IDEAL AND REAL VICTIMS

Political Discourse and Media Representation in Contemporary Societies

Edited by
Susanna Vezzadini

Bologna
University Press

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To the memory of my parents,
Giuliana and Celso,
with grateful love.

Contents

Prefaces

Victimization of civilians is a tragic, yet very frequent occurrence in most part of the worlds. From people targeted by attacks from insurgent groups to migrants attempting to cross borders, victims constitute a large and heterogenous mass that often lacks recognition and definition, also in academic terms. The volume by Susanna Vezzadini "Ideal and Real Victims. Political Discourse and Media Representation in Contemporary Societies" is an experiment and a successful one. It starts from the often-invoked premise of combining research and teaching and does so in an original way by integrating rather than separating the two dimensions. It is based on an idea that that underpins a class, *Power relations and victimization processes*, which Susanna Vezzadini has been teaching for years in the Master's degree in International Relations at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Bologna. Over the years, it became increasingly clear that it was essential to offer (graduate) students a view of problems in international politics that also focused on the individuals, often obscured by the grand narratives of power and relations among states (often, the most powerful states). Yet – and I believe that the richness and innovativeness of the book – students here are not just the audience, as they become protagonists of this learning experience: the case studies of the book are the outcome of the research projects.

The volume seeks to delve into the notion of victimhood, offering a nuanced exploration of how victims are constructed, represented, and perceived in various contexts. It does so by going to the core of the analysis the very lives and experiences of those who are frequently misrepresented in political discourse and media representation. The book begins with an examination of the conceptual

foundations of victims and their recognition (or lack of), tracing their evolution and situating it within the broader context of social sciences. This is a welcome introduction that – after defining key concepts also by reconstructing their genealogy and evolution – sheds light on the constitutive elements of what makes individuals "victims". The interaction between representation and media is scrutinized to reconstruct how victims are socially constructed through different mechanisms, and how denial of victimization is such a frequent phenomenon too. Empirical realities are addressed through various case studies – conducted by the class' students – that highlight the disparity between idealized and real victims. All chapters are connected by a *fil rouge* interrogate how political rhetoric and media portrayals often create a dichotomy between those deemed worthy of sympathy and those who are marginalized, questioning the criteria and consequences of such distinctions.

What emerges is of extreme importance to students and scholars in different domains. Though rooted in classical criminology and sociology, the book speaks to different audiences. Communication scholars and students will find the book central to the discussion on how the media wields significant power in constructing narratives of victimhood. Political scientists will immediately see the profound connections with how political authority is constructed and operates. For scholars working in diverse fields ranging from international relations to public policy, the book offers novel points of view to look at their daily objects of analysis. There is widespread attention at the reasons that underpin state and non-state actors to "victimize": here we can also look at the stories. Each case is thought-provoking and helps readers to challenge preconceived notions, inspiring further inquiry into processes of victimization.

The volume deepens the understanding and spark meaningful conversations about the intricate relationship between power, victimization, and representation. And it does so in an original way, by giving voice to a generation of aspiring scholars, analysts and practitioners suggesting to take stock of the human element in their analyses of political and social phenomena.

Francesco Niccolò Moro
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The volume represents, in the panorama of literature on the theme of victims and victimization processes, a contribution that is undoubtedly relevant for the richness and articulation of the contents and "case" studies offered to the reader, which are diverse and each of great significance. But even more so because they are introduced, by the editor, by a chapter of theoretical framework that masterfully reconstructs the complex and rich literature on the subject and fully illuminates the constant tension between recognition and denial, that characterizes the activities of defining, evaluating, and socially constructing victims' experience and lived.

This oscillation in the social and "political" consideration of victims by public opinion and institutions (some ignored, others, on the contrary, considered "ideal") is evident not only in a diachronic view that reconstructs the way in which, in different epochs, victims were considered and treated. It is even more evident if one pays attention to different types of victims, as the book does meritoriously with reference above all to the forms of denial of recognition. Not only those of common crime or determined by individual perpetrators, but also those – far more numerous, since they are "collective" – of wars and conflicts between states and organizations, of environmental catastrophes produced by the crimes of the powerful, of injustice, of social and economic discrimination, when not of torture and violence perpetrated by state apparatuses or by institutional sources.

There is no doubt that victims of individual, so-called "common" crimes, whether instrumental (such as theft or robbery) or "expressive" (such as assault, street violence or feminicide) have received increasing recognition in recent times. In particular, the victims of those crimes that most solicit media atten-

tion and political decision-makers' interest in search of arguments and support for policies of penal populism. Policies rhetorically represented as responding to a common feeling of solidarity with the suffering of victims, useful to represent themselves, by those who promote them and who are looking for easy consensus, as bulwarks of citizens' security. Security that they believe – contrary to all empirical evidence on the subject of recidivism – can be pursued through the road of inflicting retributive suffering and mere incapacitation of offenders. But only if we are talking about common crimes, possibly heinous, which can be represented in the pages of the crime chronicle through the stereotyping of the protagonists (better if, to some extent, "strangers", foreigners with respect to our social and cultural context). And if the victims themselves, as Vezzadini rightly observes, correspond to certain moral canons, those that exclude, to put it in common parlance, that they "had it coming".

Not identical recognition of the many other victims of crimes committed by the powerful, economic and corporate crimes; victims of structural and cultural violence that affects entire populations or entire generations; victims of violence generated by ideology and fanaticism, but also by political interests, perpetrated by institutional entities such as states and their apparatuses. Justified by the alleged "dangerousness" of those who are persecuted, in the name of national interest, or by displaying a "moral" superiority of those who inflict suffering on others to defend their interests or assert their own power (this is the case of women in many parts of the world or of those who are "different" by origin or skin color). In this case the variables that intervene in the dynamic between recognition and denial can be many and without a shadow of a doubt we can say that there are people and groups who have the right to be recognized as victims and others who have no such right, victims deserving of compassion and capable of arousing outrage, reactions of condemnation and actions to punish the guilty, and others who can be ignored even when truly innocent. Think of the children killed or injured, physically and even more so in the psyche, in the wars or acts of reprisal that we witness on a daily basis in these times. So frequent are these actions that they cause a growing loss of sensitivity and capacity to react – starting with the definition of certain acts as war crimes or genocide – that can bring it all to a halt.

What can be added to what can be found in the pages of this volume? Just one reflection. The need to focus not only on the suffering of the victims and the policies and services to support them, but also on all that has produced the victimization situation. And this, if we are talking about victims of common or individual crimes, in a twofold sense: on the one hand remedying the absence of sensitivity and prevention strategies capable of taking care – preventively – of

potential victims and of removing them from the risks of becoming victims; on the other hand, with reference to the many forms of marginality, exclusion, relational deficiencies, personality disorders, which characterize offenders, in the many cases in which the commission of offences and the landing in prison is the inevitable outcome of problematic life trajectories ignored by social and health policies.

A commitment, that of imagining and implementing "preventive" actions, which can also concern other forms of victimization, those that are the outcome of political or economic violence, of ethnic or religious hatred, which affect individuals but more widely groups, categories, communities, entire populations. This is certainly an arduous task, but it should be at the heart of a culture and a "policy" that truly cares about the processes of victimization in all the forms and degrees in which they occur. Processes that can only be avoided through the removal of the underlying "structural" (economic and cultural) causes that originate them and through the widespread affirmation of human rights. On this front, the various contributions in the volume offer elements of hope, when they speak of the efforts of many (organizations, media, politicians, jurists, ordinary citizens) in denouncing, mobilizing consciences, actively supporting, producing normative changes, even condemning those who consider themselves above justice and promoting, where possible, processes of reparation and reconciliation. Efforts – and here the role of research and universities is decisive – aimed at promoting a new culture permeated by increasing degrees of awareness in every citizen and in every local community in every part of the world.

Franco Prina
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Former President and Founder of the
National Conference for the University Penitentiary Poles (CNUPP)

This is an important book, a book that should be read not only by those who deal professionally with social issues but by all our students who are, indeed, the main authors of it. Susanna Vezzadini, professor and researcher, composed it with them in a work that lasted four years, intense and engaging that certainly produced excellent results.

The writings collected here analyze the figure of the victim, a subject that, at least since the 1980s, has been much discussed from different perspectives, giving rise to what various scholars, primarily the Italian historian Giovanni De Luna, have described as "victim paradigm." This paradigm is characterized by the centrality of the role of the victims in academic research, especially in the field of Memory Studies, beginning with studies on the Shoah. Perhaps only recently the perspective has open up to consider other positions as well: the perpetrators first of all, but also figures with more nuanced and difficult-to-define responsibilities, such as the "implicated" subjects, not directly involved in violent actions, but not purely passive spectators either.

But it is not only in the field of Memory Studies that we find instances of victim paradigm: this has happened, and still happens, also in the media, in newspapers, in television programs that increasingly interview the victims of violence or abuse of power, whatever it may be. At the same time, associations of victims – and/or their relatives – have multiplied, related to very different situations, from mafia victims to earthquake victims, from left-wing extremism to fascist terrorism, from malpractice to epidemics each claiming its own specificity and rights. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this, but for the implicit risks of a tendency to emphasize: for example, the potential ambiguity of the notion of

"victims' rights," which risks to become a substitute for justice and social law, or their political exploitation in a populist and justicialist sense, easy to witness today.

One of the merits of this book is that it goes in the almost opposite direction to the paradigm just outlined, first of all starting with a critique of the genericity of the concept itself: to say "victim" is generic because victims are not all the same, there are many different categories of victims, often incommensurable with each other; generalization resets their differences to zero, making opaque the different specificities and erasing the individual stories of each and everyone. Indeed, if all victims are humanly commensurable, so is not their legal or political standing, nor their social recognition and the consideration in which they are held. Of course, there are no good victims and bad victims; nevertheless, there are – and this is the underlying thesis of the book – mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in the recognition, or not, of different groups of victims, mechanisms that follow social and cultural prejudices and stereotypes strongly conditioned by the media system.

We all remember the picture of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child of Kurdish origins, a little three-year-old migrant who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea and was found lying on the beach. It was an image that went around the world, arousing enormous emotion, largely due to some details in themselves irrelevant in the face of tragedy, but emotionally very significant: the child was alone on the beach, a small individual singularity, not part of an indistinct mass with no history and no name. Very small, so as to arouse tenderness and a protective instinct, but already an individual, he seemed to be asleep on the beach, in a natural, peaceful pose, his face a little hidden and not quite visible, corroborating the impression of a peaceful sleep rather than death. "Well" dressed, in a red T-shirt and blue shorts, with his little shoes still on his feet, closer to the image of our children than that of a desperate immigrant distant from our culture. All these elements contributed to the success of an image relaunched in the media, reproduced on murals all over the world, used by famous artists such as Ai Weiwei. Since then, hundreds and hundreds of children fleeing Libyan camps died in our seas, without any possibility of hope or future, thrown back on our beaches, but none of them has deserved more than a very brief mention and a distracted glance from us. Immigrants, especially those from North Africa, are perceived more as potential dangers for us than as victims.

Thus, there are huge differences in the status of victims; there are victims "deserving" more and victims "deserving" less: the femicide of a young woman seeking her independence in the world strikes us much more than that of a mature woman perhaps of non-irreproachable morals. Stefano Cucchi, a marginal

young man possibly using drugs, died from police mistreatment, as did Giulio Regeni, a brilliant Cambridge PhD student slaughtered by Egyptian intelligence services: both victims of police state violence but victims of different status, because their social "respectability" and reputation were different.

In its to some extent surprising cross-reading, lies the great merit of this work: to make us more aware of the stereotypes that we have now accepted as normal interpretive categories that prevent us from seeing those "real" victims who deviate from our idealizations. A book that makes us reflect on our interpretative automatisms and urges us to look at reality with more critical and attentive eyes.

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Introduction and Overview

Susanna Vezzadini

Since the late 1970s, much of the Western world has witnessed the re-discovery of the figure of the victim. After a long period in which victims fell into forgetfulness in coincidence with the establishment of the States of Law – that gradually moved them away from the criminal justice system as the holder of private interests in conflict with the public good to be protected – in more recent times victims have largely redeemed themselves from that oblivion.

Thus, victims of crime, war and conflicts, disaster and environmental catastrophes, injustice and discrimination have ceased to be confined to the margins of social attention, gaining a prominent place in the political agendas of governments and the special interest of the media (traditional and new). An undoubtedly positive change, in some respects almost revolutionary, which, however, does not seem to have been matched by a real and profound cultural change, so that the interest shown by society in its various components not infrequently has problematic or even critical implications.

In fact, it is undeniable that today victims are being talked about everywhere: their stories open broadcast news, cross dedicated broadcasts and television specials, are celebrated in the cinema that narrates their martyrdom, or the heroism with which tragic events are dealt with. Contextually, they constitute a powerful appeal across the political spectrum, who take it upon themselves to represent their instances and demands in various ways, as they cannot but stand "on the side of the victims." In many cases, and in spite of themselves, they end up at the center of the judicial chronicles, their stories investigated in depth, question after question, exposing them to a public opinion greedy for news and at the same time alarmed by the advance of crimes and iniquities. Stories that

become depictions of suffering that question the fragile condition of human beings, the precariousness and transience of each existence, and the presence of suffering in the world. Thus originates an extraordinarily articulated circularity between political and media attention, the purposes of the justice system, the curiosity of public opinion, destined to feed itself by generating what has rightly been defined as a peculiar characteristic of the contemporary era: an unprecedented, common and pervasive "fascination with victims" and their unfortunate condition.

