

# Exploring victimhood

**Michael Rothberg**, Professor of English and Comparative Literature and the 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA, in conversation with **Ankur Datta**, South Asian University, Delhi.

**Ankur Datta (AD):** *What would you say constitute the contours of the contemporary politics of victimhood?*

**Michael Rothberg (MR):** My sense is that the category of the victim plays a fundamentally ambivalent role in contemporary politics. To put this ambivalence in the most straightforward terms: there are real victims but victimhood is also an ideological concept subject to easy appropriation. I do not think a politics premised on justice can do without the category of the victim, but such a politics also needs to guard against various ways that category can mislead us and distort our perceptions of historical contexts and processes.

First, it's important to establish why the category of the victim is necessary. Simply put: forms of violence – both events and structures – produce victims. Without some reference to victimhood we cannot understand and criticize violence, conquest, colonization, or other forms of injustice. The experience of victimization is real.

Yet, at the same time, the victim is an insufficient category for a variety of reasons. First, we never want to reduce those who are victimized by various forms of domination to 'mere' victimhood: no matter the extremity of the violence they face, individual and collective subjects are always more than just victims. They are also, potentially, resistors, survivors, or – as Primo Levi

and others have warned – collaborators in their own and others' oppression. That list of subject positions also points to a second issue: victim is a position not an identity and subjects can and do occupy multiple positions simultaneously. In other words, if we collapse the position of victim with actual individuals or groups we're involved in a process of reification. That potential reification of victimhood also plays a role in the last and most pernicious potential of the category of victim: its appropriation by those who manifestly do not deserve the title. Once victim becomes a reified identity, it paradoxically starts to circulate freely; it becomes an easily reversible element of an identity politics of victimization embraced by members of dominant groups.

**AD:** *In your work, you have developed the framework of multidirectional memory. What do you mean by multidirectional memory and how does it help address the recognition of victimhood?*

**MR:** My notion of multidirectional memory was meant to provide a new theory of how public memories of traumatic histories interact with each other. Even more relevant here, it was meant to address another aspect of the problem of victimhood: the tendency for claims to victimization to enter into competition with other such claims. The reification of victim status leads not only to its appropriation by those who are not victims: it also sometimes leads to conflict among those who have a legitimate claim to the status or who belong to a group with such a claim, either in the past or in the present. There is no doubt that such 'competitions of victimhood' exist and that a great deal of discursive (and sometimes material) conflict takes place among groups claiming victim identities.

\* Michael Rothberg is the author of *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 2019.

What I objected to and tried to rethink was the underlying logic of such conflicts of memory. It struck me that both in academic and public discussions there was an assumption that such conflicts obey the logic of the zero-sum game, with one memory tradition displacing another. Zero-sum logic proposes, for instance, that too much Holocaust memory means not enough memory of slavery, too much memory of slavery detracts from Holocaust memory, and so on. I don't think discourses of memory (or for that matter, discourses more generally) work that way. Rather, I came to understand, memory conflict is productive: it produces more memory and not less. That production of memory takes place through various forms of dialogism: borrowings, echoes, repetitions, ricochets. Memory traditions draw on each other and emerge together in non-zero-sum ways. The rise of a global Holocaust memory did not silence other memories, but helped provide a context for the articulation of further memories of suffering. But the importance of the Holocaust on the global memory stage, I also argued in *Multidirectional Memory*, was the outcome of its dynamic interaction with memories of colonialism and slavery and ongoing processes of decolonization.

This multidirectional dynamic has implications for thinking about victimhood. While the suffering of trauma can be a profoundly isolating experience, the articulation of memories of suffering can also produce new alliances and solidarities. There are obviously no guarantees in these realms: competition and conflict are real. But the archive of multidirectional memory and the fundamental dynamic of remembrance that I uncovered in my book also give me some hope that there are alternatives to the possessive investment in victimhood that we see all around us.

*AD: In recent times, there has been a rise in populism or the increased dominance of political movements that privilege moral, ethnic, communal and national majorities across the world. One of the striking elements of these different movements, whether in the United States of America, Hungary, Turkey or India to list a few examples, is the claim made to victimhood. Victimhood appears to be appropriated. How could observers of all kinds, from scholars, journalists to activists react and challenge this appropriation of victimhood?*

*MR:* This is one of the key questions of our time. As I've said, the status of the victim and victimhood is fundamentally ambivalent and subject to appropriation. I do think we are seeing a rise in this embrace of

victimhood by political movements that are in fact most interested in victimizing others (which is, once again, why I don't think we can simply drop the category altogether, as attractive as that often seems).

It's important, though, to state that this is not an entirely novel phenomenon. The Nazis, after all, rose to power on the back of the myth of the 'stab in the back' during World War I and because of a widespread sense among Germans that they had been treated unfairly in the wake of that war. Resentment has been a powerful motivating force in politics, then and now. Mahmood Mamdani titled his book on the Rwandan genocide *When Victims Become Killers* in order to signal precisely the power and danger of the reversibility of the discourse of the victim. His point, of course, was not that Hutu perpetrators were actually victims or that there is no difference between victims and perpetrators, but that a long discursive tradition deriving from colonial history had cultivated a victim identity characterized by resentful affects that could be mobilized in the service of the mass murder of neighbours (and even family members).

