

Review of *The Violence of Victimhood*

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The Violence of Victimhood

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A man or woman adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience may not always be someone you would wish to invite for dinner. That was the seemingly obvious truth that I nevertheless found myself needing to repeat to Amnesty members on a number of occasions during the years that I worked for the human rights organization. For, as any experienced human rights campaigner knows, the general public tends to prefer committing their energies, their time and their cash to assisting indisputably *worthy* victims of violation. It is relatively easy to mobilize interest in, and support for, the poet or trade unionist behind bars whose nobility of spirit and impeccable character match the template of victim as paragon of virtue. It is more difficult to convince a wary public that the struggle for human rights also means coming to the defence of individuals whose ideological orientation or core beliefs may in some way appear less than admirable to us.

This widely shared bias toward a conception of victimhood as a badge of irrefutable moral stature is a phenomenon that will be familiar not only to human rights practitioners, but also to journalists, academic researchers, legal practitioners, and others whose work brings them into direct contact with those who have suffered oppression, injustice, or violence. In her beautifully crafted and immensely stimulating book, Diane Enns urges us to rethink narrow conceptions of victimhood that close off intellectual argument and that require an almost automatic suspension of judgment. She asks us to consider carefully “why victims are currently invested with a moral authority that many feel unable or unwilling to challenge.” In particular, Enns

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rigorously questions the frequent invocation of a discourse of “otherness” that may distort our relationship to the victim of violation or atrocity—a reflexive “veneration” of any such individual which ultimately “render(s) the other a pure victim, beyond moral and epistemic reproach, a *good other*.” Enns argues powerfully here for what she calls, “the concept and practice of merciful judgment,” a compassionate but critical engagement with those wronged or disfigured by injustice or violence that avoids stripping that individual of all “moral agency and responsibility.”

In contexts as diverse as Israel/Palestine, Rwanda, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Enns skillfully examines some of the many complexities of the experience of victimhood and underlines the dangers of identities rooted exclusively in claims to “the pure innocence of the victim relieved of the burden of historical responsibility on the ground of injury.” In this regard, the book’s chapters on victims turned perpetrators and the public reception of accounts of former child soldiers will be of great interest to scholars and practitioners alike working in the human rights and humanitarian fields. In her interrogation of contemporary understandings of victimhood, Enns draws on an impressive range of thinkers and authors: from Emmanuel Levinas to Franz Fanon to Jean Améry. Her reflections on the controversy generated by the publication of Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*—with Enns asserting along with Arendt that, “each historical event, each experience of victimization, must be investigated and analyzed within its own historical context”—make for especially compelling reading.

Enns also contributes helpfully to vital debates about contemporary approaches to peacebuilding and takes a healthy, questioning stance in relation to that boom industry in the worlds of academic publishing and NGO activity—transitional justice. In her chapter on “Mercy for the Merciless,” Enns argues that “to criticize justice mechanisms does not mean that we are indifferent to injustice or care little about the lives of victims. It means that we throw into question the effectiveness of the law in dealing with the aftermath of conflict.” In assessing the impact of judicial mechanisms such as the International Criminal Tribunals for Rwanda and for former Yugoslavia (ICTR and ICTY, respectively), Enns expresses a concern that a mainly “retributive sense of justice . . . underlies the current discourses informing global responses to atrocity, despite recent attempts to define an alternative kind of justice as restorative or reparative.” The argument for a plurality of responses to atrocity (including non-judicial ones such as “. . . a sustained commitment to . . . reinventing politics and rebuilding civil society”) and a focus on the prevention of future violence rather than the punishment of wrongdoing is indeed a crucial one. But one might still ask whether an institution like the ICTY—flawed as it is - can be said to be wholly retributive in its workings and therefore always an impediment to the building of lasting peace. Beyond securing the convictions of those responsible for particular crimes, surely that body’s contribution to the attempt to establish a detailed, authoritative historical record of what happened in that region in the 1990s (an accounting still rejected by many in the countries of the former Yugoslavia)

is also an important, constructive function in the much longer term effort to “reinvent a community that refuses violence.” In a region where the deliberate use of bad history became a key strategy for the escalation of fear and hatred, isn’t the ICTY’s role in the writing of good history for the future—however imperfectly—in itself a positive endeavour? In this chapter, I would also have liked to see Enns address the fact that other critics of the ICTY (including victims from each of the communities affected by the region’s multiple conflicts) would insist that far from being representative of “victim-centred approaches to justice,” the institution has in fact brought little in the way of “catharsis and empowerment” to many of those seeking such a process. For them, the sentences handed down by that body have been insultingly light and therefore an insufficient punishment for the crimes committed. In their view, the problem with this particular judicial mechanism is that it has consistently refused to be retributive enough.

Undoubtedly, Enns is right to encourage us to consider the potential in alternative approaches to “dealing with the past” and post-conflict reconstruction, including the option of what she describes as a kind of “merciful forgetting.” But even as we wonder if post-conflict societies might be better off without costly, potentially divisive, institutions like the ICTY and the ICTR, we also need to engage the awkward question sometimes raised by those on the receiving end of our well-intended recommendations of the benefits of various alternatives to judicial mechanisms. How receptive would many of us living in our highly developed, affluent, and politically stable societies that we set aside our expectations that those who have harmed us will be brought to justice in a court of law in favour of some kind of alternative process?

The way in which Enns’s book precipitates this kind of much needed reflection on these issues is a mark of its real accomplishment. Enns’s impassioned, at times almost conversational writing style—an urgent, inviting authorial voice—is most welcome throughout and will help make *The Violence of Victimhood* accessible to a much wider readership than would normally be the case with a work of academic philosophy. Reading lists in university courses on human rights, conflict transformation, political thought, and ethics will be greatly enriched by the addition of this genuinely thought-provoking volume.