But, indeed, the aspects of complexity and ambivalence are numerous. Political attention, for example, can easily turn into the instrumentalization of victims for the purpose of electoral consensus, as in the case of penal populism which, by confusing every victim's legitimate demand for justice with vindictive instances, fuels social alarm and community fears by offering as the only answer the mere raising of penalties and the exponential increase in their severity. Thus (intentionally?) failing to question the causes of the offence and to recognize the very needs of the offended thus originated – the need for listening and understanding, for truth, for prevention and protection, for change. Similarly, the risk posed by a media narrative aimed at vivisecting the lives of those involved, mercilessly feeding the voracious viewer with intimate, brutal, terrible details, harkens back to that "spectacle of suffering" that both attracts and repels, repeatedly denounced in recent years by scholars, associations and sometimes by the victims themselves.

At the same time, it should be noted that while, on the one hand, such growing interest would nevertheless seem to attest – in its virtuous ways – the emergence of a new sensitivity to all those who are in conditions of suffering and affliction as a result of crime, abuse, violence and injustice, on the other hand, there is – more subtly but sharply – the narrowing of the perimeter within which the status of victim is assigned on the basis of the application of predominantly moral criteria such as innocence, purity, lack of responsibility, respectability, and reputation. On these actually depend the public validation of the experienced harm, the recognition of the violated rights, the acceptance of the petitions proposed, and the eventual overcoming of the victim condition. This is an important process, consisting of various steps and dense with meanings, which, however, does not always concern all those who have been wronged, abused or are in a condition of suffering due to a tragic event. On the contrary, it is possible to say that there are subjects, categories or social groups, with respect to whom the application of the victim status is delayed or totally disregarded, because they are considered to be "lacking" those attributes considered fundamental to allow their recognition, this having important repercussions in terms of supportive policies and their implementation. This volume asks pre-

cisely about the reasons for such disallowance referring to the underlying power dynamics and social relations, the repercussions for the lives of individuals and communities, starting from the evidence that sees the notion of victim as a social construct. And, therefore, focusing on the distinction between "ideal victims" and non-ideal, or "real," victims.

First of all, the notion of *victim* as a social construct. That is, the definition of "who" is the victim is the result of the intersection, mutual influencing and conditioning, among values, cultural representations, legal and social norms, economic and political structures within a given context. The definition of victim, then, translates the mirroring of specific but relative instances as resulting from the power relations that govern a given system. From this perspective, the social and political roots of victimization must be highlighted, inevitably leading back to the "functional" character of the victim and the role he or she plays in contemporary societies.

Secondarily, the notion of the *ideal victim*. It is crucial, helping to unravel the many stereotypes and prejudices associated with this condition. The concept, elaborated by Nils Christie in his seminal 1986 essay *The Ideal Victim*, denounces the equivocal nature of society's gaze on the victim; a gaze that chooses, separates and selects within the variegated victim universe, distinguishing between subjects "deserving" of listening, assistance, support, and subjects "not quite deserving" because they lack the ideal characteristics, unable to correspond to an angelic image of the offended. Marginalized subjects, invisible to power and dysfunctional to the logic of the system; subjects who disregard social expectations with respect to the role conferred, with whom empathizing is more difficult. A dichotomous reading, antagonistic indeed, from which derives a particular interpretation of suffering in the world that, while affirming there are "absolute," unequivocal, indisputable victims, suggests a doubt, a perplexity, uncertainty with respect to the condition of others. For the latter, the path towards a possible recognition will be fraught and difficult, studded with obstacles and denials, suspending them in the limbo of inferiority.

However, exactly because the concepts of victim, and also that of "ideal victim," are a mirror of the hierarchy of values, principles, interests and instances present within a given socio-political-cultural context, therefore having a relative nature and character, they can undergo changes, being at different times attributed even to previously excluded subjects. Sometimes, unexpectedly, they may struggle for the assertion of their own rights, thus overturning stereotypes and prejudices. This point represents, after all, an element of positivity referring to what we might call the "fluidity" of a socially attributed (and subjectively perceived) label.

This volume intends to be an opportunity to reflect on these fundamental issues by investigating the mechanisms of inclusion-exclusion underlying the recognition, or more frequently the non-recognition, of victim condition experienced by certain individuals or groups through the analysis of case study deemed particularly significant in this perspective. Ideal victims, then? More often real victims: of political violence and state violence; of ideology and fanaticism (religious, political); victims who are "inconvenient" because they are deemed not entirely irresponsible, sometimes even considered dangerous, of whom national governments and even the international community care little. Victims today, and a thousand times more, as women, condemned therefore to physical and moral humiliation, denigration, blame, madness. Victims whose ransom no one wants to pay, whose value of human life is nil. Victims of indifference as well as of the endless fears of our contemporary society: a society that remove those considered as "different" or "deviant," confines them to the geographical and socio-cultural peripheries of the system, deprives them of fundamental rights or even annihilates them.

Yet, it must be said that sometimes these stories of injustice and suffering are not definitively written in their final outcome. The ending is not already decided, irreversible. On the contrary, thanks to the efforts of third sector and voluntary agencies, or international nongovernmental organizations; thanks to the reporting work of free rather than subservient media, of determined and pugnacious magistrates and politicians; thanks to a passionate and less prone public opinion, to undaunted and competent lawyers; but, most of all, thanks to the tenacity and perseverance of courageous family members, relatives and friends, those stories – those lives – are still alive. They are among us, we know them and we can tell about them, thus constituting an invaluable heritage in the analysis of the social and political roots of victimization.

The volume is structured in two parts. The first one intends to propose an in-depth and critical review of the scientific literature on victims and victimization processes in present-day societies. It is quite interesting to note that in some cases they are studies and research that far from revealing a benevolent and compassionate attitude towards victims, have not infrequently contributed to the edification of negative stereotypes and prejudices, which are reflected in the social gaze still directed towards offended people, offering a partial explanation to the evident difficulty of empathizing with them. Chapter I thus sheds light on the complexity of victim condition in contemporary Western societies, stressing the ambivalence – if not actually ambiguity – of the social attention towards victims in the political discourse and media narrative, without forgetting the presence of a public opinion often more curious than really involved in the suffering of the others.

The second part is dedicated to "Victims of political and state violence, discrimination and social exclusion". This section presents various contributions declined in the form of the case study as exemplifications and concrete applications of the conceptual framework discussed in Part I. These contributions originated within the course of *Power relations and victimization processes* that I taught at the University of Bologna for several years, at the Department of Political and Social Sciences, for the Second Cycle Degree in International Relations. They represent, in my opinion, strong examples dense with suggestions of how teaching and research can fruitfully meet and merge, complementing and mutually enriching each other. Here, in fact, a reflection on current events – with specific regard to victims, processes of victimization and social exclusion – is born and rooted. A reflection capable, as well, of pushing itself outside the academic context, to address and involve the broader community, its components and the many social actors that make it up, as I will try to make more explicit in the conclusion to the volume (*Epilogue*). And so, the peculiarity of the contributions that make up the second part of the book is that they, all of them, are signed by several students who over the years have taken the course I taught. They, individually or in small groups as appropriate, had the opportunity to work and reflect on these issues, particularly on the juxtaposition of ideal and real victims in contemporary societies, their representation within political discourse and media narratives, thus offering critical readings and brilliant insights with respect to some stories of denial and misrecognition, or – in other cases – of redemption, rescue and affirmation.

In particular, Chapter 2 deals with the victims of "Bloody Sunday" in Northern Ireland, killed by the British paratroopers during a demonstration in Londonderry, in 1972. The chapter examines how the victim's and offender's status in the UK changed along with the British Government's political objectives and ideologies; it also examines the media coverage on those victims in Ireland and the UK and finally compares how the victims are portrayed differently in each country.

Chapter 3 discusses four different groups of victims among civilian population in the terroristic attacks of the Nigeria based-group Boko Haram (which refers to itself as "Nigerian Taliban") and the distinct experiences of violence that result from this conduct. In fact, women, children, elderly people, and young Christian and Muslim did not receive the same social and international recognition although each of them has been exposed to extremely serious forms of violence. Only those victims fulfilling the characteristics of the "ideal victim" were given social recognition more readily, leading to an unequal distribution of help and support by NGOs and international governments, and establishing a hierarchy of victims.

Chapter 4 consists of an analysis of Stefano Cucchi's case, in Italy, from his arrest which occurred on the 15th of October 2016 to his death, dated the 22nd of October of the same year, applying the dichotomy of ideal-real victim. In particular, the chapter critically focuses on the political and mediatic reaction to the case, the processes of victim blaming and misrecognition, the experience lived by Cucchi's family, in order to highlight the complexities embodied in victimization processes.

Chapter 5 explores the impact of power relations imbalances applied to the case of Giulio Regeni, the Italian researcher who was found dead in Cairo, Egypt, in 2016. In this perspective, the theoretical definition of ideal victim is contextualized within the frame of political victimization, in order to provide the elements that determine at the end Giulio Regeni's ideal victim status, after being misrecognized, and being the recipient of forms of blaming and discrediting by Egyptian authorities. The case is analyzed by comparing the versions of events provided by the Italian and the Egyptian media and their respective implications.

Chapter 6 is about "comfort stations" during the World War II, set up by the Imperial Army of Japan to effectively function as brothels for their soldiers. To find the "comfort women" that were to live in these stations, girls from southeast Asia (mostly underaged) were abducted by the military and the government of Japan. At the end of the war, a significant percentage of them was executed. Decades after the war, the physical abuse and rape that those women had experienced began to be publicized to the rest of the world and a legal battle for justice and recognition commenced. The chapter focuses on the institutional responses over time and the role played by the media with regard to the condition of these marginalized and forgotten victims.

Chapter 7 investigates how can the concept of ideal victim be applied in the context of international crimes such as genocide, within the case study of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. The chapter aims to examine the international and local media reactions to the issue, as well as how social media such as Facebook and Twitter impact the perceptions of locals in Myanmar (with differences in reporting the genocide between Western media and local media), while the ruling class has kept denying the genocide in order to protect its own status.

Chapter 8 applied the theoretical construction of ideal victim to the context of Latin American migration to the United States, a phenomenon that has occurred in increasing numbers since the turn of the century. From the viewpoint of victimology, this case study becomes interesting because it questions the binary opposition between victims and offenders: the analysis highlights that Latin American migrants can be both perceived as ideal victims and ideal offenders,

which is emphasized by multiple external actors which use different strategies to either underline the vulnerable or the deviant side of the migrants. In particular, the chapter focuses on the situation of migrant children in detention camps at the US-border separated from their parents, and how different media outlet frame migration discourse for their own ideological purpose.

Chapter 9 analyses two inter-related case-studies, that of two-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian refugee whose body was found life-less on a Turkish beach, and that of refugee groups in general. These two apparently very similar cases belong to the refugee category, but are treated from political, social and media perspectives in divergent ways. Alan Kurdi had a face, a family and a story and his photographs shocked the international system; on the contrary refugees escaping wars, oppressive regimes, economic difficulties, or humanitarian crises are labelled as a collective cluster thus preventing any sympathetic attitude of solidarity in neo-liberal societies. The case of Calais witnesses the reality of migration perceptions exemplifying how belonging to a particular country can make a significant difference to people's lives.

Chapter 10 aims to uncover the social construction behind the victimization processes of people experiencing homelessness. In fact, in today's society homelessness is still perceived as a condition to be blamed for rather than a product of social inequalities and structural violence. Based on these perceptions and stereotypes, homeless people go through a process of dehumanization which prevents them to be identified as victims. As such, they do not fit well into the priorities of the public agenda and therefore inadequate support is provided to help them break away from their condition.

Finally, as is often the case when writing, this volume owes much to many people other than the author. I would like to thank my students, whose curiosity and passion over the years have kept my interest in these topics alive and encouraged me to examine them critically; my colleagues, with whom I have exchanged suggestions and reflections. I thank my Editor for the care and sensitivity devoted to this work. My gratitude goes to the many people I have met over time who have been willing to share with me their stories of suffering, injustice, and crime: victims of violence that have changed their lives. The confrontation with them – their search for truth and justice – has changed my life as well. I would also like to thank the people I met in my work in prison, imprisoned lives with whom I imagined a more just and humane world. Thanks to my friends for their warm and precious support; to my beloved family for always being there by my side. And thanks to G., who encouraged me and took me by the hand whenever the road seemed foggy and uncertain. This book owes much to his presence in my life.

