This tragic story included Moscone as well, but Milk was killed not only because of what he did, but also because of who he was as a person, not merely as a politician. He was both a symbolic and an organizational leader in the sense meant by Klapp (1964). Harvey Milk was an elected public official in the same way as George Moscone, but Milk's public, as well as his public persona, was easily identified and identifiable – he was a gay politician.

As one of the first openly gay public officials in the country, Milk was newsworthy over the long run in a way that Moscone was not. A gay man in politics, one not afraid to speak his mind and to express his sexual identity, was clearly news of extraordinary interest. From his side, Milk's public proclamations concerning his sexual orientation were both strategic and courageous. Milk's power as a political operator and his ability to influence policy was rooted in his claim to represent a large and, at least on certain issues, relatively unified constituency. He was able to use this power in helping see to it that Dan White was not reinstated, something which contributed, as we have seen, to his own death. In this sense, White murdered Milk because he was gay, a representative of a constituency from whom White was increasingly alienated.

The second factor that helps us understand the longevity of Milk's memory lies with the community, or more precisely the marginalized social group with whom he identified and in so doing helped identify. Milk was an important figure in the attempts to mobilize a social movement around gay rights. He was important during his lifetime and then again after his death. In death, he became a martyr to the cause and an emblematic figure in the continuous process of mobilization. The annual memorial marches were as much about this as about Harvey Milk – in fact the two became intertwined. As Castells (1983: 163) puts it, 'Gay culture is inseparable from gay politics'. Large-scale public activities were a central part of this mix of culture and politics, and there were many occasions for popular celebration beyond the memorial marches.

Especially in San Francisco, the figure of Harvey Milk was omnipresent in these mobilizing events. While marginalized by the mainstream society, members and supporters of this particular group were making significant inroads into the sphere of cultural production far beyond San Francisco, something that permitted crucial access to mass media, including not only newspapers, radio and television, but also film, theater and the other arts. It should also be said that the deaths of Milk and Moscone had a significant effect on the local gay community. Although acting mayor Feinstein appointed a gay man, Harry Britt, to replace Milk, under pressure from other forces in local and state politics, she also initiated an anti-pornography bill, which would lead to a crackdown on central gay institutions, such as bookstores, bars and theaters (D'Emilio, 1993: 75).<sup>6</sup>

In 1984 a documentary entitled *The Times of Harvey Milk* was released to national acclaim and an Academy Award. It was this film, rather than Randy Shilts' biography (1982), that set the narrative tone for how Milk would be remembered. As noted earlier, the film begins with real television footage of Diane Feinstein's announcement of the murders to a shocked public. One can hear cries of 'Oh No!' in the background. This is followed by a photograph of Milk as we listen to his voice in the recorded message about the possibility of being assassinated because of his gay-rights activism. The film then moves back in time to recount the rise of Harvey Milk to national prominence. It was a powerful story, with a well-known sentimental theme: the rise of an ordinary man to notoriety, who in the middle of his success dies tragically. It is probably no coincidence that this documentary was made in the midst of what was by now identified as an AIDS epidemic, which was then having a devastating effect on the gay community, most notably in the Castro district of San Francisco. Just the year before, French researchers had isolated the virus that was the cause of these deaths, which had been known at least from 1981 as a 'strange type of cancer'. With so many dying there was a sense of a world

disappearing, and the documentary portrayed Milk as a representative figure from a happier time.

In 2008, days before the 30th anniversary commemoration and the release of the Hollywood version of this story, the director of the 1984 documentary, Rob Epstein, was asked if any progress in terms of gay rights had been made over the ensuing years. 'In some ways, it's clear that we've made such incredible strides, and in some ways it seems like we're exactly where we were 30 years ago. ... Be it teachers in 1978, or the institution of marriage in 2008, it's still up against the same fears', he lamented (Willmore, 2008).

The identification with Milk and the movement he represented seems clear in these sentiments. In response to a question about when he decided to make the film, Epstein replied:

I had already started the project before Harvey was killed. I started to do a film about the Briggs initiative – Proposition 6 [a proposal on the California ballot to fire any teacher found to be 'advocating, imposing or promoting' homosexuality in the classroom] ... That's what I was interested in, that fight, which was new then, and then it all became Harvey's story. That was all part of it, which is why I ended up doing a film that was more about the times, and showing Harvey as a man of history – that particular history – than a biopic documentary.

