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Reflection | 2019 | [Nuno Simão Gonçalves](#) (courtesy of the photographer)

POSTMEMORY AND THE CONDITION OF THE VICTIM

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The extraordinary proliferation of studies on trauma, memory and violence has given a central position to concepts whose wide circulation quite often results in an effect of banalization that puts into question its analytical productivity and, thus, calls for differentiated critique. Such a critique becomes all the more necessary given the tendency to reduce the concepts to their singular form, eschewing any reflection on their specificity. Thus, there can be no doubt that a traumatic situation may be typified according to coordinates that are common to quite diverse circumstances - namely, the fixation of



memory in a particularly violent moment of the past which recurs in a sort of cyclic present, radically disturbing the coherence of any notion of personal identity. But, to provide some drastic examples, to survive a car crash is not the same thing as having been a victim of domestic violence. And both these situations belong, undoubtedly to a qualitative level quite different e.g. from being a survivor of Auschwitz. Which is to say that the contextualization of trauma is an indispensable component of any analytic stance.

The concept of victim has been the object of an analogous generalization as well and needs to be researched with a special attention to context in each particular case. It is a concept that is plunged into a fundamental paradox. If it is true, as Simone Weil writes in her essay on "The Ilyad as a Poem of Force", that a universal characteristic of any violent act lies in the tendential reduction of the person upon whom it is committed to the status of an object, the concept of victim itself is coterminous to such a process of reification. By claiming the status of a victim - as a claim to the recognition of the suffering endured, as an accusation and bringing to responsibility of those who have inflicted this suffering, and as a claim for compensation, namely of a financial nature, that may amount to some degree of retribution - that reification is being perpetuated and, from this point of view, victory is conceded to the aggressor. This is why, concomitantly to that revindication, there has to be the affirmation of the status of a subject, the retrieval of negated identity and the construction of a possibility of future beyond trauma. This confers a particular importance to the gesture of testimony, as a gesture of authorship that, through the projection onto the level of discourse, frees the victim from the silence which reifies him or her.

At the level of research on postmemory, the concept of the victim calls for specific reflection and contextualization. Postmemory does not simply mean simply taking on the memory of a preceding generation, the ambiguous prefix "post" in no way having the meaning of a mere temporal sequence and, even less, of a gesture of identification. On the contrary, the notion of a gap, the existence of an interval, not just in time, but also at the level of the identity assumed and the position taken towards the past is inherent to the concept of postmemory. The construction of postmemory implies a gesture of construction of knowledge - its initial drive is, almost always, the need to interrogate the silence of the previous generation, to understand all the enigmas that have been accumulating within a frequently dysfunctional family relation. That drive arises from a diffuse conscience which is analogous to the condition of the victim, the object of an obscure process whose contours need to be known. The situation becomes more complex when the perception that the previous generation was a victim of violence and suffered traumatic experiences goes hand in hand with the suspicion that the condition as a victim is inseparable from the condition as a perpetrator, which may put strongly in question any



POSTMEMORY
AND THE CONDITION
OF THE VICTIM

possibility of identification with that suffering: a father who is a former combatant in the Colonial War may be a victim of posttraumatic stress, i.e. a sick person, plunged into acute suffering and with an anomalous behavior well susceptible to inflict no less acute suffering upon those who live around him; but he is also, simultaneously, the more or less conscious participant in an unjust war, and, potentially, a war criminal, namely if it is the case that he has participated in violence inflicted on the civilian population. Thus, a grey zone arises, a space of profound ambivalence which necessarily reflects on the specificity of the postmemorial relationship established by the second generation.

These few thoughts serve, basically, the purpose of stressing the extreme need for epistemological and methodological vigilance in order to avoid the banalization of the concepts I mentioned at the beginning. This is why research in the field of postmemory has to be radically of a qualitative nature and needs, in the first place, to resort to instruments of discourse analysis and narrative analysis that allow to capture with the necessary level of analytical finesse the specificity of each position. In fact, the range of possible positions in the production of postmemory is quite large. In what pertains directly to the present reflections, one of the ways to grade that range and to construct the different possible patterns analytically lies in the reference to the degree of identification or distancing regarding the condition of victim - the subject of postmemory may, at the limit, construct for itself an identity as a “postvictim” and be content with that status, or he or she may endeavor to construct an identity that is entirely based upon the refusal of that identity and the search for a much more complex articulation with the inevitable ambivalence of the relation between the generation of memory and the generation of postmemory. Between both these extreme positions lies the empirical substance of the concrete lives of men and women confronted with the violence of History.

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