

The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators, by Michael Rothberg

Book of the week: Zoë Waxman is fascinated by an ambitious argument about taking responsibility for the past injustices of which we are beneficiaries

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By Zoë Waxman

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Primo Levi, the Italian Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor, famously wrote: “The network of human relationships inside the concentration camps was not simple: it could not be reduced to two blocs, victims and perpetrators.” In his final collection of essays, *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), he described the blurred morality of the Nazi concentration camps, in which some victims were forced to become complicit in the humiliation, persecution and destruction of their

own people. They were at the same time victim and perpetrator, both abused and abuser, simultaneously innocent and guilty. They operated in a grey zone in which not only did many prisoners come to resemble their tormentors, but they were supported by a cast of hapless men and women who surrendered their capacity for moral judgement, opting instead for the safety of rational interests and self-preservation.

Michael Rothberg's important new book takes us beyond Levi's grey zone and the specificities of the Nazi genocide into a world in which violence and inequality have become almost ubiquitous. Not only has the grey zone been reproduced time and again in prisons and refugee facilities across the globe; its reach extends to those who would seek to distance themselves from such pernicious institutions. In our increasingly globalised, interconnected world, we are all implicated in the harms done to others by omission or design. The price we pay for our place in the world is that we can never be innocent of its sufferings. This is, in a sense, the dilemma of our existence. How is it possible to mean well, to work hard, to look after family and friends, and yet find ourselves – perhaps unwittingly – complicit in the violence and corruption that is all around us?

Rothberg, a professor of English and comparative literature and chair in Holocaust studies at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#), boldly takes us beyond the now-tired taxonomy of victim, perpetrator and bystander to expose this complicity both in the violences of the past and in the appalling inequalities that continue to flourish today. He cites the words of the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates making his case for reparations to descendants of slaves, that slavery is a “crime that implicates the entire American people”. It might be 150 years since emancipation, but the afterlife of slavery is scorched into the very fabric of American life. The America we see today would be a very different place without the inheritance of slavery. Furthermore, as Rothberg illustrates, African Americans will continue to bear the injustices of slavery as long as there is a refusal to accept that the structural inequalities they endure today are a direct result of that slavery.

Building on his previous work in memory and trauma studies, Rothberg aims to articulate a new theory of political responsibility for the harms of the past, and the resulting sufferings and inequalities of the present, that goes deeper than many previous accounts. He argues that we should think of ourselves not as victim, perpetrator or bystander, but as a sort of involved bystander: an “implicated subject”, who participates in events over which we have no real control.

The implicated subject is located in a position where we become linked to events transcending our own individual agency. Understanding this means understanding ourselves as inheritors of power and privilege, which enables us to understand our privilege. Importantly, someone does not need a family connection to particular events – slavery, the Holocaust, apartheid South Africa – to be among the beneficiaries of histories “not their own”. The potential in this process of discovery is that it allows us to uncover the implications of our roles as individual citizens of modern states and explore the possibility of moving forward as social agents or catalysts of change.

This is a bold project, engaging a range of contested zones including post-apartheid South Africa, Israel/Palestine, post-Holocaust Europe and a transatlantic zone scarred by the legacies of slavery. In the case of the “Israel-Palestine conflict”, Rothberg strives to take us beyond the

binary in which both Zionists and Palestinians are convinced that they are “history’s ultimate victim”.

As he explains, this has become a contest of memory, of suffering and dislocation, and an ongoing battle against violence and loss. It would be asking too much to expect him to offer a solution to this problem of competitive victimhood. Nevertheless, Rothberg urges us “to develop an ethics of comparison that can distinguish politically productive forms of memory from those that lead to competition, appropriation, or trivialization” (although quite how this is to be achieved remains somewhat unclear). Ultimately, it seems that he wants Jews born after the Holocaust – “the postmemory generation” – to reflect on the role their “genealogical” or inherited memory of the Holocaust might have in their “structurally implicated” complicity in the ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians.

While some might take issue with Rothberg’s reading of Israel/Palestine through the dual lens of perpetration and vulnerability, he does not flinch from placing his own role as an implicated subject under scrutiny. As a Jewish diasporic subject and citizen of the United States, he recognises that he is complicit in the very actions he abhors. His tax dollars support US foreign policy in Israel and perpetuate an occupation he would seek to oppose. Later, however, he warns us of some of the pitfalls of this type of inward-gazing analysis: “the forging of long-distance solidarity comes with its own risk: risks of adventurism, misunderstanding, appropriation, and ideological rigidity”. This then points to the tension at the heart of the book. To engage in this type of self-questioning – the constant search for one’s own complicity – is necessarily premised on an awareness of the essential limitations of individual subjectivity: the realisation that we can never really know the lives of others.

If nothing else, this book forces us to confront the many unresolved injustices of our world. As implicated subjects, we are part of events that extend far beyond our own individual agency. As citizens of states that are premised on the perpetuation of inequality and the manipulation of historical memory, we lose any possibility of innocence. Rothberg ends with a call to arms – a plea not to retreat into identity-based politics or “socially sanctioned denial and ignorance”, but to confront our investments in systems of “privilege and hierarchy” head-on, however difficult, however painful that may be.

While we cannot and should not bear the guilt for events that happened before we were born, we can and must take responsibility to make good some of these past wrongs. As descendants of historical violence – from slavery to colonialism, genocide and apartheid – it is not enough for us to pay lip service to the legacies of suffering and injustice. “Scholars and activists”, writes Rothberg, “need both to interpret implication and to transfigure it.” And as we confront a climate catastrophe of global proportions, we must all face the future as implicated subjects.

Zoë Waxman is lecturer in modern Jewish history at the [University of Oxford](#) and the author of *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (2017).

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The author

Michael Rothberg, professor of English and comparative literature (and 1939 Society Samuel Goetz chair in Holocaust studies) at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#), was born in New Haven, Connecticut and spent most of his childhood in the area. He studied at [Swarthmore College](#), a small liberal arts school founded by Quakers outside Philadelphia, and then went on to graduate school at [Duke University](#) and the [City University of New York](#).

Although he was initially very “interested in literary theory at a moment when deconstruction and post-structuralism were very much in vogue”, Rothberg recalls, during his time in New York he “became increasingly engaged by the Holocaust and the way it challenged the education I had received – especially in post-structuralism and Marxist theory, which nevertheless remain central to my thinking. The Holocaust could not be explained in any satisfying way by the categories I was used to using – language, discourse, class – and I found that disruption of theoretical common sense ethically and intellectually compelling and essential to confront.”

While his first book, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000), focused on the Holocaust, Rothberg explains that *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009) was already “much more comparative – I was interested in how Holocaust memory developed in relation to ongoing processes of decolonisation and in relation to the memory of slavery and colonialism”.

His new book explores even wider issues of “historical and political responsibility”. While “it is relatively easy to denounce evil”, Rothberg goes on, “it is much harder to acknowledge that we are actually implicated in it... Whether we’re concerned about sexual violence, racism, climate change or sweatshop labour, understanding the role of implicated subjects affords us greater moral clarity and suggests the need for new kinds of alliances and solidarities between victims and those who desire to break with their implication in unjust systems.”

Matthew Reisz