Part I

THE NEW ATTENTION FOR VICTIMS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Chapter 1
Victims between social recognition and denial

Susanna Vezzadini

1. Socio-cultural implications of the word "victim"

The word "victim" (from Latin *victĭma*) has etymological roots far back in time referring to the condition experienced by the subject offered in sacrifice, the "sacrificed," as found crosswise in many Western and Middle Eastern cultures. The word originates from the crasis of the Latin verbs *vincīre* and *vincere*: the former referred to the condition of immobility typical of animals and individuals tightly bound in the ancient times and offered in sacrifice to the deity for propitiatory purposes; the latter, on the other hand, to the condition experienced by the one who was forced to undergo the victor's action, to submit to his will, and thus the defeated. In both cases, the subject thus represented was left with little to do. Unable to react and destined to bend to the will of the victor, his condition was of suffering and helplessness, obedience, and passivity: a cultural legacy difficult to eliminate and still often associated with those who suffer an offense, regardless of the causes behind it (Vezzadini 2012). Particularly significant, especially because of the reinforcement offered to it by Jewish-Christian thought and tradition, is the reference to the sacrificial condition, which describes the victim as the subject who is sacrificed; this is still present today in many languages spoken in the Western world: think, precisely, of the English *victim*, the French *victime* and the Italian *vittima*; the German uses the suggestive word *Opfer*, which with a single noun refers to the (sacrificial) offering and contextually to the subject who has suffered the wrong. And again the Scandinavian *Förnerlamb*, in which even the image of the sacrificial lamb appears; the Dutch *slacht-offer*, which explicitly recalls the subject slaughtered in

the rite of sacrifice. The same moreover is found in modern Hebrew and in many Arabic-derived languages (van Dijk 2009) in which the idea of martyrdom, of the immolation of the victim for propitiatory purposes, still echoes. Entirely different is the meaning that is echoed by the words employed in many Asian countries, and more generally in the East, to refer to this same subject: in Japan, for example, the translation of the term victim corresponds to what we would define as the "wounded, suffering part" – where the word employed is *higaisha* (被害者), formed of three *kanji* that can be translated as "receiving", "harm/injury" and "someone/person." The theme of sacrifice, which is pervasive and recurring in Western culture, disappears here, as does the call for higher suffering caused by the restoration of social order, peace and harmony between humans and gods. In contrast, Eastern cultures are permeated by the depiction of a victim who, having suffered harm, needs to be helped and supported by the community because he or she is part of it. Not an isolated or separate monad to be immolated in the useful sacrifice, but part of the community which, precisely because of this, cannot remain indifferent to his suffering but rather must take charge of it, must take care for it. For that harm belongs to everyone, and no one can claim to be not responsible.

At the same time, as far as Indo-European languages are concerned, it should be noted that from about 1600 onward, particularly in Europe, the progressive humanization of the figure of Jesus Christ, that began with the Renaissance, will increasingly facilitate the use and dissemination of terms such as "sacrificial victim" and "expiatory victim" to refer to the Son of the Father. He is the one who through martyrdom redeemed the world from original sin, the true sacrificial lamb (the very Holy Lamb). From this point on, the sacrificial gesture will invariably be associated with the victim condition, marking it through two essential features: the presumption of innocence that the victim would enjoy and, secondly, the possibility of forgiveness, in the image of the Son of God on the cross (van Dijk 2009). The implications of such a representation carry important weight in terms of how we think of and depict the victim today. The sacrifice also suggests the impossibility to modify the events and their outcome, narrating a fate that seems already sealed and for which no different solution or alternative is allowed.

Only from the middle of the twentieth century – particularly since the end of World War II – did the concept of victim, as it is understood today, begin to establish itself in common parlance by being extended to a plurality of conditions, individual and group, also indicating subjects affected by crimes and offenses, disasters and catastrophes, violence and atrocities. It will supplant the concept of the oppressed, widespread in previous centuries and particularly in the 19th

century, thus implying a real change on the conceptual and socio-cultural level. In fact, the notion of oppression refers to specific structural conditions, mainly of a socio-economic order, destined to completely invest the biography of the individual, expressing itself within logics marked by domination and submission (Pitch 2009). Peculiarity of this condition is to unite all those who are forced to experience the same situation (of poverty, for example, of exploitation) within a social system divided into classes. However, exactly being ascribable to a precise social group will limit the ability of the oppressed to elicit closeness and empathy from the wider community; on the contrary, the notion of victim by invoking the element of vulnerability common to everyone, will provoke more widespread feelings of identification and solidarity.

However, it should be noted how in more recent times the terminological debate has highlighted some critical issues inherent in the word victim and its use, pointing out how the word "victim" seems to imply a certain degree of passivity, withdrawal into oneself, inability to react. In this perspective we note, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, an increasing prevalence of the word 'survivor', which seems referred to "(...) an element of agency and inner strength on the part of the person concerned to take at least some control over their circumstances and to take action to survive the trauma that has come their way" (Corteen et al. 2016: 264). So, while it is almost common to associate to the word "victim" some undesirable qualities such as weakness, the tendency to conceal, a lack of control over external events, powerlessness and shame, the word "survivor" suggests a condition of resilience, the ability to struggle against negative situations, the capability to overcome. Even the possibility to react, that seems to be neglected or denied within the word "victim." That may also explain why so many victims in more recent times refuse to be labeled by the social system as well as by the media and in the political discourse as victims. As suggested by a number of research in the field of victimology (Fohring 2018; Vezzadini 2018), to avoid the victim label is an act of self-preservation and self-protection, offering the opportunity to give coherent accounts or explanations of what happened and, at the same time, offering continuity to one's self-identity among past, present and future.

1.1 The contribution of Social Sciences to victim's recognition

The realization that the notion of victim – though necessary to describe the transitory condition of the offended subject – cannot be employed to summarize the complexity of human experience has led some disciplines, philosophy, and sociology first and foremost, to emphasize the notion of recognition as a

possible outcome of the victimization process and at the same time a landing place to strive for. In truth, it is precisely the social context that often constitutes an impediment toward this goal, giving rise to obstacles that confine the subject in the limbo of partial or limited recognition, or even disallowing and denying this possibility completely (Vezzadini 2012). In fact, the process of victimization can be described as a process of violation of trust expectations (Vezzadini 2006), those fundamental pillars that operate at different levels – conscious and unconscious – of existence constituting its barycenter, giving meaning and significance to the social relations that develop there. The victim can thus be represented as a betrayed subject, deprived of trust at different levels: for example, that of interpersonal and community relations where violence, injustice, crime takes place; that of relations with institutions that are not always able to prevent, but also to defend, protect, respond with authentic gestures of justice to the offense perpetrated. But such betrayal, or deprivation of trust, pertains to even deeper, almost subterranean dimensions – and therefore all the more difficult to unveil and cure. For example, trust in oneself, in one's capacity for self-determination and choice, in one's ability to discern between what is good and bad, right and wrong, in one's resources, in one's ability to react and respond constructively to injustice. And again, trust in the harmonious flow of everyday life, of existence itself when threatened, violated, wounded by unexpected events, for which victims often have no words to describe. A pain, a sense of disorientation that muffles the voice, that reduces to silence. As sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1963) recalled, when faced with the betrayal of fiduciary expectations there are two paths facing the subject: employing the theatrical metaphor, one can first decide to "withdraw from the scene." That is, to remove oneself from society, to isolate oneself so as not to be confronted every day with the visibility of the offense, its "tangibility." But such a strategy, far from being an effective ploy often turns out to be a trap, because in loneliness and self-referential closure negative feelings are amplified, humiliation increases and is often accompanied by the desire for revenge. Alternatively, there is the possibility of "returning to the scene": this choice also has high costs, because it involves continually confronting the pain and discomfort of the wrong suffered; nevertheless, it contains the possibility of re-acting, of opening oneself to the world by restarting events, rejecting the resignation that follows violence and reaffirming one's being, one's presence. "Returning to the scene" means deciding to re-write one's story in a different ink, through one's own eyes and the words one chooses to use – rather than those imposed by others – thus recalling the vivid expression of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004), when he asserted that for the subject "being able to say" is equivalent to "doing things with words."

The concept of social recognition, as well as those of misrecognition or denial, are at the center of the reflection of a number of scholars who, through their works, have helped to denounce the ambivalence of the social gaze toward others considered as "different," highlighting the complexity of the condition, but also the indispensable struggle that sometimes needs to be undertaken to put an end to the overpowering and affirm one's own identity and history.

In this perspective, the contribution of Alfred Schutz, a philosopher and sociologist with a phenomenological approach – Viennese of Jewish origin and forced into exile in the United States following Hitler's rise to power – is particularly opportune with regard to the fertile parallelism that arises between the figure of the victim and those of the stranger and the homecomer (Vezzadini 2012), to whom he dedicated two of his best-known essays. First of all, it should be emphasized that among the fundamental concepts of this author's thought, the concept of "schemes of reference" has a relevant place, referring to the cultural patterns experienced from birth by each individual as inserted in an intersubjective world already organized and traversed by pre-established meanings, necessary in order to delimit reality. Therefore, through the processes of "typification" of the experiences the subject comes into contact with objects, taking for granted the idea that others in the group may have of them. Thinking, deciding, reacting, and making choices appear to be based on cultural patterns totally familiar, functioning for its members as an unquestioned scheme of reference, which allow an immediate and apparently easy understanding of everyday life. But it may happen – and this is where the parallelism with the victim emerges – that the intrinsic validity of such explanations ("their truth") is called into question by an unexpected or dramatic event ("the crisis"), becoming those social, cultural, emotional and moral references less certain and secure. Those schemes of orientation and interpretation then appear unpredictable, often indecipherable or incomprehensible: they actually do not work anymore, while revealing the difficulty and the relativity of "thinking as usual." The system of relevance adopted in the past is no more able to give meaning to the new situations experienced, so the subject need to question everything that until a short time before seemed to be unquestionable. From these concepts, Schutz will modulate the figures at the center of the two important essays with an autobiographical slant: *The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology* (1944), which traces the landing in the United States as an exile and the difficult confrontation with the new reality, and *The Homecomer* (1945), which recalls the experience at the front during World War I, on the border with Italy, and the return to a homeland shattered and humiliated by the conflict. Symbolic figures, to which traits and characteristics of victims can be juxtaposed precisely because of the condition of disorientation experienced:

> If only one of these assumptions ceases to stand the test, thinking as usual becomes unworkable. (...) The cultural pattern no longer functions as a system of tested recipes at hand; it reveals that its applicability is restricted to a specific historical situation. Yet the stranger, by reason of his personal crisis, does not share the above-mentioned basic assumptions. He becomes essentially the man who has to place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group (Schutz 1944: 502).

Such disorientation arises from the new awareness of one's own vulnerability and the experience of the fragility on which human and social relationships rest. Similarly, victimization is an experience that forces one to place oneself outside the perimeter of the ordinary, the "as usual," and therefore it is configured as a difficult passage to accept, define, manage and overcome. As Hannah Arendt points out in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), the victim feels that he or she no longer belongs to the familiar world; and Schutz himself – who that dismemberment of identity knew on his own skin – grasps this passage clearly when in the essay on *The Homecomer*, while recalling that "'To feel at home' is an expression of the highest degree of familiarity and intimacy" (Schutz 1945: 370), a little later adds:

> This is the aspect of the social structure of the home world for the man who lives in it. The aspect changes entirely for the man who has left home. To him life at home is no longer accessible in immediacy. He has stepped, so to speak, into another social dimension not covered by the system of coordinates used as the scheme of reference for life at home (Schutz 1945: 372).

Nevertheless, Schutz will rely on more optimistic conclusions. Indeed, he hopes for a return to the world of family and affection by trusting in a community eager, in turn, to rebuild social ties broken by the advent of the "crisis," opening up to mutual recognition between its own expectations and those of the homecomer, accepting that something has inevitably changed in the meantime in both the conditions:

> Yet, the change in the system of relevance and in the degree of intimacy just described is differently experienced by the assent one and by the home group (Schutz 1945: 373).
> In the beginning it is not only the homeland that shows to the homecomer an unaccustomed face. The homecomer appears equally strange to those who expect him, and the thick air about him will keep him unknown. Both the homecomer and the welcomer will need the help of a Mentor to "make them wise to things" (Schutz 1945: 376).

With regard to the reactions of the social context and their important influence on the subject's self-perception, fundamental is the contribution of Erving Goffman in *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (first edition in 1963). Here are considered the practices of inferiorization through which society, by applying a label most often negative, distinguishes and places people within specific (sub)categories. Such a label is precisely a *stigma*, for the Ancient Greeks a mark of recognition that makes the subject "different" from others (the "normal ones"), thus not entirely deserving of belonging to the same social consortium:

> By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority (...). We tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one (...) (Goffman 1968: 15-16).

Similarly, the victim is also to some extent a "marked" subject: not only because he or she inevitably bears on himself or herself the wounds – moral, psychic, emotional and physical – of the event suffered; but because the one who suffers harm becomes, in the eyes of the community, a subject different "from before" and again "dissimilar" from others. It is precisely the social gaze directed at the victims that explains why it is so difficult to relate to them: society, Goffman reminds us, is often unprepared, as well as afraid, of those whom it defines as "different," from which may result in difficulties to elaborate appropriate, respectful, balanced reactions. And just as Goffman narrates in memorable pages about the figure of the cripple who wanted to dance and was therefore surrounded by the embarrassment of the bystanders that felt uncomfortable while he was not adhering to social expectations relating to "his role," even with regard to the victim the feelings are often contradictory and ambivalent: fear and distrust, reserve and curiosity, pity and discomfort:

> I also learned that the cripple must be careful not to act differently from what people expect him to do. Above all they expect the cripple to be crippled; to be disabled and helpless: to be inferior to themselves, and they will become suspicious and insecure if the cripple falls short of these expectations (Goffman 1968: 134).

At other times, the stigmatized persons, like the victims, become the recipient of discredit and forms of devaluation, blaming them for the incident and con-

fining them within dynamics of marginalization and social exclusion. Then the humiliation and shame originated by the misunderstanding drive the subjects to isolation and social withdrawal, experiencing feelings of distrust, anger, frustration and hostility that expose them to new suffering and further processes of victimization.