What began as a documentary of a political conflict ended up as a story of a man's life and times. One reason for this shift of narrative focus seems clearly to be the way Milk died. It was the drama of assassination that sparked the telling of a wider story, and it was then this story – this plot structure – which has come to be definitive. The catastrophic effect of the AIDS epidemic on the gay community combined with the way the murder of one of its leaders was treated by the legal system were contextual conditions which helped transform Harvey Milk into a martyr and an icon.

In the more recent (2008) Hollywood remake of this documentary, entitled simply *Milk*, the nostalgia is even more apparent. AIDS is conspicuously absent in this story. What we have instead is a rallying cry, a sense of pride in being gay, with death as political and heroic, not biological and excruciatingly personal. No doubt, the film may have contributed to a more positive view of the gay community against another wave of conservative reaction. It also contributed, as noted above, to the Governor of California changing his mind about a Harvey Milk Memorial Day. There were other political moments – upon accepting the Academy Award for his role as Harvey Milk, the actor Sean Penn used the occasion to criticize opponents to gay marriage. Even as Hollywood epic, Harvey Milk remains a mobilizing force and now one that has moved beyond the movement that made him.

## Remembering and Forgetting

All this is not to say that Moscone has been entirely forgotten. An interesting controversy emerged in 1980, two years after the assassination. After the construction of the Moscone Convention Center and Exhibition Hall, a commission was awarded to sculptor Robert Arneson to create a monument to the fallen mayor to be placed in its center hall. Arneson

was known for his irreverent portraits, and he produced a powerful, expressionist bust of the mayor which when previewed by the mayor's widow received her approval. What Mrs Moscone did not see was a pedestal upon which the bust was resting, as the artist had covered it up in anticipation of her visit. The 58-inch pedestal was an integral part of the work, embodying 'graffiti-like scrawls and five bloody bullet holes' and the words 'Bang, Bang, Bang' along with newspaper clippings about the assassination (Weiss, 2000). The 'Portrait of George', which measured 94 inches in height and weighed over 500 lbs, was finally rejected by Mayor Diane Feinstein as too controversial after the artist refused to remove the pedestal and redo the work. It is now owned by a private collector in Arizona, but has been shown in San Francisco's art museum.

Both Moscone and Milk have schools named after them, they are linked together on a Facebook memorial site, and there is a memorial to both in San Francisco City Hall; there is also one at Harvey Milk Plaza. San Francisco has the Moscone Convention Center and a Moscone Recreation Center. The disparity comes in the breadth of the commemoration. There are several factors that help explain this. The role of carrier groups – in this case the gay movement and the powerful position of some of its representatives and sympathizers – is of crucial importance, but there are other factors as well. Would the killing of Milk alone have lent itself to commemoration? Possibly, but in a much more restricted sense. Milk's murder could have functioned as the so-called Stonewall Riots, becoming a significant event in the formation of a group identity and formative, even foundational, to its collective memory (Armstrong and Crage, 2006). But that Moscone was also murdered was very important for the intensity and the scope of the initial media coverage. The murder of two public officials became a significant event through mass mediated coverage and construction. Had Moscone been absent, that coverage, and the ensuing broad-based reaction, would most likely have been much narrower and less intense. The fact that the mayor of San Francisco was also a victim not only conditioned public reaction in the city but also around the nation; at the same time, it widened the range of possibilities for movement activists in their mobilization of public support for their cause. Even as Moscone's part in the drama began to fade from popular memory, his name and position could be invoked to broaden the appeal.

Not every incident is a candidate for reconstructing collective memory; some are more likely than others to have long-term impact. This in part is dependent on carrier groups, but it also has something to do with the occurrence itself, its own inherent power to evoke emotional recall. Political assassinations carry this potential, especially when they involve a cast of characters and an outcome like this one. What Marshal Sahlins (1981; see also Armstrong & Crage, 2006, Sewell Jr., 1996) calls the 'structure of the conjuncture' is important as well, i.e. the local conditions that help determine which events become 'transformative'. While Sahlins and others focus on institutions and social structures, I would also include the symbolic structures of the occurrence itself. This means that the same type of occurrence – in our case, a political assassination – might be transformative of collective memory at one point, but not at another. Such local conditions would have to include the wave of violence and death that had recently struck San Francisco, as well as all the structural changes that were affecting the city. Emotions in the city were high and the atmosphere was tense, and this contributed to the intensity of the public reaction to the murders. In this sense, the murders can be seen as the

