

Diana Tietjens Meyers
Victims' Stories and the Advancement of Human Rights
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The intersection of victimhood and human rights is notoriously tricky territory to navigate. On the one hand, the collective nature of human rights discourses and the desire of human rights entrepreneurs (including NGOs and international lawyers-on-the-make) to intervene in situations of atrocity and impose (ready-made) solutions risks re-traumatizing victims and/or leaving them without agency. On the other, perpetrators of injustice, terror and torture can appropriate and usurp the language and ideas of human rights to justify and explain-away acts of horror or entrench egregious practices. The intersection of victimhood and human right often possesses a historic dimension as, for example, victims and survivors and their families may seek truth and/or justice concerning crimes committed against them in the past or politicians may harness rights-based rhetoric to claim redress for former inequities or inequalities.

Diana Tietjens Meyers explores these issues by drawing on secondary material – in particular, the memoirs of ‘victims’ of human rights abuse. Her methodological approach is to take difficult cases with a view to teasing out and unpacking the various multileveled strands and practical implications that victimhood involves. Meyers does this by describing ways of reading the experience of victims of exploitation (child soldiers or sex workers) by utilizing insights from across a broad interdisciplinary spectrum – including the work of Hayden White on narrative, Richard Rorty on moral psychology and Peter Goldie on empathy.

The case studies likewise range across the complexity of victimhood experience. For instance, she begins with a close reading of Mohamedou Ould Slahi's *Guantanamo Diary* (2015) – a vital account of rendition. Slahi's (ongoing) plight allows Meyers to explore the delineations drawn between ‘heroic’ and ‘pathetic’ victims in her opening chapters and engage with wider debates, driven, in her view, by Amnesty International's conceptualization of victimhood, which, she argues, imposes a human rights problematic (in terms of describing victimhood and suggesting remedies) that can forestall a nuanced understanding of difference (p.28). This tendency towards bifurcation on the one hand sets heroic victims to ‘face off against the repressive power of the state to fight injustice using nonviolent tactics’; while on the other, it frames pathetic victims as characterized by ‘passivity and helplessness in the face of overpowering force and unspeakable humanly inflicted suffering’ (p.18). But, as Meyers goes on to argue, the very tendency to parcel the experience of victimhood into categories with the purpose of upholding human rights may work to ‘imply the super-humanity of some victims and the evacuated humanity of others’ (p.53).

Meyers does not engage specifically with transitional justice or reconciliation discourses, but her warnings against oversimplification are compelling: for just as some victims may feel some kind of closure by forgiving and forgetting, others may struggle to move beyond their loss (if that is even possible) yet feel pressurized to participate in rhetoric and initiatives that belie their private sentiments. This public/private dichotomy is emblemized in Ishmael Baeh's troubling account of his time as a child soldier in chapter three. Baeh's account is troubling in the double sense of his chronicling of the quotidian acts of horror in which he almost gleefully participated, but also in his construction of innocence and evocation of (self)victimhood. Meyers seeks to provide a ‘productive process of moral reflection’ on the story (p.127), suggesting that he ‘lets the story speak for itself’ and that by ‘steering clear of casting his story in a

human rights mold, he entrusts readers with the responsibility to take up the difficult issues his story raises' (p.137). What that responsibility might mean is not really clarified. As such, the reading by Meyers is a rather flaccid, over-intellectualization of what is at times a sensational but, in the end, asinine memoir.

Often the methodological approach is personalized and, to the eyes of this particular reader, can come across as cloying: Meyers frequently makes assumptions on the part of her reader(s): 'Can anyone read these passages impassively? No shiver of fear? No constriction in the throat?' (p.10). If the intention is the evocation of immediacy, unfortunately, strays instead into a certain obscurity (see also, for instance, 'a transitional moral community' (p.2)). More fundamentally, the approach could be seen to simultaneously infantilize victimhood and de-politicize the idea of human rights. Thus, we are told (somewhat redundantly) that '[t]o ensure respect for victims, human rights professionals must obtain informed consent' to use their stories and 'knowledge to promote a human rights agenda' and prevent victims' and survivors' retraumatization (p.24), while practitioners and academics are offered guidelines for listening to and using stories (p.197). The question of competing rights within the victims' rights advocacy sector is subsumed in the quasi-catch-allism of human rights – after all, some victims of injustice may well be the perpetrators of others.

This treatment of victims' stories perhaps results from a lack of first-hand experience of meeting with actual victims or studying their efforts at overcoming their traumas. It gives way to a utopian 'belief in a just world'. As Meyers explains, this belief system facilitates otherwise empathic individuals ignoring or even denigrating victims due to the persistence of the idea that rewards follow achievements (p.185). It concludes with the advice that '[n]o one can altogether overcome her cultural inheritance and its stockpile of malign stereotypes, but everyone can be critical and vigilant and take responsibility for confronting social reality less defensively and more fairly' (p.190). Again, the question of redundancy arises: Rape victims or survivors of ethno-religiously motivated attacks might, I would guess, sneer at proposals to be more objective in their beliefs and approach to 'social reality'. Meyers may counter that her prescriptions are geared towards 'professionals' but that would only be to compound the false dichotomy of victims on the one side and 'professional' human rights practitioners on the other. The curtailed discussion of civil society organizations – drawing mainly on the work of Michael Edwards – is indicative of this tendency towards abstraction. In Northern Ireland, for instance, victims' lobby groups 'enjoy' complicated relationships with political parties and other groups within the sector resulting in ideological distinctions that arguably hinder collaboration or that inspire ideological readings of historic grievances dedicated towards competing for increasingly scant governmental resources.

Such murky territory inevitably requires treating victims' stories as intrinsically political and raises questions of the ethics of skepticism. It necessarily entails detailed empirical researches and perhaps an in-depth qualitative, interview-based methodology. It requires attention to historically informed source criticism. Such methodological points do not trouble Meyers' text. As a result, her focus on the audience and reception of victims' stories can come across as slightly bloodless and facile. But what it essentially means is that the *production* of those stories is largely left aside or treated almost as a given. Further, it means that the *political* implications of these stories is elided into the legalistic human rights frame that Meyers ostensibly wishes to fracture.

The approach is of a piece with the seemingly intended readership of human rights students and advocates. However, the methodology might reduce its attraction for students of the empirical and theoretical questions of victimhood across the kinds of

disciplines mentioned above. The striking cover image of a bank of microphones against a white space then works, then in that regard, as a rather unfortunate metaphor for the victims' stories promised in the title.

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