In more recent times, the theme of social recognition-and its denial-has been the focus of reflection by German philosopher and sociologist Axel Honneth, considered a leading reference of the so-called "last generation" of the Frankfurt School. The connection between the concepts of *Anerkennung* and *Mißachtung* is analyzed in his work *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (translated into English in 1995 and first published in German in 1992) where, employing a theoretical and methodological approach that aims to bring liberal positions and communitarian doctrines into dialogue, Honneth questions the social processes that lead to the recognition of the subject in contemporary societies, and the places where lack of recognition can occur instead. He considers three moments – or realms – fundamental to the construction of personal identity, namely that of primary relations, legal relations and finally that of broader ethical communitarian relations. In this framework, where recognition is missed, partial or denied, the instrument of the "struggle for recognition" (a concept indebted to the youthful writings of G.W.F. Hegel) becomes the indispensable act aimed at the creation of more ethically mature relations of recognition, a prerequisite to the development of a concrete community of free citizens. With the term *Mißachtung* the author refers to any mode of denied recognition, which is profoundly negative because it limits each person's freedom of action, affecting the positive self-image and self-understanding as a result of the social relations in which the subject is embedded. The approval of others, in fact, their consideration or appreciation, are fundamental elements for every human being. Misrecognition thus provides an ethical reason for social struggles of a different nature, that is, for all those conflicts present in the social structure capable of producing victims: of mistreatment and abuse, harassment or prevarication, violations of fundamental rights (political, social, civil). The process of "reification" that results from such practices deprives the individual of his value, degrades him to a mere object or instrument with respect to other ends, making it impossible for him to dispose of himself freely and consciously, his body, his will and self-determination. According to Honneth, we see such a process of "reification" operating in contemporary societies: here it is told that all citizens enjoy the same rights, but in fact their concrete enjoyment is tied to the power dynamics of economic reality, to the actual distribution of economic resources within a given social context.

Where this distribution is not balanced, but rather unbalanced in favor of one social class or group, the sense of discontent, frustration and humiliation is bound to increase, pushing the individual out of the community dimension. However, estrangement from the social context is not the only solution. On the contrary, precisely the struggle, at the basis of which is the feeling of indignation (as opposed to that of resignation) becomes the moral *medium* aimed at the attainment of a later and higher stage of recognition, toward the acquisition of a more mature – though never final – condition of social justice. A recognition that, with regard to the three fundamental areas mentioned above, will enable the subject to strengthen self-confidence within the primary relationships of love and affection (the "significant others"), self-respect in legal relationships – as the bearer of rights and simultaneously of normative obligations to others – and finally self-esteem, thanks to the supportive and authentically inclusive gaze deferred by the community.

2. Studying victims and victimization processes: theoretical perspectives

2.1 The Positivistic approach

To try to understand more fully the ambivalences, and indeed ambiguities, behind the word "victim," it is necessary to take a historical-temporal and sociocultural step backwards. The cross-reference is to the constructs developed by the Positive School of criminology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and their translation, a few decades later, to the newly born discipline that studies victims: victimology. Here the notion of *victim hierarchy* will be consolidated, destined to have important reflections in current events and for our reflection on victimization processes.

Positivist thought – in the field of socio-criminology and beyond victimology – regards the elaboration of typologies on the methodological level as central. Uniting positions that are all in all not overlapping, such as those of the French sociologists Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim or the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, are in fact a series of constructs among which the first and most relevant consists in considering and analyzing social facts as things by applying to them the method of investigation typical of the "hard sciences." Thus, the close and deterministic relationship between causes and effects is emphasized, applying this axiom to human behavior and social dynamics. This premise gives an account of the elaboration and classification of types, and typologies, within which to frame and explain the variety of human behavioral phenomena – specifically, for Cesare Lombroso, crimes and crimi-

nal behaviors. Actually, the figure of the "born delinquent" (as outlined in his main work *L'uomo delinquente* [1876 first edition in Italian]), will later influence the studies not only of many other authors in Italy, Germany, and North America, but will have important implications precisely in the definition of a "born victim," the latent victim of whom German criminologist Hans von Hentig will speak in 1948. Without to forget the influence of criminological positivism on fascism in Italy, through the contributions in the socio-legal field of some of its exponents, and finally the adherence to the regime of some of them. Victim typologies constitute from the beginning an attempt to interpret and simplify the complexity of reality, linking different types of victimization to specific psycho-social and bio-anthropological characteristics of the individual, or group, that suffered the offense. While certainly some merits should be acknowledged to such an approach, such as constituting an attempt to respond to the need to develop prevention strategies based on victims' characteristics, its limitations should not be overlooked. The first, and perhaps most relevant, is that of interpreting victimization as solely the result of individual or behavioral characteristics of the subject, means to underestimate or totally disregard the impact of social factors and power dynamics within society. It is exactly what happened with the notion of *victim proneness* proposed by von Hentig, which refers to the *latent victim*, such by natural determinism (i.e., his or her personality traits) inevitably and repeatedly exposed to abuses and violations. Secondly, victim typologies multiply and amplify the presence of stereotypes and prejudices in the head of the victim figure: typical is the case of the concept of *victim precipitation*, elaborated in the late 1950s and 1960s by Wolfgang and Amir, in which they emphasized not only the eventual "participation" of the victims in the dynamics of crime but above all their *responsibility*, and by extension their *culpability*.

Victim types thus are based on the guilt/innocence dichotomy, from which derives the victim hierarchy whose implications, even today, should not be underestimated. A hierarchy that is functional to a precise political discourse and a corresponding media narrative that ostensibly places all victims at the center while, in fact, it selects some deemed most deserving of attention – and then support, help, recognition – at the expense of all others, based on criteria of usefulness and functionality with respect to the system they want to preserve. At the top of such victim hierarchy is the ideal victim, innocent, pure, totally irresponsible with respect to what has been suffered. At the opposite end of the pyramid, at the bottom, stand the other victims: those considered as not entirely deserving of attention, support, recognition since they too are responsible for what happened. The latter are referred to as having partly or wholly

"contributed to their own fate," and this is because of specific personality and character traits, life choices, having engaged in behaviors indicated as unsuitable or socially unacceptable. The offense suffered is thus reinterpreted considering the deterministic cause-and-effect nexus: if those individuals, it is stated explicitly, had not exposed themselves through questionable actions, words or conduct, nothing would have happened to them. Here, then, the latter also "deserve" different treatment from institutions and communities, placing them on the scale of social, political, and institutional recognition at a lower level; and that is precisely because of their intrinsic characteristics, the adopted behavior, or their belonging to groups and social categories considered as inferior and undesirable. A discourse that is firmly rooted in positivist thinking, bringing stereotypes and prejudices in a field of study – the one of victimology – that already unfortunately contemplates many.

In order to fully understand the implications of such a reading, it is worth recalling where von Hentig himself, a German criminal psychologist and politician of Jewish descent forced to expatriate to the United States by the advent of Nazism, was starting from. In 1948 he published a handbook of criminology entitled *The Criminal and his Victim: Studies in the Sociobiology of Crime* (von Hentig 1979)*:* a work perhaps not otherwise memorable except for that last chapter XII entitled *The Contribution of the Victim to the Genesis of Crime (Part IV The Victim)*. Here the author questions the possible role played by the victim in the dynamics of crime by presenting the first typology on the basis of the concept of *mutuality;* thus, consigning to the history of social and criminological sciences the indelible image of the relationship between victim and offender borrowed from that between prey and predator in the struggle for survival in the animal world. The author asserts:

> I maintain that many criminal deeds are more indicative of a subject-object relation than of the perpetrator alone. There is a definitive mutuality of some sort (...) In the long process leading gradually to the unlawful result, credit and debit are not infrequently indistinguishable (von Hentig 1979: 384).

He further adds:

> It would not be correct nor complete to speak of a carnivorous animal, its habits and characteristics, without looking at the prey on which it lives. In certain sense the animals which devour and those that are devoured complement each other. Although it looks one-sided as far as for the final outcome goes, it is not a totally unilateral form of relationship. They work upon each other profoundly and continually, even before the moment of disaster (von Hentig 1979: 385).

The future prey, therefore, takes an active part in the dynamics through even an initial provocation. This is what happens in the human world, says the author, where the victim is more rarely completely innocent, while it is possible to find a share of responsibility even in the most serious cases. It is precisely from here that the strand of studies known as positivist victimology begins, which understands this branch of study as ancillary to criminology, encompassing the totality of biological, psychological, sociological, and legal-criminological knowledge concerning the offended person. Specific analysis will be devoted to the personality of the victim, her biological, psychological, and moral traits, her socio-cultural characteristics, possible relationships with the offender and the role she plays in the genesis and dynamics of the crime (Fattah 1967). The approach, also known as *conservative victimology*, is interested in the study of factors that contribute to the non-random selection of victims, and elaborates the types of victims who, based on certain bio-anthropological, psychic and social characteristics, ultimately turn out to be more predisposed to suffer a crime, violation, wrong or abuse[1]. Thus, von Hentig imagines in the very last lines of his volume, "With a thorough knowledge of the interrelations between doer and sufferer new approaches to the detection of crime will be opened" (von Hentig 1979: 450).

But the approach, as mentioned, contemplates various risks, the most obvious referring to the notion of *victim precipitation*, coined in the 1950s by U.S. criminologist Marvin Wolfgang and later taken up by his student Menachem Amir. In research related to the phenomenology of homicide in the city of Philadelphia, the author in fact indicates by the term *victim precipitation* "those criminal homicides in which the victim is a direct, positive precipitator in the crime" (Wolfgang 1957: 2). In particular, the working definition emphasizes that:

> The role of the victim is characterized by as having been the first in the homicide drama to use physical force directed against his subsequent slayer. The victim-

[1] Examples of typologies of victims could be found in von Hentig's volume (first edition in 1948), where the Author distinguishes born victims and society-made victims (the young, the female, the old or the mentally defective victims are in the first group, while immigrants, minorities, dull normal, the depressed, the acquisitive and the wanton, the lonesome and the heartbroken, tormentors and the blocked-exempted-fighting victims are in the second one); in Mendelsohn's typology of victims, which are classified in accordance with the degree of their guilty in the contribution to the crime (the completely innocent victim, the victim with minor guilt, the one guilty as the offender, the victim more guilty and the mostly guilty victim, until the victim who is guilty alone - 1956). During the Seventies, Fattah designed five major classes as following: nonparticipating victims, latent or predisposed victims, provocative victims, participating victims, and false victims; then Schafer elaborated a very well-known typology representing the unrelated victim, the provocative victim, the precipitative victim, the biologically weak victim, the socially weak victim, the self-victimizing victim and the political one (Schafer 1977).

> precipitated cases are those in which the victim was the first to show and use a deadly weapon, to strike a blow in an altercation-in short, the first to commence the interplay or resort to physical violence (Wolfgang 1957: 2).

The term is correlated with some specific factors, recurring in 26 percent of the cases examined, just like the presence of a previous relationship between the two parties, the abuse of alcohol and drugs, the presence of previous arrest records for both victim and offender. Wolfgang's study, which had a micro-sociological slant and thus never aimed at expressing greater representativeness, was immediately subjected to numerous criticisms, mainly methodological in nature, due to the sources used (the reports of the local Police Department, in which the definition of the crime situation was greatly affected by the attributionist perspective of the suspect/defendant). Although detractors often pointed out the obvious limitations of such a study, the findings allowed for later theoretical developments such as, for example, the Proximity and the Equivalent group hypothesis (Karmen 2004) in which the similarities existing in certain situations between aggressor and victim are highlighted; a perspective applied especially to studies of the dynamics within organized crime. Renewed criticisms were made of the concept of *victim precipitation* in its later application by Amir (1968) in cases of forcible rape, in the same geographic-spatial context as the homicide study. Here the working definition employed by the author immediately proved particularly problematic, describing

> those rape situations in which the victim actually, or so it was deemed, agreed to sexual relations but retracted before the actual act or did not react strongly enough when the suggestion was made by the offender(s). The term also applies to cases in risky or vulnerable situations, marred with sexuality, especially when the victim uses what could be interpreted as indecency in language and gestures, or constitute what could be taken as an invitation to sexual relations (Amir 1968: 495).

Although the author already acknowledged at the time how such a definition was undeniably problematic by attributing relevance exclusively to the aggressor's point of view, with respect to a crime in which stereotypes and prejudices have been contributing to the discrediting and blaming of victims for centuries, in fact it was not really challenged. On the contrary, even today it is reflected, and forcefully so, in media representations of rape victims, and more generally of gender-based violence, finding numerous echoes even in the dynamics within the courtrooms: for example, in criminal proceedings against sexual violence, where victims often experience profound forms of violation of their

dignity and further forms of victimization precisely by those who would have the duty to defend and protect them.

2.2 Towards a global victimology

Approximately at the same time as von Hentig was questioning the possible responsibilities of the crime victim, Benjamin Mendelsohn, in Romania, first introduced the neologism "*victimhood*" in late 1930 in a long unpublished paper on victims of rape. Despite a beginning traceable to the sphere of criminal and criminological sciences with a clear positivist matrix (precisely see the classification he elaborated starting from the concept of innocence/guilt of victims), in the subsequent developments of his thought Mendelsohn would arrive at quite other considerations capable of placing the universal notion of "suffering of all victims" at the center of his study (Mendelsohn 1976). Thus, while affirming the need to fund an autonomous discipline conceptually and methodologically capable of studying victims, regardless of the causes of their condition (crimes, catastrophes, abuse of power), he describes victimology as a *general phenomenon*, "the science of victims and the victim," whose goal will be to prevent further forms of suffering. The author's merit is that he is the first to have grasped the eminently "social" character of suffering, its social roots, uniting all those who suffer and paying attention to the possible causes that provoke stigmatization, isolation, and exclusion in contemporary societies.

