

Introduction to special issue: The logic of victimhood

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Abstract

This special issue aims to identify the social and affective dynamics that circulate and attach to the ‘master’ signifier of victimhood in liberal public spheres. Drawing on cutting-edge work by leading scholars across theoretical traditions, the issue illuminates the ways in which victimhood emerges as a dominant communicative logic in three distinct but interrelated domains of liberal publicity: its histories, politics and aesthetics.

Keywords

Aesthetics, histories, misogyny, politics, populism, victimhood

When #BlackLivesMatter became a major twitter trend in protest to the racialized violence and disproportionate loss of Black American lives by US police in 2014, #AllLivesMatter swiftly emerged as a counter-claim to a different victimhood: Why are white lives excluded from the movement? And, in the spring of 2020, when civil uprisings resisting police brutality against Black people were met with tear gas and rubber bullets, it was the police, not the people they targeted, who were often seen as the victims of these protests. Similarly, as thousands of migrants and refugees flee war and poverty risking their lives to reach safety, Europeans and Americans imagine themselves as victims in need of protection – a ‘Fortress Europe’ in the European Union or Trump’s wall separating the United States from the Mexican border. Finally, when Brett Kavanaugh came face-to-face with Christine Blasey Ford, who accused him of rape in the public hearing of his US Supreme Judge appointment in 2018, President Trump echoed a wider

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male sentiment when he complained about ‘how difficult . . . it is to be a young man today’.¹

Public debates in liberal democracies are today dominated by battles around who is a victim. Historically, positioning oneself as a victim has roots in debates about colonial power, patriarchy, global migration, precarity and economic disparity. Central to such debates have been claims to injury as the effect of economic and political structures that subordinate and disenfranchise social groups – be these the working class under capitalism, women under patriarchy or black people under colonialism (Brown, 1995). Claims to suffering and struggles for social justice, in this sense, have always been intimately intertwined not only with political activism for social change but also with critical theorizations of the social (Chouliaraki, 2013; Turner, 2006). Even though this relationship between suffering and justice has been vexed with internal tensions, for instance, with feminists grappling with static dichotomies of victim and agency, such complicated engagements still serve the normative imperative to critique patriarchal power relations and challenge systemic oppression (Banet-Weiser, 2019; Butler et al., 2016).

While 20th-century uses of victimhood as claims to injury in the name of the powerless are well-established across disciplines (for instance, in the context of the Holocaust, Dean, 2010; war, Hynes, 2006; or emotional trauma, Fassin and Rechtman, 2009), the proliferation of similar claims in 21st-century public discourse warrants renewed attention. This is because, if the 20th century placed victimhood at the center of collective attention and emotion, the 21st century radically expanded and intensified this shift. In other words, what, throughout the two world wars, the Holocaust, civil liberties struggles and suffrage movements (among other events), came to be established as the righteous voice of the vulnerable has today become ubiquitous and pervasive across all social groups – and, because of this, also politically weaponized. The reasons for the new hegemony of the victim are many and complex, but, for our purposes, two catalysts stand out. On the one hand, the major global economic crisis of 2008, the largest since the Great Depression, which led to the expanded impoverishment of middle as well as working classes the world over and the subsequent subjection of both to neoliberal formations of austerity that widened wealth gaps and shrank networks of care (Davies, 2016). And, on the other hand, the rise of social media platforms that ‘democratized’ voice and led to a proliferation of echo chambers of popular resentment and collective grievance (Grossberg, 2018) – both developments extensively discussed in this issue.

One key feature of this contemporary public discourse is the reversal of victimhood claims, so that those who speak out on the injustices they have suffered are now accused as oppressors by those in positions of power (Cole, 2007). Even though the link between claims to suffering and positions of power can never be completely fixed, we argue that victimhood today operates as a ‘master’ signifier, a dominant communicative logic that relies on auxiliary vocabularies – of injured white masculinity, celebrated survivorship or heroic sacrifice – to reclaim power for the powerful and retrench existing hegemonic arrangements in liberal polities. Whether it is authoritarian populists, networked misogynists or imperialist state actors, this logic of weaponized victimhood is, we contend, a crucial site of political struggle and, as such, a scholarly terrain of urgent interrogation. How and by whom are claims to victimhood made today and why are they so instrumental to our collective conversations, online and offline? What do these claims tell us about

the relationship between vulnerability and power? And how do we account for the collective and structural forms of violence that may be articulated and reproduced in the context of individuals claiming victimhood?