culmination of a series of occurrences which, when experienced as linked together through mass mediated narrative reconstructions, added to the depth and breadth of their impact. These were then broadly disseminated. However, had only the mayor of the city been involved, the occurrence might well have remained a local one, fashioned into the memory of those present, commemorated once or twice but soon forgotten. Because a gay activist was also killed, the reconstructed event became of greater significance, in part due to these mass media representations of the occurrence itself and also to the local reactions, as well as the narratives constructed by movement intellectuals who re-told the story in more partisan terms and disseminated it far beyond the location where it occurred.

Local conditions are thus important in explaining why the murder of two local public officials is still commemorated in San Francisco, but not sufficient to explain its wider impact. There is also the capacity of the occurrence to evoke powerful emotions and the capacity to create carrier groups with will, skill, and position. Such groups are not always already there and an occurrence may or may not be a catalyst to their formation. This formative potential, if it is present, must also be continually renewed and rejuvenated. It is here that the qualities, as well as quantities, of these carrier groups are a very important variable in explaining why some dramatic events enter the wider collective memory. One important quality is the forcefulness and the receptive power of the narrative they construct and disseminate. Carrier groups are not only bearers of a message; they must also shape and spread it in an effective way.

The meaning attributed to the death of Harvey Milk transcended local conditions because they were framed and interpreted as universal. Milk's life was narrated as the quintessential American success story, a veteran and high school teacher who overcame adversity to do good for others as well as himself. This had an appeal that transcended the local. This familiar narrative frame resonated with a much broader group than the gay community within which it was produced. When Governor Schwarzenegger proclaimed Harvey Milk Day a statewide day of remembrance, it was as much because of this narrative as the pressure brought to bear by interested parties. Milk had been turned not only into a symbol of a gay movement but also of America itself, a nation where minorities could win acceptance.

'Memory may be the last weapon of the dead' – a sentiment proclaimed by one of the friends of the assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in a quotation cited at the beginning of this article. To accomplish this retribution, he pointed out, the friends of the murdered 'must fashion the sword and keep it from rusting'. This is close to the role of the audience in Hannah Arendt's (1958) discussion of action, where the audience is witness, judge and recorder of the actions of individuals. Within the audience, the storyteller or recorder weaves individual actions into a coherent tale, making it available to those not present, including future generations. In and through these narratives and their ritual re-telling, a group re-constitutes itself at the same time it makes its story available to others. The storyteller, a concept Arendt borrowed from her own friend Walter Benjamin, is comparable to the 'friends' who forge the narrative sword, keeping alive their fallen hero by recalling for themselves and for others the words and deeds that constitute the collective memory of the community. This narrative can be forged in pictures as well as through words and be recomposed as speeches in the legislative battles over commemoration. This was the case in the 1984 documentary mentioned earlier and in the

struggle to get the state of California and the president of the United States officially to honor the memory of the fallen Harvey Milk. Here the friends of the fallen acted as an interest group as well as a communal carrier of memory. In terms of formal political power, one would have thought that the friends of George Moscone would have more influence in seeing to it that the murdered mayor of San Francisco and former state representative would be commemorated, especially within the state of California. To a degree, this was so. But that Harvey Milk would be afforded national recognition and commemoration did not depend on political influence in the narrow sense of the term. What brought this honor on Milk was not only the way he was killed, which of course also affected the commemoration of Moscone, but also the power and influence of his friends within the social group and social movement he represented: the gay community. The man who wrote Milk's definitive biography, Randy Shilts, was a self-proclaimed member of the community, as were those behind the award-winning documentary and the Hollywood film. Behind them stood the gay movement, a powerful force in the identity politics in the United States over the last decades. Well placed in the means of cultural production, members of this self-identified community were able to disseminate representations of Milk that helped transform him into a mythic figure – a martyr and a representative figure of a once marginalized and threatened community, which has now become powerful enough to effectively challenge the sexual politics and proclivities of the dominant culture. In this social drama, Moscone and White were important supporting actors but Milk was the leading character.

