# Book Review/Compte rendu

**Didier Fassin** and **Richard Rechtman**, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, 304 pp. $US 24.95 paper (978-0-691-13753-7), $US 65.00 hardcover (978-0-691-13752-0)

Over the past several decades, the concept of trauma has emerged as a powerful and ubiquitous model for expressing the painful memories and other suffering that arises from exposure to stressful events. As a clinical term, trauma has taken canonical form as the event that gives rise to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Originally, PTSD was conceived as a psychological reaction to horrifying, usually life-threatening experiences, including combat, rape, and life in a concentration camp. Since then, the events deemed capable of producing PTSD have multiplied many times over to include a much wider range of negative incidents. Another notion of trauma, now widely deployed in the media and everyday speech, by rights groups and humanitarian organizations, works by analogy with, but is broader than, the psychiatric concept. In this popular usage, traumas are large-scale tragic events — natural disasters, terrorist attacks, genocide, political repression, and so on — whose effects are viewed not as psychiatric disorders but as wounds in the individual psyche or collective memory of specific groups and peoples. Trauma in this broader sense is a metaphor for collective suffering, a means of representing the past and painful experience as testimony and as grounds for recognition and reparation of victims.

An immense literature has been produced on trauma, much of it in the mental health field. Few studies, to my knowledge, explore the psychiatric and the metaphorical meanings in the same study; rarer yet are these notions of trauma investigated by qualitative fieldwork in multiple organizational contexts. That is the extraordinary accomplishment of *The Empire of Trauma*. Originally published in French in 2007, the book is a powerful social history of the ascendency of trauma as a universalizing moral category, its deployment as a signifier for many different experiences of violence and victimization, and its role as a resource for claiming rights, bearing witness, and authenticating injury. Drawing on research in three cases "emblematic of the contemporary politics of trauma," the authors, both physician-anthropologists, ask probing ques-

tions about what is at stake when we interpret the world and its tragedies through this concept, and what this interpretation means for our understanding of the past, our obligations to others, and our perceptions of "misfortune and the misfortunate."

The book has four parts. The first, "the reversing of the truth," traces the history of the clinical notion of trauma, a history which begins in the late nineteenth century. Evolving through various iterations in both combat and domestic contexts, psychological trauma was long freighted with a negative moral loading: sufferers of psychic trauma were cowards, were malingering, or had some preexisting weakness that made them unable to handle the rigors of war or other stressful situations. In the 1960s and 1970s, this "truth of trauma" was overturned. The change was not precipitated by a scientific innovation but by a moral revaluation of the victim spearheaded by rethinking traumatic experience through the lens of Holocaust survivors and the activism of social movements. The concept of trauma is officially purged of any notion of victim complicity. As institutionalized in the concept of PTSD, trauma is entirely external to the individual psyche, an event that by itself can produce symptoms of distress in any normal person. A new truth takes hold, creating a new notion of legitimate victim and providing a name to describe experiences of violence and human tragedy wherever they occur.

According to the authors, the notion of trauma came late to France, which justifies the inclusion of this history for a French readership. In the English-speaking world, however, much of the story about Freud, war psychiatry, "survivor syndrome," and the development of PTSD are familiar. One might have wished that far fewer than 100 pages were devoted to it. While the role of trauma as a moral category cannot be stressed enough, the story of the "reversing of the truth" is not as original as the authors appear to assume. The main lines have been told in some feminist and sociological writing on trauma, even by those working from a naturalized view of PTSD. Further, the authors get elements of the PTSD story wrong. Their short discussion, for instance, of the issue of child abuse in the framing of PTSD is badly muddled. The issue that played a role in the formulation of PTSD was not child abuse but adult forcible rape, and both feminism and psychoanalysis played parts different than those presented.

But these are quibbles. The book is masterful and never more so than in the three historical and ethnographic case studies that follow. The "politics of reparation," drawing on a careful analysis of the activist and official responses to a chemical plant explosion in Toulouse in 2001, shows how the language of trauma was detached from its psychiatric moorings and used by victims' rights groups as a tool for building a

collective identity among affected residents and fighting for compensation. This wider notion of trauma made demonstrating psychic impairment individual by individual unnecessary. The "politics of testimony" explores the field of humanitarian psychiatry, concentrating on the activities of the two influential French organizations Doctors without Borders and Doctors of the World and their efforts in the Palestinian territories. With conditions severely limiting the possibilities for effective therapy, the humanitarians deployed trauma, now at some distance from strict clinical criteria, for the purpose of bearing witness to suffering and the psychological effects of war. Here again, trauma proved socially effective in bridging the individual and the collective, and drawing public recognition to a common injustice. The "politics of proof" explores the "psychotraumatology of exile," and the demand made of French NGOS to attest to the authenticity of asylum-seekers' torture claims by certifying their psychic suffering. In this official bureaucratic context trauma becomes a "higher proof of truth," required because bodily evidence, when present, is often ambiguous and refugee testimony is considered suspect. If psychiatric diagnosis is marginalized in the prior cases, in the asylum context, it returns in force.

These cases make clear that trauma, as deployed in the real world, includes both "appropriations and dispossessions." On the one hand, the cases demonstrate specific ways in which trauma is applied, how the status of victim is used — beyond clinical concerns or questions of mental health — in a demand for justice. On the other hand, they also suggest that "psychic trauma speaks only that truth about the victim that society is prepared to hear." In Toulouse, for example, not all were welcome in the moral community of victim. Social hierarchies and questions of culpability, seemingly eliminated by trauma as a universalizing concept, were in fact reasserted. Humanitarian testimony in Palestine fragments individual and collective stories, reducing the complexity of lived experiences to "one voice that delivers a unified message." The clinicians who issue certificates for asylum-seekers unwittingly rejoin the pursuit of malingering that has long dogged the history of psychic trauma. And so on. Far from being morally neutral, the new language of trauma leaves some people out and prevents important things from being said.

Trauma is a pervasive feature of our moral landscape. It "speaks to us" and names a new relationship to time, memory, and our shared humanity. A model of social inquiry, *The Empire of Trauma* is a major contribution not only to our understanding of trauma and the nature of victimhood but to our purchase on the times in which we live.

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