How we actually challenge this dynamic is a much more difficult question. I do think that historicizing the discourse of victimhood is valuable in itself and that there is much to be gained by observing how it plays out across different cultural, national, and historical contexts. I don't think the lesson of that kind of historicization is simply that the resentful embrace of victimhood is a constant of human nature and that therefore there's nothing much that can be done about it. Rather, I would hope, it should lead us to ask about the social, political, and economic conditions in which resentment thrives.

Since this isn't a matter of human nature, I don't think that what we'll find is that the causes are identical in all places, but I suspect we'll find some important overlapping variables and parameters that can help clarify what is happening. I'm no expert here – and certainly not for the diverse range of contemporary situations in which populism has been on the rise in the last several years. Nevertheless, I do think we can identify some common elements.

The first prominent feature I would mention is the failure of the left to articulate a coherent narrative in the wake of the economic crisis of 2007-2008. Too many parties on the left side of the political spectrum – especially the social democratic parties – had already capitulated to neoliberalism and that capitulation allowed capital to maintain legitimacy despite the obvious evidence of its catastrophic failures. This leaves plenty of people with reason to be angry about their fate,

but with no coherent progressive alternative. (I'm heartened by the rise of some prominent progressive politicians at the left end of the Democratic Party in the US, but it remains to be seen how much influence the party will allow them to wield.)

The other major factor I see at play in many of the national contexts you've mentioned is racism. Racism articulates resentful victim identities in the service of violence. Here the question of memory is also important: I don't think it would be an exaggeration to state that racism thrives in places where past racial violence remains un-worked through. The two examples I know best are the US and Turkey. In the US, it now seems clear, we are a long way from having substantively addressed the legacies of genocide and slavery that attended the founding of the country and that continue to play out today. In Turkey there is an even more explicit refusal to confront genocide and mass ethnic violence that continues to echo in the unresolved Kurdish question. In such contexts, legacies of victimization play out in perverse ways through the continued production of new victims and through mass spectacles where violence, or at least violent rhetoric and fantasies, can be enjoyed.

I think this factor of enjoyment is crucial to understand: there is a prominent sadistic dimension to the embrace of victimhood among those who align with the populist far right. In the absence of a strong progressive narrative of liberation, the right offers a seductive pleasure both in being a victim and in perpetrating (or fantasizing about perpetrating) 'revenge' violence against racialized or otherwise minoritized groups.

*AD: What implications does the appropriation of victimhood by those with power have on victimhood as a concept?*

MR: While, as I've been saying, I don't think we can do without the concept of victimhood, my own work in recent years has been trying to move beyond the victim-perpetrator binary. This work has primarily involved rethinking perpetration, but it also has implications for thinking about victims. I've just published a book called *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford University Press, 2019). My argument is that we have an impoverished vocabulary for thinking about various forms of structural violence and for forms of responsibility for historical wrongs and distant suffering. I use the concept of 'implication' to mark the different ways we participate indirectly in violence and exploitation or inherit histories of genocide and conquest. Implicated subjects, as I write in the book,

'occupy positions of power and privilege without being themselves direct agents of harm; they contribute to, inhabit, inherit, or benefit from regimes of domination but do not originate or control such regimes' (p. 1). Implicated subjects, in other words, cannot be called perpetrators because their actions do not inflict violence directly, but they cannot be called mere bystanders either because they are not as passive and uninvolved as that category suggests.

As with the category of the victim (or perpetrator for that matter), it's important not to reify the implicated subject: it's not an eternal identity in my theory, but a subject position that we occupy in particular circumstances and in relation to particular histories. We might still also be victims or perpetrators in other contexts and in other histories. That situational dimension of implication can, I hope, help us move away from thinking in terms of 'pure' identities and 'pure' politics. Rather, we are much more impure and much more implicated in injustice than we usually like to think. But being an implicated subject is quite different from being a perpetrator who could be indicted in a court of law. There is, rather, a moral dimension to recognizing oneself as an implicated subject, and even more important, there is the potential for a politics that would elude some of the traps set by the discourse of victimization.

I see the political potential of implication in forms of alliance that recognize the reality of experiences of victimization, but see the need for what I call differentiated or long distance solidarities: that is, for forms of solidarity that cut across identity positions and social locations. I take some of the inspiration for such a politics from intersectional feminists like the Combahee River Collective, a collective of African American women who both articulated the importance of identity politics on behalf of black women and also recognized the urgent need for alliances with what I would call implicated subjects. As Demita Frazier, one of the collective members, wrote, 'We understood that coalition building was crucial to our own survival.'<sup>1</sup>

This is the direction in which I'd like to see both theory and politics go when it comes to the question of victimhood: toward greater recognition of the complicated map of power that we inhabit and toward new forms of solidarity that open up and transform subject positions instead of reifying them as identities. Politics should involve moving beyond the positions we're assigned in an unequal, hierarchical world.

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1. Quoted in Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. Verso, New York, 2018, p. 9.