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untitled | 2019 | Yuran Henrique (courtesy of the artist)



“THE IMPLICATED SUBJECT”:
A CONCEPT WORTH EXPLORING

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Miguel Cardina

The notion of the “victim” emerged into the public imaginary through discussions about the Holocaust and has come to permeate debates over justice, responsibility and memory. For the historian Enzo Traverso, in his fascinating *L'Histoire comme champ de bataille* [*History as battlefield*], the emergence of this figure is indissociable from a temporality in which the ontology of the future is wiped clean. “Discrete and modest”, the victim corresponds to a new sensibility in which “the memory of the Gulag covers up the memory of revolutions, the memory of the Holocaust substitutes for the memory of antifascism, and the memory of slavery substitutes for the memory of anticolonialism. All this happens as if the remembrance of victims cannot coexist with their struggles, their victories, their defeats” (1).

But does it need to be like this? The idea of the “victim” does tend to highlight suffering and does risk depoliticizing underpinning historical processes. But it is also true that strategic recourse to the idea of the victim has nourished mobilizations for historical justice by individuals and groups subject to violence (2). For instance, in relation to Latin American dictatorships, the category of victimhood has been used to insist on reparations for past violence, and at times to denounce continuing social logics. Or – to refer to one of the examples given by Traverso – we could emphasize how the memory of slavery has today assumed a role in antiracist activism and direct resistance to political imaginaries and social structures inherited from the colonial period.

Furthermore, reflection on what Primo Levi called “the grey zone” and the increasing number of conferences, academic journals and books centred on the figure of the “perpetrator” have enriched the debate around the dichotomy between victim and perpetrators. This general context underlies the latest book by Michael Rothberg, published in 2019 by Stanford University Press. In *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Rothberg proposes the idea of the “implicated subject” – and the related concept of “implication” – to confront the lack of theorization in discussions about privilege, power, violence and injustice. This is not to lose the categories of victim and perpetrator, nor to relativize



them to the point of uselessness. However, the approach encouraged by this binary has compromised our ability to examine how historical and structural injustice is reproduced and constituted precisely through its incorporation into wider dynamics.

As the author writes: “Implicated subjects occupy positions aligned with 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. An implicated subject is neither a victim nor a perpetrator, but rather a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator, and yet in which most people do not occupy such clear-cut roles” (3). A theory of implication, as formulated by Rothberg, therefore obliges us to shift the focus from blame to responsibility, and to distance responsibility from merely legal interpretations based on individual agency. It obliges us to consider the following question: how can we be responsible for actions that we did not ourselves do, and which may even have been done before we ourselves existed as individuals?

The “complex of implication” therefore refers to different, multidimensional relations with past and present injustices: it is possible to be a perpetrator and a victim, or a descendent of a victim. It is possible to be, also, in an ambiguous and apparently distant – though not neutral – position. In effect, instead of searching for responsibility or blame for “original crimes”, the book examines the transmission belts of domination – a term the author borrows from Simona Forti. Thus, the idea of implication leads us to observe its nature as both synchronic (its relation with present injustices) and diachronic (its relation with historical injustices). We must account for how these interpenetrate, whether in terms of economic inequality, gender or racial oppression, imperialist wars or ecological destruction resulting from the sedimentation of historical processes. And, analogously, past genocides, slavery or colonialism are historical happenings which continue to interfere in the present.

The Implicated Subject is based on case studies from the artistic field and its articulations with politics. These function as “allegories of social relations” (p. 200), showing the implicated subject as someone who both inhabits, and reproduces, structures of domination. The theoretical thrust of the book allows it to examine concepts such as human rights (chapters 2 and 5), transitional justice (chapter 3), internationalist solidarity (chapters 5 and 6) and the concept of “multidirectional memory” (4) (chapter 4), cutting across various geographies and diasporas.



The book ends with an incisive conclusion containing eleven theses on the figure of the implicated subject. If the reference to the famous eleven *Theses on Feuerbach* is not obvious enough, the eleventh thesis makes a direct reference to Marx, renewing his famous mandate to his contemporaries and his successors: “scholars and activists need both to interpret implication and to transfigure it” (p. 203). And it is precisely a *figure* that must be deconstructed that is under discussion. In this sense, implication “is not an identity, but rather a figure to think with and through” or – more directly yet – “not a solution but a problem” (p. 199). The book does not present easy solutions for these two tasks of transforming and transfiguring, but it points to the need to articulate academic work with concerted collective action.

This is a notable book that will reconfigure debates over memory and power. It is an invitation to a reflection which, on the basis of new case studies, may do justice to the multiple levels of complexity inherent to its central concept. How to differentiate implication in relation to origin, citizenship, class, race, gender, political practice or biographical trajectory? What is the relation between implication and capital (economic and symbolic), in the framework of a profoundly unequal world-system? What is the status of implication for those who do not directly bear the burdens of domination or (self-)define as victims, but who are nevertheless subjects of the mechanisms that produce injustice and oppression? At various points, the book recognizes this complex and dynamic character of the concept and opens the door to conjugating “complexes of implication” with what could be defined as the “politics of implication”. Hierarchies are forged in umbilical connection to the development of different social forms. Naturally, therefore, they influence theoretical and political proposals which seek to transfigure the implicated place of subjects in the world.



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- (1) Traverso, Enzo (2011), *L’Histoire comme champ de bataille. Interpréter les violences du xx siècle*. Paris: La Découverte, pp. 264-265. “...discrète et pudique [...] la mémoire du Goulag a effacé celle des révolutions, la mémoire de la Shoah a remplacé celle de l’antifascisme, la mémoire de l’esclavage a éclipsé celle de l’anticolonialisme”.
- (2) This is a delicate balance that is always contextual and constantly re-negotiated. It is the same, in essence, as what António Sousa Ribeiro defines as the “paradox of the victim”: while the victim demands recognition for the violence endured, they resist being reduced to a mere object of compassion. Ribeiro, António Sousa (2017), “O cómico e a violência: a autoridade da vítima”, in Isabel Caldeira et al. (ed.), *The edge of one of many circles: homenagem a Irene Ramalho Santos*. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, pp. 450-451.
- (3) Rothberg, Michael (2019), *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 1.
- (4) The term “multidirectional memory” was coined by Rothberg, to suggest that different public memories – as in the case of the Holocaust and slavery – do not necessarily compete; instead, their conflict or coexistence can be productive, opening up a space for dialogue and interconnections. Rothberg, Michael (2009), *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
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Translated by Archie Davies

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