## **From Drama to Trauma**

The question of where to begin the narrative is a matter of contest in the making of any significant event (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2009). In Victor Turner's (1980) view, a social drama begins with the transgression or breach of a well-established norm in a public arena and evolves with the attempts at repair and reconciliation. In our case, the social drama begins when White, illegally carrying a concealed weapon, climbed through a window in order to avoid the metal detector at the main entrance of City Hall. From there followed the shooting of Moscone and Milk. These actions not only broke various laws for which White would be tried and convicted, but also transgressed social norms in a very public arena. Clearly, the murder of any public official constitutes a breach, which must be repaired if a collective is to continue. Calling this an assassination points not only to motive, but also to the seriousness of the rupture and the depth and direction of the process necessary to repair it. From the perspective of social drama, the story would end with some closure, a sense of moving on, and the reconfiguration of collective identity. This would come after some form of ritualized reconciliation, a period of grieving and mourning and institutionalized commemoration. In this case, after the funeral and an outpouring of public grief, the city moved on, appointing and then re-electing a new mayor and a suitable replacement for Harvey Milk. The wound opened up again with the trial and the hotly contested verdict. The scars had not healed and several violent confrontations occurred, which some deemed a 'civil war'. The final culmination of this social drama, at least from the point of view of supporters of one of the victims, appears to have come in 2009 with the establishment of a Harvey Milk Memorial Day in

California. In between, besides the death of Dan White, were a long series of commemorative events, including anniversary celebrations, the naming of schools and other public buildings, an award-winning documentary, a Presidential Medal of Freedom, a major Hollywood film and awards, a debate in the California legislature, a veto by the state's governor, and finally the passage of the commemorative legislation.

A social drama is a plotted narrative in which the actions of various protagonists can be reconstructed as attempts to define the situation. Each protagonist has his or her ideal plot: how he or she would have the story unfold and be interpreted. One task for the analyst is to reconstruct these ideal plots as conceived by each protagonist from their point of view to gain a fuller meaning of the event at the level of social action. We must ask, for example, what the ideal plot and ending might be from Dan White's perspective. Perhaps that the murders of Moscone and Milk would expose the collusion and corruption that he felt existed at city hall, where political power, and from his perspective, perverse sexuality, formed an unholy alliance against solid and virtuous working-class values. White saw himself as a representative of those values, and thought he reflected them in his actions as city supervisor and as the representative of a largely working-class district. White went to City Hall that day angered because he felt that Moscone (who had at first promised to reinstate him), Milk, and several others had conspired to prevent that from happening.

As victims of White's crime, neither Moscone nor Milk entered this drama as protagonists, except perhaps in their concerted effort to keep him from returning to office. Only if we view them as individuals and as representative figures, the way White did, can we try to reconstruct their respective ideal plot in the unfolding drama. Moscone had appeared friendly to White when the latter assumed his post as city supervisor, and even when he spoke with him about the possibilities of being reinstated. This was done from the perspective of a savvy political operator, but also because he appeared genuinely taken with White's Boy Scout seriousness and open faced honesty, so out of place in a world of backdoor wheeling and dealing. Moscone used White when he could, but their political interests were mostly at odds. He was probably sincere when he told White that he would consider re-instating him to his post a few days after he had so impulsively resigned. Yet upon further reflection, with the help of Harvey Milk and others, Moscone became convinced that he should use this opportunity to appoint someone closer to his own political views. That he never informed White of this change of mind, until their last fatal conversation, only confirmed White's view that he was a devious politician, another representative of that corrupt system of government. Moscone's ideal plot would most surely have been for White to accept his fate and quietly disappear from local politics. The same was probably true for Harvey Milk. The mass media played a key role in the unfolding drama. This was so in more than the usual sense of reporting and reconstructing the occurrence – their influence impinged much more directly upon the ongoing process itself. It was a telephone call from a radio reporter the night before the murder that might have helped pushed White over the edge – from frustration and depression to action. Hearing the news that Moscone was about to appoint someone else to the post, the reporter called White at his home for a reaction. After receiving the call, White was up all night pondering just that (Mann, 1997; Weiss, 1984).