Mendelsohn's reflections have found an important and wide-ranging response. A growing number of scholars have seized on the call to give birth to a *general victimology*, capable of promoting an autonomous approach to analysis, albeit in dialogue with other disciplines and open to comparison. Thus, it is argued, victimization is rooted first and foremost in social dynamics, from gender inequalities to racism, to forms of injustice and exploitation that affect the most vulnerable; from the violation of rights in the workplace to the lack of protections in health care or respect for the environment; and finally taking root in misgovernance and inequities consummated paradoxically by the justice system itself. This is the theme that animates the progressive or radical side of the new discipline – referred to as *radical victimology*, whose goal is the unraveling and removal of the pockets of discrimination and marginalization most often tolerated by the system for its own benefit. Also moving in this perspective is the humanistic approach of the discipline – or *human victimology* – which focuses on the protection of violated human, social, civil and political rights, helping to denounce a system that, while claiming to recognize such rights on a theoretical level, in fact denies them by tying them in their actual enjoyment to economic reality.

In particular, the reflection brought by the American sociologist and political scientist Robert Elias (1986), among the proponents of a *global victimology* within which the different souls recalled will converge – *general, radical* and *human victimology* – remains fundamental. According to the author, new relevance must be given to the political element, understood in the noblest sense of the term, that is, as the ability of politics to reorient and redirect research in this area, avoiding preconceived interpretations or, worse, rhetoric definition of the problem. The call for the role that politics should play constitutes, in Elias, the underlying theme of his entire extensive production, requiring that it would be able to foster and undertake concrete actions aimed at reducing the multiple risks of victimization present in societies. However, while Elias urges "the" policy to assume an effective role in counteracting the causes of victimization, he sharply criticizes "the" de facto policies devised and implemented, denouncing their often manipulative and instrumental traits. The actual – only partly paradoxical – outcome of such "attention" can be easily grasped if one observes that, even in the face of the plurality of experiences gained in recent decades in the areas of support and assistance, today many victims remain victims, even experiencing further forms of re-victimization by those institutions that should be taking charge of them (Elias 1993). One can thus understand why, already in his most important work entitled *The Politics of Victimization. Victims, Victimology and Human Rights* (1986), Elias affirmed the need to

> dissolve the "mental prison" that often characterizes how we think about victimization, and substitute a new, broader conception that considers not only common crime but also corporate and state crime, that examines not only individual criminals but also institutional wrongdoing, and that encompasses not merely traditional crime but all crime against humanity. In sum, we will wed victimology to human rights. A "new" victimology would, ironically, only return us back to our original conception of victimology, established over forty years ago. Back then, we defined victimology as the study of *all* victims, not merely *crime* victims. We should recapture the focus (Elias 1986: 7).

2.3 Radical victimology and the critique to the politicization of victims' cause

To "recapture the focus" as suggested by Elias, we need to also consider the political role victims of crime – but not only – play in contemporary Western societies. In this perspective social sciences offer an important contribution to reveal the instrumentalization and manipulation by politicians of both parties searching for political consensus, helping to distinguish and separate "the Facts and the Rhetoric" as in the title of a very well-known article written by E.A. Fattah (1992).

In the beginning was Richard Quinney. A Marxian philosopher and sociologist, he was among the founders of Radical Victimology and probably the first to critically question "who" is the victim in capitalist societies, that is, what are the defining criteria and parameters employed inside a socio-political and economic-cultural context governed by the tyranny of the labor, of ever-increasing productivity. In the essay *Who is the victim?* (1972) – "not an innocent question," the author emphasizes – he questions the function assumed by this subject within a system divided into classes, in which those who dominate and command also hold the ownership of the means of production, having the power to condition the cultural models of the subordinate classes. Within this framework, the criminal law has no neutral value; on the contrary, it constitutes the instrument with which control is exercised – "discipline and punish," as stated by Michel Foucault (1975) – to maintain the social order. Actually, the latter reflects the values and goals of the dominant classes, which can thus maintain – through the enforcement of criminal law – the predominance over the subordinate classes. Deviance, especially politically motivated deviance, must be vigorously resisted, legitimizing the use of force to keep the *status quo* unchanged: "While every act may conceivably involve a victim, only those acts that threaten the welfare of the ruling class become crimes. Social harm, no matter how abstract, is a reality decided upon by those in power" (Quinney 1974: 315). In this context, the victim assumes a central role and performs a primary political function, distracting public opinion from the possible failures of the ruling classes and, at the same time, authorizing the application of increasingly severe and securitarian criminal and sanction policies, in relation to which the victim becomes a flag to be waved by invoking order and security. Its mere presence justifies the intervention of force and repressive measures to restore and guarantee social order:

> The presence of a victim, then, the one officially designated, is an indication that the existing social order has been challenged. Which is also to say, the rhetoric of victimization is one more weapon the ruling class uses to justify and perpetuate its own existence. The victim, a concrete one, apart from the state itself, is held up as a defense of the social order (Quinney 1974: 315-316).

However, it would be wrong to think that all victims serve this purpose: in truth, only those functional to the interests of the dominant classes will be invested with such status, political and social recognition, while the others (Quinney cites for example the victims of police force and brutality, of war, of the "correctional" system, the victims of state violence, and oppression) will not be recognized at all. They are excluded because they are considered a threat to that

social order that discriminates against them, producing suffering and marginalization for them. The victim, in this perspective, is thus a useful, functional, and relative concept, just as relative and partial (i.e., "biased") is the notion of justice that is adapted to the needs of the classes from time to time in power: this is what populisms feed on, Quinney reminds us, in every age.

At the same time, the victim as a subject capable of catalyzing the emotions and feelings of the community in the face of the offense perpetrated also performs another function, readily captured and outlined by Jonathan Simon in his most important work, suggestively titled *Governing through Crime. How the war on crime transformed American democracy and created a culture of fear* (2007). A role, and a function, that clearly emerges in the aftermath of the terroristic attack of 9/11, 2001 on the Twin Towers in New York, becoming the element capable of unifying societies that are profoundly differentiated and fragmented internally (for ethnic, religious, economic, and political, linguistic-cultural reasons etc.), thus always at risk of implosion, clashes, and conflict. Therefore, in contemporary societies the victim – sometimes described as a martyr, sometimes as a hero – becomes the symbol of the more general condition of exposure to the risk of crimes, disasters, catastrophes. A condition of manifest vulnerability which is easy to empathize, becoming the tangible symbol of it. Thus, Simon reminds us, it is precisely in the guise of victims of crime that Americans – and not only they – can more easily imagine themselves as united: because the threat of an offence helps to reshape the differences between them, urging them to march united against the source of their anxieties, the enemy to be fought. In this perspective, political power has much to gain, and looking benevolently at victims; declaring oneself for their defense, protection and vindication of wrongs violated is always useful in terms of political consensus. Self-describing oneself as "on the side of the victims" is an effective slogan, not particularly onerous and instead very fruitful in campaigning, as E. A. Fattah reminded over thirty years ago:

> Crime victims are not the first group whose cause is exploited by unpopular governments seeking a higher rating in opinion polls, by opportunist politicians seeking electoral votes, or by incompetent public officials trying to detract attention from their failure to control crime or reduce its incidence. Showing concern for crime victims acts as a cover-up to the inefficiency of the system, and its inability to prevent victimization (Fattah 1992: 45).

The result, continued the author, is the "politicization of the victims' cause," while only the attentive voter is able to notice that very little is done for the

victims by allocating adequate resources – economic, material and properly trained personnel – for their support and help.

2.4 Vulnerability, symbolic violence and intersectionality

According to the perspective adopted by radical victimologists – like, for example Quinney – victimization processes can be understood by looking at power and power relations. Giving primacy to these types of dimensions means focusing firstly on the notion of vulnerability, as socially constructed. In this perspective, are important not only law breakings or the violations of criminal laws but also the analysis and the interpretation of social dynamics of exclusion and discrimination in contemporary society. Vulnerability is also at the roots of dynamics of oppression in particular when they are exercised in contexts of poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and marginalization by government policies or private institutions and international corporations (Elias 1986).

For these reasons, important is the notion of symbolic violence elaborated by French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu in the early 1970s. The concept refers to acts that are violent in content but which, however, because of the ways they are imparted and administered and, above all, because of their introjection by the recipients – who perceive them as "natural" – are not actually considered harmful or coercive. These are forms of violence that, in Bourdieu's own words, are "gentle, imperceptible"; yet they play a decisive role in many social situations by implying tangible consequences referred to power relations between those who dominate and those who are dominated. Symbolic violence, as a form of violence exercised upon a social agent with his/her "complicity," is difficult to be recognized and unveiled, since its daily concealment is ensured by social coverings: for example, the view of the world and things, the conceptual and cognitive categories with which reality is named, language, and the attribution of social roles. Therefore, this notion appears today to be fundamental to understanding those processes of victimization in which violence functions by resting precisely on the socio-cultural and cognitive structures of those who suffer it: in other words, it is as if the victims have deeply incorporated – unconsciously – thought and bodily structures, categories of perception and models of evaluation, capable of silently shaping their awareness. Thus, the violence exerted by the social structure is not overt, explicit and aggressive, but rather expresses itself subtly, forcing its victims into marginality and obedience. Emblematic is the case of male domination (Bourdieu 2014), investigated through the notion of habitus. The concept of symbolic violence also allows to unveil the ambivalences of culture: in fact, the latter, instead of contributing to the self-determination of the subject and his/her freedom, can become a

legitimizing factor with respect to violent acts, since it is based on the sharing of the communicative codes employed between those who oppress and those who are oppressed. From this perspective, it is not enough to say – this is Bourdieu's harsh critique of Leftist political thought – that it is necessary to make the dominated aware of such dynamics, since they themselves are often part of that "game"; rather, what is needed is a constant and in-depth work of questioning and revising the cognitive and thought structures, and the forms of interpretation of the world, that contribute to legitimizing and concealing this kind of violence: language, in particular, and the use of it by the media in our societies.

The notion of symbolic violence can be considered, from a certain point of view, as prodromal to the concept, developed in recent times, of intersectionality, elaborated by the civil rights advocate and professor concerned in race and gender issues, Kimberlé Crenshaw, since 1993, which has important implications at the social and cultural levels. The author focuses first on the concept of power relations, and thus on the layering of these relations within the social contest. Considering them as an articulated and dense set of reciprocal constraints, allows us to grasp the multiple consequences that they determine on individuals and on the categories to which they belong. The result is first and foremost the creation of a hierarchy of individuals and categories, built on the basis of relations of subordination and social exclusion, pandering to the interests of the ruling classes, in order to favor the maintenance of their power and the *status quo*. Specifically, the author states, in U.S. society two axes of oppression underlie the social dynamics of marginalization and, indeed, oppression of social groups considered inferior: an axis of sexist oppression (that concerns the biological axis of women) and another axis of racist oppression (regarding in particular Afro-American people). In the context of contemporary social forces, the combination of these two axes and positions produces different life experiences for Black women (compared, for example, to white women or black men), different social expectations as well as peculiar self-perceptions, a system of continuous discrimination and the complete impossibility to recognize one's needs. According to Crenshaw, the aim is the preservation of the existing structure, through the exploitation and the – cultural, political, professional – marginalization of some categories (2017).

3. "Ideal" victims, between stereotypes and prejudices

The media and political tendency to propose and disseminate images of the victim as an innocent and defenseless subject has important reflections regarding

first the full, authentic and non-instrumental recognition of all victims, of every victim. It should be noted, moreover, how such an interpretative approach is based – more or less explicitly, as the case may be – on a process of simplification aimed at recounting the victim universe inside a dichotomy: on the one hand, the victim against the offender, represented as belonging to different and antagonistic worlds, where no dialogue, confrontation and much less encounter can be imagined (thus denying a priori any possibility to restorative justice practices); on the other hand, within the victim universe itself, a contraposition arises between deserving victims and victims less deserving of attention, listening and support from institutions and the community, depending on the characteristics attributed to them. It is precisely from these observations that the development of the concept of the "ideal victim" and its critique by Norwegian sociologist and criminologist Nils Christie, in 1986, and later, in 2007, by American humanitarian law scholar Erica Bouris, will originate.

3.1 The social construction of the ideal victim

Christie's famous essay on the ideal victim opens these words:

> *By "ideal victim" I have instead in mind a person or a category of individuals who – when hit by crime – most readily are gave the complete and legitimate status of being a victim*. The ideal victim is, in my use of the term, a sort of public status of the same type and level of abstraction as that for example of a "hero" or a "traitor." It is difficult to count these ideal victims. Just as it is difficult to count heroes (Christie 1986: 12).

The notion of the ideal victim in the author's depiction – partly due to the well-known example of the elderly woman visiting her sick sister on a public street during the day, where she is attacked by a stranger who brutally robs her, then dissipating her loot in alcohol at the pub – immediately takes on the characteristics of a critique of the stereotypical narrative of "who" should be considered a victim today. A representation valued by politicians, across the board, and supported by the media, indicating who "deserves" to be labeled as such, hence the validation of victim status and the consequent benefits in terms of assistance, help, support. The ideal victim is thus such from a series of attributes that are recognized and that make her worthy of attention and interest. The five attributes identified and described by Christie are the following:

> (1) The victim is weak. Sick, old or very young people are particularly well suited as ideal victims. (2) The victim was carrying out a respectable project –

> caring for her sister. (3) She was where she could not possibly be blamed for being – in the street during the daytime. (4) The offender was big and bad. (5) The offender was unknown and in no personal relationship to her. (Christie 1986: 12).

