

## Book review

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### KNOWING VICTIMS: FEMINISM, AGENCY AND VICTIM POLITICS IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

Rebecca Stringer

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At first glance, the word ‘victim’ seems a simple one. Surely, to be a victim means to experience some sort of harm or injury, and to have that victimisation duly recognised, with support provided to remedy those harms? Alas, a reading of victim in this way is naïve, as what it means to experience victimisation and wear the label ‘victim’, and what it means to experience victimisation and then *be* a victim, are two very different things.

In *Knowing Victims*, Rebecca Stringer tackles this complex terrain of victimhood, and draws on work by both feminist scholars and activists to provide a thorough reading of the minefield that is victim politics. Stringer begins with neoliberalism, a movement that promotes an ethos of personal responsibility and which has contributed to the way society categorises victims and shapes their experiences. The personal characteristics of both victims and offenders, as well as the situational factors involved in the crime, largely influence the ways in which society legitimises certain individuals as victims. Nils Christie (1986) exemplifies this in his discussion of what it is to be an ‘ideal victim’. To be an ideal victim is to be the one who generates the most sympathy from society; however, society also tends to need an individual to have power and visibility to warrant a victim label. This ideal victim status is also reflected in the way that victimisation is reported in news media, where a ‘hierarchy of victimisation’ (Greer, 2007, p. 22) operates to cast a spotlight on ideal and deserving victims, whilst shadowing and vilifying the experiences of those who do not fit into this narrow media trope of deserving victims, or worse, who enjoy being a victim and wallow in victimhood.

In fact, neoliberal thinking encourages victims not to adopt a victim status, but to become ‘agents’, which is enabling and progressive, instead of victims, which is passive and debilitating. Stringer labels this the ‘victim-bad/agent-good’ (p. 59) dichotomy, which further narrows the previously mentioned trope of what it means to be a deserving victim, and serves to delegitimise the experiences of even more victims, and prioritises the victimisation experiences of a select few – arguably those with visibility, power and, in my opinion, validity.

*Knowing Victims* is organised into four chapters: constructing ‘victim feminism’; feminism, rape law and the *differend*; feminism and the politics of *ressentiment*; and Nietzsche and the victim subject in neoliberal times. The chapters are best read consecutively so as to reflect and build upon the knowledge gained earlier in the work. Although the book is not particularly long, it is quite theoretically dense and warrants substantial concentration and consideration. That said, I have suggested it as reading for some stellar third-year undergraduate students enrolled in papers on sexual violence and gender and crime.

Stringer introduces the notion of ‘victim feminism’, a concept that critics suggest entails a feminism that sees women as powerless in the face of male domination and power, thus denying women agency. Stringer carefully deconstructs arguments put forward by 1990s critics of ‘victim feminism’, especially those of Katie Roiphe, Christina Sommers and Naomi Wolf. These critiques are a branch of ‘anti-victimism’ which sees ‘victim feminism’ as damaging and obsolete. Stringer notes that some popular press critics see victim feminism as especially damaging in the Western world, where the successes of feminism are supposedly concrete, so Western women’s continued efforts to document women’s experiences of victimisation are viewed as biased and fraudulent. Further, some bolster their arguments about feminism’s obsolescence by characterising non-Western countries as those that experience *real* oppression. This serves again to delegitimise the experiences of oppression by women in the West whilst highlighting the legitimacy of oppression experienced by women in other countries, thus reinforcing the good/bad victim dichotomy once more.

In chapter two, Stringer argues that if we are to move forward and progress in creating a better society, then we must first acknowledge and permit discussion about the harms and victimisation experiences that people currently endure. Lyotard’s concept of the ‘differend’ is an illumination of suffering that is not recognised in law – a validation of one’s experience outside of criminal sanctions, if you will – and Stringer draws on this theory ‘to think about feminist efforts to reform rape law and ameliorate its effacement of various forms of rape’ (p. 58). She rightly identifies that neoliberal thinking and modern rape law places a focus on women’s agency and their capability to resist rape, which serves to deny their experiences of sexual victimisation. Further, the harrowing experiences of women in rape trials (Gavey, 2005) highlights the ways in which women continue to be blamed for experiences of sexual victimisation – their capability to resist should have prevented rape from occurring, and, if it occurred, they should be able to move on and become ‘agents’. These experiences do not bear witness to the *differend* and do not illuminate women’s experiences of suffering – in many ways, they exacerbate them. In this vein, ‘Lyotard’s theory of the differend provides a valuable alternative to the reductive logic of “victim-bad/agent-good” for thinking about the encounter between feminist politics and rape law’ (p. 83).

Amidst her thorough analysis of the complex terrain of victim politics, Stringer is mindful of an observation made by Redfern and Aune (2013) about young women’s roles as feminists, noting that there is a tendency to dismiss young women’s engagement with feminist activism as inadequate in comparison with that of our predecessors. Stringer’s work speaks to me on a personal note here. As a young feminist myself, I too have felt this dismissal, almost as if what I have been involved in is somehow less worthy than the work done by feminists before me. Stringer acknowledges young feminists’ work as worthy in her exploration of SlutWalks as a powerful countermovement to ‘neoliberalism’s victim-blaming rubric of personal responsibility as it is brought to bear on legal and social perceptions of rape’ (p. 161). Stringer views SlutWalks as speaking to the *differend* and illuminating women’s experiences of sexual victimisation, and in so doing calling for action to acknowledge and remedy such harms. Not only does this recognise the harms that women who experience sexual violence endure, but also that the action taken by young feminists in neoliberal times is powerful.

Stringer argues that as feminists, rather than continually aligning with the victim-bad/agent-good formulation, as neoliberal victim theory dictates, we must move on from this and actively reclaim ‘the notion of victim’ (p. 160). Such a reclamation serves to help forge new political terrain and challenge neoliberal victim theory. In this way, *Knowing Victims* provides a complex and in-depth analysis of contemporary victim politics that challenges our understanding of what ‘victim’ actually means. Rebecca Stringer has masterfully tackled the complexities of

victimhood in this work, making *Knowing Victims* a compelling read. *Knowing Victims* is of utility across a wide array of disciplines, including sociology, politics and criminology, as well as to those with an interest in victimhood, feminism and sexual violence.

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