The symbolic terms that script social drama must also be specified and analyzed. These can be approached from both the point of view of the actors and also that of the mass media, which reconstructed the narrative of the occurrence, turning it into a significant event for a much wider audience. Two of these symbolic terms were family and community. Dan White saw himself as not only representing a specific community but also beholden to his family. He followed in the footsteps of a father he admired, especially when he became a firefighter and an on-the-job hero by rescuing a woman from a burning building, just as his father had. In fact, this widely reported heroism helped clinch his election (Geluardi, 2008; Weiss, 1984). At least in his public representation, it was in consideration of his family responsibilities that he sought to be reinstated as city supervisor, a job that involved practices he found morally despicable. Harvey Milk also viewed himself as representing a community, the San Francisco gay community, and as a representative figure with moral as well as political responsibilities. He had to appear as a good public official in part because he was so visible a representative of a marginalized social group only recently making itself felt in the public arena. He was more adept at performing the other side of politics than White. Milk was skilled in backroom negotiation, having worked in the financial world in New York. He had a different class background and a different range of social competencies than White. Like Moscone, Milk had befriended White for much the same reasons; he was genuinely taken by White's political naivety, but also thought he could make strategic use of him.

Other symbolic terms that scripted this social drama were civic violence and terrorism. From the actor's point of view, violence was an active agent in the San Francisco air in the 1970s. The homes of local politicians, including the district attorney and that of Diane Feinstein, then a city supervisor, had been bombed. Many other local politicians had received death threats, including George Moscone and Harvey Milk. This threatening atmosphere was one of the reasons given to explain why White carried a loaded pistol into City Hall the day of the murder. Others admitted to doing the same on occasion. There were rumors of terrorist groups plotting to kill city officials, such as those from the Jonestown collective mentioned above. Testifying at White's trial, Mayor Diane Feinstein recalled, 'I had several threats from the New World Liberation Front terrorist organization' (Weiss, 1984: 310). An October 1975 *Time Magazine* article on California's underground described the New World Liberation Front as 'composed of about 25 middle class whites and possibly some black ex-convicts, the group has claimed responsibility for 23 terrorist bombings in the Bay Area and Sacramento since Sept. 3, 1974'.<sup>7</sup> Just a week before the murder, the mass suicide at Jonestown rocked the nation and dominated the headlines for nearly a week, with each day bringing more horror and higher body counts, not dissimilar to the Vietnam War coverage a few years prior. As already noted, Jonestown had an even greater impact upon the San Francisco audience, since its leader, the notorious Jim Jones, had been a local pastor, also active in the Moscone campaign and rewarded with a position in his administration.

Interpretation through social drama provides an insight not only into motive but also into alternative readings of the event. There were two dominant narratives to emerge out of the San Francisco murders. The one established at the trial was of an honest man who had temporarily 'snapped' in the face of great disappointment and the other told of two community leaders tragically struck down in a city known for violence. If White's actions

are placed in the context of the violence of the time, it is more easily understood, yet still tragic, including for the perpetrator himself. As a soldier in a wartime army, White had been trained to kill and, as a police officer, violence was part of his daily life. It was also part of the daily, mass mediated American experience in the 1970s, when violence seemed to be everywhere, from the televised reportage of the Vietnam War, mass suicide in Guyana, to the reported violence on the streets. Responding to the perceived threat to family and community with violence would not appear strange. This allows us to better address the question – who was Dan White when he engaged in the act of murder? Was he a man temporarily of ‘diminished capacity’, whose ability to react rationally to disappointment had been radically distorted by a junk food diet, as his defense attorneys successfully argued? Or was he an individual shaped by his age and background, acting desperately to right a wrong through means that appeared appropriate to the circumstances? Was he a representative figure, acting out class and gender ideals in a corrupt world he could no longer understand much less control, as in fact how his own family and community appeared to think?

## **Conclusion**

The assassination of Moscone and Milk was a very public occurrence, which once it happened could not be denied and which implied significant consequences. In addition to the law against violence to other persons, the norms of democratic process had been breached and a vacuum created at the top of local government. The three persons involved were all well-known members of the civic community and the violence of their interaction reverberated widely. Beyond their immediate family and friends and law enforcement authorities, the governing of the city was disrupted and, once reported, the mass media turned the eyes of the nation and the world toward the city. In addition, one of the victims was a prominent member of a vibrant community-in-formation, whose death caused a tear in a fragile social fabric, leaving an indelible mark and spurring a cultural trauma.