Then she (or he), first of all, must be considered as a weak subject; that is, mind you: not simply "being weak," but being considered as such by those observing from the outside. Weak, by definition, are children, women, the elderly; it is therefore first and foremost to such categories that the definition of "ideal victim" is most frequently affixed. However, it should be understood in conjunction with other attributes, which problematically do not always converge toward the same depiction. For example, victims are considered ideal if, at the time they suffer the violence or offense, they are intent on a respectable project (e.g., they are working, caring for people in need), placing themselves where it is not possible to be blamed (at school, on a public street in the daytime). But, as recalled, the correlation of such criteria is by no means taken for granted: for example, not all women who suffer from sexual abuse or rape are recognized in such terms: rather frequently some of them are considered provoking or favoring the offence, therefore the status of (ideal) victim is de facto denied. Not even the elderly, and even children, are immune to the double standard: indeed, several factors contribute to delivering their stories to the front pages of newspapers and the attention of politicians. For example, age itself: so, the closer one approaches puberty or adolescence, the less one will be identified as a "child," diminishing social sympathy for the "unfortunate victims." This is sharply recalled by Luca Mavelli (2022), in his volume on the value of human lives in neoliberal societies, with regard to the reception in 2016 in the United Kingdom of young migrants and refugees from Syria, recipients of very different forms of reception and treatment depending on their age: the closer to majority, or outwardly bearing characters related to normal physical development, the more these children experienced hostility and closure, sometimes being perceived as a threat and danger to the social order. Thus, in fact, the author recalls:

> when the first batch of child refugees arrived, they failed to meet the expectations of their clients. 'These don't look like "children" to me', conservative MP David Davies tweeted (cited in McLaughlin 2018: 1763), capturing the sense of disappointment of the British public. The latter expected cute, little, cuddy victims (...) and instead was delivered young adolescents, many of whom unashamedly displayed signs of puberty (fascial hair, muscles, height) (Mavelli 2022: 105).

This provoked a hardening in reception policies, hostility toward these young refugees, the demand – by many politicians – for them to undergo medical investigations to verify their age. The UK had given willingness to take in sick children, women who had been abused, men who had been tortured: not "anything else," it was reiterated. And the press, by publishing on-the-front-page pictures of such "grown-up" youngsters, fed and amplified social fears and the suspicion the British public had been tricked into its generosity. Another influential variable is the social class to which one belongs: if disadvantaged or lower, public and institutional recognition will be less immediate, as Marian Duggan and Vicky Heap recall about the different empathy triggered when faced with two cases of disappearances of young girls in Portugal and UK, in the same period. As a consequence, the two cases experienced a "different treatment as a result of other forms of prejudice. (...) Despite both being children (at the time of their disappearance) typified as 'ideal victims', the marked differences in responses indicated a hierarchy based on 'virtuousness' (in this case, social class)" (Corteen et al. 2016: 244).

Moreover, the most obvious contradiction that the "ideal victim" brings, lies in the dichotomy/compresence between weakness and strength. As Christie himself points out, the victim

> must be strong enough to be listened to, or dare to talk. But she (he) must at the very same time be *weak enough not to become a threat to other important interests*. A minimum of strength is a precondition to being listened to, but sufficient strength to threaten others would not be a good basis for creating the type of general and public sympathy that is associated with the status of being a victim (Christie 1986: 15).

The victim, to be truly such, must embody the condition of absolute weakness – placing herself/himself diametrically opposite to the offender – to earn unreserved public sympathy. At the same time, it is clear that victims will be able to make their voice heard if they are also endowed with a certain strength, determination, resourcefulness; but these requirements must not be over-emphasized, on pain of nullifying that ideal and angelic image that is the focus of securitarian campaigns to which a victim is needed to defend and, above all, avenge. A victim functional to the political discourse and capable of raising the audience, without, however, exceeding in protagonism and visibility. In this sense, repeated and vehement demands for attention, or whiny "victimhood," are skillfully shunned.

Now, if the construction of the image of the ideal victim is problematic, representing an obstacle to the full recognition of the "reality" of all victims (including the inevitable *chiaroscuros* of each existence), it appears even more

negative in certain circumstances, for example when one must intervene in contexts marked by very high complexity as in the cases of inter-ethnic conflicts and wars. A real drama present in numerous areas of the earth. By the end of the last century such dramatic clashes have been the main concern of the international community, which, however, rarely has the means of pressure and resources capable of bringing the massacres to an end or elaborating a shared plan for peace – as can be seen in the case of the current wars (Russia and Ukraine, Israel and the Gaza Strip). On the contrary, often the deployment of the already scanty and scarce resources – material, human and economic – in such contexts is guided by a dichotomous, and therefore necessarily simplified, interpretation of the conflict, distinguishing in their intervention international humanitarian or nongovernmental organizations between "good victims" and "bad victims"; and therefore, since these are theaters of war where victims abound on both sides, of "deserving victims" (of aid, support) and "other not fully deserving subjects."

Following the reflections proposed by Erika Bouris, it is possible to identify four requirements/parameters that guide in such complex and multifaceted contexts the activity of international organizations in the allocation of limited available resources. Here the notion of the ideal victim acquires additional valences, and purposes, posing itself as a discriminating factor for the implementation of humanitarian policies dedicated to groups and social categories defined as victims *par excellence*, as opposed to other subjects – individual or collective – that do not fall under this definition. These attributes pertain to the supposed innocence of the victim, his/her purity and moral superiority over the aggressor, and the total absence of responsibility with respect to what has been suffered. In particular, the first among the indicated parameters is certainly the most relevant, capable of largely conditioning narrative and media rhetoric as well as the implementation of concrete aid policies. The innocence of the victims, sacrificed on the altars of ideology or human folly, wars, climatic and environmental adversity, inexperience, political negligence, immorality and corruption, refers first and foremost to a moral condition, contributing in itself to construct that dichotomous interpretation of events for which good is placed on one side and evil, inevitably, on the other. However, uncritically adhering to this perspective entails various distortions, disallowing the variability of contexts and their complexity especially when international forces are involved, as well as the multiple nuances that connote human interactions. As stated by the author:

> A discourse of the complex political victim challenges the simple, reductionist image of the innocent victim to show more precisely the nuance and the complexity of those suffering political victimization. Yet in so doing, a discourse of

> the gray victim *never denies the victim status of individual*. It reaffirms the humanity of all victims. Rather than hold the victim up to a nearly unreachable standard of pure good and pure innocence (and fault her when she does not) a discourse of the complex political victim embraces the complexities and the contradictions of the victim identity in order to better recognize her, better respond to her, and better contribute to peace (Bouris 2007: 7-8).

Moreover, emphasizing this dichotomy in the absolutization of an innocent and angelic victim, means "to widen the moral gap between the perpetrator and victim, to assist in moral calculations that make it easier to recognize and sympathize with the victim and condemn the perpetrator" (Bouris 2007: 37), definitively closing the door to any hypothesis of future paths of pacification. For this reason, the highest expression of violated and immolated innocence is the child-victim, whose image of extreme vulnerability replicated in deprived contexts of war, violence or abuse testifies to the atavistic evidence of the struggle between good and evil, clamoring for the observer to stand against all injustice and violation of human beings (Hart 2023). A position that can be understood and shared in the assumption of a principle, but which risks turning into a mere exercise in rhetoric aimed at gaining political consensus and media approval. The media are aware of this, multiplying in the press and Internet images of children in contexts of suffering and death, contextually offering to public curiosity above all the plastic representation of a defeat: that of pity and compassion (Ward 2011). A second character is purity, referred to a condition of non-contamination, or corruption – again, the latter, a term that refers to the notion of guilt. The victim is such insofar as he/she stands beyond any possible reproach or discredit; no dishonor stains or tarnishes his/her transparency. The problem arises if one must decide which victims "deserve" to be helped, supported, protected: because the requirement of purity so understood is dangerous and misleading, discriminating and excluding a plurality of subjects who also have suffered injustice, wrongs, violations, crimes. The third parameter concerns the moral superiority of the victim: precisely the suffering experienced, in fact, would contribute to the acquisition of this characteristic by making the same, in the eyes of the community, a kind of moral guide – or point of reference. To forgive, then, means to place the offender on the same level, to readmit the criminal within the social consortium starting from the recognition of a common humanity. By performing such a gesture, which distinguishes and connotes the victim distinctly from the offender, the offended party becomes a symbol and model for the community: the victim is the one who, despite having suffered the most unjust of sufferings, knows how to extend the hands toward the

other in a gesture of reconciliation that banishes the specter of possible revenge and retaliation. And while the offender ceases to be named as beast, demon, and monster, the "triumph of the victim" (Bouris 2007) is simultaneously affirmed in the exercise of a power that readmits into society those who were no longer worthy of it. But this is a controversial point, as a different position should not be overlooked: in fact, to forgive the aggressor could be considered as an act of renunciation and surrender, the final capitulation of the humble.

Finally, there is another character that contributes to the creation of the ideal victim, the absolute absence of responsibility with respect to the events suffered. Nearly half a century after the elaboration of the term "victim precipitation" – and its equally critical variations on the theme such as *victim provocation*, *victim facilitation*, *victim participation* – it is possible to observe that stereotypes and preconceptions on the point are difficult to eradicate by questioning the suffering of those who have suffered injustice and violations, being considered not entirely unrelated to the dynamics of the events. Victimization in these cases is downplayed, often making victims subject of scrutiny into trials.

As can be understood, the notion of the ideal victim has significant effects on the way the offender is portrayed, negatively affecting the perception of the community as well as the possibility of reintegration into the social context once the sentence is served. Exactly as that portrayal of the ideal victim constitutes an abstraction dense with stereotypes, but with important concrete consequences, there is here another figure that shares the same characters, being specular and opposite to the first: so is for ideal offender, a sort of the "pure evil," as suggested by the title of the best-known work by social psychologist Roy Baumeister (1997). In fact, just as reminded in Christie's definition, this figure would also be connoted in media and political discourse by certain basic attributes: for example, being able to intentionally inflict harm and suffering on victims, being in this motivated only by the desire to experience pleasure, amusement. Emphasis would thus be placed on irrational traits rather than on rational or instrumental motives. Evil and evil offenders are also described as capable of behaving in an extremely brutal, cruel manner, and this "by nature," thus becoming impossible to think of their changing, adhering to other values and principles that impede their reeducation and reentry into society. Finally, this figure is imagined – as Christie himself already suggested – always arriving from the outside, an inevitably enemy-stranger, more like to the beasts in the jungle than to the human beings (sensitive, civilized, respectful...). (Ideal) offenders and victims would therefore belong to distinct, separate universes, between which there is no possibility of confrontation, dialogue, encounter. Yet, paradoxically, there is a point of encounter between them: as A. Pember-

ton (2011) reminds us, it resides in the campaigns of penal populism, in which the call for harsher and longer sentences is in fact presented to public opinion "in the name of the victims," as an example of a just response to their condition of suffering. This invocation is counterpointed by total indifference to the emerging needs deriving from the victim condition: that of truth, of course, but also that of understanding – as the possibility to understand and of being understood – and the need for change. These are needs frequently ignored and disregarded, because too complex would perhaps be the interventions to accommodate them and formulate adequate responses. Not mere slogans that speak to the public belly, but the construction of shared and articulated paths, within which to recognize each other as people first and foremost, and not as labels or social roles functional to certain political logics.

3.2 What about the "other" victims? Just World belief theory and blaming process

At this point of reflection, a question arises: what about all those who, while suffering abuse, harassment and violence in the various contexts of life and work, do not intercept the interest of the media and politics, not responding to the image of the angelic victim increasingly at the center of the public narrative? Everyone, in their daily lives, comes into contact with suffering, with processes of victimization or even social exclusion that are more or less close. How, then, to understand, interpret and deal with such situations? Stanley Cohen, in the *Preface* to his seminal volume *States of Denial. Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, recalls, "The subject, if not the pretension, remains the same: what do we do with our knowledge about the suffering of others, and what does this knowledge do to us?" (Cohen 2001: X). And some lines below:

> (...) 'acknowledgement'. This is what 'should' happen when people are actively aroused – thinking, feeling or acting – by the information. They respond appropriately, in the psychological and moral senses, to what they know. They see a problem that needs their attention; they get upset or angry and express sympathy or compassion; and they do something: intervene, help, become committed (Cohen 2001: X).

But it is quite evident that people do not always behave this way; rather, most of the time there is a tendency to tolerate, if not justify, the suffering of others. If the victim is not ideal, belonging instead to categories or social groups regarded as disadvantaged, deviant, marginalized the likelihood of doubt being expressed about the dynamics of the event, reputation or lifestyle, is high. The Just World

belief theory elaborated by social-psychologist Melvin Lerner since the early 1960s, while conducting some experiments in the social field, emphasizes the adaptive function of the beliefs in a "just world" to cope with the presence of injustice and social inequalities in society (Lerner 1980; 1998). In contemporary Western societies, where others' suffering is everyday shown by the media regardless the cruelty of stories or images, people nevertheless want to believe the world is a safe and fair place to live. For this reason, they need to find ways in order to conceptualize, rationalize, interpret and explain the presence of situations of suffering, injustice and fear. The Just World attitude is exactly a manner to react to these conditions: very simply, it suggests that the world is just, because people get what they deserve. So bad things happen to whom that deserves it or, in other words, negative events happen to some individuals (or groups) because of their fault. This belief is rooted in a generalized feeling that for brevity can be described as follows, "good things happen to good people, bad things to bad people." But, of course, this is a superficial and almost superstitious way of looking at reality which, instead, is far more complex, less linear and obvious. In fact, exactly as the "myth" of the ideal victim shows, bad things also happen to good people. And so, Lerner wonders, in the face of this awareness (which explains the subtitle of the volume published in 1980, because the just world belief is "a fundamental delusion"), how do we reinterpret and even justify the presence of suffering, harm and injustice in our societies? The fact is people employ different strategies to maintain the "justice motives", every time something seems to threaten the belief in a just world. These strategies could be grouped into three main different types: rational strategies, irrational ones, and finally protective strategies. They represent a way to react to the delusion caused by the just world belief failure, to cope with the presence of injustice in a just world (Pemberton 2011). While rational strategies involve the acceptance of injustice in our lives, including actions to prevent it before it occurs or to compensate and restore victims after justice has been violated or denied, the irrational strategies preserve the "justice motive" refusing to accept injustice and suffering by applying a new interpretation of them. So, people can reinterpret the causes at the ground of suffering, believing victims are in part or totally responsible for the harm, or they can consider as negative even the personal characteristics of victims themselves. In this last example, the Just World belief theory seems to suggest there is something wrong in people who get victimized. But as acutely reminded by R. Elias:

> Our tendency to blame victims for their fate comes from several cultural attitudes. (...) We conclude that even if victims do not precipitate their crime, they nevertheless must deserve their fate because good people manage to escape

> harms and live the good life. This attitude emerges not only from lingering religious teachings, but also from our strong attachment to the tenets of "social Darwinism." If people get victimized, it only shows their unfitness. As a result, many totally innocent victims tend to blame themselves for their fate (Elias 1986: 16).