Our special issue addresses these questions in an attempt to identify the social dynamics that circulate, cathect and attach to the 'master' signifier of victimhood. Drawing on cutting-edge work by leading scholars across theoretical traditions, the issue contributes to illuminating the ways in which victimhood emerges as a dominant communicative logic in three distinct but interrelated domains of liberal publicity: its histories, politics and aesthetics. In the *histories* domain, our articles focus on the different trajectories through which victimhood and its auxiliary vocabularies, such as trauma, rights and survivorship, have come to shape the symbolic realm where we today compete for social value and political capital; but also on how history itself becomes an auxiliary vocabulary of victimhood through which populist discourse seeks to realign national and transnational communities around exclusionary imaginations of 'us' and 'them'. In the *politics* domain, our authors focus on the relationship between gender, race and victimhood, analyzing the political consequences of the omnipresence of claims to pain in our politics and culture. And in the domain of *aesthetics*, authors engage with the ways in which cultural practices of narrativity and visuality highlight further auxiliary vocabularies to victimhood, relying on concepts like courage, bravery and sovereignty to strategically avoid or displace blame for perpetrators.

In a climate of divisive identity politics, rampant misogyny and the criminalization of vulnerable others, we argue, it is important to step back and reflect upon the key debates of our times as well as to dissect the hidden logic that shapes the structure of such debates, in the first place. Our special issue is, from this perspective, an invitation to interrogate the communicative logic of victimhood, the divisions that this logic perpetuates and the political work that it does to assign responsibilities and accrue benefits to some but not others. By identifying the possibilities and limitations of victimhood as a 'master' signifier within contemporary public discourse, our issue aspires to point to the harms, exclusions and injustices that this logic inflicts on our democracies and to suggest alternatives that place the demand for justice at the heart of our collective conversations.

Histories

In this section, Lilie Chouliaraki offers an account of the historical rise of victimhood as an *affective logic of communication* that attaches public value to those who have the power to claim it. She argues that contemporary claims to victimhood are grounded on 20th-century 'grand' narratives of trauma (psychoanalysis) and injury (human rights), both of which consolidated the victim as a figure of emotional or social pain whose performances of suffering carried new moral and political value, and that 21st-century post-recession and digital neoliberalism came to amplify, accelerate and complicate the circulation of these performances, rendering 'platformized' pain the new normal in liberal cultures. If we want to challenge the implications of this new normal for the most vulnerable in society, Chouliaraki concludes, we need to start asking different questions about victims, namely not only who is the victim but *from which position this claim to victimhood is made; who gains from such a claim and who is set to lose.*

Alyson Cole engages in a similarly historical narrative of the term ‘survivor’. Offering an account of three intersecting trajectories that, in the past half-century, increasingly imbued the meaning of ‘survivor’ with positive value, she shows how such ‘transvaluations’ have simultaneously also altered the status of the victim in deeply ambivalent ways. The *aftermath of the Shoah*, when survivors acquired moral authority as witnesses to ‘crimes against humanity’; *the stigmatization of the ‘victim’*, where anti-welfare conservatism became hegemonic in American public discourse; and *the rise of therapeutic strategies* promising to heal the traumatized, she argues, have come to consolidate a hierarchy of ‘survivors’ over ‘victims’ – one that obscures the socio-historical structures of victimhood and has come to constitute a key juncture where neoliberalism converges with illiberal populism.

Finally, instead of providing a history of victimhood and its auxiliary vocabularies, Omar al-Ghazzi focuses on *the invocation of history itself as an empty signifier in the construction of the victim* within populist discourse. This use of history as a discourse that enables collective self-victimization and the co-optation by those in power of the victim narrative and position, claims al-Ghazzi, serves to establish political binaries between ‘us’ as the patriots, faithful, authentic and ‘them’ as the traitors, faithless and intruders. Drawing on Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s populist discourse, al-Ghazzi illustrates how national self-victimization works through these leaders’ use of a ‘past decline/ future glory’ narrative to mobilize their base against their political adversaries and/or marginalized communities. In situating history at the heart of populist self-victimization, al-Ghazzi’s article does not speak only to the domain of *histories* but also highlights the political work that history does to forge injury-centered national identities and imagined communities, thus offering a bridge between the *histories* and *politics* sections of this issue.

