

Critica della vittima. Un esperimento con l'etica. By Daniele Giglioli; Roma: nottetempo, 2014. Pp.124. €12 paperback.

Daniele Giglioli is one of the most important comparatist scholars in Italy. While in 2011, in *Senza trauma*, he analysed the hypertrophic use of the category and rhetoric of trauma in literature, in *Critica della vittima. Un esperimento con l'etica*, Giglioli reflects upon what he calls the “mythological victimary machine” (p. 9). More specifically, the hypothesis and aim of the book is summarized in two sentences almost at its end: “The mythology of the victim takes force away from the weakest and make it accumulate in the wrong hands. To criticize it means to recast the play” (p. 87). On the one hand, Giglioli wants to trace the origin and to deconstruct (critique) the mythological victimary machine, the process that has elected the victim as the hero of our time; on the other hand he wants to envision (the ethical experiment) the possibility of recognising those abuses of the victimary position that fuel conflicts, violence and resentment, by indicating a possible way for reconstructing a political agency for the oppressed.

Agency is a key term that cuts across the book. According to Giglioli, the position of the victim annihilates agency and defines the subject not for what s/he does but for what s/he suffers or has been subjected to, thus putting him or her in a position of total passivity. To represent him/herself as victim allows the subject to cover a position of irresponsibility (“I did nothing”) in respect to the world; at the same time the rest of the world is positioned in a state of debt, a debt that could also be potentially inextinguishable, as Paul Ricœur wrote in *History, memory, forgetting* (2000). Hence, the victim’s past, present and future words and actions acquire the status of the “blamelessness”. Giglioli argues that victimhood is a position of power and, in Jacques Lacan’s terms, can represent a new form of the Discourse of the Master.

As Giglioli highlights in the first chapter (out of three), he is not talking of the real victim but “rather of the transformation of the victim imaginary into *instrumentum regni*, and the stigma of powerlessness and irresponsibility that it marks on the dominated” (p. 12). On the one hand, the power represents some subjects as victims in order to manipulate their lives on behalf of ‘their own sake’. ‘I, sovereign power, decide for your life because you, as victim, have no agency, no possibility of action’: this argument justifies humanitarian wars and also humanitarian discourse. It justifies dispossessing the subject of any capacity for choice, by justifying (as in the case of the “humanitarian war”) even the use of violence as the lesser evil (pp. 18-22). On the other hand the power can disguise itself as victim, usurping the victimary position. Political leaderships today often use the victimary position in order to construct their political constituencies. Resentment, hate and the identification with the leader as a victim are some of the affective mechanisms that legitimise power and authority.

To mimic the role of the victim is then strategic for legitimising actions, even violent actions, as Giglioli explains in the second chapter of the book. In order to represent and perceive him/herself as victim or potential victim, the subject needs to imagine a threat that can be completely unreal. In this way, we can defend ourselves, by re-acting to something that happened only in an individual or collective fantasy of persecution. Hence, those who imagine themselves as persecuted are allowed to defend themselves from the imagined threat, actually becoming real persecutors. This is the case of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and of all the conspiracy theories that construct an imaginary enemy against which everyone is called to fight in reality. As Giglioli points out, conspiracy theories are an important element in the construction of the victimary mythological machine.

However there is another, and more fundamental, cultural and semiotic mechanism in action in the construction of the mythological victimary machine: the essentialisation of the position of victim. Giglioli takes a very effective example that epitomises a process of victimisation that, as he says, reunifies the rights of the strongest and the rights of the weakest in a same subject. It is a sentence from Golda Meir, the Israeli former prime minister: “We can forgive you [Arabs] for killing our sons. But we will never forgive you for making us kill yours”. According to Giglioli, Meir’s sentence reveals the fundamental shift that makes the mythological victimary machine so powerful: the transformation of history into ontology. At stake here is not the denial of the immense and horrific reality of the Holocaust and the still present threat of anti-Semitism. Rather it is about pointing out a dangerous shift that transforms a historical and immense crime into an ontological injustice, something that marks forever not only victims, survivors and witnesses but also their sons, grand-sons, etc. An identity ontologically and essentially based on the-being-always-victim or potential victim in any context, something that is unalienable and makes the subject innocent and irresponsible of his/her own action. The violent action is perceived and constructed as a legitimate re-action of a victim to an ever present threat. It is, in Giglioli’s words, “a subalternity that perpetuates the domination” (p. 111).

Giglioli’s book is an illuminating read. He brilliantly analyses cultural logics and genealogies of a phenomenon that mark our time, as already noted by Paul Ricoeur, Michael Rothberg, Tzvetan Todorov and David Rieff, among others. Giglioli succeeds in interpreting in a convincing way different social and political phenomena through the conceptual prism of the victimary position.

However, the book would have benefited from a more “classical” academic approach to references that are described (but not listed) at end of the book. The style and reasoning are very sophisticated and elegant yet sometimes clarity is sacrificed for generating rhetorical effects.

Most importantly I think the book leaves a point unresolved, which threatens the possibility of transforming these reflections into actions. The author focuses his critique on our fundamental capacity to distinguish between “real” and false victims (p. 12), a capacity that asks for a cognitive effort for deconstructing and analysing victimary narrations, as Giglioli remarks. But the point does not question just our cognitive capacity. The issue is eminently political: who are we for making a decision about who is victim and who is not? From what place and which position can we decide this? This is the question that justifies the humanitarian, security and military practices (target of Giglioli’s brilliant critique) that, for example, decide if a migrant has to be protected as victim or if s/he represents a potential threat that may put us in the position of victim. S/he is tracked, inspected, his or her life analysed: Is s/he refugee or economic migrant? Persecuted or potential persecutor? True victim or false victim?

I argue that we should think the victimary position through the prism of a relational paradigm: “victim” is always a relational and contextual concept. We are victim of someone and for someone, but we can also be at the same time the perpetrator of something and for someone else. As Giglioli highlights at the end of his book, we should recover the concept of ideology as “the necessarily imaginary conscience of the position the individual occupies in the reality” (p. 113). I would argue that such a position is actually the result of the relations that we construct with our others: to distinguish between the true victim and the false victim

means firstly to be aware of the place from where we are speaking and of the net of relations from which our discourse emerges.

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