It sounds more like a condemn pronounced by society. Among irrational strategies there is also the reinterpretation of the consequences of the events; for example, they can now be considered in a positive light so that the victimization results as a learning experience, able to strengthen the character and develop altruistic attitudes toward other people in difficulties. The concept of post-traumatic growth is indeed recognized by victims themselves, in many cases well documented also in victimological scientific literature (van Dijk 2009). Moreover, in this second macro group finds place the cognitive and psychological distancing between observer and victims, so that they are considered to be different from "normal" people. A typical example are migrants on boats; here psychological and emotional distancing are a necessity so as not to feel distress or desperation in the face of their tragic, inhuman condition. No feelings of sympathy or identification with their stories is then permitted. The last group of strategies includes protective interpretations just as the "two worlds theory" and the "ultimate justice": both strategies present a reinterpretation of victimization processes as possible even unfair. The first one recalling the fact that maybe our world is just – but not necessarily their; while the second strategy suggests the presence of an immanent dimension where finally justice will be done: if not now, for sure in the future – where religious convictions play a strong influence on this belief.

Precisely the concept of blaming deserves some additional remarks. It consists of motions of discredit, disapproval or devaluation directed by society at those individuals deemed undeserving of recognition through the application of victim status. Despite having suffered harm, experiencing conditions of marginality or suffering, they are kept on the sidelines, and kept there for reasons that have little, in truth, to do with the event suffered and much, instead, with their place in a socio-economic and political system divided into classes. The term has been proposed in this sense in the early 1970s by William Ryan, an American psychologist, in his work *Blaming the Victim* (1971). His volume still represents one of the most vivid denunciations of capitalist ideology remarking the self-absolving tendency of a society that while ostensibly pretending to work for the weakest and most disadvantaged, in reality tends to reproduce the same dynamics aimed at perpetuating a system of power for the benefit of the wealthiest and dominant classes. Thus greeted its appearance by the influential

sociologist Herbert J. Gans: "This book shows exactly how we blame the victims of poverty rather than the real villain, the inequality of American society. An impassioned, often brilliant exposé of middle class ideology." A society, the North American one, guilty, according to the author, of fostering the persistent spread of multiple forms of injustice and discrimination while pretending to work against them. The notion of blaming the victim, which Ryan imagines mainly applied to ethnic minorities and the most disadvantaged groups of his time, plays a central function by contributing to the unraveling of the mystifying character of the ideology in the American Way of Life, showing its true purpose consisting in maintaining the *status quo*. In fact, to cast "discredit" on the victims, feeding the vicious circle that confines them in the limbo of inferiority and non-humanity by forcing them to live in a condition of perpetual disadvantage, are first and foremost those who seem to care for victims. Thus the lady WASP (*White Anglo-Saxon Protestant*) is moved, and outraged, by the terrible living conditions of children in the negro slums and negro ghettos of the great metropolises; the social scientist and the social worker, the lawman and the politician are outraged at the exclusion and marginalization that affect certain categories of people (the poor, African-Americans, small-time deviants, alcoholics and prostitutes); but all, Ryan asserts, inevitably ask themselves: "*what is wrong with the victim?*". What is "wrong" according to the author, is quickly stated: the gaze that society devotes to them, resulting in confining them in a marginal but yet functional role in order to maintain the social order. In this way, the question "*what is wrong with the victim?*" translates indeed a vital need: that of being able to consider oneself "*Not* Guilty" – that is, totally not responsible – in the face of the injustices, poverty, and inequalities that day after day parade (more or less silently) before our eyes as "decent," integrated and ordered citizens. That of *blaming the victim* is then an ancient reality-distorting mechanism (a mythology, the author argues), employed since time immemorial to justify oneself and feel legitimized despite everything, to exclude one's responsibility in the face of society's dramas. In particular, Ryan asserts that the action of expressing blame – or at any rate perplexity, doubt – toward the victim finds a place in countless ideologies underlying the construction of American society, rationalizing cruelty and injustice. The process behind such an approach can be summarized with regard to three basic steps: (a) first, in the victims it is observed that "there is something wrong," being with all evidence "different" from those who have never suffered forms of victimization; (b) second, this very diversity justifies and makes one understand their being victimized: if they were "the same" as everyone else, nothing would happen; (c) finally – the crux of the matter – it is equally clear that the situation can only be changed if the victims are the ones

who really want it: in other words, changing their attitudes and behavior will prevent victimization, present and future. Thus, the author suggests ironically:

> As we might expect, the logical outcome of analyzing social problems in terms of the deficiencies of the victim is the development of programs aimed at correcting those deficiencies. The formula for action becomes extraordinary simple: change the victim. All of this happens so smoothly that it seems downright rational. First, identify a social problem. Second, study those affected by the problem and discover in what ways they are different from the rest of us as a consequence of deprivation and injustice. Third, define the differences as the cause of the social problem itself. Finally, of course, assign a government bureaucrat to invent a humanitarian action program to correct the differences (Ryan 1976: 8-9).

We are in the presence of what Ryan defined as a new, more subtle and sophisticated form of social Darwinism, the basis of which is constituted by a terminological substitution, so that from the old reactionary formulation we arrive at a more modern and functional "humanitarian formulation." A harsh critique, which calls for a serious examination of conscience not only of the society of well-wishers but also the whole community, reminding how no one is really entitled to "call himself (or herself) out" when the violated dignity of the human being is at stake.

However, the attribution of responsibility, or blame, to the victim has much to do with its identification as a modern scapegoat. It, as Tom Douglas reminds us in *Scapegoats. Transferring Blame* (1995), in contemporary societies is deliberately and intentionally chosen precisely to serve as a cover for the failures and errors committed by others – usually those who hold political, economic, and cultural power in a given society. Unlike ancient times when his sacrifice served to appease the wrath of the deity by facilitating the restoration of order and harmony within a community, today the scapegoat is called upon to collaborate despite himself, through his own sacrifice, in the concealment of the failings or transgressions of others, taking responsibility for them and paying for them himself with blame, denigration and social reproach. Moreover, to be sacrificed today is more rarely life, but far more often the scapegoat is condemned to the loss of intangible and yet fundamental aspects of personal and social identity, such as honor, reputation, respectability, and social prestige. And while the victim-scapegoat will lose the esteem and consideration of the community in this process of "blame and blame transfer," the social and public image of the individual – group, institution – who caused the failure, will be preserved through the sacrifice of others, also allowing the (self-)absolution of the same.

Behind the modern scapegoat, its identification and sacrifice, often lie complex emotions originating in ignorance or selfishness, such as fear of the different or hatred of particular groups or social categories, intolerance, imagining that their immolation preserves the integrity of the context to which they belong as well as their own power. But, as sharply reminded by M. Schofield quoted by Douglas in the opening of Chapter 6:

> Throughout history the dominant majority has sought out and punished scapegoats. If the age-old idea of the scapegoat were true and we really could cure some of the ills of our society by sacrificing a few individuals, there might be something to be said for it and the only difficulty would be to decide who is to be next. But the sacrifice does not decrease our troubles. It increases them. Not only is it unjust and cruel to the goat, it covers up the problems instead of solving them. The scapegoat's punishment deflects the same fate from us for the sins we have committed ourselves. At the same time the scapegoat provides us with the flattering illusion that we are superior to him… (Douglas 1995: 85).

So, who is the next?

4. The media and the spectacle of suffering

4.1 The hierarchy of news

The rediscovery of the victim in the Western world, after years of little interest in this figure, has resulted in important effects on the media – traditional and new – with regard to the broader narrative of violent and criminal events, conflicts and wars, atrocities. Moreover, the link between the narration of the victimizing experience, to which television broadcasts, reportage and interviews with "protagonists" are devoted, and its relevance to contemporary political discourse is evident, so much so that we can describe this era as marked by "fascination pour les épisodes émotionnels négatifs," as French psychologist Bernard Rimé defines it. A *fascination émotionelle* that can first of all be explained with regard to the fact that "L'être humain cherche compulsivement à produire du sens en présence des événements du monde, et cette faculté est particuliérement stimulée par les événements émotionnels qui, par définition, prennent l'individu au dépourvu" (Rimé 2015: 126). Thus, the victims' stories of suffering and affliction sadden and indignify us, but above all, they question us about the meaning of pain in (our) existence. Their search for justice and truth becomes ours, their demand for recognition seems indispensable to us for the continued survival of humankind itself. Then there is a second important factor, as mentioned by J. Simon:

the identification to the more extensive condition of vulnerability experienced in contemporary societies, which makes the victim a kind of unifying factor within complex societies, always at risk of implosion because of the multiplicity of conflicts and contrasts within it. In this way, the victim becomes the subject in whom everyone can mirror himself – without, however, being "in his shoes," ending up playing a useful role politically as well. His or her story intrigues and attracts, one wonders what would happen "if it happened to us"; but concretely, one can remain on the living room couch asking such questions, while images of the misfortune scroll by on the video of the television set or personal computer. The victim thus performs a kind of vicarious function with respect to ancient anxieties and unspeakable fears concerning the inscrutability of human destiny; together it operates as a social catalyst of those emotions – fear, anger, horror – that are unleashed jointly and contextually within the social context upon the occurrence of dramatic events, as, moreover, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim had already intuited in his 1893 work *De la division du travail social*.

However, it is precisely the ambivalent attitude made of closeness and distancing that, once again, is at the origin of the limitations and distortions in which media interest and, consequently, the public incur. One glosses here over the ways not always ethical and respectful of others' pain with which some journalists address victims, or their families, in the immediacy of dramatic events or during the holding of trials: questions that are often disrespectful of people's intimacy, merciless. In addition, today we are overwhelmed by an almost uninterrupted flow of news, information, images and communiqués, which at the very least risk dazing the viewer and catapulting him (or her) in the short space of a few minutes from a bloody news event to a disaster, from a war front to a coup d'état: quickly, without mediation, just by zapping from one channel to another, from one site to another. Such redundancy and variability of content – as never before in human history – has important implications for how we represent, deal with, and react to victims and their suffering.

Lilie Chouliaraki tells us about the "hierarchy of news" with regard the selection made by the media in their narrative of others' suffering, to catch the public attention. This emanates from a plurality of elements: the way events are narrated and placed in space and time, their position within news schedules and news reports, the type of victims involved, and, importantly, the wide range of emotions and reactions that are elicited in the spectator. In particular, the hierarchy of news concerning distant suffering consists of three main categories: adventure, emergency and ecstatic news. In her essay *The Mediation of suffering and the vision of a cosmopolitan public* (2008), the author suggests that the process of "mediation" – by which the combination of language and images give

a specific representation of victims and harms, producing meaning about it – "propose to media audiences specific ways of engaging with distant suffering (...) encompassing a wide range of ethical positions, from responsibility and care to indifference and apathy (...)" (Chouliaraki 2008: 372). While it is almost sure that the media themes do not directly determine the public's reactions and the ways people get engaged in action, nevertheless the media could play a role in the construction of prejudices and their implementation towards individuals or categories considered as inferior, and therefore marginalized, for example exacerbating a negative attitude or feelings of intolerance. Sometimes the consequences are particularly severe, as with regard to the normalization of violent conduct or in the reinforcement of negative stereotypes leading to practices of discrimination, social exclusion up to the complete denial of the other.

According to Chouliaraki

> through their systematic choices of word and image, the media do not only expose audiences to the spectacles of distant suffering but, in so doing, they simultaneously expose them to specific *dispositions to feel, think and act* toward each instance of suffering (Chouliaraki 2008: 372).