From the point of view of social drama, after the funeral and the mourning, the story could have ended there, with a few annual commemorative events, some streets and public buildings named for the victims and perhaps a monument or two constructed in the city. Several things intervened to shift the narrative, the trial and the verdict, and the intensity of the response. From city residents the initial response to the murders was an outpouring of grief and a peaceful march in honor of the fallen. The gay community turned out in the thousands to mourn the loss of both Moscone and Milk, though with an emphasis on the latter. Had the trial been the more or less ritual act of justice and reconciliation that one could have expected, things could have ended there. But the sense of outrage that the verdict evoked was impetus to a new wave of protest and a new narrative structure. Now, the murders were more clearly assassinations, the killing not only of two political leaders, but also of a sense of justice. Through this verdict, many members of the public, though most especially amongst the gay community, felt the core, anti-gay values of the society were revealed; homosexuals were not real members, they could be legally assassinated. This feeling ignited a cultural trauma in a collective which was gaining a new sense of itself. The gay community in

San Francisco, already a strong political force, was through these occurrences further consolidated. Just as the individual had done in his life, the figure of Harvey Milk was a catalyst to collective mobilization and collective identity. Now very conscious of itself and of its fragility, this community mourned the loss of one of its representative figures, as it was forced to re-narrate its relations to the wider society. In that ongoing process, the assassination of Harvey Milk became an iconic event which has now, with the aid of mass mediated representations, inspired actors and activists around the globe.

## Notes

1. One of the conspiracy theories circulating after the murders alleged that it was Jones's representatives who had ordered the murder of Moscone and Milk.
2. Regarding those previous electoral attempts, Castells (1983: 143) writes: 'In his first election race, in 1973, Harvey Milk attracted 17,000 votes and came eleventh in a field of 33 candidates. Although it was an excellent showing, it was, at the same time, a sign that he also had to address a broader liberal constituency. In his second electoral attempt, in 1975, while he was still a gay candidate, he also dealt with the more general issues, particularly emphasizing the need to control real estate speculation. He assumed a "straight image", and his support jumped to 53,000 votes, but he still lost.'
3. White had a romantic attachment to Ireland and identified himself as Irish-American. On the day he killed Moscone and Milk, he carried a book cover in his breast pocket, from a book about Ireland. Commenting on this, one blogger wrote: "'The Town I Loved So Well" says a lot to me about Dan White. White was a boy in San Francisco in the Fifties and Sixties. SF in those days was half the size it is now; a small comfortable livable city ... The Sunset District epitomizes White ... in the Forties and Fifties [this district was] working class Irish or Italian ... Until the 1970s, the Sunset was Dan White's "The Town I Loved So Well" ... a big Asian influx started in the late Seventies, and the Sunset District is now 75% Asian, mostly Chinese. White was alive when the other Irish neighborhood, the Castro, became the gay ghetto. The Castro was a pretty rundown area in the early Seventies. First hippies moved in. Then gays began to buy up rundown houses and gentrify the neighborhood. Most of the Irish left and the hippies moved to the Haight' (Patrick Joubert Conlon, 29 March 2009, [www.bornagainredneck.blogspot.com](http://www.bornagainredneck.blogspot.com). Accessed 11 February 2010).
4. John D'Emilio (1993) has another perspective on Milk's political views and his relation to George Moscone: '[D]uring 1978 [Milk] helped push Moscone away from mainstream liberalism and toward a populist-style coalition politics. By the time of the November election, Milk had become one of the most popular politicians in San Francisco and had achieved wide voter recognition throughout the state' (pp. 73–4).
5. Fitzgerald (1986) points out that it was largely gay men who were moving into San Francisco in the 1970s and who formed the bulk of Milk's constituency. She points out that gay men and lesbian women often had different political and cultural priorities. Milk surprised many when he chose a lesbian to serve as his chief aide.
6. According to one account, Milk 'clearly designated the names of four persons who could replace him as supervisor' (Castells, 1983: 164). Among them was Harry Britt.
7. Accessed at <http://www.time.com>

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Ron Eyerman is Professor of Sociology and Co-Director of the Center for Cultural Sociology at Yale University. His most recent publications include *The Assassination of Theo van Gogh* (Duke University Press, 2008) and 'Intellectuals and Cultural Trauma' in the *European Journal of Social Theory* (2011).