

by FRED INGLIS

The Empire of Trauma: an inquiry into the condition of victimhood

by **Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman**
Translated by **Rachel Gomme**
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The stupendous waves of globalisation are, the economic historians tell us, well over a century old, but their terrific riptides, swirling, contradictory, uncontrollable, demand unprecedented new forms of thought and comprehension from the human sciences, if reason and compassion are to have a future.

Ever since Clifford Geertz's classic essay of 1983, 'The Way We Think Now', academic intellectuals have been taking in each other's disciplinary laundry in strenuous efforts to find and clean up a uniform in which to patrol the world and do good in it. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman have just made a model contribution to this collective effort at understanding and mitigating world misery.

They are powerfully qualified. Fassin has just taken up Geertz's vacant seat at the Princeton Institute and is a leading light of that immaculate conception, *Medicins sans Frontières*; Rechtman, no less *engagé*, is a director of the Institut Rivière, anthropologist and 'psychiatrist of the intolerable'. Their calm and mighty book is no less than a staccato history of military and civilian suffering since 1914.

It is however no mere chronicle of atrocity of a kind in which the statistics simply overwhelm one's judgement. Instead, the book discharges, in the poised and beautiful prose of the translator, that supreme duty of the intellectual inquirer so to compile the history of a world-altering idea that we can grasp, and in grasping, become part of a changed moral sensibility gradually suffusing countless people.

The relevant idea is that of trauma, an ineradicable scar cut in selfhood and soul by a dreadful, identifiable event. To bear the scar is to be a victim. What is owing to a victim is, first, compassion and care, second, bearing witness before the world to the damage done. The victim is his or her own witness, of course, but the injury requires a mediator. This is the

psychiatrist-humanitarian, clad in the livery of the aid army, come to listen and then to tell, to counsel but not, absolutely not, to reproach.

Fassin and Rechtman bring to birth the contemporary concept of the victim. They find its origins among deserters and shell-shocked soldiers in the First World War, there much contaminated by principles of blame as to cowardice and malingering. They report the gradual emancipation of the victim and his and her psychiatric protectors in the second war, noting as they do so the gradual replacement of ordinary neurosis by a lethal event in the aetiology of trauma.

They locate in the Vietnamese war the decisive moment at which it was agreed by the professionals – an agreement signed with an American public which still wanted to match patriotism and the idea of a just war to its horror and magnitude – that both the Marine Corps and the Vietcong might well be victimised.

They turn to terrorist attacks in Paris and an industrial accident in Toulouse to chronicle the urgent and acutely difficult question of the compensation for victims, and note that it is at this point that victimhood and human rights become necessarily entangled. Social justice replaces pity at the centre of the history.

They conclude, as well they might, with the infinite moral confusion and hideous injustices done in Palestine. This brings them up to date with the story barely begun, but gripping, anguished, at times hardly readable. They might perhaps have turned for help to that secular French saint, Simone Weil, who, expressing dissatisfaction with the all-inclusiveness of the language of rights, wrote: "At the bottom of the heart of every human being ... there is something that goes on expecting, in the teeth of all experience of crimes committed, suffered and witnessed, that good and not evil will be done to him or her. It is this above all that is sacred."

The history to hand in this splendid book may be read by the hopeful as the coming-to-epiphany in the muddled and messy world of politics of this deep truth.