Politics

In this section, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Alison Phipps explore how *the logic of victimhood becomes entwined with gender, class and race*. Both authors take up the question of the political valence of victimhood and analyze the different mechanisms that make victimhood such a powerful discursive device in the political rhetoric of the right and the left. Banet-Weiser examines the relationship between the *#metoo movement and the powerful men who are accused of sexual harassment and assault*. The testimonies of #metoo have been crucially important in challenging historical notions of the passive vulnerability of victimhood, and in forcing men who have been accused to publicly address their accusations through statements that circulated in mainstream and social media. Yet those public statements by powerful white men distorted the testimonies of women who accused them and claimed instead that the men themselves were the victims of false accusations of sexual harassment and assault by women. Banet-Weiser argues that this claim of white male victimhood, that indeed it is they who have been injured and their lives ruined, needs to be understood within a conjunctural Western context of neoliberalism, networked misogyny and the post-racial moment. Analyzing the public statements made by men such as Brock Turner, Brett Kavanaugh, Matt Lauer and others, she shows that the current moment feels like a relentless onslaught of male resentment, with

the discourse of victimhood appropriated not by those who have historically suffered but by those in positions of patriarchal power. This rerouted victimhood, Banet-Weiser argues, works to retrench patriarchal gender relations by redefining what it means to be disempowered, vulnerable and violated.

Alison Phipps makes a different argument in her article, though there are clear connections between the two pieces. Phipps, using an analytic of ‘white tears’, centers her argument on *mainstream white feminists and their performances of woundedness*. Despite the claim that mainstream feminism is about gender equity, Phipps argues, these performances are steeped in hegemonic power. Solidified and sexualized by colonialism and justified by state violence against people of color, this power is today the context for mainstream feminists’ woundedness as this often becomes aligned with the far right rather than with the structural racism and misogyny that actually wounds marginalized communities. Phipps ends her article with reflections on anti-sex worker and anti-trans mainstream feminist movements, showing how, in their complicity with the far right, white mainstream feminists occupy a position of the ‘ultimate wounded white victims’.

Aesthetics

What does victimhood look like? What aesthetic forms or narrative and visual vocabularies does victimhood take in the realm of cultural production and popular culture, and how do these confirm or challenge traditional representations of the victim as a vulnerable body? In this section, María José Gámez Fuentes takes up some of these questions, proposing that television story-telling, films and celebrity initiatives constitute a potentially fertile ground to reimagine what victimhood means, especially in terms of the construction of female agency in opposition to the victim. Applying a lens of ‘*ethical witnessing*’, which advocates for a recognition of difference that goes beyond conventional recognition, Fuentes offers a close reading of the blockbuster film *Captain Marvel*. This film can be seen in the context of a recent proliferation of Hollywood films which capitalize on and promote popular feminism narratives yet, as Fuentes points out, this hyper-visibility of feminism (important as it may be) often stops here, as if seeing feminist messages is the same thing as changing structures. Fuentes’ analysis of *Captain Marvel* goes on to show how the film as a cultural artefact explores not only flaws of the victim script *versus* empowered subject script, but also how this victim script comes to obscure the social divisions that the logic of victimhood itself perpetuates.

Robin Wagner-Pacifiçi examines a very different form of cultural production in her article, namely the portraits of wounded US veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan painted by former US President George W. Bush – the very president who sent these veterans to war. Wagner-Pacifiçi is also interested in witnessing but from a different angle to Fuentes; she positions Bush as a particular kind of sovereign/witness who first orders soldiers to war and then renders them in portraits that emphasize their woundedness. Her article offers us an original reading of the ways in which the consequences of war are rendered visible on the canvas while nonetheless remaining at a distance from the painter/witness. At the same time, drawing upon Foucault’s essay on the Velasquez painting *Las Meninas* that explores notions of looking and power, Wagner-Pacifiçi

reflects on *the auxiliary vocabularies of courage, heroism and sacrifice that are mobilized by sovereign power to invest soldierly victimhood in meaning*. Through the lens of sovereignty, her article thus tracks the politically vexed communicative exchanges of deference, recognition, power, identity and victimhood that such portrait-making raises for its viewers.

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Note

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45722404>

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Biographical notes

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Sarah Banet-Weiser is a professor at the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is the author of several books, including *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012) and *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (2018). She is the co-editor of several anthologies, including *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (2012) and *Racism Post-Race* (2019).