The three categories of news have specific elements of relevance with regard to the lights and shadows that media attention places on victims in contemporary times. For example, adventure news does not produce real participation in the viewer; the news is placed in the midst of many others, presented quickly through a concise and often aseptic narration of facts ("a chain of random and isolated 'curiosities'"), without reference to the presence of victims except through the use of numerical expression. Such news is also placed within an abstract spatio-temporal context, where events are told as a simple registration of facts, thus unable to emotionally engage the public and resulting in cognitive and moral distancing. Emergency news, on the other hand, is chosen to open broadcasts editions ("prime time news") and is presented through the attentive, careful choice of words and images capable of providing an empathetic narrative, so as to induce feelings of co-emotion and pity in the spectator. Here events are told in details and victims are represented with their own faces: they are "stories of life," projects and interests, dreams and desires. The latter passage explains why such news stories are able to propel the viewer toward emergency action (material or financial as well) in order to help and support victims, while the spectator feels close to them and their suffering. The last category is that of ecstatic news referring the narrative of extraordinary events, i.e., situations that literally stand outside the ordinary everyday life. Therefore, the "ecstatic" ele-

ment is essential, provoking a break in the ordinary temporality; a condition in which disbelief, shock and amazement easily merge. In the face of such narratives, the viewer remains "nailed" to the video, feeling closeness and compassion for the victims, experiencing dependence toward the narrative. Ecstatic news follows the facts moment by moment, which are presented as unique events in history, "when a minute seems to last a lifetime"; events capable of producing momentous turning points, after which nothing will be the same as before. The narrative is therefore rich in details and particulars about the unfortunate victims; again the public is told about their passions, interests and dramatically interrupted relationships, so that the spectator can take part in their suffering and create a connection, or even a overlapping, between those existences and his/her own, through the establishment – continuous and intense – of what the author calls a sort of "reflexive identification". This is how the viewer is called upon to intervene: because the suffering narrated is not only of the victims but invests the entire community: in the "global village," it is configured as the suffering of everyone.

4.2 Victims between visibility and compassion fatigue

Of course, what has been said should not make us forget that the images conveyed through the media, which represent the condition experienced by the victims of crime and violence, war and conflict, atrocities and torture, natural disasters, perform the main and indispensable function of making visible what is distant, concealed, removed or mystified. Their commitment toward social denunciation is substantial and indisputable.

Such considerations, however, do not preclude the emergence of two orders of problems. First, as Susan Sontag (2003) already reminded us discussing the proposing of the photographic image, one is never only in the presence of the mere reporting of a fact. On the contrary, photographing – as well as shooting a video, a reportage, a docufilm – always implies an action of selection: someone chooses, first of all, or even in the course of events, the object to be framed (and what is to be excluded instead), the chosen angle, the detail to be emphasized. So, the issue of relevance – which is also a problem – arises: some stories of suffering certainly turn out to be more attractive than others, for example because of the role played by the victim, his/her characteristics, his/her place within the social system. In a metaphorical sense, here, too, the framing is chosen, from which the placement of that story within the vast and articulated landscape of the media narrative will descend. It is moreover evident, and consequent to what has been stated, that such operations can only refer to a simpli-

fied depiction of the subject experiencing that event; a depiction – and here is the problem – that translates a stereotyped image of the victim by emphasizing the characters and traits most useful and functional for the purposes set. Thus contributing to the creation of a static, monolithic image of the same, unable to account for the many facets and complexities of the human condition. An artificial, inauthentic image which seems, again, to preclude any possibility of transformation and change: a sort of sublimation of what victims, and human beings, in reality are not.

It should also be noted that suddenly finding oneself – and without having wanted to – at the center of the media and public scene has significant implications also in emotional and relational terms for the exposed subject. Feelings of annoyance, embarrassment and shame, discomfort are among the most common and certainly do not help to distance oneself from an unwanted condition. Such exposure can result in increased visibility, and it is certainly true that some victims choose to recount and tell their stories publicly, sharing their experience in the media in many cases in the hope that it may help prevent or limit the recurrence of other similar events. Or again, to seek broader validation of their suffering, asking for institutional or social recognition, afferent to the community. Sometimes these individuals, or groups, are accused of protagonism, of seeking notoriety – as if they were any "Big Brother" reality participants in search of fame. Thus, in the age of keyboard haters on the Internet, it is not implausible that, in the short span of time, from being a role model or a hero to be celebrated, the victim turns into the recipient of blame and violent criticism. Although, as E. Goffman (1968) recalled about the bearer of stigma, it should not be forgotten that even victims, precisely because they are human beings, may wish to take advantage of the benefits of such a condition, accepting the instrumentalization not only of politics but also of the media, which through their stories raise the audience of TV programs and the circulation of newspapers (traditional and online). Famous is the passage in which the author, dealing with those who make their stigma a profession, with his usual irony points out how the same, instead of leaning on the crutch, use it as a golf club, ceasing to represent their reference group having embarked on the personal career of "professional stigmatized."

A second problem to highlight is inherent to the enormous flow of information to which we are subjected in contemporary Western societies, through multiple media and channels of communication: if in the past radio and television, in addition to the press, conveyed the most important news, today the real source of information is represented by the Internet, consulted and questioned transversally by generations and at every moment of the day and night.

Again, Susan Sontag pointed out (2003), however, how some images are rises of "memento mori" to which one should devote time, attention, and dedication, transforming themselves into objects of contemplation capable of offering the occasion for a deeper reflection on the theme of the suffering of the others. In this regard, the author emphasized how it would be necessary to create a space consecrated to them, "secular icons" of current societies, and their injustices, offered to our gaze. But where could be that public space coated with a sacred aura, if today the mall is just the more attractive and maybe emblematic place of our times?

These considerations explain why today continuous exposure to the viewing and telling of others' suffering causes, quite frequently, that reaction referred to as *compassion fatigue* or even *media fatigue* (Moeller 1999; Cohen 2001). A kind of torpor, indifference and apathy that is generated in the public exactly as an outcome of the overdose of negative and tragic news. The term compassion fatigue was firstly coined in 1992 by the historian and writer Carla Joinson regarding the hospital context. It refers to a condition of psychological and emotional exhaustion that implies a diminished ability to feel compassion for others, their suffering and to empathize with them. At the beginning, it has been studied with regard to helping professions: doctors and nurses, police officers or informal caregivers are exposed to a continuous proximity to victims' suffering, thus provoking feelings of helplessness, irritability and lack of concentration. But in more recent times scholars like Susan Moeller or Stanley Cohen considered the concept referred to the role played by the media in the narrative of others' suffering and the impact it has today on the public, thus remarking an important concept's shift with respect to the two contexts. According to their studies, compassion fatigue (and media fatigue) refers to an emotional, cognitive, psychological and moral distancing as a mean of defense in front of the huge amount of images of others' suffering and cruel descriptions of this condition. An overdose of images of pain and sufferance is hard to be tolerated, and that is why it is not infrequent to react to them in a fatalistic way as a mean of defense. In fact, while in the case of medical contexts and caregivers compassion fatigue originates in the desire to help and alleviate the harm (and in the frustration that emerges when it is not possible to intervene like that), in the case of media's audience the very risk is to get used to disasters, violence and shocked images knowing only very little can be done, if really nothing. This tell us about the process of normalization of suffering in our times: to get exposed repeatedly to bad and tragic news leads the public to apathy, passivity, insensitivity and lack of interest. People could feel reluctant to react properly to suffering; but, according to Cohen, this is exactly what the individual spirit of the global labor

wants: mitigating compassion for people considered "distant" is what needs to be done. The other side of the coin is sensationalism: stories and events must be represented as more and more tragic and violent, in order to capture the attention and the empathy of a frightened, but also more and more overwhelmed and exhausted, public.

5. From neutralization to dehumanization

In the late 1950s, two American sociologists, David Matza and Gresham M. Sykes, elaborated the notion of *techniques of neutralization* aimed at highlighting how the deviant needs to elaborate justifications for his or her conduct, pointing to explanations that would allow – from their own point of view – a suspension of sanction, whether moral or legal, therefore legitimizing the transgression. Such "techniques" would allow individuals to neutralize the negative implications of their behaviors, as well as temporarily suspend their loyalty to internalized social values, opening brackets of "freedom" that permit the commission of wrongdoing (the *drift*). Among the various modalities described, victim denial appears to be of particular interest, since it is an expedient that allows the offender to consider the deviant act as legitimate punishment or necessary vindication to one who has already committed a wrong, for which the victim deserves to suffer the offense. In this same perspective, the violent action or abuse may be directed all the more toward individuals deemed inferior, recipients of social blame or even deserving of condemnation, so that from the perpetrator's point of view "there is no victim." This is what happens when the targets of such conduct are subjects already marginalized (people in prostitution, drug addicts, homeless, transsexuals), or in the framework of *hate crimes* directed toward members of ethnic, political and religious minorities whose fundamental rights suffer significant impairments – thus making them more vulnerable to further violations. Another technique of neutralization, namely the denial of injury, reiterates how – again from the perpetrator's point of view – the acts committed cannot result in truly negative consequences, and this is either because the victim, by reason of his or her *status,* is a person who can afford to suffer loss, damage, humiliation and moral harassment, or because in the deviant's will – as reported after the fact – the intention to truly bring suffering through his or her conduct was absent: "The injury, it may be claimed, is not really an injury; rather, it is a form of rightful retaliation or punishment. By a subtle alchemy the delinquent moves himself into the position of the avenger and the victim is transformed into a wrong-doer" (Sykes & Matza 1957: 668).

Similar to neutralization techniques operate the *moral disengagement mechanisms* elaborated in more recent years by Albert Bandura (1986). The latter, by allowing the subject to loosen control over his or her impulses, limit – and sometimes nullify – the sense of guilt that arises from the cognitive dissonance originated by the consequences of one's actions, thus favoring the commission of conduct otherwise considered reprehensible. According to the theory of moral thought and action, there is a significant correlation between realized conduct and internalized moral principles, their relationship being mediated by self-regulatory mechanisms and internal sanctions (such as guilt or self-blame) capable of anticipating and preventing immoral behavior. In this manner they contribute to the maintenance of that inner harmony indispensable to the subject. However, precisely this system of self-control can, under certain circumstances, be deactivated through the use of psychological mechanisms capable of producing the loosening of inner controls. In particular, Bandura, alongside such mechanisms as moral justification of conduct, advantageous comparison, diffusion or displacement of responsibility, identifies some that are particularly effective, unfortunately, precisely in relation to processes of victimization. So it is with the attribution of blame to the victim or the euphemistic labelling – a sort of "sanitizing language" which, by transforming negative conducts making them respectable, modifies and manipulates the perception of facts from the victim's own gaze. According to the Italian psychologist Chiara Volpato (2011), it should not be underestimated how the depowering, or debasement, even the destruction of language are mechanisms that profoundly affect the victim's self-perception, her self-image, depriving of the attributes that define humanity and making the pain invisible. In this perspective, the dehumanization of the other – which for Bandura follows from the activation of the mechanisms of moral disengagement – implies the disappearance of moral sanctions in the agent subject. In fact, when one perceives in the other a human being, empathic reactions are felt toward him or her, which make it more arduous to bring physical, psychological, moral pain or suffering, without causing feelings of anguish, shame or guilt in the perpetrator. On the contrary, attributing non-human characters to the other inhibits or reduces the emergence of such feelings. In this way, the inner, familiar connection among subjects is lost, and the other is no longer considered similar but subhuman, inferior: a mere object against which everything is permitted. This happens, as Herbert C. Kelman reminded us in his seminal essay *Violence without restraint: Reflections on the Dehumnization of victims and victimizers* (1973), because processes of dehumanization rob human beings of the two main qualities that define them: identity and community. According to the author:

> To accord a person identity is to perceive him as an individual, independent and distinguishable from others, capable of making choices, and entitled to live his own life on the basis of his own goals and values. To accord a person community is to perceive him – along with one's self – as part of an interconnected network of individuals who care for each other, who recognize each other's individuality, and who respect each other's rights. These two features together constitute the basis for individual worth – for the acceptance of the individual is an end in himself, rather than a means toward some extraneous end (Kelman 1973: 48-49).

When people are deprived of these agentic and communal aspects of humanness, they are individuated, loose their capacity to evoke compassion and moral emotions – they become an abstraction, just numbers – and they are finally treated as means toward vicious ends.

For the victim, this implies dramatic consequences: the denial and disavowal of his or her individuality forces him or her within a rigid categorical belonging, in which the only possible reality is that of the non-human, of an externally imposed reification of subjectivity; a paradoxical belonging, moreover, with respect to which one will have to adapt if intends to survive.

Dehumanization is then able to assume other forms being a social phenomenon that occurs in interpersonal as well as among intergroup dynamics. For this reason, it assumes different constructions depending on the domains it occurs (Opotow, Gerson & Woodside 2005; Volpato 2011). In this perspective, animalization is the most ancient form, more often used in relation to ethnicity issues, race or immigration processes, genocide. In all these cases people are considered as animals or savages with brutish appetites for violence and sex, impulsive and even prone to criminality. In case of wars and conflicts populations are described as dogs, pigs, rats or insects, by the application of animal metaphors able to describe them as threats to the social order. Another form is mechanization, which may assume different features: technology in general and computer in particular are important contexts in which to realize the reduction of humans to machines. It recalls the notion of alienation in the Marxist approach and the condition of exploitation that so many people experience today in different situations, in factories as well as in the *caporalato*, or regarding the so called "delivery boys." It involves the pursuit of efficacy and regularity, a way of working and living constructed on procedures like standardization and routinization, an approach to life more often rational, unemotional and lacking spontaneity. Even demonization is still present in contemporary societies: inside the war contexts, it results as a propaganda technique often applied against the enemies depicted as evils, monsters. But in many other contexts (even the political one, for example inside the electoral campaigns), women are still described as witches, har-

pies or emissaries of the evil, just like we were in the Middle Ages and among the pages of the *Malleus Maleficarum*'s book. Finally, biologization describes the others using the organism metaphor: undesirable individuals or categories are referred as virus or cancer according to the paradigm of the public safety, or social security, comparing them to bacteriological elements and parasites able to infect and corrupt the social body. In this perspective they are considered a danger, being insensible to pain and prone to immoral behavior; thus, unfit to live in community with "normal" people. Their fate is already written: they must disappear as in the case of sanctioned massacres and extreme dehumanization (Kelman 1973), be destroyed, legitimizing what has been called in every era the "cleaning," or final, solution: the genocide.

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